

# THE GROWTH OF CZECH FEMINISM: ANALYZING RESISTANCE ACTIVITIES THROUGH A GENDERED LENS, 1968 TO 1993 / MEGAN R. MARTIN

**Abstract:** This paper explores how women's roles and participation in resistance to Czechoslovak communism from 1968 to the Velvet Revolution serve as a base for Czech feminist thought. By examining three generations of participants through a gendered, Beauvoirian lens, the emergence of feminism can be easily charted through changing perceived gender roles and increased attention to gender issues. After the events of the Prague Spring, women from different groups of the Czechoslovak underground risked their own safety to exercise free speech and expression. Women's struggles for greater liberties were framed by traditional gender barriers, supposed communist equality, and Western influence. To understand the experiences of female dissidents as a base for Czech feminist thought, one must examine the nature and progression of various underground communities and women's roles within them. Since 1968, an increased emphasis on women's freedoms and liberties has helped create a unique, local sense of femininity and feminism.

**Keywords:** gender, feminism, resistance, the Czech Republic

Although Czech feminism has long been elusive, it is nevertheless an important part of the Czech resistance movement's history and shapes the base for modern expressions of Czech feminism. Up until 1989, Czechs lacked the academic rhetoric for a gender discourse: there was no Czech word for "gender" until after the Velvet Revolution. Yet, growing attention was given to feminist issues in resistance communities starting in 1968. First embodied as a quest for universal human rights, Czech feminism became a search for increased liberty, gender equality and equal opportunity. As a loosely organized movement, Czech feminism searches to empower women both in their traditional functions and in dynamic new circumstances. The emergence of Czech feminism largely follows Simone de Beauvoir's model of transition from immanence to transcendence with some small differences and local adaptations. From the Prague Spring to the Velvet Revolution and beyond, Czech feminism slowly emerged from a mounting drive for greater freedom within resistance circles.

In this paper, I will demonstrate the evolution of Czech feminism as an increase in gender awareness and sensitivity driven by a Beauvoirian desire for increased freedom. First, I will outline my methodology and the theoretical foundations for my argument. Second, I will briefly describe the background and context for resistance and dissent in Czechoslovakia. Third, I will examine how universalism and the human rights agenda of Charter 77 laid the groundwork for the emergence of the feminist movement. Fourth, I will illustrate how women's resistance shifted towards the circles of cultural expression as an alternative means of obtaining greater freedoms to the political and philosophical milieu of Charter 77. Fifth, I will explore how women who matured after the 1989 transition came to view Czech feminism as a legacy bound in human rights and individual expression. Lastly, I will hypothesize about the future course of Czech feminism with its emerging role in academia. It is imperative to recognize that Czech feminism was not simply a reaction to the transition of 1989, a subset of re-

sistance activities, or an untouchable socio-philosophical process, but was rather a developing movement bound by context, individual narratives and collective desires for increased liberties.

## Methodology

I chose to examine the growth of Czech Feminism from 1968 to 1993 through historical and personal documentation as well as individual interviews and accounts. Using the case study method, I chose five women whose involvement and contribution to the Czech resistance ranged from strong, highly political involvement to weak, passive involvement. However, all interviewed women share a deep sense of involvement in the current Czech feminist movement and/or education. This sampling is by no means representative of the entire Czech female population, nor is it representative of the dissent movement during the late communist period. However, I was able to extract the overall tenor of feminist development from the general trends portrayed in the literature and communicated in personal interviews.

The interviewees fall into three categories that are loosely framed by the nature of women's involvement and the sequence in which these categories appear. The delineations are porous and by no means absolute. However, they do serve to classify and track different periods of feminist development. The first group, as represented by Alena Hromádková and Jiřina Šiklová, was the women of Charter 77. They fought alongside their male compatriots for greater equality and universal rights regardless of gender differences. They were the most outwardly political of the three categories, situating themselves either against the communist government or as proponents of reform. Hromádková participated in a religious-affiliated dissent group, which fought to restore democracy and the rule of law in Czechoslovakia. Šiklová was active in the underground press, smuggling texts in and out of the country. Both women signed Charter 77 and are now university educators in Prague.

The second group, represented by Eva Hauserová and Pavla Jonssonová, were slightly younger and less politically inclined than the first group. Their dissent was more culturally and artistically oriented, using music, literature and art to express themselves and at times their discontent. While they may not have considered themselves part of an active group of dissidents, their actions undermined the regime. Hauserová wrote science fiction novels and short stories during the communist era, many of which were published after 1989. Jonssonová played bass for *Zuby Nehty*, the first all-women rock band in the Prague rock scene.

The third group, represented by Vanda Thorne, came of age during the 1989 transition and was heavily shaped by changes in the educational system as the communist regime lifted and Western ideas poured in. While Vanda Thorne was not a dissident and did not participate actively in communist resistance, she represents a third group of Czech feminists because her identity reflects an educational and cultural divide between communist and post-communist Czechoslovakia. As a Czech married to an American and a professor of Women's Studies in Prague her story exemplifies the Czech nation's adaptation to the transition and the future trajectory of Czech feminism in the academic world.

The interviewed women are linked in their common pursuits for greater freedom and face similar struggles because of their gender. No doubt, they all faced individual adversity. But their struggles and victories, like a palimpsest, built on each other to help constitute an image of a greater Czech feminist movement. If the first group had not demanded universal rights and clashed with the government, the second group would not have been encouraged to seek more specific, apolitical and personal expressions of resistance. If neither of the first two groups had existed, the third group would have little political, academic or cultural claims to a pro-feminist, anti-communist legacy, making it more difficult to temper Western feminist doctrine with Czech beliefs. That was increasingly visible after 1989, as politicians, writers and artists from the first and second groups became more public with their work, providing more visible expressions of feminism through activism and art. The first and second groups provided a stepping stone for the third group to translate Czech feminism into scholarly discourse.

### Theory

This paper follows the basic feminist notions set out in Simone de Beauvoir's theory concerning ideas of transcendence and oppression. However, the relationship Czech feminism has with subjugation and subsequently freedom is more nuanced than Beauvoirian theory presents. Simone de Beauvoir's theory outlines how women are as capable of choice as men. Thus, women can choose to elevate themselves, obtaining transcendence, moving beyond the "immanence," or interiorized, alienated, and contained state to which they were resigned and for the most part assigned by societal norms. After gaining transcendence, women take responsibility for themselves by choosing freedom and

striving for greater liberties. (de Beauvoir, 1972: Introduction) Simone de Beauvoir argued that freedom is not given to anybody; men too should go through this process to achieve full liberties.

In my opinion, this moral, personal revolution goes against the social mechanisms and norms that govern strictly patriarchal societies, but does not come at the expense of the personal liberties of men. The moral revolutions mentioned in this paper are mostly female in nature, but they do not contrast or contradict the liberties of men. Thus, feminism can be defined as the respect and desire for all sexes to work together for a more respectful and equitable way of life and the pursuit of greater liberties. It includes dislodging women from their assumed societal status and actively pursuing greater freedoms.

Czech feminism falls within the Beauvoirian model but deviates slightly from the initial premises when considering the context of communism. The struggle for freedom took on a different shape because, as a modern movement, it formed under the blanket control of an oppressive communist government. The beginnings of feminism manifested as a struggle for human rights within dissent communities. Equality in name and action was essential to both men and women, irrespective of gender, to become truly free. An additional layer of control, communist oppression, can be added to Simone de Beauvoir's initial theory of transcendence. She assumed that her theory would function within a free society. However, when a society is not completely free, as was the case during the communist era, it becomes necessary to overcome the control of the government before a women's movement can take root.

The long struggle for Charter 77 and universal human rights created space and opportunity for women to transcend their previous positions and increase their personal liberties through dissent activities. Incremental claims to liberty in all three categories examined in this paper build on each other to create a diverse yet cohesive feminist movement.

### Communist Views and the Realities of Gender in the ČSSR

Although the communist government declared gender issues resolved, in reality structural and social discrimination, especially regarding wages, occupation and the allocation of domestic work prevailed in Czechoslovakia. However, the repression of the communist government disproportionately affected women due to the patriarchal nature of government structures. Overcoming this additional layer of repression made it necessary for the dissident fight for human rights to precede feminist agendas.

One problem with communist gender conceptions stemmed from a gap between gender theories and actual application. While the communist party formally acknowledged equality between men and women as workers, they granted neither true equity nor liberty. Lenin called on women to work as emancipated equals with men and bear

revolutionary children. (Jancar, 1978: 74) However, this theory was never integrated into practice. The regime pushed gender equality through its political rhetoric but failed "to effect real changes in patriarchal relationships." (Věšíňová-Kalivodová, 2005: 425) Out of either disinclination or ineptitude, the state did not "prepare or educate the population for the new gender roles whose construction it declared." (Věšíňová-Kalivodová, 2005: 425) For example, although it was a source of pride for many, women bore the double burden of working a job and performing housework. (Věšíňová-Kalivodová, 2005: 425) The government's empty rhetoric and its persistent domination of the economic and social sectors imposed an additional layer of control on the Czech population. The communist government was an overarching power that acted above and in the name of the Czech people.

The government's failure to instill ideas of gender equality was evident in the structural aspects of the employment system. For instance, the government added incentives to childbearing and extended maternity leave, which discouraged women from pursuing uninterrupted professional careers and increased the population. Perpetual shortages in state-run housing moved women to marry and have children early in order to secure an apartment. (Jancar, 1978: 74) Young women were often perceived as unreliable employees because they could potentially become pregnant and leave their posts. As a consequence of this discrimination, they were paid less than men. (Jancar, 1978: 108) Care professions like education, health care and social work were feminized, isolating women in traditionally female sectors of the job market. (Corrin, 1992: 107) In 1988, women represented "71.6 percent [of the workforce] in education, 78.8 percent in health services and 89.0 percent in social care." (Corrin, 1992: 99) Although by the late 1960s "the education level of both sexes was equalized in the population under 30 years of age," women were often forced to accept jobs under their ability or educational level. (Busheikin, 1997: 73, Corrin, 1992: 108) The disproportionately high levels of underemployed women and the high number of those in the care sector indicate the extended influence of the central government in both the job market and the social sector. Despite their rhetoric, the communist government's control over Czechs and women in particular necessitated the Charter 77 campaign for universal human rights before feminist ideas could burgeon.

### **Resistance Activities after the Prague Spring**

The suppression of Alexander Dubček's "socialism with a human face" precipitated a long and complex shift in the tactics of repression used by the StB (the secret police force) which demanded new modes of resistance for dissidents. New government tactics of intimidation sent reformers and dissidents underground and subsequently helped push the human rights agenda. (Salecl, 1994: 40) Thousands of men and women; professors, journalists and intellectuals were dismissed from their positions and reassigned to menial jobs like truck driving or window washing. (Salecl, 1994: 41) Dissidents were put under surveillance, alienat-

ed and intimidated by the StB. Alienating and humiliating the members of the educated classes eventually led to the call for universal human rights from intellectuals and professionals in the dissent community.

However, before this academic and professional call to arms ensued, there was a "retreat into privacy, which developed in order to escape the overwhelming power of the Party." (Salecl, 1994: 47-8) The government intimidation led dissident leader, Václav Havel, to encourage, "private resistance coupled with public obedience." (Corrin, 1992, 48) The resistance literally went underground into apartments, living rooms and other domestic spaces, which gave women greater opportunities to participate in more subtle, undetected ways. Firing academics and professionals and forcing them underground only encouraged their enduring desire for the basic human rights that the regime had so egregiously violated.

### **Group 1: The Struggle for Human Rights:**

#### **Female Roles in Rhetoric and Practical Participation**

The universal human rights discourse of Charter 77 made way for the consideration of individual rights for specific groups and thus laid the groundwork for the future development of Czech feminism. Much of the resistance activities of the first group of interviewees revolved around the ideological tenets of Charter 77. The document demanded the Czechoslovak government uphold universal human rights and called for government accountability following the Helsinki Accords in December 1975. A whole range of Czech resistance groups signed the document, uniting them for the first time with a clear, politicized purpose of gaining free speech and increased liberties.

Although Charter 77 made no reference to "feminist issues or the specific nature of women's status" (Šiklová, 2007: 1), some scholars claim that women's "gendered, individual concerns were erased by the language of the universal human rights." (Hron, Madelaine, 2003: 2) However, grouping gender issues under the umbrella of human rights did not erase them. Rather, the Charter 77 movement opened up space to expand feminist ideas in a domain framed by equal rights for all. While resistance groups shared little besides a foundational desire for freedom, this desire acted as a precursor from which individual agendas, like feminism, followed. The larger groups within the Charter 77 movement, were divided into,

three streams, the most dominant one was the wing of reformed communists that was involved in the Prague Spring in '68. The second stream or wing was the central liberals with Václav Havel and right of center were the Christians, also called politically aware people, conservative liberals or the traditional Czech conservative liberals. (Hromádková, 2008)

According to Alena Hromádková, there was little intermingling between Socialist Reformers and her group of



Christian anti-communists with the exception of Charter 77. (Hromádková, 2008) Although Hromádková preferred the restoration of the rule of law and democratic institutions to the human rights agenda, she became a signatory as soon as the petition came out. She believed that there was strength in “viewing men and women as an undifferentiated, collective whole when furthering common goals.” (Hron, 2003: 7) Jiřina Šiklová expanded on that point, saying, “principles of human and civil rights should be placed above the feminist approach to the world.” (Šiklová, Author’s own, unknown date) Šiklová explains that at that time, “we didn’t ask who is man and who is woman. It is important what is your opinion.[sic]” (Šiklová, 2008)

Despite the lack of gender discourse, it is difficult to believe that gender differences were not influential in resistance circles. Even though women ostensibly held an equal position in the discourse surrounding Charter 77, in actions and assumed roles few were equal to men because of the social constructs embedded in the lives and minds of the participants. For example, Šiklová claimed that gender was not a consideration when vocalizing one’s opinion in the Charter 77 community, yet she portrayed actions in that same community to be greatly divided on the basis of gender. She asserts that “while men tended to be the initiators of various proclamations, women tended to be the ‘laborers’ of samizdat and *Charta 77*.” (Šiklová, 2007: 2) While women may have spoken their minds, they worked laborious, menial tasks assigned to them out of tradition and habit. However, speaking their minds and relating to men as equals certainly encourages Beauvoirian desires for gender equality and social freedoms.

Similar to women’s roles in Charter 77 circles, the women who participated in samizdat (the unofficial publication and distribution of banned literature) had mostly secondary and intermediary positions. However, their participation and influence over samizdat texts were substantial and allowed them to grasp for greater liberties and power. Women worked as “couriers as well as producers of the samizdat”, copying, typing and circulating material, whereas men composed and wrote. (Wolchik, 1996: 533) Women would often stay after hours at their office jobs to type texts. Being caught copying or transmitting prohibited material could mean imprisonment or government tracking. While their duties were menial, women’s work on samizdat literature should not be demeaned as meaningless labor. Rather, it should be considered as a selfless contribution to the dissent movements. These women symbolized the whited-out or blank spots of the dissent writers’ economy. While their dissent was quiet and often went unnoticed, they were essential to the success of samizdat. Although only a handful of women participated as writers, female copyists and editors controlled samizdat publishing by virtue of their intermediary roles. Their thoughts and opinions were, no doubt, expressed in the editing process of the literature that they were so often responsible for producing and distributing. (Hron, 2003: 8)

## Reclaiming the Domestic Sphere

Since the end of the Prague Spring, resistance was intimately connected to the private, domestic sphere as the site of amicable conference and activity. The retreat from public space into the home caused,

men [to regain] their feeling of importance by being the boss of the household, in command of the women and children, while women also achieved a sense of worth by accepting the role of ‘being a woman’ and by rediscovering ‘femininity’ which they perceived communism had denied them. (Salecl, 1994: 48)

The site of personal resistance was relocated to the domestic sphere, a traditionally female space, endowing it with a new power of private choice and self-expression. However, this return to the home and rediscovery of traditional roles was a conscious choice. Many felt that obligatory employment in a traditionally masculine working world stripped women of their femininity which was hitherto closely linked with the domestic realm. Considering the communist policy of female workforce “emancipation,” staying at home and reclaiming femininity was tantamount to an act of resistance and an increase in personal liberty and agency.

## Group 2: The “Grey Zone” – Flowers Blooming in the Shade

Thanks to the space opened up by the universalist dissidents of the 1968 era, the second group focused less on external politics and more on personal creativity as a means of resistance and obtaining greater individual liberties. Although many people disdained the regime, political resistance was generally weak. This middle generation was not greatly interested in politics or ideology, but instead focused on internal culture and community. Participants from this middle group often considered themselves to be part of the Grey Zone, a term coined by Šiklová to explain a spectrum of passive participants. Šiklová defines the Grey Zone as,

those people somewhere between the ‘*nomenklatura*’ and the dissidents, people who had been members of the Communist Party, but were never very prominent – who had been involved in a little dirty dealing, but not too much. These people would be acceptable for both sides, a buffer between the *nomenklatura* and the dissidents. (Šiklová, 1990: 347)

Although inclusion in the Grey Zone is a form of private resistance, many considered themselves apolitical. Regardless of overt political intentions, Grey Zone members passively participated in activities that were both mildly tolerated and prohibited by the communist regime. Their activities, which ranged from listening to Radio Free Europe and Voice of America to playing in blacklisted bands, grew in

the 1980s with the relaxation of government restrictions. Smaller-scale participation became easier and more plausible for many; Eva Hauserová explains, “we didn’t sacrifice our career for our political persuasion or opinions [...] we didn’t speak about it so we could travel abroad and I could study and my parents had their quite good jobs.” (Hauserová, 2008) Grey Zone participants were still obliged to conform to public life in order to maintain certain privileges, while exploring restricted freedoms in the privacy of their homes.

With methods of dissent focused on cultural expressions in a domestic context, women’s roles as personal creators and participants grew. Female creativity was able to thrive in a new manner and context. Daniela Fischerová explains: “It is a great illusion that freedom is conducive to creativity and that censorship only destroys it. It just changes it. Some flowers bloom well in full light, others in the shade.” (Fischerová, 2000) By opening their homes to and participating in creative resistance, women allowed creativity to bloom in the shade. The threat from government authority cast a long shadow into the private realm, which gave creative expression a riskier, highly charged and meaningful context. The struggle embodied Simone de Beauvoir’s idea of moral revolution, but within the confines of private life, away from the additional, repressive government influence. For resistance communities, the home became a private bubble of free expression within the totalitarian state. This private defiance enabled women to create a new conception of the feminine and strive for greater liberties and Beauvoirian transcendence. They embraced a vision of domestic femininity shunned by the communists, yet different from traditional roles, as an expression of personal agency. With the home as a powerful and significant location, women became creators and protectors of art, music, literature and free speech in their own living rooms.

Despite traditional and communist confines, women of the resistance managed to fashion a new feminine identity stemming from a desire for freedom, creative expression, and the liberal attitudes of the previous generation. Jacques Derrida asserts the necessity of a “space for women’s creative self-expression outside of the constraints of [...] traditional social and cultural archetypes [...] Woman could be not merely an inspirational and dependent force but a creator herself.” (Heczková, 1997: 45) Appropriating the traditionally feminine attributes of beauty, caring and compassion to their roles as creators, these women distanced themselves from the de-feminized communist worker. (Heitlinger, 1993: 105) However, women also distanced themselves from the traditionally passive, muse-like picture of femininity. Their awareness of their own female power and self-determination grew, making the feminine both active and empowering.

### The Creative Dissent of the Middle Group: Literature

Women made bold, empowering statements in their literature, which often mirrored their critical sentiments towards

the circumstance of women at the time. While it was possible to publish some women’s literature during communism, most could only be published and widely circulated after the Velvet Revolution. Literature was another means for Czech women to express their opinions. Czech women’s literature often focuses on the construction of alternative realities to escape from the totalitarian present. (Ambros, 2002: 41) The adoption of alternative realities indicates both an escape from the present, uncontrollable reality and a sense of personal agency in creating a new alternative universe. Eva Hauserová wrote science fiction because it allowed her to “speculate about society or about roles of men and women” in an invented, controlled environment instead of in public reality. (Hauserová, 2008) Hauserová’s constructed realities offered social and political critiques of communist society which were either dangerous or unfeasible to offer publicly. Writing about fictitious situations that parody reality allowed Hauserová to expose hypocrisies and flaws of the communist regime without being overtly political. Science fiction created a safe haven in which Hauserová could express her feelings about the communist system. While interiorization opposes the idea of Beauvoirian transcendence, Czech literature communicates and shares interiorized, alternative worlds with a readership that perhaps shares that view. Working within a totalitarian regime, women writers’ alternative worlds articulated clear visions for a preferred way of life, which highlights important steps towards personal agency and the expression of personal liberties.

### Rock and Roll

The all-female band *Zuby Nehty* made a name for itself in the male-dominated world of alternative music while its members supporting each other in their collective as well as individual self-expression. They were a rarity in the Czech music scene at the time; “among the hundreds of bands that [played] around here, there [was] really only one all-female band, *Zuby Nehty*.” (Vaničková, 2002: 69) Their singularity as the only all-female rock group was an important first step to initiate the entrance of women into the world of Czech rock. Jonssonová recalls other bands being confused by the band’s unique all-female stage presence. In time, *Zuby Nehty* gained a large support base of male fans. The women in the group were consciously and loudly breaking down gender barriers. Despite their strong public presence, *Zuby Nehty* was anything but masculine. They projected a powerful, loud and at times abrasive feminine presence, illustrating Simone de Beauvoir’s idea of agency, freedom and transcendence.

Formerly known as *Plyn* and *Dybbuk*, the women of *Zuby Nehty* fostered a sense of mutual support and friendship. According to Pavla Jonssonová, “most of the time we were just screaming with laughter because it was just so hilarious. We loved each other.” (Jonssonová, 2008) Describing the evolution of *Zuby Nehty*’s songwriting process, Jonssonová explains how earlier in their careers, songs “spontaneously materialized in outbursts of laughter and deep

thought.” (Zuby Nehty, 2003) Through their bursts of laughter and deep thought, *Zuby Nehty* reclaimed emotionalism as a celebration of female emotion rather than its stereotypical stigmatization as weakness and fragility. Perhaps the songs that came out of these unplanned writing sessions revealed more about the female psyche than could be permitted in the public sphere. The band was blacklisted twice and as a result had to change its name from *Plyn* to *Dybbuk* and finally to *Zuby Nehty*. Before playing a venue, the band had to be approved by an official committee. Jonssonová recalls, “[the committee] called me up and said ‘we read the lyrics and it’s so dark that we just cannot let you play,’” so they “were blacklisted... for not being cheerful.” (Jonssonová, 2008) In reaction to this particular censor, the group wrote a song titled “let us rejoice and let us make merry. Let our joy be eternal. Let our joy be forever,” which they played in a dour, melancholy manner in order to gently tease the communist officials on the band’s approval committee. (Jonssonová, 2008) *Zuby Nehty* undermined the power of the censors and official government authority with their creativity and tone. Their music was distinctly female without fitting preconceptions of femininity. In fact, *Zuby Nehty* challenged and helped redefine conceptions of female behavior through Beauvoirian transcendence.

When reflecting on the changes in female rock music since the Velvet Revolution, Jonssonová speaks of a need for increased desire and compassion in female rock. The unnecessary aggression of the alpha female seems to dominate the post-1989 female rock scene. Jonssonová feels women’s rock should exhibit a passion for music and not the mapping of male aggression onto female musical performance. Following de Beauvoir’s theory of moral revolution, female transcendence should be born out of agency and desire for greater liberties, not by mimicking men.

Much like the alpha female complex in rock, since the fall of communism, issues of gender and feminism have shifted dramatically from their previous locus. Under communism, conceptions of feminism slowly built upon each other and developed in local resistance circles. However, the Velvet Revolution, the opening of Czechoslovakia to the rest of the world and the introduction of Western Feminist theory permanently altered the course of Czech feminism.

### The Velvet Revolution: Reactions and Rebuilding

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 overturned communism and the resistance helped forge a new civil society and government. In two months, “a 40-year regime crumbled and a dissident who nobody knew became president.” (Thorne, 2008) The last group to experience communism and the first to mature under a capitalist regime had a variety of different goals and aspirations than their predecessors. The post-1989 period was “marked by a distancing from great ideas and universal values, and a move towards the self, material reality and local knowledge.” (Hron, 2003: 13) The pursuit of more specialized knowledge coupled with a flood of Western influences increased the scholarly focus on fem-

inist issues. With an influx of Western European and American scholars into Czech universities, Western feminism quickly became a known and taught discourse. However, the influx of Western feminism was not warmly welcomed and caused much anxiety in Czech society, especially concerning women’s liberation.

Many Czechs perceived feminism as an ideological imposition filling the vacuum left by communism, leaving Czech women defensive of their newfound choices and traditional ideals. As Busheikin says, “the iron curtain has been replaced by blinds.” (Busheikin, 1997: 12) Czech rejection of the Western concept of women’s liberation was a clear refusal of imposition and domination. The initial Czech refusal to accept foreign imposition, and Western feminism in particular, expressed previously repressed agency. However, some Western feminists were insensitive to the particular historic details of Czech women’s history and insistent on employing their own models of feminism. For example, some Western feminists advocated women’s emancipation in the workforce when Czech women spent the last fifty years as “emancipated” workers under communism. Many Czech women were eager to exercise their right to stay at home, which was perceived by many Western feminists as subjugation. (Šiklová, 1997: 79) While this may seem traditional, “it is also part of an effort to regenerate a society whose personal dimension has been so much forgotten and neglected in the reduction of relationships to duties.” (Corrin, 1992: 121) Staying out of the workforce was an exercise of new liberties not an adherence to chauvinistic pressure as some Western feminists believed.

### Group 3: The Change of Power, Traditionalism and Western Feminism

Distancing themselves from the human rights visions of the older generation, the third group was open to more specific and personal understandings, creating the space for gender dialogue thanks to the freedoms generated by the new Czech democracy and open civil society. They experienced the surfacing of previously clandestine literature, theater, and art as a new government and vibrant civil society quickly appeared. (Thorne, 2008) The surfacing of resistance art no doubt affected the third group’s conceptions of Czech identity, as did the introduction of Western feminist thought. Thorne recalls her British and American professors introducing her to and asking her opinion of Simone de Beauvoir and Irigaray, which was not only a realization of her academic identity, but her affinity with feminism. (Thorne, 2008)

A long process of adjustment began reconciling vestiges of the recent communist past and traditional Czech gender norms with the newly introduced political and economic identities. Czech feminism had to react to the presence of Western feminism and new (imposed or discovered) gender norms. As Western academics taught feminist theory, their students tempered it with Czech expressions of feminism that became increasingly visible to a wider public with



the surfacing of resistance art. However, reconciling various identities was not always easy. Vanda Thorne remembers an encounter with a Czech boyfriend, "It was expected that I was going to be the person taking care of everything while they're literally lying on the couch and still trying to have a really nice conversation with me while I'm scrubbing the floors." (Thorne, 2008) But, unlike Thorne, many Czechs were hesitant to accept feminism: "a lot of my Czech male friends from high school would ask me if I did [chores] because by then I was the Czech feminist." (Thorne, 2008) Some habits and stereotypes did not fade with the revolution. However, a small contingent of men and women continue to believe "that feminism is something that would be quite useful for Czech women." (Hauserová, 1997: 98) The final generation's interest in Gender Studies as a discipline encourages the development of visible Czech gender and feminist discourses. With their basic human rights won, the third group was able to concentrate on and specialize in issues like feminism, but not without a long period of adaptation to the new government system and external influences.

### **Czech Feminism as a Palimpsest: Binding Together the Past, Present and Future**

Czech feminism can be understood as a palimpsest: rewritten numerous times, but with every rewriting, traces of past identities remain, adding to the resulting picture. The Czech feminist movement "links an interpretation of the past – what are women's experiences – to an interpretation of the future—what are women's aspirations" in the present time. (Marx Ferree, 1997: 161) This allegorical palimpsest reinforces the importance of gender history in the development of Czech feminism. As de Beauvoir emphasized, it is in the process of reaching for greater liberties that women reach transcendence. (de Beauvoir, 1972: Introduction) Indeed, the act of reaching towards freedom drew Czech feminism forward to meet a series of challenges posed by historical events and circumstance.

By demanding universal human rights, the intellectual dissenters of 1968 laid the foundation for further discussions of gender inequity, which the second two groups pursued in greater detail. The second group broke down gender barriers using cultural expression instead of politics extending the struggle for greater (female) freedom into a creative dimension. With universal human rights established under the new government and the surfacing of a rich, creative female identity, the third group was well equipped to challenge Western feminist theory academically while forging their own post-1989 Czech feminist identities. The progression from 1968 to 1989 and beyond demonstrates that Czech feminism is a dynamic process that develops over time.

The future of Czech feminism lies in the contributions of women from all three groups. Since the Velvet Revolution, Czech feminism as a movement has gained a small but significant place in academia. Most of the interview-

ees are active educators in Gender Studies programs or related fields. Their contributions to the discipline propel it forward to gain a greater foothold in Czech academia. With its central tenets of freedom and liberty, Czech feminism emerged into the post-communist context and in time will gain increased importance.

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