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DOI 10.48261/INRR250710

1989 ROK ZMENY.

ZBORNÍK Z MEDZINÁRODNEJ VEDECKEJ KONFERENCIE, BRATISLAVA 4.–5. NOVEMBRA 2014.

**1989 – YEAR OF CHANGE. ANTHOLOGY
OF THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE,
BRATISLAVA 4–5 NOVEMBER 2014,**

ed. Jašek, Peter.

Bratislava: Ústav pamäti národa, 2017

Abstract

The purpose of this review is, first and foremost, to introduce and briefly describe a collection of papers devoted to the political changes of 1989 in Slovakia and Europe. It also offers an opportunity to provide an overview of historical and social research conducted over the past decade on the changes of 1989, their context, and their consequences in Slovakia. Although numerous works have been published, most concentrate on how witnesses recall and interpret the events. Certain areas remain neglected, such as the situation within the Communist power structures or the State Security apparatus in Slovakia. To some extent, this is also true of the volume under review. It should be noted that the Slovak

public also reads works on 1989 published in the Czech Republic. This is due not only to linguistic proximity, but also to similar developments in the two societies, which were at the time part of a single state. In addition to the state of historical research, another key question – raised not only in the present proceedings, but also in many other publications on 1989 – is whether, and in what ways, there have been changes in the manner in which Slovak society relates to this historical event, which so profoundly transformed the country and enabled it to achieve independence. It seems that the perception of 1989 in Slovakia is becoming increasingly critical.

Keywords: Velvet Revolution, November 1989, communist party, students, dissidents, State Security, StB, ŠtB

The proceedings were published three years after the conference, which will mark its eleventh anniversary this year. Has anything changed in the way people in Slovakia assess November 1989? How has the historical study of the revolutionary change progressed since 2010?

The year 1989 unquestionably marked an extraordinary historical event in modern Slovak history. It also created the conditions for the establishment of the modern independent Slovak Republic on 1 January 1993. In Slovakia, 17 November was declared a national holiday, the “Fight for Freedom and Democracy Day.” However, this only happened in 2001.

In his introduction to the volume, editor Peter Jašek points out that only a short period has elapsed since the events under examination (Jašek 2017). Nevertheless, a number of documents, collective monographs, and collections of memoirs have already been published in Slovakia. Jašek admits that, even in comparison with neighbouring countries, Slovak historiography still has much ground to cover. He observes that historiographical works dedicated to the 1989 political change published in the Czech Republic also represent an important source for Slovak historiography.

Important anniversaries have often spurred a surge in publishing activity. After the proceedings under review were published in 2017, there was a notable increase in publications for the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. These books examined the protagonists and the changes in society after the 1989 revolution (Hrīb and Mojžiš 2019; Kňazko 2019; 1989. *Cesta k slobode* 2019; Kotian and Štulajter 2019). The female perspective on 1989 was

particularly noteworthy (Maďarová 2019). Some works appeared in new and updated editions in 2019 (Hudo 2019; Ondruš 2019). The Slovak Nation's Memory Institute issued a monograph in Slovak and English, accompanied by photographs and documents (Jašek et al. 2019). In 2022, a book of interviews with protagonists was published, supplemented by contributions from historians and journalists on the 1989 student movement (*Hasta la vista* 2022). Although a number of books and papers on the topic have been published in Slovakia since the 2014 conference, most have focused on the reflections of witnesses on 1989 and the subsequent decades (Hrīb and Mojžíš 2019; Kňazko 2019; 1989. *Cesta k slobode* 2019; Kotian and Štulajter 2019). This is why “1989 – Year of Change” remains relevant, as it presents the results of historical research.

The proceedings include 21 of the 24 papers presented at the 2014 international conference. The conference was co-organised by the Slovak Nation's Memory Institute, the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, and the Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security. The volume features texts in Slovak, Czech and English, depending on the language of the original conference presentation, with each text accompanied by a summary in another language. The common theme across all contributions is, of course, the change of 1989. Some also describe developments prior to that year, but most focus on the impact of November 1989 on Slovakia in the years and decades that followed. In addition to Slovakia, the authors consider the situation in neighbouring countries, though always separately.

The first conference session was dedicated to the international context. The study titled »*Novoje myšlenie*« *ako faktor revolučných zmien v stredovýchodnej Európe* [“*Novoye myshlenie*” as a Factor in the Revolutionary Changes in Central and Eastern Europe] was written by Beáta Katrebová Blehová (Katrebová Blehová 2017). A substantial body of literature is available on the topic of Soviet politics in the second half of the 1980s, as well as online sources. The author focuses on Gorbachev's policy towards the Soviet satellite states, which soon became markedly cautious, even passive, compared to the previous period. The reason why will probably remain the subject of constant speculation. Soviet policy and East–West relations (USA–USSR) in the late 1980s can be viewed from multiple perspectives, and different aspects can be emphasised. What makes this contribution particularly valuable is the author's effort to present not only the viewpoints of the winners, but also the ideas of those who were later defeated. Such

a perspective is largely absent from the other papers in the volume, as well as from other works published in Slovakia. We can hardly accept the claim that the USA disregarded the USSR in 1990. The escalating crisis in the East raised concerns that were exacerbated by the 1991 August coup in Moscow. Certainly, no one wished for rapid destabilisation. The Warsaw Pact continued to exist and remained a significant factor. Such a rapid dissolution of the Pact was not envisaged in 1990. Although the change in Soviet policy undoubtedly enabled and accelerated social changes in the former satellite countries, it is difficult to say whether this was due to naivety or ineptitude. The ultimate consequences, however, were certainly far from what Gorbachev intended. On page 25, the author mistakes the plan for the partial withdrawal of Soviet troops in Europe (by 10%) in 1989–1990 for the total withdrawal of troops from the territory of Czechoslovakia, thereby concluding that the total withdrawal was agreed upon before the outbreak of the 1989 revolutions and was therefore not one of their achievements.

In *Rok 1989 – história alebo súčasnosť?* [The Year 1989 – History or Present?], Juraj Marušiak offers a remarkable analysis of the developments in Slovakia in 1989 and the subsequent transformation of Slovak society (Marušiak 2017). He does not mention the weakening pressure from Moscow, a circumstance distinctly different from any other time during the Cold War. The USSR focused primarily on its own mounting internal problems, little alleviated by Gorbachev's unpredictable policies: the declaration of prohibition, the unilateral reduction of Soviet troops in Europe, and indications to the satellites that they should solve their own problems. The export of 'restructuring' to satellite countries did not meet with any real response among the populations, completely sceptical and apathetic after many reform attempts. However, most researchers do not take into account the inertia of ever-increasing arms spending and oversized armed forces, which placed an excessive burden on the economy, not only in Czechoslovakia. Attempts at reversing the trend were not successful. In Czechoslovakia, November 1989 revealed the emptiness of society and exposed as false the illusion of an advanced socialist society presented by the monopolised media, even when it came to the government and political elites. Practically everyone left their red banners behind without even trying to defend them. Interestingly, the author observes that the changes in Europe were not driven by a clearly articulated alternative political programme, but by a desire for remedy, firstly through "third way" models, or by returning to an undistorted form of socialism or to the pre-communist period. The author notes

that the post-November changes had only a limited impact on Slovak society, which remained in the shadows for a long time – in Czechoslovakia, but also in the European context. This, however, is just a brief introduction to the study of where Slovakia stands thirty years after the revolution and, ultimately, what we still do not know about the November 1989 change. According to Marušiak, Slovak society has yet to fully detach from the pre-November era, because, notwithstanding the political backdrop, it experienced substantial modernisation under communist rule. After 1989 disappointment, rather than satisfaction, seems to be the prevailing sentiment. The author points out that in Slovakia voices critical of the 1989 change play an important role. November is an important reference point but, for Slovakia, breakthrough events came later. November was only an important beginning.

The following two papers explore events in neighbouring countries. In *The Diplomacy of Change: the International Dimension of the Polish Political Transformation in 1989* Patryk Pleskot examines the development of the famous Polish round table talks, the subsequent election campaign, and the 1989 government crisis, drawing primarily on Western diplomatic documents (Pleskot 2017). While extending political support, the West clearly expressed concerns about unforeseeable developments and the possible escalation of problems. The USSR's actions, too, could not be predicted with certainty.

The situation in Hungary is described by Szilvia Köbel in her paper *Establishing the Rule of Law is a Process. 1989 – The Changing of the Political System in Hungary, Focusing on Freedom of Expression and the Activities of the Political Police* (Köbel 2017). By the late 1980s, it had become evident that the economic crisis could not be resolved without political liberalisation. Köbel thus convincingly explains the inevitability of political change in Hungary. She gives ample space to summarizing, through several excursions into the years 1986, 1987–1988 and 1989, how the political police's stance towards the opposition evolved in response to changes in the policy of the Hungarian United Workers' Party (*Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt*, MSZMP).

The second conference session is aptly titled “The Fall of the Communist Regime in Slovakia.” In his paper, *Bratislavskí vysokoškolskí a pochod mestom 16. novembra 1989* (Bratislava's University Students and Their March Through the City on 16 November 1989), Juraj Kucharík describes an event that, to a certain extent, has been overshadowed in the broader context of the revolutionary developments in Czechoslovakia. (Kucharík 2017).

Historiography records it without further analysing it, likely under the influence of the events that followed. A planned demonstration to mark the 17 November was held a day earlier due to the practical concern that fewer students would participate on a Friday, as they usually left for the weekend. The author provides an overview of how this demonstration is represented in the literature and describes the context of the students' critical movement in Bratislava in 1989. The students were critical of the Socialist Youth Union – the only legal youth organisation – and were concerned about anticipated changes to the Higher Education Act. On the eve of International Students' Day, Bratislava students independently expressed the same view on the matter as their counterparts in Prague. This unity attests to the then prevailing atmosphere in society. State Security knew about the event, monitored it, and penalised the participants. Nonetheless, about 250 students marched through the city centre and even spoke with politicians outside the building of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The protest march offered them an opportunity for expression and, in the following days, it became an integral part of the revolutionary events. The paper is supplemented by interviews with several participants and by additional documents.

Timea Verešová's paper »*Začíname sa učiť demokracii*«... (We Are Beginning to Learn Democracy), examines the revolutionary events in Košice, eastern Slovakia, using archival documents and examples of contemporary press coverage (Verešová 2017). Verešová traces the emergence of an opposition movement led, again, by students, albeit with some delay, and by civic opposition groups. On 21 November 1989, the students insisted on opening some form of dialogue. They responded primarily to events in Prague, and to the demands of the Prague strikers and the Civic Forum. The Košice leaders of the Communist Party of Slovakia were at a loss. They were completely unaware that they were facing a turning point that was ending a stage in the country's development that had lasted over forty years. Their reaction to the situation was belated, inadequate, and ultimately failed to resolve the matter. Within a few days in late November, a real transformation of the public space took place in Košice. Incidentally, this is the only paper in the volume to examine, albeit partially and at a regional level, the communist regime's reaction to the unfolding changes.

Patrik Dubovský contributes the biographical study *Hlavné aktivity Jána Langoša – od samizdatov po lustračný zákon* (Ján Langoš's Key Activities – From Samizdat to the Vetting Act) (Dubovský 2017). It offers a concise biography of Ján Langoš (1946–2006), one of the

best-known and most prominent figures of Slovak dissent, who later played an important role during Czechoslovakia's political transformation. As a member of the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly and Federal Minister of the Interior after the free elections of 1990, Langoš made a significant contribution to the country's reckoning with its communist past. His personal story mirrors the broader developments in Slovakia before and after 1989. Patrik Dubovský published a full-length biography of Langoš in book form in 2021. The book is also closely connected with the topic of 1989 and the subsequent period (Dubovský 2021).

The session dedicated to the revolution in Slovakia concludes with a short contribution by Ján Šimulčík, *Tajná cirkev v roku 1989* (The Clandestine Church in 1989) (Šimulčík 2017). The author summarises all the major events that characterise the clandestine (independent) Catholic Church in Slovakia. Given the historical and social environment in Slovakia, the Church was a strong natural opponent of the atheist Communist regime, which made no secret of its ambition to suppress religion until it would go extinct. By the late 1980s, the Catholic Church in Slovakia was increasingly more active in its efforts, both covertly and publicly, to promote religious freedoms. This proves that the Church remained an organic part of the awakening society. Major actions included mass petitions for religious freedoms, the so-called Candle Demonstration in Bratislava on 25 March 1988 (the first mass protest by Slovak citizens in twenty years), as well as extensive independent samizdat activity.

The next session bears the title "The Transformation of Society After the Fall of the Communist Regime." The collection of papers shows in many places that the study of the intellectual legacy of November 1989 and the complex paths of Slovak society in the decades that followed is not only a historical but also a political science topic of great importance in Slovakia.

Ondrej Podolec wrote the paper *K niektorým nečakaným úlohám posledného komunistického parlamentu* (On Some Unexpected Roles of the Last Communist Parliament) (Podolec 2017). November 1989 brought the return of parliamentarism. Except for the brief episode of the Prague Spring in 1968, parliament played only a marginal and decorative role during the Communist era. The author focuses on the period from the 'elections' in 1986, through legislative measures against the opposition in 1989, to the sudden changes to the Czechoslovak constitution at the end of 1989. This is more of a concise overview of significant legislative innovations at the end of the 1980s. However,

the text sometimes does not make clear what prompted them. It is also unfortunate that the author often fails to include the dates when laws and amendments were adopted.

Law is the subject covered by the following paper, *Transformační legislativa po roce 1989* (Transformative Legislation After 1989) by Czech lawyer Kamil Nedvědický (Nedvědický 2017). Nedvědický reflects on the relationship between the continuity and discontinuity of the law of the pre-November state in the post-November Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, and later in the Czech Republic. He presents the laws by which post-November society sought, with relative success, to redress wrongs, protect society, transform the economy, and so on. He concludes his overview by noting that, despite all of the obstacles, the transformation of Czech society took place on a surprisingly broad scale, and that various steps ultimately led to the establishment of the rule of law.

A seemingly marginal topic is addressed in the paper entitled *Formovanie športového hnutia po Novembri 1989* (The Development of the Sports Movement After November 1989) by Ján Grexa (Grexá 2017). Yet it is a novel presentation of the impact of political change on sport and sports organisations. The author traces the post-revolution changes in sport at both the federal level and in Slovakia. He concludes that sport rather suffered from the revolution, as many existing structures disappeared and no adequate or qualitatively better replacements were created. Interest in mass sport declined and state support for sport was not sufficiently restored. Sport may have suffered because of its apolitical nature. And the session concludes with the paper entitled *Stav slovenského divadelníctva pred rokom a po roku nula* (The Situation of Slovak Theatre Before and After Year Zero) by Martin Timko (Timko 2017). Theatre, too, had in fact been amply subsidised by the state, even while being politically controlled. Although actors could play a significant role in the process of social change, Slovak theatre found itself in existential and organisational uncertainty after 1989. The transformation of theatre was complex and seemingly devoid of innovation.

The session entitled “Churches in the Process of Transformation of Society” returns to matters of religion, which has traditionally played a major role in Slovakia. At the same time, the struggle for freedom of religion was a battleground for clashes between the communist authorities and churches in a country with a historically strong religious tradition. In the 1980s, this struggle lost much of its openness.

Novembrový medzník v dejinách Rímskokatolíckej cirkvi na Slovensku (The November Milestone in the History of the Roman Catholic Church in Slovakia) was written by Peter Zubko (Zubko 2017). He points out the unprecedented amount of scholarly literature on the subject. He also surveys the state of various areas of anti-church policy at the end of the 1980s and addresses the changes in the Church after 1989. He notes that, despite the growing revival in the 1980s, the decisive change for the Church came suddenly. The Church was not mentally prepared. Therefore, in the post-November period it made numerous mistakes and lost the moral capital it had previously gained. This certainly does not apply only to Slovak Catholics.

The study *Evanjelická cirkev augsburského vyznania na Slovensku v rokoch 1989–1991* (The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia in 1989–1991) does not confirm that the largest Protestant church in Slovakia belonged to a critical current within society in the 1980s. According to Peter Račko (Račko 2017), this church, too, was taken by surprise by the new situation. Until the political change, it was led by loyal clergy. Therefore, the main changes in the history of this church came only after November 1989. A kind of delayed revolution then took place within the church, including the use of pressure tactics.

Peter Borza, author of the paper entitled *Transformácia Gréckokatolíckej cirkvi v Československu na nové spoločensko-politické pomery po novembri 1989* (The Transformation of the Greek Catholic Church in the New Political and Social Situation After November 1989) (Borza 2017), focuses primarily on the process of redressing the wrongs inflicted on the Greek Catholic Church by the Communist regime. In its efforts to weaken the Catholic Church, the regime had long favoured the Orthodox Church in Slovakia. The Greek Catholic Church had been strong especially in eastern Slovakia, so the study complements the spectrum of religious denominations in Slovakia. The political change in 1989 was therefore welcomed by the weakened Church, even if it had not actively participated in it. It was an opportunity to begin a new stage of change, which, however, lasted for the next twenty years.

The title of the final session is “Intelligence Services and the Fall of the Communist Regime”. This is undoubtedly due to the nature of the organising institution, as well as to the importance that has always been attached to the political police in maintaining communist rule.

The contribution *Hlavní správa kontrarozvědky SNB v roce 1989* (Main Directorate of the National Security Corps [SNB] Counter-

Intelligence Service in 1989) was written by Czech historian Jan Kalous (Kalous 2017). Kalous describes the agenda of the Main Directorate of the State Security (StB) Counter-Intelligence Service, which was reorganised into this form only in 1988. It then adopted various measures aimed at eliminating the “internal enemy.” The author also emphasises certain events related to the opposition movement and, above all, the ever-growing base of civic resistance. Unfortunately, the inserted list of the Directorate’s leadership is entirely superfluous. The professional biographies of StB members reveal nothing about the time of the upheaval or about the counter-intelligence service itself. The author asks whether the StB could have saved the regime and why it did not do so, or whether there were similar opinions within the StB as in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSĊ). It can be inferred from the text that the KSĊ transferred its uncertainty to the StB, which was not similarly profiled and was not accustomed to making independent political decisions.

In *Stranický aparát na federálním ministerstvu vnitra v roce 1989* (Party Apparatus at the Federal Ministry of the Interior in 1989), Milan Bárta (Bárta 2017) provides a detailed account of the structures of the Communist Party within the security apparatus, especially the StB, and its connections to the apparatus of the Central Committee of the KSĊ. The meetings of communist organisations at the federal Ministry of the Interior at the end of 1989 had no significance and only confirmed the helplessness within.

Do nové éry se star(onov)ými tvářemi aneb poslední týdny kontrarozvědky (Into a New Era with Old[-New] Faces, Or the Last Weeks of the Counter-Intelligence Service) is the title of a paper by Czech expert Josef Halla (Halla 2017). He analyses the transition of the security apparatus into the new era and the last manifestations of StB activity as late as in November 1989, as well as various measures and efforts to take over the Ministry of the Interior by the new authorities, which, however, had no experience. The new authorities paradoxically relied on some of the existing StB members and reactivated others who had been dismissed after the Prague Spring for alleged political mistakes and had been out of service for twenty years. The author concludes his dense and valuable account with the appointment of Ján Langoš as federal minister of the interior after the first elections in 1990.

The last paper in this session is *Rezidentúra Brusel v roce 1989* (The Brussels Station in 1989) by Michal Miklovič (Miklovič 2017). This was an important foreign station of the StB intelligence service near both the NATO headquarters and the EU institutions. The author

described its staffing, agenda, and agent network, noting that the political change at home took the intelligence station's officers by surprise. It can be assumed that this was the case at other stations of the StB abroad as well.

Interestingly, none of the contributions in this session deals directly with the activities of the State Security (StB) in Slovakia in 1989. Three papers cover the “federal view” of the central bodies of the StB and the Ministry of the Interior, and in one case a foreign station of the intelligence service is described. It seems that the only professional study on the activities of the StB in Slovakia at the end of 1989 is the work by Jerguš Sivoš, published in a proceedings volume as early as 2009 (Sivoš 2009). Otherwise, the Slovak Nation's Memory Institute has published only works of a popularizing nature on the topic of the Slovak StB in 1989 (Jašek 2019).

Two more papers are appended. *Politické strany a volby roku 1990* (The Political Parties and the Elections of 1990) by Anton Hrnko focuses on the elections, characterises the political entities of the CSFR and their tactics, and reflects on the causes of the election results (Hrnko 2017). Rafał Łatka, in his paper *The Role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Transformations of 1989* (Łatka 2017), emphasises the importance of the Catholic Church and especially Pope John Paul II. He admits that the Church played a role mainly in Poland, and at certain moments also in Czechoslovakia and Lithuania. The book concludes with biographies of the authors.

Conclusion

Has anything changed in the way people in Slovakia assess November 1989? How has the historical study of the revolutionary change progressed since 2010?

November 1989 was a precondition for Slovak independence and a new Slovak future. However, for Slovaks, the events of 1989 are increasingly becoming history, and they are being seen as the beginning of problems in society (Marušiak 2017). Contributions analysing sport and theatre likewise show that a comparison of state support before and after 1989 does not reflect favourably on the new era in Slovakia. The relatively considerable publishing activity in Slovakia in 2017 should therefore be seen more as evidence of historical interest rather than a sign of a positive attitude towards the events of 1989.

Several papers in this volume repeat the surprising observation that little is known about the condition of Slovak society in the period before the 1989 upheaval. The topic of the Communist Party of Slovakia is almost entirely absent from the volume, except for the Košice region (Verešová 2017). Yet the role of this ruling power was crucial. In 1986, the Communist Party of Slovakia had 435,537 members, the highest number in its history, and thus represented a significant part of society (Sikora 2006). The proceedings also reveal that Slovak historiography, despite the existence of a common Czechoslovakia in 1989, is heavily focused on Slovak themes, even though the centres of power and decision-making for the whole state (the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the federal government, the president, the Federal Assembly, key ministries such as the Interior, Defence, and Foreign Affairs, and so on) were situated outside Slovakia, in Prague. In the reviewed volume, the important issue of State Security is represented only by contributions dealing with the central level of the political police and not directly with the situation in Slovakia. Of course, the volume reflects the papers presented. However, the fact that such contributions are missing suggests that the topics of the repressive apparatus and political power in Slovakia are probably not given much attention in Slovak historiography. By contrast, the development of the churches clearly enjoys great interest among scholars in a traditionally rather religious country.

Contributions from experts from Poland and Hungary also focused on developments in those countries. The events of 1989 undoubtedly had important international connections. Developments in neighbouring countries certainly influenced the pace and force of change. Nevertheless, except for research into Soviet politics, there is a clear lack of emphasis on the broader European perspective. According to the conference proceedings, it would seem that the revolutionary events in individual countries are now studied in isolation and in parallel.

The volume is in itself a collection of very interesting and valuable perspectives on 1989 and its temporal, spatial, and social contexts. Moreover, it is clear that there is still a lack of stimulating scholarly historical works on the events of 1989 in Slovakia and in Central and Eastern Europe. The very fact of its publication gives the volume greater significance than might appear at first. In Slovakia, the research perspective is still dominated by the viewpoint of the protagonists. Moreover, the study of the period following the historic change at the end of 1989 clearly prevails. It is not impossible that this interest

stems from the need to understand the roots of the current state of Slovak society. Current developments in Central and Eastern Europe confirm that the results of research into the roots of developments in society after 1989 can also provide answers to questions of the present. As far as historical research is concerned, Slovak historiography still has much work ahead.

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