


# Book Review: Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society by Miroslav Vaněk & Pavel Mücke

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**Vaněk, Miroslav, and Pavel Mücke. *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xii + 251 pages. Hardcover, \$34.95.**

Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Mücke, academics of Oral and Contemporary History at Prague's Charles University, have done something remarkable. They have created the first work of Czech oral history. Until this book, no work existed that documented people's perceptions and opinions of living in communist Czechoslovakia from 1968 until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, as well as how the Czechs view the more recent capitalist era.

Vaněk and Mücke have compiled oral narratives from 138 Czech citizens, born between 1922 and 1967, and emanating from all walks of life. These narrators discuss a plethora of topics from their lives in communist Czechoslovakia covering education, politics, family life, and leisure activities. They also give insightful commentaries on how the new capitalist and democratic system in today's Czech Republic has changed these aspects of life since the Velvet Revolution. Vaněk and Mücke capture the people's nostalgia for the old, communist system, yet the range of narrations on the various topics mirrors the variety of personalities among the narrators.

For example, the majority of the narrators believe in the practical value of education, though how much depends on their station in life. However, they differ on their view of the effectiveness of education during communism vis-à-vis today's educational system. Many of the narrators feel that education today is effective, while others think that today's teachers are far too lenient towards students, thus failing the Czech tradition of high-quality education. Some of the varied findings are also surprising; for instance, many of the narrators who skipped mandatory Party meetings at work because they thought that the meetings were pointless and ineffective, were the same people who felt that the Communist Party of the 1970s and 1980s was a monolithic entity that would not account for their misgivings!

The book has many wonderful insights into how the Czechs viewed foreigners during Communism. Strikingly, the consensus presented from the narrators is how they may have been envious of the material prosperity of the West, but found that the Westerners' work conditions detracted from the *important* aspects of life: family, friends, and personal growth. Although these narrators found personal value in work, they go on to lament how young Czechs today do not experience the 'fun' that the communist era allowed among friends and family—that young Czechs today are victims of the same trappings that they saw in the pre-1989 West.

While the book gives us such telling perceptions and opinions, the work is not without its faults. Firstly, *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society* was written for a Czech audience, translated from Czech into English, and then edited. The strength of some phrases in Czech are lost when they are clumsily translated into English; for instance, the English translation from one narrator states, "People shouting 'Havel for President,' you know, we all went crazy" when in fact the people were shouting, "Havel na hrad!" ("Havel to the Castle!") (p.

1). This reviewer found himself translating many portions of the text back to the original Czech to understand what the authors and the narrators were meaning to convey.

Secondly, where Vaněk and Mücke could have spent more time explaining the local situations and important cultural documents in Czechoslovakia for Western readership, they left some of these events and documents obscure. For example, they refer to ‘The Ten Commandments of Communism’ and *Charter 77* (a document of civil protest written by Vaclav Havel and others whose distribution was considered a crime in communist Czechoslovakia) with no explanation whatsoever. They also comment on Czech politics, both past and present, in such a way that only those readers who are intimately familiar would understand without clarification. The book is in English and published by the Oxford University Press; therefore, one would expect that this text would have some clarification on these details to make reading it much easier for Western scholars.

Regardless of its limitations, *Velvet Revolutions: An Oral History of Czech Society* is seminal. It is the first work of its kind, and hopefully Vaněk and Mücke have begun a tradition of recording Czech oral history so that other works will reach an English-speaking audience. For any researcher of Czech culture, Slovak culture, or communism, this book must find its way into his or her collection. The narratives and insights are indispensable, and the book will become foundational literature for students of Czechoslovak communism from the Prague Spring to the Velvet Revolution.

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