

A Fully Functional Autarky: Socialist Czechoslovakia and Drugs

KOLÁŘ, Jan: O problému, který měl nebýt: Drogy v socialistickém Československu
[A Problem that Should Not Have Existed: Drugs in Socialist Czechoslovakia], Brno: Doplněk 2018, 159 p.

If a historian sets about exploring a problem of pressing public concern, it is necessary to be on one's guard. Drug addiction indisputably ranks among such complex problems.

It is a social phenomenon that operates in many dimensions: medical, legal, political, social, culture and media-related, and for a number of people, personal. To broach the subject in a way that avoids a superficial scandalization and to accommodate the technical demands of experts from the field of psychiatry or criminology, is a literary and intellectual challenge.

I can already say that the author has managed to tackle this topic in a dignified manner so that it is not an examination of a collection of curios of persons living on the margins of society, but a serious contribution to the perception of normality (and deviations therefrom) in socialist Czechoslovakia. The recently published publication is the author's dissertation,¹ published with financial support for the grant-aided project "The phenomenon of self-destruction in socialist Czechoslovakia (1968–1989)" completed in 2016 in the Faculty of Arts of Charles University.

The publication is structured in a coherent and reader-friendly manner. It is divided into six chapters, which comprise three thematic areas, the first of which is devoted to the changes in the circumstances of drug consumption.

The author places the roots of drug addiction in socialist Czechoslovakia in the context the socialist healthcare and the boom of the pharmaceutical industry in the 1950s. A very liberal approach to allowing the population access to medicines, which was based on the post-Stalinian promise of improving the quality of life through scientific and technical means, gave rise to what was known in Czechoslovakia as "pill culture", a social situation marked by an excessive domestic consumption of medicines (such as analgesics).

A counterpoint to individual drug consumption in the 1950s and 1960s was to be a drug addiction subculture emerging at the end of the 1960s. It was typical of the drug addiction subculture that it used drugs not at home and individually, but in public spaces and collectively, in "junkie gangs". The author's central thesis is that the youth drug-taking subculture of the 1970s developed from the pill culture fostered by the generation of their parents, and also drew on foreign inspiration, especially the world of the hippies. According to the author, the pill culture, and the domestic environment, provided the material, i.e. synthetic drugs and synthetic volatile substances (toluene, cleaning agent Čikuli), whereas the West influenced the cultural and social milieu.

¹ Jan Kolář, *Drogy v socialistickém Československu*. Dizertační práce, Filozofická fakulta UK, Ústav hospodářských a sociálních dějin, Praha 2018.



The second thematic area is the reception of the problem of drug addiction in the professional circles, among psychiatrists, psychologists and criminologists, and the way in which drug addiction was reflected in the legislation. Among the psychiatrists, from the late 1940s to the second half of the 1950s, drug addiction was a relic that was overshadowed by alcoholism. The first mention of the occurrence of drug addiction was identified by the author at the end of the 1950s. The dominant narrative of the causticities concerning drug addiction in the 1960s was one of a personal and individual tragedy, regarding drug addicts as people deserving pity, whose family relationships and workplace performance are troubled owing to the abuse of drugs. A growing self-esteem of experts in the field of addictology was manifested in the second half of the 1960s by their calls for restricting access to addiction-inducing drugs.

The state power responded to these challenges by introducing a prescription for some preparations, but what was symptomatic of it was slowness in the response, especially after the onset of normalization. During the 1970s the drug addiction narrative began to be dominated by a narrative about drugs being a source of danger and violence. The newly formed junkie gangs were a source of criminality, whether violent or economic, and health risks for the members, from unintentional overdoses to targeted self-harm.

However, according to the author, the drug-related legislation was not mindful of the material autarky of the Czech addicts and thus prevented criminal prosecution of drug addiction as such. The police had to rely on the criminal character of the lifestyle circumstances of the drug addicts. The key thesis of this section is that, although the state authority responded to the threat posed by drug addiction to the normalizing “work calm”, it did so very slowly, and decisive action was taken only within the framework of the ‘restructuring’ in the second half of the 1980s.

The third and last thematic area is the perception of drug addiction in the media and the arts, specifically in film and literary production. Originally, drug addiction was presented as a logical side effect of capitalism, related to unemployment and alienation, a phenomenon that can only gradually die under socialism rather than thrive. Drug addiction was, in short, presented as a “phenomenon alien to socialism”, and this interpretation was perpetuated in the Czechoslovak public space until the second half of the 1980s when it was no longer considered believable. According to the author, the media reported abundantly on drugs as a Western problem. At some moments, in their efforts to warn young people against the dangers of drugs, the media were more likely to incite them.

Taking the example of film production at the end of the 1960s when the issue of drugs in the Czechoslovak public space began to be thematized, the author shows the development from the foggy ideas of filmmakers and spectators about the exotic Western drugs alien to the Czechoslovak environment (heroin, cocaine, marijuana) to a specific notion of the reality of the use of domestic drugs in Czechoslovak industrial agglomerations during the restructuring period.

While the 1970s were dominated by film and literary depictions of the genre of crime and detective stories, a case in point being an episode titled *Mimicry* in the series ‘30 Cases of Major Zeman’, by the 1980s there were already some naturalistic perspectives to the life realities of people on the side-lines of the socialist society,



such as *Memento* by Radek John. This topical area, though it may seem at first glance somewhat out of place in relation to the previous parts of the book, provides a mirror, which reflects the relationships of drug addiction, state and socialist society. The author concludes that the problem of drug addiction in the period of restructuring began to be a problem of the socialist society, which corresponds to Pullmann's book *Konec experimentu* [End of experiment].² Thus, drug addiction was one of the fields in which the communist dominion discourse failed.

I consider the author's approach to be helpful and inspiring in the way in which the author deals with the integration of the explorations of expert cultures, political leaders and art in relation to the problem of drug addiction. It is well to highlight the breadth of the source base, as well as its interpretive work and alignment into the context of the social history of Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 20th century. As helpful is an enumeration of the categories of medicinal substances and drugs, as well as their effects. It should also be noted that this book is eminently readable.

The only shortcoming in the peer-reviewed publication is that it was published without a list of sources and secondary literature. The literature can, fortunately, be obtained from the annotations. The lay reader might note some contrast between the ease with which the text is built and the occasional use of English or an unexplained term that is not in common use. However, this is only a minor reservation, which does not detract from the overall positive impression of the book.

The book by Jan Kolář is a serious and at the same time readable work that should not escape the attention of researchers devoted to the history of socialist Czechoslovakia, medicine or marginal social groups in the second half of the 20th century. I am convinced that it has much to say, by dint of it being easy to read and topical, to readers outside the historiographic community, especially those who are dealing with drug problems in the Czech Republic.

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² Michal Pullmann, *Konec experimentu: přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu*, Praha 2011.