

Luboš Švec, *Perestrojka, Pobaltské Republiky a Československo 1988–1991*, Praha: Dokořán, 2013. 392 p. ISBN 978-80-7363-564-0

The new book by the famous Czech historian working at Prague's Charles University Dr Luboš Švec *Perestrojka, Pobaltské Republiky a Československo 1988–1991* (Perestroika, the Baltic Republics and Czechoslovakia in 1988–1991) was published by the Prague publishing house Dokořán in 2013. The career and activities of the author are linked with 20th-century investigations of the history of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, to which he has devoted the last couple of decades. Not only does he explore the history of the Baltic countries, publish various articles and make presentations at international conferences, he also lectures on the history of the Baltic countries at Charles University, in this way making the historical past and heritage of these countries more popular. We should rejoice that this is not the first monograph on the Baltic countries prepared by Švec. In 1996 he, Vladimír Macura and Pavel Štol prepared a monograph on the history of the Baltic countries, and in 2001 he published a serious scholarly study revealing the political and economic relations between Czechoslovakia and the Baltic countries in the years 1918 to 1939.<sup>1</sup>

In preparing his third monograph, Švec focused on the three Baltic countries, Czechoslovakia and its relations with the Baltic countries, as well as the role of the USSR in Eastern Europe in the turning-point years for the whole continent of 1988–1991. The author went deep into the political and socio-economic developments and changes taking place in the minds of people moving from the 'old' to the 'new' system, and the relationship between society and the political elite (for communist and like-minded reforms). One of the most important problems faced by the author while conducting his investigation was the search for sources. A large part of the most important documents from that time are classified, or still kept in private papers, this is particularly true for the creation of social movements and their activities. The author made use of the abundant historiography of various countries, as well as articles in the press, based on personal memories and the personal documents of active players at that time. Nevertheless, most attention was devoted to the analysis of Czech

<sup>1</sup> L. Švec, V. Macura, P. Štol, *Dějiny pobaltských zemí* (Prague, 1996); L. Švec, *Československo a pobaltské státy v letech 1918–1939. Vývoj politických a hospodářských vztahů Československa s Litvou, Lotyšskem a Estonskem v meziválečném období* (Prague, 2001).

sources, documents and historiography. Švec has managed to find important documents in the archive of the Office of the Czechoslovak Press, the Federal Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Archive of the Office of the Chancellery of the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, as well using very important documents revealing the circumstances of the time stored in the archive of the Gorbachev Foundation in Moscow, and archival documents from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

The very title *Perestrojka, Pobaltské Republiky a Československo 1988–1991* reveals that the book intertwines several plot lines, analysing the problems and changes, at the same time as complementing others, the process of the transformation of the USSR, the revolution in the Baltic countries, the establishment and aspirations of the Popular Fronts of Latvia and Estonia and the Sajūdis Movement in Lithuania, the understanding of the problems of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in Czechoslovakia in 1988–1989, the normalisation process in Czechoslovakia and the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the cooperation between dissidents of the Baltic countries and Czechoslovakia and the creation of social movements in Czechoslovakia supporting the independence of the Baltic countries, and the approach of Czechoslovakia to the independence-seeking Baltic countries in 1990–1991. In the monograph, the peripheries of historical events, the national political aspirations of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Czechoslovakia in 1988–1991, often intertwine; but Švec inserts Moscow's role and the personality of the then Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev into the context of these events in a very interesting and informative manner. This is based on unpublished documents from the Gorbachev Foundation. It can be argued that the book reveals the aims for independence in the Baltic countries and Czechoslovakia, and their relations with Moscow, the position of the CPSU and President Mikhail Gorbachev himself, and the recommendations of his advisors, and his navigation between commitments to the Communist Party (CP) nomenclature and Western countries.

The first two parts of the book are devoted to revealing the concept of the historical and political events and processes. First of all, the author analyses the concept of social movements in the historiography and publicistic writing of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, i.e. he discusses how the historians and politicians of these countries understand and evaluate contemporary movements, the political situation and specific events, and introduces the most important works published on this topic. The next part of the work is devoted to revealing the concept of perestroika. One should note that historians of various countries devote a lot of attention to this theme, and here we miss a broader comprehension of the process of Perestroika by historians from Western countries, Russia, the Baltic countries and the Czech Republic, an evaluation of the analysis which would have enabled the author to explain more deeply the different interpretations of past events. Relying on historiography and various documents, the periodisa-

tion of the Soviet Perestroika process is presented: the conservative phase of 1985–1987, openness (*glasnost*) and the democratisation of 1987–1989, and the rise of national conflicts and the relations between the centre and the periphery in 1989–1991.

The book devotes most attention to the creation of the so-called people's fronts, Lithuania's *Sajūdis*, the People's Front of Latvia and the *Eesti Rahvarinne* (Popular Front) of Estonia, public sentiment and the fall of communism. The activities of these people's fronts are analysed from various points of view. Of course, seeking to explain to readers in foreign countries as rapidly as possible the historical chain of events, considerable attention is also devoted to revealing the circumstances of the incorporation of the Baltic States into the USSR in 1940. In April 1988, the first People's Front was created in Estonia, later in Vilnius the initiative group of *Sajūdis* was formed. According to the author, the Popular Fronts were born with the clear socialist rhetoric of perestroika, with the strong cultural and scholarly elite of the republics, most of whom were members of the CP. Members were reform-minded communists and intellectuals. The People's Fronts in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were established as certain organisational 'umbrellas', under which banded together both peaceful and radically minded layers of society. An important point is the connections between the Popular Fronts and the Communist Party of the Baltic States and the USSR. According to the author, the People's Fronts became the tool for the de-monopolisation of the CP. Attention is drawn to the fact that Lithuania became the first Soviet republic in which even the Supreme Council of the old composition at the end of 1989 abolished the monopoly of the Communist Party which was enshrined in the Constitution, and, even more, the Communist Party of Lithuania joined the idea of proclaiming the independence of Lithuania. Thus, in the fall of 1989, the People's Fronts adopted their programmes, the ultimate aim of which was the restoration of the independence of the republics.

Švec presents the rather eloquent idea G. Shakhnazarov, the advisor to the Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, expressed at the end of 1989 on relations between Lithuania and Moscow: 'This nation has convinced itself that it wants to break free from any diktat. And when similar thoughts overpower public awareness, priority will be given to death, rather than a disavowal of such ideas.' Meanwhile, he did not paint the economic situation in dark colours: 'Lithuanians do not have to be afraid of the future, because regardless of all the exceptions of state planning, Lithuania will survive perfectly without the USSR. The Scandinavian countries will help it stand on its feet. The very state itself is small, but capable of feeding the entire nation. National problems will not cause it too much trouble, because there are few Russians and other minorities.' Assessing the Act of 11 March, Švec notes that the right to self-determination, even to total separation, was included in all Soviet constitutions, even in the 1936 Stalinist

constitution, but no one allowed himself to imagine that such a case could happen, that in a totalitarian system any of the Soviet republics could try to legitimise the right from the theoretical to the real level.

Švec also highlights the change in Moscow's approach to events in Lithuania: in 1988, the people around Gorbachev supported the creation of the People's Fronts, and with their help hoped to resist the nomenclature and promote the development of perestroika and openness. The president of the USSR supported the reform process in the Communist Party. According to the author, the situation changed fundamentally in Moscow in the autumn of 1990, when some people close to Gorbachev were replaced. In his opinion, by the end of the year, it was already evident that perestroika had fallen into a deep crisis, and the president, seeking to take control of the situation, may use power structures which until then had been refused. The relation with time, with the pace of reform, was lost. In January 1991, Moscow chose the plan that was proposed in April 1990 by General V.I. Varennikov for military intervention in Lithuania. The book provides the quite interesting telephone conversation between Gorbachev and the US President George Bush just before the events in Vilnius on 11 January. Gorbachev spoke about the growing tension in Lithuania, and his attempts to make use of all the possibilities for a political solution. He announced that if a very important danger arose, then the most severe steps would be taken. He said that he would act responsibly, but that everything did not depend on him, once again stressing that if a great danger arose, appropriate action would be needed. Bush responded sluggishly to the information provided and assessed the interpretation of the situation. The author notes that in none of the numerous publications of Gorbachev does he accept responsibility for the events in Vilnius, and instead presents himself as a victim of the actions of the secret armed forces.

Expanding the story of the development of Czechoslovakia in 1988–1991, Švec notes sharp differences between the development of the Baltic States and Czechoslovakia at that time. We should note that at the beginning of perestroika, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria were the states with the greatest reserve with regard to Perestroika which had begun in the USSR, and responded sluggishly to the Kremlin's instructions. But at the same time, Gorbachev and the Soviet leadership, seeking reforms without any exceptions, supported the normalisation process in Czechoslovakia even before the beginning of December 1989. According to the author, Gorbachev became a symbol of hope, but seeking to maintain the stability of the bloc, he could not fulfil this hope. The politicians of Czechoslovakia linked perestroika exclusively to the restructuring of the stagnating economy, and not to the broad liberalisation and openness (*glasnost*) which occurred in the USSR in 1988. In this context, another aspect was also important for Czechoslovakia: openness would have automatically raised the issue of the Prague Spring, and socialism with a human face. The situ-

ation in Czechoslovakia in 1988–1989 is discussed very briefly, there is no broader analysis of the events, and the events of the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 are not discussed. Seeking to reveal the mutual contacts between representatives of the Baltic States and Czechoslovakia, the author could have devoted more attention to Havel's personality, how the society of Czechs and Slovaks valued him, and how Baltic politicians and public figures assessed him. True, the book reveals how Czechoslovakia was seen in the Baltic countries until 1989. In 1988–1989, there was an attempt in Czechoslovakia that the news evaluated under new circumstances (from the Baltic states and other sources) about the events in 1968 in Prague would not reach the citizens and public opinion, in which the newly created People's Fronts were already interested.

The first part of the book provides an overview and an analysis of the mutual relations between the Baltic States and Czechoslovakia after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Individual facts are if as known, often repeated, remembered. Conferences, various presentations and exhibitions, and meetings of diplomats discuss them, but the author has decided to gather these facts for the first time, synthesise them and present a distinctive analysis. The first contacts between Czech scholars and representatives of the Baltic States began in the 1950s–1960s, especially among philologists and translators. In Czechoslovakia, a circle of people interested in Baltic studies formed. Ties between dissidents were developed when the Estonian writer Arvo Valton visited Vaclav Havel in 1987, and the Lithuanian publicist Almis Grybauskas the same year stayed in Czechoslovakia for a longer period. He was interested in Czech history and culture, established the first contacts with representatives of Charter 77, and in the spring of 1989 he met with Havel who had been released from prison. The somewhat forgotten fact that in March 1989 the Lithuanian Writers' Union also appealed to the government of Czechoslovakia, asking for the release of the Czechoslovak dissident Havel from prison, is remembered. At that time in Czechoslovakia, like-minded persons (writers, translators, editors, emigrants, those who had visited the Baltic countries, and others) who were not indifferent to the events in the Baltic countries, started to gather. The social groups *Baltský svaz* (Baltic Union), the Czechoslovakia–Latvia and Czechoslovakia–Estonia clubs, and the Czechoslovakia–Lithuania Society, which consisted of about 20 members, were formed. The activities of these organisations became more active after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, but remained purely social and cultural. The monograph also discusses the increased attention in the Czechoslovak press to the problems of the Baltic States, especially Lithuania, from the spring of 1990.

The book also develops another story associated with official bilateral relations between Lithuania and Czechoslovakia from 1990. It is noted that up to now no Czech historian was interested in the position of Czechoslovakia towards Lithuania after it had declared independence. After the

Velvet Revolution, Czechoslovakia went from being a state loyal to the USSR to a state which shaped its foreign policy itself, or in other words, conducted a 'return to Europe'. Lithuanian politicians placed great hopes in Czechoslovakia, hoping for its political support. In Lithuania, the election of the dissident Havel as President of Czechoslovakia was very well received. However, Czechoslovakia first of all valued its relations with the USSR, which it did not want to complicate. The author draws attention to the fact that, unlike some Western countries, in 1943 and 1970 Czechoslovakia had legally recognised Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as part of the USSR. On the other hand, what position Western states were taking with regard to the Baltic States was very important for Czechoslovakia. Immediately after Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1990, the chairman of the Supreme Council of Lithuania Vytautas Landsbergis wrote to Havel asking for recognition of Lithuania's independence. On 29 March, President Havel offered his mediation, suggesting that the negotiations between Lithuania and the USSR could take place in Czechoslovakia, but the USSR did not respond to this offer. The Czechoslovak foreign minister Jiří Dienstbier on 23 March asserted that his country supported the independence of Lithuania, but did not recognise it officially. On 21 May 1990, the speaker of the Czechoslovak parliament, Alexander Dubček, raised the issue of the Baltic States during his visit to Moscow, and asked Gorbachev's opinion, but the latter noted the need to comply with the law. In the book, the author reveals the political moods of Czechoslovakia, due to which interest in the problems of the Baltic States decreased. There was an effort to explain why in essence the official political provisions of Czechoslovakia with regard to the Baltic States did not change, even after the May 1990 two-day visit to Prague by the Lithuanian Supreme Council chairman Landsbergis, and the visit in September to Czechoslovakia by the Lithuanian prime minister Kazimiera Prunskienė. Czechoslovak politicians then spoke about the need for Lithuania to find a dialogue with Moscow. According to Švec, President Havel clearly demonstrated support for Lithuania; but, on the other hand, he valued Gorbachev as a guarantor of the democratisation processes and changes in Europe. Czechoslovakia's position only changed in August 1991 after the Moscow Putsch. On 26 August the Christian Democratic Party of Czechoslovakia expressed the hope that Czechoslovakia would not be the last to recognise Lithuania. Czechoslovakia officially recognised Lithuania on 29 August, after Great Britain, Germany and other countries already had.

The book is supplemented by appendices, which provide the thoughts and remembrances of important representatives of the social movements in Czechoslovakia at the time, along with the most important documents, and several photographs reflecting events, mostly from personal collections.

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