

THE PLAY

Synopsis

The Shape of the Table deals with the dissolution of the Communist government in an unidentified Central/Eastern European nation. Though they may try to hang onto power, they wind up giving up increasing amounts of it until they are swept completely from power. Mirroring the transition processes in Czechoslovakia and Poland, it is a powerful examination on the exigencies of practical politics and the cyclical nature of societies.

The play begins with the figure of Pavel Prus, an author and dissident who has been imprisoned by the Communist government of an unidentified Eastern/Central European state. His work on children's fairy tales have been seen as criticism of the sitting government and his silencing and imprisonment has made him an international star and symbol of the resistance against Communism. On offer is an artistic fellowship at an American university, which would allow Prus to travel abroad and, essentially, remove him from the oppression which he currently faces. It would also get him out of the hair of the Communist authorities. The alternative is a return to prison. Though initially tempted by the offer, Prus decides to stand firm by his principles and return to prison as opposed to allow himself to be expatriated.

This is followed by a scene that depicts a meeting between a number of key party officials. Concerned by growing unrest from the populace and quiet from the Soviet Union, the ministers of the Communist government and high party officials argue about what steps should be taken. Eventually, moderate factions within the government prevail upon party officials to reorganize themselves and allow for limited dialogue with the dissident movement. One concession includes the release of Pavel Prus from prison and the rehabilitation of Victor Spassov, a former leader who's reforms were quashed by Soviet invasion.

In initial meetings between party figures and the dissidents, led by Prus, a rough framework for further talks is agreed upon. The goal of the Communists is to give up as little power and authority as possible while making enough concessions to stabilize the situation in the country. However, throughout the talks, it becomes evident that the movement toward liberalization has gained too much momentum and, during free elections, the Communists are roundly defeated and removed from power.

The final scene replays the initial, but with roles reversed. The former head of the Communist party has been indicted for his role in purges and crackdowns, and the newly elected President Pavel Prus has brought him in to confess, be pardoned, and allowed to retire to a country villa under house arrest. Holding to his ideals, not unlike Prus in the first scene, the pardon is refused.

Production History

The Shape of the Table was first staged at the National Theatre of Great Britain in November of 1990. It would receive its American premier at Burning Coal Theatre Company in Raleigh, NC in 2011. It has since been performed throughout the United States and Europe.

TRANSITION IN CENTRAL EUROPE

Of all the post-communist transitions, *Shape of the Table* most closely resembles the process underwent in Czechoslovakia and Poland, and to a more limited extent Hungary. Indeed, both Czechoslovakia and Hungary had reformist movements crushed by Soviet invasion, while Poland and Czechoslovakia both had extensive round-table negotiations between the Communist authorities and dissident figures. The figure Pavel Prus bears a strong resemblance to writer Vaclav Havel and, to a more limited extent, Lech Walesa. Further, Victor Spassov is similar to the Slovak leader Alexander Dubcek and the Hungarian Imre Nagy.

Though there are significant differences between the transitions in each of these nations (Poland embraced market reform as a form of "shock treatment" while Czechoslovakia moved slowly and Hungary had already instituted limited market reforms before the fall of communism.), each of their experiences have placed a strong imprint on *The Shape of the Table*.



VACLAV HAVEL

One of the historic figures on which the character Pavel Prus is based, Vaclav Havel was a Czech playwright, author, politician, and dissident. Born in October of 1929 to a bourgeois family that had close ties to the development of Czechoslovak culture in the 1920's, 30's, and 40's. His father owned a complex of buildings on the highest point in the city of Prague while his mother was a well-known journalist and daughter of a Czechoslovak ambassador. Graduating from school in 1954, he was kept out of the University due to his middle-class background (Communist policy reserved University education for member of the party and working class), he eventually studied Economics at Czech Technical University. He dropped out after two years.



Following this, he began working in the theatres of Prague. He began working as a stagehand, first at Divadlo (Theatre) ABC and then at Divadlo na zbradli (Theatre on the Balustrade) while taking correspondence courses in Drama at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Divadlo na zbradli presented his first full-length play, *The Garden Party*, in 1963 as part of a series on Theatre of the Absurd. These were followed by *The Memorandum* and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*. *Memorandum* was so popular that it was brought to the Public Theatre in New York City, helping to establish Havel's reputation abroad.

Following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Havel's works were banned and he himself was forbidden from working in the theatre, which led to an increase in his political activity. His reputation as a dissident was established when he spearheaded the development of Charter 77, a manifesto written in response to the imprisonment of the band The Plastic People of the Universe. His political activities would see him in and out of prison repeatedly, as well as subjected to constant surveillance.

Havel was instrumental, however, in founding a group called the Civic Forum, which acted as a counterpoint in negotiations with the Communist government. In 1989, in the first free elections, Havel was unanimously elected President of Czechoslovakia. He would serve in this position until resigning in 1992 in protest of the breakup of Czechoslovakia into independent nations. He would then be named the first president of the Czech Republic, a position which he would hold for a decade. His work as an artist, essayist, and playwright is still performed today, and he is the recipient of numerous recognitions for his work in human rights. He died in 2011.

PRAGUE SPRING

The Prague Spring, analagous to the "New Dawn" in *Shape of the Table*, was a movement toward political liberalization in Czechoslovakia. Led by the First Secretary of the Communist Party, Alexander Dubcek began to institute reforms at the beginning of 1968. Among reformers were democratization of elections, decentralization of the economy, and restoration of rights to media, free speech and travel. At first attempts were made to split the nation into a federation of 3 republics (Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia, and Slovakia), it was later decided to federate as two (Czech Republic and Slovakia). This last was the only reform to survive the Prague Spring.



The Soviet Union attempted to negotiate an end to these reforms, but finally invaded at the head of a Warsaw Pact force. Of all of the member of the Warsaw pact, only Romania refused to participate. In response to the invasion and occupation (which would last until 1989), a lwave of emigration swept the country as well as numerous suicides by self-immolation. Dubcek would be taken to the Soviet Union and forced to recant. His successor, Gustav Husak, would undo almost all of the reforms. The Prague Spring would inspire numerous artists and authors, including Vaclav Havel and Milan Kundera.

VELVET REVOLUTION

The End of Communist Rule in Czechoslovakia became known as the Velvet Revolution particularly due to its nonviolent nature. Running from November 17 to December 29, 1989, popular demonstrations of students and older dissidents led to the eventual end of Communist rule and conversion into a Western-style parliamentary democracy.

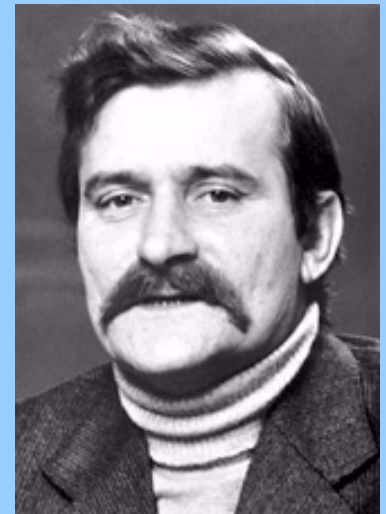


When riot police quashed a demonstration on international students' day it touched off a wave of unrest and demonstrations around Prague and Bratislava. It is estimated that nearly a half-million people flocked to Prague (number for Bratislava are less clear) in order to participate in the demonstrations. By the end of November, a two-hour general strike (which had a nearly 100% participation rate among Czechoslovak citizenry) led to the resignation of the entire Communist Government. In response to the collapse of other Warsaw Pact governments, the Czechoslovak Communist Party relinquished power. The first non-Communist government was appointed shortly thereafter and the borders with Austria and West Germany were opened. Alexander Dubcek was elected speaker of the Federal Parliament and Vaclav Havel President of Czechoslovakia.

The Velvet Revolution remains one of the most well-documented transitions from Communism in the West.

LECH WALESIA

Lech Walesa was born during the second World War. His father, Boleslaw, was a carpenter arrested by the Nazis and interned in the concentration camp at Mlyniec. Though Boleslaw returned at the end of the war, he died two months later due to illness. Lech would credit his mother for raising him to be exceptionally determined. Graduating in 1961, he would serve two years in the military and then find work as an electrician at the shipyards in Gdansk. In 1980, the Gillette corporation would offer him \$1,000,000 to shave off his trademark moustache for a commercial. He refused, but would shave it later for personal reasons.



In 1970, Walesa would rise to prominence as a charismatic leader and organizer of strikes at the shipyard where he worked. As additional strikes broke out across Poland, the government would allow the shipyard workers to organize their own trade union independent from Communist control. The strike committee would then organize into Solidarity, a driving force behind the transition from Communism. Solidarity would be outlawed in 1982, and Walesa would be chosen for the Nobel Peace Prize. However, Walesa sent his wife to accept the award, fearing that if he left, the Communist government would not allow him back into the country. During this time his house was continually bugged and he was often jailed for his Solidarity-related activities.

Following the negotiations with the Communist government, which allowed for a partially-contested election (65% of the seats were reserved for the Communist party and their allies), Walesa then negotiated a coalition with a number of former Communist allies (Solidarity itself had taken all 35% of the contestable seats). This would lead to the first non-Communist government in Eastern/Central Europe. In 1990, he would stand for the newly-created office of President, winning by a handy margin and presiding over the democratization and market-reforms of Poland.

SOLIDARITY

The first independent trade union in the Eastern Bloc was organized at the Gdansk shipyards. Underpinned with Catholic social teachings and secular concerns with social justice, this organization was instrumental in the transition from Communism. However, following the initial transition, its influence has waned.



POLISH ROUND TABLE NEGOTIATIONS

In response to pressure from a mounting wave of strikes, the Polish Communist party agreed to sit down with Solidarity and other opposition leaders in order to find a way to transition to a more open form of government. However, before the Round Table could be held, secret meetings between Lech Walesa and Minister of Internal Affairs Czeslaw Kiszczak were held to agree upon a format, agenda, and overall aims for the Round Table Talks.

The talks themselves were held at a round table in the Council of Ministers office in Warsaw (the table itself is currently preserved in the Presidential Palace, picture at right). The meetings were co-chaired by Kiszczak and Walesa.

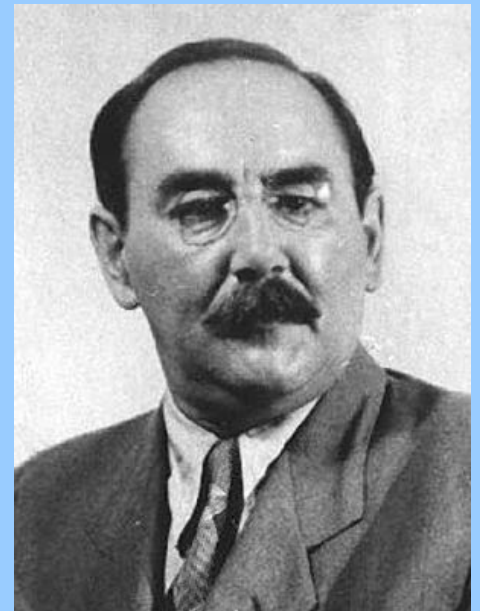


The topics covered during the talks included pluralism in the workplace and in union organizing, limits on the future president's competence as well as parliamentary powers, and opening of mass communication to the opposition. Mutual distrust, as well as the Communist government's unwillingness to relinquish power, often held the meetings up. Admiral Jaruzelski, leader of the Communist faction, hoped to co-opt prominent opposition members into the government while making little changes to the power structure. In reality, the talks radically reformed the political landscape of Poland. Though fully free election would not come until 1991, the groundwork was laid.

IMRE NAGY

Born to a peasant family, Nagy was the leader of the Hungarian Council of Ministers (Prime Minister) on two occasions. Having served in the Austro-Hungarian army and joining the Russian Communist party and Red Army during the Russian Revolution, there is some evidence the Nagy served on the firing squad that executed the Tsar and his family. He would return to Hungary in 1921, but move back to the USSR in 1930 and rejoined the Communist party. Following the Second World War, Nagy would return to Hungary for good and first serve as the Minister of Agriculture and then as Minister of the Interior. While in these positions he was active in the expulsion of Germans from Hungary and the redistribution of land to the peasantry.

From 1953-1955, he would serve as the Chairman of the Council of Ministers and promote his "New Way" of Communism. However, these promised reforms were either slow in coming, never delivered upon, or strongly opposed by the Soviets. He would be removed from his post in 1955 and replaced by a Soviet-style hardliner.



His second term as Prime Minister coincided with the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, in which the Soviet-style government of Hungary would fall in the face of popular uprisings. Nagy and his reformist colleague, Janos Kadar, agreed that the new government would recognize the uprisings and undertake liberalising reforms. The reform movement, as well as the uprising, would be crushed by a Soviet invasion. The Soviets would have him arrested, tried, and executed in secret proceedings on charges of treason. The trial was only made public after the execution.

He would be politically rehabilitated in 1989, and the reinternment of his remains would be a major event in the fall of Hungarian Communism. His attempted reforms would provide inspiration for numerous political movements.

GOULASH COMMUNISM

In 1962, six years after the 1956 uprising and the execution of Imre Nagy, the 8th Congress of the Hungarian Communist party declared that the “consolidation of socialism” that occurred in the wake of the uprising was now complete. This allowed for a general amnesty of people involved in the fighting, as well as an opportunity to engage in some limited reforms.

The term “goulash communism” was used to refer to this unique form of Communism exercised in Hungary. Named after a popular Hungarian dish, it was marked by a distancing from Stalinist ideas, institution of limited market reforms, and improvement of the nation's human rights record. By the time Communism fell in 1989, Hungary was known as “the happiest barracks in the socialist camp,” and was already well-poised to institute the reforms that have allowed it to join the European Union.

EXPATRIATION

In the wake of the Hungarian invasion of 1956, Czechoslovak invasion of 1968, and the Polish martial law of 1982, each nation had a large number of its citizens flee to live abroad, often in Western Europe, the United States, or Yugoslavia. Middle and upper-class individuals were the most likely to have the material means to move abroad, and thus it was not unusual for cities in the United States and Western Europe to host substantial cultural groups of Czechs (more so than Slovaks), Hungarians, and Poles. Dissident writers and artists would sometimes leave the country and find themselves unable to return, as was the case with the Czech author Jiri Dienstbier when he travelled to Austria.



Activity: Imagine that you have been forced to leave home for political reasons. You cannot go back. It is not that you will be arrested, you simply are not allowed to cross the border. How would this make your life difficult? Where might you settle? How would you live?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

- Imagine that you are representing one of the factions in this play. Either the Communists or the Dissidents. How would you go about achieving your aims? If you were in the government, how would you try to hold on to power.
- Arrange the table for negotiations. How would you shape it? Why?
- Imagine that you are the newly-elected president of this nation, like Pavel Prus. Prepare a speech for the first time you face the public. What is the way forward? How do you distance yourself from the past?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Preshow

- 1.) What is your expectation in regard to a play entitled *The Shape of the Table*? Have you ever seen a play before?
- 2.) What will you be looking for going into this play? What do you expect to grab your attention most strongly?
- 3.) Where do you think this play fits into the “Iron Curtain Trilogy?” Why?

Post-show

- 1.) Describe the show in one complete sentence. How does the summary look to you? Does it leave anything important out?
- 2.) What part of the show surprised you most? What did you imagine differently?
- 3.) What do you think is going to happen after the play ends? Why did Edgar choose to leave it on a cliffhanger?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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