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The socialist work groups: from the Soviet case to the Czechoslovak one

Dalibor Státník

The theme of the socialist work groups which is covered in the paper by Sandrine Kott interests me not only as a historian but primarily as a participant. In fact, I was confronted with them to an increasing extent from the second half of the 1970s onwards, firstly as a student and then as an archivist. My paper will therefore not be just a commentary based on second-hand sources but a reflection on a phenomenon from our recent history from the double point of view of historian and witness.

I shall start by referring to the doctrine that underlay the work groups, that of the "participation of the workers in the management of the economy", and shall continue by recalling the beginnings of "socialist emulation" in the Soviet Union and then the results of its application in Czechoslovakia. I shall then turn to the methodological problems raised by the theme of the socialist work groups as seen by a contemporary historian. In conclusion I shall raise the fundamental issue of the appropriateness of writing the history of events that we have lived through in person.

The doctrine underlying the work groups: the participation of the workers in the management of the economy

The socialist work groups in Czechoslovakia have always been something that was above all connected with the trade unions. Their activities were governed by directives from the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, the ROH [*Revoluční odborové hnutí*],¹ and in particular from its central command body, the Central Trade Union Council. The various directives were then transmitted down from the top level until they reached the ROH trade union councils at the factory level.

There was nothing coincidental about this structure. As is well known, in the states that called themselves "socialist", the trade unions had been deprived of their traditional rights such as the right to strike and trade union pluralism, and were thus incapable of carrying out normal activity. On the other hand, in applying the doctrine, "[...] it was necessary to involve the masses in running the country, which implied on the legal level the progressive transference to the trade unions of a certain number of prerogatives that until then had been assumed by the state."² And so in the 1950s Czechoslovakia did what the Soviet Union had done after 1933, and abolished the Ministry of Employment, transferring its powers to the ROH, together with various other functions such as social security, health care at work, etc.

On the surface, the principal task of the ROH was to concentrate on improving productivity at work, but also to snuff out any trade union conflict at the grass roots. Far from protecting workers and their rights, it sometimes became their inspector, indeed a sort of "gendarme", in cooperation with the authorities of the economy and the Party. Underneath, it had an even more ambitious function. The ideologues of the time believed that it ought to become, in the final stage of its development, a "school of communism": "The socialist revolution constitutes a decisive turning-point in the development of the trade union movement. The role of the trade unions is fundamentally different under capitalism and socialism, since the working class, formerly oppressed, becomes the ruling class [...]. It is necessary to transfer all the combative energy of the masses into the arena of the national

¹ The ROH, created by the forced amalgamation of all the former trade unions, was the only trade union allowed in Czechoslovakia under communism [Translator's note].

² *Dějiny odborového hnutí v SSSR* (The history of the trade union movement in the USSR), Prague, 1962, p. 274.

economy, where the victory of the new social order will be decided[...]. The trade unions are a school of administration, a school of management, a school of communism."³

In this context, it is possible to understand the socialist work groups as an integral part of the broader notion of the "participation of the workers in the management and development of the economy." Here too, the Soviet model played a substantial role. During the plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in December 1957, a directive was adopted on trade union activity. Among other things it stipulated, "The forms in which workers should be involved in the management of production are socialist emulation, production councils, innovation and creation movements, technical conferences, etc."⁴ This vision was never denied under the communist regime, and nearly twenty years later the theoreticians of the Czechoslovak trade union movement were still at the same stage: "Socialist emulation is the privileged expression of important changes in the socio-economic structure and the increasing participation of the workers in the management of production [...]."⁵

In the context of a virtually total nationalisation of the means of production and radical limitation of the political activities of ordinary citizens, the so-called "participation of the workers" could hardly be anything more than a propaganda manoeuvre which did not and could not have anything in common with genuine participation in "power". It was no more than a slogan intended to boost output and production at the very time that socialist production conditions were causing the communist countries to lose more and more ground in comparison with the capitalist economies.

The absurdity of this combination of functions is admirably illustrated by the principle of *socialist emulation* at all levels, an emulation that was supposed to lead to a result (which is debatable) not only in the concrete sphere of production, but also in terms of ideology and propaganda. As the official concept proclaimed, "Socialist emulation is the best management school, the school of struggle for the socialist discipline of the workers that Lenin talked of. Emulation does not allow us to remain at the same level, or to have a facile satisfaction with the results that have been obtained. It leads us to move forward, to search for new possibilities, and to increase the tempo of construction, and it raises the political activity of the workers and their cultural level."⁶

Or again, in the terms of a manual for these "pioneers of socialist work" that the members of the work groups were supposed to be, "The most effective method for the trade union organisation to be able to connect the worker with the production quota and exceeding it is socialist emulation. It constitutes a method of creating a new human being, of developing his capacity for creativity, criticism, and self-criticism."⁷

Socialist emulation

Socialist emulation was launched in Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1950s as a movement of "shock workers" who would exceed and then raise the production quotas, which

³ František Srb, "Odbory - mocná opora strany" (The trade unions – a powerful support for the Party), in *Ze čtyřiceti let zápasů KSČ. Historické studie* (Forty years of struggle for the KSČ [Czechoslovak Communist Party]). Historical studies, Prague, 1961, p. 424.

⁴ *Dějiny odborového hnutí v SSSR* (The history of the trade union movement in the USSR), op. cit., p. 407.

⁵ Bohuslav Chýle (ed.), "Účast ROH na rozvoji československé ekonomiky" (The part played by the ROH in the development of the Czechoslovak economy), in *Kapitoly o ROH, sborník statí* (Some chapters on the ROH, a collection of articles), Prague, 1979, p. 205.

⁶ František Srb, op. cit., p. 426.

⁷ *Průkopníci socialistické práce a života. 1. celostátní porada BSP, 2. díl* (Pioneers of socialist work and life. The first national consultation of the Socialist Work Groups, volume 2), Prague, 1962, p. 5.

had fallen spontaneously as a result of the passive resistance of the majority of the workers. Various campaigns and promotional events were launched, such as the movement of Libčice and Myjava for work groups that did not take a break ("from siren to siren"), the participation of the foremen and technicians in the peace movement, or the campaign "Truman's bomb will not fall on us."

The Soviet model continued to be copied during the "normalisation" period in the 1970s, and gave rise to such inspiring initiatives as the Saratov movement of impeccable work, the Ivov system of quality management of products, the Bassov method aimed at eliminating accidents at work, and many other eccentric ideas – even if in spite of everything they did contain certain elements that modernised labour management. As the propaganda summed it up, "During the course of the construction of socialism, numerous initiatives came into being in the area of socialist work, from the voluntary work groups through the "shock work groups" to the pioneers and the work group leaders."⁸

And the results matched the high expectations: "Recently, the many different forms taken by socialist emulation have made possible the emergence of a powerful group of leading workers coming from its ultimate form, that of the socialist work groups. The work groups raise the struggle for greater productivity to a qualitatively unparalleled level, transform all their members into innovators, and turn them into more productive workers. They improve the cultural and technical levels of the worker, of employees and agricultural workers, and they help them to improve their knowledge to the level of that of an engineering technician. Through their work, the participants in this movement help to establish the principles of socialist ideology and morality as part of the norms of everyday life and behaviour both at work and in private life, and they take great care that the economic changes that society has been going through are completely accepted by the social conscience, all of this in accordance with the principle: *Work in the socialist way – live in the socialist way.*"⁹

Thus we can see that the socialist work groups were considered by the "theoreticians" of scientific communism as the most important element of the concept of socialist emulation. Indeed, obtaining the title of "work group" was dependent on meeting certain obligations in terms of productivity, savings in raw materials, and so on.

The origins of socialist emulation: the Soviet case

The aim of my paper is not by any means to go into a detailed description of the phenomenon of "socialist emulation" and its derivative, the socialist work group, in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1989 – or rather 1945 to 1989, because we find the first embryonic stages of this emulation soon after the liberation of the country in 1945, in the form of the National Competition for war damage reparations and also in the fulfilment of the two-year plan. However, it seems to me necessary to trace back the specific context of the Czechoslovak case, at the risk of falling into the trap of a potentially misleading analogy with the East German case.

Socialist emulation has its origins in the political works of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in the early days of the Bolshevik regime in Russia. It is to his *Great initiative* that later theorists refer and from which everything else develops, from the directives of the Party and the unified trade union to propaganda brochures. In spite of all the criticisms and gibes, the scorn and the hate that are bestowed on the Soviet regime today, it is necessary to understand the era and the context in which these concepts made their appearance, in particular the place of

⁸ Report and tasks of the ROH as presented during the 6th Trade Union Congress in 1967. See Bohuslav Chýle (ed.), op. cit., p. 206.

⁹ See František Srb, op.cit., p. 439.

the working class in Tsarist Russia and the hope for change that "experimental socialism" might have represented. The situation of this working class, to speak in minimalist terms, was not yet on the level of standards in Western Europe. It is incidentally in the backward character of the country that some critical historians of the communist and working-class movement have seen an explanation for the failure to export the revolution on a firm basis to the more developed countries of Central Europe.

A considerable amount can be learned about socialist emulation and its beginnings in the USSR and Czechoslovakia through a literary form *sui generis*, the novel on the theme of building up socialism, which substituted schematism and ideology for critical realism. Without abandoning the necessary critical approach, it is possible to find in these novels significant descriptions of the reality of Soviet shock workers; this type of literature was after all supposed to act as a propaganda model. It was intended to educate the *people*, above all so as to encourage them to carry out informed and devoted work at the service of the regime and of the state.

Let us take one example at random among many others. The Ukrainian writer Aleksander Kopylenko wrote about the necessity of socialist emulation and the new mechanisms that it needed to develop in order to achieve the construction of the new "socialist" town of Stalgorod. The old bricklayers, not just any bricklayers but the ones who were working on the facades, refused to use the new methods – methods that were passed over in silence but which would certainly have favoured quantity at the expense of quality, and would have enabled the non-qualified farm workers who came into industry and construction at the end of the 1930s as part of Stalin's five-year plans to learn them quickly. The old bricklayers expected to carry on working in the way they had been used to in the past, and came into conflict with the young "builders up of socialism" (completely fanaticised and manipulated), who were bursting with modern ideas. This is how they described the old days: "Before, we did it like this: the foreman came and said, *Boys, if you finish this building ahead of time, you will get half a bucket of schnapps...* You should have seen us go. Walls and records went up in no time [...]." ¹⁰

What a contrast with the new approach, of which the protagonist is a seventeen-year-old komsomol, Balala: "We are the youth and the komsomol... A youth that renovates facades. We have a duty to show everybody how youth works. You tell me five days and me, I tell you: four days, or even less. We are required to set an example... We are going to devote our days off to it. If they give us light we will spend our nights on it. I tell you, comrades, let us show them what our komsomol battalions are capable of. Let all youth see how we struggle for the five-year plan." ¹¹

The socialist regime liked to describe itself as being based on scientific management, which was why the future was supposed to belong to it. It is therefore not surprising that socialist emulation was also understood as being the movement of the inventors and creators. The bricklayers followed this line when resolving the problem in the book: "We have been told, quite correctly, that Váňa, for example, earns more and works more. Why? Because he works efficiently, on the basis of scientific knowledge, whereas we don't have this scientific knowledge, although in fact we need it because it would help us. I don't understand why we should be afraid of science. Science is there for us, so let's go, let's get started, let's work in a scientific way... We should change to new methods motivated by science." ¹²

The appearance and the development of the "shock work groups"

¹⁰ Olexandr I. Kopylenko, *Rodí se město* (A town is born), Prague, 1949, p. 106.

¹¹ Idem, p. 113.

¹² Idem, p. 184.

Socialist emulation, methods intended to improve productivity in a disorganised country, and the desire to do more and more work made their appearance in Russia right after the October Revolution, originally in the form of *subotniki*, "volunteer" work groups and teams working on Saturdays and days off. According to the official Soviet history of the trade union movement, the movement of "shock workers" came into being at the beginning of 1927, when the best members of the komsomols at the Lysvensky enamelling factory set up a group that they called a "shock work group".¹³ Others followed their example and their initiative was supposed to produce a saving in material and machines as well as increasing productivity.¹⁴

In 1928, the "shock workers" movement acquired mass proportions. In the *Equality* textile factory in Leningrad, members of the komsomols organised model groups and committed themselves to make proper use of the whole working day and to reduce slack periods, absenteeism and defective production.¹⁵ It is important to realise that for the Russian muzhiks industrialisation was not such a familiar process as it was for people in the West, who had known it for centuries. They had to submit to an artificial division of time based on the rhythm of the factory siren, collective life, dormitories and other elements, all of which uprooted them from their culture.

Now the Soviet industrialisation that took place as part of the first five-year plans had absorbed, as we noted earlier, an influx of the population from the countryside. The initiators of the shock work groups no doubt came up against much more determined resistance on the part of the workers, who were afraid that they would have to produce more and have their wages reduced – just as was the case in Czechoslovakia after February 1948.

At the end of the 1920s, during the "glory days" of the first five-year plans, the first initiatives in creating work collectives certainly came "from above", whether from the Party authorities or from the trade unions. This was the true beginning of mass socialist emulation.¹⁶ The appeal to all Soviet workers by the workers of the *Red trade union worker* factory in Leningrad, published in *Pravda* on 5 March 1929, is considered to be particularly important. It called for an increase in productivity, a better use of machines, and so on. It was not intended to be a short-term campaign but a method of working enabling workers to discard for ever the old habits and working methods of the capitalist era.¹⁷

The year 1929 in fact represents an important period for heroic acts of various sorts. On the initiative of a painter of buildings called Slobodchikov, who worked in the *Proletarian factory for the repair of locomotives*, the religious festival of the Transfiguration was abolished and replaced by Industrialisation Day, intended to fulfil the plan by means of a grand trade union parade celebrating socialist emulation, which subsequently took on the name of "great *subotnik*".¹⁸ From this period, too, dates the slogan "The five-year plan in four years."

A few figures will serve to illustrate what we mean. At the end of 1929, 330,000 shock workers were recorded; this figure would climb to 3.5 million, divided into 200,000 work groups, in 1931, and to 5 million in 1933¹⁹ (and it continued to grow afterwards, at least on paper). Admittedly, even at the time, the formalism of this movement was criticised. Although

¹³ This term was symptomatic of a country "besieged by capitalism", as it liked to describe itself. Other communist parties later adopted it, as they did various other terms such as the "battle for wheat", the "implacability of the struggle against reaction", "ideological fronts", and so on.

¹⁴ *Dějiny odborového hnutí v SSSR* (History of the trade union movement in the USSR), op. cit., p. 222.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 223.

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 234 ff.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 236.

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 239-240.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 242, 269 and 277. According to official statistics, 70 % of industrial workers were involved in socialist emulation in 1933.

criticism and self-criticism formed part of the classical display of communist officials, in this case it was certainly justified.

The year 1932 marked another turning-point, with the miner from the Donbas, Nikita Izotov, exceeding his quota ten times over, which gave birth to the *Izotov movement*.²⁰ But the shock worker movement certainly saw its most glorious moment on 31 August 1935, when the famous Aleksei Grigorievich Stakhanov, from the *Irmino central* mine in the Donbas, succeeded in mining 102 tonnes of coal in a single day's work, thus exceeding the quota fourteen times over.²¹ Even if it is clear that, as with all the other records that preceded or followed it, this one could not have been achieved without the support of the whole of the mine, under conditions specially created for the occasion, with the aim of being used for propaganda purposes, the term "Stakhanovite" acquired international fame and to some extent caused the movements that had preceded it to be forgotten.

Similar records, commitments, initiatives, proclamations and other "new working methods" are to be found throughout the lifetime of the communist regimes. They testify to the constant necessity to stimulate the population by the use of new methods, which however inevitably failed in their essential aim, that of increasing productivity and the quality of production.

The importation of the work groups into Czechoslovakia

The movement of the socialist work groups as such came into being in the Soviet Union under Krushchev, in the second half of the 1950s. Coincidentally, it was in the same locomotive depot in Moscow where the first *subotnik* had taken place on 10 May 1919 that the term socialist work group was used for the first time. At the time, the following explanation was given of how the title of worker in a socialist work group differed from other forms of socialist emulation: "The main features of the competition for the title of worker or shock worker in a socialist work group consist in the fact that such a worker combines in an organic way the effort to increase productivity on the basis of new techniques and the birth of a new person, an administrator of the country who continually looks forward, searches, reflects, and is creative. This emulation links work, teaching and everyday life, allowing its presence to be felt in all aspects of human life, and is an important method of removing the old distinction between physical and intellectual work."²²

In Czechoslovakia, it was the Nosek mine in Buchlovice (near Kladno), that was the first to import the concept of the socialist work group on the Soviet model, in November 1958. Others followed immediately: "In 1959, the news that workers in the Soviet Union were competing for the title of socialist work group circulated in our factory. It had already been planned during meetings of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the ROH to strengthen internal competition. And so we started setting up collectives that competed for the title of socialist work group."²³

It seems that this initiative really did come from the grass roots and not from above, and that the trade union leadership was at first somewhat taken aback by this spontaneity, before taking the appropriate measures to submit this new movement to its authority: "In 1958, the

²⁰ Idem, p. 267.

²¹ Idem, p. 279-280.

²² See *Pravda*, 28 May 1960. See also *Dějiny odborového hnutí v SSSR* (History of the trade union movement in the USSR), op. cit., p. 447.

²³ *Průkopníci socialistické práce a života. 1. celostátní porada BSP, 2. díl* (Pioneers of socialist work and life. The first national consultation of the Socialist Work Groups, volume 2), op. cit., p. 96 (account by a representative of a transport enterprise in Horažďovice.)

establishment of the movement of communist work groups in the Soviet Union triggered off a certain response among the Czechoslovak workers. Once again they fully grasped the importance of this Soviet experience. It was primarily the workers who responded by taking action. Work collectives were established on their initiative and they decided to work, to learn, and to live in a socialist way. By applying the Soviet experience, they linked the movement of the socialist work groups to the rich tradition of work initiatives in Czechoslovakia [...]."²⁴

From 19 to 21 January 1961 the first national conference of the socialist work groups was held in Prague, convened by the Central Council of Trade Unions and the Union of Czechoslovak Youth. Its ambition and its objectives were not exactly modest: "The struggle for the title of socialist work group worker finds expression in our society in the sincerity of human relations. Our society will no longer have any need in its dictionary for entries such as 'hate', 'war', or 'enemy' ".²⁵ The expectations sometimes bordered on sainthood: "[...] the struggle for this heroic title is a difficult one, the members of the collective have to constantly demonstrate their absolute and disinterested love for work, for their socialist motherland, and for the policies of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. If they do not feel this love, then they cannot and will not be able to succeed, and their efforts to achieve this title will take a long time."²⁶

At the beginning of 1959, 33 work collectives took part in the competition; by the end of the year, 100,000 more people had joined them in a total of 10,015 collectives, of which 168 obtained the famous title. In 1960, there were 40,000 collectives involved (of which 2,548 obtained the title), representing 379,898 workers and technicians. By 1965 there were 94,000 socialist work groups, including some 51,000 collectives with a total of a million members. After a substantial drop in 1966-1967, numbers picked up again, and by the end of the 1980s there were 2,825,161 members involved in the competition in 208,308 collectives, of which just over half had been awarded the famous title of "work group".²⁷

The subject of the work groups gave rise to a wealth of literature, from which we have quoted some extracts here, which continued to repeat practically the same thing all the time from the end of the 1950s until the end of the communist regime. Inasmuch as this discussion was based on premises that were not contested and were to a large extent shared by academic communism and the Marxist-Leninist ideology, I am assuming that the Czech and East German versions were certainly quite comparable.

The specific features of Czechoslovakia as compared to the GDR

Nevertheless, there is a point that is specific to the Czechoslovak reality: it was fond of aspects that were very real (though difficult to reconstruct) in the Czech national character, that well-known tendency to ridicule, be ironic, and see things from a different perspective. The experience of the Prague Spring, the reform movement in 1968-1969 that is associated with the name of its protagonist, Alexander Dubček, is also important. At least since the beginning of the 1960s, the system had been going through a global crisis, and that included the trade unions and socialist emulation. The crisis led to a process of regeneration and not the opposite, as the official legend tried to make people believe. We can in fact ask the question: was it really a case of a reform of the Party and consequently of the whole of society, or, on the contrary, a gradual change in society to which the Party simply adapted?

²⁴ Bohuslav Chýle (ed.), op.cit., p. 203.

²⁵ *Průkopníci socialistické práce a života. 1. celostátní porada BSP, 2. díl* (Pioneers of socialist work and life. The first national consultation of the Socialist Work Groups, volume 2), op. cit., p. 47.

²⁶ Idem, p. 68.

²⁷ *Brigády socialistické práce* (Socialist work groups), Prague, 1982, p. 15.

In any case, after the armed intervention, nothing could be considered "real" any more in our country. In the GDR, which did not experience this crisis, even if factors of disintegration were certainly present there too, things may have looked more authentic. The period 1968-1969, no matter how limited it may have been in terms of time, or even, for some people today, in its intellectual and political dimension, was the most inspired part of the whole communist era. Its victories, its magazines, its books and its films enabled us to keep going until November 1989. It was the only time when we were able to talk, write, think, and carry out our research in complete freedom. The old ways of thinking were examined and called into question, at least until the period of "normalisation" under Husák put a stop to this.

This critical spirit is particularly apparent in a work detailing the results of a sociological survey devoted to socialist emulation, which was carried out in several mechanical engineering factories.²⁸ The researchers seemed to feel it was necessary to evaluate the policy of socialist emulation not simply using the same old stereotyped political language, but in terms of measurable results, something which had never been done. This explains why factories that did not fulfil the plan could still receive a positive assessment: "When attempting to evaluate the results of socialist emulation, it was often impossible to base oneself on the official data from the economic or trade union bodies, which failed to correspond to the expected results from the production plan. So it was proclaimed that socialist emulation provided satisfactory results, at the same time as the plan was not being fulfilled, with hollow phrases like, 'If socialist emulation was not applied so successfully, the deficiencies would have been even more serious...'. Incidentally, this observation illustrates the positivist role of the socialist work groups and their way of "modelling the regime".

The survey also shows us that the socialist commitments were not taken very seriously. The reason lay in their formalism, in other words the fact that "[...] the people making the production commitments were not connected to the productive capacity, but to sectors that had nothing to do with it, usually the trade unions or the administration. Making the commitment thus testified not so much to a true spirit of conquest as to a spirit of good will, which however is not enough so far as socialist emulation is concerned. This is why we often come across commitments that do not require anything more than perfectly ordinary work quotas. They are usually made under pressure, without any true inner conviction."²⁹

The change of generations was also regarded as a decisive factor: "A new generation has appeared which is not linked to the past and did not participate in the construction of our socialist society. The motivation and excitement that prevailed in the post-war years have now disappeared or only have a reduced influence."³⁰ Lenka Kalinová confirms that the 1960s saw the rise of a post-war generation that had neither experienced the economic crisis of 1929 nor the Munich betrayal, which naturally modified its scale of values. The members of this generation were frustrated at not being able to express themselves better, not being able to travel, etc. According to the author, they aspired not so much to a radical change of society as to a greater degree of openness.³¹

The survey also shows that "according to the workers, socialist emulation as it exists today no longer inspires much respect. Formalism has reached such a degree that emulation no longer has much influence on tasks linked to the construction of socialist society."³² Only

²⁸ See Ivan Halada, *Socialistické soutěžení očima pracujících* (Socialist emulation through the eyes of the workers), Prague, Práce, 1968. This research was carried out by the Trade Union of Workers in the Metallurgy Industry together with the Institute of Sociology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.

²⁹ Idem, p. 75-76.

³⁰ Idem, p. 62.

³¹ Lenka Kalinová, "Sociální reforma a sociální realita v Československu v šedesátých letech" (Social reform and social reality in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s), *Studie z hospodářských dějin*, 5, Prague, Vysoká škola ekonomická, 1998, p. 64.

³² See Ivan Halada, op.cit., p. 50.

the over-50s, in other words "those who knew the motivating force of socialist emulation in the post-war years, with the end of the occupation and the belief in a rapid transition from capitalism to communism, reinforced by their progressive socialisation", still attached a certain importance to it.³³

The purely formal character of the commitments made in connection with the socialist work groups is here underlined once again. The proof can be seen in the fact that 23.3% of those questioned replied that their motivation for making these commitments lay in the fact that "it was what was expected of them", 12% "because it was what the others did", 11.5% "in response to an order from their superior", followed by other various motives. Altogether, only 15.8% of those interrogated mentioned their conviction that it was effective. (This last statistic is particularly interesting because it shows a strong correlation with the election results of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia after 1989. This is without doubt no coincidence but the expression of a "potential communist" in Czech society, who is only marginally affected by the propaganda representing communism as a scandalous period in our history.)

These results were analysed by the socialist experts of the time as follows: "During the crisis years of 1968 and 1969, numerous distortions of socialism became established, which applied to the field of work initiatives as well. Socialist emulation was considered useless, and the principal motivation for work was supposed to lie in the salary [...]. In order to overcome this crisis, the work programme revived the work initiatives [...]."³⁴

The philosophy underlying the Czech historical approach to the socialist work group

In spite of the wealth of material available on the theme of the socialist work groups, the methodological question that is inherent in the study of contemporary history remains a real one: we lack that distance in terms of time that can either confirm or invalidate many elements in the past, so that we are able to identify those long-term cycles so beloved of the French school of the *Annales*. Fortunately, Professor Sandrine Kott certainly has this detachment, above all on the emotional level. However, I think that we who have lived part of our lives in socialist Czechoslovakia do not have this detachment and never will. We lived through this era without knowing that one day, and during our lifetime to boot, it would be the subject of such pitiless analyses.

Many colleagues to whom I have mentioned the theme of the socialist work groups were astonished to hear that they are the subject of serious research today; the fact is that the study of everyday life and the history of mentalities have not so far penetrated sufficiently into our academic arena to be able to become an integral part of the arsenal and the philosophy of historians of mature or advanced years. Some of them are still firmly encamped on the positions of positivist and political historiography, professing at the most a slight interest in economic and social history.

If we do have this detachment from the events in terms of time, then archive documents become a blessing for us. If we do not, they can turn out to be problematic, an opinion that you might not have expected to hear from an archivist. For let us ask ourselves the question: did we believe in socialist emulation, in the movement of "improvement", in the economy of foreign currency, in the economy of goods? Did we really believe in the socialist work groups? I think that the answer is obvious.

I myself experienced many times the humour that prevailed among the "production" workers. Even though our French colleagues may be tempted to call into question the experience of a student forced to take part in a socialist work group, I would like to inform

³³ Idem, p. 51.

³⁴ Bohuslav Chýle (ed.), op.cit., p. 208.

them that Czechoslovak students were often sent forcibly to work in the work groups, either short- or long-term, both after 1945 and in the 1970s and 1980s. So instead of going on practice placements or studying abroad for a while (such openings were extremely limited), we were sent to work in the work groups, picking hops, working on building sites, or doing other similar work.

In spite of this, I have never come across the slightest vestige of the mentality of the work groups in the way people live today, nor even other traces left by the socialist way of life, such as the work initiatives and emulation, not to mention the supposed cure of human failings by socialism, like the relationship to property, which the people was supposed to be liberated from through the collective possession of the means of production. It is certainly true that people complained about shortcomings in production, but I cannot ever remember them looking for a solution in emulation, the work groups, the Communist Party, or the trade unions.

It is also important to understand that the number of socially active people devoted to the "cause of socialism" declined visibly, especially after the crushing of the Prague Spring. There were certainly still plenty of people who wanted to make a career with the help of the Communist Party. Such people had no trouble simply swapping the Communist Party for another political direction later on. Incidentally, one of the explanations for the non-violent political transition in our country lies in the fact that the communists metamorphosed without any resistance into democrats – as they would have been capable of becoming adherents of any other regime. Here we can say that our democracy, and perhaps not just ours, experiences a certain limitation, a certain fragility, at this point.

Researchers from other countries may perhaps find it difficult to believe, but active communists did not have an easy life under the "normalisation" regime in Czechoslovakia; it would not be exaggerating very much to say that they were "underground", in Prague for example, or at least that they were completely isolated. It seems to me that it is absolutely essential to integrate this factor into the picture if one wants to understand the reality of our life (a proof incidentally of the absurdity of "real socialism") and to have an objective attitude towards the sources.

I do not in any way want to call into question the ability of the Communist Party and its committees (from those at the level of individual enterprises right up to the Central Committee) to well and truly demean human lives and society as a whole through their decisions on acceptance into schools and employment, dismissals from posts, foreign travel, etc. But most of the grass-roots members were ashamed of their association with communist politics. They did not brag about it and did not justify the party policies in public, even though the party statutes imposed this obligation on them. Opportunism could still just about be tolerated, but ideological conviction was socially completely unacceptable.

It was no different with the showcase for the Communist Party that the socialist work groups represented. Everybody, including the members of the work groups, knew that working in them was not always something to be proud of, but it was a necessary evil if they and their families were to be left in peace. But if we look at the official documents (we do not even have to visit the archives; it is enough to leaf through contemporary magazines such as *Svět socialismu* [The world of socialism]), we read the exact opposite, namely that the communist members of the work groups are a model for youth, that they inspire the others by their personality, etc.

This is an additional methodological problem. I am aware that a whole series of documents can be found testifying to the activity and the success of the work groups. People in this country can still remember television news programmes when practically every evening was edified by examples of work groups that functioned in a scintillating way. But I think that few people believed this. So the question remains of how to deal with this source

and other written documents. I do not know of any Czech equivalents of the work group chronicles mentioned by Sandrine Kott, but I would like to warn against placing too much trust in this type of source.

My experience with the trade union sources, above all with those of their highest authorities, leads me to maintain that no trace of social movement is to be found there before November 1989, and that their documentary value is debatable. The reports of the trade union apparatus contained tall tales couched in a stereotyped political language (remember Havel's "ptydepe"), based on outdated patterns and clichés, in terms of both form and content. We are left with the choice between sweeping them aside with the back of our hand, together with the television news programmes, and working seriously with them, and consequently conferring a *certain reality* on the work groups.

We can do this. It has certainly happened to all of us that we have revised our judgement on one point or another of the communist past, and been influenced by a propaganda that knew only too well how to combine exaggerations with what was false and also with what was true, traces of which can certainly be found in these documents, too. How can we rediscover them, then? For my part, I am not sufficiently detached. For me, until very recently, they were just pieces of waste paper representing abject attitudes. But could I have been wrong? Let us say that this is more than a simple question. It is an invitation to pursue a line of research on this theme that is very underdeveloped in our country.

It would certainly be possible, too, to take the work groups as an oral history theme and interview their former members, and members of the Party, in regions that are today affected by industrial restructuring, such as Northern Bohemia. They would no doubt tell us the opposite, in other words that it was a golden age when their work groups had control over the kindergartens, when they used to visit the schools and agricultural cooperatives, when they improved production, etc. These people today find themselves being driven out of society by unemployment (or retirement, which sometimes comes to the same thing from the financial point of view), or completely outside it, and feel rejected and disregarded; which is why they have long since forgotten their past recriminations. The phenomenon of *Ostalgie* is nothing else than the idealisation of the past in the new German *Länder*, as Sandrine Kott has mentioned.

I have spoken several times of the phenomenon of lack of detachment, or, to put it differently, of personal experience. If I may be permitted a modest *bon mot* in conclusion, I would like to say that I can only express myself with difficulty on this theme, since "my" work group, the one I was a member of, never produced any of the things that the theorists of socialist emulation dreamed of. When preparing this article, I contacted several colleagues and I was struck by the spontaneous character of their responses. For example, I learned that another work group did not do any work either, but still managed to be awarded the prize for being the best work group in our department.

What lies behind this apparent counter-example? An element that seems to me to be absolutely crucial, even if it is almost impossible to grasp it and document it on the basis of the official sources: it was not the work groups that shaped its members, but the other way round. It was a mixture of human relationships, based on personal friendships and professional energy, and responsibility, that managed to create a better atmosphere in workplaces. It was in fact the opposite of what the regime hoped for from the socialist work groups. It was not successful in using them so as to exploit people; it was people who, while sometimes making use of them, made workplaces more human and thus perhaps lent a more bearable aspect to this regime in which they were forced to live.