ANGLO AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

AAU VELVET REVOLUTION WRITING CONTEST 2024:

HOW COULD ANY REVOLUTION BE VELVET?

An Anthology of Winning Entries 2024


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These proceedings are based on the competition AAU Velvet Revolution Writing Contest 2024 announced by Anglo-American University for students in two age categories (Up to 18 and 19 to 26) in the Czech Republic and Slovakia on April 15, 2024.

Contest Partners and Supporters

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Foreword

On the **35th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, Anglo-American University** in Prague organized a literary competition open to all students in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The subtitle of the competition is *"How could any revolution be velvet?"* This initiative is based on the fact that, on 17 November 1989, students called a rally in Albertov, from which they proceeded in a procession through Vyšehrad to Národní třída, where they were violently stopped and beaten by the repressive forces of the then-totalitarian Czechoslovakia. The students became not only the initiators but also the driving force behind the social changes that followed. Therefore, the perspective of their "successors"—representing the next generation of students—on the events of 35 years ago, which have had the most significant impact on the lives of the inhabitants of our country since the February 1948 coup, is important to us.

By launching this literary competition, we are not aiming for nostalgic recollection, but rather for a living legacy that resonates in the lives of today's young people with varying intensity and in different forms. The theme aims to stimulate both the literary skills and creativity of young authors, as well as their critical thinking—skills that are crucial in today's rapidly evolving and increasingly polarized world.

The competition was open to students in two age categories: under 18 and under 26. In the form of an essay, report, or short story, students could write on a topic inspired by the Velvet Revolution or linked to its legacy. Notably, the students' literary works were judged by key figures from 17 November 1989, namely **Monika MacDonagh-Pajerová** and **Martin Klíma**, who sat on the committee alongside AAU lecturers and active writers.

The competition was made possible through the support of **Post Bellum** (Memory of Nations), **the Embassy of the United States of America, the Embassy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland**, and the communications agency **Media:list**. We would also like to thank the **Law and Patent Office Korejzová Legal, FOMOSO – Forum for Central and South-Eastern Europe, Sportisimo**, and **Albatros Media** for their support.

Introductory word by Anglo-American University President

Dear readers,
In honor of the 35th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, Anglo-American University in Prague has decided to hold a literary competition open to all students in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The subtitle of the competition is "How could any revolution be velvet?" This is because we aim not just to remember, but also to bring a living legacy that can be reflected in different ways and forms in the lives of today's young people. The theme was intended to stimulate both the literary skill and creative inspiration of young writers and their critical thinking, so important in today's dynamic and somewhat unmoored times.

This anthology is a selection that includes the three winning texts as well as a range of other very interesting works. We hope it will provide the reader with a literary experience and insight into the history of today's youth in a diverse range of subjects, approaches and attitudes.

A big thank you to the contest partners, which are the Post Bellum Association, the US Embassy, the British Embassy and the Media:list communications agency. The competition was also supported by the law and patent company Korejzova Legal, FOMOSO – Forum for Central and South-Eastern Europe, Sportisimo and the publishing house Albratros Media.

I wish you an inspiring reading,

Jiří Schwarz
President of Anglo-American University

November 2024, Prague

Úvodní slovo rektora

Milí čtenáři,
k 35. výročí Sametové revoluce v tehdejším Československu se Anglo-americká vysoká škola v Praze rozhodla vyhlásit a uspořádat literární soutěž otevřenou všem studentům v České republice a na Slovensku. Provokativním názvem „How could any revolution be velvet?“ chceme zdůraznit, že nám nejde jen o encyklopedické znalosti o tomto klíčovém úseku našich moderních dějin, nýbrž o živý odkaz, který se odlišnou intenzitou a různými formami promítá do života dnešní mladé generace. Téma má ambici podnítit jak literární dovednost a tvůrčí inspiraci mladých autorů, tak jejich kritické myšlení, tolik důležité v dnešním překotně se vyvíjejícím rozporuplném světě.

Tato antologie je výběrem tří vítězných textů doplněných o další pozoruhodné práce. Věříme, že čtenáři tím poskytneme nejen literární zážitek, ale také sondu do myšlení, přístupů, postojů a emocí aktivních mladých lidí v kontextu politického zvratu před 35 lety a jeho vlivu na následný společenský vývoj.

Velký dík patří partnerům naší soutěže, jimiž jsou sdružení Paměť národa, Velvyslanectví Spojených států amerických, Velvyslanectví Spojeného království Velké Británie a Severního Irska a komunikační agentura Media:list. Soutěž dále podpořily Advokátní a patentová kancelář Korejzová Legal, FOMOSO – forum pro středo-východní a jihovýchodní Evropu, obchod Sportisimo a nakladatelský dům Albratros Media.

Přeji vám inspirativní čtení,

Jiří Schwarz
rektor Anglo-americké vysoké školy

V Praze v listopadu 2024

List of participating students

Age Group: up to 18

Berta Basta, 18 years old; PORG Libeň, Praha
Kateřina Bidlová, 16 years old; Střední škola veřejné správy a diplomacie, Most
Žofie Čadová, 16 years old; Gymnázium Uherské Hradiště
Bianca Chuffartová, 16 years old; Gymnázium Jana Keplera, Prague
Kevin Horák, 17 years old; Gymnázium Krnov
Vendula Kahn, 16 years old; Duhovka gymnázium, Prague
Nela Kedziorová, 18 years old; ScioŠkola Medlánky, Brno
AAU Bachelor's Scholarship winner
Andrea Kempná, 18 years old; PORG Ostrava
Yeva Khvostichenko, 18 years old; Post Bellum, Prague
Ferdinand Lehmert, 17 years old; Střední odborná škola Drtinova, Prague
Viktorie Kosourová, 17 years old; Škola ekonomiky a cestovního ruchu, Jihlava
Barbora Vlčková, 16 years old; Waldorfská základní a střední škola, Ostrava

Age Group: 19 to 26

Niyota Burkes, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Serena Bush, 22 years old; Anglo-American University
Philip Wetzel, 23 years old; Anglo-American University
AAU Master's Scholarship winner
Rachel Kate Cronnelly, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Post Bellum Internship winner
Isabella Fattore, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Eugene Gol, 25 years old; Charles University, Prague
Tereza Jandová, 23 years old; University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice
Bridget Kirkham, 21 years old; Anglo-American University
Pavlína Kořínková, 19 years old; Masaryk University, Brno
Kiley Mack, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Magdaléna Michalková, 19 years old; LEAF Academy in Bratislava
Kateryna Mylovydova, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Matěj Myška, 19 years old; Křesťanské gymnázium Praha
Martin Vacek, 22 years old; Metropolitan University Prague

Age Group

up to 18

Berta Basta
18 years old

PORG Libeň, Praha

The Feeling of Velvet

A sound soft as cotton growing on the fields slowly crawled into my ear. I let it reach my eardrum and continue further and further into my head. It stretched over my brain like a spider web and gradually started filling up my body—legs, arms, bones and flesh were echoing the frequency of harmonious bird chirping.

Such a lovely way to start the day, a day when nothing has happened yet and is waiting to be filled with heart-warming memories. Sitting in the local park and feeling the wooden bench, hard as stone, pinch my body, listening to the shimmering of leaves. Except, not being able to see anything.

I had always wondered how it must feel to open one's eyes. Instead of feeling my scars, wrinkles and imperfections of my body virtually observing them. Instead of picturing how a key looks like, so sharp and irregular, performing the act of unlocking a door without a struggle. How does shine look like?

I have never been able to observe the world properly, and I was always stumbling through darkness, the unknown, surfaces and sounds. Sounds have always played a significant role in my life. My mother would call me to eat meals with my family, and my daughter navigates me through the indescribable uncertainty, the world. I know that a loud, targeted sound is the siren of our local fire station, and a gentle flicker is a person flipping the page of a book.

Times have changed. Electrical devices exist, though I cannot imagine them. Are they like the sound of a plate shattering on the floor? There are so many more sounds, the world seems busy; I can feel the rush, it is not my favorite feeling. It's as if an invisible force was pushing on my back, pressuring me to move forward. I don't know what lies in front of me, I'm not given the time to stop and feel. It was not always like this.

As a child, I would regularly hear my parents' mood swings. They were arguing, their voices acute and thorough, with tension filling the room, I was unable to breathe; then, suddenly, my father would sigh, a flow of air full of sadness. My father would often talk about how gray Prague was, but it didn't mean anything to me; was gray vibrant or dull? I wondered how Prague looked in its golden age, the 1920's. Since I wanted to relate to my parents, I would sit on our balcony and listen. There was complete silence, but not the kind of silence which I later experienced during my library visits. This silence was as empty as our candy jar, but unlike that jar, there was

something else circulating in the air. I could never decipher what it was, but I was certain that it was what made my parents miserable. That's how I started to picture gray.

I recall a day when the sounds in Prague felt different than before. It was as if the city had awakened; I could hear women crying, the echoes of someone running in the streets, the "shhhhh" sound of spray. I felt chaos. Sounds and feelings were reaching my head from every direction. My stomach started to move around in my body, and I felt the need to vomit. Such a whirl of thoughts was occurring in my mind that suddenly I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I felt the uncomfortable scratching of our couch blanket. More importantly, though, my father exclaimed silently to my mother: "It's over, the Soviets came."

The following years were odd. It seemed like the space I was moving through became darker and darker. The chirping of birds and the bubbly laughter of children disappeared from the streets. I wanted to study law in university, yet apparently the Communists messaged my parents, saying that it was not possible. I couldn't comprehend it and started to seek freedom. Pleasure. Happiness. It was probably those years which left scars as deep as our well in my soul.

During my life, there were two moments when the sounds around me changed. Once in 1968 during the Soviet occupation, and the second time in 1989. I had settled with my family in the heart of Prague. My husband used to describe the buildings, which in his words were as beautiful as when one touches velvet.

On that day in 1989, my daughter came home early. I could tell by her heavy breathing and quick movements that something was wrong. It reminded me of the time in 1968, when I was a child. I found my way to the door where I heard the sound of my daughter's keys—I grabbed the silky chair, now patting the rough wall, here's the corner, and…I finally grabbed her arm. "Please," I begged, "Don't go. I'm scared."

With a disappointed sigh and a rattle of the keys being put on the shelf, my daughter slammed her bedroom door. The sound of the keys resonated in my ears: ring, ring, ring. My heart was pounding in my chest, as if it wanted to jump out! I rushed to the window and reached for the curtains: they were made of velvet and reminded me of the beautiful buildings in the street.

After this event, I sensed that the tension which I had grown accustomed to had begun to ease. My husband came home more cheerful and

energetic, my daughters spent more time outside. The sun rays found their way into our apartment and filled it with life. Standing there, by the window with our velvet curtains, I realized that I was no longer alone in my uncertainty; in fact, the world I had been living in was now filled with hope.

Kateřina Bidlová
16 years old

Střední škola veřejné správy
a diplomacie, Most

Beyond Belief

While her dad sat on the couch, engrossed in his phone, Kája was busy rearranging books on a shelf in the living room. a photograph slipped out from between the pages of a book. It fluttered to the floor, landing face-up. She bent down, picked it up and looked at it closely. It was a seemingly ordinary photo, colours showing a car driving through a crowd with motorcycles flanking it. Curious, she turned it over and saw a date and words in the right corner: "23rd of December 2011"

Intrigued by the scene captured in the photograph, she walked over to her dad and gently tapped his shoulder. "Dad, look what I found," she said, holding out the photograph for him to see. Her dad glanced up from his phone, his expression softened as he took the photograph in his hands. He studied it for a moment, a distant look in his eyes as memories began to stir.

"That's from Havel's last ride. It's been a long time since this day. Did you find it in the books?"

"Yeah, it just fell out," Kája replied, and her curiosity deepened. She hesitated for a moment before asking, "Can I find you in this photo somewhere?"

Her dad responded with a teasing smile "What do you think?"

"Well, I know that you used to work at Prague Castle and rode motorcycles, so I assume you must be one of these riders," Kája said, pointing to the motorcycles in the photograph.

Dad smiled. "Yeah, that's right. I'm driving on the left here" he said, pointing to a specific spot in the photo.

Kája leaned in closer and asked, "How did you even end up there?"

Her dad chuckles. "Do you want to know the whole story? But I warn you that this is not short."

"It's okay, take your time," Kája said, settling in for the tale.

"Well, it all started when I was 15 years old…

* * *

…Me, my classmates and our teacher were at a military exercise. We were learning how to behave in the event of an attack and how to protect ourselves if necessary. It was an autumn morning in 1988, and we were walking through some woods in a small village called Mladé Buky. The crisp air carried hints of damp leaves and the faint scent of the woods swirling

around us as we listened to our teacher's instructions. After hours of drills, the teacher led us to some cottages. He seemed to have a purpose in mind, something important to tell us..."

"Guys, listen up!" The teacher called for attention. "That cottage over there belongs to the biggest anti-state element in our country!"

"That was the first time I heard the name Václav Havel. I was 15 years old and had no idea that this man would one day become the most iconic figure in our country's history, especially during the Velvet Revolution. And I never dreamed that I would get so close to him in the future. But something about that day stuck with me."

"What do you mean by 'stuck' with you?" Kája asked, curious to know more.

"Well, after the teacher pointed out that cottage, I started to notice Havel's name more and more frequently. He was on television, in newspapers, and more teachers started talking about him, but in the same way – portraying him as a dangerous dissident. So, I thought he must be some kind of criminal. I didn't think much about it and just went along with the majority opinion."

"But the next year the Velvet Revolution came, didn't it? Did something change?"

"Yes, almost everything changed. Maybe not for me at that time but for many other people. The air felt thicker, full of anticipation, like something big was about to happen. I could feel it from my parents. When they had the TV on in the living room, I could see and hear thousands of people in the streets chanting for freedom and reform. The Berlin Wall had fallen, and a wave of revolutions were sweeping across Eastern Europe."

"Wait, what do you mean by 'maybe not for me'?"

"Well, even though the tension grew, and those news and discussions were still moving forward, I didn't pay attention to it. As I said, I was 15 years old, happy to ride bikes with my friends and explore the world around us."

"I wonder when you started wanting to know more about politics. Because now it feels like you devoted your whole life to it. And I'm still very interested in how you got so close to Havel," Kája giggled at her own question.

"Well, that came a few years later, after the revolution. It all started to change when I began to work as a policeman in Prague in 1994. Until that year I was still a young adult living my best life and I wasn't into politics at all. Working in Prague exposed me to a lot more than I´d anticipated.

I started to see the direct impact of political decisions on a daily basis. Slowly, my interest in politics grew, and I began to understand the importance of the events I had once ignored. You see, one day, back in 1997, I was assigned to hold up traffic at the intersection near Jiráskovo bridge for the presidential motorcade with Havel. The motorcade approached with an impressive array of motorcycles leading the way, straight from the castle. As I stood there, watching the sleek bikes glide by, I felt a pang of envy. I thought to myself that joining those elite riders was an impossible dream, that I would never be one of the 13 selected from the entire Czech Republic. But little did I know the path I was on would lead me closer to that dream than I could ever have imagined."

"Then what happened?" Kája asked, still very interested.

Her dad showed a hint of nostalgia in his eyes. "Well, not long after that, my girlfriend at the time broke up with me. It hit me hard, but instead of letting it get me down, I did the opposite. I decided to push myself further and joined the Special Forces Immediate Response unit. The training was grueling, but it gave me purpose and direction. And it was during this time I met the real love of my life—your mother. However, duty called, and soon after we met, I was deployed to Bosnia and then Kosovo. The conflict there was brutal, and it tested me in ways I had never imagined. But I came back in a new form, stronger and more determined."

"You survived, and by seeing this photo I can tell that your dreams really came true," Kája said, smiling.

"Yes, they did. After I returned from Bosnia, I was assigned to the presidential security detail. It was a dream come true to be one of those elite riders I had once envied. And after being part of Havel's last ride it felt more than just a job, it was being part of history."

Kája looked at the photograph again, a new sense of pride filling her. "I never knew all of this about you, Dad. It's incredible."

Her dad wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Every picture has a story, Kája. And sometimes, the stories behind the photos make them truly special."

"How did your opinions change after you started being this close to him"

"At first, it was surreal. I had grown up hearing all sorts of things about Havel—most of them negative. But as I spent time understanding his vision and the sacrifices he made for our freedom, then seeing him interact with people and hearing his speeches up close, these experiences completely changed my view of him. Everyone saw him just on television, but

he was a really funny person sometimes. For example, when he went to the pub, he didn't draw attention to himself at all and chatted with people like a normal civilian." Her dad lost himself in this memory for a moment and then snapped out of it. "Would you like to end it with something funny but serious at the same time?"

"Tell me," Kája pleaded. "I want to know everything while we're at it!"

"Okay. Just imagine. The whole world is watching this event, the funeral of a global leader, but under our helmets, we agree on our radios that now is the last chance to ask Havel's relatives about the beer money he owed us. Of course, we were all sad, and we even shed tears. But the only thing that could help us in that situation was our daily dose of dark humor at which Havel himself would have laughed."

Kája giggled because it really sounded funny. "And the serious part?"

"Well, as we approached the crematorium, the car with Havel's coffin drove inside and we just stood outside, silent. Beyond the cameras, we realized something profound: how fleeting fame and glory really are. One moment the world watches you, forming opinions, and the next, you're just another person, facing the same fate as everyone else."

Kája nodded thoughtfully, absorbing her dad's words. "It's like... no matter how significant someone may seem in the moment, in the end, we all share the same human experience."

"Exactly," her dad said with a smile. "It's a lesson I carry with me every day."

"Well, that hits different, I don't think that anyone will ever believe me"

"Let it be. Whether people take it seriously or not, whether they understand it or not, or whether someone believes it or not—that's up to them."

They sat together quietly for a moment, the weight of their conversation hanging in the air. Kája glanced at the photograph, now seeing it not just as a picture, but as a glimpse into her dad's journey and the lessons he had learned along the way.

Žofie Čadová
16 years old

Gymnázium Uherské Hradiště

The Velvet Revolution, which took place in 1989, is one of the most important moments in the history of Czechoslovakia. Its name evokes gentleness and peacefulness, in contrast to the common understanding of a revolution as a violent upheaval. I am a high school student, scout, and competitive swimmer who is interested in history and significant events. This text is the result of my efforts to understand and express how a revolution can be "velvet" and what we can learn from this analogy in today's world.

Much of what I know about the Velvet Revolution comes from the stories of my grandparents and parents, who were children at the time. They told me how they watched the events with apprehension but also with hope for a better future. They described how people in the streets came together and stood up against the regime that oppressed them. My grandparents often told me how they would gather with friends and neighbors in the evenings to discuss what was happening and how they planned to participate in the demonstrations together. These stories help me understand something that is almost unimaginable to me.

The Velvet Revolution got its name because it happened non-violently. One of the key elements that made it "velvet" was the power of dialogue and unity. People came together and stood up against the regime. The protests were not just cries in the dark but well-thought-out actions with clear demands. Students, workers, intellectuals, and ordinary people of all ages and professions united in their desire for freedom and democracy. Mutual support and cooperation played a crucial role. My father told me how his parents would hide leaflets at home and secretly distribute them to neighbors. Non-violence became the symbol of the revolution and showed that even without the use of force, great changes could be achieved.

My grandparents also had several friends who emigrated before the revolution. Leaving their homeland, friends, and family was not easy. They told me about one young family who decided to emigrate to the USA. They had two small children and knew they were risking everything. "Their biggest fear was that they would never return," my grandmother recalled. "But at the same time, they knew they had no future in Czechoslovakia." These friends settled in America and gradually built a new life there. Our family still visits them today, and their stories about starting anew in a foreign country are fascinating. "They started from scratch, but they were determined to succeed," my father said. "They always said that the greatest freedom they found was the ability to speak and act freely."

How could a revolution be "velvet" in today's world? Primarily by trying to resolve conflicts through dialogue and cooperation instead of violence

and aggression. As a scout, I believe in the power of community and cooperation. We can be inspired by the story of the Velvet Revolution and look for ways to achieve change through peaceful means. This does not mean that we should be passive or retreat in the fight for justice but rather look for ways to achieve our goals without harming others.

I think about how difficult it must have been for people in 1989 to stand up against a regime that had oppressed them for so long. They had to face uncertainty, fear, and the risk of repression. Yet they managed to unite and fight together for a better future. My grandmother told me how, during one of the demonstrations when the temperature dropped below freezing, people helped each other by sharing thermos flasks of hot tea and covering each other with blankets to stay warm. This courage and determination are a profound source of inspiration for me.

I also realize how important it is not to forget the values the Velvet Revolution brought. Freedom, democracy, and human rights are not to be taken for granted but are values that must be continuously fought for and protected. Today's world is full of conflicts and political unrest, whether it is the fight for human rights in different parts of the world, such as in Myanmar or Hong Kong, or political crises and protests, like the demonstrations against police brutality in the United States or the global protests for climate justice. The inspiration of the Velvet Revolution could help us find ways to resolve these conflicts through peaceful and non-violent means. In a world where voices of hatred and aggression are often heard, it is important to remember that change is possible.

In the context of today's Czech Republic, it is also important to maintain and develop the democratic values that were so hard-won 35 years ago. We should be active citizens, take an interest in public affairs, and not be afraid to express our opinions. Democracy is a process that requires continuous care and engagement from all members of society.

The Velvet Revolution is one of the most important moments in the modern history of Czechoslovakia. Its legacy teaches us that even in difficult times, change can be achieved through non-violent means and that freedom and democracy are values worth fighting for. The stories of my grandparents and parents have shown me how challenging and at the same time inspiring this period was. I hope that even in today's world, we will be able to draw inspiration from this significant historical moment and strive to ensure that our revolutions, whether political, social, or personal, are also "velvet."

Bianca Chuffartová
16 years old

Gymnázium Jana Keplera, Prague

What has changed over the years – is "velvet" still in?

A lot of the time we speak about a complicated and or troubled historical milestone, we tend to overlook the sensible side of the matter. In spite of that, this problem does not apply to the subject of the Velvet Revolution.

The Czech people's approach to this specific time period is very personal because it is still very fresh in our memory. My generation (Gen Z) is pretty much the first one that did not experience this era. My parents and their contemporaries witnessed a moment that changed history and the direction of our country forever. It makes sense that this topic is very touchy for them.

The Velvet Revolution has defined our country. It is such an important symbol of resistance, as that the year 1989 has proven revolutions can be done with no violence. This is why we call it "velvet" – it symbolizes the process going smoothly, lightly and gently. It has given the word revolution a totally different meaning. It changed so much that some experts believe it should not be called as such.[1] For instance, Soňa Szomolányiová, a current Slovak political expert and sociologist, supports the opinion that events of 1989 do not capture the essence of the word revolution. She argues that while the events resulted in a significant political change, they differed in one elementary aspect – the absence of violence. She suggests using a more specific variation of the word, such as "negotiated transitions" or "peaceful revolutions" to describe the situation better.[2]

According to Hannah Arendt, an American philosopher and political scientist, the role of violence in revolutions is also prevalent. "Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy."[3] In our case we can interpret the mentioned "power in jeopardy" as a starting point in a revolt. In this theory, a revolution can not be completed without brutality.

I would like to humbly disagree with previous theses. When the meaning of revolution has grown, the definition can change with it.

One notable example of an evolution of a definition would be the word "computer". The Oxford English dictionary describes the first meaning from 1613 as "a person who makes calculations or computations". That has obviously changed and the new definition states "an electronic device which is used to store, manipulate, and communicate information, perform complex calculations".[4]

We did not form another special word for a computer as a device, because the first meaning (computer as a person) had become useless. Maybe because of that, the computer-profession has disappeared. If we had kept the term with its original meaning, this occupation might have stayed with us, even though we no longer needed it. Just like that, if we shift the definition of a "revolution" to a coup without any need for violence, it could lead into a future with more examples of peaceful resistance. I do not imply that a slight change of a definition will make us forget about violence. There will still be brutal revolutions with or without this shift in meaning. However, this small change could serve as a symbol, a reminder that fighting against violence without it, is possible.

Nevertheless, there is a potential downside to this harmonious approach. Because the Velvet Revolution was largely peaceful and focused on a non-violent transition, the former communist leaders were not subjected to harsh retributions. Some people view this as a positive, saying that giving former leaders of the regime the opportunity to live their lives without any significant persecution was the right thing to do.

Others believe there can not be justice without some kind of retribution. Roman David, a Czech sociologist, has expressed that the process of dealing with the communist past in Czechoslovakia was incomplete and lacked actions addressing past injustices. There is even an opinion that after the events of 1989, it was a mistake not to ban the Communist party. Roman David however does not stand by this belief and argues with these words: "I think if we want to have a liberal society, we cannot really use those instruments which are available to authoritarian rulers."[5]

My stance on these views concerning the persecution of former communists or the Communist party is rather rejectful. The reason why the Velvet Revolution had such an impact is, as mentioned many times before, its conflict-free character. It would have been hypocritical if we preached peace during the revolt and then started persecuting everyone involved with communism. We emphasized reconciliation and moving forward, and like that, we showed the world we were better than the previous regime.

Incidentally, after 35 years, our president, Petr Pavel, is a former member of the Communist party, however, his beliefs could not be more different from it. He represents democratic and western principles and thanks to him, our country is led where – I think – Václav Havel would have wanted it.

The year of 1989 was not just a year of transition into a democracy for Czechs but practically for all the satellite states of the USSR. It seemed like

there was something in the air, strengthening the courage and resistance of people. Before the 90s nobody had believed the Soviet Union could ever collapse.[6]

Nevertheless, revolutions have spread even further from the eastern European borders. The Chinese revolution in 1989, better known as the Tiananmen Square protests, brings us back to reality after the previous idealistic thoughts. This chilling example of a revolution shows us that we cannot wish for peaceful resistance with regimes so tough and determined as this one.

The pro-democratic movement climaxed in Tiananmen Square, where students and intellectual activists – just like in Czechia at the more or less same time – had gathered in demand for a political reform, freedom of speech, and an end to government corruption.

However, the Chinese government suppressed the demonstrations by military forces. This led to a violent clash with troops and tanks clearing the square. Estimates of the death toll vary widely, from several hundred to potentially thousands.[7]

Not every nation has the chance our republic has had – China is a living example of it. The fact that we have gotten rid of a strangling regime and were able to do it in a way that subsequent generations can be proud of is not a given for any country.

It still is one of the most impactful events in our history and holds the nation together. It is something we, Czechs, all have in common. This is signified for example by the origin of the adjective "velvet". There is no specific author who came up with the term, it is said this iconic adjective arose in a folksy, natural way.

By romanticizing this time period, we are keeping this symbol of bravery and resistance alive. In addition to this, every year on the 17th of November – the day of the outbreak of the Velvet Revolution – tens to hundreds of thousands of people still flow through Národní Street and Wenceslas Square, where it all began 35 years ago, to celebrate this anniversary. The symbol of the Velvet Revolution is perhaps more important to the nation now than ever before.

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Kevin Horák
17 years old

Gymnázium Krnov

Behind a thousand closed doors, before the daylight can exorcise such desires, a nation's heart beats. It echoes a rhythm, uneven, crude, as ancient as man itself. It is carried in the painter's brush, shaping clouds like a shepherd. It swims through the writer's ink, imbuing each word with hate. It grows in the child, forced to witness things it can't yet speak of.

A thousand eyes look up at god, spite and pleading mixing in the iris. The nation needs to fight pandemonium, the one filled to the brim with demons wearing suits and helmets. The people are looking for someone who will help them, chanting for someone strong enough. but who has the courage to be the one of a thousand someones? All the angels have lost their swords. They lay trembling, now just symbols of conquer to demons, and effigies to their loved ones.

So, the heart is wrapped in velvet, passed from one to another. a revolution is velvet because you can't simply kill compassion, it can't just evaporate. In some it was burnt, in some it flourishes, but when you let go of it, it will always leave claw marks.

Vendula Kahn
16 years old

Duhovka gymnázium, Prague

Mission 1989

Wolf crawled under the bed, curling himself into a ball. It was nearly time to enter the spaceship Royalty 4 and fly to Earth. But the young prince was worried about his first mission to explore the universe. The king had ordered him to travel to the far away small country called Czechoslovakia. The king chose the country because it enjoyed democracy briefly in the early 20th Century but then fell under totalitarian rule for forty years. According to recent reports things seemed to be changing, so the king picked his young son to explore the situation.

The silver spaceship stood on a metal platform with two people beside it, talking with the king. The king turned as he noticed Wolf approaching. "Wolfram, these are your guards, Stelle and Caelus. The three of you will travel to Earth." The king sternly handed Wolf a notebook. "Write your experiences here, we will review them after you come back." Wolf frowned. "Why did you choose me?" he asked. "I chose you Wolf, because I need someone I can trust. To protect our freedom, we need to understand how other people lose and fight for theirs."

The minute the spaceship left the platform, Caelus turned to Wolf and grinned, "Told ya we'd manage to go with you." Stelle smirked, "Our powers are indisputable." Wolf rolled his eyes, "Alright, I understand." Then more quietly, "Thank you for joining me," he said, happy to be with two friends who had traveled before to strange and far away planets.

After what seemed like weeks, but in reality was only a few days, the three stepped out of the spaceship into a city filled with cobble-stoned streets, historic buildings and a castle looming over a river. "Let's explore!" Wolf said, wondering how a place so beautiful could have such an ugly government that didn't allow freedom.

They soon wandered to the center of town where a crowd of people were gathering. Young people were in the streets, carrying banners and chanting. Wolf heard the loudest one: "*Máme holé ruce*!" The language was strange, but Wolf and his companions carried magic relics that allowed them to understand and speak different languages.

Wolf saw a young girl and asked her what "*Máme holé ruce*" meant. She smiled. "It means our hands are empty—we don't have any weapons. The Communists who control the government and the police are armed. We have only our voices and our desire to be free. We want a peaceful revolution. They

use violence and harsh tactics to strengthen their control. But we have Vaclav Havel! Join us today! I gotta go. See you later!" The girl ran after to join a group of friends, leaving Wolf and his companions in the growing crowd. "What did she say?" asked Caelus. Wolf frowned, confused, "Something about a revolution and communists?" Wolf shook his head, "Let's follow these people to learn more."

Mission Report 1: Planet Earth, 1989, 17th November, 3:50pm – Prague
Upon our arrival, my group encountered a girl. She said some words along the lines of "revolution" and "communists". Is there a revolution happening? Who are these "communists"? We also have to find out who this Václav Havel is.

Wolf looked up from writing. "Alright, let's go." He pulled out another relic and hung it around his neck. "I can run ahead and gain more information. You two continue with this crowd back here. Here, I'll give you my relic so you can speak with them, as well." "And what about you?" asked Caelus. "I have my own relic here. It allows me to understand but not speak." He started walking to the front. Caelus and Stelle joined the procession in the back. Wolf listened and walked for hours before pushing through a growing number of people to meet Caelus and Stelle. He was worried because he could feel the tension rising as more police surrounded the area, but he also saw the determination among the protestors. Once he met his friends, Wolf pulled out his notebook.

Mission Report 2: Planet Earth, 1989, 17th November, 5:00pm – Prague
The banners and chants with slogans are anti-Communist. Communism is a type of government. In a Communist system, individual people do not own land, factories, or machinery. Instead, the government or the whole community owns these things.

Students organized a parade on 17 November to commemorate International Students Day and the 50th anniversary of the murder of student Jan Opletal by the Nazi government. Things got out of hand and the event quickly turned into an anti-communist protest. Lines of police officers in riot gear are now standing against the young people with flowers in their hands!

We have learned more about Václav Havel. He is a writer and playwright who spent time in jail fighting for freedom and one of the first signers of an anti-government document called Charter 77.

It was almost evening by the time the trio arrived at a street called Národní třída. The Gothic and Baroque buildings stood over police who blocked the protesters. They were closing off all escape routes and surrounding the students. Wolf lunged forward with a wild howl. "Hey move away!" The protesters joined in, but the police overtook them. He vaguely remembered fighting his way through the crowd with his bare hands before darkness swallowed him.

"-olf. Wolf. Wake up. Please wake up." a bright light was turned on. Wolf cracked open one eye and looked around. Stelle and Caelus stood beside him. They looked relieved when he sat up. "You're safe here. We're in a hospital." Wolf stood up. "What happened?" he asked. "We got surrounded by the police and they attacked us. There was nowhere to hide. They hit you with their batons. There are other protesters here in the hospital." Wolf looked around and with a groan he stood up. "Let's see people's reaction to what happened." Wolf crouched down and listened to a young woman discussing something with a friend.

"I'm hearing a rumor about a dead student," the woman said. She was both angry and sad. "All my life we are not free! We can't travel, elections are a joke, we're made to recite ideology at school. And now they've killed a student. People will not stand for this. We need to protest more, no matter what the police do. And, mainly, we need adults to join!" She noticed the trio of youngsters staring at her. "Hey, kids! Will you help me spread the rumor?" Wolf got excited: "Yeah, now we can actually help!"

Mission Report 3: Planet Earth, 1989, 17th November – Prague
On the 17th of November a rumor was spread that a student named Martin Šmíd was killed. The victim was supposedly a student of the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics at the Charles University. It later turned out that Drahomíra Dražská, who took part in a demonstration on Národní třída and was injured in the attack, created the rumor out of anger and hopelessness. She also talked about it with the wife of Petr Uhr, the editor of the East European Information Agency and he managed to pass it along to Radio Free Europe, the BBC and Voice of America.

As Wolf and his friends learned, common people secretly listened to these broadcasts for years. Now they sparked public outrage. The three raced back to the streets and heard people talking in cafes that more action was needed. Schools went on strike and students, joined by theater actors and artists, created groups and started visiting small towns and

factories around the country to explain what was happening in Prague to ordinary people.

Over the next days and weeks, demonstrations and strikes broke out across the country. Wolf was caught up in the excitement. He even bought a ring of keys so he could jingle them alongside the locals calling for the old politicians to leave. The government also decided to arrest Petr Uhl for spreading false rumors. But the damage was done. Even with the story debunked, forty years of totalitarian rule was coming to an end. On Wenceslas Square, Václav Havel stood before 200,000 people and talked about freedom. After his speech, hundreds of thousands of Czechoslovaks rang their keys and told the Communists, "Goodbye, it's time to go."

Mission Report 4: Planet Earth, 1989 – Prague

On November 28, Czechoslovakia was officially freed from the Communist rule. Václav Havel, a rebel playwright and human rights activist was elected as President on 29 December 1989. The resilience of the people of Czechoslovakia led them out of a dark time. Unlike in places like Romania the revolution was peaceful, and so it was called the Velvet Revolution.

After Václav Havel was elected president, things slowly calmed down. Wolf, Stelle and Caelus enjoyed the newfound peace and joy Czechoslovaks were experiencing. They stood on a roof, their spaceship behind them. Caelus and Stelle were already walking towards it. "You coming, Wolf? We need to report our findings." Wolf hesitated, "You know, I really like this place and the inhabitants. Tell my father that I will stay here for a year as a correspondent and report back." His friends weren't surprised: "Building democracy out of this mess will be an interesting process. We will come get you in a year!"

Nela Kedziorová
18 years old

ScioŠkola Medlánky, Brno

AAU Bachelor's Scholarship Winner

The Right Moment

"How could the Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution be so… velvet?" I asked myself often as I first learned about it at school, in the end attributing it to what I saw as the almost miraculous, heroic bravery of students who unmasked the regime, revealing the "inevitable" cracks in its legitimacy. I credited the "natural" desire of the people to live in a liberal democracy and the inability of the communists to legitimize a crackdown. It is no surprise that the regime change felt like a wonder to me, as it is in Czech discourse painted more like a mythological occurrence than a real historical event, often stripped of any context.

The truth lies elsewhere, however. Reflecting on the crucial event, I've come to the conclusion that the "velvet-like nature" of the revolution was first and foremost a product of the context in which it played out. Observing a broader trend of the more-or-less peaceful ends of the communist monopoly on power in surrounding countries, and the socio-economic developments in the Eastern bloc and beyond, we can state that the environment was quite favorable for the Velvet Revolution.

In this essay, I want to argue that a peaceful revolution can only succeed if the conditions are right. I will use the context of the Velvet Revolution to illustrate the case and reflect on its implications for today.

By no means do I want to claim that the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia was inevitable in the (geo)political climate back then – as we saw in the case of China, not all communist regimes fell in 1989, in the case of Romania, not all regimes fell that peacefully, and, in the case of Yugoslavia, not all were followed by a relatively smooth democratic transition.

Yet, we must dismantle the narrative of an all-of-the-sudden rise of students against a brutal regime. Despite it being a source of pride for the entire nation (or two nations, depending on the perspective), we shall employ a more internationalized and nuanced perspective. Nothing happens in a vacuum, neither did the Velvet Revolution; try as we might, the success of the revolution is not entirely a product of our nation's own struggle.

By stating that, I mean in no way to diminish the bravery of the students who marched at Národní Street that fateful night that had ignited the transition, nor to claim that their struggle wasn't justified, nor to downplay the undeniable changes the Revolution had brought about in Czech society. The Velvet Revolution was a crucial event in Czech and Slovak histories, and it ultimately brought our nations democracy, freedom

and relative prosperity. However, it is necessary to admit that the peacefulness of the fall of communism in the Czech Republic was in no way guaranteed—and had the attempt occurred isolated or at a different time in history, it might not have been that velvet at all.

Just look at how The Prague Spring ended. Why did the Velvet Revolution succeed while the Prague Spring did not? The difference lies in the international conditions surrounding the events. The 1960s saw the height of the Cold War, accompanied by an everlasting fear of the infamous "domino effect", an unyielding ideological grip of the communists in the USSR and the broader Soviet bloc, and the prevailing fear of the fragile balance getting out of hand. Any attempts to liberalize were bound to be met with suppression from the Eastern superpower.

None of this was true in the late 1980s. The ideology had weakened its influence in the Soviet Union as Gorbachev began with reforms, which also included the reluctance to use force to suppress popular unrest in the Eastern bloc (Tismaneanu, 2009). Combined with the success of democratic movements in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and East Germany, and the second détente, the way was almost cleared for a regime change in Czechoslovakia.

The Czech people had picked up on a favorable moment in history – a rare window of opportunity.

It is not my intention to give an excuse to those only waiting for the "right moment", using the circumstances as an alibi for why social change cannot be achieved. What I mean to say is that the peacefulness with which the transformation occurred is mostly a product of the weakness of the communist regime at the time. The weakness had been caused by external factors of a systemic nature (changes in the bipolar arrangement), factors inside the bloc – which had at the time significantly disintegrated – and, last but not least, by internal changes in the Soviet Union, which had undergone significant political loosening.

We can draw a lesson from the events of November 1989 for today. Some movements are not unsuccessful because they are undesirable but rather because of a hostile environment. It is imperative to pick the right moment and utilize the conditions to accelerate the momentum of social movements, or even such groundbreaking changes, as the Velvet Revolution undoubtedly was. However, the circumstances are not everything, action is necessary, as well.

The Velvet Revolution has had a profound impact on the Czech Republic. Not only the people as a whole but individuals also benefited from being

in the right place at the right time. The generation that had just become adults as they witnessed (or participated in) the Velvet Revolution, has since been the generation predominantly in power. More than 30 years after the revolution, not many post-November political figures have retired. As our democracy grows older, its leaders age with it – hardly to the benefit of the young generation that has already grown up in democracy.

We barely think about democracies as regimes having a succession problem. There are elections, we say – repeated, free and fair – isn't succession ensured by the best mechanism possible? However, elections also require someone to choose from. And we see a problem on the side of the "supply" – young politicians rarely run for office, and especially young women still face significant obstacles in politics. It seems as if our democracy belongs to those who fought for it on November 17th, 1989.

Who would have thought that a revolution led by students would lead our democracy into a state where it is the students who feel underrepresented, unheard and misunderstood by the political leadership? (Generace svobody, 2019) It is, indeed, a paradox that has been woven into the very nature of our democracies – the Czech one, but also the Slovak, Hungarian, Polish, and to a certain extent German ones – our leaders, having fought to give the people back their power, now seem unwilling to let go of it.

Feeling let down by democracy, young people, but not just them, might become a force pushing the nation in the very opposite direction than it had embarked on in 1989. The future of freedom in Europe depends on democracy being able to deliver solutions for everyone, even those who never had to put themselves at risk for it.

The older generations fought for our democracy, for our freedom and for our rights. Those are never granted. Nowadays, we, the young people, need to take the wheel and resist the antidemocratic forces of our times, which threaten to destroy our political system. It is high time the youth asserted its legitimate position as a formidable political force. We need the new generation to fight for its democracy. As the motto of the Velvet Revolution goes: "Who, if not us? When, if not now?"

Andrea Kempná

18 years old

PORG Ostrava

Inevitability of change

I have to admit that I was more than a little bit surprised by the development of Czechoslovakia on the days that followed the demonstration of the 17th of November 1989. By the time the news got to me, I was, as usual, sitting next to the window in Anna's flat, looking at the greyish street below.

At first, the day didn't seem like anything special. Following my routine, I was waiting for Anna to return from school. She went to the seventh grade at an elementary school here in Ostrava. Most days, she came from school tired with a lack of enthusiasm for the upcoming school days. However, on this day that I'm trying to describe, Anna's mood was different.

To fully understand the situation and the actions in November 1989, it is important to imagine the world as it was then. Czechoslovakia had been living under socialism for the last 40 years. People, including workers, were desperate. The remaining bit of hope had been extinguished by the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact in 1968. Travelling was allowed only with official permission, borders were closed and guarded. Oranges could be bought just in winter. There was always a shortage of something in the grocery stores. But this was not the worst of it. What I saw looking out of the window was the constant fear in the citizens' eyes, the fear of the police, the fear of the regime itself, the fear of no future.

Although in November 1989 I didn't notice any growth of the ever-present fear at the time. Looking back now, I remember some signs that a change was coming. Before Anna came home that afternoon, I had no idea what was happening in Prague, and soon other cities, and what should so heavily influence our lives.

Looking forward to Anna's arrival, I was nervously watching the street. Anna emerged from around the corner, running as if it had been an Olympic race. I heard her loud footsteps on the staircase until she finally reached the fourth floor, where our flat was located. I ran to the door and saw how Mirka, Anna's mother, opened them before Anna took her keys out of her pocket. She gesticulated to Anna to go the hallway and closed the door quickly. "Have you gone absolutely crazy? The whole house had to hear that you came home! The last thing that I need right now is a problem with the neighbors," said Anna's mom to her daughter with anger in her voice.

Anna looked at her toes, but tried to explain herself, "Mom, a revolution is coming! We have to go and support it. Everyone from my class is on their way to the main square right now. I can't be left out."

Mirka, Anna's mom, was clearly undergoing an inner conflict. Her face was changing from a smile to a stare to a frown. After a while, she seemed to be decided and said, "Anna, I'm angry because this is not how you're supposed to come home—without a greeting, stamping. On the other hand, I'm proud that you want to be involved in making a change, because I believe that only your young generation can truly alter this country. But I'm afraid the strike will fall under the control of the police, and you'll get hurt."

"Mom, please, let me go. I'll be cautious!" Anna looked at her mom with an imploring expression. Later, Anna told me that she was angry that her mom was an elementary school teacher and was at home so early. The mothers of her friends were workers; hence, they couldn't come home before 6 pm and their kids could do whatever they wanted.

Mirka looked at me. It was the first time that day when someone acknowledged my existence, and I realized I wasn't aware of what was going on. What was this whole "revolution" about, anyway? The question occupying my mind was not answered; instead Mirka declared to Anna, "I'll let you go to the main square, if you promise you'll be careful. And before that, you have to go for a short walk with Hafik."

Hearing my name and the mention of a walk, I smiled at Anna and wagged my tail. She didn't seem as happy as I was, which made me a tiny bit sad. Usually, Anna enjoyed our walks to the neighboring park and along the river.

In summer, I always felt the urge to jump into the river, but Anna shouted at me not to do it, as the river was very dirty. Therefore, I had to stop myself in order to maintain Anna's good mood. However, as I already said, this afternoon was a different case. We went outside only for 15 minutes; I didn't even meet any other dogs and I had no time to sniff at all the trees I wanted. When we got home, Anna didn't say a word and left again.

There I was, waiting for Anna next to the window for the second time that day. The situation was unusual for me, and I was not its biggest fan. Nobody paid attention to me, my expression was getting darker and darker. I recognized I was falling into depression. Some readers may wonder whether dogs can experience depression, but looking back to my own experience, I must affirm that. I believe it has already been proven scientifically and if it hasn't, it should.

When Anna came home that miserable day, it was already 8 pm. I was still angry at her because of the short walk and her apathy towards me. I tried to ignore her, but I was soon attracted to the food she gave me, and, thus, I had to forgive her. Because it was already late and the next day was a school day, we soon went to bed. In this moment, everything returned to its routine. Anna started to tell me about her day, and this time, I found the story interesting and concluded that her normal days were nothing compared to this one. It was this moment when I felt like I had matured; I began to see the world with a new perspective.

That morning, Anna went to school like normal and took a test in mathematics. Of course, she knew that something was happening, but she did not expect it to come so quickly. By the second break, the rumor had started spreading around that there was a student strike on the main square in Ostrava, just a short walk away from the school building. The kids wanted to connect to the crowd and be a part of history. However, the school door remained closed throughout the day and was guarded constantly. The attempts of Anna and her classmates to leave the school earlier had not succeeded. They had to wait for the afternoon, the atmosphere in the building was becoming heavier and more excited.

When they were finally allowed to leave, it was natural that everyone did everything to go the main square. Anna did the same. On the main square, Anna found out about the situation in other cities across Czechoslovakia and it seemed to her that the world was turning to the right side again. The protesters spoke about freedom and Anna was amazed by this idea so much that she found herself standing calmly in the middle of the crowd, looking at a bright future.

As Anna told me this story full of new mottos connected to the end of socialism and freedom, I feared the current actions might not have as positive outcomes as expected by the students, including Anna. I did not want to damage her enthusiasm, so I kept my mouth shut. In the end, the so-called Velvet Revolution fulfilled its goals and is now known as one of the gentlest revolutions in the 20th century. a dog like me does not actually feel the administrative changes in the country, but he can most definitely spot the relief of his closest people.

Yeva Khvostichenko

18 years old

Post Bellum, Prague

Velvet Over Violence

What makes society want to change? Usually, it's the bad choices that politicians make for their own benefit. It makes intelligent people start to protest, and that's how peaceful revolutions begin. Contrary to the violent past, modern society develops new ways to move in the right direction and mend old ways. It knows that cruelty and violence is not the only way to make a change; the result is what we now call 'a velvet revolution' – a non-violent way to change a political system. But will peaceful revolutions have the same effect on people, governments, and history as revolutions that cost hundreds of innocent deaths? Human life and human rights are of the highest value, and many lives can be saved if we find the right way to make a societal change.

Let's look at some examples, starting with the famous revolution that happened in 1989. Czech and Slovak people are rightfully proud of the fact that the revolution didn't cost any lives and had a massive impact on the countries. While exploring its history and path, I found out that the people were triggered to protest by the alleged death of a fellow student, Martin Šmíd. Luckily, the student survived, but the civil disobedience and demonstrations resulted in the collapse of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Also, many more positive changes followed: the restoration of parliamentary democracy, Václav Havel becoming the President of the country, and eventually, the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia. Granted, it cost the Czechoslovak civilians many injuries during clashes with the police, but no family lost their children. The people were already angry and tired from their political system and repressions, thus, willing to protest up until the actual change.

An example of the other type of revolution – a violent one – is the Revolution of Dignity that happened in Ukraine at the end of 2013. The then-president Yanukovych's decision to make closer ties with Russia instead of the EU pushed people all over the country to protest the pro-Russian government and corruption. The three-month long riots led to the victory of the opposition parties, which meant many radical changes: the ex-president fled to Russia and was overthrown, changes were made in the constitution and the government, and also a widespread decommunization and de-Sovietization of the country began. This meant that the people and the country were moving in the right direction towards democratic values. But the revolution also led to hundreds of deaths and thou-

sands of injuries. At that time, I was living in Ukraine and remember how my family and I went to protest in the cold winter and how scared I was of the burning fire. When I see pictures of this revolution, I feel pain and anger towards the heartless authorities leading the country at that time. But if I could choose to change history and make the revolution nonviolent, I definitely would.

So, can an uprising be peaceful? In a country with educated people as a majority, of course! If citizens engage in politics and vote for wise and honest people, if politicians really represent their voters, then our civilization will start to evolve faster and one day perhaps there won't even be a need for revolutions. Unfortunately, at this moment, a huge number of people are still uneducated, which makes them unnecessarily aggressive, politicians don't listen to the people, and humans' egos put themselves higher than the whole society's well-being. But I am hopeful – education is becoming more and more accessible to everyone, people become more empathetic and caring, and young generations try to design new systems that work.

I believe that societal change can be humane. Soon people will start to get more involved in politics, care about each other, and learn to work together. From my perspective, both types of revolutions have a strong impact. We shouldn't be afraid of change, it's our only way to evolve; and to make every revolution without human sacrifice is to educate ourselves. Most people believe that their actions don't affect anything, but it's a common misconception that has little to do with the truth. We are all responsible for the state of the world we live in, and understanding this is empowering.

Ferdinand Lehmert
17 years old

Střední odborná škola Drtinova, Prague

Fifty years ago, my grandmother was there. She stood a few meters from where Opletal was shot. Later, she was one of many who demonstrated against the Nazi regime's closure of universities. Almost 30 years later, my mother was here too, protesting the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia. And there I was. All my life I had lived in a world where every step was measured, where every word was examined to see if it matched the official narrative. But that ended then. But let me start at the beginning of this story.

After 1968, everything seemed gray. Normalization was in full swing and no dissent against the regime was allowed. Those years were sad and uneventful. But that was about to change. In January 1989, Palach's week had come. The desire for freedom was smoldering deep inside of us and could not be extinguished. We were not yet ready to strike, though. That would come later. There had been huge demonstrations in Poland since the summer. Hungary had overthrown its communist government just a few weeks before. And with the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was our time to be caught up in this wind of liberty that was sweeping across the continent.

I was just a regular student at the time, enjoying my teenage years with my friends. When we heard about the upcoming demonstration, we saw no reason not to attend. It was planned as a peaceful commemoration of Opletal's murder, so there was no reason for the government to deny it, although some more radicalized students planned to show their dissatisfaction with the regime there as well. On November 17, we met with all the other participants in Albertov, all of whom had brought flowers. After an initial speech by our leader, we set off on foot to our next destination, Vyšehrad. The demonstration was supposed to end there. But plans were changed. Some of us turned toward the center of the city, a place where we weren't supposed to be. But plans were changed. Some of us turned toward the center of the city, a place where we weren't supposed to be. Some of us chanted anti-communism slogans, but the police weren't involved in any way against us. We were just too strong, and our determination was too much for them. The critical moment came in Vyšehradská Street, where the police tried to prevent the further march for the first time. But they couldn't stop us so easily. The police cordon was no match for the sheer pressure of thousands of people. We met our end at Národní třída, where two cordons kept us in one place. Some of the demonstrators sat down and many people chanted, "Our hands are bare!" meaning we are unarmed. Girls began to push flowers behind the police shields. My friend tried to do the same, but she was suddenly hit by a policeman. The crowd

started to panic. The violence of their reaction surprised everyone. The police were beating anyone unfortunate enough to be within their reach with batons, slowly pushing us towards the second cordon, and our only chance of escape was through the streets around us, where more police were waiting with batons at the ready. But such an inconvenience cannot stop someone who was born and raised in the narrow and dark alleys of Prague. I quickly grabbed my friend's hand and led her into a nearby alley, with two other friends following close behind. After a few quick turns, we escaped the immediate danger of being slaughtered by an overzealous policeman. Somehow we survived that Friday without having our souls beaten out of us.

The next day, rumors spread like wildfire. It was the weekend, so no one went to work, and we all just sang and chanted on Wenceslas Square, listened to speeches, and got drunk on the feeling of unity and sharing a dream with everyone around us. The most important thing I remember from that time was a report about the death of Martin Šmíd, which shocked everyone. We knew that the police were brutal, but no one had any idea that they had killed anyone. It wasn't until later that it turned out that no one had died and that the whole situation was just a bluff. Sunday was similar, with another mass protest for the allegedly dead Martin Šmíd. Another important event was the establishment of the Civic Forum led by Václav Havel.

Monday was another interesting day. Our school, run by die-hard communists, didn't participate in the strike like most other schools. Instead, my friends and I took the day off and went to the nearest publishing house to deliver newspapers outside Prague. We were under an information embargo because the government didn't want the revolution to spread to other parts of the country. The rest of the week passed in the same way, everything blurred together. The endless cycle of protests, discussions, and spreading news outside. This went on until the next Monday, when the general strike happened. Our Bolshevik homeroom teacher, who had previously made my school years a living hell, suddenly changed sides and greeted us with her OF pin, a symbol of revolutionaries, proudly pinned to her chest and began to talk about our future, where democracy and freedom would flourish. As we learned much later, she had taken advantage of the revolution to elevate herself to the role of principal, discrediting the previous principal. It was at this time that the first news from the West began to appear. The revolutionary movement was called the Velvet Revo-

lution by foreign journalists as a tribute to the fact that it was not written in blood, but in the velvet softness of determination and peace.

From there, things began to move faster and faster. In early December, the Communist Party government of Czechoslovakia resigned, followed shortly thereafter by President Husák. On December 29, the newly elected President Václav Havel gave his speech on Wenceslas Square. It was a cold day, but no one cared. Everyone was jingling their keys as a sign of affection for our new president and in the hope of a better future. We had done it. We had overthrown tyranny and brought about a peaceful revolution. As I stood there, surrounded by a crowd of enthusiastic people, I knew that my life and the lives of everyone else would never be the same. We were moving into a future with a smooth, hopeful, velvet glow.

Viktorie Kosourová
17 years old

Škola ekonomiky a cestovního ruchu,
Jihlava

How could any revolution be Velvet? – a short story

I remember. I was there when it happened. I was there and I felt the same panic and fear as everyone else. We didn't know what was happening. We didn't do anything wrong. We didn't deserve this. And people call it Velvet.

It's the 17th of November. It's a few minutes after lunch and I'm at home, getting dressed. For the past few months there have been demonstrations happening all over the country. And today I am taking part in one of them, along with my boyfriend and our friends from the university. It's basically the whole school, including the professors. Our goal is to help call for freedom and recall the protests against the shutting down of universities by the Nazi occupation fifty years ago. At about three o'clock I hear the doorbell ring, letting me know my friends are waiting for me. I quickly grab some things I might need – my wallet, ID and keys, put them into my bag and make my way to the door. Before leaving, I say goodbye to my mom, dad and little brother. When I leave the apartment building, I greet my friends with a hug. We slowly walk to Albertov, where the demonstration is supposed to take place at four o'clock.

I am sitting on the curb next to my boyfriend and his arm is wrapped around my shoulders. We came a bit too early, so we have to wait for the demonstration to start. We aren't the only ones, though. The number of people is unbelievable. I wouldn't be able to count them if I tried. My watch shows four o'clock, when the demonstration starts and Monika Pajerová is the one to speak first, while the hymn 'Gaudeamus igitu' plays. After her more people share their contributions, talking about Jan Opletal and the current university situation.

After the speeches and a minute of silence, people are told to move to Vyšehrad. However, some participants want to go right to Václavské náměstí. Eventually, the crowd, along with us, goes off to Vyšehrad. Everyone is shouting different chants, trying to prove our point and make people hear and listen to us. At around half past five, we arrive at the Vyšehrad cemetery and people, who were chosen, place candles and flowers at the grave of Karel Hynek Mácha. We all sing the Czech national anthem, as loud as possible. It feels good. Like I'm doing something meaningful.

Next, we head toward the center of Prague. But our path is crossed by policemen in white helmets. I grip my boyfriend's hand, trying to keep calm. Some people sit down on the ground, shouting "*Máme holé ruce*!"—

our hands are empty!—to try and let the officers know we're unarmed and harmless. Soon we start moving again, heading to Národní třída, fueled by our determination. As we walk past the Národní divadlo, I look up and see actors, I think, waving to us. They're supporting us.

Suddenly the crowd stops. Me and my friends are standing in the middle and I can't see what's happening at the front. Apparently, we are surrounded by officers of the STB. Again, a lot of people are repeatedly shouting, "*Máme holé ruce*!" Panic fills my stomach. My fingers tighten around my boyfriend's hand. The officers are urging us to leave the street, so we push through the crowd, trying to find a way out. But there isn't any. The policemen with shields are blocking every open street, making it impossible to leave. At this point, we are separated from our friends, and I can't see them anywhere. I just hope they're okay.

I hear and see buses coming around. Everyone is singing and shouting, and I can't focus enough to think. I can only focus on the panic and fear in the pit of my stomach. The policemen are attacking people with their batons and arresting some of them, taking them into the buses. As I watch the chaos, I feel a tugging on my hand. My boyfriend quickly leads me into an apartment of some old lady, I think. I just mindlessly follow him, glad he took the initiative. I watch through the curtains on the window of the apartment, as the officers continue their attacks and I notice my best friend, as she's led into a bus with her hands behind her back and blood dripping from her forehead. She's always been the braver one. Soon the crowd is practically gone and all that's left on the street are destroyed flowers and candles and blood stains on the pavement. I sigh softly and lean my head on my boyfriend's shoulder, as we sit at the kitchen table of the nice old lady.

I just hope all this actually meant something…

Barbora Vlčková
16 years old

Waldorfská základní a střední škola,
Ostrava

The Velvet Revolution through the eyes of the statue of St. Wenceslas

Things had already started moving on by the time my colleague, Agnes of Bohemia, was beautified. There are five of us standing on our statue: saints Ludmila, Procopius, Agnes, Adalbert, and I. It was November 12th, 1989, when Agnes was declared to be a saint. The air was as thick as butter and the tension so sharp you could cut it with a knife.

Just a few steps from us was a dissident group discussing ideas and sharing views, all united by a disgust toward the communist régime, which was about to crumble to dust.

Day by day, the crowd of brave hearts grew bigger. There were mostly students. Some came for the speeches, others wanted to show support for the common idea. However, there were still those who tried to pass by as quickly as possible. The man who has just rushed away indeed wasn't here to support the dissidents. He was wearing a heavy coat and a hat.

I've known this man since his childhood. We first met when he was a toddler. He was staring at my horse telling his older brother that one day he would have one, as well. His shaggy hair was sticking out from under his cap. There is no hair left now; that is why he wears a hat. At present, this 50-year-old fatty could afford a horse. He owns one of the large apartments next to Old Town Square. This fact says a lot about him. In communist Czechoslovakia it was impossible to afford such a swanky place without being in the communist party.

Things aren't the way they used to be. As a toddler, the man in the hat used to live in a small flat on the outskirts of Prague and be happy to have something to eat. No wonder people couldn't resist the sweet promise of the communists, which gave hope for a bright future and a chance for an ordinary person to become someone significant—from a house painter to a mayor. The man in the hat was called Kuba. His dad joined the party with no hesitation and taught his children well to love and respect the Soviet Union and its connections.

Kuba was a proud pioneer. He successfully completed military service and joined the communist party as soon as he could. He did his best to contribute to the communist team. He married a comrade and became mayor of a Prague district. He walked proudly along the streets showing no interest in my horse anymore. On the 1st of May, he was waving the Soviet flag under my nose.

Another character in our story is a dissident. He was almost thirty when I first noticed him standing next to the streetlamp quite close to our statue, sticking posters on it with slogans like freedom of speech, human rights, etc. He was about two meters tall with a strong constitution. He was purposely sticking the posters high up, so that when the cleaning crew came the day after, they couldn't reach them. I saw him with a bunch of posters about three times. When Charter 77 came out, he was walking around my square trying to collect signatures. After that, he disappeared. Ruda was accused of anti-state activities and sent to Pankrac prison. I prayed for him every day.

Three months passed and he was here again—a shadow of his former self. He was missing two teeth. Though he looked somehow smaller, he still held his head up with that defiant look of his. I did feel sorry I couldn't tell him how nice it was to see him again.

Let me introduce the next character of our story: The Emigrant. When Petr was five, his dad took him to the National Museum situated just behind me. By the time he was twelve, he was visiting the museum on his own. I kept an eye on him. Then he started coming less frequently, and after 1989 I never saw him again. I hoped he was somewhere in the West, studying at Harvard or Yale. I wished that one day he would become a famous scientist. Petr's dad had been a biology teacher at the Faculty of Science. His mom had been trained as a pharmacist. After his dad was fired, he worked as a waiter in a small restaurant. Mom got hired as a cleaning lady. Even though the family emigrated to West Germany and was finally free, life wasn't much better. Because of the language barrier, Petr's parents couldn't find the jobs they wanted. So, the family lived in a small room in a Czechoslovakian community. Unlike his parents, Petr got used to the new environment, despite the West Germans' prejudices. Petr went to high school and later college in Munich. And when things started happening back home in Czechoslovakia, he listened to Radio Free Europe every night and slowly got ready to return to his native land.

The last character of our story is an StB agent. I used to see this lawyer and StB investigator quite often. Wearing civilian clothes and shouting out anti-regime slogans, he pretended to be one of the dissidents. He participated in all the political protests and never missed a dissident demonstration. I'm quite sure that the dissident Ruda was honored to meet him in the pre-trial detention center in Bartolomejska Street. Lots of opponents of the regime were fired or had to leave their apartments thanks to him.

Their children were unable to enter colleges and get higher education. He destroyed the lives of those who opposed the communist regime. He was so into his job that he didn't see the consequences of his "honest" work.

Five days had passed since the canonization of Agnes. It was about 4:00 PM when the students began gathering at Albertov to honor the memory of Jan Opletal. The growing crowd was coming closer. Police with white helmets, water cannons, and batons had blocked their way to Národní Třída—National Street. Students and dissidents sat down in front of the policemen and shouted slogans like, "You are also Czechs!" "We are barehanded!" I shouted with them. They stuck flowers between the policemen's shields and lit candles. Actors waved at them from the windows and lots of people joined the singing and shouting crowd. One of the commanders of the brutal intervention was our StB agent. There was our Ruda, who had been recently released from prison on the other side. It was horrible to hear the screams of the beaten students and watch them being chased in the surrounding streets. If only I could, I'd jump off this pedestal and fight with the police troops myself.

In the following days, the protests extended to my statue. Tens of thousands of people calling for freedom gathered in my square, and then the protests spread to other Czechoslovakian cities. I was surprised when I saw our well-known man in the hat among the protestors. He wasn't wearing his hat this time, but he was holding keys in his hand. He was shouting with the crowd: "End with one-party rule!" He enthusiastically applauded Vaclav Havel's speech and sang along with Karel Kryl's songs. After almost fifty years the communist regime was destroyed, and our country was finally democratic and free again. Thanks to this, emigrants, including Petr from Germany, were able to return from exile.

The fate of our four heroes took unexpected turns: The StB agent was never accused or sentenced for his actions. He used his old connections and set up a successful company selling real estate. The man in the hat lost his high position at the office, but he was allowed continue as a clerk. So, they both were doing well and later, when they retired, they received a good pension. However, the dissident Ruda fared differently. Although he received an award from President Havel and was invited to lectures at schools, he kept living in his small apartment on the outskirts of Prague and had to live humbly due to his low pension. Even the emigrant Petr was disappointed, as soon after he had arrived back here, he lost his life's savings when he was cheated by a colleague in business. Others looked down on him and didn't want to listen to his opinions, because they felt he

hadn't suffered under the communist regime like they had. Two years later he returned to Germany and worked as a professor at a university.

Does it seem unfair to you? Should everything have ended up differently? I think so. However, it was worth it. Today thousands of foreign tourists take photos with me. When people disagree with something, they come to my square without fear to express their opinion. Indeed, just recently dissidents have protested in front of the government office for higher pensions. People can travel and vote freely for the parties they want. I straighten up immediately in my saddle when I see scouts walking by and hear the chant of St. Wenceslas from the cathedral. I have been given a public holiday and people can enjoy the day off in my honor!

With these four stories, I wanted to give you a picture of Czech society during and after communism. They may seem fictional but, unfortunately, they are based on the true-life stories of real people's experiences. Next time you walk down my square, come and take a selfie with me :)

Age Group

19 until 26

Niyota Burkes
20 years old

Anglo-American University

Within Gen-Z, scrolling on different social media networks for hours and hours on end is considered a completely normal occurrence. However, during my nightly scroll session on Instagram, the flier for the Velvet Revolution Writing Contest stopped my finger from swiping. The bold letters conveyed a sense of deep purpose, and I knew that I would have to answer the call.

"In commemoration of the upcoming 25th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution," it read. I brought my phone closer, feeling the same wave of emotions that I had felt upon my arrival in Prague two years ago. I was a wide-eyed student from America, eager to immerse myself in a world that was so different from my own. Or was it?

During my time in Prague, I have grown to absolutely adore it. With the spires atop the buildings and the silhouette of the castle keeping close watch over the city's residents, I fell in love with its history that is rich with stories of transformation and resilience. During my studies, I developed a special fascination with the Velvet Revolution. During my classes, we discussed it in harrowing detail, sometimes even getting perspectives from individuals that either lived through it or were directly involved in the organization of the protests. These peaceful protests that had ended decades of communist rule served as a testament to the power of nonviolent resistance.

The individuals I have met that were directly involved in the Velvet Revolution were passionate and dedicated to the cause, even now. Some have founded organizations that study these regimes and others speak in bookstores and student groups, encouraging young people to speak out about current events. This ensures that the shining legacy of the Velvet Revolution is passed down to the next generation: my generation.

The contest's theme, "How could any revolution be velvet?", really resonated with me. I knew I had to enter; the only question was what story would I tell? I thought of the many people I had met, each with their own unique perspective on those transformative days. As I pondered this, it suddenly hit me.

The Velvet Revolution is not about any one person or story. It's about the collective. a group of young people banding together, taking their futures into their own hands and refusing to take no for an answer, especially from places of high authority.

Focusing on passing down the message of the collective group, raising up a multitude of voices, was the answer. These voices screamed out and came together in a beautiful chorus to create a peaceful revolution.

And that's how I think any revolution can be Velvet. If the movement consists of young individuals that are banded together, dedicated to their peaceful activism, I think that it can be considered Velvet.

Velvet revolutions are everywhere, meaning that they touch everyone, no matter where you live or the people you surround yourself with. There's the White Rose Movement from Munich, the Fisk University Protests in Tennessee, sit-ins all across America during times of segregation, the Soweto Uprising in South Africa, and so many more movements that were started by individuals that shared at once a need for change and a want for peace.

Their legacies are all around us, wherever we go, if only we are brave enough to take their need for change and add our action to it.

Serena Bush
22 years old

Anglo-American University

The term "Velvet Revolution" refers to a regime change initiated through a non-violent, peaceful transition of power, typically moving from an authoritarian to a more democratic governance structure. While many countries have experienced different Velvet Revolutions, Czechia's encounter is particularly significant. In Czechia, the Velvet Revolution marked the end of 41 years of Communist rule. This uprising achieved its goals through peaceful protests and negotiations, leading to the establishment of a political system that guaranteed greater human rights and freedoms. This transition facilitated the smooth development of free speech, a free press, and civil society organizations. The Czechoslovak Velvet Revolution is a testament to a beacon of hope in peaceful political transitions. However, not all countries have had such positive experiences. More recently, Ukraine and Armenia also experienced versions of a Velvet Revolution, albeit with differing outcomes.

In 2018, Armenia's Velvet Revolution occurred when then-journalist Nikol Pashinyan demanded the resignation of former Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, who had held office for ten years. The revolution was triggered by Sargsyan's decision to become Prime Minister after constitutional changes shifted the country from a presidential to a parliamentary system, widely seen as an attempt to retain power despite term limits. Growing frustration among the Armenian population over corruption, economic stagnation, and lack of political freedom fueled the revolution. Led by Pashinyan, the Armenian public held a revolution from April 13 to 23, ultimately resulting in Sargsyan's resignation. Pashinyan has been Prime Minister since May 8, 2018. Despite the change in leadership brought on by the Velvet Revolution, Armenia has faced multiple wars, territorial losses, and an influx of refugees. Recently, violent protests have erupted in Yerevan against Pashinyan's government. Many attribute the perceived downward pattern of Armenia's status as being due to Pashinyan and the Velvet Revolution of 2018.

Ukraine's Orange Revolution in late 2004, involved mass protests in response to allegations of massive electoral fraud during the presidential election. Protests erupted after the announcement that incumbent Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych had won the election despite significant evidence of voting irregularities and manipulation. This was seen as an unlawful attempt by the ruling authorities to retain power. Frustration over corruption, economic stagnation, and lack of political freedom had been growing among the Ukrainian population. Led by opposition figures Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, the public demanded a fair and

transparent electoral process. The protests, lasting from late November 2004 to January 2005, involved large-scale peaceful demonstrations and civil disobedience, culminating in a rerun of the disputed election. Viktor Yushchenko's decisive victory marked an outstanding triumph for the protest movement, leading Ukraine toward democratic reforms and closer integration with Western Europe. Ukraine, however, continued to suffer from political instability, economic troubles, and corruption. Today, Ukraine's sovereign territory is under claim by Russia and its surrogates.

These two countries discussed have not fared as well as Czechia following their respective Velvet Revolutions. When examining why that is, we may understand what is often taken for granted in the West. Building blocks for democracy include freedom of the press and a lack of corruption. Armenia ranks 43rd out of 180 countries for press freedom and 62nd for corruption. Ukraine is ranked 6th for press freedom but 104th for corruption. These rankings reflect each country's unique geopolitical context. Both states are influenced by Russia, a former hegemon desperate to maintain its international importance.

Czechia's success goes beyond these two points and can be attributed to several factors. Czechoslovakia had a relatively developed civil society and intellectual class, facilitating the organization of peaceful protests and negotiations. Leadership figures like Václav Havel, who articulated a vision of democratic governance and human rights, provided a unifying voice for the opposition. Geopolitical factors must also be considered. The decline of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev's reforms weakened its ability and willingness to intervene forcefully against the revolution, granting Czechoslovakia more autonomy in its transition. Support from Western countries, particularly through diplomatic channels and economic aid, bolstered the resolve of the Czechoslovak people in their quest for freedom and democracy. This combination of internal solidarity, international support, and favorable geopolitical conditions contributed to the Velvet Revolution's success in Czechoslovakia, setting a precedent for peaceful regime change in the region.

In Immanuel Kant's philosophy, particularly his work "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," he explores the idea of progress in human history. Kant believed that history moves toward realizing moral and political ideals, such as freedom and equality, despite setbacks along the way. He argued that through reason and the gradual cultivation of human capacities, societies could progress toward a more just and enlightened state. Going back to the building blocks of democracies, Czechia

is ranked 41st for corruption and 17th for press freedom, serving as a testament to self-determination; it is evident that the path to long-lasting peace, governance, and security is complex. This is not to say that it is not possible to truly encompass sovereignty. The will of the people of Czechia brought about massive change, capturing the spirit of the nation and the attention of the West, and has been kept by their prosperity and determination.

Within our world, there are various stances on governance; some work well given the cultural norms, while others suffer from incumbent leaders who have directly affected their chances of success. Today's generations must realize that until we all have sufficient governance that does not stifle human creativity and expression, no one is equal. The opportunities I have differ from those who have not had the privilege of growing up in a place where stability is mentioned when describing said country. Is it possible to spread such values to other nations? Education amongst nations has proved itself to be an effective catalyst; one that promotes critical thinking while preserving a bird's eye view of the world. Additionally, while states in the international system continue to flirt with the current world order, none of us can truly step into freedom and exist in a world where all velvet revolutions lead to long-lasting peace, governance, and security. Indeed, the Velvet Revolution of Czechoslovakia 35 years ago has endured – and continues to motivate change. As more individuals unite and mobilize through peaceful resistance, the seeds of democracy and human rights are sown more deeply into the fabric of societies worldwide. This aspiration enables a global community where shared values of justice and equality begin to flourish. Thus, we promote a more common reality where Revolutions can truly be the foundation of lasting peace and security.

Rachel Kate Cronnelly
20 years old

Anglo-American University

Post Bellum Internship Winner

I follow in the footsteps of a man who lived 254 days longer than I have lived now. Our lifetimes are separated by 35 years and a revolution.

At 7,212 days old, on sunny days, I step off the metro a stop early and navigate the awkward crossing outside the Faculty of Arts building at Charles University. The wait feels interminable, the pavement too narrow, the crossing time too short. These minor frustrations eclipse my intention to savour the sun.

Jan Palach passed at 7,466 days old, his body shrouded in burns after self-immolation. In his hospital bed, he grants interviews without complaint. I wonder if he pondered the crossing outside his university building, to a square now named after him, or if such mundane grievances ever seemed worth mentioning.

Now twenty years old, revolutionary violence has felt palpably close throughout my life. I grew up in the echoes of the Troubles. Family tales of terror from a supposedly ended war resonate uncomfortably close to a present brewing with unrest. At thirteen, classmates debated the merits of bombing, shooting, and the brutalities of paramilitaries in pursuit of independence. The idea of revolution begins to unsettle me.

In the deep hours of evening, I find myself atop Wenceslas Square. Below the lights, crowds bustle—shoppers, finely-dressed opera-goers emerging from the metro for a concert. Traffic whirls, an uncertain dance. Standing by Jan Palach's memorial, I wonder what he beheld in those final moments, if he too found a strange comfort in his chaos, as I find in mine.

At eighteen, I witnessed revolutionary violence in my Turkish city. From a window, a sharp bang—at first, I mistook it as a car backfiring or a nearby truck—turned into a violent act shattering lives below. For days, I dared not leave my building; the city paralyzed by death and injury of children and families. Yet, no revolution dawned. Revolutionary violence became a nightly spectre as I lay awake, mouth dry with dread.

Nearly a year into Prague, the question persists from friends and family: why this city? Is it for its beauty, its European centrality, or the promise of my university? Before my arrival, Prague's history had never crossed my mind; I knew so little of it. I never imagined Prague would ignite within me newfound hope and faith. Here, I began to read deeply, to listen attentively, and to scrutinise leadership and community in ways I had never considered. Most profoundly, I began to view revolution through an entirely different lens.

In my readings, I found references to Palach signing off as Torch 1, suggesting affiliation with a larger organisation and hinting at future self-immolations. Writers noted Palach stood alone as Torch 1, but I believe this assertion couldn't be more mistaken.

In today's world, where conflict and revolution seem to loom on every street corner, some might question the efficacy of self-immolation. Why burn oneself when a building can be razed? How does a suicide resonate more deeply than a massacre? Is the goal not to maximize impact on as many lives as possible? These perspectives overlook the profound tenderness, care, and compassion inherent in Jan Palach's choice of self-immolation. Palach eschewed harm; his intent was never destruction but protection and the resurrection of what had been lost. His act was not an act of annihilation but an attempt at renewal, a rebirth amidst the echoes of the Prague Spring.

This dedication to the people of Czechoslovakia created the torches that would allow this revolution to become the Velvet Revolution. These torches are not merely self-immolators, but individuals driven by a deep, often unconscious passion for freedom and change. These are people who dared to burn not just what they knew and understood, but also the comfort of complacency, risking their very selves for the hope of a stronger, freer collective. It is this absence of malice, this lack of desire for destruction, that allows the Velvet Revolution to occupy such a profound place in history. Velvet—a revolution gentle, smooth, soft—because Jan Palach, a twenty-year-old twenty years prior, did not burn alone.

I remain in Prague not for its history but for its present. I remain because Palach's and my footsteps frame a revolution neither of us lived to see, guided by torches burning within us that Prague has managed to ignite. I stay because I have 254 more days until I see the age he never got to see; in a city I get to see because his love helped set it free. I stay because understanding how a revolution could be velvet helped me relight my torch, and my love for humanity.

Isabella Fattore
20 years old

Anglo-American University

The first thing Ondra learns about revolution is that freedom isn't without cost. To free oneself from the wrath of burdens unchecked is also to lose what once was. To be free is to be untethered, to be untethered is to have let go. Ondra hopes that what he has let go may be replaced by more agreeable things to grasp, yet he cannot know for sure. The thing about revolution is that one must throw themselves into the velvet abyss with the will to come out on the other side, or else they may float in that haze of contempt forever.

Ondra's revolution starts as something quite small. He is merely a boy of nineteen. He studies at university. He lives with his father. He doesn't have a mother—or, rather, he did, but she left them a couple of years ago. This was not unexpected. In fact, Ondra felt surprised that it took her so long. His father has never been a kind man. Ondra's memories are filled with the weight of his spiteful glare, a constant from his childhood that has followed him into adulthood. His mother's treatment was no different. He remembers the last sounds of hers clearly: the rolling of her suitcase wheels, the thump of her hurried footsteps, the jingling of her house keys.

Ondra always assumed he would leave his father, as his mother did, once he came of age. But the time has passed, and yet he stays. His friends from class, Dominik and Matej, often try to convince him to leave; they've even offered him a room in their flat. But something inexplicable holds Ondra back. The idea of freedom feels like an impossible thing floating somewhere above him, just out of his reach.

Perhaps it has something to do with the world he has grown up in, where thoughts of freedom and revolution are kept behind a seemingly impenetrable curtain. But things are changing—that much is obvious to those who are paying attention. Ondra has heard whispers of it at university, the stilted conversations spoken behind cupped palms, the words of encouragement shared between students after class, the once muffled sounds now stronger, clearer cries full of those forbidden ideas. And the authorities, with their bland uniforms and sleek batons ready to crack—their ways of quick silence, words pulled out of thin air and gone, and their formidable walls built so high they appear never ending. They have surely noticed the changes, as well. The city of Prague has begun to house an electric spark in the air, one that could charge the entire population into a state so powerful they surely could not be contained.

Ondra has been witness to this over the past week, and yet he was separate from it all. He saw the crowds gathering in the parks, in the squares,

outside of the university campus, all the while he walked by with his head turned away. But it wasn't the voice of reason that made him distance himself from his classmates and their movement; it was his father's voice.

"No son of mine will be seen consorting with the likes of these rioters! No, criminals are what they are. And they'll surely get what comes to them! Just as I did…"

His father had been arrested in his youth by the secret police. Ondra supposed that perhaps, before the incident, his father could have been a gracious man. But what he'd gone through had changed him; he became a man solemn and paranoid, who kept himself and his family strapped on an iron-clad leash. And he'd made sure Ondra learned through his mistakes as he did, raising him to be the meekly obedient boy he was, to study in school and then university, to take what job was assigned to him, to support what family he could one day have. And Ondra had done it all, down to the very hardest trial, which was not joining his fellow students in their well-deserved protesting. But Ondra's will to obey his father was dwindling as the voices of his classmates grew louder. And on one chilly November morning, it broke.

When Ondra awoke to the sound of banging at his door, he did not expect it to be his best friends, Dominik and Matej, asking him to join a nationwide strike. The likes of it had never been heard of before, and Ondra could not know if he would ever have the chance to witness something like this again.

"Come on, Ondra! The whole country is doing it!" Dominik cheered.

"Don't you wanna know if things could be different? Don't you want to see if things could be better for us?" Matej urged.

Ondra froze in the frame of his door, his gaze on his friends, but his thoughts were racing away. He heard the words of his father ringing in his head, now blended with the words of his friends: Criminals! Come on, Ondra! Rioters! Don't you wanna know?

But now there was a third voice beating around in his brain, one that seemed to come from his own heart. It said: freedom. Freedom from the commands of his father, freedom from the acts of the government, freedom from all the rules, and the walls, and the silencing.

Ondra, in his resolution, turned away from his friends to face his father, who had come to the door upon hearing the commotion. Ondra met his father's eyes, and an unspoken understanding came between them of what Ondra would choose to do.

His father had just sighed. "Go on, then. But if they take you, I won't be there to save you. And if they don't—well, don't bother coming back, anyway."

Ondra gave his father one last look before going with his friends through the door.

The first thing Ondra learns about revolution is that freedom isn't without cost. He has given up his relationship with his father, however minuscule it was, to fight for his liberty alongside his friends, classmates, and fellow citizens. And now he has nothing but this fight, this passion, this anger which has lived smothered inside of him for far too long. He can only surrender himself to it now and allow it to lead him away.

As Ondra walks with Dominik and Matej toward the square, he begins to think of his mother for the first time in a long while. He's done what he has always said he would do, following in her footsteps, the ones that lead them both out of that house. He wonders where she went, where she might have ended up, and if, perhaps, she felt the same way he did now.

As they reach closer to the square, the three friends begin to hear the unmistakable sounds of thousands upon thousands of people chanting together, relentless words of joy and passion and agony. But behind the loud buzz of ruckus, there is the noise of something else, something which holds Ondra's attention captive. It is a faint metallic clanking noise, coming from something shiny held high in the hands of countless protestors. As Ondra moves closer into the crowd, he realizes what it is, bringing him to a distant memory. The jingling of keys—the last sound he heard of his mother as she walked out the door.

To his left, Matej pulls out his keys and waves them in the air, joining the crowd. "Communists, go home!" he shouts, and quickly Dominik starts to mimic him.

Go home, Ondra repeats in his head. How simple of an idea that was, and yet how hard it could be to obtain. But Ondra knew now what he did not before. The second thing Ondra learns about revolution is that one pays much more for tyranny than for freedom. Because now, instead of belonging to a home of repression, of snide glares and unforgiving words, he may belong to whichever home he wishes to choose. And so could his mother, who started her own revolution so many years ago, more alone than he is now. And so can the people of his country, who stand together and chant in unshakeable unison. Each of their fights, each of their revolutions, align to the same wish, something which now lies so close within reach—a home of freedom.

Eugene Gol
25 years old

Charles University, Prague

Burden of Effort

The writer was at her absolute limit, slouched in the chair, eyes bagged with exhaustion, mildly convulsive in the arms, dried up skin beginning to peel off her fingers from all the intense clattering on the typewriter. The unbearable aching of her fingertips was only marginally surpassed by the annoyance at her chief editor's constant remarks and clap-backs. He was a rare perfectionist of superficiality, striving to milk the most out of his subordinates, despite caring very little about what they actually wrote. You could bring a made-up story to fill your weekly quotas; he couldn't care less. But you had better make it an engaging read. On occasion, she would plagiarise his own writing from years past as a jest and a test. He never noticed, but still found a multitude of errors to improve upon. The writer wondered, in her ever-dissociating exhaustion, what serious scrutiny does the chief editor's work undergo. Mustn't be much, if her tricks on him yield only sly remarks on the text's mediocrity.

She has been staring at this one page all highlighted in red for a few dozen minutes now, having previously only produced an addition of two commas. Nothing else has yet spawned in her head. If all writing is revision, then she must have surely found the process's untimely end. Wait, who said that, she wondered. One of the Frenchmen, their intellectual blabbering was always too dense for her taste and ambition. Was Durrida one of them? Or was it Daronda? No, that is a novel. How do you spell those damned French names, anyway? Drumont, perhaps…

She caught her own mind wandering off again, distracting itself with irrelevant ponderings. Focus, idiot. She scolded her own tiredness like it was an unruly child behind on its homework. Not like any determined focus was to salvage the text, which was, in the words of His Highness Mr. Chief Editor Esq.:

- Too blunt, yet too flowery at the same time
- Factually questionable, despite the recent intelligence
- Stylistically inconsistent in every instance, no matter how homogenous she has tried to make the paragraphs sound.
- Displaying lack of interest

The last pretense was actually new and came after some seven versions of the same few pages she was forced to type out. If displaying lack of interest is the biggest handicap her writing has suffered under such an ordeal, then she must be fresh enough still. She has previously toyed with

the idea of manufacturing the entire story once again. Her reputation is virtually non-existent, but at least that way the scornful eye of chief editor lies firmly satisfied that all his needs were caved to like a gluttonous rich man at a luxury hotel. But no, she cannot do that. Too much is at stake here. Not for her own sake. Her fellow citizens may feel largely indifferent to the plights of some Central European country that, for all they know, has chosen to be in league with the wretched snake of Communism. Why cry foul play now, when you have known the terms and services agreement long beforehand. Or so they assume, provided they give it the due moment of thought to begin with.

In her despondency she started typing a variety of bizarre sentences, just to see if her aching mind and fingers could still produce cohesive thought or waste the ink on paper like it's blood on the street. Huh. Waste of ink like it's blood on the street. Maybe they can after all. Just as she wrote it down, she pictured the chief editor's gripe with that line: "a bit too dramatic, isn't it?"

She tore the page out.

If you ever find yourself ruminating on the variations of the names of foreign literary critics, you may as well fold your work for the day. If you discover that administering irrelevant one-liners onto a page where productive work was to find its dwelling is a healthier plan for your day, you might be due for a reassessment of your life choices. Bluntness in text may not attract aesthetics in language. Hopefully the chief editor was right. And yet, why are we observing historical events that will no doubt affect the course of history like a stain on our clothing: just a chore to run through until another one clutches on to us.

She had recalled an interaction with the editor after the fourth article returned. "You write about civil unrest, make it more civil. What is it with all this coarse language?" "How can unrest be civil?" "Well, how can a revolution be gentle? Isn't that what they're calling it? Doesn't seem like much of a revolution to me, if it isn't even that grand." Where is the vitriol of the universe at the actions of a usurping slight in any scenario? And indeed, how could a revolution as gentle and nonlethal as this be lauded as a prime mark when so many had to lay their heads at a stake for less.

The final version now lies in anticipation, prepared for the final bombardment of notes. But the better one, folded into a small unremarkable envelope awaits its trial, blunt and aggressive as it is, is being sent around among the writer's friends and their friends of friends. It will soon make its way to underground publications and, if her efforts prove fruitful, to

the hands of the better bootleggers who can deliver it where it needs to be, countries not yet going through their necessary revolution. The revolution may not be televised, but with enough people writing and talking, it sure will be heard of.

She, having coaxed the final words of the approved version in anxiety and the many pages of the passionate one in velvety hope, now sits and dwells in utter numbness. I write while they suffer. What more can I do? Where more can I head? We might see the end of a country right in front of our eyes and the general reception is the critique of formatting. There is a cruel joke waiting to be told by someone a little more inclined and a little less tired than her. For now, she sits satisfied enough, yet feeling guilt aplenty for the utter inaction and inability to action on the behalf of those who need it. It must be that pesky human spirit, always compassionate, never willing to sacrifice its own neck. If not her neck, surely her text and that of many others will do the job. Surely somewhere a better text is being penned from a worthier source, reaching the right audience, knowing better ways, dreaming of a brighter future, taking action more directly, in places where it needs to be taken. Surely, if she knows and cares, others do, too.

Tereza Jandová
23 years old

University of South Bohemia,
České Budějovice

The Power of Velvet

Anna, an ambitious student, had always dreamed of traveling the world and embracing freedom. Yet, her aspirations were suppressed by either her family or the oppressive political regime. Her father frequently admonished her, insisting she could only pursue what was possible, not what she truly desired. Nonetheless, Anna remained undaunted by these constraints. She firmly believed that despite challenges, people could dream and work together to make them a reality.

"Pah..." Anna scoffed and mumbled to herself, "Admire someone chosen by others, not the one you choose for yourself," while adjusting her attire. Everyone constantly advised her on how to behave to avoid standing out and cautioned her against mentioning her uncle, who had been imprisoned for his beliefs. To Anna, her uncle was a hero, unafraid to speak the truth. Despite her attempts to appease others, she always felt pride in her uncle and aspired to be as brave as he was.

Tomáš, a cautious student and Anna's best friend, observed her closely as she adjusted her clothes, preparing to hand her back the flower she had brought. His family occasionally spoke of how communism restricted their opportunities and yearned for a brighter tomorrow. Unlike his family, Tomáš chose to remain inconspicuous to steer clear of unnecessary trouble, yet he found himself drawn to Anna, who was his complete opposite.

November 17, 1989, found Anna and Tomáš in Czechoslovakia, getting ready to participate in a scheduled assembly.

"Anna, do you think this is a good idea?" Tomáš asked uncertainly while putting on his jacket. "What if it ends badly?"

"Tomáš," Anna said firmly, gently grabbing his shoulder. "This will be more than just a reminiscence! We are embracing the ideals of freedom and truth, as everyone whispers about here. You don't want to live your whole life like this," She pointed at him playfully. Tomáš knew she meant well, as he nervously smiled and ran his hand through his hair.

After a brief preparation, Anna and Tomáš set off for the meeting point. Within minutes, they reached Albertov, where many students were already gathered. Anna exchanged greetings with her peers as the crowd steadily swelled. Initially skeptical, Tomáš sensed that something much larger was unfolding and harbored doubts. Anxiously moving through the crowd, he observed more people arriving – students, workers, and intellectuals alike. Suddenly, what had begun as a small gathering of students burgeoned into

a vast crowd. Amidst the growing throng, passionate proclamations began to resonate.

"Do you hear that, Tomáš?" Anna said excitedly as she appeared beside him. "It's a huge crowd! And they're with us. They're chanting for freedom."

"I know," Tomáš said with concern. "But..." At that moment, Anna covered his mouth.

"No buts," Anna said firmly. "Don't you ever dream? There's a world where we can live without fear, in unity, solidarity, and love... Don't you want to experience that someday?"

Tomáš pondered, looking earnestly at Anna. "What if the revolution brings only chaos and danger? What if it gets worse?"

"We must believe," Anna smiled and clutched the flower she had brought.

Soon, the crowd swelled in size and energy, with thousands marching through Prague. Loud chants continued, and more people joined in solidarity. Driven by the electrifying atmosphere, Anna grabbed Tomáš's hand and guided him through the march, despite the uncertainty on his face. a sense of unity permeated the air, a collective belief that change was on the horizon.

"We've had enough!" the crowd chanted loud and clear.

It was an overwhelming sight. Tomáš allowed his gaze to sweep across the immense crowd. Signs and placards waved fervently, each one carrying a different message but all sharing the same goal – freedom. Still holding Tomáš's hand, Anna pulled him closer and turned to face him. Her eyes sparkled with a mix of excitement and determination.

"I know it's scary," Anna shouted, her voice filled with reassurance. "But change always is. We can't let fear hold us back."

Slowly but surely, the excitement started to overshadow Tomáš's doubts. He saw determination and conviction in everyone around him and found himself caught up in the whirlwind of emotions. Glancing at Anna once more, he noticed the fire in her eyes. When their gazes met, hers was unwavering. She gave his hand another gentle squeeze and said firmly, "We deserve better."

Tomáš glanced around him once more, and this time, the fear and uncertainty clouding his mind began to dissipate. "You're right, Anna," he declared, his voice growing stronger. "We can't let fear hold us back anymore."

As the crowd surged forward, the energy and excitement became palpable. There was an undeniable sense of unstoppable momentum as people pressed onward. Yet, they encountered an unexpected sight: police in

riot gear had formed a blockade, brandishing shields and batons to halt their advance. Anna and Tomáš exchanged glances, surprise flickering in their eyes. Despite the resistance, the crowd persisted. a steely determination and defiance simmered beneath the surface, fueling their chants and shouts. Anna, holding her flower in one hand, gently set it down with a sigh.

The police line, tense and on edge, abruptly shifted, their demeanor turning more hostile towards those attempting to pass. The sound of batons thumping against bodies filled the air, mixed with the cries and gasps of the protesters. Amid the chaos, Anna and Tomáš were forcibly separated, their hands torn apart as a police officer seized Tomáš's arm, pulling him away from the crowd.

Anna stumbled but managed to steady herself, scanning frantically for her friend. Her heart pounded as she witnessed Tomáš being dragged away by the police, their grip tight on his arms. "Tomáš!" she screamed, but her voice was drowned out by the uproar of the crowd.

The crowd was in disarray, people running and yelling in different directions. As she struggled to navigate forward, a strong hand suddenly gripped her arm, halting her abruptly. Anna spun around and found herself face to face with another police officer, baton in hand. The officer looked at her sternly, his grip on her arm tight.

"You're coming with me," he commanded harshly.

She fought against his hold, straining to break free, but his grasp was too strong. He started pulling her away from the chaos toward a small clearing, where he released her.

His stern demeanor softened a little. "This is only the beginning," he whispered urgently. "Things are going to change. a new world is on its way."

As he finished his words, Tomáš emerged, looking disoriented, onto the same street. Anna rushed to him, and they embraced tightly, finding solace in each other's presence.

The next day, the demonstration was bigger than ever. Thousands had gathered in the city center, holding various signs and banners. The air resonated with the collective chants of the crowd, and music added an unforgettable dimension to the atmosphere. However, what truly captivated everyone was the sound of keys clinking.

Thousands of individuals raised their keys above their heads and gently clinked them together, creating a mesmerizing and poignant effect. The synchronized clinking of keys became a powerful symbol – a symbol of unity and a call for freedom.

Over the next few days, the people's resolve remained unwavering. And soon, they learned that the regime had fallen, and a new world had dawned.

In the wake of the Velvet Revolution's triumph, Anna committed herself to pursue her studies in philosophy more seriously, delving deeper into her passion for knowledge and truth. She became a fearless journalist, traveling the world and writing about societal shifts and transformations.

Meanwhile, Tomáš embarked on a journey within a thriving family business. His endeavors not only benefited those in his community but also drove technological innovation, supported international trade, and contributed to regional growth.

Many years later, Anna and Tomáš reminisced on a warm summer evening. They sat by a peaceful lake, surrounded by the soft sounds of nature. Anna smiled, her face reflecting the warm glow of the setting sun.

"Do you remember when I told you we must believe?" she asked, turning to her friend. Tomáš couldn't help but smile, the memories flooding back. "How could I forget? We were part of something much bigger than ourselves. And we made it."

Tomáš reached into his pockets and found some keys. After a nostalgic glance, Anna did the same.

Together, for one last time, they raised their keys and clinked them in unison. They exchanged smiles, knowing they had been part of a history that had not only shaped their own lives but also the futures of many others.

Bridget Kirkham
21 years old

Anglo-American University

Forty Years

It was hot, unbelievably hot. It was only June in Ohio. Why was it so hot? It hadn't rained enough in the spring, the winter was dry and cold but not cold enough, and autumn was hot into October.

The year had been an election year where the option between two candidates for president of the United States boiled down to the better of two bad choices.

There was no movement in the air, just heat and stale humidity. It was suffocating.

The first option was a fascist that most people believed would threaten to tear apart the already threadbare fabric of the country. The second was a puppet of the party that responded to the opposition party's extreme doctrines by abandoning its base and driving to the moderate middle. To anyone paying attention over the past decade the sheet was being pulled back displaying the dirty mattress comprising the foundation of the United States.

An entire generation was raised in this house with a crumbling facade.

There is a unique sense of theft among this group of people, a government that does not serve them, and so they reciprocate. There can be no permissible government without the consent of the governed. The air in the house was sweltering and stifling, the walls crumbling, and floors falling from beneath them. But they want to rebuild.

I

"It didn't used to be like this," Miranda, her mother, said while taking a sip of rosé from her stemless wine glass. She always got chatty when she drank.

Anna looked to her mother exasperated. This wasn't the first time they had had this conversation, and it wouldn't be the last.

"I understand that politics in this country have changed. Social media has given a voice to many different experiences in this country and most of us paint a picture of unnecessary struggle and pain. Nevertheless, my point is that the issues this country is facing reflect a deeper problem. This republic's two-party system makes any real change difficult because of these two parties' opposite and polarizing opinions, the result is a compromise that satisfies no one. This country is too large—a country of

350 million people all experiencing vastly different landscapes. They cannot have one government," said Anna to her mother.

Miranda dragged her eyes over her daughter with a contemplative look. Her child is representative of a sentiment shared by her generation. Maybe not the breaking up of the U.S. into smaller countries, but a deep anger at the government for allowing her generation to inherit the worst modern circumstances for emerging adults to enter the world. Miranda is gazing at a young adult who was raised during the dawn of social media and watched the world change because of it. She has already seen her daughter mobilize for Black Lives Matter protests, climate protests and gun safety school strikes. If Anna is a representative of even half of her generation, they will not wait for change to come but be the driving force behind a searing and painful revolution that does not stop at borders.

"I agree. Maybe not to that extent." While Anna laughed Miranda continued, "but something major has to change and I believe that your generation will be the ones to fix the world, because unfortunately my boomer generation made a mess of things, and now you all have to fix it."

II

The house was maintained by people that loved what it could be—but wasn't. It was swampish and dilapidated but tried its best to welcome all people—an idea of plurality and inclusion, not well executed. It also became the center of exploitation and unchecked influence that contributed to the breakdown of the very same house that fostered it.

III

Anna was a student of history like everyone should be. She believed that understanding the past was crucial in not repeating it, but history provides important lessons, too.

During her second semester at university, she focused on philosophy, literature, and history classes. Having been born and raised in Ohio, Anna understood that she had an America-centric perspective. Actively shedding this perspective was important for her. Anna wanted a global point of view, so she enrolled in a university abroad after high school.

Upon learning about the Velvet Revolution, Anna considered if its principles could be applied today or if perhaps, they were already being applied around the world. Protests have been an extremely useful form of activism. Whether that is political, environmental, or human rights oriented. Additionally, with the advent and popularity of social media, global

connectivity has increased tenfold creating global communities. This has broadened connections between various groups of individuals, opening the eyes of the populations of the world to the incalculable number of similarities shared by humans. Anna noted that particularly in the twenty-first century, due largely in part to global connectivity, the mobilization that social movements and protests gather is rapid and no longer confined to state, nation or continent. Anna had witnessed or taken part in social movements since she was fourteen. And now as a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate student, she has exposed herself to the unlimited potential of a people united under the same cause for justice and visibility. As she studied the movements of the twentieth century, the Velvet Revolution was a defining example of how to protest, as well as the changes a united group of individuals can achieve. The Czechs represented a tenacious and dedicated spirit as they protested the Communist regime for over four decades. With leaders like Vaclav Havel and a committed group of student activists, this revolution represents a method of governmental opposition leading to a mostly nonviolent transition from brutal communist rule to a parliamentary republic.

IV

In November, the house was set on fire. The subsequent months were occupied by the piece-by-piece disassembling of the remaining burnt shell. After the election an autocratic dictatorship was installed and consolidated power. This once respected and cared for house that was representative of democratic values has fallen to a pile of ash anointed to a theocratic regime.

Anna would not stand by this coup d'etat. She was an outspoken critic of the United States government, because she loved what it could be. She loved the people, the cultures, the history, the community. She intimately understood what drove the protesters behind the Velvet Revolution. The deep love for her country and the promise of its future was stolen from her hands, and maybe like the activists of revolution, the country would be made hers again. But certainly, like the Czechs, there was no time limit or deadline for this revolution because this was her house, and she would rebuild it for forty years.

Pavlína Kořínková
19 years old

Masaryk University, Brno

How could any revolution be velvet? It's a good question with a seemingly easy answer. The word "velvet" symbolizes something soft, smooth, or, in this case, the lack of violence and bloodshed. The Encyclopedia Britannica describes The Velvet Revolution as: "Velvet Revolution, nationwide protest movement in Czechoslovakia in November–December 1989 that ended more than 40 years of communist rule in the country." Simply put, what started as a peaceful march approved by the communist government to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the suppression of Czech students during World War II evolved into a protest that eventually led to the fall of the communist regime in our state. Officially, the entire affair passed without any casualties, which for a situation of this sort is rare, especially in Europe. For that reason, I think the question we should be asking is: How is it possible that the Czech (or Czechoslovakian) revolution was so peaceful?

Applying the knowledge gained in primary school, the Czech nation's history is anything but peaceful. Sometimes we were the cause of a conflict, sometimes we defended ourselves, and sometimes we were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. However, all these scenarios lead to the same point: peacetime in the Bohemian lands is few and far between. Starting with Frankish merchant Samo, who united the Slavs against the Avars, continued by the reign of the Premyslid dynasty that included fratricide, bride kidnaping, or gaining a crown by killing someone else's enemy. Then there was the Luxembourg dynasty during which the Czechs basically coined the term "defenestration"—which comes from Latin "de" (down from) and "fenestra" (window) otherwise described as "a term that refers to the act of throwing someone out of a window"—after committing it three times in the span of 200 years (1419-1618) under three dynasties (the House of Luxembourg, Jagiellonian dynasty and the House of Habsburg). The first one even sparked the Hussite wars which were known for their innovation in common folk weaponry and even the adaptation of medieval socialism (in their times called brotherhood and sisterhood). The history of the House of Habsburg in the lands of the Bohemian crown is filled with conflicts and ends during World War I. Then there were about 20 years of peace and prosperity until World War II started. Shortly after the war, Czechoslovakia fell under Communist rule after a coup, ending the journey through Czech history with the Velvet Revolution. So, how could we have managed, after years of oppression and this rather bloody history, to have an essentially peaceful transition of power? I would like to compare our situation to the non-violent activism against racial segregation in the 60s in

the USA led by Martin Luther King Jr., as it sets a fine example for not only how but why, as well.

Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers believed that violence was not the answer for their issues, and so their protests held the shape of non-violent acts and civil disobedience such as African Americans sitting in the "whites only" section of a restaurant or bus. The response of police and other citizens was not only violent but, in some instances, brutal and fatal. But the black population held their ground and eventually reached their goal, albeit not casualty-free. The opposing society was not only displeased with their demands but actively tried to stop them, believing in their own superiority based on skin color. The non-oppressed society didn't want anything to change because their comfort and "God-given" right was more important that stopping the large inequality. And here is the difference: the oppressors in the American instance were either turning a blind eye or simply refusing to change, whereas the Soviet Union´s oppression was already starting to change its course.

The label "peaceful" was, in both instances, initiated by the citizens as it was their decision to fight their way out of oppression with arguments rather than physical weapons. It was their bravery rather than vengeance that bought them their deserved freedom. It was their love that outsmarted the hate. And here comes the difference between the two events: with the Velvet Revolution, it was not only the citizens that initiated the change, but it was also the regime itself. Yes, the communists wished to stay at power, to hold the regime, but to some extent they were not only willing but also actively trying to make changes. The majority of the country, two sides of the same coin, desired change, with only a handful preferring the status quo. And that is the answer to your and my own question. The reason how any revolution could be velvet is if all sides are willing or wanting to change, and they directly or indirectly agree that bloodshed is not the answer but rather the obstacle. I believe the reason why our revolution was "velvet" is that looking back at our history we saw the death and destruction and, therefore, concluded that words and gestures are not only just as effective as brute force but more powerful, less expensive and, above all, humane. Because at last, we are all just humans and just as our revolution was velvet others could be, too. Ultimately, it is no one else's but our own fault if we believe that violence is ever the right answer. History is supposed to teach us not to repeat the mistakes of our predecessors, and I am of the impression that in those revolutionary times we did just that: we learned.

Kiley Mack
20 years old

Anglo-American University

Imagine me, an American with no connections to the Czech Republic, packing her life into two suitcases, and moving across the ocean to a city that wasn't my own. My only picture of Prague was its nickname, the "City of a Hundred Spires," nestled in the heart of Europe. That girl was naive to the chapters and chapters of history I was about to learn. Growing up in the United States, the struggle for freedom over 200 years ago is a constant discussion. From a young age, we are taught to revere the Founding Fathers and the principles of liberty and justice that they championed through grand spectacles of fireworks, a loud proclamation of pride and grandiosity. However, I've learned now that the Czechs have a very different holiday. The 17th of November is a solemn, reflective day, the emphasis being on honoring the courage and solidarity of those who protested for freedom while also promising to uphold democratic values when navigating the challenges to come. Candles are lit, quiet and unyielding, a reminder of the resilience of those who came before them, a small light in the darkness. a stark contrast from the booming firework—a fleeting, explosive illumination—to the candle, a steady and enduring glow, the very spirit of the Czech people. This comparison embodies why peaceful demonstrations are successful. The revolution I was taught about had to be violent, brutal, and destructive. The Velvet Revolution is proof that you can be disruptive while remaining peaceful.

Sometimes, I find myself sitting in class, gazing out the window, listening to the vastly different languages spoken in the courtyard below, trying to transport myself back decades ago. How strikingly different is the image of a student then, thirty-five years ago—a girl who looks just like me, in this very place. I imagine her trading the classroom for the streets, marching in demand for academic freedom. She's joined by thousands of others, their tenacity, their thirst for the knowledge they were deprived of, buzzing through Prague. How dissimilar her life was to mine now. I sit amongst a diverse group of peers hailing from a vast group of countries. Some have faced a similar struggle to their Czech counterparts, a struggle I, as an American, can't comprehend. Nonetheless, we all receive an education free of bias. I possess freedom at my fingertips, having access to a diverse ray of information. I can express my opinions freely, participate in political activism, and experience many vibrant cultures without fear of reprisal. With this privilege, it is owed to their memory that I make the most of this opportunity I've been given. I must remind myself every time I step on campus that it was because of them, a generation of a defiant, resilient,

and courageous group of students who were integral to the liberation of Czechoslovakia, that I get to be this lucky. But now I realize we aren't so different. We both got to call Prague home, a city where the past and present intertwine. We, bound by the eternal spirit of youth, carry the same hope in our hearts, a hope for an even greater tomorrow.

Magdaléna Michalková
19 years old

LEAF Academy in Bratislava

When the glass doors close behind Eve with a loud thump, she already anticipates the insinuation about her roughness. Grabbing the old-fashioned decorated handle she riotously pushes forward, her eyebrows set in close proximity to each other.

"I'm back!" she says out of habit, expecting a response.

However, all she hears is the soft music of religious adoration. While she takes off her shoes and a warm jacket she tunes into the lyrics.

My chains are gone, I've been set free, my God, my Savior has ransomed me.

Hearing those familiar declarations, her expression softens as she moves to the living room. There she embraces the armchair and closing her eyes she recalls the event that made her so agitated. Lost in thoughts she does not register the sound of the squeaking floor.

"Eve, hello," her grandma's voice disturbs the stillness in the room.

"The loud thump," the woman with gray hair turns the volume of the speakers down and sits on her bed, looking straight at her youngest granddaughter, "has something happened at school?"

Silence sets in the house. The girl thinks about formulating her contemplation when she finally seems to find the right words.

"No. We just talked about the revolution, again," she sends a tired smile at her grandma who reciprocates the gesture.

"I just don't understand why we call it 'velvet'. Talking about how peaceful it was and then in the same sentence the teacher mentions that people were injured and beaten up. But, hey," Eve raises her eyebrows and throws her hands in the air theatrically, "no one was killed, so hurray! Let's call it velvet! Let's give them applause for being decent enough to not kill unarmed civilians!"

Her irritation that seemed to fade away just a moment ago is back. Being aware of her outburst, she sighs heavily and lets her arms rest next to her. She cannot help it. The feeling of injustice fills her lungs, as if preparing ammunition for another word attack.

However, there is no one to attack. Her grandma does not fight back. Instead, she smiles proudly, exposing wrinkles around her eyes. She waits if there is anything more that troubles the curious and verbal girl in front of her. But instead of loud arguments, Eve whispers through her teeth.

"Why do I even care?"

She then stretches the sleeve of her orange sweater and pulls it towards her cheeks, drying the tiny streams of a river that have appeared on her face. Now it is the time for the wise old woman to choose her words carefully, being aware of the trust they share with each other.

"Eve, dear, do you care because you feel that it is unfair? That the name might glorify the…" she pauses to find the right word, but the girl jumps in to help.

"Bad guys? Persecutors? Yes! It's as if we still follow their propaganda—of them being the 'saviors'."

Being able to put into words the ambiguous feeling calms her down. It almost feels like by saying it out loud she is becoming free from the feeling, able to take control over it. Suddenly she realizes that her whole body is tight, so she relaxes her muscles, straightening her clenched fists.

"The name was given by the people. We called it velvet. Those who protested. Why do you think they would agree to this? Or be even proud of that name?"

As usual, Eve's grandma gives leading questions, letting her come up with the answers herself. Hearing those questions, Eve is yet again surprised at the new perspective that she had not considered until now. When she finds the first plausible argument, she voices it out, knowing that she thinks better while talking.

"Maybe because they wanted to call it something other than just the 'Czechoslovak Revolution'? But why do it? If it was just another revolution, then it should be called just that. So, they might have wanted to indicate that this was a special one. Without blood, yes, okay, that's what we always say, but maybe…" she turns her train of thoughts on mute again, trying to catch the idea that is slowly forming in her head.

Her grandma takes a sip of tea that is already lukewarm, but she does not go to warm it up, as not to interrupt Eve who is now looking out of the window with an empty gaze and a subtle frown. Suddenly, her eyes widen, and she turns her head so that it faces her grandma.

"The French Revolution ended up with democracy, but the revolutionists used their newly gained power to avenge the monarchy and executed them. The Russian Revolution was more or less the same: the new system was established, and all opposition was eliminated for good by the new keepers of power."

Her voice gets more confident with each word. Her grandmother bows her head in agreement, happy to see the girl's radiating smile again.

"Those revolutions were part of or started a civil war, proving the newly gained power. But not in Czechoslovakia. Not in Prague, right?"

She gets another nod.

"So, they called it velvet because it shows that even though we gained power afterward, we did not use it to take revenge and finish off everyone

from the communist party, but rather we focused on setting democracy in place. This way it really was velvet, as the party was not even dismissed fully, but it became just another party in a democratic government. They were given a second chance."

"Exactly."

Now both women smile at each other being reminded of the just act of their nation. They are silently commemorating the terrors that individuals had to go through, the changes that came, and the courage of those who stood up for their country and for the next generations. For freedom.

"But I guess it is also a privilege to have a revolution without the need to fight back."

Going over the stories she learned in her history classes, she recalls the unnecessary shootings from the leading power.

"It's God's blessing," replies her grandma, who stands up from her bed with the lukewarm tea in her hand.

"I still remember as if it was yesterday, how I went with my father to the church. When walking away from the mass, I put out my head to see if there was anyone from the party on the streets, and when the coast was clear, I indicated it to the others by walking out with my head down."

She demonstrates it by putting her head out of the doorpost and looking to the sides. Then she looks back into the living room, where Eve is still sitting in her armchair.

"And if there was someone, I would knock on the door, and then walk out."

Then grandma knocks on the door jamb, and with her head down walks away, moving her hips exaggeratedly side-to-side, which forces Eve to let out a short laugh. But soon after someone else pops out of the corner.

"Eve, are you ready for choir practice? We're going in 20 minutes!"

It's her older sister, Martha, brushing her hair energetically.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll just change my bags and I'm ready to go."

Eve stands up from her comfortable place and moves to their shared bedroom. Changing her school backpack for a bag with singing scores, she wonders one more time about the event that happened thirty-five years ago. Thank you for the freedom. That we don't have to hide anymore. That we don't have to put our heads out in fear anymore. Thank you for your courage and for your generosity with those who oppressed you. Thank you.

She finally sees how the name that was chosen to signify the day honors those who took part in the change.

Suddenly, thinking of the name, she is inspired to give it her all when singing that day. As a tribute to those who fought without weapons. And with a smile on her face, she sits down and waits in the car.

At the same time, in the kitchen, grandma pours the hot water into her cup and adds one teaspoon of brown sugar. Content, she turns the speakers back on, and the familiar melody resonates through the house once again.

My chains are gone, I've been set free, my God, my Savior has ransomed me.

Kateryna Mylovydova
20 years old

Anglo-American University

Velvet is exquisite, precious, and unsurpassed. It is considered one of the most luxurious fabrics due to its stunning appearance and quality. It is pleasant to the touch, strong and durable. Therefore, when a series of peaceful civil protests against the communist regime took place in socialist Czechoslovakia in 1989, it was called "velvet". For a revolution, it means being smooth and based on democratic principles. However, this does not mean that velvet is easy to produce or that the peaceful nature of revolution can be achieved in a completely non-violent way.

The history of Czechoslovakia is full of revolutionary events that not only influenced the country's modern political course but also demonstrated the people's desire for independence and democracy. From its foundation in 1918 to its peaceful dissolution in 1993, Czechoslovakia experienced many important revolutionary stages that left a deep wound in the consciousness of its citizens, which grew steadily in the shadow of the oppressed generations and turned into what is called the Velvet Revolution. The words of Czech journalist and dissident Jan Urban describe it this way: "This revolution was not started by us, but by the communists, gradually undermining their legitimacy and inability to adapt to a changing world." The revolution began on November 17, 1989, with peaceful student protests in Prague, which quickly became massive, gathering hundreds of thousands of people demanding change, and holding flowers and candles as a symbol of peace.

Thus, answering the question of how any revolution could be velvet, world history shows that there are few such examples, and it is difficult to say that the revolution in Czechoslovakia was entirely non-violent. The police did not appreciate the "velvet" symbolism and attacked the marching students. Eventually, people became victims of violence in their democratic quest for freedom, walking with "empty hands". The fear of the students with waxed hands demonstrated that there was no way to go back, because they had realized that they were writing their history by launching this irreversible ship that would lead them to independence. It gave people a sense of power to shape their destinies and to defy oppression. Ultimately, the revolution ended 40 years of Communist Party rule in Czechoslovakia and opened the way for a multi-party system and democratic elections. Czechoslovakians were able to vote freely, express their political views, and participate in the political life of the country without fear of persecution. The revolution not only led to the fall of the evil and decaying communist regime but also contributed to social and cultural changes that strengthened the national identity of the two peoples. This event left

a scar of dark memories, which became an example for future generations and played a major role in the far-reaching consequences.

There is no doubt that 1989 was a revolution of hope, an inspiration for the social change that could be achieved through the peaceful demonstration of the will of the people. The spirit of the Velvet Revolution found its echo 30 years later in the Czech Republic in the 2019 protests, where the basis was the same values that the leaders defended and promoted in 1989. People did not want a coup but sought the preservation and protection of the state and everything that had been achieved. The two events are connected by common values and methods of struggle for democracy, justice, and civil rights. The methods were also peaceful: public initiatives organized mass demonstrations and meetings; thousands of people took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with the current government, and most importantly, students, intellectuals, and cultural figures who became the leaders of the movement played an important role. The 2019 protests, although aimed at solving contemporary problems, carried the spirit of the same revolution, reminding everyone of the power of civil society and the importance of democratic values.

Unlike other Eastern Bloc countries where political change was relatively peaceful, for Romania, 1989 was a year of bloodshed. Attempts by Romanians to protest the authoritarian regime ended in genocide. The regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena was one of the most brutal and repressive in the Eastern Bloc, making peaceful protests nearly impossible. The economic situation in Romania was dire, with the country suffering from shortages of goods, low living standards, and economic stagnation. In Romania, Ceaușescu rejected Soviet aid and the influence of Mikhail Gorbachev, establishing his cult of personality. It highlights that the nature of the revolution depended greatly on the type of political regime, the economic situation, and the role of the army and police. These factors determined whether political change would be peaceful or violent. As a result, more authoritarian and repressive regimes, such as Romania at the time, were less likely to implement peaceful reforms and more likely to resort to violence to suppress protests. In countries with a willingness to reform, such as Czechoslovakia and Poland, political change was more gradual.

Delving deeper into the topic of the "velvet revolution", my thoughts returned to my homeland, because during my lifetime already two revolutions have taken place on the territory of independent Ukraine. The Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity of 2013–2014

became defining events that reflected the aspirations of Ukrainians for democracy and European integration. Although the Orange Revolution was peaceful, the people's expectations for the government were not met and nine years later it turned into a large-scale coup. The 2004 revolution was a response to large-scale falsifications of the presidential elections and the peaceful nature of the protests forced the Supreme Court of Ukraine to appoint a second round of voting, where the opposition candidate won. This became a symbol of the victory of democratic forces and the beginning of a new era in Ukrainian politics. But was the revolution effective?

Although the Orange Revolution led to a change in the political direction of the country, the expected reforms of Euro integration were not fully implemented, and the next Revolution of Dignity became for Ukrainians a real struggle for the future of their rights and freedoms. The protests began with students protesting on the main street in Kyiv, quickly gathering people from other cities. After the violent dispersal of peaceful demonstrators, the protests turned into a massive uprising. People demanded not only the signing of an agreement with the EU but also the complete resignation of the president, and an end to corruption and authoritarianism. Clashes between demonstrators and security forces resulted in many deaths. Under the pressure of mass protests, the ex-president fled the country. Both revolutions were directed against corrupt government and authoritarian management methods, but they were very different. They significantly influenced the political course of Ukraine, strengthening its desire for European integration and distancing itself from Russian influence.

Although the concept of a "velvet revolution" sounds appealing, it cannot be applied universally. Velvet revolutions require certain conditions that are often difficult to achieve. One important factor is the presence of a broad popular movement that is willing to wage its battle "empty-handed." Leadership that can inspire and sustain a commitment to nonviolence is another important factor. Velvet Revolution leaders, such as Vaclav Havel, played an important role in keeping the movement peaceful. The existing regime must be relatively open to reform or weakened by internal problems. In the case of Czechoslovakia, a peaceful transition was more likely given that the communist regime was already undermined by economic stagnation and its inability to adapt to the pressures of perestroika and the glasnost policies of the Soviet Union. Despite these factors, the contrasting examples of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime in Romania in 1989 and Ukraine in 2014 illustrate that not all regimes are prepared to give up

power without a fight, and when a regime is entrenched and repressive, peaceful revolution does not always work once and for all. Overall, history makes the Velvet Revolution of 1989 a successful and valuable event. It remains an outstanding example of how determined peaceful protest can lead to meaningful political change, but it also highlights the difficulty and rarity of such attempts on the international stage.

While every country strives for independence and democracy, the peaceful path is often a sacrificial one. Nevertheless, the lessons of the Velvet Revolution have become a genuine inspiration for movements for democratic change worldwide, serving as an example of a people's ability to gain freedom without violence.

Matěj Myška
19 years old

Křesťanské gymnázium Praha

The streetlamps were already on when the head of the demonstration parade cut the corner onto Národní třída. I felt a slight breeze on my cheek, reminding me of the upcoming winter. The atmosphere, as most of the procession reached the boulevard, was electrifying. To this day, I have not felt anything like it. Everyone was brought together by the love for their nation. But also, by the hatred of their regime. Every person seemed so different, but at the same time so close. The feeling of togetherness felt like adrenaline. We felt so strong, but still we wanted peace. We felt so big, but still we wanted so little.

After a few hundred metres the crowd started to slow down, until it stopped completely. From where I was standing, I could not recognize the cause of the stop, although the change in the atmosphere was palpable. Everyone was confused.

When I got to the front of the parade, I finally understood what was going on. Dozens of policemen with protective gear were blocking the street. Why? I thought to myself. It was a completely peaceful and legal demonstration. So, why would they do this? It was incomprehensible to me.

Looking at the police block, I have never hated anyone more in my whole life. These people with helmets and shields. Forcing us to stay where we were. I could not relate to them at all. I could not understand why they would do this. We felt like sheep. Harmless and so easy to herd. There was no way out. We had no other option than to wait.

I am still wondering today who gave the command that completely changed history. What would have happened if they had just let us leave that crowded street? It was like a lightning strike. So fast, and very unexpected. In the blink of an eye, everyone started panicking.

When the first policemen started pushing the defenceless students, the crowd went crazy. Everyone wanted to get out, but there was nowhere to go. Some people tried to fight back; some took off. It was chaotic. The police force was brutal. They were hitting anyone in their way, even if they were desperately trying to escape. And because of what?

I remember seeing this young woman kneeling next to a person with blood all over his body. But the thing I see most vividly are her eyes, filled with horror, unable to comprehend what was happening, covered in tears, because of the shaken reality that unfolded moments ago—a reality where police beat students without mercy, just because they were expressing their opinions.

After that, the memories of this night fade. While I was trying to evade the brutal beating, I got hit. Bad. In that moment, when the baton hit my head, my life flashed before my eyes.

When I woke up from my coma, the world was different. I was different. I had spent the entirety of the revolution asleep. For a while I was shocked. Back then it was unthinkable that the regime would fall. Still, it happened. It took some time for me to understand what really took place on that cold November night. I always thought that the regime was unbeatable, that they would always find a way to beat you. But that day, it all changed forever.

It is interesting that in the blink of an eye, the people who spied on you, forbade you from travelling and beat you in the street, are now face to face with you. You and they are equal. Finally. You are free.

Martin Vacek
22 years old

Metropolitan University Prague

Did they deserve velvet?

For over three decades, democracy has reigned in our fair country. In 1989, Czechs and Slovaks threw down forty years of communist tyranny and once more entered the community of democratic nations. The era of dictatorships that had been choking our people since 1939 was finally over—through a non-violent revolution. The Velvet Revolution is held up as an example across the western world. An example of how a tyrannical system can be overthrown without any bloodshed. a peaceful transfer of power that was eventually followed by an equally peaceful end of Czecho-Slovakia in 1993. Yet, a question must be asked. Was it deserved? Did the regime that spent over four decades oppressing its people deserve this peaceful ending? Or should vengeance have been applied?

The crimes of red autocrats are too many to fully list, but some of them should ever be remembered. 262 people were executed under its aegis in Czechoslovakia. Some were dissidents and political enemies. Others were fellow communists, caught in the self-devouring web that resulted from that vile ideology. More still were spared immediate death but forced into prisons and labor camps, which often proved themselves a mere delay to the death penalty, as the imprisoned suffered from dreadful living conditions. And what of the tens of thousands of people who had to flee our country over those four decades? Be it at the end of 1948 or during the invasion of 1968, many were forced to leave their homeland. In many cases, they never got to return. Do the actors of these crimes deserve forgiveness or vengeful wrath?

One might say that many of the perpetrators were already dead when the revolution came. True, little could be done against most of the butchers that executed their opponents in 1940's and 50's. Yet the officials of the 70's and 80's were, and often still are, alive. They were not only tyrants, but traitors and collaborators with the Soviet occupiers. They would have gladly crushed the protests of 1989 but realized that their position was untenable. And what happened to them? Why, they went on to live fine lives. Some even stayed in politics, inside of a fully legal communist party. The few trials held were only for the lowest level officials and officers. Only in 2022 was any penalty given to a few high-ranking communist officials that still live. Their pensions received a slight cut. At the same time, some former dissidents received no pensions at all, due to the

lack of work opportunities during the red tyranny. Forgiveness is a beautiful concept, but not when it replaces punishment.

It has to be said that Czechoslovakia was hardly unique in this regard. Peaceful regime change was the motto of most of the dissolving Warsaw pact. Poland, Hungary and others went the route of little true punishment. In East Germany, some leading communists did face trial at least, and only his impending death saved Erich Honecker from prison. The strongest punishment was seen in Romania, where Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife faced a firing squad. But Romania also kept a semi-communist government deep into the 1990's, so it is hard to call their revolution more effective at ensuring vengeance. The regimes of the Warsaw pact were dispatched with little bloodshed (except in Romania), so it is no grand surprise that forgiveness was given so freely in Prague and Bratislava. Yet could it have been different?

Over a million Czechs and Slovaks were members of the communist party before 1989. Some took part in the atrocities of the previous years: members of parliament, judiciary, police and so on. They often had long careers under democracy, because there quite simply were no people that could replace them. Most members of the party were people with little or no role in the decisions that shaped our state or enforcing the vile system. If a person wanted to reach higher positions, party membership was required. How exactly can we determine those that were guilty? Is membership of the party a reason for ostracization? Even if it was merely a means to a better life? And if we say that only some were guilty, then where exactly do we draw the line? Collective punishment is nonsense. When it was last applied, our country lost 3,000,000 people and was forever crippled. The scars of ethnic cleansing that we unleashed against our German citizens still haunt our country. But is complete forgiveness the correct answer? And if there is a true middle ground, can it be found? Some moves could have certainly been made. Outlawing the communist party or trials for the highest-ranking communists. But how peaceful would the transition have been if such an option loomed over the regime's higher ups? Would spilling blood of fellow countryman be worth vengeance? Or would our people have merely trapped themselves inside a new cycle of violence that would worsen our state for decades to come?

A reader might be confused that not once has the word justice been uttered in this article. Vengeance and forgiveness rule these pages, but justice cannot be found. This is intentional. The approach of forgiveness throws justice away completely. How can there be justice, if criminals that

ruined the country for decades get to walk free? Why should any criminal fear a system that allows such a travesty? And in vengeance, little improvement can be found. Would it have been just to line the entire communist leadership before a wall and do to them as the Romanians did to the Ceaușescu pair? Why stop there, once vengeful death has been unleashed? Why not continue? Kill the judges, hang the policeman and send every communist officer to the labor camps where they once tortured their inmates. And continue on! Throw every communist out of the country, back to their beloved Soviet Union. As was vengeance visited upon our Germans, so let it strike our communists!

Justice necessitates perfection. It calls upon truth and deserved punishment. And as much as perfection is a myth, so too is justice. There is no united perception that could declare true justice. Put a hundred judges on a case and you get thirty verdicts. Get such a case before all the systems of law in the world and you will read the opinions for the rest of your life. True justice is not something that will be delivered upon this world. So, we have to acknowledge that any solution to the issue of the old communist leadership will be imperfect. And when we reach this conclusion, then we can finally start answering the original questions.

So, what is the answer, then? Did they deserve velvet or not? No, they didn't. The regime officials and many collaborators deserved something much more punitive than what happened. But that is not the true question, is it? No form of response would at once give the guilty what they deserve and preserve a functioning country. Whether it was the correct approach is what matters in the end. We tried vengeance in 1945 and after nearly 80 years, we might finally start admitting that it was a mistake. It has been over thirty years since we tried forgiveness instead. In fifty years, we might know if it was the ideal approach or if we once again merely added to our problems. Maybe it was foolish to give such a full forgiveness. Truthfully though, given all the vile atrocities of our history, perhaps 1989 was the right time to finally start giving peace and reconciliation a chance.

Philip Wetzel
23 years old

Anglo-American University

AAU Master's Scholarship Winner

The region of Central Europe has, over the past century, faced an unprecedented amount of change, much of which has been achieved through violence. Throughout history, this part of Europe has been conquered, ruled, and divided by different powers, oftentimes at the cost of many lives. The story of the Czech lands is unique within this region, from the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the creation of the First Czechoslovak Republic, all the way up to today, as the modern-day Czech Republic deals with the challenges that face the European Union. Over this past century, the Czech lands have witnessed political turmoil the likes of which humanity has never seen, which leads to a question concerning the maintenance of a sense of national identity in the face of such unprecedented adversity. Have the events of the 20th century contributed to an identity crisis for our beloved Czech Republic?

This question can be posed all the way back during the creation of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, as the newly independent state consisted of a diverse population. Aside from Czechs, the country included ethnic Germans in the Sudetenland and in Prague, Slovaks and Hungarians in the east, and other ethnic minority group holdouts from the previous ruling empire. While Europe may be known for being ethnically and nationally diverse, the Czech lands stand out for its diversified makeup. Challenges to maintaining a national identity have only continued from there, as before 1989, the country was three different republics, a Nazi protectorate, and a socialist republic, all of which brought with them new borders, languages, and regimes. Undoubtedly, all this change would have an effect on the population's view of a national identity.

As a student living in Prague, I find one of the best ways to see the region's challenging history with identity is in the buildings I pass each day. I consider Prague's architecture to be a metaphor for the Czech identity, as the styles of architecture are as colorful and diverse as the region's history. The baroque buildings leftover from previous empires, the beaux-arts facades reminiscent of European cities further west, and the brutalist concrete facades erected during the soviet era all tell the story of a region struggling to distinguish itself as its own independent entity. While sprinkled throughout the city you might find efforts made to remedy this challenge, with the emergence of the Czech cubism and art-nouveau movements in the early 20th century, I find that these examples serve to muddy the waters rather than clarify a specific identity for the region.

Perhaps one of the best places to see this diverse tapestry of architectural history is on Narodní Street. While offering an exceptional collection of

different architectural styles, one building in particular stands out in striking contrast to the rest: the New Stage of the National Theatre—a massive, brutalist block of metal, stone, and glass built at the height of Soviet influence. It dominates the street. To me, this building paints a picture of life under the Soviet regime and serves as another metaphor for the lead-up to the Velvet Revolution. Completed in 1983 during the height of the Normalization Period, the building looks unlike anything else in the city and reflects the immovable and oppressive presence of the Soviet regime in the region. Czechoslovaks during this time had largely given up their efforts to change the system after the Prague Spring was crushed in 1968, as many felt it was a hopeless cause. After decades of being subjected to foreign rule, who could blame them?

Yet in 1989, the tides of change swept through Europe, bringing with it a renewed sense of hope for those people who sought autonomy and independence. The independence of countries such as Romania, Poland, and East Germany from the USSR served as a sign to the Czechoslovaks that perhaps it was also time to try their hand at independence. With the memories of 1968 still fresh, a new movement, led by students, intellectuals, and playwrights, was able to achieve autonomy for the country without using force. Gathered in the historic Wenceslas Square in Prague, Czechoslovaks made history through one of the modern age's most peaceful revolutions and established a new democratic government.

Looking back to those days in November 1989, it is truly remarkable what took place. Today, it can be easy to overlook how unprecedented those events in 1989 were, especially for the increasing number of tourists who visit the Czech Republic each year. For many from outside the Czech Republic, the Velvet Revolution may just be grouped with all the other tumultuous events that seemed to define Europe throughout the 20th century. Yet, the Velvet Revolution stands as one of those rare moments in history when the people united under a common cause and identity and were able to make change—all of this without bullets or bloodshed. The Velvet Revolution serves as an example to other democracies around the world that real change can be made by ordinary people. I'm reminded of this each time I walk down Narodní Street, passing the different buildings erected at different points throughout the country's history. While the New Stage still stands as a testament to the era of the previous regime, many new buildings line the storied street, continuing the story of a country that found its way to becoming a prominent, modern, and independent European country without the use of violence.

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How Could any Revolution be Velvet?

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Yeva Khvostichenko, 18 years old; Post Bellum, Prague
Ferdinand Lehmert, 17 years old; Střední odborná škola Drtinova, Prague
Viktorie Kosourová, 17 years old; Škola ekonomiky a cestovního ruchu, Jihlava
Barbora Vlčková, 16 years old; Waldorfská základní a střední škola, Ostrava

Age Group: 19 to 26

Niyota Burkes, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Serena Bush, 22 years old; Anglo-American University
Philip Wetzel, 23 years old; Anglo-American University
AAU Master's Scholarship winner
Rachel Kate Cronnelly, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Post Bellum Internship winner
Isabella Fattore, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Eugene Gol, 25 years old; Charles University, Prague
Tereza Jandová, 23 years old; University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice
Bridget Kirkham, 21 years old; Anglo-American University
Pavlína Kořínková, 19 years old; Masaryk University, Brno
Kiley Mack, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Magdaléna Michalková, 19 years old; LEAF Academy in Bratislava
Kateryna Mylovydova, 20 years old; Anglo-American University
Matěj Myška, 19 years old; Křesťanské gymnázium Praha
Martin Vacek, 22 years old; Metropolitan University Prague