

Module 05: 1968 — A Generation in Revolt?

Evidence 13: "The Two Thousand Words" Manifesto Signed by Intellectuals and Artists, June 17, 1968

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Introduction

The following text is an excerpt from the most significant manifesto written during the Prague Spring. Written primarily by Ludvík Vaculík, who was joined by nearly 70 influential intellectuals and celebrities, "The Two Thousand Words" was published on June 17, 1968, in a prominent literary journal as well as in three daily newspapers. The manifesto captured the spirit of liberalization that many in Czechoslovakia felt in the spring and early summer of 1968, while warning, presciently, of the coming danger. The manifesto was not only influential in Czechoslovakia; it also raised the ire of Moscow and other members of the Warsaw Pact, who denounced it as "counter-revolutionary." Yet rather than calling for the rejection of socialism and an embrace of free market capitalism, the manifesto critiqued where socialism went wrong and called for democratization and reform.

Document

Two Thousand Words that Belong to Workers, Farmers, Officials, Scientists, Artists, and Everybody

The first threat to our national life was from war. Then came other evil days and events that endangered the nation's spiritual well-being and character. Most of the nation welcomed the socialist program with high hopes. But it fell into the hands of the wrong people. It would not have mattered so much that they lacked adequate experience in affairs of state, factual knowledge, or philosophical education, if only they had had enough common prudence and decency to listen to the opinion of others and agree to being gradually replaced by more able people.

After enjoying great popular confidence immediately after the war, the communist party by degrees bartered this confidence away for office, until it had all the offices and nothing else. We feel we must say this, it is familiar to those of us who are communists and who are as disappointed as the rest at the way things turned out. The leaders' mistaken policies transformed a political party and an alliance based on ideas into an

organization for exerting power, one that proved highly attractive to power-hungry individuals eager to wield authority, to cowards who took the safe and easy route, and to people with bad conscience. The influx of members such as these affected the character and behavior of the party, whose internal arrangements made it impossible, short of scandalous incidents, for honest members to gain influence and adapt it continuously to modern conditions. Many communists fought against this decline, but they did not manage to prevent what ensued.

Conditions inside the communist party served as both a pattern for and a cause of the identical conditions in the state. The party's association with the state deprived it of the asset of separation from executive power. No one criticized the activities of the state and of economic organs. Parliament forgot how to hold proper debates, the government forgot how to govern properly, and managers forgot how to manage properly. Elections lost their significance, and the law carried no weight. We could not trust our representatives on any committee or, if we could, there was no point in asking them for anything because they were powerless. Worse still, we could scarcely trust one another. Personal and collective honor decayed. Honesty was a useless virtue, assessment by merit unheard of. Most people accordingly lost interest in public affairs, worrying only about themselves and about money, a further blot on the system being the impossibility today of relying even on the value of money. Personal relations were ruined, there was no more joy in work, and the nation, in short, entered a period that endangered its spiritual well-being and its character. . . .

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Since the beginning of this year we have been experiencing a regenerative process of democratization. It started inside the communist party, that much we must admit, even those communists among us who no longer had hopes that anything good could emerge from that quarter know this. It must also be added, of course, that the process could have started nowhere else. For after twenty years the communists were the only ones able to conduct some sort of political activity. It was only the opposition inside the communist party that had the privilege to voice antagonistic views. The effort and initiative now displayed by democratically-minded communists are only then a partial repayment of the debt owned by the entire party to the non-communists whom it had kept down in an unequal position. Accordingly, thanks are due to the communist party, though perhaps it

should be granted that the party is making an honest effort at the eleventh hour to save its own honor and the nation's. The regenerative process has introduced nothing particularly new into our lives. It revives ideas and topics, many of which are older than the errors of our socialism, while others, having emerged from below the surface of visible history, should long ago have found expression but were instead repressed. Let us not foster the illusion that it is the power of truth which now makes such ideas victorious. Their victory has been due rather to the weakness of the old leaders, evidently already debilitated by twenty years of unchallenged rule. All the defects hidden in the foundations and ideology of the system have clearly reached their peak. So let us not overestimate the effects of the writers' and students' criticisms. The source of social change is the economy. A true word makes its mark only when it is spoken under conditions that have been properly prepared—conditions that, in our context, unfortunately include the impoverishment of our whole society and the complete collapse of the old system of government, which had enabled certain types of politicians to get rich, calmly and quietly, at our expense. Truth, then, is not prevailing. Truth is merely what remains when everything else has been frittered away. So there is no reason for national jubilation, simply for fresh hope.

In this moment of hope, albeit hope still threatened, we appeal to you. It took several months before many of us believed it was safe to speak up; many of us still do not think it is safe. But speak up we did exposing ourselves to the extent that we have no choice but to complete our plan to humanize the regime. If we did not, the old forces would exact cruel revenge. We appeal about all to those who so far have waited on the sidelines. The time now approaching will decide events for years to come. . . .

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There has been great alarm recently over the possibility that foreign forces will intervene in our development. Whatever superior forces may face us, all we can do is stick to our own positions, behave decently, and initiate nothing ourselves. We can show our government that we will stand by it, with weapons if need be, if it will do what we give it a mandate to do. And we can assure our allies that we will observe our treaties of alliance, friendship, and trade. Irritable reproaches and ill-argued suspicions on our part can only make things harder for our government, and bring no benefit to ourselves. In any case, the only way we can achieve equality is to

improve our domestic situation and carry the process of renewal far enough to some day elect statesmen with sufficient courage, honor, and political acumen to create such equality and keep it that way. But this is a problem that faces all governments of small countries everywhere.

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This spring a great opportunity was given to us once again, as it was after the end of the war. Again we have the chance to take into our own hands our common cause, which for working purposes we call socialism, and give it a form more appropriate to our once-good reputation and to be fairly good opinion we used to have ourselves. The spring is over and will never return. By winter we will know all. . . .

Source:

Jaromír Navrátil et al, eds., *The Prague Spring 1968: A National Security Archive Documents Reader*, translated by Mark Kramer, Joy Moss, and Ruth Tosek (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998), 177-181.
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