

BOOK REVIEW

## McDermott, Kevin, and Matthew Stibbe, eds. *Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in the Era of Normalisation, 1969–1989*

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In the small world of English-language historians of East Central Europe, few if any match Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe's ability to bring together scholars for edited volumes. *Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in the Era of Normalisation, 1969–1989* is the editors' fourth such volume, and perhaps their best yet. This is because the volume's authors deftly balance the stifling aspects of normalization with the varied colorful experiences of those living in the era. In this, the book succeeds in its mission to "illuminate the multi-dimensional and complex processes of normalization" (5).

The volume consists of fourteen chapters, including an introduction by McDermott and Stibbe, which expertly sets the tone of the volume by contrasting its theme of diversity with the heretofore dominant narrative of the era as "frozen" in time. The editors have organized the thirteen main chapters in a manner that takes the reader into the high politics of the early days of the Warsaw Pact occupation and the implementation of Husákite policy to more specific studies of the security service, memory, gender, regional history, and finally to four chapters on aspects of foreign relations. All of them provide important insights.

Several chapters place the era in its more traditional schema—a time of regression, conformity, and failure. James Krapfl's contribution shows how conservative communists maneuvered in the wake of the Warsaw Pact invasion to redefine the Prague Spring and to define what was going to be normal socialism. Following Krapfl, Michael Pullman convincingly explains how the Husák regime's strategy broke with Leninist notions of an engaged public to create an authoritarian welfare state in which the "central legitimizing principle was expertise and state authority" (6). The chapter shows how the regime sought to break the fervor brought about by the reforms of 1968 by replacing political activism with dreams of a "quiet life." Martin Štefek's article follows along these lines to explain a "fragile stability" among the ruling class in the Czechoslovak Communist Party that prevented initiative. Jan Mervart's contribution furthers this analysis of failure with an explanation as to why cultural policy failed to create support for the normalization regime.

Other chapters make the heterogeneity of normalization apparent. Adam Hudek's article highlights how the "success of Slovak modernization" (107) created a loyal base for the communist government among Slovaks, while Kieran Williams' piece follows the secret police across two decades of normalization to show how post-1968 purges significantly weakened operational capability and favored hardliners, but in relatively short order allowed for the professionalization of the organization. In fact, Williams suggests a fascinatingly restrained secret police after normalization. Miroslav Vaněk's contribution, which is wonderfully translated by Rosamund Johnston, discusses how oral history narrators have responded to the "greyness" of the era in complex ways.

Of special interest to this reviewer were the articles by Celia Donert and Vítězslav Sommer. Donert approaches the era through the idea that "gender was central in mediating (citizens) relationship with the late socialist state" (173). Her work finds longer continuities between the conservative gender order of normalization and earlier technocratic ideas, and she hints at an important monograph to come.

Sommer's pioneering article offers a microhistory of the industrial shoe making town of Gottwaldov/Zlín through the normalization era to highlight the "economic absurdities of late socialism" (231).

Articles by Rachel Applebaum, Matthew Stibbe, Ondřej Klípa, Ondřej Vojtěchovský, and Jan Pelikán conclude the volume by covering aspects of Czechoslovak foreign relations. They offer important insights into the cultural and economic relationships created during the period. For example, Ondřej Klípa's article on Polish workers in Czechoslovakia offers a fruitful avenue for future research on the study of socialist labor contracts and international construction.

There are, of course, a few quibbles to be had. They range from the minor—the introduction promises a kaleidoscopic view, but many of the articles reinforce the heretofore dominant viewpoint of a time of stultifying grey—to the important: missing is a chapter offering an overview of the economic history of the era. This is unfortunate as economic projects and decision making are crucial to most of the contributions.

Fortunately, these quibbles do not diminish the importance of this work. The articles are of a high quality, and they collectively move us closer to understanding the complexities of normalization. Indeed, as with most edited volumes of this type, one of the most profound takeaways from the work is the heterogeneous nature of the subject. Normalization looked different depending on where one was standing. Moreover, what is perhaps most special about this volume, and reflective of the current state of Czech and Slovak history, is that Czech and Slovak scholars provide the bulk of the articles. The days of a bifurcated historical landscape, in which Czech-language and Anglophone scholars wrote primarily for their own respective audiences, is over. Such a revolution in historical collaboration guarantees a bright future for the field.