

Modern Czech Literature

Writing in Times of Political Trauma

Edited by

Andrew M. Drozd

University of Alabama

Series in Literary Studies



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Table of contents

	Editor's acknowledgements	v
	Introduction	vii
	Andrew M. Drozd <i>University of Alabama</i>	
Chapter 1	Responsibility vs. greed for power: Karel Čapek's <i>The White Plague</i> in a cultural context	1
	Karen von Kunes <i>Yale University</i>	
Chapter 2	Kundera, Tolstoy, and the lightness of being	15
	Mary Orsak <i>University of Oxford</i>	
Chapter 3	Injurious attachments and dangerous cul-de-sac: gendered reading and deconstructing "deconstructive" logic of selected early Czech novels by Milan Kundera	37
	Jan Matonoha <i>Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Rep.</i>	
Chapter 4	Reluctant dissidents, writer-philosophers, Kundera and Hrabal	73
	Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield <i>Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Rep.</i>	
Chapter 5	Normalization in contemporary Czech prose: between nostalgia, ironizing, payback, and problematizing	103
	Marek Lollok <i>Masaryk University, Czech Rep.</i>	

Chapter 6	Against everything: the brothers Topol and the second generation of the underground	147
	Daniel Webster Pratt <i>McGill University</i>	
Chapter 7	Eda Kriseová: Writing human ecology. Serving poetic justice to truth and love	169
	Hana Waisserová <i>University of Nebraska</i>	
	About the contributors	209
	Index	213

Editor's acknowledgements

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Introduction

Andrew M. Drozd

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With the proclamation of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, as the First World War was winding down, the Czech nation experienced much euphoria and hope. Despite some problems and disappointments, the first fifteen years of the First Republic were relatively stable.¹ This period saw the productive unleashing of many previously restrained cultural forces and it would later be perceived nostalgically by many Czechs. However, with the rise of the Nazis in neighboring Germany in the 1930s, dark clouds began to appear on the Czech horizon, setting off a long series of traumatic events. Because of the numerous traumas experienced by the Czechs, Derek Sayer has characterized Prague as the capital of the dark twentieth century.²

The current collection of articles, which originated in a panel (“Betrayal, Anxiety, and Rebellion in Milan Kundera and in Contemporary Czech Literature”) at the 52nd Annual ASEEEES Convention in 2020, seeks to provide treatments of some of the responses to these traumas in Czech literature.³ The

¹ For those unfamiliar with the vicissitudes of Czech history, see Hugh LeCaine Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2004). For a treatment of Czechoslovakia from its inception until the Communist takeover, see Victor S. Mamatey and Radomír Luža, eds., *A History of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1918–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

² Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century. A Surrealist History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8–12. In recent decades Czech scholarship has been devoting more attention to the theme of trauma. Jan Matonoha, one of the contributors to this volume, would like to draw the reader’s attention to the following: Alexander Kratochvil, ed., *Paměť a trauma pohledem humanitních věd. Komentovaná antologie teoretických textů* (Prague: Akropolis, 2015); Alexander Kratochvil, *Posttraumatické uvprávění. Trauma – Literatura – Vzpomínka* (Brno: Host, 2023).

³ While no comprehensive survey of Czech literary history is available in English, the combination of Novák’s survey with Holý’s will provide the necessary coverage for those readers in need of more background. Arne Novák, *Czech Literature*, trans. Peter Kussi, ed. William E. Harkins (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976); Jiří Holý, *Writers*

chapters in this volume help shed further light on the various responses by Czech writers when confronted with often very trying circumstances. One of the earliest responses to the time of trauma was the work of Karel Čapek, who was one of the leading Czech prose writers in the first half of the twentieth century. Čapek's novel *The War with the Newts* (*Válka s mloky*) was very much concerned with the growing Nazi menace and has been much discussed by scholars. In her chapter, Karen von Kunes focuses on Čapek's play *The White Plague* (*Bílá nemoc*), which was also a response to the Nazi pressure. While von Kunes recognizes the importance of the immediate context of the play, she focuses on the larger theme of the issue of personal responsibility which remained central to Czech (and Slovak) intellectuals and artists in subsequent eras. Her analysis connects the pre-1948 period of Czech literature with developments after the Communist takeover. In particular, von Kunes connects this theme as it appeared in Čapek's play with its presence in the Slovak-language film *The Shop on Main Street* (1965). Not only is there a connection in theme, but there are direct parallels between characters in Čapek's play and characters in the film, which is set in a Slovak village. Von Kunes also ties the theme of responsibility to Václav Havel's call for a better future by awakening a sense of responsibility as well as its appearance in other works by Čapek. In short, von Kunes demonstrates a consistency in response to totalitarianism that transcended the particular traumas of one regime.

The current collection contains three essays that are concerned with the recently deceased Milan Kundera. This is quite justified since he was one of the major Czech prose writers of the twentieth century, the only one to have acquired a sizable international audience. Above and beyond this fact, Kundera is a good example of an individual response to the traumas of Czech history. As Jan Čulík has stated, "His story is that of many Czech intellectuals of his generation: it is the story of freeing oneself of Marxist dogma and of gaining and communicating important insights based on the traumatic experience of life under totalitarianism in Eastern and Central Europe."⁴ In response to the Nazis, Kundera started out as a Communist true believer who came to be very

under Siege. Czech Literature since 1945, trans. Jan Čulík and Elizabeth S. Morrison (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008). For readers seeking a very concise summary of Czech literary history but which also provides extended coverage of many of the most significant writers of the last century, see Chapter Six in Craig Cravens, *Culture and Customs of the Czech Republic and Slovakia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006).

⁴ Jan Čulík, "Milan Kundera," in *Twentieth-Century Eastern European Writers. Third Series*, ed. Stefan Serafin, Dictionary of Literary Biography (Detroit: The Gale Group, 2001), 210.

much disappointed with the reality of Communist-controlled Czechoslovakia. His disillusionment was so profound that he emigrated from the country in 1975, settled in France, began to publish his work in French translation before the Czech original appeared, and even began to write in French. There was a distinct sense of wounded pride on Kundera's part after he left the country. Whereas the pop singer Karel Gott, who went abroad in 1971, was invited by the Communist regime to return without penalty, Kundera was not.⁵ Instead, the regime deprived him of his citizenship in 1978. Kundera's alienation from his homeland was so profound that not only did he not return after 1989, but he was reluctant to allow publication of his works there.

The theme of responsibility also appears in the work of Milan Kundera, demonstrating further continuity between the different eras in which Czech authors operated. In Kundera's work, responsibility is unbearable for most human beings. In her chapter, Mary Orsak explores the theme of the "lightness of being" as found in Kundera and Leo Tolstoy, but within the context of the ideas of Nietzsche and Parmenides. Kundera's relationship with Russian literature was not necessarily a harmonious one: despite his obvious familiarity with it, he tried to distance himself from it.⁶ Nevertheless, the relationship between Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is impossible to miss. Not only is Tereza identified by her heavy copy of Tolstoy's novel, but Tomáš and Tereza name their dog Karenin. Michael Heim apparently viewed Kundera's novel as a playful response to *Anna Karenina*.⁷ Orsak argues, however, that the tie with Tolstoy goes much

⁵ In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera purports to quote a letter from Gustáv Husák to Karel Gott, in which Husák begs Gott to return. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Knopf, 1981), 181. Such a letter seems to be a mystification on Kundera's part, although an oral invitation to return was given to Gott. See Jan Čulík, "Mystification as an Artistic Strategy in Milan Kundera's Work," *Slavonica* 23, no. 2 (2018): 121–22.

⁶ Arguably, he owed much to Tolstoy for his novel *The Joke*. The idea that life is a cruel joke played on mankind is found in Tolstoy's "Confession": "My mental condition presented itself to me in this way: my life is a stupid and spiteful joke someone has played on me." Leo Tolstoy, "Confession," in *The Portable Tolstoy*, ed. John Bayley (New York: Penguin, 1978), 679.

⁷ In her study Banerjee refers to a paper given by Heim on the topic. As far as I have been able to determine, Heim never published this paper. Maria Němcová Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox. The Novels of Milan Kundera* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 285. Throughout her study, Banerjee makes repeated comparisons between the classics of Russian literature and Kundera's works although she does not necessarily argue for direct influence.

deeper than just *Anna Karenina*. She demonstrates that there are extremely close correspondences between Kundera's phrase "unbearable lightness of being" used in two of his novels (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Immortality*) and passages involving Andrei Bolkonsky in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Orsak also examines further ties between Kundera's fiction and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, specifically, the theme of suicide. However much he might protest otherwise, Kundera's work reveals a deep connection to Russia and its literature.

In the Western world, Kundera has become infamous for the misogyny and sexual violence contained in his novels. Much discussion of these themes has been produced by critics and literary scholars. For his part, Kundera was rather unapologetic on this point and in his works written with a Western audience in mind, he threw down the gauntlet. For example, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, one of his characters declares that "only the best of men are misogynists" and that "a woman can be happy only with a misogynist."⁸ In his chapter, Jan Matonoha argues for a reassessment, focusing particularly on Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* and *The Farewell Party*. Matonoha accepts much of the results of prior scholarship, particularly the work of John O'Brien (*Milan Kundera & Feminism: Dangerous Intersections*), but argues for the need to expand the scope. Matonoha concludes, contra O'Brien, that there is a more complex, triadic structure to Kundera's sexism. Matonoha agrees with O'Brien that there is an overt level of misogyny in Kundera's novels, which is then deconstructed on a less overt level. Where Matonoha disagrees with O'Brien, however, is that there is yet a third level to Kundera's fiction, which ultimately reaffirms the misogyny.

In response to the traumas of the twentieth century, some dissident Czech intellectuals developed the concept of an inner metaphysical freedom. In his chapter, Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield examines both Milan Kundera's and Bohumil Hrabal's engagement with this concept. Dronsfield's chapter is much more philosophical in nature. That is, he examines Kundera's and Hrabal's use of philosophy in their fiction. While both writers introduced material from philosophy into their respective works, they resisted the notion that works of literature are philosophical tracts. Kundera, in particular, was insistent that literature, especially the novel, has its own form and that approaching a fictional work as a philosophical treatise impoverishes it. Rather, both writers subscribed to the notion of polyphony, the multitude of voices within a literary work, and the philosophical content is merely one of those voices without any

⁸ Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 132.

claim to the ultimate truth. Finally, Dronsfield considers both Kundera and Hrabal to be dissidents, despite the fact that they were not comfortable with that label. Indeed, Kundera explicitly rejected it as yet another ideologization and politicization of art. Nevertheless, because they rejected the concept of an inner metaphysical freedom under totalitarianism, Dronsfield concludes they were still dissidents. In effect, the Communist insistence on the intimate tie between the personal and the political forced them to be “reluctant dissidents.”

Daniel Webster Pratt’s chapter is transitional in two senses. First, in chronological terms, it transcends the divide of 1989, focusing on the work of the Topol brothers, Filip and Jáchym, before and after that date. The essay also transcends fields in that it is concerned not only with literature but also with the rock music scene. Pratt challenges the conventional narrative regarding the music scene, both the exaggerated role assigned to it in bringing down Communism as well as the typical view that the musicians involved faded into obscurity after the Velvet Revolution. Pratt stresses that the Topol brothers, like others in the so-called second generation of dissent, never knew the freedom of the Prague Spring, and their experience was, therefore, fundamentally different. The period of Normalization and its associated traumas, however, were very much a part of this generation’s experience. Their response was an almost total nihilism, a rebellion against existence itself. In contrast to the usual names of Havel, Kundera, Hrabal, and Škvorecký, this group is less well-known in the West. Pratt’s chapter will serve as a valuable introduction to them for many readers. Pratt stresses that there were significant differences between the music underground and the dissidents. This became clear whenever the dissidents, or even the music underground itself, came to be seen as a new “establishment.” Pratt’s essay also points to the issue of moral responsibility, a theme that continued to engage Czech artists and intellectuals across the decades.

In Marek Lollok’s chapter, the fictional treatment of the period of the Normalization is the primary concern. Whereas Pratt examines how these themes were handled by authors writing during that period, Lollok is focused on post-Communist treatments. Indeed, Lollok insists that fiction written after the Velvet Revolution was created in a very changed set of conditions and, therefore, is fundamentally different. Not only was the censorship no longer a factor, but the Normalization was now history, not the lived present. Lollok divides the material into five different narrative modes. Since he focuses on more recent authors, the chapter covers writers who are lesser known in the English-language world; some of their works not yet translated. As a result, this chapter will be a valuable first introduction to these authors for some readers.

Lollok's chapter effectively demonstrates that the trauma of the Normalization is an integral part of the Czech collective memory and has strongly influenced the society. Finally, as the earlier essays have indicated, Czech prose of the post-Communist period continues to be engaged with moral issues.

In the last chapter, Hana Waisserová focuses on Eda Kriseová, who published much of her work in the post-Communist era. Her career is a good example of what has been referred to as writing for one's own desk drawer. That is, some of her texts were written well before the Velvet Revolution but were published only in its aftermath. Kriseová was closely tied to Václav Havel, and her work reflected his, as well as the general Czech intellectual, focus on moral issues like truth, love, and responsibility. Kriseová is not a figure well-known to the English-language world and Waisserová's chapter provides a good introduction to her fiction. Many of Kriseová's works deal directly with the traumas of Central Europe and the multigenerational pain arising from them. In the middle part of the chapter, Waisserová argues for a new framework in which to approach women's fiction. While Kriseová is acknowledged as a dissident, she and other women dissident writers have been marginalized within this narrative. In the later part of the chapter Waisserová chronicles Kriseová's transition in the post-Communist era into being a writer concerned with and treating global issues.

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Index

A

Adorno, Theodor W., 38, 55
Althusser, Louis, 40, 41
amor fati, 20, 22
Andropov, Yuri, 140
Anti-Charter, 106, 167
Arendt, Hannah, 55
Aristotle, 92
Assmann, Jan, 109, 110
Aurelius, Marcus, 6
Austerlitz, Battle of, 23

B

Balabán, Jan, 128, 129, 130, 131
Bartůňková, Jana, 152, 153
Bass, Eduard, 5
Bataille, Georges, 54, 89
Baudelaire, Charles, 52
Beatles, 148
beautiful, the, 85, 93
Beauvoir, Simone de, 45
Benda, Václav, 49, 182
Bendová, Kamila, 47
Beneš, Edvard, 5
Benjamin, Walter, 55
Berlin Wall, 148
Binar, Ivan, 46
biopolitics, 169, 170, 171, 174, 198
Blok, Alexander, 52
Bok, John, 122
Bolton, Jonathan, 157, 170
Bondy, Egon, 122, 123, 150, 152
Borodino, Battle of, 23
Boučková, Tereza, 42

Brabenec, Vratislav, 122, 123, 154
Bratinka, Pavel, 195
Brezhnev, Leonid, 140
Brikcius, Eugen, 123
Broch, Hermann, 38, 80, 88
Brodsky, Joseph, 16, 17, 44
Brown, Wendy, 39, 40, 49, 54, 67
Buddhism, 194, 200
Bunin, Ivan, 17
Butler, Judith, 39, 40, 49, 67

C

Camus, Albert, 80, 92
Čapek, Josef, 5
Čapek, Karel, viii, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
Castro, Fidel, 134
Černý, Václav, 46
Chalupecký, Jindřich, 122
Chamberlain, Neville, 4
Charter 77, 106, 147, 149, 151, 154, 157, 159, 167, 186
Chekhov, Anton, 16
Christian, R. F., 23
Chytilová, Věra, 152
Civic Forum, 183
Cixous, Hélène, 39
Communism, vii, viii, ix, xi, 8, 27, 41, 48, 49, 52, 57, 59, 74, 77, 84, 90, 92, 93, 94, 104, 105, 111, 112, 115, 116, 118, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 140, 141, 142, 148, 149, 150, 153, 157, 158, 160, 161, 163, 164,

165, 167, 173, 179, 180, 183, 187,
198, 205
Communist Party, 87, 88, 106, 110,
111, 112, 114, 119, 125, 126, 133,
134
Čornej, Petr, 107
Čulík, Jan, viii
Cushman, Thomas, 149, 166
Czarniecki, Piotr, 164

D

Dalai Lama, 194, 195
Dean, James, 159
Deleuze, Gilles, 85
Derrida, Jacques, 76, 95
Descartes, René, 13
Děvetsíl, 151
DG 307, 154, 161
Diderot, Denis, 16, 17, 34, 60, 81
Dienstbier, Jiří, 46
dissent, x, xi, xii, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49,
50, 70, 73, 74, 75, 77, 94, 97, 99,
113, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152,
154, 155, 156, 157, 159, 162, 167,
169, 170, 175, 176, 177, 180, 182,
183, 186, 188, 189, 190, 192, 194,
196, 203, 204
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 15, 16, 17, 30,
34
Dousková, Irena, 117, 118, 119,
120
Dubenka. *See* Gifford, April
Durkheim, Emil, 109
Dworkin, Andrea, 54

E

Eagleton, Terry, 165
Esenin, Sergei, 52, 160

Estes, Clarissa Pinkola, 204
eternal return, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21,
22, 25, 28, 29, 79, 81
existentialism, 20, 26, 80
Expédice, 182, 184

F

feminism, 37, 38, 39, 41, 42, 44, 46,
47, 49, 50, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 60,
63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 169, 172, 177,
203
Forman, Miloš, 148, 152
Foucault, Michel, 38, 41, 181
freedom, x, xi, 9, 27, 62, 66, 73, 74,
75, 77, 82, 87, 89, 95, 97, 98, 114,
147, 150, 151, 180, 181, 182, 194,
204

G

Galenus, Claudius, 6
Garage, 155
gender, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44,
46, 48, 49, 50, 52, 54, 55, 57, 61,
63, 64, 66, 67, 141, 170, 171, 176,
202, 203, 204
Genet, Jean, 54
Gifford, April (Dubenka), 91
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 34,
52
Gogol, Nikolai, 17
Gott, Karel, ix, 106, 167
Gramsci, Antonio, 52
Grof, Christina, 195
Grof, Stanislav, 195
Gruša, Jiří, 46, 48, 185
Guattari, Félix, 85

H

Haas, Hugo, 12
Hácha, Emil, 124
Hagan, John, 24
Halík, Tomáš, 195
Hašek, Jaroslav, 177
Havel, Ivan M., 195
Havel, Václav, viii, xi, xii, 1, 10, 11, 42, 44, 45, 46, 48, 91, 112, 115, 122, 123, 148, 150, 151, 152, 156, 157, 158, 159, 169, 170, 178, 179, 180, 182, 183, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 194, 195
Havelková, Hana, 40, 49
Havlíček, Karel, 47
Heczková, Libuše, 44
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 89, 92
Heidegger, Martin, 19, 94
Heim, Michael, ix, 4
Hejdánek, Ladislav, 46
Hippocratic Oath, 1, 5, 8
Hitler, Adolf, 2, 4, 21
Hlavsa, Milan, 123
Holocaust, 9, 45, 166, 177, 193, 199, 205
Holub, Miroslav, 89
Horkheimer, Max, 38
Hrabal, Bohumil, x, xi, 42, 45, 52, 73, 74, 76, 77, 78, 79, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 97, 98, 99, 122, 130, 152, 164, 177
Hrzánová, Bára, 119
Hůlová, Petra, 136, 137
Hus, Jan, 179
Husák, Gustáv, ix, 57, 106, 107, 116, 124, 125, 135, 139, 140

I

inner freedom, 73, 74, 75, 77, 87, 93, 94, 98
Irigaray, Luce, 39, 45, 57
Iron Curtain, 123, 204
irony, 52, 73, 74, 82, 87, 120, 125

J

Janáček, Leoš, 5
Janoušek, Pavel, 122, 123
Jesus Christ, 20
Jirous, Ivan Martin, 122, 150, 153, 154, 155, 158, 159, 182
Jirousová, Věra, 48, 185
Joyce, James, 30, 31

K

Kábrtová, Lidmila, 133
Kadár, Ján, 8, 10
Kafka, Franz, 53, 178
Kant, Immanuel, 73, 76, 82, 83, 84, 92, 93, 94
Kantůrková, Eva, 42, 46, 47, 48, 49, 185, 203
Karásek, Svatopluk, 154
Karfík, Vladimír, 120
Karlík, Viktor, 151, 156
Kaufmann, Walter, 19, 20
Kierkegaard, Søren, 95
Klein, Melanie, 57
Klíma, Ivan, 42, 48, 150, 170, 177, 185
Klíma, Ladislav, 82, 84, 85
Kliment, Alexandr, 42, 185
Klímová, Ruth, 47
Klos, Elmar, 8, 10
Kohout, Pavel, 42, 48, 52

Kolář, Jiří, 152
 Kozelka, Milan, 122, 123, 125
 Krchovský, JH, 151, 156
 Kremlička, Vít, 151, 156
 Krise, Jindřich, 179
 Kriseová, Eda, xii, 42, 46, 47, 48,
 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175,
 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182,
 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189,
 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196,
 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203,
 204
 Kristeva, Julia, 39, 57, 60
 Křížková, Kamila Ruth, 47
 Kroupa, Daniel, 195
 Kundera, Ludvík, 59
 Kundera, Milan, vii, viii, ix, x, xi, 1,
 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20,
 21, 22, 25, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33,
 34, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 48,
 50, 51, 52, 53, 55, 57, 59, 60, 61,
 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 73, 74, 75, 76,
 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 84, 85, 87, 88,
 89, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 152, 170,
 177
Kvartál, 185

L

Laclos, Pierre Choderlos de, 34
 Landovská, Betina, 155
 Landovský, Pavel, 155
 Lenin, Vladimir, 134
 Lermontov, Mikhail, 52
 Lexová, Andrea, 123
 Liehm, Antonín, 186
living in truth, 171, 176, 180, 187,
 188
 London, Jack, 164
 Lopatka, Jan, 123

Loukotková, Jarmila, 49
ludibrionism, 82, 84
 Lustig, Arnošt, 42, 45

M

Machaček, Jan, 155
 Machonin, Pavel, 113
 Machonin, Sergej, 46, 185
 MacKinnon, Catharine, 54
 Macura, Vladimír, 52
 Majerová, Marie, 49
 Mandelstam, Osip, 17
 Marvanová, Anna, 47
 Marxism, viii, 39, 40, 52, 163
 Marysko, Karel, 152
 Masaryk, Tomáš Garrigue, 1, 5, 10,
 124, 179, 189, 190
 Matonoha, Jan, 203
 May, Karel, 164
 Mayakovsky, Vladimir, 52
 Menzel, Jiří, 84, 152
 metaphysics, 73, 74, 76, 82, 90, 94,
 97, 98
 misogyny, x, 37, 38, 51, 53, 59, 65,
 66, 67
 Moliere, 60
 Munich Agreement, 4
 Musil, Robert, 38, 80, 164

N

Národní třída, 156
 Nazi, vii, viii, 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 30, 45, 56,
 65, 173, 179, 193, 198
 Němcová, Dana, 47
 Němcová, Veronika, 155
 Němec, Jan, 152
 Němec, Jiří, 155
 Nepraš, Karel, 123

Neubauer, Zdeněk, 195
 Nezbeda, Ondřej, 135
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, ix, 15, 18, 19,
 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 29, 73, 76, 79,
 80, 81, 82, 92, 95
 Nirvana, 166
 Nixon, Richard, 134
 Normalization, xi, 50, 91, 103, 105,
 106, 107, 110, 111, 112, 114, 115,
 116, 117, 119, 120, 122, 124, 125,
 126, 127, 128, 130, 131, 132, 133,
 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141,
 142, 143, 154, 155, 165, 180, 181,
 182, 186, 192, 203
 Novák, Arne, 7
 Novák, Jan, 48
 November 1989. *See* Velvet
 Revolution
 November Revolution. *See* Velvet
 Revolution
 Nussbaum, Martha, 202

O

O'Brien, John, x, 30, 32, 37, 38, 39,
 42, 44, 50, 54, 56, 63, 66, 67
 Orten, Jiří, 52
 Orwell, George, 11
ostalgie, 167
 Otáhal, Milan, 112
 Otčenášek, Jan, 49

P

Palach, Jan, 160, 178, 179
 Palouš, Martin, 195
 parallel polis, 49, 50, 182
 Parmenides, ix, 18, 19, 21, 22, 28
 Pasternak, Boris, 17
 Patočka, Jan, 46, 180

Pechar, Jiří, 46
 Pekacz, Jolanta, 148
 Pekárková, Iva, 42
 Pelán, Jiří, 85
 Pelc, Jan, 48
 Penčeva, Anželina, 42, 50, 51, 58,
 67
 Peroutka, Ferdinand, 5
Petlice (Padlock), 47, 184, 185, 186
 Pilař, Martin, 52, 152
 Pistorius, Vladimír, 184
 Pithart, Petr, 47
 Pithartová, Drahomíra, 47
 Placák, Petr, 127, 128, 131, 151
 Plato, 92, 195, 197
 play, 73, 74, 77, 78, 81, 82, 87, 122
 Poláček, Karel, 5, 118
 polyphony, x, 5, 87
 Pope, 194, 195
 Popovičová, Iva, 50
 Popper, K. R., 107
power of the powerless, 158, 171,
 180, 181, 187
 pragmatism, 5, 76
 Prague Spring, xi, 77, 89, 91, 105,
 111, 147, 150, 165, 178
 Presley, Elvis, 125
 Příbáň, Michal, 138, 190
 Psí vojáci, 147, 149, 150, 155, 156,
 160, 162, 166
 Pujmanová, Marie, 49
 Pushkin, Alexander, 52
 Putna, Martin C., 195

R

Rabelais, François, 81
 Ramet, Sabrina Petra, 148
 Rashomon Effect, 1, 5
Revolver Revue, 147, 155, 156

Richardson, Samuel, 34
 Rilke, Rainer Maria, 52, 53
 Rimbaud, Arthur, 52
 Robespierre, Maximilien, 21
 Rorty, Richard, 73, 76, 94, 95, 96
 Roth, Philip, 177
 Rotrekl, Zdeněk, 46
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 34
 Ruddick, Sara, 57
 Rupnik, Jacques, 190

S

Šabach, Petr, 130, 131, 132
 Šabatová, Anna, 47
 Sabina, Karel, 52
 Salivarová, Zdena, 44
samizdat, 45, 46, 47, 91, 92, 116,
 182, 184, 186
 Sartre, Jean-Paul, 80, 92
 Sayer, Derek, vii
 Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm
 Joseph, 92
 Schiller, Friedrich, 92
 Schmiedt, Jiří, 119
 Schopenhauer, Arthur, 92
 Schulz, Karel, 151
 Schwarzerová-Kriseová, Zdenka,
 179
 Seifert, Jaroslav, 150, 152
selective attention, 7, 8
 Shakespeare, William, 60
 Shaw, George Bernard, 2, 12
 Shore, Marci, 164
 Sidon, Karol, 46
 Šiklová, Jiřina, 41, 49, 113
 Šimečka, Milan, 112
 Šimečková, Eva, 47
 Šimsa, Jan, 47
 Skupina 42, 152

Škvorecký, Josef, xi, 42, 48, 52, 60,
 90, 91, 152, 170
 Snyder, Timothy, 193
 social ecology, 171, 172, 173, 174,
 177, 178, 193, 203
 Socialist Realism, 52, 90, 204
 Socrates, 195
 Sontag, Susan, 156
 Soviet, 30, 95, 110, 120, 134, 135,
 174, 177, 180, 198
 Speransky, Mikhail, 23
 Špidla, Kryštof, 134
 Stalin, Josef, 30, 82
 Stankovič, Andrej, 46, 122, 123
 StB (State Security Council), 130,
 131, 139
 Stendhal, 28
 Sterne, Laurence, 34, 81
 Stýblová, Valja, 49
 sublime, the, 93
 suicide, x, 15, 17, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33,
 45, 129, 151, 156, 159, 160, 161
 Šustrová, Petruška, 47
 Szemere, Anne, 149

T

Taoism, 196, 200
 Tatarka, Dominik, 46
 The Plastic People of the
 Universe, 149, 150, 153, 154,
 156, 157, 159, 161
 Thirlwell, Adam, 85
 Tolstoy, Leo, ix, x, 15, 17, 18, 19,
 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 31, 32,
 33, 34
 Tominová, Zdena, 47
 Topol, Filip, xi, 147, 149, 150, 151,
 155, 156, 157, 159, 160, 161, 162,
 166, 167

Topol, Jáchym, xi, 147, 149, 150,
151, 155, 156, 159, 162, 163, 164,
165, 166
Topol, Josef, 147, 151, 155
totalitarianism, viii, xi, 6, 55, 73,
74, 75, 85, 87, 88, 89, 91, 94, 97,
98, 111, 112, 136, 137, 169, 170,
171, 174, 179, 180, 198, 204
Trakl, Georg, 52
trauma, vii, viii, x, xi, xii, 117, 143,
198, 199
Trefulka, Jan, 46, 185

U

Übermensch, 20, 29
underground, the, xi, 122, 123,
147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153,
154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 161,
162, 163, 167, 184, 185, 186, 187

V

Vaculík, Ludvík, 42, 46, 48, 91, 170,
184, 185, 186
Vaněk-Úvalský, Bohuslav, 124,
125, 126
Vašíček, Zdeněk, 108
Vašinka, Radim, 46
VB (Public Security), 130, 131
Velvet Divorce, 184
Velvet Revolution, ix, xi, xii, 91,
112, 115, 116, 137, 139, 141, 151,
162, 165, 179, 183, 198

Viewegh, Michal, 120, 121
Vokno, 156
Volková, Bronislava, 42, 50, 51, 58
Vonnegut, Kurt, 11, 152
Vostrá, Alena, 44

W

Wágnerová, Anna, 151
Wallace, R. Jay, 1, 7
Warsaw Pact, 15, 59, 105, 110, 111,
121, 152, 155, 161, 180
Wasiolek, Edward, 22, 24
Wicke, Peter, 148
Wilde, Oscar, 52
Williams, Kieran, 188, 189
Williams, Linda, 54
Wittig, Monique, 39
WWI, vii, 2
WWII, 8, 10, 48, 53, 55, 104, 166,
193, 198

Z

Zachová, Alena, 152, 153
Zajíc, Jan, 178, 179
Zajíček, Pavel, 154
Zand, Gertraude, 164
Zandl, Patrick, 139, 140, 141
Zemančíková, Alena, 132
Zrzavý, Jan, 122
Zusi, Peter, 165