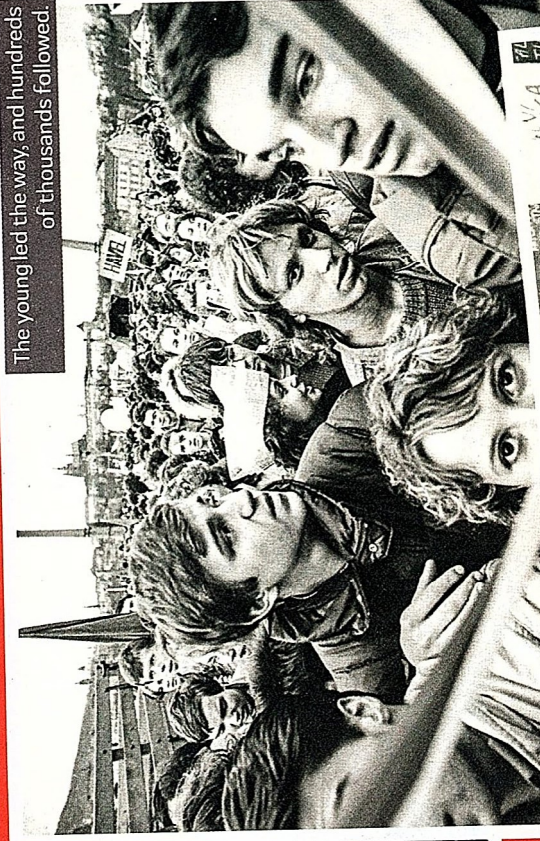
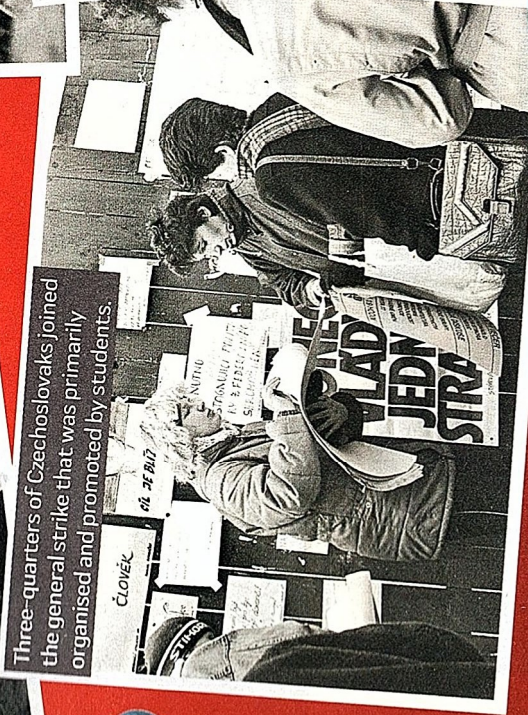


Václav Havel, a philosopher and playwright repeatedly imprisoned for pro-democracy activism, was popular among students and had friends among the movement's directors and musicians who supported the movement.

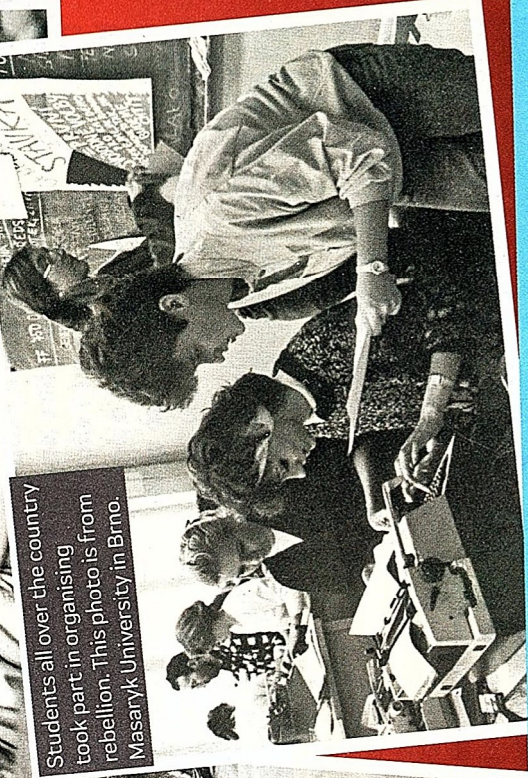


Three-quarters of Czechoslovaks joined the general strike that was primarily organised and promoted by students.



The young led the way, and hundreds of thousands followed.

Students all over the country took part in organising rebellion. This photo is from Masaryk University in Brno.



Over the next few days, the students organised more demonstrations. They got support from theatres, which cancelled all plays and held public meetings instead. The theatres also helped to publicise the students' call for workers all over the country to join a two-hour national strike on November 27th.

On November 19th, 200,000 people marched. The next day, 500,000. Then 800,000 – and more. The Communist leaders all resigned on the 24th. When the day of the planned national strike arrived, 75% of workers took part.

On November 28th, parliament announced the end of the one-party state. The Communist era was over. Václav Havel became president on December 29th 1989, and the next year the country held its first democratic elections since 1946.

AVOIDING BLOODSHED

Communist regimes fell across Eastern Europe, but the student-led Velvet Revolution was unique in that it was almost entirely peaceful. Its leaders wanted to find a new way to do politics. Petr Oslizly, a theatre director who helped the students, explained how they worked to do this.

"Our demonstrations were planned like great theatrical events," he said. "For instance, there was a moment when that

crowd of a million people stopped shouting and began a quiet, gentle song. This was to remind everyone that it is possible to fight for freedom in a different way."

Despite this approach, it was almost a bloodbath anyway. On November 21st, government officials called in 4,000 members of the 'People's Militias' (armed groups of Communist party supporters) to crush the protests, but cancelled the order at the last minute. If they had not, it is likely that hundreds of people would have died.

A BETTER LIFE

Both good and bad changes followed the revolution. There were big economic problems, but they were mostly short-lived –

Young voices and powerful ideas can make real change.



at least for Czechs. Slovakia was slower to recover, and a feeling that the economic policies of the new government in Prague often benefited Czechs but harmed Slovaks was one of the reasons that Czechoslovakia split a couple of years later. It was also more difficult in rural areas, where change was slowest: "The same Communists are still in the same offices," complained one villager three years later.

Many felt a frightening loss of security. Michael Kocáb, a member of Havel's first government, spoke about this in 1991. "Sometimes I even feel nostalgia for the Communists. It's no joke. Everybody knows that there's a relationship between the jailer and the prisoner. This was the world we were born into, the world we knew. Our own dungeon."

But the fall of Communism brought new choices in careers, in education, in travel, in the goods in shops and much more. It brought the possibility of choosing your own politics and ideas. In the words of Martin Mejstřík, a student dissident who knew poverty and homelessness in the two years after the revolution, "We've seen that democracy isn't ideal; I've no illusions that it's perfect – but it's better. It's better."

Paul Farrington-Douglas (UK)

Quotations in this article were drawn from a 1993 PBS documentary, *The Czech & Slovak "Velvet Revolution": A Look Back*.