

"WE ARE NOT CHILDREN"



HOW STUDENTS CHANGED A NATION

Did you know it was mostly young activists who brought down the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia? The Velvet Revolution stands as proof that young voices and powerful ideas can make real change.

Too often we hear that "protests never change anything", especially when it is young people protesting. Online magazine RMX News, for example, wrote that Czech children joining the school climate strikes were "losers" who should stop their silly protests and "just skip school instead". Again and again we hear the message. You're too young. You're not serious.

THE CHILDREN'S REVOLUTION
After crowds of demonstrators filled the centre of Prague in November 1989, Communist leader Miroslav Štěpán rejected the protest as just teenage rebellion: "In no country on earth do 15-year-old children make decisions about who should be president!" It was the kind of statement we often hear today.

The crowd responded with, "We are not children! We are not children!" The protestors in the streets were not children, but many were young. They were school and university students, and they started the biggest mass movement the country has ever known.

THE TEENAGE DISSIDENTS

One of the many young activists was the Slovak student Nataša Dudinská. Her father was a member of the Communist Party. "He used to say, 'You want to study at university, I have to be in the party,'" she said. "I told him I couldn't accept being at university just because my father was a Communist. In the end, I accepted his help. But I couldn't bear the feeling, so almost immediately I got involved [with student dissident groups]. When her activism was discovered, she was kicked out of the university.

Those with the wrong family might never have a chance at all. The teenage Saša Floriánová's parents had been Communist war heroes, but after opposing the Soviet invasion in 1968, both were expelled from the party. "There were all kinds of problems – for me to go to school,

for my mother to find a job. She spoke three languages and ended up feeding pigs. People used to ask her, 'Are you still teaching the pigs French?' Saša knew she'd never get into university, so she joined the dissidents, secretly printing an illegal anti-government newsletter at home.

HOW STUDENTS MOVED THE COUNTRY

The Socialist Union of Youth (SSM) was officially a Communist student organisation. In early November 1989, SSM members secretly met members of Stuha, a pro-democracy group. Together, they planned an event for International Students' Day on November 17th 1989. About 15,000 students joined the official SSM march in Prague, but they then continued, illegally, into the city centre. Some brought out banners and shouted anti-Communist slogans. They were stopped by police near the National Theatre, and many were brutally beaten. (Miroslav Štěpán, the man who described the protestors as children, was eventually imprisoned for 14 months for ordering the beatings.)