Top Communist Officials: Where Are They Now?

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Virtually all the communist officials swept from power by the democratic revolution in late 1989 have disappeared from public view. Once presiding over one of the most oppressive totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe and feared by the population of Czechoslovakia, the majority of the former top Communists have retired from public life and appear to have been largely forgotten by the public.

Since the democratic revolution in late 1989, most of the leaders of the ill-famed "normalization" regime, installed in Czechoslovakia after the Soviet-led invasion of that country in 1968, have sunk into oblivion. The Czechoslovak media and public pay surprisingly little attention to the officials who once exercised unlimited power and were dreaded by the majority of Czechoslovak citizens. Although calls have been made periodically, especially by right-wing parties, to prosecute the former communist officials for engaging in criminal activities, for destroying the country’s economy, and for abusing power, neither the political representatives of the new democratic regime nor the general public seem eager to avenge themselves on the former oppressors.

A new wave of anticommunist sentiment resulting in the prosecution of former communist officials cannot be ruled out; but it seems increasingly likely that most of this group will be left in peace and will even be able to enjoy some privileges, such as special police protection. Some have been charged with definite crimes; and at least one, Miroslav Stepan, was found guilty of abuse of power. Only a handful of former communist officials have commented on the developments in postcommunist Czechoslovakia or on their role in the "normalization" regime; most have chosen to maintain a low profile.

Gustav Husak

The most prominent figure associated with the "normalization" regime, Gustav Husak, was Secretary-General of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCS) from 1969 to 1987 and President of Czechoslovakia from 1975 to December 1989, when he was forced to resign under pressure from democratic forces. Thereafter, Husak quickly disappeared from public life. In a letter sent to the Presidium of the CPCS Central Committee (CC) on December 13, 1989, Husak asked to be relieved of his CPCS CC membership.

February 15, 1991
The party's extraordinary congress on December 20 and 21, 1989, suspended Husak's membership but did not actually expel him from the party. The decision to expel Husak from the CPC's was made two months later, at a CC plenum held on February 17, 1990. Husak protested against the decision but, unlike some other former officials, never applied for readmission to the party.

On June 6, 1990, Husak and six other former officials were questioned by the authorities about allegations that they had invited the Soviet Union to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968. Husak was released the same day; no official charges were brought against him. In November 1990, Husak's son, Vladimir, denied rumors that his father had been writing his memoirs. He said that Husak had been too sick (he underwent complicated stomach surgery that same month) for such a task and did not have a personal secretary to take dictation from him. Husak's son also claimed that the former secretary-general had received no income since January 1, 1990, when his special pension of 12,000 koruny ($430) a month was stopped. At that time, the average monthly salary in Czechoslovakia was 3,200 koruny ($115). This claim was obviously untrue, because Husak, like all other former officials whose special pensions had been stopped, was entitled to receive a regular state pension. Husak's son also revealed that his father was receiving special police protection and that the authorities had put a car at his disposal.

**Milos Jakes**

The fall of Milos Jakes, CPC's Secretary-General at the time of the 1989 democratic revolution, was quick. On November 24, 1989, he resigned from the party's highest post and was not re-elected to any of the communist party's highest bodies. A few days later, on December 3, 1989, he was relieved of his duties as Chairman of the National Front. On December 7 Jakes was stripped of his CPC's membership; his application for readmission to the CPC was rejected at the party's congress in November 1990. On December 12, 1989, Jakes resigned as a Federal Assembly deputy. Early in 1990, the former secretary-general was questioned by a special parliamentary commission investigating the events of November 1989. In its report, the commission ruled that Jakes bore "political responsibility" for the violent suppression of the student demonstration on November 17, 1989. In June 1990, Jakes was briefly detained and questioned by prosecutors about his role in inviting Soviet troops to Czechoslovakia in 1968 (at that time, he was Chairman of the CPC's CC Auditing and Control Commission). The media also attacked the former secretary-general for allegedly threatening the previous owner of his luxurious Prague home with charges of espionage unless the owner agreed to sell him the house far below its market value.

Even Jakes's most loyal followers have since shown only disrespect for their former leader, who, during his tenure as CPC's Secretary-General (1987-1989), was a popular target for jokes and ridicule. In an interview with the daily Mlada Fronta, former party hard-liner Vasil Bilak claimed that Jakes was weak and "spoiled everything he could." He remarked that the secretary-general "followed a bad principle—first he shot and then he aimed." Other former leaders, including Ladislav Adamec and Rudolf Hegenbart, made similar comments. More recently, the former secretary-general has taken over a new role, namely, that of a character in Tomas Vorel's new film "Kour." Vorel said that he had wanted Vaclav Havel for the part but Havel had been elected President of Czechoslovakia before he could ask him. Jakes accepted the role, and Vorel said he was "performing well."

**Jan Fojtik**

The 62-year-old Jan Fojtik was one of the most powerful men in the communist party. A long-time member of the CPC's CC Presidium, he became the party's ideologist in October 1988 and was one of the chief architects of the rigid policies instituted by the party under Jakes. After the violent suppression of students on November 17, 1989, Fojtik told an Italian newspaper that he was "ready for a constructive dialogue" but was willing to meet with only a few hand-picked representatives of the opposition. No representative of the opposition, however, was interested in talking to him.

Although he initially refused to step down, Fojtik eventually understood that his political career was over. He was forced to resign from the CPC's CC Presidium on November 25, 1989. Under pressure, he resigned from the CPC's CC on December 16 and was expelled from the party on December 21. In the only published interview Fojtik has given since his fall, he admitted that "communist thought finds itself in a crisis" but maintained that the vision of a communist society was based on "the scientific understanding of historical developments." Fojtik also complained that he had been, at times, severely criticized for his "liberal ideas" by party hard-liners and said that, in fact, he had been one of the CPC's most progressive members. He was not charged with corruption or abuse of power, like some of his colleagues. He apparently still lives in his Prague apartment on a pension of about 3,500 koruny ($140) a month. Fojtik and his wife maintain a very low profile. But even if someone were to meet the former ideologist on the street, he would be
difficult to recognize: he has reportedly grown a long beard and wears dark glasses and a hat in public.

**Miroslav Stepan**
The 45-year-old Miroslav Stepan is one of the very few former high-level communist officials to have been sentenced to a prison term. Stepan had a remarkable career. Within a fairly short period, he became Chairman of the Prague CPC Municipal Committee and a member of the decision-making CPC CC Presidium. After the events on November 17, 1989, it first seemed that Stepan would survive the political turmoil. Indeed, during the extraordinary session of the CPC CC on November 24, he was re-elected to the Presidium. However, after strong protests from the public and his own comrades, he decided to resign all his posts. Together with some other former members of the CC Presidium, he was expelled from the CPC in December 1989. He was arrested on December 23, 1989, and sentenced to four years in prison for "abuse of power" on July 9, 1990. His sentence was later commuted to 28 months. Unlike most of his comrades, Stepan has given several interviews in which he was fairly outspoken about his former colleagues. He refused to accept any responsibility for the brutal police action against peaceful demonstrators in Prague in 1988 and 1989 and portrayed himself as a representative of the "liberal but cautious wing" of the CPCs.14

**Vasil Bilak**
Reputed to be the most conservative member of the former leadership, Vasil Bilak was the CPC's ideologist until October 1988, when he was replaced by Fojtk. In December 1988 he was ousted from the CPC CC Presidium, but he remained a member of the CPC CC and the Presidium of the Federal Assembly.15 Bilak resigned from the latter post on December 8, 1989, under public pressure. On December 16 he was expelled from the CPC CC and on December 21 from the party itself.16

Bilak did not withdraw from public life immediately. In March 1990 Peter Weiss, the First Secretary of the Slovak Communist Party, remarked that Bilak was "politically active" in Slovaka and recommended, probably in jest, that Bilak establish his own political party.17 In April and June 1990 Bilak was detained and questioned by the authorities in connection with allegations that he had been among those Czechoslovak officials who had invited the Soviet Union to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968. Bilak has repeatedly been accused by the Czechoslovak media of financial and property misdeeds, in particular the way he acquired his apartment in Bratislava. No official charges, however, have been brought against him. Since the revolution, Bilak has given several interviews to Czechoslovak newspapers, some of them critical of the Jakes leadership. Both Bilak and Jakes have admitted that their relations had not been good, and Jakes acknowledged that he had been personally responsible for Bilak's ouster from the leadership in December 1988.18

**Lubomir Strougal**
Lubomir Strougal was Czechoslovak Prime Minister until October 1988, when he was replaced by Adamec and forced to resign from the CPC CC Presidium. When the revolution swept the Jakes leadership from power, Strougal had been attempting, unsuccessfully, to stage a comeback. He lost his post as a Federal Assembly deputy in December 1989 and was expelled from the communist party on February 17, 1990.19 It was frequently rumored when Strougal was still in power that he was involved in illegal financial dealings, but he was never prosecuted under the Jakes regime. In November 1990 the Prosecutor-General opened an investigation into charges that Strougal had accepted bribes from foreign companies during his tenure as Prime Minister. According to these charges, Strougal had received tens of thousands of dollars from the Japanese firm Toshiba, reportedly for helping the firm establish a foothold in Czechoslovakia. The investigation is still underway.20

**Ladislav Adamec, Vasil Mohorita, and Karel Urbanek**
The only top communist officials who have so far survived politically are former Prime Minister Adamec, Vasil Mohorita, and Karel Urbanek. At the time of the November 1989 revolution, Adamec and Urbanek were members of the CPC CC Presidium and Mohorita was a member of the CPC CC Secretariat and also Chairman of the Socialist Youth Union. Urbanek replaced Jakes as the party's secretary-general on November 24, 1989, but remained in that post only until the party's extraordinary congress in December 1989. Adamec and Mohorita were more successful than Urbanek in creating images of themselves as moderate reformers; at the party's extraordinary congress in December 1989, they were elected to the party leadership. Adamec became party chairman and Mohorita first secretary, while Urbanek had to settle for the position of head of the CPC CC Auditing and Control Commission. Adamec was perceived as a link between the CPC's mostly conservative older generation and its primarily younger reformers. However, on September 2 he resigned from his post, ostensibly for health
reasons, and was replaced by Mohorita.\textsuperscript{21} Adamec is still a Federal Assembly deputy.

Mohorita's liberal image was badly tarnished in October 1990 when he called for an end to the period of "national understanding," an uncompromising political struggle, and the return of communist party cells to work places. Criticized by some other party leaders, Mohorita lost his post as party chairman at the party's congress in November 1990. He has, however, remained a member of both the party leadership and the Federal Assembly.\textsuperscript{22} In November 1990, Mohorita's membership in the Federal Assembly's Presidium was withdrawn.

**Miroslav Zavadil, Frantisek Pitra, and Karel Hoffmann**

Miroslav Zavadil, a CPCCS CC Presidium member since 1988, was re-elected to that body at its emergency session on November 24, 1989; one day later, however, he resigned. On November 26, 1989, he was removed from his position as Chairman of the Central Council of Trade Unions. On December 12 he resigned from the Presidium of the Federal Assembly. Four days later, on December 16, he was expelled from the CPCCS CC and, on February 19, 1990, from the party itself. Zavadil has refused to give any interviews. His name was last mentioned in the media when, in November 1990, he appealed the decision to expel him from the CPCCS. He was not readmitted, however.

The fall of Frantisek Pitra, Zavadil's colleague in the CPCCS CC Presidium, was more gradual. Pitra, who was also the Czech Prime Minister at the time of the revolution, held that post until January 31, 1990, when he stepped down. (He had lost his position in the CPCCS CC Presidium two months previously.) For his "constructive" role in the round-table negotiations between the representatives of the opposition and the communist party, Pitra was appointed in January 1990 director of a new agency charged with managing the development of Czechoslovakia's border areas. Under public pressure, however, he was removed from that post in the second half of 1990. It is not known whether Pitra is still a member of the communist party.

The fate of Karel Hoffmann, in November 1989 a CPCCS CC Presidium member in charge of the party's internal affairs, was more clear-cut. Hoffmann was expelled from the CPCCS CC in December 1989 and from the party itself in February 1990, since when he has completely disappeared from public view. His name resurfaced only once, in April 1990, when he was questioned about his possible collaboration with the Soviets during the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

**Jozef Lenart and Peter Colotka**

Jozef Lenart, a member of the CPCCS CC Presidium at the time of the revolution, was expelled from the party's CC on December 16, 1989, and from the party on February 17, 1990.\textsuperscript{23} He was one of the top Communist officials under investigation for their possible role in inviting the Soviet Union to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968; he was not officially charged.

Peter Colotka resigned from his posts as CPCCS CC Presidium member and Slovak Prime Minister in October 1988 and was subsequently appointed Czechoslovakia's Ambassador to France. He was removed from that post on January 19, 1990.\textsuperscript{24} Colotka was also one of the officials questioned about their role in the 1968 Soviet invasion. On June 11, 1990, he was detained in connection with a corruption scandal that had first surfaced in 1987 and accused of embezzlement, theft, and abuse of power.\textsuperscript{25} His case is still under investigation.

**The Deceased**

Three former leaders, Alois Indra, Villam Salgovic, and Antonin Kapek, have died. Indra was Chairman of the Federal Assembly and a member of the CPCCS CC Presidium at the time of the revolution. Kapek, a prominent member of the "normalization" leadership, had been ousted from the top party leadership in 1987. Salgovic was the Chairman of the Slovak National Council and a member of the Presidium of the Slovak Communist Party when the revolution took place. Both Indra and Salgovic were forced to resign from all their posts shortly after the revolution. Salgovic was expelled from the communist party in December 1989; Indra and Kapek were expelled on February 17, 1990.\textsuperscript{26}

Indra was interrogated in April and June 1990 in connection with reports that he was among the Czechoslovak officials who had invited Soviet troops to Czechoslovakia in 1968. On August 2, 1990, he died of natural causes.\textsuperscript{27} Kapek and Salgovic died under more dramatic circumstances. Salgovic hanged himself on February 5, 1990, without leaving a suicide note.\textsuperscript{28} Kapek first attempted suicide on January 1, 1990. After firing several shots from his gun without injuring himself, he set fire to his summer house, remained inside, and, after losing consciousness, was rescued from the flames. On May 23 Kapek was found hanged in his daughter's country house in western Bohemia. The police ruled that he had committed suicide.\textsuperscript{29}

**Assessment**

In their occasional interviews with the Czechoslovak media, some former communist officials have argued that they tried, without success, to
convince the Jakes leadership of the need to liberalize its hard-line policies. Since some officials are now accusing each other of shortsightedness and an unwillingness to support reform, it will be difficult for historians to assess the exact responsibility of various officials for the oppression and mismanagement perpetrated under the “normalization” regime.

Many former officials used their positions to become extremely wealthy, but it seems that only a few of them did so by breaking the law. For example, some of the laws instituted by the “normalization” regime made it possible for these officials to acquire, for a token price, real estate abandoned by people who had fled the country. The Czechoslovak press has pointed out that some of the houses acquired so cheaply by former communist officials have a current market value of millions of koruny.

Yet, for reasons that are not always clear, the current democratic regime does not seem particularly determined to prosecute even those officials who clearly did break the law. The investigation into the charges that some of these officials invited the Soviet Union to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968 seems equally inconclusive for a variety of reasons, not least the unwillingness of the Soviets to cooperate in the investigation. Thus, barring unforeseen circumstances, the only punishment confronting the majority of the former communist leaders, once accustomed to commanding public attention, is a surprisingly rapid fall into oblivion.

Notes:

1 AP, December 10, 1989.
2 Radio Hvezda, December 13, 1989, 5:00 p.m.
4 Czechoslovak Television, February 17, 1990, 7:30 p.m.
6 AP, June 6, 1990.
7 Prazda, November 24, 1990, p. 3.
8 Radio Hvezda, December 12, 1989, 8:00 p.m.
9 Rude Pravo, January 23, 1990, p. 3.
12 Corriere Della Sera, November 22, 1989.
13 Radio Czechoslovakia, February 2, 1990, 6:00 p.m. Some of his colleagues disagreed, however. Rudolf Hengenbart remarked in an interview that Fojtik was one of the most rigid conservatives in the CPCS CC Presidium. Hegenbart also claimed that Fojtik was arrogant and tried to humiliate Jakes whenever possible (The Independent, February 21, 1990).
15 Radio Hvezda, December 15, 1988, 4:00 p.m.
17 Radio Czechoslovakia, March 3, 1990, 2:40 p.m.
18 Ibid., January 9, 1990, 10:30 p.m.
20 AFP, November 5, 1990.
27 Radio Czechoslovakia, August 4, 1990, 4:00 p.m.
28 Ibid., February 6, 1990, 10:00 a.m.
29 Ibid., May 23, 1990, 3:00 p.m.