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Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society, by Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Mücke (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2016; pp. xi + 251. Hardback £22.99).

In *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society*, Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Mücke set themselves the admirable aim of bringing the views of ‘ordinary’ people into narratives of the 1989 anti-Communist revolution and subsequent ‘transition’ to democracy and capitalism. Relying mainly on public opinion polls, published oral historical testimonies and 300 bespoke interviews with 139 ‘narrators’ conducted over eight years (2006 to 2013), the authors seek to uncover the perspectives of a lost generation of ‘normalized’ Czechs. These ‘children of Hitler and Stalin’, born between 1935 and 1955, spent most of their adult lives under Communist rule. Young during the Prague Spring and middle-aged by the Velvet Revolution, this was the generation whose world fell apart after 1989. Almost without exception, the respondents had ‘never thought it would be so hard’ (p. 144) to adapt to the new, post-Communist world. Describing the pain and humiliation, at nearly 53, of having to search for work, one man felt it was ‘more than a human being can take’ (p. 141).

Velvet Revolutions offers a lively compendium, almost a commonplace book, of Czech memories, anecdotes and opinions about the Communist and post-Communist periods (the study does not look at Slovakia). The selections of transcribed speech that form the book’s core are arranged, prefaced and summarised by Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Mücke, who add editorial commentary and occasional explanatory footnotes to contextualise the material. Purists will notice that the interview transcripts have been lightly edited to remove the repetitions, hesitations, fillers and pauses that characterise ordinary verbatim speech. More seriously, there is no explanation as to how interviewees were selected for the study, how statistically representative they might be, or even what specific questions they were asked. Nor is there much acknowledgement of the unintended effects that the phrasing or context of questions, or the behaviour and perceived expectations of the interviewers, might have had on those being questioned. Only as late as p. 139, more than halfway through the book, is there finally direct acknowledgment that ‘some’ interviewees were ‘obviously influenced by virtual propaganda’ about the inherent superiority of free-market capitalism over socialism (p. 139), and that this may have affected what they felt able to share with the interviewer. The specific problems of undertaking oral history in post-Communist countries, where ‘correct’ autobiographies were used to signal ideological commitment, although well explored in James Mark’s *The Unfinished Revolution* (Yale University Press, 2010), are not discussed here. Even the fact that questions on such intimate topics as childbirth and motherhood were addressed to female interviewees by male interviewers does not seem to have elicited any consciousness that this might have influenced the answers given. ‘Unlike intellectuals,’ Vaněk and Mücke airily conclude, ‘women seemed reconciled to their lot as women’ (p. 143).

The topics raised in *Velvet Revolutions* range from the meaning of ‘freedom’ to perceptions of foreign countries; from experiences of working in an agricultural collective to the miseries of unemployment; from the pleasures of foreign travel to the importance of the *chata* (dacha); and range from shame, regret and contempt to

nostalgia for the old Communist regime. As so often with oral historical material, it is the quirkiness and detail of specific anecdotes that leaves the strongest impression. ‘Our uncle’, remembered a craftsman born in 1955, ‘would always bring us chocolate from Switzerland. It was like Christmas! I can still remember how we unwrapped it. The flat was all filled with that smell, first of the wrappings and then of the chocolate. I’ll remember it all my life. To me, that was the West’ (p. 71). A glass worker, born in 1937, judged that little of substance changed from one regime to the next. ‘We have the same freedom as we’ve always had,’ he explained. ‘You can always complain, but it doesn’t do any good if you don’t have enough money or the right connections’. (p. 34).

An amiable feature of the authors’ narrative is the empathy they evidently feel for their interviewees. Even if the honours their ‘narrators’ had received ‘were “Communist”’, they explain, ‘the narrators were rightly proud of them’ (p. 131). At times, however, unwarranted editorial assumptions distort the analysis. In the sections outlining Czech attitudes towards foreigners, for example, the authors seem unable to acknowledge the racism they are hearing. After reproducing some of the negative comments about foreigners expressed by the interviewees, they suggest that chauvinism and prejudice are only apparent, since ‘the negative traits the interviewees detect in foreign countries are meant to serve as a foil against which to preserve and develop positive features of the Czech state, nation, and society.’ (p. 86) Later, when the topic of discrimination towards the Roma (gypsies) comes up, they declare that ‘the Czech Republic has been a target of criticism from international nongovernmental organisations for its poor handling of the “Roma issue”’ and then dismiss the whole complicated topic in a single sentence: ‘Most of our interviews confirmed that the Roma are neglected or even a taboo subject’ (p. 112).

There are also other methodological problems. The ‘ordinary people’, whose opinions are the *raison d’être* of the study, are defined as ‘those Czechoslovak citizens who had no apparent political ambitions... [the] 98% of the population of Czechoslovakia (or later the Czech Republic)’ that were neither ‘Communist Party functionaries at any given level’ nor ‘active opponents of the regime – dissidents.’ (p. 219, note 3). Among those quoted in the work, however, are pre-1989 dissident and post-1989 Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier; the former Secretary General of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Miloš Jakeš; the co-founder of VONS (and, later, Civic Forum) Václav Malý; and the prominent Communist-turned-dissident Jiří Ruml. None of these could conceivably be understood as either ‘ordinary’ or politically disengaged citizens.

No book is perfect. *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society* makes an engaging and welcome, if not entirely rigorous, contribution to our developing understanding of life in ‘Normalized’ (post-1968) Communist Czechoslovakia. It will be of interest to students and scholars alike.

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