

# LIGHTING THE NIGHT

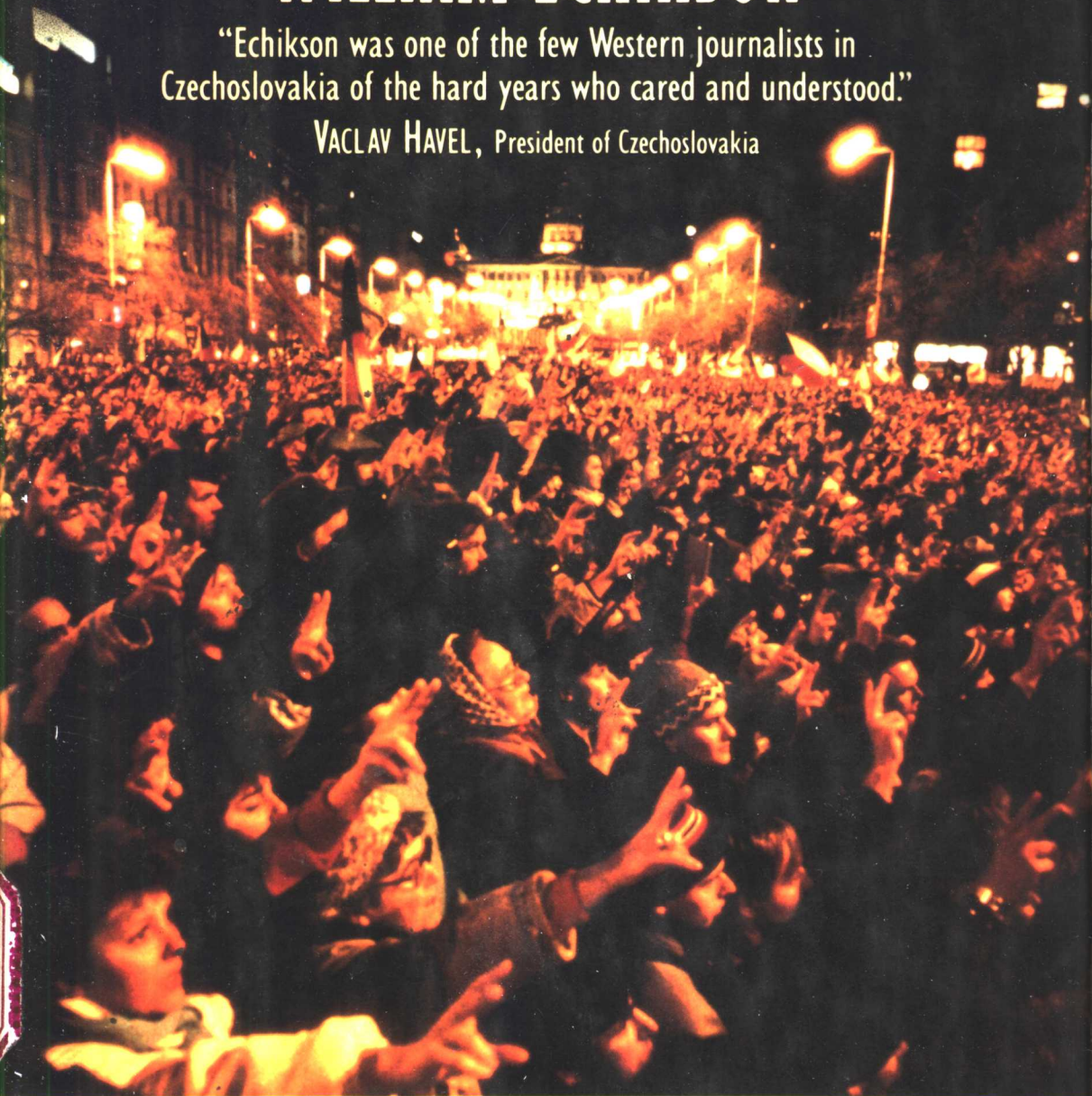
## REVOLUTION IN EASTERN EUROPE

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**WILLIAM ECHIKSON**

"Echikson was one of the few Western journalists in Czechoslovakia of the hard years who cared and understood."

VACLAV HAVEL, President of Czechoslovakia



**A PERSONAL LOOK AT THE PEOPLE AND PASSIONS  
BEHIND THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM**

# LIGHTING THE NIGHT

Revolution in Eastern Europe

*William Echikson*

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## LIGHTING THE NIGHT

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*William Echikson*  
*April 1990*

# EASTERN EUROPE



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# Introduction

## The Bearable Lightness of Being

### Dienstbier

What happens but once might as well not have happened at all. The history of the Czechs will not be repeated, nor will the history of Europe.

*Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

During my five years of reporting from Eastern Europe, I witnessed the world turn upside down. Communists who received me in their palatial offices in 1985 had fled from the scene by the beginning of 1990. Dissidents whom I first met in small, cramped apartments had suddenly become national leaders. For me this remarkable revolution is personified in one man, Czechoslovakia's new Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier. When I first met Jiří, we went to a smoke-filled pub and ordered two beers. Over a long evening he told how he had been a Communist Party member and star foreign correspondent for the National Radio. He covered the Vietnam War and was appointed to the plum post of senior correspondent in Washington.

After Soviet tanks squashed the Prague Spring in 1968, Jiří was recalled home. He refused to sign a declaration saying that the invasion was necessary to crush a "counterrevolution." For his defiance, he and half a million others were expelled from the Party. The heart was cut out of his career. He floated from job to job. In 1977 he signed the Charter 77 human rights declaration. For that "crime," he was arrested and imprisoned between 1979 and 1982. Upon his release, only his old dissident friends dared stay in touch. He ended up working as a stoker, shoveling coal into a furnace, for the Prague subway system.

Over the next few years I became a regular visitor to the Dienstbier flat on Nekazanka Street near Wenceslas Square. In the spacious study and dining room I spent many evenings with Jiří, eating hearty Czech dumplings and discussing the world. He



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never lost his courage – nor his wry sense of self-deprecating humor. Police tailed him, often placing guards outside his apartment building and conducting regular searches for samizdat material. The point wasn't to hide the surveillance, he once explained. It was to make it so blatant as to frighten him. The tactics gave his wife Věra serious migraines. He ignored the police. He, the caged dissident, was freer than any other Czechoslovak because he lived as if he were free. "You know, I sort of like my job," he once admitted. "I don't work too hard and I get four days a week off for my real work." His "real" work remained journalism – spiced with opposition politics.

After Prague erupted with street protests in November 1989, Jiří Dienstbier became the spokesman for the opposition group Civic Forum. He was brilliant in the job, charming the assembled mob of foreign correspondents in nightly press conferences at the Magic Lantern Theater. "Will there be a Green Party?" he was once asked. "This country needs all parties to be Green," he responded. When journalists pestered him for his opinion on the divisions within the Communist Party and the relationship between the Czech and Soviet Parties, questions which we had no way of answering, he responded with another ironic jibe about the "fraternal assistance" invoked by the Warsaw Pact as its reason for invading Czechoslovakia in 1968. "We won't ask for international assistance any more," he remarked.

Exhausted, he told me that he wasn't sleeping more than three hours a night. Events left him dazed. At one point, someone proposed him as head of the National Radio. "Can you believe it – me as the chief of radio?" he asked. He himself couldn't believe it. When the new Czechoslovak government was finally announced on December 10, 1989 (International Human Rights Day), Jiří Dienstbier wasn't appointed head of the National Radio. Instead, he became Czechoslovakia's Foreign Minister. Along with Jiří, eleven of the twenty-one ministers in the new Czechoslovak government were non-communists – with seven from the opposition Civic Forum, including Finance Minister Václav Klaus, Social Affairs Minister Petr Miller and Interior Minister Jan Černogurský, who had been in prison only weeks before.

Dienstbier was amazed. He, the longtime enemy of socialism, would be sitting in the beautiful baroque chambers of the Czernin Palace directing the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic's foreign policy. It wasn't only he who had trouble keeping up with Czechoslovakia's dizzying transformation. So did the

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police. Just before the protests exploded, they cut his home telephone line. "Don't try to call me," a smiling Jiří warned the assembled press corps. It was restored only the day before he took office. Ever the master of witty repartee, he announced that before taking over as Foreign Minister he would first have to find a replacement for his job as stoker.

For forty years, occupiers had ruled Czechoslovakia. Soviet troops had crushed the Prague Spring and put unqualified louts into power, their only recommendation being their loyalty to Moscow. External force had fed the country a sleeping pill. Now Czechoslovakia was awakening and the best were rising normally, naturally, to the top. Jiří Dienstbier has made a superb Foreign Minister. How many of his communist predecessors in the post spoke four foreign languages? How many could converse on world affairs as fluently as he did?

Freedom did not come to Eastern Europe as a gift from Moscow or Washington. It came from more than forty years of struggle – a daily, grinding struggle against a corrupt and evil system. This book is about people who exposed communism's fraud and brought about its collapse. It is about the people whom I have known, written about and socialized with for years, men such as Jiří Dienstbier in Czechoslovakia, Solidarity's parliamentary chief Bronisław Geremek in Poland, the Free Democrats' leader Miklós Haraszti in Hungary. It is also about the ordinary people who danced on the breached Berlin Wall and stared down tanks in Bucharest's Palace Square; the people who shook their keys in Prague's Wenceslas Square and lit candles in front of Budapest's neo-Gothic Parliament. Traveling through Eastern Europe for the past five years, I came across countless examples of moral courage and intellectual integrity, which forced me to drop my air of American superiority. In Eastern Europe, the abstract notion of struggling for fundamental human rights and self-determination came alive. The issues are not about power and money. They are about right and wrong, truth and lies.

In Part I, I introduce these themes by recounting the climactic events of 1989. This section should be read as an impressionist outline, not a comprehensive narrative. It draws on my own personal experiences and travels. The technique, I hope, will permit readers who were not in Eastern Europe at the time to experience the heady atmosphere of the revolution. In Part II, I move on to the more solid, sober ground of hindsight. The chapters profile the revolution's major players: not just its

protagonists but also its adversaries; not just its principal actors but also its supporting cast – deposed communists, threatened apparatchiks, rebellious workers, courageous intellectuals and radical students. In Part III, I look at the various passions that ate away at the old communist order, the faltering centrally planned economic and political systems, the burgeoning democratic opposition, the mounting anger over a polluted environment, the growing attraction of religion and the renewed pull of nationalism.

Structuring the book by themes, not by individual countries, raises inevitable difficulties. Eastern Europe, after all, is a misnomer. It never was a monolithic bloc. It is a region full of deep differences – different nationalities, different traditions, different histories. The imposition of Soviet-style communism not only failed to wipe out these differences: one of the exhilarating and dangerous aspects of the present revolution is the rediscovery of unique national identities. My contention remains, however, that the former Soviet Empire can be dealt with as a whole. Eastern Europeans face common problems. All are small countries, fearful for their very existence. All have broken the Communist Party's monopoly of power. All now must pick up the pieces of their bankrupt centrally planned economies. Everywhere in these societies which long preached egalitarian ideals, inequality has mounted. Religious belief has become more powerful. A defiant young generation has emerged.

Communism was imposed on Eastern Europe after World War II only with the backing of Moscow. In some places – Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria – the communists enjoyed a fair amount of support. But nowhere did they have a majority. Stalin envisioned building the same system for all these countries, by brute force if necessary. He never succeeded. Soviet-installed regimes failed to win full legitimacy. The people of Eastern Europe always considered communism alien, associating it with the Russians, whom, with their oriental heritage, they perceived as culturally second rate compared with Western cultural, religious and intellectual heritage. "The Russians are peasants," my friends in Prague snickered.

These prejudices persist, despite Mikhail Gorbachev and *glasnost*. After Solidarity took power in August 1989, the Polish historian Marcin Król, who has taught at Yale, still refused to visit the Soviet Union. "I am afraid the KGB would make me vanish," he confided. "It happened to a friend of mine." After I had been to Moscow, friends in Warsaw subjected me to a

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rude grilling. "Wasn't it backward?" I told them that both Poland and the Soviet Union reeked of the same sad socialist "realist" façades on their modern buildings, the same sparsely stocked shops and the same unappetizing restaurants. They were shocked. "But Russians smell," they insisted. To avoid a fight, I described being pushed and shoved while shopping at the GUM department store. My friends smiled. At least in Poland, they said, our queues are civilized.

In contrast, the prosperous, democratic West is considered a reference point. While Western Europeans often ridicule Ronald Reagan as an ignorant cowboy and George Bush as a cautious do-nothing, both men are heroes in Eastern Europe. They stood up to the Soviet Union. As Vice President, Bush visited Warsaw and became the first Western leader after martial law to meet with Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa in public. When he returned as President, he offered little concrete aid, but Poles didn't seem to care. They waved American flags and sang "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Until recently, we in the West did not return the loving attention. We forgot about Eastern Europe as soon as one of its periodic eruptions cooled down. Proud Hungarian patriots lobbing Molotov cocktails at Soviet tanks in 1956, joyous Czechs screaming for "socialism with a human face" in 1968, and throngs of striking Polish workers in 1980 once captured the world's attention. But without such volatile confrontations, the press assumed there was no news. When I first met Jiří Dienstbier, few correspondents bothered to come to stagnating, repressive Czechoslovakia. "We don't have a story here," he said. "We have a situation – the same situation for the last sixteen years."

Change was taking place outside the glow of television lights, in a more subtle, elusive fashion, in church basements where independent lectures were given and in private apartments where independent magazines were edited. None of these slow, incremental actions made headlines. The inevitable explosion caught most of the media off guard. American television networks had closed their Warsaw offices after the declaration of martial law in 1981; when new strikes broke out in 1988, they could not be on the scene. The quiet in Eastern Europe was deceptive. Even before Mikhail Gorbachev, discontent was always bubbling beneath the surface.

Anyone who takes Mr. Gorbachev as a point of departure for analyzing the bewildering Eastern European vista is mistaken. Not every new development in his farflung empire can be

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treated as a result of Soviet *glasnost* and *perestroika*. If Gorbachev has been important, even crucial, it has been more for what the Soviet leader didn't do than for what he did. Before he came to power, Eastern Europe seemed set in a deep freeze. Although reform looked necessary, the examples of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the 1981 suppression of Solidarity in Poland showed that it was dangerous for satellite countries to question the status quo. Gorbachev removed this fear. As part of his "New Thinking," he said that each communist country should have the right to find its own path to socialism. His stress on non-interference, his denial of the universal application of Soviet experience, his decision to thin out Soviet forces – all these things undermined the Soviet position in Eastern Europe and left its communist regimes exposed. "Our leaders can no longer claim that Soviet tanks are waiting on the border," explained Jacek Kuroń, the Polish dissident turned Minister of Labor. "Everybody knows that the decision to bring Solidarity back depended on our own government – and not on the tanks over the border."

Communism counted on fear. It depended on the knowledge that if one stood up and spoke out, one could lose job, car, home, and in some cases face prison or death. That choice silenced everyone except a few courageous dissidents like Dienstbier. Most didn't like the system but were too frightened to do anything about it. With the Soviet leader conceding the failure of the Soviet model, Eastern Europeans found more courage to press their individual claims. "I see a definite increase in civic courage," noted Jiří Hájek, Czechoslovak Foreign Minister during the 1968 Prague Spring, who became one of the original spokesmen for the Charter 77 human-rights group. "People are no longer so afraid." Hundreds of thousands of once-timid Czechs took to the streets in November 1989, demanding democracy. The revolution's spiritual spark, the decisive moment, came when the masses of individual Eastern Europeans stood up and said, "I am no longer afraid."

The collapse of fear first happened in Poland in 1980, with Solidarity's birth. The Solidarity revolution turned the dissident minority into a majority. It changed the way people thought. And for the first time people said aloud what they thought. They ended their internal isolation and became involved in public life. Even after martial law was declared the following year, people lived as if in a free country. In 1989, the rest of Eastern Europe discovered the same sensation. The moment the lid of repression was lifted, the communist system collapsed.

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People realized that they all felt the same, and that together they could be strong.

Everybody in Eastern Europe seems to remember that one special moment when fear stopped. For baby-faced Czech drama student Pavel Chaloupa, it took the beating of some fellow students in November 1989 to transform him into a revolutionary leader: "I said, we can't continue to live in a country where people don't say what they think." He thought the police would take over their campuses and expel him and other strikers from the university. But the police never came. Journalist Jana Smidová of the Czech newspaper *Svobodné Slovo* thought her article about the student demonstrations would be censored. It was not. So she went ahead and wrote an honest story.

Even if it sometimes seemed insincere and opportunistic, the transformation was remarkable, turning the most unexpected people into revolutionaries. For two long decades newscaster George Marinescu mouthed lies on Romanian television about the greatness of despot Nicolae Ceausescu. As soon as demonstrators took over the television studios in Bucharest in December 1989, he went on the air and offered a *mea culpa*: "I lied. I was commanded to lie." He put on the revolution's blue, yellow and red armband as a badge of honor and became the chief anchorman for Free Romanian Television. "I was not a hero," he said afterwards. "I had to feed my family and there was no other television station for which I could work." If his apology revealed little courage, at least it rang with truth.

The Rubicon of fear crossed, it will be almost impossible to restore the former status quo. Before, the old communist order came under attack only in isolated bursts. There were two tragic weeks of Hungarian freedom in 1956. The ill-fated Prague Spring in 1968 lasted only eight months. Solidarity's first legal existence in 1980 was sustained for just thirteen months. In 1989, however, change took place all over Eastern Europe. The only historical analogy that seems to capture the scope of these dramatic events is 1848, "the Springtime of Nations," when a wave of revolution swept continental Europe. Eastern Europe's revolutionaries no longer want to "reform" stagnant communism: they aim to install a new democratic, capitalist system. In a few years, today's events could be described as another Springtime of Nations.

The analogy, to be sure, offers few solid assurances for the future. Europe's first Springtime ended in disaster, with the old repressive emperors crushing the national liberation move-

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ments. It was to take decades of struggle before the captured nations could free themselves. But the omens look better this time. Outside threats of intervention are fading. The main threat facing the countries of Eastern Europe comes from within. In long-closed societies, a little hope can be a dangerous thing. The nineteenth-century French historian Alexis de Tocqueville noted that the most dangerous period for a repressive society comes with the first stirrings of change. Long-oppressed people see the possibility of freedom and suddenly make new demands, which inspire either more reforms or a return to repression. Perceptive Eastern Europeans recognize the danger. "Either we will manage a calm evolution," Lech Wałęsa has often told me, "or we will face an uncontrollable revolution."

As I wonder whether the accelerating process of change can be kept from spinning out of control, my thoughts keep returning to that dramatic day in June 1989 when the Poles voted the communists out of office. I witnessed the historic events in a small village, Rejszew, and as voters emerged from the booths I asked for whom they had voted.

"Solidarity, of course."

"Why?"

"Because it gave me hope."

The answer was the same – thirty-five times in a row.

That evening I returned to Warsaw to learn about the massacre in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. A demonstration was taking place outside Warsaw's Chinese Embassy. While a few policemen looked on sympathetically, the protesters lit candles. They prayed. They hung posters reading "Freedom, Peace for China." Most of all, they asked if Solidarity's electoral victory could become tomorrow's Tiananmen Square.

"We must move slowly," one student cautioned. "Each change needs time to be digested."

"You're a lousy gradualist," another young student shot back. "Poland doesn't have any more time."

"Calm down, calm down," an older onlooker implored. "We have to find a common language. If we're going to get anywhere, we're going to have to learn to cooperate."

# Revolution



