

From Restricted to Revolutionary: The Trajectory of Human Rights Expression in Czechia

**FSU
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Study Abroad Program: Social Work and International Affairs: Human Rights

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Authoritarianism vs Democracy



Timeline of Events

- The history of human rights and the expression of these rights within Czechia is defined by the political systems that governed the country in the 20th and 21st century.
- Under the authoritarian rule of the Soviets, certain fundamental human rights like the right to liberty, security of person, and fair trials were not guaranteed.
- Since becoming a democratic country in the early 1990s, an increased number of human rights have been exercised by the Czech people, even as the country has been tested by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.
- Czechia (then known as Czechoslovakia) was liberated in 1945 by both American and Soviet forces during the Second World War, but the Czech's ended up within the "Soviet sphere of influence".
- Czechoslovakia was incorporated in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1948 following a coup by the pro-Soviet Czech communist party.
- A movement known as the "Prague Spring" gained traction in 1968, pushing for reforms from the authoritarian Czech government, this movement was put down by the Soviet military in August of the same year.
- Student protests sparked the "Velvet Revolution", a series of nonviolent protests, in 1989 which ultimately led to the end of Communism in Czechia.
- A new government, a unitary parliamentary republic, is founded in 1991.

Methodology and Perspectives



■ I chose monuments specifically as a dimension of analysis because these structures represent a concentrated effort to represent and remember a certain event in history. These structures effect the "collective memory" of a populous, which impacts ideas around human rights and the memory of human rights violations.

■ In order to explore these changes, I focused on the built spaces of the city of Prague itself and certain international metrics of human rights expression to obtain a clearer picture of the trajectory of human rights in Czechia.

Main Points of Focus

1. Comparing politically motivated monuments built in Prague during the communist era and the present era of democracy.
2. Analyzing the work and influence of NGOs within Czechia under communism and democracy.
3. Analyzing data on Czechia's participation in international human rights agreements during and after communism and how human rights were exercised through these agreements.



■ These three methods of analysis allowed me to explore my Community Based Interest in how human rights are expressed and exercised under different political systems.

Monuments and Their Impacts

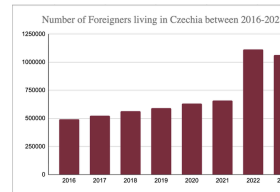


- The complex political history of Prague has led to several monuments commemorating both WW2 and the fall of communism to come and go over the years. All of these monuments concern human rights in some way, whether they condemn violations of human rights or celebrate the defense of them.
- Monuments during the Soviet era usually commemorated victories by the red army during WW2 or glorified Communist thought and history
 - These were extremely difficult to find in the city, as most of these statues have been removed since the fall of the Soviet regime in 1989.
- Monuments built after the Soviet era usually focused on the Czech people themselves, specifically how they banded together to defeat communism.
 - The human rights abuses under communism were of particular importance in many modern monuments, especially the "Memorial to the Victims of Communism" (right).
- I found that each monument I either saw in person or researched was attempting to advance a version of history that supported the political system of governance at that time.



Internationalism and Human Rights

- During my summer experience, I engaged with a variety of NGOs within Czechia that receive funds from both the Czech government and international sources to do their work.
- Because of the centralized nature of the communist Czech government in the 20th century, there was very little influence from non-profits or the civil society sector prior to the Velvet revolution.
- NGOs uphold important human rights that government agencies cannot always address. This aspect of life has been in strong demand since the fall of communism with "nearly half of all Czech citizens being involved in a civic organization".



- Since the fall of Communism, Czechia has signed onto several human rights treaties with the UN, specifically treaties that allow for increased emigration and immigration and the freedom of assembly.
- During the communist era, it is estimated that over 550,000 people illegally emigrated from the country.
- Since then, the number of immigrants has slowly increased and has spiked in recent years due to the war in Ukraine.
- During Communism, movement outside of the country was strictly prohibited for Czech citizens and immigration was heavily restricted for people coming from non-communist countries.

La Strada

Findings

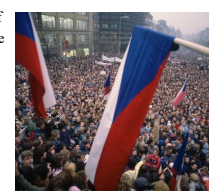
■ Integrating myself into a country that has experienced such intense political strife in the last 30 years opened my eyes to how large political events can impact the reality on the ground.



- Through this study of political monuments and government data, I was able to track the seismic changes that occurred in Czechia after the fall of Communism and how they impacted the communities I interacted with while abroad.
- Finding almost no communist-era monuments in Prague showed me the Czech government's desire to move past that period in history and instead honor the human victims of authoritarianism.
- The increase in a civil society sector and the number of foreigners living in Czechia point toward a nation that is more internationally integrated than it has been in its communist past.
- Integration within the global community is an effective way to uphold International human rights.

Moving Forward

- Human rights research has grown into a passion of mine throughout my Global Scholars research. The topics explored in this project can be applied in other settings, both international and domestic.
- The choice to study monuments was, in part, motivated by the debate over Confederate monuments in the United States. Analyzing how other nations deal with unsavory aspects of their pasts can contribute important information to this domestic policy issue.
- Studying a region of the world so intensely effected by war led to the discovery of how modern warfare can impact entire regions of the world, specifically in the context of refugee crises. The experience I had in my program with getting to hear firsthand from NGOs helping refugees put the theory that a strong civic society leads to more human rights enforcement into practice.



■ This theory can be applied to other nations that have strong civil societies and other that need more development in order to determine what human rights priorities can be positively impacted by government involvement in the non-profit sector.

References and Acknowledgements

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