

Yvetta Lizatović, *Careers Precipitated and Shaped by the Velvet Revolution: An Oral-Historian Analysis of Individuals* (Diploma Thesis, FHS UK: Prague, 2021)

REVIEWER'S REPORT

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The thesis attempts to answer the question “*where people who helped transform one regime into another [during the 1989 Revolution], had come from and how they coped with tasks they could not have been prepared for in advance.*” The primary oral history material used as a source comes from interviews with six protagonists of the 1989 events.

Theory and methodology

The theoretical base of the thesis is interesting, but rather unclear. The author creatively, but rather light-heartedly combined several theoretical inspirations, namely grounded theory and concepts of Alexei Yurchak. The student also did not reflect the obvious fact that oral history as one of the paradigms of modern historiography, has been more or less traditionally divided into several distinct “sub-paradigms” – and rather instinctively, without any declaration, choose one of them, the one, which Lynn Abrams would label the quasi-sociological. I would expect Yvetta Lizatović to make such choice explicitly, as she attended one of my seminars, devoted to discussions of paradigmatic turns in oral history. The student choose the sociological “*grounded theory*” approach, which is a difficult choice for many reasons – also because of its application being extremely theoretically and analytically demanding and time-consuming. Nevertheless, it is clear that grounded theory represents only an indirect source of theoretical inspiration. The student declared to study highly subjective “*value systems of a given set of individuals...*” or “*lifestyle habits*”, patterns of agency in “*landmark events*”,² etc. It would be much more fitting to declare for the cultural-turn paradigm going from Passerini through Portelli to the likes of Thomson or Hamilton.

The theoretical inspiration provided by the famous text by Alexei Yurchak (*Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*) is on the other hand far more relevant than the initial declaration in favor of the grounded theory approach. Unfortunately, we learn about Yurchak only after the student closed the theory and methodology chapter. On the other hand, the attempt to interpret Havel’s concept of “living in truth” according to Yurchak is surely intriguing, but it is truly a herculean task to meaningfully combine concepts by Havel and Yurchak and I am not sure whether this was the right choice. In terms of theory the thesis is creative but at the same time a bit careless.

Research findings

The text reads very well and is written in an eloquent essayistic style, mostly ignoring the initial professions of theoretical faith. The student employed a sort of quasi-biographic

1 Yvetta Lizatović, *Careers Precipitated and Shaped by the Velvet Revolution: An Oral-Historian Analysis of Individuals* (Diploma Thesis, FHS UK: Prague, 2021), 6.

2 Lizatović, *Careers Precipitated and Shaped by the Velvet Revolution*, 12.

narrative strategy, but in fact, the resulting text acquired a visibly analytical and interpretative tone. It is evident already during the opening chapter on Jan Urban. Nevertheless, the deeper knowledge of the Czechoslovak dissident literature could help to discover even more meanings, for instance regarding the case of Urban's boss being contacted by the secret police and given the task of reporting on Urban, which made him genuinely helpless and asking Urban to write those reports himself. "*And so it happened, that at a certain point, Urban found himself writing reports on himself for the secret police...*"³ In fact this is a key part of the central plot of a theatrical play by Vaclav Havel – the famous *Audience*.

The following analysis of various coincidences and cases of luck, is certainly valid and highly interesting and shows well using Urban's example, that being an agent of change, despite all proclaimed Marxist laws of historical inevitability, was possible and people, who had been monitored closely by the secret police, could become agents of change.

The chapter dealing with the narrative of Petr Miller, on the other hand, shows how working-class people like him could make a good living inside the communist regime, being utterly pragmatic and using their extensive network of contacts. The pragmatic "*straightforwardness*" of a highly skilled manual worker, enjoying relative luxury, living in a very nice apartment, and driving three cars, is the key interpretative category here.⁴ Vavřinec Korčíš has been an altogether different case. A "hardcore" dissident who served 15 months of prison time already in 1969–1970, had become a bookbinder, underground printer, and also distributor.

The next three narrators, Michael Kocáb, Lubomír Schmidtmajer, and Igor Klimovič all demonstrate a different way to become dissidents and "agents of change". Again, one of the key motives is to explain the omnipresent "chance", mentioned by all narrators, the way the narrators again and again improvised "*makeshift solutions*", which in the end worked well.⁵ The author in fact does not argue in favor of a general pattern of change or some discernible resemblance of order in the transformation process. She is not proposing a new set of categories, but follows the highly individual mixture of chance, improvisation, personal qualities (the ability to self-educate is seen as one of the most important), family backgrounds and traditions, etc. helping each and every one of her narrators to influence the course of the post-1968 Czechoslovak and Czech history.

Final assessment

Despite the thesis submitted suffers from a kind of theoretical carelessness, the resulting text is surprisingly analytic and raises a number of good interpretative points. It certainly stands out of the crowd. **I recommend the thesis to pass and be graded somewhere between 2 (Very good) and 1 (Excellent).** The final decision is up to the Committee.

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3 Lizatović, *Careers Precipitated and Shaped by the Velvet Revolution*, 36.

4 Lizatović, *Careers Precipitated and Shaped by the Velvet Revolution*, 43.

5 Lizatović, *Careers Precipitated and Shaped by the Velvet Revolution*, 58