

## Local-level Officials and “Ordinary” Inhabitants between Proclaimed Utopia and Reality



**Jaromír Mrňka, Svěhlavá periferie. Každodennost diktatury KSČ na příkladech Šumperska a Zábřežska v letech 1945–1956 [The Stubborn Periphery: The Everydayness of the Communist party dictatorship in the Years 1945–1960 on the examples of Šumperk and Zábřeh districts]**, Prague: Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů 2015, 216 pp.

The Czech economic and social historian Jaromír Mrňka's book "Svěhlavá periferie" [The Stubborn Periphery] deals with an extremely important phase of Czech contemporary history — the period of 1945–1960. The subtitle "The Everydayness of the Communist party dictatorship in the Years 1945–1960 on the examples of Šumperk and Zábřeh districts" [Každodennost diktatury KSČ na příkladech Šumperska a Zábřežska v letech 1945–1956] shows how the author made his research on the given period — it is an analysis of regional development in two Moravian districts of that-time Czechoslovakia.

The greatest benefit of the book lies in the method the author uses and the sources he draws from. He tries to capture the everyday reality of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC) rule and the transformations of this reality. If we can say that we understand the given period of Czechoslovak history, it concerns mostly the top-down view, the overall character and the crucial events. These including basic political, economic, social and other developments are quite well-mapped. To a great extent, we have a clear idea of the intentions of the Communist Party. However, the functioning of the Communist regime (but also of the so-called Third Republic in 1945–1948) "down", i.e. at lower levels, is still relatively uncharted. In this sense, the reviewed book is a very valuable contribution to historical knowledge. It allows the reader to look into the mental world of "ordinary people", as well as of local officials of the Communist Party or the public administration. All of these people were going through specific situations in specific places, faced particular problems and, according to them, chose their negotiating and communication strategies. As the author correctly stated in the introduction, "[...] by turning the optics to look down from the perspective of concrete historical actors, great social processes suddenly appear to be far more plastic and more differentiated" (p. 20).

The author's approach to the subject is based on an analysis of period discourses (which the author perceives as "[...] a set of textual statements that relate to each other and — interconnected through time and space — create a whole that is tied to language, social structures and acting", p. 23), namely the ones of the central power, regional and local representatives of the Communist Party and the "ordinary" inhabitants. It is therefore the language that actors use in communication strategies. This is necessary because, despite all its cruelty and barbarism, the regime is forced (especially at the local level) to negotiate with the people in some way and, at least in part, to legitimize its dominion. The author has managed to show a very good example and analysis of the contemporary "meta-language" used by different actors. He reveals correctly that this "meta-language" is imposed on the one hand by a discourse from



the top (periodic slogans, which often changed in the empty clichés and even the authors sometimes failed to understand them), but on the other hand, the authors often use it deliberately in their communication strategies (for example, emphasizing the indispensability of the work of the person concerned for running the business and thus “constructing socialism” when applying for a flat).

In summary, the book consists of three parts which are chronologically arranged. The author has decided not to respect the periodization commonly used in the literature (1945–1948, 1948–1953, and 1953–1960). It was a good decision. It is not disputed that for the political development at the central level, the above dates are fairly unambiguous. However, the author deals with the local level where the CPC dictatorship (and its various crises and stabilizations) had somewhat different (generally speaking delayed) dynamics.

The first section of the book deals with the years 1945–1951, the period from the end of the war to the fundamental stabilization of the new regime. At first it analyzes the issue of border regions with their specifics (forced displacement of the German population, subsequent settlement and creation of a new social structure). The confrontation of the mental world of the old residents and the newly-settled people, which were to a great extent contradictory, is very interesting. It could be demonstrated, for example, on the perception of wartime. Old residents, who remained in the detached areas regardless the annexation of the regions by the third Reich, perceived this act as “the heroic time of their national resistance”. On the other hand, they were “directly or indirectly suspected of co-operation with the Germans and of potential betrayal” by the newcomers (and the general discourse) (p. 51). In addition, the author also rightly points out that, for example, incoming peasants on farmland were not usually among the most capable farmers — the successful farmer would not leave his fields inland. Groups with very specific traditions (such as re-emigrants from Volyn or Romania) also played their part. In the second part of the first section, the author devotes himself to the creation and consolidation of the communist regime and shows to what extent the general proclamations (or the expectations of the central authorities) differed from reality, which of course the population perceived and expressed to the local representatives. The incipient obsession with criticism and self-criticism also played its role in the doubts of the inhabitants (but also of the local officials).

The second section of the book deals with the years 1951–1956. This period started with the consolidation of the dictatorship and ended with its stabilization after the 1953–1956 crises. Jaromír Mrňka analyses the perception of the culminating terror, especially inside the CPC (fears and chaos following the Rudolf Slánský trial and execution, as well as the other affairs, but also the instrumentalization of those affairs in interpersonal conflicts and fights). He records the interesting comparison of Slánský to the local removed officials (including neologisms like “stavinohasm” — “stavinohovština” as the terms for incorrect behavior and opinions of the former regional political secretary of the KSČ Josef Stavinoha, based on the example of generally used “šlingism” — „šlingovština“ after the executed KSČ official Otto Šling). The general trend, until the second half of the 1950s, was to blame the saboteurs (mostly those, who could not defend themselves or object, such as, for example, the executed

Rudolf Slánský) for all the mistakes and problems (p. 98). Notable is also the obvious general confusion after the proclamation of the “new course” in 1953.

A very important role (or a key one) in both districts was played by agriculture. The collectivization (founding of “United agricultural cooperatives”, JZDs) was successful only in part and after 1953, some of the JZDs fell apart and dissolved. The lack of qualified personnel in industry was another problem. The author excellently analyses very smart (or even cunning) communication strategies of the citizens with the local officials regarding their various requests or complaints. The officials could not often deal with that and sometimes even agreed (like e.g. by assessing the private farmers — who refused to join the cooperatives — as being very competent, hard-working and successful, p. 179).

The third section of the book deals with the final years of the period under review, i.e. the stabilization of the regime in 1956–1960 culminating in proclaimed achievement of socialism in the 1960 Constitution. The author deals firstly with the transformation of the understanding of the legitimation of the regime, moving from the utopian goal of building communism to the more pragmatic goal of raising the standard of living of the population and ensuring social security. Parallel to this, the emphasis on “honest work”, typical of the post-war period and the first years of dictatorship, is shifting to “work and loyalty to the regime”. Such “work and loyalty” can help people to be treated as “first-class” citizens allowed to claim those benefits of social security and increased standard of living. The author convincingly shows how this reformulated legitimation of the regime was confronted with the inexorable reality of the Stalinist-type shortage economy — for example in housing (young families had to wait for years to get a flat/apartment) or supply (lack of goods, poor quality, narrow variety of products). There is also a renewed perception of the border areas as a specific territory (which was abandoned in 1948–1950), this time, however, as a problematic territory. This was also associated with the re-emerging mistrust of the Germans, which the regime and its local leaders could hardly face. And finally, the author shows on local cases how the proclaimed desire to stabilize and adhere to “socialist legality” differed from reality, for example, with renewed pressure on rural collectivization.

A sort of deficiency of the reviewed book, in my opinion, is an insufficient emphasis on the daily and general pressure of the regime against the population. Mrňka is fully right that the regime — despite its ambitions — did not (and logically even was not able to) discipline its population absolutely and had therefore to negotiate with citizens. On the other hand, a part of this negotiation was, in my opinion, basically some sort of rituals without deeper sense. In other words, the mentioned “meta-language” could have been (and in large measure was) some “mirror” of real mental processes — but not necessarily. It could have been just an adaptation to the pressure and circumstances, a form of speaking something that was expected to be said, without further connections. This was often the case of “common” citizens (as a part of their communication strategies), but also of officials (e. g. trying to keep their positions and jobs). As a reviewer, I feel a little lack of this message in the book. A researcher in the field of contemporary history is — of course — aware of this fact. However, it is questionable, whether this is the situation of all the potential readers.





To sum up: The book “Stubborn Periphery” is a very good case study of the everyday life of the Communist dictatorship and its previous three-year period. In some areas, it is brilliant, especially when demonstrating and analyzing the population’s negotiating strategies towards the regime. It shows how locally the regime had to communicate with the population, and in this communication unwittingly showed its limitations and opened spaces for local differences. The book is absolutely recommendable to all the scientists researching the fields of social and economic history, the history of everydayness or the general period under review.

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