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Is March still the Month of Books?

In the Czech Republic, March is "The month of Books". The event was introduced in Czechoslovakia in 1955 and was based on similar events throughout the communist bloc. But while the literary discussions, held in rural libraries, schools, and factories, were predominantly a propaganda tool, the promotion of the book was not all unwelcome. In today's Czech Republic, is the Month of Books just a redundant leftover from communist cultural policy, or does it still have a place in the cultural landscape?

Is March still the Month of Books? Such a question seems to require an unambiguous — and preferably a one-word — answer: yes or no. However, a serious answer cannot be so categorical. For some, March still remains synonymous with the Month of Books; others are put off by the ideological tag on this term; still others prefer the Internet and would like to consign books to the waste bin of history. However, the aim of this article is not to advocate one or other of these stances. Instead, I will provide a brief history and analysis of the phenomenon, which, like it or not, was a factor in defining the character of cultural activities in the former Czechoslovakia.

The Month of Books was held for the first time in 1955. From the very beginning of its history, it was cherished by the ruling establishment. This is no contradiction, since the grandiose cultural project had its origins within official circles. Oldrich Kapsa, writing in *Ctenar* magazine in 1954, described the birth of the event was as such: "One fundamental measure to promote books should be a special event based on an agreement between the Ministry of Culture and the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, publishing houses, book wholesalers, mass organisations, and in particular involve representatives of the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, the Union of Czechoslovak Youth, the Union of Czechoslovak–Soviet Friendship, and other bodies. Based on the experience of the Soviet Union and other people's democracies, especially Poland, a decision was made that every year one month would be dedicated to a broad-based promotion of books. March has been declared "Month of Books".

The Communist propagandists may also have drawn inspiration in domestic tradition. During the First Republic, the so-called "Weeks of Books" took place under the auspices of the Union of Booksellers and Publishers. The Communists saw the Month of Books as a highly promising propaganda tool. Kapsa went on to write that, "The first task is to help spread books to every part of our country, to turn them into an everyday need of all citizens, in particular the youth, so that books fulfil an ideological–educational purpose to a greater extent. The second task is, through promotion and propagation of literature, to help solve economic questions more easily, especially in rural areas; in other words, to get a specialized book into the hands of peasants and to increase the preparedness of the population for the celebration of the tenth

anniversary of the liberation of the Czechoslovak Republic by the Soviet Army. A further task is to facilitate the propagation of the scientific worldview and a more efficient promotion of political literature, especially the classic works of Marxism–Leninism and those of Klement Gottwald."

The difficulties in switching from coke gas to blast–furnace gas

In the hands of the propagandists, books turned into a tool of political campaigning, power struggle, and ideological propaganda. The ruling party was very well aware of the power of the written word and so left no stone unturned in its efforts to dominate it. The Month of Books event was designed to demonstrate the harnessing of the written word in the service of Communist doctrine. The Month of Books was targeted above all at select population groups where "ideological growth" could be expected. The youth, peasants, and workmen were to be remoulded and remade into politically mature comrades devoted to the Socialist regime. By establishing the post of literary adviser, the state apparatus secured access to workplaces. Factories, foundries, schools, and other institutions became venues for exhibitions, literary discussions, and other cultural events. Milos Vantuch, former head of the central library at the *Klement Gottwald New Foundry*, gives a detailed account of one such discussion:

The book, *The Basics of the Coking Industry*, authored by Kozina and Pisa, two excellent experts, has become available on the market. It is written in a very readable form so that almost all employees of the coke plant will be able to study it thoroughly. These are the reasons we chose this book for the discussion. How did we organise the discussion? The operational library of the coke plant provided us with the names of all those who had borrowed the book and we visited them personally in their workplaces. We discussed the book with them and asked their opinion. They also agreed to present their views as contributions to the discussion. We explained to them the significance and importance of the fact that they themselves would present their contributions. [...] The discussion was very interesting. Its course was as follows: [...] comrade Cejka opened the discussion and asked engineer Splichal to host it. The first person to enter the discussion was comrade Kormanec, blast–furnace foreman. In his opinion, the book lacks information on the water consumption per tonne of coke when quenching in the coke–quenching tower. He also mentioned the difficulties of switching from coke gas to blast–furnace gas. [...] At the end of the talk, professor Kozina took the floor and, speaking on behalf of his co–author, said that they were very content with the results of the discussion and warmly thanked the organizers. The talk began at 14:40 and ended at 17:10. 65 comrades, both men and women, took part; there were 22 contributions to the discussion."

The whole class is reading

However, it was libraries and bookshops that formed the backbone of the Month of Books. Based on a fixed set of instructions, they would organize competitions, for example (in co–operation with elementary schools) "The whole class is reading". These and other cultural events are difficult to assess from today's point of view. The striking propaganda character of all events,

especially in the 1950s and 1970s, has left an unpleasant odour on the Month of Books that is not so easy to get rid of. On the other hand, these undertakings, at first sight monstrous, had great importance for readers in remote regions of Czechoslovakia. Thanks to the construction of libraries in places where, until then, public institutions of this type did not exist, a route to literature was opened up for many. That aside, ideological instructions and declarations were not put into practice in many cases. Marie Deuserova, who worked as a librarian for fifty years, describes her personal experience: "Of course it was controlled ideologically and reports had to be presented. However, it was only a formality. We reported some activities but nobody meddled in the events themselves. It was us that organized poetry nights and, in cooperation with the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, readers' talks. Of course, readers were glad something was going on. Thanks to the Month of Books, books were talked about much more and people joined who otherwise would not have been interested in a library."

The form and content of the Month of Books were influenced by the publishing output of that year. A brief look at the randomly chosen year of 1978, which was dominated by the achievements of cosmonaut Vladimir Remek, includes the following titles: *The History of World War II* (Russian original); *On the Question of Nationalities* (miscellany of works by V.I. Lenin); *Socialist Slovakia; Michelangelo; Lives of the Most Important Painters, Sculptors and Architects; Victorious February in Political Posters; Russian–Czech and Czech–Russian Pocket Dictionary*; and, *Death of the 37* (short stories about the Slovak National Uprising). In addition, in the same year, the daily newspaper *Rude pravo* published bombastic statistics of book production since 1948:

The immense boom in the field of literature brought about by the Victorious February in our country has no parallel in any capitalist state. Since February 1948, we have published 115 000 titles, totalling 1.5 billion copies. This year alone, publishing houses in the Czech regions are preparing 4630 new titles and a total of 51 million copies. This includes 668 new works of fiction. 40 titles are devoted to Victorious February, while many others (or we could say most of the others) are inspired by Victorious February and our present time. [...] It is gratifying that not only fiction, but also political, scientific and specialist literature, abound with a whole range of new authors, and that diversity of genres keeps expanding while quality is growing. Some extraordinary publishing projects are in preparation: The second edition of works by V. I. Lenin, a selection of stories for the Victory series..."

The Month of Books and the Internet

The Velvet Revolution in 1989 brought about many changes. The Month of Books ceased to be an official event and almost stopped taking place. It was replaced by the Week of Libraries, which is organized by the Union of Librarians and Information Workers and held for the tenth time last year. With the onset of film and electronic media, the book has lost its position of prominence, something reflected among other things in the renaming the event "The Month of Books and the Internet". This has incited a debate, at times even quite heated, about the role of books today. To give an example, here's a passage from an article by Ivo Fencel entitled, "Why can't March be the Month of Books in the Czech Republic any more?":

So we have lost the Month of Books too. Is that positive or negative? We have other priorities and the hit with the education system is the Internet! [...] When the multimedia fad passes, classical books and books on CD will continue to be the main medium and basis of our education, cultural value, and national identity. Therefore, we should not try to avoid discussing their new roles. Schools should remain reliable and competent places where our relation to books is cultivated. Schools and public libraries should not be built as data warehouses without respecting the quality and hierarchy of values."

For completeness' sake, we should mention a relatively piquant circumstance — Fencel's article was published on the website *Britske listy*, one of the best-known Internet magazines. On another website, the portal of the BMI (*Brezen mesic internetu*, or March — Month of the Internet), a survey was conducted entitled "Month of Books or of the Internet?" The results were clear-cut: 73.5 per cent of those surveyed perceive March as the Month of the Internet and only 24.5 as the Month of Books. The authors of the survey, in which 103 readers took part, conclude that there has been a change in the way people see the month of March. It is a very radical conclusion, and one ought to bear in mind that the reliability of the survey is rather questionable, especially given that it was run by a website explicitly named *March — Month of the Internet*.

Due to its "Communist" past, the Month of Books phenomenon bewilders many. To devote one month of the year to books is a noble intention, but experience shows that mere intention is not enough. At the same time, we should assess whether we still need an event of this type, and if so, whether it should be controlled centrally by the Ministry of Culture. Any answer should be as matter-of-fact as possible, without ideological prejudices. The 1950s were an era of constructive enthusiasm, collectivism, and ideological conflict. The present era is its antithesis in many respects. Postmodern scepticism, the emphasis on individuality, and a liberal loathing for centralized planning characterize our present times. However, even without central directives, many libraries and bookshops organize events that continue to bear the name Month of Books. Some publishing houses offer significant discounts for selected titles and launch new publications in the first spring month. Anybody who wants to organize Month of Books activities is free to do so. Less pompous, less ideological, less official. Fears that the Internet will oust books and seize the throne forever are not substantiated. A printed book will remain an irreplaceable companion for many people for years to come. The Internet will live alongside, in the same way as television, cinema, radio, and theatre. Prophets of the apocalypse will have to wait a little bit longer.

To better illustrate the atmosphere of the 1950s, we cannot refrain from one more citation, again from an article by Oldrich Kapsa entitled, "Writers talk to their readers": "In Horni Slavkov, women demanded that authors try to solve the problem of unemployed married women and that they help fight against officials who hire other women while leaving their own wives at home, like in the old days." We can only hope that novels inspired by constructive enthusiasm also solved this pressing problem.

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