

Czechoslovak President Václav Havel arrives in Bern in November 1990.

Swiss National Museum / ASL

Poet-president in a snowstorm

When Václav Havel made a state visit to Switzerland in 1990, it was a minor sensation. Diplomatic documents shed light on the event from a variety of perspectives.



Thomas Bürgisser

Thomas Bürgisser is a historian at the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) research centre.

The image is deceptive. He's not holding an umbrella for the Swiss President – what he's holding in his hand is a rose. He, Václav Havel, back then, on the morning of 22 November 1990, on the Bundesplatz, smiling in a snowstorm. For Bern it was the biggest visit of the year. No other public figure symbolises the dynamics of the events in Eastern Europe quite like the newly elected Czechoslovak poet-president, the icon of the 'Velvet Revolution'. In January 1989 the dissident writer was thrown into prison by the ruling Communists for attending an illegal rally in memory of Jan Palach (dodis.ch/54688 (<https://dodis.ch/54688>)). Palach, a young student, had set himself alight on Prague's Wenceslas Square 20 years previously, on 16 January 1969, in protest against the crushing of the 'Prague Spring' by Soviet tanks.

When Václav Havel was locked up for his peaceful civil disobedience of 16 January 1989, the Czechoslovak apparatchiks seemed to be tightening their geriatric grip on the reins even more brutally than elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc. That was about to change, and fast. Suddenly, throughout Eastern Europe, the wind was blowing from a different direction. In East Germany, Poland, Hungary and even Bulgaria, the old Communist guard was beginning to totter. The USSR, under the reformer Mikhail Gorbachev (<https://blog.nationalmuseum.ch/en/2018/03/the-watch-of-presidents/>), was no longer willing to step in to protect repressive party regimes against their own people. Before that surprising year of 1989 was over, Havel had been released from prison and on 29 December he was elected President of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. 'The revolution is complete' (<https://dodis.ch/54689>), the Swiss Ambassador in Prague, Serge Salvi, reported to Bern.

Havel at a press conference in Bern in 1990.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

An unconventional president

On his first official visit to the Hradčany, Prague Castle, Salvi was impressed by the unorthodox figure of the President: 'Dressed in black jeans, open-necked shirt and jacket.' Havel was reserved in his manner, despite his huge popularity among the Czechoslovak people. He was 'more a man of the pen than of the sword' (<https://dodis.ch/54689>). In conversation he showed no animosity towards the bankrupt Communist regime, instead outlining his ideas for the future.

In a meeting with Havel at the federal parliament building on 22 November, Swiss President Arnold Koller also paid tribute to his 'prominent role in reshaping the political landscape of Europe': 'Havel's vision is of a confederate Europe that truly upholds the ethnic diversity and the wealth of cultures of which the continent is composed', reads the visit report compiled by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (the EDA), which was sent by weekly telex (<https://dodis.ch/55850>) to the agencies of the foreign ministry in Switzerland and abroad. No mention is made in this weekly telex of any Helvetian fear of loss, faced with the visionary strength of an East-Central Europe. While that East-Central Europe, freed from the shackles of Communist power, 'turned back to Europe', Switzerland was casting about for a new role, and made heavy weather of the negotiations on an EEA Agreement.

From left: René Felber, Václav Klaus, Václav Havel, Jiří Dienstbier, Arnold Koller, Otto Stich.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

Request for help from the West

The day before his visit to Bern, Havel and Koller, together with the other heads of state and government, had signed the 'Charter for a new Europe' (<https://dodis.ch/54680>) at the summit meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in Paris. Symbolically, they brought an end to 'the age of confrontation and the division of Europe' and ushered in a new era of 'human rights, democracy and the rule of law' on the continent.

With the end of the East-West conflict, Switzerland's special role lost its influence. The EDA concluded that the country must be prepared, in the future, to increasingly share the neutral power's traditional mediating role with other medium-sized and smaller

states in Europe – states such as Czechoslovakia, which handled itself very confidently in the CSCE negotiations.

Primarily, however, Havel came to Bern on 22 November 1990 to ask for assistance. The economic and political reform process in Eastern and Central Europe could '*not happen without the help of the Western nations*,' he told Koller. Havel noted with satisfaction that Switzerland ranked third as a foreign investment partner in Czechoslovakia. Havel was accompanied by Finance Minister Václav Klaus, who would later be the head of government and President of the Czech Republic, and Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier, a long-standing companion from his dissident days. With the signature of a declaration of intent, Dienstbier and his Swiss counterpart, Federal Councillor René Felber, reaffirmed their willingness to intensify bilateral contacts in the areas of democratic institutions, culture, science, education and the environment | dodis.ch/54814 (<https://dodis.ch/54814>).

After the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, thousands took to the streets, as here in Bern.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

Remembering the Prague Spring

In a conversation with Felber, Foreign Minister Dienstbier thanked the Swiss '*for the warm welcome that his fellow countrymen have found in Switzerland in the past*'. In the wake of the Prague Spring (<https://dodis.ch/T941>) in 1968, the country took in 12,000 refugees.

On the afternoon of 22 November, Havel met with 'representatives of the Czech and Slovak colony' at the Kongresshaus in Zurich. The party later continued to nearby Rüslikon, where the Czechoslovak President was awarded the Gottlieb Duttweiler Prize. The laudatory speech was delivered by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the *grand seigneur* of Swiss literature. He praised Havel's courageous commitment to freedom and democracy. And in a magnificent gesture of audacity, he held up a distorting mirror to the assembled glitterati of Swiss politics.

Arrival of Czech refugees in Buchs, 1968.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

To Havel, the proponent of the theatre of the absurd, his fellow writer presented *'Switzerland as the grotesque'*. *'As a prison, a prison admittedly quite different from the prisons into which you were tossed, dear Havel, a prison in which the Swiss people have taken refuge. Because there was absolute mayhem outside the prison and because only in prison can they feel safe from attack, the Swiss believe themselves to be free, freer than all other people, free as prisoners in the prison of their neutrality.'* Obliquely referencing the secret files scandal (<https://blog.nationalmuseum.ch/en/2019/07/nagra-for-the-cia/>), the elderly Dürrenmatt painted a picture of a Switzerland whose inhabitants were themselves both the prisoners and the jailers. The speech in Rüschlikon was his final legacy. Friedrich Dürrenmatt died a few days later.

Portrait of Friedrich Dürrenmatt, late 1990.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

Havel's meeting with Czechoslovak emigrants, the awarding of the Duttweiler Prize and a subsequent cultural event at the Schauspielhaus Zurich are only mentioned briefly in the report for the EDA weekly telex. The rapporteur, department head Jenö Staehelin, actually missed the old man's egregious performance in Rüschlikon. The federal administration's VW minibus, which Staehelin was to have driven from Bern to Lake Zurich, broke down on the motorway and was stuck in a heavy snowstorm.

Joint research

This text is the product of a collaboration between the Swiss National Museum (SNM) and the Forschungsstelle Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz (Dodis), the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland research centre. The SNM is researching images relating to Switzerland's foreign policy in the archives of the agency Actualités Suisses Lausanne (ASL), and Dodis puts these photographs in context using the official source material. The files for 1990 will be made public on the Dodis online database in January 2021. The documents cited in the text are already available online: dodis.ch/C1910 (<https://dodis.ch/C1910>). Documents relating to Havel's visit to Switzerland produced by Czechoslovakian diplomatic circles, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic has made available to Dodis, can also be found at this link.

20th / 21st century

Politics

Article