

James Krapfl: Revolution with a Human Face. Politics, Culture, and Community in Czechoslovakia, 1989-1992, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2013. 292 pp. – ISBN 978-0-80145-205-5.

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The purpose of James Krapfl's book is to write the history of the Czechoslovak citizens in the "Gentle" or "Velvet" revolution of 1989. For too long, the focus has been on the elite actors in Prague and, to a lesser degree, Bratislava, while the active engagement of ordinary people in other parts of the country has largely been forgotten. Krapfl aims to uncover and analyse the multiple meanings ascribed to the revolution by ordinary citizens between November 1989 and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992. The sources studied to this end are flyers, pamphlets, and posters, retrieved in numerous regional and local archives in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Krapfl begins his study with a chapter on the narrative rhetoric of revolution that provides the framework for his analysis. Drawing on Hayden White and Northrop Frye, he analyses four generic ways to plot the revolution: as romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire. The chapter posits a chronological development that begins with a romantic struggle between good and evil at the outset of the revolution on 17 November. Just a few days later, however, a more reconciliatory, comedic framing was used by the revolutionary elites who now negotiated with the Communist leaders. As disappointment with the slow progress started to spread in 1990, a tragic employment of the 'failed revolution' began to dominate. Finally, a satiric turn claiming that nothing had changed and denying that a revolution had even taken place emerged in the spring of 1990 and grew stronger over the following years. The chapter's narrative analysis is rather schematic and condensed, but it is instructive in showing how quickly the revolutionary zeal waned.

Chapter 2 focuses on the revolutionary culture in the hectic November days. Krapfl compares the sense of stale intransience that preceded the revolution with the sudden birth of a new sense of belonging to a community actively changing the country for the better. Chapter 3 provides a quantitative and qualitative study of revolutionary texts such as bulletins and demand lists produced in November and December 1989. Statistics are presented based on a random sample of one hundred Czechoslovak demand lists from November and December 1989, but the presentation of the sampling procedure in footnote 14 confounds simple random sampling with randomized sampling and leaves this reader questioning the claims to geographical representativity. Fortunately, Krapfl's qualitative analyses based on studies of more than one thousand documents are more illuminating and easily redeems the quantitative methodological imprecision. The chapter shows that materialist demands were rarely expressed in the revolutionary documents. Instead, the texts lend support to the view that the revolution was about idealistic aims such as "humanness" and democratic representation. Even the ideal of socialism (in a renewed form) remained popular, especially with citizens outside the capital. The chapter concludes with a critique of Furet's and Habermas's lamentations over the lack of new ideas emerging from the East European revolutions. Krapfl insists that "the ideals of November", elevating human dignity above ideology was an innovation in the history of European revolutions.

In the following chapter, Krapfl challenges the widely held belief that two citizens' initiatives emerged to orchestrate demands and initiate changes in the Czech lands and Slovakia, respectively the Civic Forum (OF) in Prague and the Public against Violence (VPN) in Bratislava. He shows how OF branches also existed across Slovakia until the summer of 1990. This is an important finding as it undermines the simple narrative of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992 as the inevitable result of political communities constituted through parallel revolutions. Instead, Krapfl shows how local and regional struggles between citizens' initiatives to represent as large constituencies as possible eventually severed federal ties and produced the bifurcation between Prague and Bratislava.

In chapter 5, Krapfl zooms in on the implementation on the ground of the revolutionary ideals in the early months of 1990. It highlights the efforts of students and workers to democratize their workplaces and the ensuing conflicts between revolutionary zealots and advocates of moderation — or, in narrative terms, the conflict between a romantic and a comedic plotment of the revolution. The final analytical chapter provides detailed insights about the local-level spokes-persons of the citizen initiatives' and the challenges they faced as mediators between the popular will and the leaders in Prague and Bratislava. It analyses the tragic plotment of the revolution as unfinished and the calls for a second revolution that marked the end of the citizens' initiatives and the emergence of partisan politics. The book concludes with a short chapter that briefly analyses the anniversary commemorations of 17 November.

Krapfl openly laments the remembering of the revolution as a negotiation between elites in Prague and bemoans the forgetting of the revolutionary ideals and their support by engaged citizens across the country. The chapter leaves the reader curious to know more about this satirical plotment of the revolution as its temporal distance from the present grew larger. Overall, the book is skewed towards the years 1989 and 1990, but this does not detract from the fact that James Krapfl has written a richly detailed cultural history of the "Velvet Revolution" as it was experienced from below. The book will be of special interest to area experts and to readers concerned with the history of revolutions.