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Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992, by James Krapfl. Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2013. xxi, 260 pp \$45.00 US (hardcover).

‘It is a strange thing,’ muses James Krapfl, that ‘most studies of the Czechoslovak revolution of 1989 ignore or marginalize its most important actor: Czechoslovak citizens.’ If the 1989 revolution was indeed a ‘democratic’ revolution, along the lines of the French Revolution, ‘then it follows that the *demos* – the people – should be at the center of our attention’. Krapfl’s *Revolution with a Human Face*, originally published in 2009 as *Revolúcia s ľudskou tvárou* but now made available in English for the first time, corrects this central flaw.

Inspired by Lynn Hunt’s study of politics, culture and class in the French revolution and steeped in Charles Tilly’s theory of revolution, *Revolution with a Human Face: Politics, Culture and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992* seeks to get under the skin of ordinary citizens who – first in their thousands, then in their millions – created the collective ‘effervescence’ that fizzed across Czechoslovakia in November and December 1989 in the form of demonstrations, symbolic strikes, ‘happenings’, pilgrimages, festivals and gestures of support. It was during these two months, when ‘people power’ held sway in streets and squares throughout Czechoslovakia, that the revolutionary ‘ideals of November’ were formulated and the Communist old regime forced, without violence, to give way to a new, democratic order. The atmosphere was something those who experienced it would never forget. This was the ‘Gentle’, ‘Joyful’, ‘Merry’ or ‘Velvet’ revolution that inspired so many Czechoslovak citizens in late 1989 but was later claimed by many Czechs and Slovaks to have been ‘stolen’ from idealists or ‘corrupted’ by professional politicians.

Sweeping aside the notions that 1989 in Central Europe did not constitute a ‘real’ revolution or merely involved the importation of Western models of democracy, Krapfl argues that a new, revolutionary culture, akin to ‘a new religion’, came into being in Czechoslovakia on 17 November 1989, the day that youthful demonstrators were beaten by Prague riot police. The widespread outrage caused by the Communist regime’s overreaction to a peaceful demonstration rapidly created the national sense of a ‘revolutionary community’, one with distinct hopes, aims and ideals as expressed in hundreds of bulletins, thousands of flyers, and tens of thousands of proclamations, declarations and manifestos, the main sources for this minutely-researched study.

At the heart of Krapfl’s analysis is the notion that the revolutionary crowds held certain ideals, aims and methods as sacred. Among the most cherished were ‘nonviolence’, ‘self-organisation’ and ‘spontaneity’. The revolutionaries’ stated goals were ‘freedom’, ‘fairness’ and, above all, ‘humanity’, ‘humaneness’ or ‘humanness’ (*lidskost, ľudskost*). The Czechoslovak revolution, Krapfl argues, was different from the French Revolution, and perhaps all other European revolutions, in raising ‘humanity’ above ideology. This was its unique contribution. Otherwise, it mostly followed the French pattern, not least in its ‘straightforward Aristotelian understanding’ of democracy and recovery of the ‘lost treasure’ of the revolutionary tradition.

Krapfl’s scrupulous determination not to ignore the Bohemian, Moravian, Silesian and Slovak regions, or anachronistically to ‘nationalise’ accounts of 1989 into separate Czech and Slovak (as opposed to Czechoslovak) narratives, enables him to glimpse many aspects of the revolution that have been missed by others. In late 1989, there was as yet no clear consensus as to whether or not the revolutionary aims of *humanita*, freedom and democracy were best pursued under a reformed socialist or

alternative political and economic system. Although few remember it now, it was still Alexander Dubček, the former Communist Party leader associated with the Prague Spring, not dissident playwright Václav Havel, who was the political favourite across the country. Nor was it nationalism, argues Krapfl, but rather the old Habsburg instinct to centralize, which ended by taming the revolution and dividing the state. It was only after first local, and then regional, demands for self-organisation were blocked by towns and cities that considered themselves ‘more important’ that ‘nationalist rhetoric’ was used in the attempt to keep ‘sacred’ revolutionary ideals alive. This ended with the tragic ‘exclusion of the *demos* from what had begun as a genuinely democratic revolution’ (220) and the division of the country, against the clearly stated will of a majority of its citizens, into separate Czech and Slovak states.

Revolution with a Human Face makes an important and timely contribution to the rapidly developing historiography of the 1989 revolutions in East-Central Europe. Krapfl’s research is exemplary; his style clear and engaging; and he successfully avoids the pitfalls of anachronism, Prague-centralism, and nationalist distortion alike. Less persuasive, in this reviewer’s opinion, is his dogged insistence on placing the 1989 Czechoslovak revolution within a French revolutionary framework even when other contexts -- Czechoslovakia in 1968 or East Germany, Poland and Hungary in 1989 – seem more obviously salient. One could also criticize the study for its failure to incorporate regional, local and national Communist archival sources, an omission now made good in David Green’s unpublished doctoral dissertation (‘The Czechoslovak Communist Party’s Revolution, 1986-1990’, University of Strathclyde PhD thesis 2014). Even without giving us the Communist side of the story, Krapfl has contributed enormously to our understanding of what the *vox populi* was saying

during the Czechoslovak revolution of 1989 and how and why it lost its unified, optimistic tone.

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(850 words)