
Popular Resistance in

Communist Czechoslovakia:

The Plzeň Uprising, June 1953

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Abstract

This article examines an important, but little-known, event in the history of post-war Czechoslovakia: the Plzeň uprising of June 1953. After outlining the context, processes and outcomes of the revolt, I argue that the disorders were less an expression of ubiquitous political and ideological resistance to the communist regime than a reflection of the disastrous socio-economic conditions and the breakdown in relations between party and workers at the point of production. I also maintain that the conventional wisdom of the ‘Stalinised’ Communist Party of Czechoslovakia as a fully fledged ‘totalitarian’ party is in many ways wide of the mark. Finally, the uprising prompted the party’s tentative turn towards a ‘New Course’ and eventually a strategy of ‘socialist consumerism’.

‘Down with the communists!’ ‘We want free elections!’ ‘We want a new government!’ ‘We want freedom!’ ‘We are hungry!’ These were among the subversive proclamations of the thousands of protesters who took to the streets and for a short time overran the major Czech industrial city of Plzeň (Pilsen) on 1 June 1953, less than three months after Stalin’s death. In many other towns throughout the country, including Prague, tens of thousands of workers and citizens expressed their grievances against communist policies in an outburst of popular anger and resentment which in a few places lasted for two or three days, alarming party and trade union leaders. And yet this remarkable occurrence – ‘one of the most spectacular acts of working-class protest [in Eastern Europe] during the early socialist years’¹ – is scarcely known, even in the Czech Republic, and has rarely surfaced in English-language historiography.²

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¹ Mark Pittaway, *Eastern Europe 1939–2000* (London: Arnold, 2004), 60.

² The main exception is Johann Smula, ‘The Party and the Proletariat: Škoda 1948–53’, *Cold War History*, 6 (2006), 153–75.

This lacuna is best explained by several factors: first, the strikes and demonstrations, although volatile, did not seriously threaten the Czechoslovak regime; second, they were very soon overshadowed by the mass uprising in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) two weeks later and, definitively, by the Hungarian Revolution in 1956; third, Soviet troops were neither in situ nor required to restore order and hence the disturbances did not become part of the broader ‘Cold War myth’;³ and, finally, strict censorship meant that the events went essentially unreported in the Czechoslovak media, a state of affairs more or less replicated in the Western press. Subsequently, lack of access to relevant archival documentation, at least until the early 1990s, severely curtailed scholarly research. Perhaps it was this paucity of coverage that prompted one émigré Czech observer to describe the Plzeň revolt as ‘a rather extraordinary incident the outside world did not quite notice’.⁴

In this article I seek to redress the balance by examining the context, processes and outcomes of the uprising, tackling the following questions: what caused thousands of Plzeň workers to take to the streets? what happened when they did so? and what were the immediate reactions of the communist authorities? In exploring the uprising I have chosen to focus on the highly charged issues of popular resistance to communism and the relationship of the ‘Stalinised’ Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa – KSČ) with the Czech working class.⁵ I conclude by briefly discussing the wider historical significance of the revolt in terms of the party’s never-ending quest for effective strategies of mobilisation and legitimisation. Equally challenging and important themes, such as comparative analyses with the GDR uprising and the Poznań rebellion three years later, fall outside my remit and must await future serious consideration.⁶

Resistance: definitional dilemmas

Writing in the late 1990s, Pdraic Kenney noted that ‘the central question of opposition to communism remains largely unexamined’.⁷ Maybe this is because

³ The Red Army withdrew from Czechoslovak territory in December 1945 and did not return until August 1968.

⁴ Otto Ulč, *The Judge in a Communist State: A View from Within* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1972), 117.

⁵ For developments in Slovakia, see Zdeněk Jirásek, ‘Problémy měnové reformy roku 1953 na Slovensku’, in Jan Pešek, ed., *V tieni totality: politické perzekúcie na Slovensku v rokoch 1948–1953* (Bratislava: Historický ústav SAV, 1996), 90–7.

⁶ For recent English-language works on the East German uprising see Gareth Pritchard, *The Making of the GDR, 1945–53: From Antifascism to Stalinism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 206–20; Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945–1955* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 165–99; and Matthew Stibbe, ‘The SED, German Communism and the June 1953 Uprising: New Trends and New Research’, in Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe, eds., *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 37–55. For a fine summary of German texts see Jonathan Sperber, ‘17 June 1953: Revisiting a German Revolution’, *German History*, 22 (2004), 619–43. For Poznań see Paweł Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite: Poland 1956* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 87–124.

⁷ Pdraic Kenney, ‘The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland’, *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 399.

resistance is such a slippery and polemical concept, not least in contemporary Czech historiography and current affairs, where it is often used as a political football in the search for a usable national past.⁸ The picture is further complicated by the lack of definitional clarity and doubts about whether it is fruitful to seek an exact definition for a multidimensional and ambiguous phenomenon. Can historians specify precisely which acts constitute resistant behaviour? How to penetrate the subjectivities of resistance and disentangle individual impulses in chaotic situations like the Plzeň uprising? In highly authoritarian systems such as Stalinist Czechoslovakia, where the state itself was instrumental in turning 'normal' deeds into criminal offences, it is tempting to evince 'resistance' not only in brazen acts of anti-regime violence, but also in common practices such as low labour productivity, listening to jazz or the ubiquitous political joke. Certainly this would be the case if we followed James C. Scott's powerful notion of 'hidden transcripts' and 'passive everyday' resistance,⁹ and there can be little doubt that many Czechoslovak citizens chose to mask their aversion to communism with feigned ignorance, dissimulation and false compliance.

But the implication that all those workers who operated a 'go-slow' or flitted from job to job or engaged in anti-Stalin banter were putative 'resisters' is surely problematic. Workers change employment or go on strike for many reasons; political joke-tellers were not necessarily anti-socialist. In this sense, it is not surprising that Scott's theory has been criticised for detecting resistance in 'almost any act'.¹⁰ Workers, including many party members, certainly grumbled about high work norms or paltry wages, dragged their heels and even occasionally downed tools, but at the same time insisted that 'the factory belongs to us all', not to a capitalist entrepreneur.¹¹ They also devised strategies and practices of 'working the system' to their advantage, sometimes assisted by lower-level enterprise functionaries and official bodies, such as factory councils.¹² Even émigré Czech commentators writing in the 1950s acknowledged that the 'working masses ... obviously consider the nationalisation of the means of production, the elimination of private enterprise in industry and economic state planning as a definitive, unchanging and unchangeable reality'.¹³ In short, they embraced cardinal aspects of socialism. This is significant because it suggests potential sites of communication and negotiation between labour and the communist authorities based on certain shared perspectives, even if these

⁸ For a representative 'resistance' study see Jaroslav Cuhra and Václav Veber, eds., *Za svobodu a demokracii. 1. Odpor proti komunistické moci* (Prague: Karolinum, 1999).

⁹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist and Marshall Poe, eds., *The Resistance Debate in Russian and Soviet History* (Bloomington: Slavica, 2003), 232–3.

¹¹ Peter Heumos, 'Práce a politika ve státním socialismu. K problému politické stimulace výkonnosti a k formám kolektivní resistance v československém průmyslu v padesátých letech', in Jiří Pernes, ed., *Po stopách nedávné historie. Sborník k 75. narozeninám doc. Karla Kaplana* (Brno: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2003), 217.

¹² Peter Heumos, 'State Socialism, Egalitarianism, Collectivism: On the Social Context of Socialist Work Movements in Czechoslovak Industrial and Mining Enterprises, 1945–1965', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 68 (2005), 47–74.

¹³ Ivo Ducháček, 'Deset let, která neotřásla světem (Profil čs. komunismu 1948–1958)', *Svědectví*, 2 (1958–59), 236.

opportunities were generally squandered by heavy-handed party and trade union functionaries.

The problem, however, is far from exhausted by such stark binaries as ‘resistance’ versus ‘accommodation’, ‘coercion’ versus ‘consensus’ or ‘us’ (the good people) against ‘them’ (the evil regime). While remaining at all times sensitive to the massive depredations of the Stalinist system, we should not, I think, posit an undifferentiated resistant Czechoslovak society locked in some unequal ‘heroic’ confrontation with an inorganic illegitimate state. As Lynne Viola has argued in her pioneering work on Stalinist Russia, the Soviet state was multilayered and ‘was neither monolithic nor external and alien to “society”’. Moreover, ‘resistance was only one part of a wide continuum of societal responses to Stalinism that included accommodation, adaptation, acquiescence, apathy, internal emigration, opportunism, and positive support’.¹⁴ Jan Plamper has recently gone a step further, urging scholars to conceive of the Soviet ‘subject not as autonomous and monolithic, but rather as multidimensional’, capable of harbouring ‘multiple, overlapping and conflicting opinions at the same time’. Here, Plamper speculates about the fluid identity of the hypothetical ‘citizen who shed tears over Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953 and later in the day told an anti-Stalin joke’.¹⁵ Clearly, this analysis of shifting Soviet socio-cultural milieus and attitudes should not be unthinkingly applied to a Czech society whose political culture, socio-economic development and demographic structures were in many ways different from Soviet realities. Nevertheless, this more nuanced understanding of state–society interactions and individual subjectivities, going beyond outdated binaries, helps us better grapple with the enigmatic and recalcitrant notion of ‘resistance’ in communist Czechoslovakia.

Context and motivations

The origins of the Plzeň uprising must be sought in the contradictory political and sociocultural contexts of Czechoslovak Stalinism and in the divergent responses to them on the part of the working class. On the one hand, the Soviet-inspired ‘militarisation’ of the economy,¹⁶ the repression visited on many workers and the fierce labour discipline imposed by the infant communist regime undoubtedly contributed to embedded alienation and resentment. Crucially, gross imbalances in production and investment, steep price rises, depreciated real incomes, a lack of decent housing and a concomitant plunge in living standards, particularly in the first half of 1953, showed definitively that the cherished hopes and expectations of abundance under

¹⁴ Lynne Viola, ‘Introduction’, in Lynne Viola, ed., *Contending with Stalinism: Soviet Power and Popular Resistance in the 1930s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 1, 9.

¹⁵ Jan Plamper, ‘Beyond Binaries: Popular Opinion in Stalinism’, in Paul Corner, ed., *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 64, 75.

¹⁶ Karel Kaplan, *Československo v letech 1948–1953* (Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1991), 102–5.

socialism had been far from fulfilled.¹⁷ On the other hand, important components of Stalinist 'lived experience', such as upward social mobility, security of employment, an egalitarian wage structure, expanded social benefits and improved cultural and educational opportunities facilitated a fragile bond between worker and state based on the strident 'class perspective' (*třídní hledisko*) at the heart of Stalinist rhetoric. As many as 300,000 'traditional' workers moved into non-manual administrative jobs and were replaced by more than 600,000 'new' workers from largely non-proletarian backgrounds.¹⁸ In these circumstances an ideologically privileged, but exploited, Czechoslovak working class was able to forge a strictly limited social and institutional space to voice discontent over specific government policies deemed to have broken the unwritten 'social contract'. The accumulated frustration boiled over in 1953, most dramatically in Plzeň, but also in many other parts of the Czech industrial heartlands, prompting one expert to speculate about 'the birth of an autonomous workers' movement' in the country.¹⁹

Contrary to the stereotypical 'Švejkian' image of Czech passivity, indifference and buffoonery, expressions of popular anger were not unknown in these years. Anti-communist leaflets and posters – 'The KSC is Leading Us to Destitution and Poverty', 'The Death of Stalin Means Death to Communists', 'Long Live the USA, Death to Communism' – appeared sporadically in various Czech and Slovak towns.²⁰ Industrial workers were not slow to vent their resentment over high work norms, Soviet-style 'socialist competition' and cuts in customary social and labour benefits. Between 1948 and 1953, a total of 218 strikes broke out in the country's principal industrial areas, by far the highest number (146) in 1953.²¹ Most were short-lived particularist affairs, such as the strikes in Plzeň in 1951 and January 1953,²² but two mass demonstrations did occur in Moravia, the first in Brno in late November 1951, when an estimated 6,000 workers marched on the city centre, briefly bringing public life to a standstill.²³ The second took place in the town of Prostějov on 10 April 1953, when a crowd of around 3,000 protesters attacked the seat of municipal authority after a statue of Tomáš G. Masaryk, the revered founder of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 and the country's first democratic president, had been demolished by local communists.²⁴

¹⁷ Lenka Kalinová, *Společenské proměny v čase socialistického experimentu. K sociálním dějinám v letech 1945–1969* (Prague: Academia, 2007), 193–6.

¹⁸ Karel Kaplan, *Proměny české společnosti 1948–1960. Část první* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2007), 300–10.

¹⁹ Peter Heumos, 'Dělnické stavky v Československu v padesátých letech', *Pohled*, 8, 6 (2000), 20.

²⁰ National Archive of the Czech Republic (NA), Prague, fond (f.) 014/12, svazek (sv.) 11, archivní jednotka (a.j.) 168, list (l.) 19; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 10, a.j. 103, l. 2; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 10, a.j. 104, l. 2.

²¹ Peter Heumos, 'Vylhňme si rukávy, než se kola zastaví!' *Dělníci a státní socialismus v Československu 1945–1968* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2006), 64.

²² Adam Skála, 'Měnová reforma 1. června 1953 v Plzni v hlášení mocenských orgánů', *Minulostí západočeského kraje*, 2 (2007), 603–4.

²³ Security Services Archive (ABS), Prague, f. A2/1, a.j. 1861.

²⁴ ABS, f. 310–70–11, ll. 5, 41–3, 46–8.

The degree and durability of this popular unrest should not be exaggerated, nor should it automatically be construed as politically motivated. Indeed, Peter Heumos, the leading Western expert on the Czechoslovak working-class movement, has concluded that strikes were usually of a defensive character, focusing on 'social issues' with 'political demands' playing a 'marginal role'.²⁵ Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that major work stoppages and large-scale public disorder, combined with endemic absenteeism, job fluctuation and theft of state property,²⁶ disturbed party dignitaries and imparted a sense of looming social crisis, not least because they indicated that political discontent could rapidly emerge from socio-economic concerns.

This was precisely the pattern that would be followed in Plzeň. The immediate catalyst for the events of early June 1953 was the currency reform promulgated by the government on the evening of Saturday 30 May, effective from 1 June, and the accompanying abandonment of the dual system of rationing and market prices. The monetary measure, inspired by Soviet planners and executed in the utmost secrecy,²⁷ was intended to deal a crushing blow to the 'bourgeois class enemy' and 'speculators' who had hoarded financial assets, but party leaders were aware that some sections of the population, including those who traditionally gave their support to the KSC, would be adversely affected.²⁸ In reality, it had a sudden and devastating impact – retail prices roughly doubled – on the savings and standards of living of millions of people, outraging many citizens.²⁹ Particularly badly hit were large working-class families, pensioners, invalids and better-paid employees with bank deposits. By stipulating that existing Czechoslovak crowns would be exchanged for new currency at a ratio of 5:1 for the first 300 crowns, and thereafter at the extortionate rate of 50:1, the decree was widely regarded as 'state theft' or, in collective memory, as 'the robbery of the century'.

In addition, there were important local factors which impacted on events in Plzeň. The region, south-west of Prague and strategically important as lying close to the West German border, had been liberated from the Nazis by the US army in spring 1945, and many citizens retained a residual pride in this fact. Czechoslovak–US friendship societies had existed in the city, and some demonstrators in June 1953 apparently, and forlornly, believed that 'the boys from the USA' would come to their aid.³⁰ The area had also been a bastion of social democracy before the war and although after 1948 the KSC made substantial headway, communist leaders constantly warned of the dangers of 'right-wing social democratism'. More relevant are the immediate practical concerns that deeply rankled with Plzeň workers. First and

²⁵ Heumos, 'Dělnické stavky', 20.

²⁶ Robert K. Evanson, 'Regime and Working Class in Czechoslovakia 1948–1968', *Soviet Studies*, 37 (1985), 250.

²⁷ For behind-the-scenes Soviet involvement see T. V. Volokitina et al., eds., *Vostochnaia Evropa v dokumentakh rossiiskikh arkhivov 1944–1953 gg. Tom II 1949–1953 gg.* (Moscow: 'Sibirskii khronograf', 1998), 923; NA, f. 02/5, sv. 63, a.j. 171, ll. 1–2.

²⁸ Dana Musilová, *Měnová reforma 1953 a její sociální důsledky. Studie a dokumenty* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1994), 17.

²⁹ Kalinová, *Společenské proměny*, 198; Musilová, *Měnová reforma*, 22.

³⁰ Otto Ulc, 'Pilsen: The Unknown Revolt', *Problems of Communism*, 14, 3 (1965), 47.

foremost was the question of advance payments (*zálohy*). According to government decrees, these payments were to be made on the twentieth day of each month.³¹ However, in the huge Škoda engineering and armaments plant,³² which was pivotal to the Soviets' militarised conception of the Czechoslovak economy and which was to become the fulcrum of the disturbances, *zálohy* were not distributed until Thursday 28 May and what is more the payment was in 'old' currency. This meant employees had insufficient time to spend their wages before the monetary reform effectively rendered them worthless, a situation routinely described as 'robbery' and 'sabotage'.³³ Unsurprisingly, the wages and prices issue profoundly disoriented the entire labour force, communists included.³⁴

The workers' sense of dignity was further offended by the lies peddled by party officials about the solidity of the Czechoslovak crown. As late as 29 May, President Antonín Zápotocký himself mendaciously informed the country that 'our currency is firm'.³⁵ Workers were also morally enraged by the perceived corruption and avarice of local communist 'red barons', notably the Mudra family, who allegedly went on a 110,000-crown buying spree just before the currency reform.³⁶ Such actions were incendiary, given the gross material shortages in the region. On the day of the uprising it was reported by the Plzeň party committee that 'in all districts . . . shops are inadequately stocked with basic goods, such as butter, fats, sugar and cigarettes'.³⁷ In short, the initial motivation behind the disturbances was acute socio-economic distress and anxiety exacerbated by official corruption and hypocrisy which affronted the workers' sense of natural justice and embedded egalitarianism.

The 'events'

It is not easy to reconstruct a narrative of the 'events [*události*]', as they were euphemistically called in party terminology. Different sources offer different details, chronologies and statistics. There is, though, sufficient consensus to establish the main contours.³⁸ At 6 a.m. on Monday 1 June 1953, angry and confused Škoda

³¹ I am indebted to Peter Heumos for explaining the payment of *zálohy*. For relevant government decrees see Musilová, *Měnová reforma*, 59–61.

³² The Škoda plant was at this time formally known as the 'V. I. Lenin Works' (ZVIL).

³³ For complaints about *zálohy* see NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 170, l. 13; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 171, l. 3; NA, f. 1261/0/43, inventární číslo (inv. č.) 157, karton (k.) 114; Skála, 'Měnová reforma', 617, 626.

³⁴ NA, f. 1261/0/43, inv. č. 157, k. 114; Musilová, *Měnová reforma*, 18.

³⁵ Zápotocký's radio announcement made a lasting impression on participants in the uprising. See Eva Šafránková, "'Ty jsi černověj, vid'?" 1. červen 1953 v Plzni očima pamětníků', MA thesis, Západočeská univerzita, Plzeň, 2005, 31.

³⁶ State Regional Archive in Plzeň (SOAP), inv. č. 100, k. 29, l. 54; NA, f. 19/13, a.j. 49 (4), l. 309; NA, f. ÚV KSČ, nezpracovaný fond, Kraj Plzeň, konference 1953–1954.

³⁷ NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 173, l. 9.

³⁸ My reconstruction is drawn from Skála, 'Měnová reforma', 603–8, 612–30; Jiří Bílek, 'Československá armáda a měnová reforma v roce 1953', *Historie a vojenství*, 1 (1995), 75–80; Zdeněk Štěpánek, *Utajené povstání 1953* (Prague: Michael, 1993), 11–44; and Ulc, 'Pilsen', 46–9. Central and local party reports are interesting, although contentious. See NA, f. 02/5, sv. 62, a.j. 167, ll. 12–15; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 171, ll. 3–4; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 173, ll. 8–9; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 174, ll. 3–6; SOAP, inv. č. 3603, k. 449.

workers began to assemble for the morning shift. They were almost immediately addressed over the factory tannoy by the managing director, František Brabec. According to Čestmír Císař, an eyewitness regional party functionary, ‘it was a “technocratic” speech . . . coldly matter-of-fact and lacking in understanding of the disturbed psychosis in the workshops’.³⁹ As in other worker uprisings in communist states, heartless comments by enterprise bosses represented important ‘radicalising moments’.⁴⁰ This was certainly the case for many Škoda employees, several hundred of whom began to gather in disgruntled groups after Brabec’s curt announcement. The mood turned sour, with much public swearing and cursing. Finding no channels of conciliation through the plant management, the idea of a strike and a street demonstration took root, especially among younger workers and non-communists.

By 9 a.m., with communist officials and party members attending lengthy and sometimes ill-tempered cell meetings, a crowd of between 1,000 and 2,000 had congregated at the First Machine Works. Despite attempts by factory guards to lock the gates, many workers were able to force their way out, where they were joined by around 500–600 employees from the Electro-Technical Doudlevec plant, an affiliated Škoda enterprise to the south of the city. These protesters then marched on the national committee building (town hall) in Republic Square to air their grievances at the seat of municipal government. By 9.45 a.m. the first marchers, bolstered by perhaps hundreds of school and college students,⁴¹ apprentices, brewery workers and curious onlookers, reached the square, where, in the words of one security report, ‘the situation is becoming critical’.⁴²

Indeed, the party’s regional committee and local law enforcement agencies, including State Security (StB), the National Security Corps and the People’s Militia,⁴³ were effectively powerless to quell the crowds, despite having been placed on alert over the weekend.⁴⁴ The result of this remarkable incapacity was that a band of about 150 people stormed the town hall more or less unopposed and proceeded to ransack the building, symbolically hurling busts of communist luminaries – Lenin, Stalin, Malenkov, Gottwald and Zápotocký – into the square to the great delight of the protesters. The Soviet flag was burned, a large portrait of Edvard Beneš, the last democratic president of the republic, was draped from an office window and for about ten minutes a few of the rioters were able to broadcast over the city radio: ‘We want freedom! We demand justice! Down with the communists! We

³⁹ Čestmír Císař, *Paměti. Nejen o zákulisí Pražského jara* (Prague: SinCon, 2005), 413–14.

⁴⁰ The revolt in the southern Russian city of Novocherkassk in June 1962 was in part ignited by provocative comments – ‘use offal for your meat pies’ – by the ‘pot-bellied’ director of a large enterprise. Vladimir A. Kozlov, *Mass Uprisings in the USSR: Protest and Rebellion in the Post-Stalin Years* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), 227, 229.

⁴¹ Reportedly, ‘over 100 school pupils actively took part’ in the ‘provocations’, sixty-seven of whom were punished, as were about ten teachers. NA, f. 014/12, sv. 12, a.j. 202, l. 8; SOAP, inv. č. 812, k. 108. It is possible that these party figures are an underestimate.

⁴² Cited in Štěpánek, *Utajené povstání*, 18.

⁴³ The People’s Militia, composed of armed communist workers, sought to ensure security in and around industrial enterprises.

⁴⁴ ABS, f. 310–72–29, ll. 1–7.

want free elections!' Similar events took place at the district courthouse and prison, where attempts were made to release arrested demonstrators. Others gathered at the Masaryk monument, singing the national anthem and popular folk tunes. Three or four young insurgents, including two women, commandeered an armoured security vehicle and drove around the city, waving the Czechoslovak flag and a picture of Beneš.

It became evident to both the regional and the central authorities, who were kept closely informed of developments via regular telex messages, that local police and security forces were unable to contain the strikers.⁴⁵ Hence Jan Hlína, secretary of the regional communist party, requested Antonín Novotný, the party boss, to send armed reinforcements to restore order. These detachments, of several hundred men from the People's Militia and border and interior guards, eventually arrived by mid-afternoon from Prague, České Budějovice, Kladno and elsewhere. By all accounts the numbers of demonstrators also swelled after midday, and pitched battles and skirmishes ensued in various places, the most violent occurring at Gate 4 of the Škoda plant on Korandova Street. According to one uncorroborated source, sub-machine guns were turned on the rioters,⁴⁶ and perhaps as many as fourteen were injured, three seriously.⁴⁷ Sporadic shootings also occurred at the courthouse, where two terrified judges took a couple of potshots at the protesters, although no one was hurt.⁴⁸ The rebels hurled stones, bricks and wood, engaged in fist fights and even on occasion disarmed their opponents and destroyed the confiscated weapons or lobbed them into the canal. They were met with a good deal of force, security officers beating up individual demonstrators and firemen's hoses being used to drench the crowds. In the late afternoon more armed detachments arrived and these proved decisive. By about 6 p.m. Republic Square was evacuated and a state of martial law was de facto in operation throughout the city. StB plainclothes officers swept through the throng, arresting many people. Wet clothing was, apparently, sufficient to justify detention.

As the dust settled, party functionaries in the Škoda plant belatedly organised a pro-communist 'anti-demonstration' of several hundred workers, officials and, somewhat bizarrely, a few local actors who, after parading through the city in the evening sunshine, proceeded to dismantle the Masaryk monument, 'an act of cultural barbarism' in Císař's words.⁴⁹ Sporadic strikes and minor disorders continued in several factories throughout the region for the next day or two, many more Škoda workers were arrested and the local security forces were kept in a state of heightened alert until 8 June. But the Plzeň revolt was effectively over within ten hours.

Neither primary nor secondary sources agree on the key question of the number of demonstrators from the Škoda works and other enterprises. According to local StB statistics, sixteen factories struck in the Plzeň area with 2,928 participants, 'about

⁴⁵ The telexes are located in SOAP, inv. č. 3603, k. 449.

⁴⁶ Zdeněk Jirásek and Jaroslav Šůla, *Velká peněžní loupež v Československu 1953 aneb 50:1* (Prague: Svítání, 1992), 102.

⁴⁷ SOAP, inv. č. 100, k. 29, l. 62.

⁴⁸ Ulč, *The Judge*, 117, 122; Skála, 'Měnová reforma', 628.

⁴⁹ Císař, *Paměti*, 414–15, claims that the counter-demonstration attracted '2,000' marchers.

1,231' coming from Škoda.⁵⁰ This figure was slightly raised in the report on the events ratified by the party's political secretariat in August 1953, which stated that '1,400 people' from Škoda took part.⁵¹ This represented 5 per cent of the total workforce of approximately 28,000.⁵² A Plzeň civil police report dated 2 June indicates that 'perhaps' 2,000 workers from the plant marched on the city centre.⁵³ On the other hand, two Czech specialists have insisted that far more struck, at least twice as many as the StB files suggest.⁵⁴ Even if this is the case, no more than 10 per cent of Škoda operatives were involved. In terms of overall numbers of demonstrators, sources range from a minimum of 3,000–5,000 to a maximum of 20,000 citizens.⁵⁵ The total municipal population was around 132,000, although this was swelled significantly by migrant labourers, so-called *kovorolníky* (metal-farmers), commuting from surrounding districts, who formed almost half of the entire Škoda workforce.⁵⁶ Whatever the estimates, it seems safe to assume that only a minority, albeit fairly substantial, of Plzeň inhabitants were caught up in the unrest. Officially, 336 people were arrested, many during the disturbances.⁵⁷ Of these, 217 were sentenced in the trials that followed the uprising, 10 were acquitted⁵⁸ and 109 were released from custody in late June.⁵⁹ Some scholars have insisted that the number of arrests and convictions was far higher, but their figures are not borne out in the archival record.⁶⁰

Hopes were high among the insurgents that workers from other industrial areas would join the struggle, but these were largely dashed, as there were no means of communication between regions. In the heavy industrial and coal-mining districts around Ostrava, 11,601 workers from twenty-nine enterprises downed tools and eighty-four people were arrested.⁶¹ In Prague, thirty-two factories struck with 6,490 participants and seventy-six arrests, and in several towns of southern Bohemia, especially Strakonice and Vimperk, there were quite lengthy work stoppages and

⁵⁰ ABS, f. 310–72–30, ll. 13–14; NA, f. 1261/0/43, inv. č. 157, k. 114; Karel Kaplan and Jana Váchová, eds., *Perzekuce po měnové reformě v Československu v roce 1953: Dokumenty* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1993), 141.

⁵¹ NA, f. 05/1, sv. 378, a.j. 2292, l. 34.

⁵² NA, f. 02/5, sv. 62, a.j. 167, l. 10.

⁵³ Skála, 'Měnová reforma', 617.

⁵⁴ Kaplan and Váchová, *Perzekuce*, 141, n. 1.

⁵⁵ NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 174, l. 5 (3,000–5,000 participants); NA, f. 1261/0/43, inv. č. 157, k. 114 (10,000); NA, f. 05/1, sv. 378, a.j. 2292, l. 6 (12,000); Jirásek and Šůla, *Velká peněžní loupež*, 102; Jan Rataj, *Komunistické Československo, 1948–1960* (Plzeň: Pedagogická fakulta Západočeské univerzity, 1995), 138; Ivan Martinovský, 'Plzeňské události roku 1953', *Plzeňské noviny*, 1 June 1990; Hans Renner, *A History of Czechoslovakia since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1989), 28 (20,000). Skála, 'Měnová reforma', 621, insists that the figure of 12,000 participants is 'exaggerated'.

⁵⁶ NA, f. 02/5, sv. 62, a.j. 167, l. 7; Smula, 'The Party and the Proletariat', 162.

⁵⁷ Kaplan and Váchová, *Perzekuce*, 141.

⁵⁸ Helena Baťková, 'Plzeňské povstání v roce 1953 a jeho důsledky', MA thesis, Západočeská univerzita, Plzeň, 1998, 131.

⁵⁹ NA, f. 02/5, sv. 60, a.j. 160, l. 1.

⁶⁰ Jiří Pernes, *Krise komunistického režimu v Československu v 50. letech 20. století* (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2008), 91, estimates 'around 650' arrests. The highest number – 'about two thousand' – is given by Ulc, 'Pilsen', 48.

⁶¹ Figures in this paragraph are from official sources, cited in Kaplan and Váchová, *Perzekuce*, 141.

disorders.⁶² There were also strikes and disturbances in many other Czech and Moravian towns and in several parts of Slovakia, notably Košice and Žilina. In total, official documents report that 129 factories in the republic went on strike, involving 32,359 people, of whom 472 were arrested. Even if we double these numbers, it is clear that the vast majority of Czech and Slovak workers did not participate in the unrest. Indeed, Heumos has estimated that 4 to 5 per cent of workers struck nationwide.⁶³

Contemporary Western informants were likewise often inaccurate in their statistics. BBC archives claim, apparently, that ten people were killed and 2,300 injured, but one Czech author dismisses these as ‘absolutely fanciful figures’: ‘no one’ died and perhaps ‘hundreds’ were wounded.⁶⁴ Other Western media and émigré organisations spoke, incorrectly, of several deaths.⁶⁵ There are no hard-and-fast tallies of casualties, but the regional Plzeň archives reveal that six men of the People’s Militia, two civil policemen and two secret police agents were seriously injured and forty-seven others were slightly hurt.⁶⁶ The number of injured demonstrators is unknown. Two Czech scholars suggest a ‘very low’ estimate of 200 wounded,⁶⁷ while an American historian talks of ‘seventy to eighty casualties . . . nearly all . . . members of the local People’s Militia and StB’.⁶⁸

Although firearms were deployed, they were used sparingly as a last resort. Neither central nor local authorities were keen to have a bloodbath on their hands. Plzeň’s communist mayor, Josef Mainzer, refused to use arms against the demonstrators at the town hall, remembering how ‘capitalists shot workers – he couldn’t condone anything like that’.⁶⁹ Moreover, one army commander told the protesters, ‘I’m supposed to disperse you, but I’ve given an order that we shall not open fire. We would never do that.’ Other officers are reported to have assured the demonstrators that ‘the army will not use arms against the workers’. There were also indications of fraternisation between young conscript soldiers and the crowds, especially women: ‘Aren’t you ashamed to fire on workers? Don’t shoot our children . . . Boys, come and join us!’ Some security ‘lads’ responded with ‘We’ll be with you!’ and one border guard

⁶² Jiří Petráš, ‘Peněžní reforma 1953’, *Sborník Archivu ministerstva vnitra*, 3 (2005), 141–71.

⁶³ Heumos, ‘Dělnické stavky’, 21.

⁶⁴ Štěpánek, *Utajené povstání*, 60.

⁶⁵ *New York Times*, 7 June 1953; Muriel Blaive, *Promarněná příležitost. Československo a rok 1956* (Prague: Prostor, 2001), 183. As far as I can judge, the only scholars writing since the events who have argued that fatalities occurred are Petr Jokeš, Andrzej Mąkiewicz and Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, ‘Peněžní reforma v Československu v roce 1953 a její ohlasy v Polsku’, *Slovanský přehled*, 85 (1999), 65, who say that six people were killed, but provide no convincing source for this figure. Otherwise, only contemporary sources, mainly Western or émigré, talked of deaths, although there were rumours to this effect at the time among the Czech population.

⁶⁶ SOAP, inv. č. 812, k. 108; Skála, *Měnová reforma*, 630.

⁶⁷ Jirásek and Šůla, *Velká peněžní loupež*, 103.

⁶⁸ Mark Kramer, ‘The Early Post-Stalin Succession Struggle and Upheavals in East-Central Europe: Internal–External Linkages in Soviet Policy Making (Part 1)’, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 1 (1999), 21.

⁶⁹ NA, f. 05/1, sv. 378, a.j. 2292, l. 7.

admitted that ‘we were ashamed to the depths of our souls’.⁷⁰ Above all, there was a marked reluctance and ‘indecisiveness’ on the part of some men of the People’s Militia and even StB agents to use coercion against ‘co-workers’.⁷¹ In sum, it is clear that the scale of violence was considerable but not excessive, given the potentially explosive nature of the disorders and in comparison with similar uprisings in Poznań (June 1956) and Novocherkassk (June 1962), where seventy-three and twenty-three citizens respectively were killed by security forces.⁷²

The ‘strong hand’

There is no evidence that the Plzeň rebellion was organised or planned, regardless of the spurious insistence of party officials that ‘the action was prepared in advance . . . by alien elements . . . with the help of agents’ and ‘Western imperialists’, the latter accusation becoming particularly prevalent after the mass revolt in the GDR on 17 June.⁷³ All accounts agree that the strikes and demonstrations were spontaneous elemental outbursts of popular anger, with little or no leadership and overall direction. No strike committees or ‘revolutionary councils’ were created, although a factory in the town of Blovice did elect a delegation to send to Plzeň to put forward their two, rather moderate, demands: higher wages and the release of all arrested comrades.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, party and trade union bosses were in a desperate hurry to identify and punish the ‘ringleaders’ of the ‘anti-state putsch’. As soon as news reached Prague of the unwelcome developments in Plzeň, the party’s organisational secretariat ordered the regional authorities to compile lists of ‘provocateurs’ who should be ‘isolated’ and ‘sent to labour camps’.⁷⁵ This revengeful, almost hysterical, reaction was encapsulated by Zápotocký’s oft-cited words at a gathering of party secretaries on 11 June: ‘we have every reason to show a strong hand [*silnou ruku*]’. He rejected the notion of the ‘cult of the worker’, which too often meant that ‘he is excused everything’,⁷⁶ and threatened to act ‘mercilessly’ against any proletarian who ‘crosses the other side of the barricade and betrays their class point of view’. By so doing they become a ‘class enemy, even if they are ten times a worker’.⁷⁷ Zápotocký’s tone was more moderate in other parts of his speech, but ultimately he was not joking.

The stick took several forms, the most severe being a series of thirteen trials in camera held between 13 and 22 July 1953, in which 217 people, generally charged with perpetrating ‘violence against public figures and buildings’, were imprisoned

⁷⁰ Štěpánek, *Utajené povstání*, 15, 20, 26, 29.

⁷¹ NA, f. 018, sv. 15, a.j. 110, l. 45.

⁷² Machcewicz, *Rebellious Satellite*, 118; Kozlov, *Mass Uprisings*, 259–71.

⁷³ SOAP, inv. č. 100, k. 29, ll. 38, 63; SOAP, inv. č. 3400, k. 450; NA, f. 05/1, sv. 378, a.j. 2292, l. 36.

⁷⁴ Bílek, ‘Československá armáda’, 80.

⁷⁵ SOAP, inv. č. 3603, k. 449.

⁷⁶ NA, f. 018, sv. 15, a.j. 110, ll. 15–18.

⁷⁷ All-Trade Union Archive, Czech and Moravian Chamber of Trade Unions (VOA ČMKOS), Prague, f. ÚRO – Předsednictvo, inv. č. 180, k. 16, ll. 103–4.

for terms ranging from a few months to fourteen years.⁷⁸ Secret police investigators, following Soviet practice, lumped the accused into ‘groups’ led by ‘class aliens’ – ‘Nečas and co.’, ‘Melka and co.’ and so on – in order to give the impression that the uprising was organised in advance. Several of the condemned were stigmatised as ‘daughters of kulaks’ or ‘sons of businessmen’, a few had committed minor criminal offences, others had blemishes on their party or youth union records and one or two were targeted for their ‘immoral’ sexual proclivities. The majority of them served all or part of their sentences in the notorious Jáchymov uranium mine and camp complex in north-western Bohemia. At least two prisoners – both women – died in captivity.⁷⁹

Several conclusions can be drawn from the social and generational composition of the accused. First, the vast majority – about 80 per cent – were employed as ‘workers’ (*dělníci*), or were of working-class origin,⁸⁰ a fact confirmed by several reports compiled by the Škoda authorities.⁸¹ This caused a major headache for the party, which consistently sought to blame the disorders on ‘reactionaries’, former ‘class enemies’, ‘speculators’ and ‘black marketeers’. The archival sources are silent, though, on whether these workers were skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled. Only one Czech historian has broached this issue and she deduced that the demonstrations were strongest in factories with a relatively permanent cadre of ‘class conscious’ engineering workers.⁸² However, judging from the professions listed in the Škoda documents, all categories of workers participated, including technical, research and service staff.

Second, while the age range was seventeen to sixty-two, an absolute majority, 137 or roughly 63 per cent, were between seventeen and thirty years old, giving some credence to the idea that Plzeň was a ‘revolt of the youth’. Official assessments on the nefarious role of ‘Teddy boys’ (*potápky*) and ‘hooligans’ confirm this supposition, but it is not evident what motivated these young people.⁸³ A recent study on Polish youth in the 1950s suggests that their rebelliousness was not so much the product of a politicised rejection of ‘totalitarianism’ as a fierce reaction against traditional ‘cultural elitism’ grounded in ‘a sense of their difference and distance from parents, priests, cultural activists, and Party bosses alike’.⁸⁴ Finally, it is noteworthy that women represented an unusually high proportion of those convicted: in total forty-eight, approximately 14 per cent. This rate of involvement may well reflect the frustration and travails felt by female workers with their treatment inside and outside the factory and

⁷⁸ Štěpánek, *Utajené povstání*, 62, says that 256 people were tried. Jirásek and Šůla, *Velká peněžní loupež*, 134, give a figure of 331 sentenced. Trials were also staged in Ostrava, Prague and seven other towns. ABS, f. H-193, ‘Měnová reforma 1953’, ll. 23–178.

⁷⁹ Bat’ková, ‘Plzeňské povstání’, 132.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 106–31; ABS, f. A2/1–1586.

⁸¹ Škoda Archives (SA), Plzeň, ZVIL 203, OS 302.

⁸² Kalinová, *Společenské proměny*, 197.

⁸³ NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 172, l. 3.

⁸⁴ Katherine Lebow, ‘*Kontra Kultura*: Leisure and Youthful Rebellion in Stalinist Poland’, in David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Bloc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010, forthcoming).

party – ‘no one helps women’ as ‘their work is undervalued’.⁸⁵ In an essentially patriarchal society, women also faced the prime burden of housekeeping and shopping and were thus more immediately affected by price rises. As such, they were regularly attributed with negative reactions to the currency reform.⁸⁶

Trials were, however, the tip of the iceberg in the repression that followed the uprising. A wave of vindictive extrajudicial measures was unleashed almost straight away: expulsions from trade unions, sackings and demotions in the workplace, forced resettlement and confiscation of property were among the crass weapons wielded by the party. As ever, there is no agreement on the numbers persecuted in this way, but within three weeks of the events Zápotocký and Jaroslav Kolář, a prominent trade union official, recognised, not without reservations, that ‘800 unionists’ had been expelled from Škoda and a further 300 from ET Doudlevice.⁸⁷ Heumos, citing local archival sources, maintains that 375 Škoda operatives were hauled before the factory’s ‘worker commission’ to explain their actions on 1 June. Of these, fifty-four were immediately fired and fifty-six transferred to worse jobs in the plant.⁸⁸ Yet, according to a report by Brabec, by the end of August 1953 a total of 1,127 Škoda employees had been punished in one way or another for their participation in the strikes. Over 230 were sacked.⁸⁹ The authorities also lost no time in exploiting the opportunity to remove ‘enemy elements’ from Plzeň by means of forced resettlement, generally to dilapidated accommodation in bleak border areas. The evacuated – at least fifty families, many of whom had had no direct involvement in the civil unrest – were given scarcely any notice of eviction and, what is more, their belongings were often confiscated by the police. Arguably the most insidious punishment was the long-term stigmatisation and discrimination suffered by the victims, epitomised by the ban on higher education of their offspring and the notation ‘Action 1 June 1953’ stamped in their identity cards.⁹⁰

Nevertheless, a partial reversal of the ‘strong hand’ was initiated in late summer 1953, probably under Soviet influence after Lavrentii Beria’s ‘trial’ in Moscow in July. This concession opened the way for numerous amnesty pleas from Škoda workers beginning in August 1953 and lasting well into 1954. Typically, letter writers, sometimes supported by workshop councils, couched their appeals in protestations of loyalty to the values of the regime: ‘I very much regret my actions and will try to be a model worker’; ‘I left my workshop, but without any evil intentions of helping the reactionaries’. Others made more personal statements: because of the cut in pay ‘I am unable to support my family of four’. In many cases, but not all, the appeals were upheld and workers were reinstated in their former, generally better paid,

⁸⁵ NA, f. 19/13, a.j. 49 (4), l. 337; NA, f. 01, sv. 21, a.j. 34, l. 77.

⁸⁶ NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 170, l. 13.

⁸⁷ VOA ČMKOS, f. ÚRO – Předsednictvo, inv. č. 180, k. 16, l. 98 (Zápotocký); NA, f. 018, sv. 15, a.j. 110, l. 92 (Kolář).

⁸⁸ Heumos, ‘*Vyhňme si rukávy*’, 78, note 72.

⁸⁹ SA, ZVIL 203, PŘ 1674; SA, ROH 16, ETD 35.

⁹⁰ Šafránková, “‘Ty jsi červnověj, vid’?”, 71–6; Štěpánek, *Utajené povstání*, 58–9.

jobs.⁹¹ These decisions represented a reluctant and tacit admission that the precipitous ‘kangaroo justice’ following the uprising needed to be rectified. One suspects that they did little to improve labour relations, and a comprehensive amnesty had to wait until 1960.

The limits of popular resistance?

At face value, it would appear logical to interpret the Plzeň revolt as a symbol of mass resistance to a manifestly unpopular regime: the ‘first anti-communist uprising’ in Eastern Europe, and, what is more, one in a long list of oppositional activities and ideological battles presaging the eventual collapse of communism in 1989.⁹² Indeed, for some insurgents the ultimate aim in all likelihood was or, better, *became* in the course of rapid radicalisation and politicisation, the revolutionary overthrow of the communist system. At least one participant maintained that ‘1 June 1953 was not a velvet revolution. It was a violent outcry of discontent and resistance towards the ruling regime.’⁹³ This was partly how the authorities chose to interpret events. As Císař wrote many years later, local officials believed that ‘there existed a scheme to transform the demonstrations into an anti-state uprising . . . To state and party functionaries, the street demonstrations didn’t appear as a popular manifestation of discontent, but as anti-socialist riots.’⁹⁴

These weighty considerations notwithstanding, I would argue that the evidence on the uprising is open to a countervailing reading that identifies the limited, confused and localised nature of the events. We should be cautious about assessing popular objectives and the variable motivations for involvement in mass actions. For a start, the immediate causes of the civil unrest were socio-economic, a mixture of workplace injustices and moral outrage associated with the currency reform and poor material circumstances. Anti-regime political slogans *were* vocally expressed, but ideologically conditioned demands for an end to socialism and a return to the pre-war capitalist liberal democratic status quo were noticeable by their complete absence. Certainly Otto Ulč, an assistant judge in Plzeň who witnessed many of the trials of young Škoda workers, ‘strongly felt that their share in the violence directed against the System was not so much the result of a sacred yearning for “democracy,” for “freedom” . . . as the spontaneous release of a host of accumulated frustrations and grievances’.⁹⁵

As we have seen, only a minority of Škoda workers took part in the strikes, and relatively few from neighbouring enterprises, offices and educational facilities joined them. What does this mean? It may, simply, signify that many employees were too frightened to participate or were prevented from demonstrating by factory

⁹¹ SA, ZVIL 1074, ETD 118; SA, ZVIL 1552, PV 1988; SA, ZVIL 1455, PV 109; SA, ZVIL 1074, ŘED 84; SA, ZVIL 1513, PV 1441.

⁹² This is the explicit or implicit interpretation of several authors, including Jirásek and Šála, *Velká peněžní loupež*, 101; and Karel Kaplan, ‘1953. Počátek obratu’, in Štěpánek, *Utajené povstání*, 6–7.

⁹³ Štěpánek, *Utajené povstání*, 26, 69; Šafránková, ‘“Ty jsi černovej, vid’?”’, 37–49.

⁹⁴ Císař, *Paměti*, 416.

⁹⁵ Ulč, *The Judge*, 124.

guards. But it may also show that older, more established skilled hands had too much to lose by striking, or that they were prepared to give the authorities the benefit of the doubt. Interestingly, archival records note that Škoda operatives appreciated Zápotocký, because he ‘goes among the workers and always talks plainly so that everyone understands him . . . [He] should be a model for all functionaries.’⁹⁶ Given this, we might speculate that if party officials and Škoda managers had addressed workers’ material concerns openly and sympathetically on the morning of 1 June, the revolt may well have been averted. After all, there was nothing inevitable about the disturbances spilling over into the streets. What is more, the available sources do not indicate how the language of resistance was understood and how ubiquitous were the anti-communist slogans: did fifty people shout them, or several thousand? And even if the latter, how many are required to constitute a critical mass of ‘resisters’? In the opinion of one leading scholar, political slogans ‘which arise spontaneously in the heat of confrontation . . . are far too ephemeral and inchoate to be taken as evidence of any programmatic political content to workers’ action’.⁹⁷ The overtly political demands in Plzeň appear to have arisen extempore outside the factory gates in response to a pro-regime speech by the mayor, Mainzer. Before this time, the main cries were economic – ‘We want our money!’ and ‘We’ll not put up with theft!’⁹⁸

We can certainly assume that not every ‘rebel’ was a dyed-in-the-wool anti-communist. Some were, but others were curious,⁹⁹ some may have felt constrained to participate through peer pressure,¹⁰⁰ others were prepared to strike and demonstrate, but not to engage in violence, while others still may have thought it was a good way of avoiding work. If official documents are to be believed, not a few were possibly operating under the influence of alcohol. It was reported that on the evenings of Saturday 30 May and Sunday 31 May, after the public announcement of the currency reform, many people chose to spend their excess old crowns in restaurants and bars, many of which were ‘overcrowded’.¹⁰¹ One Western source also notes that at lunchtime on 1 June ‘many demonstrators went home to eat’,¹⁰² hardly the action of a determined revolutionary mob! It is also the case that more than a handful were undercover security agents busy photographing participants.¹⁰³ Finally, it is quite feasible that a striking Plzeň worker in June 1953 had earlier welcomed repressive measures against ‘bourgeois class exploiters’ and gave credence to state propaganda about ‘Zionist’ and ‘imperialist spies’ plotting a third world war or NATO planning

⁹⁶ NA, f. 19/13, a.j. 49 (4), l. 332; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 12, a.j. 206, l. 8.

⁹⁷ Alex Pravda, ‘Industrial Workers: Patterns of Dissent, Opposition and Accommodation’, in Rudolf L. Tökés, ed., *Opposition in Eastern Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 226–7.

⁹⁸ Memoirs of a participant cited in Ducháček, ‘Deset let’, 238.

⁹⁹ ‘Curiosity’ led several ‘participants’ to leave their workplaces. SA, ZVIL 1552, PV 1988; SA, ZVIL 1074, ETD 118; SA, ZVIL 1074, ŘED 84.

¹⁰⁰ Intimidation and threats were certainly emphasised by official sources. NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 172, l. 8; SA, ZVIL 1552, PV 1988.

¹⁰¹ NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 168, l. 17.

¹⁰² Tad Szulcs, *Czechoslovakia since World War II* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1972), 108.

¹⁰³ One undercover agent, Josef Fencel, became so involved in the uprising that he was arrested, tried and sentenced to seven years. ABS, f. 310–68–4, ll. 5–7; ABS, f. A2/1–1586.

an invasion through West Germany.¹⁰⁴ My point, like Plamper's on Stalinist Russia, is that human beings have multiple identities, beliefs and mentalities that can change over time. An individual may back one policy of the government while opposing another and may internalise some values of the 'system' while remaining suspicious of others. As Heumos has tellingly suggested,

The focus on social relations is not to be understood . . . as a history characterized by the actions of the state . . . and the often oppositional reactions of those who were simply acted upon. Co-operation with the political system could coexist with actions that could be described as deviant, just as accommodation and the pursuit of individual interests could reinforce conformity. Patterns of behavior that were unambiguous were only found occasionally.¹⁰⁵

By casting doubt on the sustained political motivations of the Plzeň rioters, I do not wish to trivialise the uprising, attenuate the very real threat under which they acted or imply that popular opposition to the Czechoslovak communist regime was inherently ephemeral and incidental. My scepticism stems, rather, from the supposition that only a relatively small minority of citizens were irrevocably opposed to the communist system, most finding some way of reconciling themselves to the regime, particularly at times of socio-economic improvement as in the mid-1950s and again in the 'normalised' 1970s. The Czech social historian, Dana Musilová, hints at this by dividing popular reaction to the currency reform into three main groups: the largest fell prey to 'apathy and the desperate hope that "it won't be too serious"'; the second 'and numerically smallest' group supported the KSČ; and the third publicly protested against the reform. She also draws a semantic distinction between 'loyalty' and 'faith' in the regime, arguing that a majority of citizens, including party members, were 'loyal' rather than 'faithful'.¹⁰⁶ This sullen compliance was surely a major factor in the relative stability of Czechoslovakia in the momentous year 1956.¹⁰⁷ Compared with Poles and Hungarians, most Czechs and Slovaks, in varying degrees, were prepared to adapt to the system and play by the rules of the game, albeit grudgingly and with little enthusiasm. Whither resistance in this complex matrix of state-society relations and subjective motivations?

The party and the proletariat

The Plzeň events and the official reaction to them shed much light on the nature and day-to-day operation of the KSČ and on the relationship between workers and the 'workers' state'. First, a localised view 'from below' in a crisis situation exposes the disorder, disunity and complacency in the central and particularly regional party bureaucracies. This, in turn, suggests that the conventional image

¹⁰⁴ Many workers, although far from all, appear to have accepted the party's version of the Rudolf Slánský trial in November 1952. See Kevin McDermott, 'A "Polyphony of Voices"? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slánský Affair', *Slavic Review*, 67 (2008), 840-65.

¹⁰⁵ Heumos, 'State Socialism', 47.

¹⁰⁶ Musilová, *Měnová reforma*, 17, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Blaive, *Promarněná příležitost*.

of the KSČ as a strictly ‘totalitarian’, efficient organisation suffused with iron ‘democratic centralism’ and staunch ideological conformity is in important ways an over-simplification. If this was a ‘totalitarian’ party, it was totalitarianism *in the making*, a process never fully achieved throughout the communists’ forty-year rule. Archival sources give the distinct impression that the party was composed of a thin layer of committed *apparatchiki* cut off from the mass of basically apathetic and/or opportunistic members and lower-ranking officials, let alone from the bulk of non-communists. Democracy and participatory activity were at an absolute premium, with all the major decisions being taken by executive bodies and with more than a hint of corruption. Organisational problems abounded. In several party cells in the Škoda works, for example, membership dues were not collected correctly, the ‘whole political level’ was low, the members’ attitude to their organisations was ‘weak’ and barely ‘a quarter to a third’ attended meetings.¹⁰⁸ This calamitous situation was laid bare by Comrade Zika, a Plzeň official speaking at a session of the Regional Committee on 25 September 1953:

We have political departments but they don’t do any work whatsoever. Of the forty or sixty communists there, four go to meetings and if ten turn up it’s considered a success. Comrades say that it’s useless to attend because you can never make yourself heard and organisations cannot decide anything . . . In ZVIL [Škoda] basic organisations don’t work.¹⁰⁹

As a result, large numbers of rank-and-file communists, members of the Czechoslovak Union of Youth and even some lower-level party and trade union functionaries joined with their non-partisan workmates in the strikes, occasionally standing ‘at the head of the anti-state actions’.¹¹⁰ In effect, they failed to defend the regime in its hour of need. Such unreliability was confirmed by Václav Kolena, the chair of the Plzeň regional committee, who revealed that ‘it is impossible to rely on [rank-and-file] communists . . . because they could join the demonstrators’.¹¹¹ Numerous documents attest to the lack of party discipline, but, unsurprisingly, no firm figures on communist participation in the disorders are available.¹¹² The extent can be gleaned, however, from the fact that 171 members had been expelled, presumably for active involvement, from the city party organisation by the end of August 1953.¹¹³

Second, the near-total ineffectiveness of Plzeň’s party, municipal, police and security bodies in quelling the uprising suggests a deep malaise at the heart of regional governance. It was a disastrous state of affairs fully recognised by the KSČ political secretariat in its damning evaluation of the ‘events’. The report berated the ‘helplessness and impotence’ and ‘absolute disorganisation’ of the local authorities,

¹⁰⁸ NA, f. 05/1, sv. 361, a.j. 2190, l. 115.

¹⁰⁹ NA, f. 05/1, sv. 361, a.j. 2190, l. 19.

¹¹⁰ NA, f. 018, sv. 15, a.j. 110, ll. 45, 95; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 172, l. 3; Heumos, ‘Dělnické stavky’, 21.

¹¹¹ NA, f. 05/1, sv. 378, a.j. 2292, ll. 4–5.

¹¹² NA, f. 02/5, sv. 62, a.j. 167, l. 3; NA, f. 014/12, sv. 11, a.j. 172, l. 3; NA, f. 05/1, sv. 378, a.j. 2292, l. 5.

¹¹³ NA, f. 19/13, a.j. 49 (4), l. 368. Also NA, f. 05/1, sv. 416, a.j. 2463, l. 37.

which had resulted politically in ‘opportunist capitulationism’,¹¹⁴ bordering in some cases on a dereliction of duty.¹¹⁵ As one member of the regional committee frankly conceded: ‘We communists were indeed powerless’.¹¹⁶ There was no doubt an element of fear, too, and even more an unforgivable degree of complacency. The party at all levels simply could not conceive of the violent response of Plzeň workers. Even Ladislav Kopřiva, the high-ranking central committee representative despatched from Prague to oversee developments, proved to be completely ineffectual, admitting on 2 June that ‘No one reckoned with such an onslaught.’¹¹⁷ Most revealingly, party authorities could not rely on the solidity and loyalty of the forces of law and order, including the pillar of ‘totalitarian’ control, the secret police. Many of their members were ambivalent, hesitant, even sympathetic towards the ‘putschists’. The ‘state’, then, did not react unanimously and, remarkably, the Plzeň regional security apparatus appeared to have no contingency plans to deal with mass unrest. The fact that similar developments occurred in other heavy industrial areas indicates a broader administrative paralysis.

Finally, at the micro-level it is evident that party, trade union and youth apparatuses in the vital Škoda plant were in virtual disarray and had dismally failed to politicise and engage factory workers, communists included. As Johann Smula has persuasively argued, the poor planning and organisation of production, the endemic shortages of materials, the dearth of reliable and efficient cadres, the ‘everyday failures, the frustrations and indignities of daily life’, and the party’s ‘arrogance and contempt’ for the workforce had ‘estranged’ Škoda operatives well before summer 1953, leaving the party ‘without authority’.¹¹⁸ This chasm between party and worker was, moreover, inbuilt into the entire system, as is graphically illustrated by Kolář’s speech to the Trade Union Presidium on 19 June 1953. Having bemoaned the fact that many workers show ‘disrespect’ towards the unions and do not even keep ‘membership books’, Kolář proceeded to list a whole array of crucial tasks that could only further exacerbate the gap between party and worker on the shop floor: ‘iron discipline’ and ‘mass political work’ were paramount, as was tight unity between the unions and party; greater wage differentials were necessary to fulfil the Five-Year Plan; ‘socialist competition’ and production ‘pledges’ for the 36th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution had to be strengthened; high-quality deliveries to the USSR had to be carried out; and, above all, ‘state and labour discipline’ had to be maintained, which meant in essence that ‘every employee must work’ in order to implement government decisions.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ NA, f. 02/5, sv. 62, a.j. 167, l. 1. Also NA, f. 05/1, sv. 361, a.j. 2190, l. 16.

¹¹⁵ One local People’s Militia commander was allegedly drunk during the disorders. Two high-ranking regional functionaries were demoted and several others reprimanded for their failings. Skála, ‘Měnová reforma’, 604; SOAP, inv. č. 820, k. 109.

¹¹⁶ SOAP, inv. č. 100, k. 29, l. 38.

¹¹⁷ SOAP, inv. č. 100, k. 29, l. 66.

¹¹⁸ Smula, ‘The Party and the Proletariat’, 155–71.

¹¹⁹ VOA ČMKOS, f. ÚRO – Předsednictvo, inv. č. 180, k. 16, ll. 70–6.

The historical significance of the uprising

Was the Plzeň revolt indicative of a crisis at the heart of Czechoslovak communism? Was it the ‘first anti-Stalinist uprising’ in Eastern Europe with broad political and ideological significance, or a localised outburst sparked by local concerns with local outcomes? It was, paradoxically, both. There was indeed a crisis in Czechoslovakia in 1953. But it was not a macro political or ideological one. Rather, Plzeň shows that there had developed since 1948 a profound crisis in worker–state relations at the point of production, rooted not so much in big issues such as ‘democracy versus dictatorship’ or ‘capitalism versus communism’, but in the dire failings of party, state and trade union functionaries to ‘connect’ to the workers, to defend their daily existential needs; to act, in other words, like traditional labour organisations protecting the interests of their constituents. This caesura and resultant disempowerment was recognised by all workers, but was understood politically only by a minority. Most limited themselves to grumbling and ‘go-slows’, while remaining broadly receptive to ‘socialism’ and their understanding of the nascent ‘social contract’.

Party leaders were unable to offer cogent and sustained solutions to these quandaries. But the Plzeň uprising and the wave of strikes throughout the country in early June 1953 did force them to rethink their priorities. The most far-reaching social, and ultimately ideological, outcome was that it induced the KSČ to shift, tentatively and painstakingly, from the stereotypical Stalinist methods epitomised by Zápotocký’s ‘other side of the barricade’ formula towards a longer-term ‘softer’ strategy of ‘socialist consumerism’ in the constant drive for labour mobilisation and political legitimacy. Undoubtedly pressures from Moscow for a ‘New Course’ aimed at improving workers’ standards of living were instrumental, but the Plzeň events made it palpable that lower prices, higher levels of consumption and better housing were all required to build ‘the happy and joyful life’, about which the same Zápotocký opined in June 1953.¹²⁰ To this end, in September 1953 the government announced a round of retail price cuts and the construction of 40,000 new homes for 1954.¹²¹ Although a fair degree of public scepticism, as well as enthusiasm, greeted these tardy decrees, it was not entirely warranted. Between autumn 1953 and autumn 1956 retail prices were lowered six times, personal consumption rose by 14 per cent in 1954 to its highest post-war level, most wages, pensions and some social benefits increased, and in the next few years electrical appliances such as refrigerators, washing machines, radios and television sets became more readily available and affordable.¹²² It is surely no coincidence that in early 1957 a large Plzeň department store hosted ‘A Day at Home’, described as a ‘new form of socialist advertising’ which used actors to

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 104.

¹²¹ NA, 02/1, sv. 37, a.j. 34I, ll. 6, 93; SOAP, inv. č. 825, k. 109.

¹²² Blaive, *Proměnná příležitost*, 302–4; Musilová, *Měnová reforma*, 35–7; Edward Taborsky, *Communism in Czechoslovakia 1948–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 380.

demonstrate an abundance of novel domestic products, reportedly generating ‘great interest among the public’.¹²³

I have attempted to walk something of a historiographical tightrope in this article. The question of the nature and scale of popular resistance in communist Czechoslovakia is not resolvable with any certitude. Ideologically conditioned party and secret police archival reports, tendentious present-day uses and abuses of the term ‘resistance’, and theoretical and definitional complications all conspire to make the job of the historian extremely difficult. That said, I agree that we should ‘discard . . . the old myth that opposition was natural and inevitable’.¹²⁴ In this spirit, I offer the following three broad propositions based on my reading of the Plzeň events. First, the uprising was not indicative of ubiquitous political and ideological resistance to the existing order and should not be viewed teleologically as the first in a line of mass revolts culminating in the *annus mirabilis* of 1989. The revolt, ignited by the ruinous currency reform of 30 May 1953, was more a reflection of the disastrous socio-economic conditions and the breakdown in relations between party and workers at the point of production. Second, the conventional, and still influential, wisdom that the Stalinised KSČ in this period was a fully fledged ‘totalitarian’ party permeated with Leninist ‘democratic centralism’ is in many ways wide of the mark and needs revision. If not ramshackle, the party, especially at the regional and enterprise level, was dysfunctional and divorced from its own grass-roots members, let alone from the mass of non-communists. Finally, the Plzeň events represented the initial turning point in the party’s tentative realisation that fresh methods had to be found to improve worker–state relations by means of a ‘New Course’ and eventually a strategy of ‘socialist consumerism’.

¹²³ Greg Castillo, ‘The American “Fat Kitchen” in Europe: Postwar Domestic Modernity and Marshall Plan Strategies of Enchantment’, in Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, eds., *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 50–1.

¹²⁴ Padraic Kenney, ‘Peripheral Vision: Social Science and the History of Communist Eastern Europe’, *Contemporary European History*, 10 (2001), 177.