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Kladno : A Showcase of Socialism ?

Catherine Perron and Zdena Vajdová

After their accession to power in the different Central and East European countries in 1944-1948, the Communist parties engineered a wide social project. The new elites launched voluntary policies in different sectors of social life, one of them being the urban policy, which was used as a way to promote a new society and a new type of man (the “homo sovieticus”). They intended not only to embody the communist regime in an architectural manner, but also to model society according to their ideology, promoting both the needs of the population (mainly the workers), a new, more egalitarian and socialistic style of life, and a certain functional rationality¹.

In all East European countries, cities built during the 1950s and 1960s substantiate these attempts. They are usually closely linked to the industrialisation efforts of the new regime and to the battle for energetic independence, feature an important working-class population, and were erected as symbols of the regime’s political, economic and social ambitions. Kladno in Bohemia is an example of such a city². In this paper, we will analyze, beyond the “privileged city” myth, the kind of power practice entailed by these policies implementation; we will study the effects of this legacy in 1989 at the time of the regime fall.

Kladno: a short history of its industrialization and the arrival of socialism

"The town of Kladno ranks among the most important political and economic centres of the Kladno District due to its population and to its labour force concentration in the mining and metallurgy industries. This fact justifies the classification of Kladno as a first category town."³ Kladno’s social history is hiding behind these seemingly commonplace characteristics found in the City National Committee’s documentation of the 1980s. What was the central authorities’ power of decision based on? What consequences resulted from the use of this power? And what happened in 1989?

The development of the town and of its vicinity dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when coal mining began; the first blast furnace was built in 1855. Metallurgical plants then became the central element of Kladno’s history. They turned into the largest employer and the social and cultural aspects of the population’s life became closely related to their ups and downs. In 1946, at the end of the capitalistic industrialisation process, the metallurgical sector was modern and held a reserve production capacity, while Kladno’s population had stabilized at around 50,000 inhabitants. But the nationalization of the metallurgy sector in 1946 through the birth of the Unified Steelworks National Enterprise (SONP Kladno) and most importantly, the Communist coup in 1948, were followed all throughout the 1950s by a period of decline,

¹ See Ivan Szelenyi, "Cities under Socialism - and after", in Gregory Andrusz, Michael Harloe, Ivan Szelenyi (eds.), *Cities after Socialism: Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies*, Cambridge, Blackwell, p. 286- 317.

² Interestingly, Kladno’s image as a modern, dynamic city, an “American town” in the sense of a melting pot of population, and a booming, industrial, new urban center - thanks to the coal discovery- was forged during the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. See Jana Ratajová, “‘Czech California’: The creation of Kladno’s image at the end of the 19th and in the earlier 20th century”, in Lud’a Klusáková (ed.), *“We” and “the Others” : Modern European Societies in Search of Identity*, Prague, Karolinum, 2000 and 2004, p. 221-229. Later the communists used this image to stress the workers town and workers movement aspect.

³ It is technically inaccurate, since only the City National Committee was assigned a category status.

affecting both the Kladno factories and the people's standard of living. Exploitation is quite an apt term to describe what was happening at SONP.

It was only in the 1960s that extensive apartment-building activities, which brought a stabilisation of the labour force and an improvement of the living standards, began in Kladno. Higher-level professionals and young university graduates renewed the community lifestyle with their wider horizons and differentiated interests and needs. This generation had grown up under socialism and many took the state to be the best warrantor of their personal and collective welfare⁴. The socialist regime, though not perfect, was the source of their social status, success, and identity. A large group of professionals owed it their positions. The lower layers of society, on the other hand, valued a secure job and relatively good material conditions. The town of Kladno, with its huge metallurgical enterprise and adjacent coal mines, had become a model. A large working-class population and highly qualified professionals, all working in a very important socialist industrial sector, was its fundamental feature during the 1970s and 1980s.

The town population increased by 7,000 souls in the 1960s and 8,000 in the 1970s. In 1980, it had settled at 71,000 people, mainly thanks to incoming migration. People came looking for a good job and an apartment, elsewhere very difficult to obtain. In 1975, more than 25 years after the nationalization of the enterprise, the concept of metallurgical production finally won over: all other production but high-grade steel was abandoned. In 1977, the company was renamed Poldi United Steelworks National Enterprise, as a reminder of its original name, Poldi. It employed 20,000 people, who accounted for one-half of Kladno's population with their families. Employees wages were increasing annually. The 1985 average monthly salary at Poldi SONP was 3,640 CSK (3,537 CSK for workers, 4,063 CSK for mid-level managers)⁵. By comparison, the average monthly salary at the City National Committee was 2,188 CSK. Only Sigma Kladno (a machinery factory) offered salaries comparable to Poldi; the others, such as Kamenouhelné Doly (collieries) boasted 3,000 CSK, Kablo (cable manufacturer) 2,697 CSK, Mrazírny (refrigeration plant) 2,600 CSK and Sázavan (textile factory) 2,075 CSK.⁶

Urban policies as a tool for constructing socialism: a "first category" town

Already in the 1970s, a "social project" was drawn up for Kladno at the cost of 1.4 billion crowns, which was supposed to cover the period until 1985. Half of the money was due to be spent on the construction of new apartments. However, this project was never carried out. On the other hand, Poldi SONP's new director (in position since 1974) launched a social program. It actually extended beyond the factory borders and provided the town with a number of cultural and sporting centres, resulting in an exceptionally high level of sport sponsoring (with the successful sports club TJ Poldi SONP starting from 1977). The company built many apartments of its own, and supported the co-operative form of apartment construction in

⁴ See George Schöpflin, "Culture and Identity in Post-Communist Europe", in Steven White, Judy Batt, Paul G. Lewis (eds.), *Development in East European Politics*, London, Macmillan, 1993, p. 16-34.

⁵ Miroslav Jungr, "Sociálně-politický vývoj 1946-1985" (Social and political development 1946-1985), in K. Klíma (ed.), *Sto let oceli Poldi* (One hundred years of steel at Poldi), Prague, Kladno, Práce, SONP Poldi, 1989, p. 185-232.

⁶ From the document *Současný stav a výhled rozvoje města Kladna* (City of Kladno Current Status and Future Prospects, 1984), Městský národní výbor Kladno, 1984. According to J. Hampl, *Regional Development*, Prague, 2001, p. 31, the average salary in the Kladno district in 1989 reached 107.1 as opposed to a 100 average for the Czech Republic, attaining the sixth position after Karviná (122.4), Ostrava, Most, Frýdek-Místek and Sokolov. In 1999, the district fell out of the top ten – the first position was held by Prague (137.8), followed by Mladá Boleslav. Regions which had benefited from the socialist system now tend to lag behind.

several other ways. A large reconstruction of Kladno was planned in the late 1970s. The town was to become an architectural model; the town centre was to be taken down and completely rebuilt. But this plan never materialized either.

Central bodies of the Czechoslovak Communist Party were trying to ease their link to the government during the entirety of the 1980s. It was repeatedly heard at party forums that the Party's leading role should be implemented in such a way as to prevent the political leadership from interfering with the administration and economy management. The effort was also to involve Local National Committees, in particular City National Committees, the lowest unit of rule and control over the municipality and its population. A great deal of attention was paid to "increasing the efficiency of the National Committees action, specifically in the implementation of the regional units' comprehensive economic and social development" in cooperation with other organizations in the region⁷.

The National Committees Act was amended in 1982 in order to define the different categories of City National Committees (CNCs) and their authorized level of authority. The subsequent Czechoslovak Republic Government Decree No. 152/1982 Coll. established which of the large and spa cities would benefit from the first category status due to come into effect on 1 January 1983; Kladno was among them⁸. The authority of the CNC was increased. It began to include approval of important documents, such as the terrain map of the town, long-term concepts of regional development, and also medium-term and implementation economic plans, etc.

Decisions about investment allocation were among the most important as investments constituted the major part of the national economy means, directly affecting the proportional development of regions. First-category CNCs were represented in the Regional Investment Office, the decision-making investment body. They were also compelled, among other things, to establish, control and manage public services and the administration and maintenance of housing. This scope of activities was an extensive one, formerly exercised by District National Committees, and it enabled first category CNCs to exercise a substantial influence on the population's living conditions.

What were the consequences of Kladno's requalification? The Kladno CNC's archival material from the 1980s is not accessible yet. Only incomplete minutes of the meetings, sent to the District National Committee, are available. But other sources of information can be found in eyewitness accounts. One former CNC official was asked the same question he had been posed at a 1984 meeting (e.g., the second year of the first category promotion): "How has the first category status affected the public facilities in Kladno?"

His answer, at least today, is the following: "The CNC's representatives were members of the Regional Investment Office, where investment money was allocated - in Kladno's case, mainly for housing development. Then there were the so-called 'public facility standards' concerning health care, education and supply; representatives of the CNC could require from the Regional Investment Office the necessary investment to fulfil those standards. But the top priority was apartments, while the public facilities lagged behind."

Our main source of information on this period is a document entitled *Current Status and Future Prospects of the City of Kladno, 1984*. It was drafted by the CNC at the request of the Czechoslovak Communist Party's Central Bohemian Regional Committee. Here are its two main points:

⁷ See Vladimír Flegl, Miroslav Buřival, Antonín Eliáš, *Významná úloha národních výborů ve střediskových obcích* (The National Committees' significant role in the Central Bohemian districts), Prague, Svoboda, 1983.

⁸ The others were Mladá Boleslav, Karlovy Vary, Mariánské Lázně, Děčín, Chomutov, Liberec, Most, Teplice, Pardubice, Gottwaldov, Jihlava, Prostějov, Frýdek-Místek, Havířov, Karviná, Olomouc, Opava, Přerov and Třinec.

- the expected increase in population will not take place. It was expected in the 1970s that Kladno will one day reach the 100,000 population mark. But in 1984, it only counted 72,500 souls; the population estimate was revised since the increase had obviously stopped during the period 1980-1983 and the prediction was now set at 75,500 for the year 1990⁹;
- the environment will further deteriorate due to the metallurgy and mining industries, and neither the town nor the district have sufficient means to remedy it. The administrative authorities and the party bodies at both levels push for the Kladno agglomeration to be put on the central government's list of exceedingly damaged areas¹⁰.

The document further described the current status with a list of utterly insufficient civic facilities, missing classrooms in primary and secondary schools, insufficient health-care facilities, a few thousand missing apartments, and vastly insufficient building capacities. It pointed out the inadequate network of shops and the missing goods, from purses to footwear and underwear.

All this might lead one to wonder whether the situation was really better in Kladno than elsewhere, as is often claimed. Perhaps it is just one of those “prevailing myths,” based on the fact that there were several ESO (delicatessen) shops and one TUZEX. But the interviewee answered: “No, it is no myth if it was better in Kladno. The town had its privileges, thanks to the mines and steelworks. An effort was made to keep the population satisfied. More apartments, better facilities. Many new apartments were built, and people from the vicinity moved to the town. Their lifestyle was simple: work, home, and nothing more. Later, some of them took up gardening. There was a high level of comfort, city apartments had running water and heating. People were not utterly dissatisfied. Their living conditions were higher than anywhere else as far as culture, supply, textiles, foods and agricultural products were concerned. They were indeed incomparably higher. And so were the salaries.”

By the end of the 1980s, certain elements described as insufficient in the document had been remedied through improvement, repair and construction. So why did the regime collapse so easily in Kladno? Most inhabitants had grown up under socialist industrialization and had enjoyed the benefits provided by the socialist state even better than in other towns. But the interviews express precisely the “erosion of power”¹¹. A closer look at the way the Velvet Revolution took place in Kladno might help us to grasp what made the regime change possible and why it went on so smoothly, even in a place known as a “red bastion”. It also leads to question again this myth and the workers attitude towards the regime in general.

An imported “revolution”: the weakness of the opposition’s local resources

In the cities forming the Prague periphery, like Kladno, the Velvet Revolution took place through an imitation process. The mobilisation did not occur thanks to local activists but was imported from Prague, mainly by students and actors, who tried to spread the movement born

⁹ The actual figure in 1991 was 71,700. Another prediction counted on an 80,200 mark for the year 2000, the actual figure being 71,100 in 2001. The population continues to decrease.

¹⁰ They did not make it before the regime downfall.

¹¹ Zdena Vajdová, "Late communist rule at the district level", in Martin Hájek (ed.), *Hierarchy as the Strength and Weakness of Communist Rule*, Prague, SOU AV ČR, 2004, p. 97-105. Here is for example the opinion of the Poldi Museum director: “In Kladno, little was known about the dissident movement. But discrepancies between the proclamations and the reality were visible: there were no Russian computers but only IBMs in Poldi; boilers were not from the USSR but from West Germany; toilet paper was nowhere to buy and people brought home colour TV sets from business trips to the West. The regime was discredited. People were beaten during demonstrations in Prague in 1988; the Buštěhrad Mine Dump affair affected people in Kladno, many spoke of it with outrage; there were protest songs, samizdat books, a lot of listening to the BBC... The regime was unable to take any steps against the open manifestations of people's wishes to change it.”

in the capital on 17 November 1989¹². Given the weakness of the local opposition potential, it is with much delay that a Civic Forum branch finally appeared in Kladno. The homogenous social structure, the geographical diversity of its settlers, the city structure and the Party's strong will to control all spheres of life under communism, had combined to leave almost no space for underground or opposition movements¹³.

In November and December 1989, this link to the centre turned out to be a major resource for the mobilized few. Kladno's main activists were connected to *Laterna magika*, the Prague theater where the first revolutionary meetings had been held. They travelled back and forth and circulated ideas, information and strategies back home. Kladno's society was thoroughly unprepared and few local resources could be mobilized to overthrow the regime. Like elsewhere, the end of the communist rule came less as the result of a strategically planned action, structured and well organized, on the part of the "revolutionary avant-garde", than thanks to the Communist self-collapse. Therefore, it is worth taking a closer look at the functioning of the power structures in Kladno during these "revolutionary" months.

In Kladno, Poldi SONP turned out to be the main element at stake. The important issue was whether or not the workers would join the general strike on Monday 27 November¹⁴. Because of its economic, human (about 20,000 people were still working there) and symbolic weight (steelworks were considered a jewel of the communist regimes), Poldi was standing from the very beginning of the revolutionary movement at the center of attention, both for the power and the opposition, although both also held an ambiguous attitude.

Workers were strategically important because they could exercise a strong influence upon the course of the revolution yet opposition leaders, who mainly belonged to the "intelligentsia", distrusted them. They knew they had little in common and expected them to stick to their material well-being and to remain in favour of a status quo with the power. The Communist leaders, on the other hand, were afraid to lose the "ruling class" support and tried to ensure their loyalty by appealing to their economic sense of responsibility, while stressing a major economic destabilisation risk in connection with a living standard plunge.

The workers and management's attitude during the crisis

It would have been very helpful to know more about Poldi's internal situation during the revolution in order to understand the workers reaction towards the regime and the role played by the working-class in its 1989 demise. But we were denied access to the company's archives, so we had to content ourselves with interviews and local newspapers information¹⁵.

It seems that different groups set the mobilisation in motion inside the Poldi plant: young students of the Poldi technical schools, the Youth Union (SSM) and some mid-level managers, albeit not the workers. Workers did not get organised, even though many general meetings were held between 20-26 November. They did adopt a critical attitude, ask the government to clarify the 17 November events and pledge for dialogue with the students, but they remained loyal to the regime and openly doubted the Civic Forum and its claims' legitimacy; finally, they spoke out against the general strike and refrained from planning any

¹² For more details on the course of the Velvet Revolution in Kladno and other Czech cities, see Catherine Perron, *Les pionniers de la démocratie. Élités politiques locales tchèques et est-allemandes 1989-1998*, Paris, PUF, 2004, p. 55-58.

¹³ This does not mean that there were no people hostile to communism; but those who wanted to be active engaged in dissident or opposition movements directly in Prague, which is only a few kilometers away from Kladno.

¹⁴ The general strike was called for by the students and the Civic Forum to serve as a plebiscite against the regime.

¹⁵ The *Kladenská Záře* (Sparkle from Kladno) and *Kladenský Kovák* (The Kladno Steelworker.)

action. The will or the means to contest the existing power were obviously very weak and point to a form of constraint integration at the grassroots, where the regime pressure was particularly strong.

Poldi's striking-committee was founded very late (on Saturday 25 November, only two days before the actual strike) at the personal initiative of Martin Peroutka. This white collar, working in the electronic maintenance department, used his connections to the Civic Forum Coordination Centre in Prague as an organisational and informational resource and managed to launch the protest inside Poldi. He took the lead and concluded the big Letná rally in Prague on 26 November by announcing, without having previously consulted the others, Poldi's participation in the general strike. This participation eventually stemmed from individual decisions, not from preliminary activism on the workers' part, nor from an organized mobilisation policy. The 6,000 Poldi employees (out of 20,000) who did take part had simply taken advantage of the top management's momentary hesitation.

The said managers, who were very powerful in and out of the plant, unexpectedly did let things happen. They could have made use of the workers militia to threaten those willing to join the demonstration during the general strike on 27 November, but they lacked the will to do so.

This attitude is significant. Due to their influential position, they were involved in the local political struggle and decision-making. They reacted to the events apparently faster and more independently than their local counterparts, the Party's District Committee and the Local and District National Committees, as they were not completely hostile to change. The declaration they issued during Hanuš's (member of the Communist Party Central Committee) visit to the plant on 22 November, not only appealed to the Central Committee to be open to discussion with the students, but asked for more space to be left for creative work (i.e., less party domination). Poldi's management publicly distanced themselves from any attempt to use force¹⁶.

This responsiveness, as opposed to the paralysis of the National Committee and Party bodies at local and district level, leads us to speculate that the party members directly employed in the production had been confronted to the regime absurdities and shortages much more abruptly, and had thus become more critical than functionaries working in the party apparatus. It would be interesting to examine how the formers' careers and networks had shaped their legitimacy vis-à-vis the locals and the party hierarchy, whether they found party-affiliation or technical competence to be more of use, and to what extent they had used this legitimacy and their professional networks to preserve autonomy spaces from the party hierarchy.

Conclusion

If one is to question the forms of domination exercised by the Communist Party on society (for instance the totalitarian paradigm), or the theory that the administration and mass organisations acted as the Party's driving belt, the answer is going to be complex for the late 1980s. The Party might have kept dominating the state apparatus until the end but Poldi's case shows that it was not so as far as the mass organisations and production were concerned.

In November 1989 the Kladno potential for mobilisation and collective action was weak. The locals paid a more or less cynical obedience to the regime. Nevertheless, it seems that even in this "privileged city" ideology could not conceal anymore the inner contradictions of everyday life. It was more difficult than anywhere else to entertain among the workers the

¹⁶ See *Kladenská Záře*, "Přehled nejdůležitějších událostí v našem okrese od soboty 18. do pátku 24 listopadu. Zelená požadavkům rozumu a otevřenosti" (Survey of the most important events in our district from Saturday 18 November to Monday 24 November. Green light to reason and openness demands), 29 November 1989.

illusion of success Kladno was supposed to stand for, an illusion founded on what Miroslav Kusý has called the “as if” ideology¹⁷. The nonconformity between myth and reality was all too obvious.

During the 1980s, the equality principle which had fueled the advent of real socialism was completely disreputed, and did not function anymore in a society which, even in Kladno, aspired to a bigger differentiation in lifestyle and consumption. More than anywhere else, the population must have realized that the private profits one could gain from the system were about to peter out.

¹⁷ See Miroslav Kusý, "Chartism and Real Socialism", in Václav Havel (ed.), *The Power of the Powerless*, New-York, Hutchinson, 1985, p. 164.