Czechoslovakians campaign for democracy (Velvet Revolution), 1989


16 November 1989
To: December 1989

Country: Czechoslovakia
Country: Czech Republic
Country: Slovakia

Goals: Campaigners sought an end to the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, as well as an end to communist rule. They demanded an end to state-mandated censorship and the set up of free elections.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 3rd segment:
- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 097. Protest strike
- 104. Professional strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Factory Workers
- actors
- many other Czechoslovakian citizens.
- students
- writers
Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Leaders included: Vaclav Havel, a dissident playwright and leader of the Civic Union who later became president of Czechoslovakia; Public Against Violence; Alexander Dubcek, the Slovak leader who initiated a series of reforms that helped set in motion the Prague Spring in 1968

Students initiated the campaign

Partners:
Not known

External allies:
Not known

Involvement of social elites:
On 21 November 1989, Catholic Cardinal Frantisek Tomasek of Bohemia declared his support for the Czech student campaigners.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- Students
- actors

Groups in 2nd Segment:
- Catholic Cardinal Frantisek Tomasek
- Civic Forum
- Journalists
- Public Against Violence
- writers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 3 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Communist Party government of Czechoslovakia

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known
Repressive Violence:
Hundreds were arrested.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

By the end of World War II, the Soviet Union had invaded and taken over much of Czechoslovakia. The Communist Party officially came to power in February 1948, and under its rule dissidents faced persecution by secret police, censorship was enforced, Marxist-Leninist ideology was proclaimed mandatory in schools, and all schools, media, and businesses became the possessions of the state.

During the Prague Spring in 1968, Slovak leader Alexander Dubcek initiated a series of progressive reforms that prompted the Soviet Union and its members to intervene. Gustav Husak then assumed power over the Communist Party.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s 1985 reforms of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), while not immediately changing the political situation in Czechoslovakia, did embolden some dissident groups to begin experimenting with different forms of protest.

25 March 1988, Roman Catholic groups who sought religious freedom organized a Candle Demonstration, an event that was attended by more than 5,000 Slovaks. The Organizers of the Candle Demonstration had used radio stations including Radio Free Europe and Voice of America to inform Czechoslovaks of the planned demonstration. It was the first mass demonstration since 1969, and police forces responded by shooting protesters with water cannons and beating them with sticks and batons.

As Czechoslovakia’s economy continued to suffer in the 1980s, growing discontent among the population spurred citizens to begin supporting calls for economic reform. In the summer of 1989, activists circulated a petition that demanded an end to censorship and called for the beginning of political reform.

Meanwhile, growing numbers of East Germans began demanding exile to West Germany, and after decades of separation the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989. Czechs and Slovaks watched on their television screens as Soviet domination of Eastern Europe began to crumble.

On 16 November 1989, on the eve of the 50th anniversary of International Students Day—a day that commemorated the death of Jan Opletal, a student who participated in the student protests against Nazi occupation—Slovak high school and university students organized a peaceful demonstration in Bratislava. Expecting trouble, the Communist Party alerted the armed forces, but the students were able to proceed peacefully and reached the Slovak Ministry of Education to discuss their demands for educational reform.

The following day in Prague, what began as a legal rally that was organized by the Socialist Union of Youth (a wing of the Communist Party) turned into a larger demonstration that drew approximately 50,000 people. After the official end of the march, demonstrators continued into downtown Prague holding banners and chanting anti-Communist slogans. However, the demonstrators were stopped by riot police, who blocked escape routes and battered the students. One student was rumored to have been killed; although the rumor was later proved false, it helped spur greater public anger with the police. That evening,
students and theater actors agreed to go on strike

On 18 November 1989, striking actors in Prague opened theater stages only for public discussions, and university and performing arts students went on strike. Homemade posters and proclamations were posted in public spaces, and actors read a proclamation by the students and artists to audiences, calling for a general strike on 27 November.

The next day, members of artistic and literary associations joined the strike, as well as actors in Bratislava, Brno, and Ostrava. In addition, about 500 Slovak artists, scientists, and leaders met at the Art Forum in Bratislava, denouncing the attack against the students in Prague. While there, they formed the Public Against Violence organization, which became the leading force behind the opposition movement in Slovakia. In addition, dissident playwright Vaclav Havel helped establish the Civic Forum, which called for the dismissal of top officials responsible for the violence on 17 November, the release of all political prisoners, and political and economic reforms.

In response to the strikes and growing opposition, government officials appeared on public television in an attempt to convince the public that no one had been killed and to call for a return to normalcy. However, on November 20, students and actors decided to stage a permanent strike until the Communist officials stepped down.

Also on that day, police officers stopped a demonstration from continuing toward the Prague Castle and Civic Forum representatives held an unofficial meeting with Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec who was sympathetic to the students’ demands but refused to make concessions. Mass demonstrations continued in Prague and Bratislava.

The following day, the Civic Forum held an official meeting with the Prime Minister, who, although promising that violent force would not be used against the demonstrators, said that he would steadfastly protect socialism. During these meetings, mass demonstrations were held in Wenceslas Square in central Prague, as well as in Hviezdoslav Square in downtown Bratislava, demonstrations with about 200,000 participants.

Also on this day, a separate demonstration was held in front of the Palace of Justice, where protesters demanded the release of political prisoner Jan Carnogursky, who was released two days later. Catholic Cardinal Frantisek Tomasek of Bohemia also declared his support for the striking students on 21 November. Students and actors also traveled to factories to gain support of industrial workers.

In response to the demonstrations, the Communist government continued to declare that order had to be preserved and that socialism was the only acceptable system. Milos Jakes, Chairman of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, held a special address on Federal Television in which he criticized strikers for instigating disorder.

On 22 November, Civic Forum responded to the Communist government’s unwillingness to relinquish power by reiterating the call for a two-hour general strike to take place on Monday 27 November. The government countered this by cutting off live reports of demonstrations on Federal Television. However, employees of the Slovak section of Federal Television threatened to initiate a strike of television employees if the events in the country went unreported. Uncensored live reports from demonstrations in Bratislava then followed.

On 23 November, the Minister of Defense delivered a television address in which he called for an end to the demonstrations, but also declared that the army would not take action against the Czechoslovak people. However, on the following day, the entire executive committee of the Communist party resigned, including General secretary Milos Jakes (Karel Urbanek was named the new General Secretary). Also on this day, Federal Television televised film from the 17 November demonstration, and Vaclav Havel gave his first television address. Czechoslovak TV and Radio also announced that they would join the general strike. On 25 November, the new communist leadership held a press conference while demonstrations continued.

On November 26, the editorial staff of Slovakia’s Pravda, the central newspaper of the Communist party of Slovakia, joined the opposition, while two members of the Czech riot police who took part in the beatings of students, apologized at a mass rally in front of hundreds of thousands. Demonstrations continued.
On Monday 27 November, the planned two-hour general strike went into effect at noon, and nearly three-fourths of the Czechoslovakian population participated. The following day, Civic Forum held its second meeting with prime minister, who agreed to form a new coalition government and erase articles in the Czechoslovakian constitution that provided that the Communist Party must have the leading role. On 29 November, Parliament voted in favor of the legislation and also abolished the provision that made Marxist-Leninist ideology a mandatory part of school curriculum.

In early December, Communist leader Gustav Husak appointed the first largely non-Communist government in Czechoslovakia since 1948, and eventually resigned. Two weeks later, Alexander Dubcek became the first speaker of the federal parliament, and on 29 December 1989 Havel was elected president of the republic. Free elections were held in June 1990.

Research Notes

**Influences:**

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Communist governments throughout Europe began to topple (see Soviet Bloc Independence Campaigns (1989-)). With the fall of the Berlin Wall in early November 1989, Czechoslovaks became increasingly emboldened to challenge their own form of authoritarian domination. (1)

**Sources:**


<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1844842.stm>


**Additional Notes:**
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