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“The War Brought Us Close  
and the Peace Will Not Divide Us”:  
Exhibitions of Art  
from Czechoslovakia in Warsaw  
in the Late 1940s

In 2005 Piotr Piotrowski published his book *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty* (*In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*),<sup>1</sup> which came to be the fundamental guide to the history of art in Central-Eastern Europe. The method proposed by Piotrowski, which he termed “horizontal art history”, constitutes an attempt to revise the obligatory narrations and to pinpoint the peculiar nature of this region. In his study *O horyzontalnej historii sztuki* [On horizontal art history], Piotrowski criticised the fact that the approach to the geography of art in which artistic phenomena occurring in Western Europe are considered to be the basis, the norm and the origin has so far not been revised.<sup>2</sup> Focusing attention on relations between the “centres” and the “peripheries” is to facilitate the deconstruction of the hierarchical and universalistic canon. The “horizontalness” as postulated by Piotrowski refers to, among others, the need of making the geography of art more dynamic. The task of critical geography is to pinpoint the relations between artistic centres<sup>3</sup> and to underline the differences in comparison with the “Western idiom”.<sup>4</sup> Not only relations between particular artistic centres, but also the directions taken by the artists’ interests are of key importance here.

The book *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty* focuses on circles of avant-garde artists who tried to retain as extensive independence of contacts and methods of

1 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty. Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Poznań, 2005. Cf. idem, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, London, 2009.

2 P. Piotrowski, “O horyzontalnej historii sztuki” [On horizontal art history], *Artium Quaestiones*, 2009, vol. XX, p. 60.

3 Ibid., p. 29.

4 Ibid., p. 17.

presenting their output as was possible in the face of the oppressive system. Horizontal art history aims to deconstruct hierarchical art history, according to which art produced on the peripheries (in this case in Central-Eastern Europe) constitutes an adaptation of models worked out in the art metropolises (in the West).<sup>5</sup> A critical stance towards the “centre vs. peripheries” relationship is one of the pillars of research on art in Central-Eastern Europe. Mariá Orišková has pointed out that both sides are responsible for the fact that the region has been marginalised in the “universalistic”, Western discourse.<sup>6</sup> Eastern-European critics offered an image of art which was simplified and firmly dominated by the “dissident paradigm”; this narration was then copied in Western Europe. Focusing on the “dissident” character of art produced in Central and Eastern Europe makes it possible to highlight some phenomena which are not widely known and yet important in art history, but this approach cannot be applied uncritically.

In his book, Piotrowski observes that both the Polish and Czechoslovakian artistic milieus “did not operate in mutual isolation”.<sup>7</sup> He also underlines that the meeting of the milieus was facilitated by, among others, the *Arguments 1962* (*Argumenty 1962*) exhibition at Krzywe Koło Gallery in Warsaw.<sup>8</sup> A closer look at the issue of exhibitions of the Czechoslovakian artists presented in Poland has proved fruitful,<sup>9</sup> as my research has revealed that thirty-five exhibitions of art produced in Czechoslovakia, i.e. an average of one exhibition per year, took place in Warsaw in the period of the People’s Republic of Poland.<sup>10</sup> Almost all of these exhibitions, both collective and solo ones, were accompanied by the publication of catalogues. Other source materials documenting the organisation of these exhibitions have survived as well. Also, these were not only propagandist exhibitions of government-supported art or ones intended to emphasise the cultural policies of both states. In the following essay I shall concentrate on two collective exhibitions that presented art from Czechoslovakia in the first years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War as examples of cultural cooperation conducted by two different institutions involved in the organisation of exhibitions.

5 Ibid., pp. 59–73.

6 P. Piotrowski, *Agorafilia. Sztuka i demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie* [Agoraphilia. Art and democracy in post-Communist Europe], Poznań, 2010, p. 17.

7 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty...*, op. cit., p. 89.

8 Ibid.

9 The essay is based on a section of an M.A. thesis entitled *Wystawy sztuki z Czechosłowacji w Warszawie w latach 1945–1989* [Exhibitions of Czechoslovakian art in Warsaw in the years 1945–1989], supervised by Dr hab. Gabriela Świtek and presented at the Institute of Art History, University of Warsaw, in November 2015.

10 The calendar of exhibitions was determined mainly on the basis of materials available at the National Museum in Warsaw and at the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art. The entire activity of the Czechoslovakian Culture Centre cannot be reconstructed due to the absence of data. Most probably exhibitions directly connected with various festivals were also organised in Warsaw, yet not all of them could be retrieved.

## Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance (1947)

Despite the conflicts between Czechoslovakia and Poland, which were mainly caused by issues of borders and national identities, questions of cooperation in the area of culture were regulated as early as in the first years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War.<sup>11</sup> The first draft of a treaty on culture was signed in February, and the Association for Polish-Czechoslovakian Friendship was established in Warsaw the following year.<sup>12</sup> In March of 1947 Poland and Czechoslovakia signed the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance,<sup>13</sup> in which, among others, they undertook to develop and strengthen cultural cooperation. The signing of the treaty was motivated – much in the spirit of contemporary propaganda – by the Slavonic countries’ need to unify in the face of any potential German aggression. The treaty reads: “The President of the Republic of Poland and the President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, striving to assure the peaceful development of these two Slavonic countries which, sharing a border with Germany, have during their entire history been victims of German rapacity [...], have for this reason decided to sign the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance”.<sup>14</sup>

The Agreement on Cultural Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Czechoslovakia was signed in July 1947.<sup>15</sup> Among others, the articles of the agreement referred to the commencement of efforts to establish an Institute of Polish Culture in Czechoslovakia and an Institute of Czechoslovakian Culture in Poland; each institution was to promote the culture of its own country in the other. Another postulate referred to supporting academic and artistic exchange; scholars, artists, journalists, librarians, members of museum staff and students, including art history students, were selected to be sent for summer training visits.<sup>16</sup> Both sides undertook to facilitate contacts between members of the scholarly and artistic milieus and to cooperate in “obliterating the detrimental consequences of anti-Slavonic

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11 Cf. A. Szczepańska, *Warszawa–Praga 1948–1968. Od nakazanej przyjaźni do kryzysu* [Warsaw–Prague 1948–1968. From a mandatory friendship to a crisis], Szczecin, 2011, p. 201.

12 Ibid., pp. 201–202.

13 Układ o przyjaźni i wzajemnej pomocy między Rzeczpospolitą Polską a Republiką Czechosłowacką, podpisany w Warszawie dnia 10 marca 1947 r. [Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Czechoslovakia, signed in Warsaw on 10 March 1947]; *Dziennik Ustaw* 1948 no. 7 item 47, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/DetailsServlet?id=WDU19480070047> [accessed 20 June 2015].

14 Ibid.

15 Umowa o współpracy kulturalnej między Rzeczpospolitą Polską a Republiką Czechosłowacką, podpisana w Pradze dnia 4 lipca 1947 r. [Agreement on Cultural Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Czechoslovakia, signed in Prague on 4 July 1947], *Dziennik Ustaw* 1948 no. 47 item 346, <http://dziennikustaw.gov.pl/du/1948/s/47/346> [accessed 21 June 2015].

16 Cf. A. Szczepańska, op. cit., p. 226.

German propaganda in the area of scholarship and culture".<sup>17</sup> Article 3 of the treaty contained an undertaking to support art exhibitions and to intensify efforts for radio stations to include productions on the art of the neighbouring country in their programmes.<sup>18</sup>

The Czechoslovakian Centre of Culture and Information operated from 1947, and the Polish Centre of Information opened in Prague in 1949.<sup>19</sup> In 1950 the "Nové Polsko" Centre of Culture and Information opened in Bratislava.<sup>20</sup> The aim of these institutions was political, mainly to spread propaganda. Window displays at the Polish Centre of Information were connected with anniversaries of the October Revolution or the signing of the treaty of Polish-Czechoslovakian friendship.<sup>21</sup> Also celebrated were the birthdays of Josef Stalin or Klement Gottwald, the Czech Communist politician who was promoted as the "Father of the Nation" and who became the president of Czechoslovakia in 1948. The opening of the Polish Centre of Information was filmed by the Polish Film Chronicle.<sup>22</sup> The Centre's library was reported to contain "a selection of the best books published in the Polish language" and recent magazines (*Trybuna Ludu* is discernible in the newsreel's frame). One method of building the feeling of brotherhood was by emphasising the linguistic proximity. The Chronicle's narrator noted that "reading in Polish is not much of a problem to the Czechs". The institution was to serve "the cause of increasing the closeness of brotherly nations"; consequently, the rule was to underline kinship in various areas and to overlook the ticklish issues.

Another effect of signing the agreements was the emergence of associations promoting cooperation between Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Association for Cultural Cooperation with Poland was instituted in Czechoslovakia as early as in 1945. In the following year the Commission for Culture founded the Association for Polish-Czechoslovakian Friendship, which embraced sections responsible for organisation, propaganda, culture and art, sport and tourism, economy, a youth section and a women's section.<sup>23</sup> The Association for Cultural Cooperation with Poland was established in 1947 and the Polish-Slovak Association in 1948.<sup>24</sup> The Academic Association for Polish-Czechoslovakian Friendship, instituted in Poznań in 1948, cooperated closely with the Czechoslovakian Association for Cultural and Economic Cooperation with Poland.

17 Dziennik Ustaw no. 47, op. cit., p. 952.

18 Ibid., p. 953.

19 A. Szczepańska, op. cit., p. 236.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., p. 237.

22 *Polski Ośrodek Informacyjny w Pradze* [Polish Information Centre in Prague], sequence: Czechosłowacja, PKF 49/07, Kronika, 1949, Polska, <http://www.kronikarp.pl/szukaj-18850,tag-689417,strona-3> [accessed 12 July 2015].

23 A. Szczepańska, op. cit., p. 229.

24 Ibid., p. 228.

Not only newly established but also well-established institutions began to initiate contacts between Poland and Czechoslovakia. As early as in November 1945, the Association of Polish Architects (Stowarzyszenie Architektów Polskich, SARP) sent two representatives, Michał Ptac-Borkowski and Jerzy Milan Sobiepan, to Czechoslovakia, where they gave papers on the topic of the rebuilding of the ruined Warsaw. According to a report published in *Stolica*, their presentations riveted the attention of the Czech people and the press, which extensively reported on the devastation of Poland's capital. A few months later, Czech architects came to visit Poland.<sup>25</sup>

The propagandist activities focused mainly on highlighting the positive connections between Poland and Czechoslovakia. The aim was to alter the tone of the relationship which until then had been dominated by territorial conflicts that had been considerably inflamed by Poland's annexation of Zaolzie, i.e. trans-Olza Silesia, in 1938 and also by the situation of the minority groups – the Czech and Slovak minorities in Poland and the Polish minority in Czechoslovakia.<sup>26</sup> The scholarly and cultural milieus, in turn, experienced purges and repressions. In Czechoslovakia, opponents of the Communist Party were being excluded from public life; this especially concerned journalists, writers, playwrights and radio reporters.<sup>27</sup> The number of artistic and cultural organisations was reduced and culture-oriented magazines were closed. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia actively promoted cultural propaganda and the building of a “Socialist culture”. Among the Czechoslovakian institutions involved in controlling culture and spreading cultural propaganda were the Ministry of Information headed by Václav Kopecký, the Ministry of Education, Science and Art, the Section for Culture and Propaganda of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (the so-called “Kultprop”), the Central Bureau for Music and Art, the Theatre and Drama Council, and the Association of the Artistic and Cultural Service Staff.<sup>28</sup>

In researching Czechoslovakian art it is also crucial to consider issues of ethnicity. The state was instituted in 1918 as a product of a conception known as “Czechoslovakism”, which was aimed at “bringing closer” the Czechs and the Slovaks,<sup>29</sup> although the essential differences between these two nations must not be forgotten. Until the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, the Czechs, Moravians and Silesians (and the minority groups) lived in the Austrian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and enjoyed some political autonomy.<sup>30</sup>

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25 “Zbliżenie kulturalne polsko-czeskie” [Polish-Czech cultural relations get closer], *Stolica*, 1947, no. 12, p. 8.

26 A. Szczepańska, op. cit., p. 11.

27 J. Knapík, *V zajetí moci. Kulturní politika, její systém a aktéři 1948–1956*, Praha, 2006, p. 20.

28 Ibid., pp. 23–29.

29 C. S. Leff, *National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State, 1918–1987*, Princeton, 1988, p. 133.

30 E. Stein, *Czecho/Slovakia: Ethnic Conflict, Constitutional Fissure, Negotiated Breakup*, Ann Arbor, 1997, p. 26.

In his book *Czecho/Slovakia*, Eric Stein pointed out that in the Czech part a civic society, a national culture and political awareness had managed to evolve.<sup>31</sup> The Slovaks, however, remained under the Hungarian rule and were subjected to Hungarisation, which was especially strong in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A private conversation with a Czech scholar related by Stein may serve as an ironic illustration of how deeply the differences were lodged in the national awareness of both the Czechs and the Slovaks:

“What is the Slovak nation?”, asked a Czech academic with a twinkle in his eye. “They have no distinct language, no hero, no myth, no literature, not even a saint.” His statement was clearly intended as a bon mot and a hyperbole. In reality, the Slovaks had already had under the Communist regime a complete education system, an entrepreneurial class, a press, and a layer of intelligentsia and artists, although greatly influenced by, and much thinner than, the Czech counterpart.<sup>32</sup>

In the inter-war period, most Slovaks supported the idea of a joint Czechoslovakian state, but the Slovakian independence movement was also developing. In 1939 Slovakia separated from the Czech Republic and, with the support of the Third Reich, created its own state, which then joined the Pact of Steel. After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, tensions between the Czechs and the Slovaks still existed in Czechoslovakia. Two subsequent constitutions (from the years 1948 and 1960) limited the Slovaks’ autonomy and their influence on state affairs.<sup>33</sup> At this point, it is sufficient to note that the titles of exhibitions presented in Poland before and after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War reflected the changing political situation. In 1927 the National Museum in Warsaw hosted the *Exhibition of Czechoslovakian art* (*Wystawa sztuki czeskosłowackiej*). After the war the term “Czechoslovakian art” still predominated in the titles of collective exhibitions, but from the early 1970s onwards the ethnic distinctiveness was increasingly often highlighted, for instance in *Czech and Slovak contemporary graphic art* (*Czeska i słowacka grafika współczesna*) (Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Warsaw, 1973) or in the already mentioned *Czech and Slovak painting 1947–1987* (Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Warsaw, 1987).

In 1946, still before the signing of the treaties between the two states, the National Museum in Warsaw presented an exhibition entitled *Czechoslovakia 1939–1945* (*Czechosłowacja 1939–1945*).<sup>34</sup> It was prepared by Czechoslovakia’s propagandistically minded Ministry of Information.<sup>35</sup> Earlier, in 1945, a similar Polish exhibition, entitled *Warsaw accuses* (*Warszawa oskarża*) was shown

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., p. 29.

33 Ibid., pp. 26–27.

34 *Czechosłowacja 1939–1945* [Czechoslovakia 1939–1945], exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Warsaw, Prague, 1946.

35 Some materials bear the title *Czechosłowacja 1938–1946* [Czechoslovakia 1938–1946]. Cf. *ibid.*



in Prague and Brno.<sup>36</sup> *Czechoslovakia 1939–1945* was a presentation of photographs showing, among others, the atrocities committed by the German army, the Slovak partisans preparing for the uprising of 1944, and the Red Army's welcome in Prague). In the archival material of the Polish Film Chronicle documenting the opening of this exhibition in Warsaw the chairman of the Czechoslovakian delegation is quoted as saying: "The war brought us close and the peace will not divide us".<sup>37</sup>

The catalogue of the *Czechoslovakia 1939–1945* exhibition contains a passage written by Klement Gottwald: "The only certain guarantee of their [the Czechoslovakian people's – P. S.] freedom and sovereignty is a strong, brotherly alliance with the Soviet Union and the other Slavonic states, and [the fact] that no one shall ever dare to infringe this alliance".<sup>38</sup> Gottwald's text also includes the postulate of "purging" Czechoslovakia of the German minority.<sup>39</sup> The process of constructing a feeling of concord between Poland and Czechoslovakia meant, among others, their uniting against a common enemy, i.e. Nazi Germany. The justification for the turn towards Moscow was the assumption that both countries were thus returning to their Slavonic roots. The author of a review from the exhibition published in *Stolica* emphasised the similarities in the course of the war years in Poland and in Czechoslovakia. He also stated that a visitor to the exhibition viewed it with "a certain feeling of envy"<sup>40</sup> that was caused by a greater "sense of realism" displayed by the Czechs during the war (Prague was not destroyed to the extent that Warsaw was) and by the fact that they had "more cold blood, which we are in need of". The propagandist effect of the exhibition was also mentioned, with the suggestion that considering this aspect "might do us good".<sup>41</sup>

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36 *Warszawa oskarża* [Warsaw accuses] was the first exhibition to be organised by the National Museum in Warsaw after the war. It popularised the general awareness of the scale of the war's destruction. It was later presented in Chorzów, Katowice, Prague, New York, Paris, Sofia, Brno, Vienna and Budapest. See *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1944–1960* [Polish artistic life in the years 1944–1960], ed. A. Wierzbicka, Warsaw, 2012, vol. 1, p. 138, p. 70.

37 *Otwarcie wystawy w Warszawie* [The opening of an exhibition in Warsaw], sequence: Czechosłowacja 1938–1946, PKF 46/37, Kronika, 1946, Polska, <http://www.kronikarp.pl/szukaj,17746,strona-1> [accessed 24 May 2015].

38 K. Gottwald, "Nowe wolne życie wyzwolonej Czechosłowacji" [The new life in liberated Czechoslovakia], in: *Czechosłowacja 1939–1945...*, op. cit., pp. 5–6.

39 Ibid.

40 "Czechosłowacja w latach 1938–1946" [Czechoslovakia in the years 1938–1946], *Stolica*, 1946, no. 2, p. 7.

41 Ibid.

## *Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art* (*Współczesna grafika czechosłowacka*, 1947)

On 1 September 1947 the exhibition entitled *Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art* (*Współczesna grafika czechosłowacka*) opened at the National Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 1).<sup>42</sup> It was a response to the exhibition *Contemporary Polish Graphic Art* (*Współczesna polska grafika*, Czech: *Současná Polska Grafika*), which had been on show from May to June 1947 in Prague.<sup>43</sup> This presentation of graphic art in Czechoslovakia was prepared by SCUG “Hollar”, an association of Czech graphic artists that had been in existence since 1917, by the National Museum in Warsaw and by the Foreign Cooperation Office (Biuro Współpracy z Zagranicą). It was under the “elevated protection” of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zygmunt Modzelewski, the Minister of Culture and Art, Stefan Dybowski, and the ambassador of the Republic of Czechoslovakia in Poland.

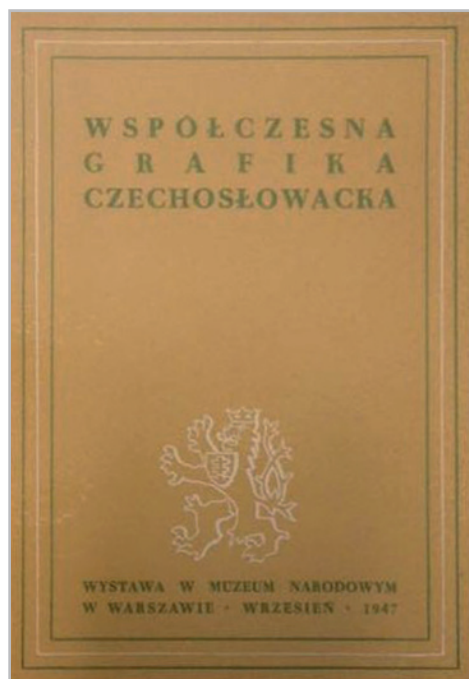
The narrative of the exhibition encompassed the period from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1940s. Regardless of the title of the exhibition, which features the word “Czechoslovakia”, in the catalogue Czech and Slovak graphic art were discussed separately. Only nine out of about seventy exhibited artists were Slovakian; these were Orest Dubay, Ľudovít Fulla, Eugen Lehotský, Cyprián Majerník, Dezider Milly, Imro Weiner-Kráľ, Ernest Zmeťák, Adolf Hofmeister and Antonín Pelc.<sup>44</sup> The all-encompassing diversity of topics, formal aspects and graphic techniques used by the artists, their technical virtuosity and the high artistic quality of the exhibited works were especially emphasised. The techniques presented at the exhibition included lithography, copperplate etching, woodcut (also coloured woodcut), drypoint, etching, mezzotint, linoleum printing and drawing. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century was described as “the revival of Czech graphic art”. Mentioned as its representatives were artists associated with Realism, Art Nouveau and Symbolism, who created vedutes, landscapes, fairy-tale imagery and decorative portraits: Vojtěch Preissig (1873–1944), Taviík František Šimon (1877–1942), Viktor Stretti (1878–1957), Jaromír Stretti-Zamponi (1882–1959), Jan C. Vondrouš (1884–1956), Karel Vik (1883–1964), František Kobliha (1877–1962) and Anna Mackova (1887–1969).

42 After the exhibition closed in Warsaw it was transferred to Łódź, then to Poznań, Katowice, Bydgoszcz, Cracow, Toruń, Bydgoszcz again, and finally Białystok. Each showing lasted for about a month. *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1944–1960*, vol. 1, 1944–1947, ed. A. Wierzbicka, op. cit., p. 468.

43 *Współczesna polska grafika* [Contemporary Polish graphic art] exhibition was presented in Prague, Berlin, Dresden, Frankfurt am Main, the Hague, Brussels, Ghent, Vienna and Rome. Ibid., p. 558.

44 See *Współczesna grafika czechosłowacka* [Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art], exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, 1947.





**Fig. 1.** *Współczesna grafika czechosłowacka* [Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art], exhibition catalogue, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, 1947

Emil Filla (1882–1953), an outstanding representative of Czech Cubism, was presented as “the pioneer of avant-garde trends in Czech art who, after six years’ imprisonment in German camps, has returned to creative work”.<sup>45</sup> Max Švabinský (1873–1922) was called a “national artist” whose oeuvre was “a marker of development in modern Czech graphic art”.<sup>46</sup> Švabinský was also presented as the mentor of the young generation of artists who “are successfully upholding the good reputation of Czech graphic art at home and abroad”.<sup>47</sup> Švabinský’s successor in the graphic art studio of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague was Tavo František Šimon. The new generation of graphic artists was based on Švabinsky’s and Šimon’s pupils. Their output was described as Realism; the oeuvre of Ludmila Jirincova exemplifies their work.<sup>48</sup> In the exhibition catalogue the Czech graphic artists’ topics of interest were divided into three sections: social topics (work in factories, mines and construction sites or scenes from the everyday life of the working class), Czech provincial landscapes, and “poetical Realism”, whose representatives were mainly concerned with book illustration.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

The fact that the youngest generation of artists was included in the narration of the *Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art* exhibition is interesting. Their output was divided into two large groups: the work of the first group displayed “traces of suffering in the bygone years”; the other concentrated on formal issues, which found their place at the exhibition as the “new realism of the new social system”.<sup>50</sup> This also encompassed topics of mundane human existence and the man/machine relationship that had been undertaken by the artists. The second group included works by František Hudeček (1909–1990), Jan Kotík (1916–2002), Kamil Lhoták (1912–1990), Antonín Machourek (1913–1991), Václav Sivko (1923–1974), Jan Smetana (1918–1998) and Karel Souček (1915–1982). Most of these artists belonged to Group 42 (Czech: *Skupina 42*), which was active in the years 1942–1949 and which embraced avant-garde artists and writers. The Group’s theoreticians were Jiří Kotalík (later the director of the National Gallery in Prague) and Jindřich Chalupecký.<sup>51</sup> Group 42 did not have a clearly defined programme; its members shared the belief in the importance of creative freedom and originality. The artists were interested in the mundane life of the metropolis; hence they undertook such subjects as factories, railway stations or lamp-lit night streets.<sup>52</sup>

Slovak graphic art was described separately in the catalogue, even though, as has already been mentioned, the exhibition included the works of only nine Slovak artists. The rhetoric of the texts included in the catalogue is typical of the period; it reflects the echoes of ethnic conflict and transformations of the political system. For instance, the catalogue contains information that Slovak artists “since the liberation in 1918 have been fast catching up on what they had lost during the period of oppression and now they are contributing in equal measure to the development of Czechoslovakian graphic art”.<sup>53</sup>

## *Young Czechoslovakian Art* (*Czechosłowacka młoda plastyka*, 1948)

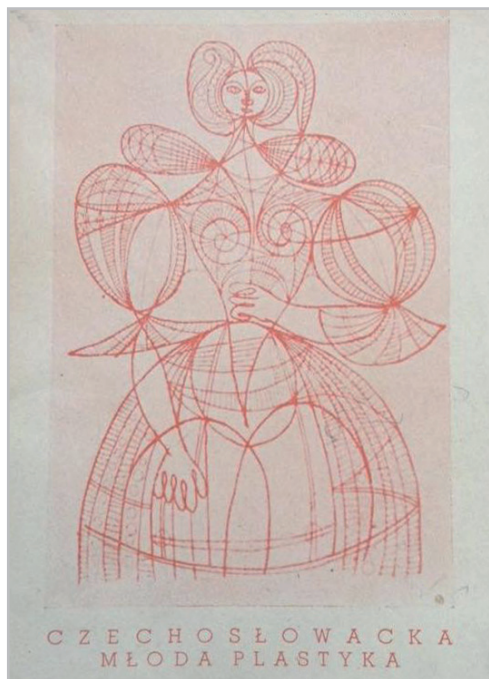
The subsequent exhibition of graphic art from Czechoslovakia opened in Warsaw on 6 June 1948 (Fig. 2). Entitled *Young Czechoslovakian Art* (*Czechosłowacka młoda plastyka*), it was shown at the Young Artists and Scientists’ Club

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>51</sup> Group 42 comprised František Hudeček, Kamil Lhoták, Jan Smetana, Jan Kotík, František Gross, Jiří Kolář, Bohumír Matal, Jan Smetana, Karel Souček, Ladislav Zív, Miroslav Háek, Jiří Kotalík, Jindřich Chalupecký, Ivan Blatný, Jan Hanč, Jiřina Hauková and Josef Kainar; <http://www.artlist.cz/skupiny/skupina-42-3846/> [accessed 5 July 2015]. Cf. *Czech Modern Art 1900–1960*, ed. L. Bydzorska, Prague, 1995.

<sup>52</sup> See *Współczesna grafika czechosłowacka* [Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art], op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



**Fig. 2.** *Czechosłowacka młoda plastyka* [Young Czechoslovakian Art], exhibition catalogue, Young Artists and Scientists' Club, Warsaw, 1948

(Klub Młodych Artystów i Naukowców) whose painting section was supervised by Marian Bogusz.<sup>54</sup> The idea for the exhibition was suggested by the Association of Polish Artists and Designers (Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków).<sup>55</sup> A presentation of Polish art entitled *Young Polish painters* (*Młodzi malarze polscy*, Czech: *Mladi Polští Malíři*) opened in Prague in 1948.<sup>56</sup>

54 The Young Artists and Scientists' Club was instituted in 1947. It embraced representatives of various disciplines and artistic approaches. Marian Bogusz supervised the painting section, to which Zbigniew Dłubak, Jan Lenica, Maria Ewa Łunkiewicz-Rogoyska, Henryk Stażewski, Bogusław Szwacz, Ignacy Witz and Marek Włodarski belonged. Stefan Krygier, Hanna Orzechowska, Władysław Strzeмиński, Stanisław Wegner and Alfred Lenica cooperated with the club. Cf. M. Kurzac, "Klub Młodych Artystów i Naukowców (1947–1949). Dyskusje i polemiki na temat nowego modelu sztuki nowoczesnej" [Young Artists and Scientists' Club (1947–1949). Debates and polemics on the new model of modern art], *MODUS. Prace z historii sztuki*, 2002, III, p. 53. See also A. Pietrasik, "Antagonizm w polu sztuki: działalność Klubu Młodych Artystów i Naukowców (1947–1949)" [Antagonism in the area of art: the activity of the Young Artists and Scientists' Club (1947–1949)], in: *Zaraz po wojnie* [Right after the war], eds. J. Kordjak, A. Szewczyk, Warsaw, 2015, pp. 216–227.

55 L. Bielska-Tworkowa, "Wystawy w K.M.A. i N." [Exhibitions at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club], *Nowiny Literackie*, 1948, no. 26, p. 7.

56 The Polish exhibition in Prague consisted of forty works by thirty-one artists, among whom were Jan Betley, Marian Bogusz, Janina Brosch-Włodarska, Helena Cygańska-Walicka, Maria Jarema, Tadeusz Kantor, Kazimierz Mikulski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Rafał Owidzki, Bogusław Szwacz, Hanna Zaremba-Cybisowa, Leokadia Bielska-

The exhibition hosted by the Young Artists and Scientists' Club presented the oeuvre of the leading members of the post-war Czech avant-garde rooted in the tradition of Surrealism.<sup>57</sup> It embraced the output of thirteen artists: Orest Dubay (1919–2005), František Gross (1909–1985), František Hudeček (1909–1990), Viliam Chmel (1917–1961), Josef Istler (1919–2000), František Jiroudek (1914–1991), Jan Kotík (1916–2002), Kamil Lhoták (1912–1990), Evžen Nevan (1914–1967), Zdenek Seydl (1916–1978), Václav Sivko (1923–1974), Jan Smetana (1918–1998) and Ernest Zmeták (1919–2004). One of the thirteen, Josef Istler, was an important figure in the history of Polish-Czech relations. He most probably had had long-standing contacts with Marian Bogusz, since also in the 1960s he had exhibited his works at the Krzywe Koło Gallery, which was directed by Bogusz.<sup>58</sup> It must also be added that, with time, Istler would increasingly distance himself from the tradition of Surrealism, abandoning it in favour of abstraction.<sup>59</sup>

Nine artists from the above list participated in both the exhibition at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club and in the earlier one, i.e. the *Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art* exhibition at the National Museum in Warsaw. These nine artists were the Czechs: František Hudeček, František Jiroudek, Jan Kotík, Kamil Lhoták, Zdenek Seydl, Václav Sivko and Jan Smetana, and the Slovaks: Orest Dubay and Ernest Zmeták. They presented different works at each exhibition, which may indicate that they perceived the show at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club as complementary to the one at the National Museum. The fact that the same artists presented their works in both places demonstrates that in researching art history in Central-Eastern Europe, it would be imprudent to exclude from our area of interest exhibitions organised in the framework of official cultural exchange.

It is also worth emphasising that the *Young Czechoslovakian Art* exhibition had not been prepared in Czechoslovakia and dispatched to Poland as a ready-made show. The Czech and Slovak artists who were to present their works at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club were invited to Warsaw. Greeting them, Professor Aleksander Rafałowski from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw commented that both exhibitions were tantamount to an act of exchanging ratification documents:<sup>60</sup> they constituted the moment

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-Tworkowa, Maria Ewa Łunkiewicz, Zbigniew Pronaszko, Aleksander Rafałowski, Henryk Stażewski, Jonasz Stern, Marek Włodarski and Jerzy Wolff. After the exhibition closed in Prague it was transferred to České Budějovice and Karlovy Vary. *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1944–1960*, 1948, vol. 2, ed. A. Wierzbicka, op. cit., p. 255.

57 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty...*, op. cit., pp. 46–50.

58 Istler participated in the *Argumenty 1962* exhibition. Cf. *Galeria Krzywe Koło. Katalog wystawy retrospektywnej* [Krzywe Koło Gallery. Catalogue of the retrospective exhibition], ed. J. Zagrodzki, National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, 1990, p. 107.

59 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty...*, op. cit., p. 50.

60 (wr), "Walka o nową treść w sztuce malarskiej – na wystawie młodych plastyków czechosłowackich" [A struggle for new contents in the art of painting – at the exhibi-

when artistic cooperation between the Czech, Slovak and Polish milieus became a reality.

In a interview given in 1989, Zbigniew Dłubak reminisced that he and Marian Bogusz had first met a group of Czechoslovakian artists during the war, namely in the Mauthausen concentration camp:

A kind of surrogate artistic life existed in the camp. Apart from the Poles there were Czech artists there, Spanish artists... We organised meetings, exhibitions, we held long conversations. Bogusz and I managed to get out of the camp before the official repatriation and we returned to Warsaw via Prague. Our short stay in Prague was nevertheless very important. Because of our camp connections we had many friends there, and we also encountered Czech Surrealism for the first time. A little later, this fact proved extremely profitable.<sup>61</sup>

Bearing in mind the wartime connections between the artists from Poland and from Czechoslovakia, as well as the exhibitions of Czechoslovakian graphic art hosted soon after the war by the National Museum and the Young Artists and Scientists' Club, it must be emphasised that the thaw of the 1960s was by no means a beginning, but rather a continuation of links between the Polish, Czech and Slovak avant-garde. References to Czech Surrealism in Polish art, as well as the durable personal friendships, may well have resulted from the Polish creators' contacts with art produced in Czechoslovakia. Tracing the history of exhibitions makes it possible to outline these contacts, and information found in the catalogues enables us to investigate the exchange of views between the circles of Polish, Czech and Slovak artists.

The aim of the exhibition was to familiarise Polish viewers with the oeuvre of three Czech avant-garde groups: Group 42, Group RA and "Seven in October".<sup>62</sup> Group RA was the focus for a circle of young artists who functioned as "young Surrealists"<sup>63</sup> who were not connected with the early, i.e. pre-war, Surrealism (in contrast to members of Group 42). Group RA included the painters Josef Istler, Bohdan Lacina, Václav Tikal and Václav Zykumunt, photographers Miloš Koreček and Vilém Reichmann, and writers Ludvik Kundera and Zdeněk Lorenc.<sup>64</sup> The catalogue of the *Young Czechoslovakian Art* exhibition emphasised the connections of contemporary Czechoslovakian art

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tion of young Czechoslovakian visual artists], *Życie Warszawy*, 6 June 1948, no. 154, in: *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1944–1960*, 1948, vol. 2, p. 139.

61 *Galeria Krzywe Koło. Katalog wystawy retrospektywnej*, op. cit., p. 27.

62 The "Seven in October" group (Czech: *Sedm v říjnu*) was instituted in 1939. Its members were Věra Gabrielová Fragnerová (1919–2002), Václav Hejna (1914–1985), František Jiroudek (1914–1991), Pavel Kropáček (1915–1943), Josef Liesler (1912–2005), Jan Rafael Michálek (1915–1989), Arnošt Paderlík (1919–1999), Václav Plátek (1917–1994) and Zdeněk Seydl (1916–1978), <http://abart-full.artarchiv.cz/skupiny.php?Fvazba=seznam-clenu&IDskupiny=150> [accessed 2 October 2015].

63 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jaity...*, op. cit., p. 49.

64 Ibid.

with Surrealism and Cubism, which it was supposed to synthesise, deriving its topics from the tradition of Surrealism and the “visual logic of construction” from Cubism.<sup>65</sup> Three Slovak artists, namely Dubay, Chmel and Zmetak, were presented as linked with the folk tradition. The Czechoslovakian avant-garde was described as a “progressive force” which, owing to the innovative form and focus on topics of everyday life, was firmly embedded in the development of Socialism.

## Conclusion

The interval between the two exhibitions, i.e. *Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art* at the National Museum and *Young Czechoslovakian Art* at the Young Artists and Scientists’ Club, was just a few months, as the former had opened in September of 1947 and the latter in June of 1948. Yet the exhibitions were also divided by a tragic event in Czechoslovakia – the coup d’état that resulted in the Communists assuming undisputed control over the country’s government. The coup, then officially known as “Victorious February”, took place in early 1948 and initiated a period of severe censorship and increased control over cultural life.

In his book *Awangarda w cieniu Jaty*, in the chapter referring to the years 1945–1948, Piotr Piotrowski describes the Hungarian, Czechoslovakian and Polish avant-garde of the era<sup>66</sup> and analyses the European School in Hungary, the tradition of Czech Surrealism, and the First Exhibition of Modern Art and the Cracow circle in Poland. In practice, each of these milieus is described in isolation from the others. Piotrowski considers the Czech avant-garde to be representative of the native, pre-war tradition, and also to be the milieu placed at the fore in contacts with Western Europe. He recalls *Art Tchecoslovaque*, an exhibition organised in 1946 by Galerie La Broëtie in Paris. The exhibited artists came from Group RA and Group 42, and the vernissage “attracted the Paris elite”. Piotrowski also mentions Group RA’s exhibition in Hungary in 1947, which was instigated by the European School.<sup>67</sup>

Piotrowski presents the Czech avant-garde as operating in opposition to the new political system and as “a remedy [...] to years of Socialist indoctrination”.<sup>68</sup> In his view, “after the Communist coup d’état in Czechoslovakia [...], the avant-garde tradition (including Surrealism) again (after the period of the Nazi occupation) became the officially condemned art and [was] not exhibited in public”.<sup>69</sup>

65 *Czechosłowacka młoda grafika* [Young Czechoslovakian Art], exhibition catalogue, Young Artists and Scientists’ Club, Warsaw, 1948, p. 6.

66 P. Piotrowski, *Awangarda w cieniu Jaty*..., op. cit., pp. 37–65.

67 Ibid., p. 49.

68 Ibid., p. 50.

69 Ibid., pp. 49–50.



Let it be emphasised once again that the *Young Czechoslovakian Art* exhibition, which displayed the oeuvre of two generations of Surrealists, opened at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club in Warsaw a few months after the coup d'état in Czechoslovakia. It constitutes one of the last examples of relative freedom the country enjoyed until the year 1948. Yet the fact that such exhibitions did take place at all encourages art historians to rethink and revise the currently accepted “trajectories” of the activity of the avant-garde milieus in Central-Eastern Europe in the first years after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War.

In addition, more caution should be exercised in assessing the issue of the artists' “programmatic opposition” towards the new system. As has already been emphasised, the same artists presented their works at the National Museum in Warsaw and at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club. The exhibition hosted by the National Museum had been prepared by ŚCUG “Hollar”, which means by the artists, not only by a government institution. Attempts at including avant-garde art into the new, Socialist system are evident in the catalogues of both exhibitions. However, it must be remembered that incorporating an artist's work into the ideology of the new system may have been a condition under which his works would be presented abroad. The repressions were increasing, forcing the creators to make very difficult choices. A detailed analysis of individual artistic choices during the period of political repressions is not central to this essay. However, a comparison of the conceptions and the selection of works presented at the exhibitions organised at the National Museum in Warsaw and at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club reveals with all certainty that Polish artists and Polish viewers were given the opportunity to familiarise themselves not only with the most recent works of art produced in Czechoslovakia but also with their authors.

A critical analysis of art produced in one country of the Eastern bloc as exhibited in another country of that bloc enables an art historian to outline a section of the history of artistic life which did not necessarily have to reflect the character of the official social and political relations in that given period. *Young Czechoslovakian Art* was on show at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club – and the authors of the exhibited works were invited to its opening – after the coup d'état in Czechoslovakia in 1948. In the period of “normalisation” in Czechoslovakia, which was marked by severe repressions, the National Gallery in Prague sent the exhibition *Czeski kubizm* [Czech Cubism] (1981) to the National Museum in Warsaw. An investigation of the circumstances in which the exhibitions were exchanged yields a very complex image of artistic life, and the analysis of texts published in the exhibition catalogues reveals how the interpretations of avant-garde art were dominated by the language of the official propaganda.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

## Abstract

In his book *Awangarda w cieniu Jałty* (*In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*), Piotr Piotrowski mentioned that Polish and Czechoslovakian artists were not working in mutual isolation and that they had opportunities to meet, for instance at the *Arguments 1962* exhibition in Warsaw in 1962. The extent, nature and intensity of artistic contacts between Poland and Czechoslovakia during their coexistence within the Eastern bloc still remain valid research problems. The archives of the National Museum in Warsaw and the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art which I have investigated yield information on thirty-five exhibitions of art produced in Czechoslovakia that took place in Warsaw in the period of the People's Republic of Poland. The current essay focuses on exhibitions organised in the late 1940s. The issue of official cultural cooperation between Poland and Czechoslovakia was regulated as early as in the first years after the war. Institutions intended to promote the culture of one country in the other one and associations for international cooperation were established soon after. As early as in 1946, the National Museum in Warsaw hosted an exhibition entitled *Czechoslovakia 1939–1945*. In 1947 the same museum showed *Contemporary Czechoslovakian Graphic Art*. A few months after “Victorious February”, i.e. the coup d'état carried out by the Communists in Czechoslovakia in early 1948, the *Young Czechoslovakian Art* exhibition opened at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club, a Warsaw gallery supervised by Marian Bogusz. It showed the works of leading artists of the post-war avant-garde, and their authors were invited to the vernissage. Nine artists participated in both exhibitions, i.e. at the National Museum and at the Young Artists and Scientists' Club. A critical analysis of art produced in one country of the Eastern bloc as exhibited in another country of that bloc enables an art historian to outline a section of the complex history of artistic life. Archival research yields new valuable materials that make it impossible to reduce the narration to a simple opposition contrasting the avant-garde with official institutions.