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Prague's Philosopher-King: A New Biography Chronicles the Remarkable Life and Thought of Vaclav Havel

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Recommended Citation

Mahoney, Daniel J. "Prague's Philosopher-King: A New Biography Chronicles the Remarkable Life and Thought of Vaclav Havel." *City Journal* (June 26, 2015). <https://www.city-journal.org/html/prague's-philosopher-king-9879.html>.

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***Havel: A Life*, by Michael Zantovsky (Grove Press, 543 pp., \$30).**

Michael Zantovsky has written a remarkable book about a complex and genuinely admirable human being. Zantovsky, a long-time friend and sometime press secretary to Václav Havel, went on to become Czech ambassador to Washington and to the Court of St. James in London. He has intimate knowledge of Havel and writes with verve and clarity. He freely admits to “loving” Havel, even as he maintains his critical distance and avoids anything resembling hagiography. Zantovsky is aided in this seemingly impossible task by his experience as a clinical psychologist, which allows him to combine admiration with detachment and remarkable descriptive powers. Unlike so many other critical accounts inspired by suspicion and anti-elitism, his “loving” but measured account leaves Havel’s greatness undiminished.

As Zantovsky shows, Havel was “one of the more fascinating politicians of the last century” even as he was much more than a politician. He ably explores Havel’s multiple roles as writer, dramatist, moralist, dissident, and anti-totalitarian theoretician. The book also captures Havel’s myriad “contradictions,” which were never too far from the surface. A born leader who was kind, polite, humorous, and self-effacing, he was also a “bundle of nerves,” prone to depression and self-medication, and to “sometimes ill-considered sexual adventures.” Havel’s admirers are obliged to confront that latter point. This moralist did not readily apply moral criteria to affairs of the heart and was sometimes promiscuous in ways that belie conventional morality and religious principles. He seems to have at least partly bought into the radically “individualist” ethos of the 1960s, at least as regards “personal” morality. Zantovsky provides an insightful analysis of the dissident culture of the sixties and seventies, which was in most respects admirable, even as it defended sexual “freedom” as a venue for individual autonomy in an order dominated by totalitarian repression and the erosion of individuality.

Sexual indiscretions aside, Havel was an intensely spiritual man who didn’t adhere to any religion. Despite his admiration for Pope John Paul II and his prison friendship with the future cardinal archbishop of Prague, Dominik Duka, he “did not die a Roman Catholic.” But he respected religion and even attended secret masses in prison. In his voluminous writings and speeches, he upheld a quasi-theistic “conception of being” and an understanding of “responsibility rooted in the memory of Being.” In Havel’s philosophical conception, everything we do is remembered, “recorded,” by “being” itself. This was Havel’s equivalent of immortality; it provided cosmic grounds or

support for moral responsibility. These spiritual convictions, bordering on New Age philosophy, were a staple of Havel's speeches at home and abroad during his years as president first of Czechoslovakia and then of the Czech Republic.

Much of Zantovsky's book traces Havel's remarkable partnership with his wife of many years, Olga Havlova. Their relationship was both solid and stormy. Olga was Havel's "rock." A strong and capable woman who acted as his editor and first reader, she was his eyes and ears at home and during his four periods of imprisonment. Havel was frequently unfaithful to her and she, too, was less than faithful to him. Yet a larger fidelity, an unbreakable partnership, undergirded Havel's serial infidelities. For her part, Olga was loyal *and* fiercely independent. Havel's imprisonment in the early 1980s gave rise to his most philosophical work, *Letters to Olga*, a work combining high-order philosophical reflection with sometimes obnoxious instructions and advice to his wife. Olga knew how to handle Havel's more tyrannical requests. She later served as a faithful first lady who nonetheless kept her personal distance. She comes across as a woman of immense strength, her dignity on display in her stoical confrontation with terminal cancer in the 1990s. By contrast, Havel's second wife, Dagmar, guided him through many health crises, but was preoccupied with celebrity culture and was not nearly as beloved by the Czech people.

Zantovsky's book is not primarily about Havel's thought, though it gives an expert and reliable account of the principles that guided his thought and action. Its treatment of his seminal 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless" is superb. Havel's genius was to locate the specific features of the "post-totalitarian regime"—ideological to the core but no longer relying on mass violence in the manner of a classic Leninist-Stalinist regime. Like Solzhenitsyn before him, Havel saw the ideological lie as the glue holding together a totalitarian or post-totalitarian regime. The green grocer who thoughtlessly raised the sign "Workers of the World Unite" above his produce stand was "ritualistically" reinforcing the hold that the regime of the lie had on human souls. The spiritual decision "to live in truth" could break the lie's ritualistic stranglehold and open up a space for personal integrity, human rights, and even a nascent civil society. The "power of the powerless" lay precisely in the ability of truth to break through the "automatism" of the lie.

The Czechoslovakian dissident movement pursued the path of truth with Charter 77—a courageous document that called upon the authorities to live up to obligations agreed to in the 1975 Helsinki accords and even in Czechoslovakia's mendacious constitution. Its original signatories were few, but they spoke for the self-respect of a submerged civil

society. Its spokesmen, such as Havel and the great Czech philosopher and phenomenologist Jan Patočka, were men of undeniable courage and integrity. Their movement was informed by solidarity, dignity, and resistance to the lie. Patočka had considerable influence on Havel's subsequent thought and action. In his memorable essay, "What Charter 77 Is and What It Is Not," he discussed the difficulty of sustaining moral responsibility in modern, technological civilization, of which totalitarianism was the caricature and perfection. He defended the "unconditional nature of Principles" that are for all intents and purposes "sacred." He knew that salvation could never come from the state. Havel was deeply moved by Patočka's death after repeated interrogations by the Czech STB in 1978. Havel, too, felt compelled to act when confronted by the "unconditional character" of "sacred" principles. Repression—and another prison sentence—quickly followed.

Havel was convinced that modern technological civilization did not have the moral resources to sustain itself and was undergoing a crisis. This led him to have some sympathy for the Greens and other countercultural movements. Yet he had no sympathy for pacifism, peace movements, or unilateral disarmament. In his 1985 essay "The Anatomy of a Reticence," he discusses the asymmetry of Western pacifists and Eastern dissidents and critiques the moral blindness of the 1980s peace movements, which didn't understand the nature of totalitarianism and were committed to unilateral disarmament that Havel saw as a "disingenuous form of suicide." As Zantovsky suggestively puts it, "sometimes one could only live in truth by taking up arms." In his presidential years, Havel opposed every form of appeasement, supported intervention in Kosovo (though he failed to appreciate all the complexities of that situation) and gave moral support to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (though Havel had some reservations about how this was pursued). Zantovsky speculates that Havel never received the Nobel Peace Prize because of his principled opposition to appeasement and pacifism.

Zantovsky also sheds light on the *annus mirabilis* of 1989—part revolution, part ideological implosion, and part a negotiated transfer of power to Havel and his political movement, the Civic Forum. The Czechoslovakian people rediscovered the tools of civic life and the courage to oppose ubiquitous lies. Havel's New Year address of January 1, 1990, spoke about a "contaminated moral environment" and promised not to lie as previous governments had habitually done. Havel, following Tomáš Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's first president, invoked Jesus and the power of trans-political principles, rather than Caesar and power, as ends in themselves.

There were difficult days after 1990. The split between the Czech Republic and Slovakia left the Czech people with a moral hangover. Havel did his best to appeal to the better angels of their nature when he became president of the reconstituted Czech Republic in 1993. But his power was diminished, and he exercised influence primarily through moral suasion. Zantovsky exposes the silliness of those who complain that Havel was some kind of leftist or Jacobin in his years in office. Havel was no utopian: the existential “revolution” he called for had nothing to do with violent, revolutionary, or totalitarian politics. His philosophical themes were often conservative or anti-modern (though never in a reflexive or irresponsible way).

One of Zantovsky’s major contributions is to shed some light on the famed dispute between Havel and Václav Klaus, Havel’s principal rival for moral and political preeminence in the post-Communist Czech Republic. Klaus is often caricatured as a “soulless technocrat” and Havel as a “leftist” and “do-gooder.” Klaus defended the market, economic freedom, and allegiance to the “national community as the conduit of history, culture, and traditions.” He was a Euroskeptic of the first order and a critic of radical environmentalism. Havel emphasized solidarity, tolerance, human and minority rights, care for the environment, and civic activism. Havel was distrustful of Russia; Klaus distinguished between the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union and the moderate authoritarianism of Putin’s Russia. Yet Zantovsky suggests that the two men had more respect for each other than they would admit. Both were anti-Communist. Klaus acknowledged Havel’s historical role and his contribution to the Czech Republic’s international reputation. Contrary to legend, he was also a cultivated man. And Havel knew he would not have become president in 1990 without Klaus’s support.

After his political career ended, Havel was not seen as a prophet in his own country—until his death in 2011, when he was “rediscovered” by his countrymen. Zantovsky beautifully describes the mix of joy and mourning that accompanied Havel’s death and funeral. He calls it “the joy of being confronted with greatness.”

Zantovsky’s book shows us genuine human greatness and the fragility of even the most admirable human being. The writer and statesman who “played a prominent role in putting an end to one of the most alluring utopias of all times” also reminded us of the indispensability of civility, grace, courage, and responsibility in a postmodern world that increasingly mocks truth and greatness. Havel’s irony, so evident in his fiction, never countenanced cruelty or disdain for truth or the moral life. Havel is the model of a humane, liberty-loving “philosopher-king.” Zantovsky’s moving and intelligent book guarantees that Havel’s monumental achievement will not soon be forgotten.