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BOOK REVIEWS

Klára Pinerová, Michal Louč, and Kristýna Haluzíková Bušková. *Prison as a Mirror of Society: The Unequal Battle between Politics, Science, and Humanity, Czechoslovakia 1965–1992.*

Frankfurt am Main: CEEOL Press, 2023. xvi, 540 pp. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. Tables. €50.00, paper.

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In the last decade, prison history has come into its own. Historians are recognizing the prison complex—including jails and camps of all kinds—as an integral part of modern society and culture. A key work in this shift may have been Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), which showed that thinking about penal systems allows us to understand American politics and history. Incarceration is not an epiphenomenon, nor simply a necessary state function, but—as the title of the book under review insists—a "mirror of society."

In this thorough and wide-ranging study of communist Czechoslovakia (with the briefest of glances at the post-communist transformation), Klára Pinerová, Michal Louč, and Kristýna Bušková use the concept of *master narratives* to explore how the prison experience changed for prisoners and prison staff alike. Pinerová is a social historian, Louč an anthropologist, and Bušková a psychologist; while the different parts of the book are clearly written from different disciplinary perspectives, the whole is the product of a multi-year collaboration at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in Prague.

The master narratives themselves will not surprise readers. The political-ideological framework, characterized by the idea of re-education and transformation through productive labor, dominated throughout the era. In the post-Stalinist era, a technocratic framework based upon expertise and scientific knowledge (partly derived from western social science) emerged. In the normalization period after the 1968 Soviet invasion, this master narrative lost ground again, largely disappearing by the early 1980s. Finally, the authors acknowledge a humanistic narrative that existed primarily in dissident thought. There is occasional reference to a fourth, national master narrative; one wonders whether this narrative might help to understand the expulsion of Czech Germans in 1945–48, on the one hand, and the resurgence of punitive rhetoric among many Czech politicians after 1989 on the other. Regardless, the value of the master-narrative approach is that the prison is a closed system governed by custom more than by formal rules; the tools of social anthropology help us to understand the prison experience.

An introductory survey of the history of the Czechoslovak prison is followed by three substantial chapters that approach the prison from different disciplinary perspectives. "Tendencies in the Prison System" unpacks the master narratives and traces their transformation. Thus, while the general idea of re-education remained central, the emphases changed. Re-education depended in part on political-educational work, following the guidance of Anton Makarenko—yet this became harder to deliver and yielded primacy as less-educated Party members took positions in prison administration. Punishment, stripped of all but the slenderest of reference to re-education, was easier to inflict. The rise of the prison expert in the 1960s did not mean the disappearance of punishment; indeed, to some extent the expertization was performative: publication in western penological journals and appearance at international conferences served more to "humanize" the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic than it did to improve the prisoner experience. On the other hand, Czechoslovak prison experts grappled with the concept of socialist human rights; re-education, in this framework, restored human dignity to the prisoners. The authors devote attention to the efforts by dissidents connected with Charter 77 to articulate an alternative understanding of human rights; as they note, that conception never had any impact on regime discourse.

The chapter on "Everyday Life in Prison" uses memoirs, interviews, and prison documents to articulate the spatial and temporal disruption experienced in prison and the efforts by prisoners to make their own worlds. There are many fascinating glimpses into the prison cell here, for example a discussion of the shadow economy of the prison (an enterprising prisoner could trade an onion for cigarettes, cigarettes for tea, tea for a pen, and so on until he had four onions—and start again). It is unfortunate that the authors do not make much use of the literature on prison experience, with the significant exception of Marek Kaminski's remarkable *Games Prisoners Play: The Tragicomic Worlds of Polish Prison* (Princeton, 2004). This section is also flawed by a frequent, seemingly unconscious adoption of the perspective of the political prisoners. For example, a brief discussion of homosexual relations in the prison assumes (quoting political prisoners' memoirs) that this was only among criminal prisoners. This may well have been true—but one also wonders whether political prisoners thus articulated their moral superiority to people of an alien culture. So too the discussion of resistance is weakened by an artificial distinction between political forms of resistance (petitions, hunger strikes) and actions like self-harm, tattooing, and the shadow economy. Each of these could be interpreted more richly by considering them also as ways to carve out autonomy in a total institution.

The final chapter opens up new territory, as there are few studies of prison personnel in communist eastern Europe. Interviews with thirteen former employees, including wardens, psychologists, and other staff, provide a rich portrait of the master narratives as they were adopted and contested. Some interview subjects (wardens in particular) are able even well after the end of the communist era to articulate and defend a political-ideological concept of imprisonment; others remained loyal to the institution while endeavoring to stay true to a more humanist system of values. That moral dilemma will not come as any surprise to students of the communist system, of course. As did Libora Oates-Indruchová in *Censorship in Czech and Hungarian Academic Publishing, 1969–1989: Snakes and Ladders* (Bloomsbury, 2020), Pinerová, Louč, and Bušková illuminate the gray world between communists and dissidents. If it were possible previously—again, thanks in part to the dominant narratives provided by political prisoners—to imagine the prison as outside time and space, this useful study grounds the prison in society. Its thorough examination of prison worlds will be of great interest to anyone who seeks to understand the communist prison.

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