



## Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism

By Jonathan Bolton

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Western scholars of the Cold War have only recently begun to try to reconstruct what life was actually like in Eastern European societies during the Soviet era. And until the publication of this book, the phenomenon most central to the Western narrative of communism's collapse—dissident opposition—had escaped this treatment. In an intelligent, fluent study of Czechoslovak dissent in the 1970s and 1980s, **Bolton** pushes aside the mythologized image of Czechoslovak dissidents and examines the diverse and sometimes conflicted ways they went about their lives. He is not so much deflating the political influence or courage of dissidents such as Václav Havel and Adam Michnik as he is 'explaining the texture and psychology of dissident life,' breaking down the compartmentalized notions of dissidence and ordinary life and allowing them to flow together. In doing so, he affords a much broader understanding of what constituted a defection from regime orthodoxy, including the role of the underground music scene and the free thinkers and artists whose work predated the existence of a 'dissident' label. (Robert Levgold *Foreign Affairs* 2012-09-01)

**Jonathan Bolton's** inquiry into the formative years of Czech dissent responds by taking dissidents off the Cold War pedestal they never wanted, and telling the stories they told to and about themselves. Though such stories are often the stuff of legend rather than hard fact, Bolton appreciates their importance in creating group identity. Taking the stories seriously allows him to replace haloes with something much more human—a sense of the thrill, the happenstance and the grind that marked dissidents' lives. The result is a new and very welcome type of narrative about dissent, one that respects but does not exaggerate its place in the history of Communism. Through diaries, memoirs, letters, oral history and samizdat debates, Bolton brings to life the key moments of the 1970s when men and women struggled to make sense of what had befallen their country and of themselves as non-conformists. An act such as signing Charter 77, a petition calling on the government to honor its human rights obligations, emerges as a thoroughly social, contingent experience, something to be negotiated with recruiters, gatekeepers, companions and spouses, rather than just an impulse of conscience. (Kieran Williams *Times Literary Supplement* 2012-06-08)

**Jonathan Bolton's** fascinating and sensitively argued study of the period, *Worlds of Dissent*, shows how little consensus there was about dissent itself. The Czech resistance, like all others before and since, was riven by controversies—dividing reform-minded or former Communists from those who had never joined the Party—and by different ideas about how to respond to the 'crisis of the Charter' prompted by the state's vicious crackdown. (Michael Weiss *Wall Street Journal* 2012-06-07)

The Arab Spring saw more than 300,000 protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square bring down Hosni Mubarak. But did these protesters represent the average Egyptians who stayed home? Writing about another equinox—the 1968 Prague Spring that introduced liberal reforms to communist Czechoslovakia and provoked a Soviet crackdown—**Jonathan Bolton** examines in *Worlds of Dissent* how revolutionaries speak for a nation... The author's nuanced view of Czech activism is helpful in understanding the Middle East's blithely named 'Facebook revolutions' as they enter their second year. (Justin Moyer *Washington Post* 2012-05-11)

#### About the Author

Jonathan Bolton is Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University.

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