

Environmental Positions of Czechoslovak Stalinism



Jiří Janáč, Doubravka Olšáková: Kult jednoty: stalinský plan přetvoření přírody v Československu 1948–1964 [A Cult of Unity. The Stalinist plan for a transformation of nature in Czechoslovakia 1948–1964], Praha: Academia 2018, 292 p.

Environmental stance of Stalinism — what can one imagine on hearing this? The historiography of Stalinism was regarded for many years as a history of politics and repression, later it took a revisionist and post-revisionist turn, with the related spread of applied perspectives — but an environmental history of Stalinism? Yet it is clear that rapid industrialisation, mass electrification and agricultural collectivisation must have had a significant impact on the environment, whether it involved its transformation as such or the shaping of people's attitudes to it. These and several other positions, which the specific Stalinist concept of human-nature relations acquired in the 1950s in Czechoslovakia, are set out and described in a book by Doubravka Olšáková and Jiří Janáč, *A Cult of Unity*.

The work in question is not one of those that simply borrow someone's theoretical concept and try to frame it according to a template. The different positions taken by the environment policy within the complex system of the Stalinist societal project for rebuilding the world are reflected in the multitude of forms of historical science with which the book operates.

The treatment of environmental history itself can be characterized in the sense of the three perspectives set out by Donald Worster for this field of historiography.¹ According to this American classic, the environmental history can be understood 1) as the history of nature and its transformations in a long-term perspective; 2) as interaction between human society and nature (e.g. the impact of the Industrial Revolution on nature); 3) as a transformation of thinking about nature in terms of the history of mentalities. The book *A Cult of Unity* clearly falls into Worster's second and third perspectives, while the first perspective remains intact here.

Out of the other directions of historical research with which the authors worked, it is possible to mention the history of science (description of institutional transformations) or the history of ideas — in a separate chapter they discuss the anti-Malthusian beliefs of the Communists who, with the help of modern science and technology, want to avert dark visions of future overpopulation and provide resources for all. Furthermore, the applied approaches include the social history (the ideological discourse versus the everyday life at the grand construction works of Communism), and the urban history (in a section about the construction of Havířov on a greenfield site).

The book puts the environmental development of Stalinism in the temporal and spatial context. It outlines the pre-war environmental thinking in Czechoslovakia, the development of the environmental issues in the Soviet Union and the import of Soviet ideological dogmas in the post-war Central Europe (Lysenko, Michurin), and

¹ Appendix: Doing Environmental History. In: Donald Worster (ed.), *The Ends of the Earth. Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, Cambridge 1988, pp. 289–307.



finally, it focuses on the emergence of expert groups by the end of the addressed period.

“A Cult of Unity” in the title of the book refers to the belief in the correctness of the unified direction and management of society, which seemed universally advantageous and correct after the World War II. This consensual unified management was supposed to lead to the transformation of society by leaps and bounds, as well as to the transformation of nature, whose elemental force was to be harnessed and regulated in the same way as the elemental force of market economy. The relationship between the humankind and the nature is described by the authors as imbalanced, and doctrinally anthropocentric.

The utilitarian attitude reflected, for example, the concept of national parks, which were appointed as the places for the working classes’ recreation, where nature was to be enclosed as in a reservation. Along with the emergence and the (short) duration of the Stalinian “cult of unity,” the publication considers its disintegration, with the gradual emergence of expert groups. This topic is abundantly analysed by the currently published historical books on the 1950s and 1960s.² Czechoslovak Stalinism was, according to the authors, originally formed in the Soviet Union and subsequently implemented in the local conditions. However, the imported authoritative discourse not only deformed the Czechoslovak milieu, but also this one in its turn deformed back the Stalinism. This was due to a reluctance, but also to a practical impossibility to fully adopt and fulfil the promises of Stalinism and develop them further in the local context. One great problem was given by the natural conditions, which were different than in the Soviet Union. There were no endless belts of steppe or tundra in Czechoslovakia, and the local rivers and mountains could not compare in size to the Russian ones. It was not easy to implement such a spectacular construction in a country with diametrically modest geographical conditions, even if the ideological plan demanded it.

Yet the leaps-and-bounds realization of the socialist modernity was carried out precisely through the so-called great constructions of Communism, including among the key ones the construction of magnificent waterworks providing electric power. Therefore, it is evident that the reconstruction of the ideological visions of the Stalinist period, as well as the possibilities of their practical application, were studied by the authors from scratch and they did not get carried away by the conventional idea of a one-way transfer of Soviet ideology to Czechoslovakia.

It is necessary to appreciate that the authors were able to detach themselves from the focus exclusively on ideology. On the contrary, in many passages of the text, they focused on the “history of people”. They focused both on the actions of the actors from the ranks of the engineering elites (Karel Růžička), and on the daily activities of the working-class collectives. The daily activities were associated with a number of

2 See e.g. Matěj Spurný, Vnitřní rozpory a překvapivé kontinuity „pražského jara“, A2larm 23.8.2018, URL: <http://a2larm.cz/2018/08/vnitрни-rozpory-a-prekvapive-kontinuity-prazskeho-jara/>. Also Sommer, Vítězslav, Zrození „normalizace“ z ducha pražského jara, A2larm 22.8.2018, URL: <http://a2larm.cz/2018/08/zrozeni-normalizace-z-ducha-prazskeho-jara/>; [Seen: 20.12.2019]



social difficulties that emerged under the surface of the ideologically stylized celebrations of the building of socialism presented in medias. Workers complained about a lack of special pieces as of common components. The construction sites were hampered by a lack of components at many levels. In consequence, there was a chaining of stalling factors. And of course, the political pressure on quick completing the great constructions of Communism further harmed the quality of the resulting products.

The book addresses also the domain of the scientific institutions. They underwent a centralization process in the early 1950s. On 1 January 1953, it was established the Czechoslovak Academy of Agricultural Sciences, which was set as a controlling institution over the agricultural colleges and scientific institutes, as well as the research focus deciding centre. Experiments with the cultivation of non-traditional crops in an attempt to emulate the celebrated Soviet achievements, such as Khrushchev's favourite corn, or with the planting of rice in South Moravia, were unsuccessful. What is surprising, however, is that the authors do not deal with some symptomatic examples of the destruction of nature, with their long-lasting consequences. For example, the consolidation of arable land that accompanied the agricultural collectivization of the 1950s, have their impact still nowadays. This process led particularly to the reduction of species diversity in the countryside, the destruction of natural wildlife shelters, and to the increase in soil susceptibility to erosion. It would have been very beneficial if the consolidation of arable land had been included and reinterpreted in the context of the environmental perspective. Similarly, the authors can be criticized for not mentioning the ecological impacts of coalfield mining.

As the above-mentioned commentaries show, the environmental aspects of the Stalinist policy are manifolds. In consequence, they require the application of a wide scale of analytical tools. In addition, the book strives for a balance between the actors' and the structures' perspective. Thus, the result of such a various approach is rather cluttered (not to say non-Cartesian) structure of the text.

Nevertheless, the environmental perspective on Stalinism offered by Doubavka Olšáková and Jiří Janáč can be situated alongside other fresh perspectives on this period. Among them, for the Czechoslovakia for example, Peter Heumos addressed the culture of working-class protests and the manifestations of *Eigensinn*,³ while Jan Randák focused on the historicizing connection between Communism and the legacy of Hussite history by.⁴ Along with these, the authors of the *Cult of Unity* manage to depict the extraordinary character of the Stalinism, so difficultly to understand today.

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3 Peter Heumos, „Vyhrňme si rukávy, než se kola zastaví!“ Dělníci a státní socialismus Workers and state socialism 1945–1968, Prague 2006.

4 Jan Randák, V září rudého kalicha. Politika dějin a husitská tradice v Československu 1948–1960, Prague 2016.