

## Report on Research Project

### **Between Ecological Crisis and Environmental Protection: The Evolution of Social and Political Discourses on Environment in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s and 1990s**

The aim of my research stay was to gather certain documents pertaining to changes in the discourse on environment and ecological crisis, documents previously unknown to Czech scholars. These materials are kept in the OSA Archivum, mainly its RFE (Radio Free Europe) collection, and they should form the basis of a wider study on the changes in the environmental discourse in Czechoslovakia in 1975–1993. We investigate this subject as part of a new research agenda of the Working Group for Contemporary Environmental History at the Institute for Contemporary History of the Academy of Science of the Czech Republic. As a matter of fact, a discourse analysis of the origins of ecological ‘opposition movement’ in 1970s–1990s is a follow-up on my research of the environmental history of Czechoslovakia in the 1950s–1960s (published as *In the Name of the Great Work: Stalin’s Plan for the Transformation of Nature and its Impact in Eastern Europe* by Berghahn Books, Oxford–New York, 2016).

Ecology originally did not belong to the main subjects on which the dissent in Eastern Europe focused, but political opposition managed to turn ecology into a political issue par excellence. With Communist regimes’ growing pressure on economic production, the once purely scientific issue of human impact on the environment became first a social and then a political issue. My intention was to study the role of RFE in the process of transformation which turned environment into a socio-political issue that would play an important role not only in Czechoslovak society but also as part of the opposition’s agenda. The key document – which not only shaped the perception of the importance of environment in the society at large but also highlighted the drastically worsening state of Czechoslovak environment – was the *Analysis of the Ecological Situation in Czechoslovakia (Rozbor ekologické situace v Československu)*. This report had a far-reaching impact and significantly boosted cooperation between scientists and dissidents. It was prepared by the Ecology Section of the Biological Society of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and issued in December 1983 as part of an expert opinion commissioned by the Czechoslovak government. Although the document was immediately classified as top secret, it was broadcast by the Voice of America and the RFE (Czechoslovakia, sign. 300-30-9:3/3). Other reports prepared by activists of the Charta 77 focused on the situation in northern Bohemia (1983), on Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros Dams (1985), and on air pollution in Czechoslovakia (1987). In 1989, Charta 77 issued another four documents dedicated to ecological issues.

My initial assumption was that an analysis of materials in RFE archives would help me demonstrate the ways in which these opposition documents formulated and disseminated the notion of an ‘ecological crisis’, which became part of the political discourse after 1989. It turned out that the RFE did not play in the process of changing the perception of environmental problems and ecological crisis a role quite as prominent as I had supposed. My original assumptions were based on a generally accepted hypothesis that a civic movement which advocated nature protection and aimed at raising environmental consciousness contributed to the fall of Iron Curtain and that RFE’s broadcasts had considerably influenced the public opinion in Communist countries which in turn stimulated the opposition movement, including independent ecological initiatives, and thus contributed to the fall of the Iron Curtain, too.

Based on my study of archive documents provided by the RFE (OSA Archives, 300, Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute; collections OSA 300-8-3 'Publications Department: Background Reports', here especially Vladimir Sobell's summary report 'The Ecological Crisis in Eastern Europe' of 20 January 1988, but also the OSA 300-30-15 'Collection of Documents Relating to the Czechoslovak Opposition and Protest Movement', fonds 300-120 Western Press Archives, section Agriculture; Czechoslovakia, 300-30-9:3/3; Papers of Andras Hegedus, 361-0-8; Files Dan Ionescu, 205-60-5), it seems that although environmental journalism is, generally speaking, one of the most dynamic branches of journalism, in this particular case its inclusion in RFE's general agenda was delayed and suffered from lack of information. Despite my disappointment over the failure of my original hypothesis, the need to rethink and redefine my research axis paradoxically made my stay extremely interesting and fruitful.

I had to start analysing the causes of the delay of the environmental agenda and see whether the RFE Czechoslovak unit was an exception within the RFE or if this was part of a more general problem. To do this, I had to compare the Czechoslovak environmental agenda with the agenda of other units (special thanks for consultations to Anna Mazanik, who specialises in environmental discourses in the former USSR) and pay much closer attention to the way in which RFE functioned and identified the subjects of its interest (special thanks for consultations to Anna Bischof, another Visegrad Fellow working on the RFE, Czechoslovakia, and Czechoslovak Unit). Various both internal and external factors played a role in establishing the environmental agenda in RFE's broadcasting. Some of these factors had probably an even greater influence than one can discern based on the research of archive documents. Environmental agenda should thus be understood as a 'social construct', the result of internal as well as external reasons.

In the end, it seems that the most important factors which led to the delay of environmental agenda were lack of information, certain hesitation regarding the social and political value of environmental discourse in Czechoslovakia (at least before the Chernobyl explosion in 1986), but also the fact that 'nature protection' was officially supported by the Communist regime. Apart from internal reasons, the echo of environmental problems in the German (Bavarian) society as well as the international context (the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, which was boycotted by the Soviet Bloc) had also contributed to the perception of environmental issues at the RFE.

During my stay, I started working on a paper which I intend to submit to an international journal. Its aim is to explain the role of various internal and external factors contributing to the social construction of environmental agenda and, using the example of the RFE's Czechoslovak environmental agenda, analyse the hierarchy of priorities given to different topics in RFE broadcasting.

As a complementary part of my research, I came across various other documents dealing with the subject of Ecology (1990–1992, f. Czechoslovakia, sign. 300-30-9:2/3, 300-30-9:3/1), Environmental Pollution (sign. 300-30-9:3/2), Nuclear Plants (sign. 300-30-9:5/4), Forrest Ecology (sign. 300-30-9:5/3), and others. Of particular interest is a shift in the discourse pertaining to dam building (1986–1992, sign. 300-30-9:5/2), which was after 1991 covered within the context of Water Ecology (1992, sign. 300-30-9:5/5), and especially the very rich files on Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros, an issue that clearly has a strong potential and should be studied as a separate research topic.

In Prague, 28<sup>th</sup> February 2019

*Doubravka*  
*Olšáková*