



BUREAU OF  
INTELLIGENCE  
AND RESEARCH

THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA  
**RELEASED IN FULL**

Summary

The Charter 77 movement--approaching the third anniversary of its establishment--has successfully focused attention on the human rights violations in Czechoslovakia and on the repressive policies of the regime. In doing so, it has gained considerable sympathy and support in the West, as well as among other dissidents in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

From the outset, the Charter movement has had to cope with formidable obstacles:

- constant harassment and intimidation from a regime taking its cue from Moscow;
- divisions within its membership over tactics and strategy; and
- difficulties in gaining popular support for its goals.

Despite recent efforts by the regime to suppress the movement, Charter activists vow to continue their human rights struggle. However, prospects for the future look bleak; there is little chance that Charter efforts, by and of themselves, will improve the human rights situation in Czechoslovakia.

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Background

Charter 77 was established in January 1977. Its spokesmen asserted that there was no intention to constitute a political organization or to function as a political opposition to advance reforms or changes. The signatories of the Charter claimed to have banded together as a form of "citizens' initiative," which they said was common in both East and West. Its first manifesto, "Charter 77," criticized the regime's failure to honor the human and civil rights provisions in the Czechoslovak Constitution, the Helsinki Final Act, and three UN Human Rights Covenants which had been ratified by the government and had become part of Czechoslovak law.

The Charter stated that the authorities had the duty to abide by international agreements and Czechoslovak law, and that many basic human rights existed only on paper. It sought to engage the regime in a "constructive dialogue" by drawing attention to specific violations of civil and human rights, suggesting solutions, submitting proposals to further and to guarantee those rights, and acting as a "mediator in conflict situations."

It claimed--correctly--that among the rights consistently violated by the regime were:

- the right to work at one's profession, regardless of political convictions;
- the right for children to be educated, regardless of the parents' political convictions;
- freedom of expression;
- freedom of religion;
- freedom of assembly;
- freedom to participate in public affairs;
- equality before the law; and
- freedom to travel abroad.

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The Charter accused the Ministry of Interior and its police of illegal wire taps, physical surveillance and harassment, house searches, confiscation of personal property, mail censorship, use of networks of informers, and suborning of courts and employers. Investigative and judicial agencies were said to have repeatedly flouted Czechoslovak law and the Constitution in conducting politically motivated trials.

Original signatories of the Charter numbered 244; at present, the movement claims more than 1,000. The three leading positions, those of designated spokesmen, have thus far been held by nine persons. Although this rapid turnover has been attributed to deliberate annual rotation, regime harassment and intimidation have taken their toll. One of the original spokesmen (Jan Patocka) died following intense police interrogation. Four spokesmen have been arrested. Another has been hospitalized after an assault by police thugs.

Since its establishment, the movement has issued 26 documents. The contents range from appeals to cease the harassment of Charter supporters to an analysis of problems of economic consumption and corruption in Czechoslovakia.

#### Charter Accomplishments

Despite unremitting harassment and intimidation, the movement has survived--no mean feat considering the overwhelming power posed against it. Charter leaders vow to continue their struggle for human rights, whatever methods the regime uses against them.

Charter activities have focused Western attention on the repressive character of the Czechoslovak regime and its violations of human rights, as well as its economic problems. The regime's crackdown on the signatories has:

- opened a new breach--if only temporarily--between Moscow and its allies in Eastern Europe on the one hand and West European communist parties on the other;
- set back Prague's attempts to gain wider international acceptability and to improve relations with various Western governments; and
- may have caused some embarrassment to Moscow during the latter's attempts to pursue detente with the West and, particularly, the US.

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Western reaction may have also contributed to divisions within Czechoslovak leadership on how best to deal with dissidence--whether to moderate harsh policies to blunt Western criticisms or to charge Western governments and media with blatant interference in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs. This is the charge made by Moscow and other East European regimes in the debate over human rights.

Aware that they could not publicize their goals and documents within Czechoslovakia, Charter activists have sought to have their documents published or broadcast in Western media. They have hoped thus to have them receive maximum publicity both in Czechoslovakia and abroad. The Charter's success in gaining the support of Western governments and media has perhaps been its single greatest accomplishment.

The Charter movement has also enlisted support from other dissidents in Eastern Europe and in the USSR. For instance, in early 1977, dissidents in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the USSR sent messages of support for the aims and purposes of Charter 77.

Little is known about the contacts which the Chartists have carried on with other East European dissidents. However, formal contacts were established with the Polish Committee for Social Self-Defense (KOR). Meetings were held in August and September 1978, at which it was announced that efforts would be made to coordinate activities and establish permanent working groups to further human rights. A third meeting planned in October 1978 was broken up by coordinated action of the Czechoslovak and Polish police.

Recently, support from Polish activists has become apparent: a Krakow student group allegedly plans to stage a hunger strike in support of the ten arrested Chartists prior to the opening of their trials, while members of KOR plan to conduct similar strikes in Warsaw churches. In early July, KOR made public a letter by a group of Polish Catholics to Czechoslovak Cardinal Tomasek asking him to defend the ten Chartists, four of them Catholics.

#### Charter Failures and the Regime's Tactics

The Charter movement, however, has not been able yet to secure actual improvements in human rights in Czechoslovakia. In some respects, the regime is more repressive today than it had been in late 1976. There has been no "constructive dialogue" or role for the Charter as "mediator in conflict

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situations." At no time has the movement posed a threat to regime stability (although this was not, of course, its stated intention). The movement has also been troubled by internal divisions and lack of popular acceptance. Most important of all, however, has been the regime's repression of the dissidents.

Although there may be disagreement among Czechoslovak leaders over how to deal with dissidence, there was never doubt that the regime would deny the Chartists any role in the political process. After publication of the Charter 77 manifesto, the regime immediately resorted to harassment and intimidation; it conducted a massive propaganda campaign denouncing the Charter and its signatories--without allowing the contents of that manifesto to be published or revealed at the "spontaneous" meetings of intellectuals, officials, and workers convened to sign anti-Charter petitions.

After a time, the intensive harassment and propaganda campaign abated somewhat--perhaps because the regime realized that its tactics served more to call attention to the Charter and to human rights than to discredit the movement. Nevertheless, Charter spokesmen and activists continued to be subjected to heavy surveillance and harassment. Their drivers licenses have been confiscated; telephones tapped or removed; and their homes have been searched and materials confiscated. They have been repeatedly detained and interrogated, denied employment, and exposed to kidnappings and assaults by police thugs. In addition, the regime has tried to weaken the movement by forcing or inducing Charter supporters to emigrate. Informers have been infiltrated into the movement, not only to keep the authorities informed about Charter activities, but also to sow dissension within the movement. Among the most repressive measures taken by the regime are:

--trials and imprisonment of four dissidents in October 1977 for terms of 14 months to 3 1/2 years on charges of subversion (during the Belgrade CSCE review conference, while the subject of human rights was being debated at length).

--the round-up and preventive detention of some 40 activists on the eve of Brezhnev's May 1978 visit to Czechoslovakia. Similarly, that summer--as the 10th anniversary of the invasion neared--the regime warned various Chartists to leave Prague or face detention.

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--the late May 1979 arrests of ten activists of the movement on charges of subversion. The reasons for these arrests are not known, but perhaps reflect renewed determination by the police to wipe out political dissidence before the 1980 CSCE review meeting in Madrid. Two of the arrested are Charter spokesmen. All ten are activists in the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS), a sub-group of the Charter, founded in May 1978. VONS has issued more than 100 statements, giving details about the arrests, trials, and sentences of Charter 77 supporters. The trials of the activists were reportedly planned for July, but apparently have been postponed twice--to give the public prosecutor more time to prepare his case. The trials are now said to be scheduled for late October.

--the September 10 police raids carried out in several Czech cities against Catholic priests and laymen. Between six to twelve Catholic activists are reported to have been arrested and charged with circulating samizdat Catholic literature and with impeding state control of religious activity. There is yet no information that the Catholics are associated with the Charter movement, but the operation itself comprises perhaps the harshest measure against Catholics in some 25 years and reflects the determination of the regime to crack down on all dissidents.

The Czechoslovak samizdat movement, the so-called Padlock Press, has not been subjected to nearly as much harassment as the Charter movement. The regime may view the underground literary movement as much less a threat than the Charter movement.

#### Popular Acceptance Lacking

The Czechoslovak population has avoided active commitment to Charter 77. While there is little doubt that the overwhelming majority of Czechoslovakia's 15 million inhabitants privately sympathize with the aims and goals of the Charter movement, few are willing to identify publicly with it--thereby inviting regime reprisals. The 1968 invasion apparently reinforced the belief that any political activity not sanctioned by the regime is fruitless.

Even among the 1,000 signatories that are claimed, a solid social base is lacking. There are only a few workers,

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peasants, or Slovaks. The vast majority appear to be intellectuals, with the movement itself concentrated in Prague.

The professions of some 750 signatories are known: two-thirds claim to be members of the intelligentsia; the remaining one-third are registered as workers, artisans, or manual laborers. Even these figures are misleading, since some manual laborers or workers are in fact intellectuals forced into menial positions in order to survive. Charter 77 is thus the product of the Prague intelligentsia--with a considerable number of this intelligentsia comprising communists ousted from the party for their opposition to the present regime.

#### The Slovak Factor

The reasons for the failure of the Charter to obtain Slovak support may be more complex than mere communications difficulties or geographic distance from Prague. Traditional Czech-Slovak animosities evidently play a role: some Slovaks reportedly reject any association with the Charter on the grounds that it is a Czech-conceived stratagem intended to weaken party leader and President Husak, a Slovak. While such a reaction is narrow and chauvinistic, the Charter's establishment in Prague undoubtedly is a factor in the Slovak reaction to it.

Political dissidence in Slovakia has not been as marked as in the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia--at least, as far as is known. This may reflect the somewhat more moderate treatment of former Dubcek reformers and supporters in Slovakia. Children of Slovaks purged from the party since the invasion, for instance, appear to have more opportunities to higher education than those elsewhere, particularly in Prague. Given their minority status in Czechoslovakia, the Slovaks may also feel the need to band together against the Czechs and, therefore, Slovak officials may be less inclined to take harsh actions toward their brethren. The purges which followed the 1968 invasion and the fall of Dubcek in April 1969 appear to have been less severe in Slovakia than in the Czech lands.

The Slovaks may also feel that their political and economic status within Czechoslovakia has improved since 1968, when federalization was enacted--the only surviving major feature of the Dubcek reform period. Accordingly, they would seem to have less reason to oppose a regime headed by a Slovak. On the other hand, many Czechs are

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known to resent bitterly the present federal structure, which they feel has the minority Slovaks in dominant party-government positions.

#### Other Shortcomings

Some non-communists reportedly question the motives of various leading activists in the movement. Particularly the ex-communists are distrusted and viewed as using the Charter movement as a vehicle from which to attack those communists in power. The ex-communists are criticized as opportunistic and insincere, since they now espouse the civil and human rights which they had ignored while holding party positions.

Although some factionalism evidently existed within the Charter movement in its early stages (e.g., between ex-communists and anti-communists, Catholics and atheists), the divisions deepened as the membership grew and became more diverse. The first three spokesmen--philosopher-professor Jan Patocka, playwright Vaclav Havel, and former Foreign Minister Jiri Hajek--were well known in Czechoslovakia and abroad, and commanded respect and authority. (Neither Patocka nor Havel was communist; both in fact had been persecuted by the regime. Hajek, a professor, served as Foreign Minister under Dubcek; he was among the first of the reformers to be purged after the invasion.)

Factionalism became more of a problem for leaders of the Charter after Patocka's death in March 1977. Younger members were said to favor more aggressive, confrontational tactics, while Hajek and others counselled that the movement should remain within the "strict confines of legality." Disillusionment with increasing factionalism may have been a main factor in Hajek's decision to resign as spokesman--although the view that the position should rotate annually was obviously a factor. Those spokesmen who later came to represent the movement have not been able to use their influence to resolve differences--in part, because of their lesser prominence at home and abroad. While acknowledging divisions, some Chartists dismiss them as of little consequence, underscoring instead the common goal of the struggle for human rights.

Organizers of the Charter clearly recognized that concentrating the movement in the capital city of Prague would be a disadvantage, but they had little choice. They sought to avoid police attention by limiting their contacts outside Prague; some who played a prominent role in the

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establishment of Charter 77 had been under police surveillance and any travel outside the city would have been duly scrutinized. Moreover, such travel would have given the impression that a "conspiracy" was underway or that attempts were being made to found an "organization," for which Ministry of Interior approval is necessary and would never have been granted.

### Prospects

~~Prospects that the movement will accomplish its goals remain as bleak as ever, since:~~

--The regime has all the necessary levers of power and coercion at its disposal and will not hesitate to use them if threatened. It also sees no reason to consider any "dialogue" with the Chartists, since this could open a Pandora's box. Prague takes its cue from Moscow, where the attitude toward human rights dissidents is also one of hostility and repression. As a result, Prague can feel confident it has Soviet support for its policies against dissent.<sup>1/</sup>

--The failures that have plagued the Charter movement from the outset (above all, the lack of popular support) have not been reversed, with little prospect for improvement in the foreseeable future. The movement is likely to remain concentrated in Prague, with the intelligentsia its hard core and driving force.

Despite these bleak prospects, the movement deserves respect, admiration, and sympathy for its ability to survive thus far and for its willingness to confront the regime in the face of overwhelming odds.

Prepared by J. Stoddard, P. Costolanski  
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Approved by R. Baraz  
x29194

<sup>1/</sup> Prague would hardly have conducted the October 1977 trials of the four dissidents without Moscow's approval--coming as they did at a most sensitive time during the CSCE review conference. Similarly, it is unlikely that Prague would try those Chartists now under arrest without informing Moscow beforehand and gaining its understanding and approval.

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