



## Why a pink tank made Prague see red

by Patrick Wright

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Until a few weeks ago, a Soviet IS-2 tank stood on a three-metre high stone plinth in a square in the Smichov district of Prague. Dedicated to the memory of the Soviet soldiers who had died during the liberation of Prague in May 1945, this wartime relic, still identified as Tank No. 23, was a well established part of the scene. Its barrel reached out imperiously over cars and passersby; and it was surrounded by trees, herbaceous borders and a couple of flag-poles used on those regular occasions when the communist authorities celebrated the Soviet liberation of their city.

But on 28 April 1991, Prague woke to find its memorial tank converted into a very different kind of icon. At 5 o'clock that morning, David Cerny, a student at Prague's Academy of Fine Arts, had arrived with a number of accomplices, climbed the plinth and set about painting the tank bright pink. The police came along at 6.45 but Cerny had anticipated their arrival, and was able to fob them off with a fake document of permission from City Hall. The artists continued their work, further ornamenting the tank by adding an absurd appendage that poked upwards from the cupola, an extended finger borrowed from America's best-known rude gesture, and eventually daubing their signatures in white along the bottom of the grey stone plinth: 'David Cerny and the Neostunners'.

Cerny and his fellows had finished their work by 6 am, and there was a short interlude before uproar broke out a few hours later. Photographers poured into the square and telephone lines burned between City Hall, the Foreign Ministry and the offices of State Security. The Minister for National Defence, Mr. Dobrovsky, denounced the pinkening of the tank as an act of vandalism, offering hasty official apologies to the Soviet Embassy. He also despatched the soldiers who came along the next day to cover the stone plinth with sheets of protective plastic and then paint the tank over in proper military green. By 8 May, the General Prosecutor had charged David Cerny under an infamous Article of Law concerned with 'public disturbances': Paragraph 202 is remembered as the 'rubber paragraphy' because the communist authorities used to stretch it out to suppress every kind of dissident activity (including Vaclav Havel's own endeavour to place a floral tributer to Jan Palach in Wenceslas Square) under the general rubric of riot.

Unreformed communists were gratified by this uncompromising response; as, no doubt, were the nocturnal vigilantes who expressed their opposition to Cerny's action by smearing white paint over Prague's memorial to Jan Palach and also a monument in West Bohemia commemorating the American soldiers who had fallen in the liberation of that part of Czechoslovakia.

There were others, however, for whom the regreening of Tank No. 23 was the real provocation. A Pink Tank Account was opened at a nearby bank so that supporters could

make donations towards the cost of Cerny's anticipated fine. A Society of Friends for the Restoration of the Pink Tank was formed: its members took up cardboard and scissors, turning themselves into an agit-prop column of pink tanks and marching on the regreened memorial to demonstrate against the restoration of this 'symbol of violence'.



David Cerny, The Pink Tank (1991)

By this time, the twice daubed tank was surrounded by clamorous disputation, with political insults echoing from its sides. As one champion of the pink tank remarked, 'When they started to shout "Fascists" we yelled back "Communists", and they stopped.' David Cerny, meanwhile, was making the most of his new found fame. Not content with signing the original work, he issued a number of postcards documenting its speedy mutation. One entitled 'The Pink Tank (1991)' showed the pinkened machine in its full glory, its finger thrusting upwards with jaunty confidence. Another was taken after the authorities had flattened this offensive digit and tried to cover the humiliated memorial with a suitably green but rather too small military tarpaulin. This variation was entitled: 'The Covered Pink Tank (1991)'.

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By 17 May, a group of 15 deputies from the Czechoslovak federal parliament, all of them connected either with Civic Forum or its sister movement in Slovakia, Public Against Violence, had resolved to take the matter into their own hands. Led by Jiri Ruml, this group of former dissidents converged on the newly greened monument. Dressed in blue boiler suits with letters on the back identifying them as deputies, and therefore as immune from prosecution, they took up their brushes and set about re-pinkening the tank in protest, as their leader declared, 'that Paragraph 202 could ever again be abused.'

By this time, Prague's pink tank seemed to be everywhere. Its image had been spread across the world and, in Czechoslovakia, it had given rise to a whole industry of models, postcards and hastily manufactured toy pink tank replicas.

In the midst of this storm of publicity – indeed, at the very height of its notoriety – Tank No. 23 was removed from its plinth in the square. The local authority had apparently

wanted to dismember it even before David Cerny came along to trigger such controversy. The Foreign Minister, Jiri Dienstebier, was also said to favour replacing the tank with a less provocative memorial. Caught in this embarrassing battle between remembrance and its deliberate negation, Tank No. 23 was carted off to a military museum where it is now said to languish in uncontroversial obscurity, colour unknown.

Outside Czechoslovakia the tale of the pink tank could be relished as a beguiling anecdote which proved that Prague, the city of dissidence, had not lost its sense of humour. It offered teasing consolation to a world that, as the Iron Curtain came crashing down 18 months previously, had been rash enough to imagine bidding farewell to arms and consigning its tanks to the museum. Here, at least, was a break from the dreadful column of tanks that have ‘rolled’, true to the time-honoured cliché that has attended this machine since its first appearance on the Western Front in 1916, across the fields of that pastoral delusion: crushing civilians in Lithuania, bursting through improvised barricades along the shattered roads of Slovenia and Croatia, adorned with the corpses of butchered Shi’ites in Southern Iraq, or advancing towards Kuwait with television reporters perched on them – all dressed up in military camouflage and babbling excitedly into the camera as they peered forward into the Mother of turkey-shoots named Desert Storm. Faced with this gruesome succession, we can be thankful that ‘Magical Prague’ could still manage something in the way of light relief.

Within Czechoslovakia, however, the story of the pink tank had different ramifications. To begin with, there was considerable curiosity as to the kind of artists that David Cerny and his Neostunners may actually be. The magazine *Reflex*, itself a product of the new, post-communist climate, ran a humorous ‘search’ for the culprit: a piece which, while it seemed happy to merge fact with fiction, left little doubt that Cerny, born in 1968, was a conventional ‘happenings’ man working 23 years after his time. He had initiated a group called The Stunners in the second half of the 1980s, and in Autumn 1990 he had organised an ‘exhibition of the lowest instincts’ which had, as one critic declared, ‘attempted to reveal the brutality in our lives’. The show was made of sculptures which visitors were incited to demolish and, true to type, was all over in a few minutes.

Asked for his own views on art, Cerny remarked that up until the velvet revolution of November 1989, every exhibition had been political, and regretted the extent to which this had since changed. As he saw it, ‘art should consist of conflict’; indeed, if it didn’t then it could hardly be called art at all. Full of contempt for the pretty pictures and nice little expressive statues – ‘We already have enough of those’ – Cerny was not content to leave people growing fat in the warmth and comfort of habit. Instead, he wanted to confront them: to break through their stereotyped ideas, to mystify and provoke them, to force them to question their own complacent assumptions.

Full of youthful impatience, he nevertheless came across like an old-fashioned member of the avant-garde. A critic was pulled in to reaffirm this impression: he declared Cerny to be closer to the art of the late 1960s than to the more introverted works of his contemporaries, and then allowed the inevitable question, ‘Is it postmodernist?’, to float off unanswered. Certainly, it is not so difficult to reconcile Cerny’s disruptive aesthetic

with his cheeky claim, which also carries a reference to 1968 when hopeful leaders of the Prague Spring talked of building ‘socialism with a human face’, to have painted Tank No. 23 pink because he wanted to give it ‘a more human face’. The pink tank was in the same spirit as the posters that went up on Prague walls in the summer of 1990 to advertise an approaching concert by the Rolling Stones: these too had fired the 1960s back at the tank and its attendant cliché, declaring that ‘When the tanks roll out, the Stones roll in’.

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First among the sedimented ideas against which Cerny and his Neostunners did battle was the communist symbolism of the tank. Tanks had attended the formation of the post-war Czechoslovak state, and they were there right up until November 1989 – keeping it in place and featuring prominently in its iconography. In this part of the world everyone has tanks in mind, but the drama of the pink tank accentuated the fault-lines between different generations and their conceptions of this brutally symbolic machine.

For older people the story begins with the Nazis. Whether or not they remember the massed ‘tank wedges’ of ‘Operation Green’ with which Hitler’s generals planned to spit Czechoslovakia in two, they can hardly have forgotten the machines that advanced so unstoppably through subjected Czech lands in 1939, exerting the foul mesmerism that a stubborn patriot tried to reverse in Bohumil Hrabal’s celebrated novel *Closely Observed Trains*. The man died standing in front of an advancing Nazi tank and trying to stop it by sheer force of will. A few of those Nazi machines are still to be found, preserved in museum parks or in places where battles were fought, but they are always subordinated to the triumphant Soviet tanks that defeated them.

The first Soviet tanks entered Prague in May 1945. They were hailed by crowds and adorned with seasonal lilac as they advanced; and the post-war communist state worked hard to ensure that their memory would be forever wreathed in the rhetoric of liberation. The Soviet tank was projected as an emblem of military progress, of the triumphant advance of the communist state. Here, as in the West, the tank was customarily portrayed as a ‘Peacemaker’. In communist iconography it was up there with the patriotic mother holding a child in one hand and a wholesome loaf of bread in the other, gazing out after her husband as he marches off heroically to defend the homeland. The sculptors of this era liked to show it rising up to crush a Nazi tank beneath it, but other combinations were also available within a repertoire that placed equal stress on the fluttering white doves of ‘peaceful coexistence’ and the anti-fascist partisan with his machine gun held high.

The Soviet tank was essential to the formal May Day processions, which in later decades at least were only staged on a grand scale every five years because they were expensive and the armoured columns did such damage to the roads. It was also part of communism’s song and dance routine: The Russian Alexandrov Ensemble, which visited Czechoslovakia repeatedly during those years, is still remembered for its singing and dancing tank commanders, strutting about in their characteristic helmets and being covered with flowers by enraptured crowds as they re-enacted the liberation of Eastern

Europe. Communism created and insisted upon its own myth of 1945, but it was not just unreformed Party men among the older generation who were affronted by the pinkened tank. There were others, no friends of communism, who felt that the difference between Nazism and the communism of 1945 was still worth marking, and that the memory of those Soviet soldiers deserved better than 'disruption' of the blithe variety that could be achieved with a few tins of pink paint.

The younger generation is also mindful of Soviet tanks, but for them the defeat of Nazism is remote and the heroic meaning of Tank No. 23 thoroughly corrupted by the experience of more recent years. As Prague's Academy of Fine Art explained in a statement justifying student Cerny's antics, the tank had become an altogether different kind of symbol after the Soviet invasion of 1968. Once again, Soviet tanks had advanced on Prague, and once again there had been a moving combination of flowers and weaponry. This time, however, the flowers were not draped, like the lilac of May 1945, over the advancing machines as garlands of welcome: instead, they were placed in gun-barrels as symbols of helpless protest. Despite the best endeavours of the authorities to prevent such a shift, the Soviet tank had become a symbol of totalitarian power, of repression rather than liberation.

One of Cerny's Neostunners told the magazine *Reflex*, that the pinkening of Tank No. 23 was intended not as a cheap provocation but to protest the falsehood of the myth that Tank No. 23 had come to represent the years of communism. To paint the tank pink was to insist on historical truth after decades of official distortion. There were all sorts of conjectures about the authenticity of Tank No. 23: it was apparently not the original 'first' Soviet tank into Prague, as the communist cult had encouraged people to assume, and, anyway, those liberating Soviet tanks had never even come to the Smichov District in which the memorial had been placed. More damning still, the first tanks to enter Prague had not been those of the Red Army at all. They had come with General Vlasov, the captured Soviet commander who had raised a maverick force from among Germany's Soviet prisoners and led them into battle against Stalin's Red Army. The pinkened tank was, by this account, really a tribute to Vlasov and his soldiers, who had been liquidated by Stalin after American forces had refused to allow them to flee the Red Army.

As a debunker of such communist myths, Prague's retouched monument found a fortuitous echo in the film of Josef Skvorecky's novel *Tank Regiment*, an independently produced satire about morale in the Czechoslovakian army of the 1950s, which opened with a Western-style premiere while the pink tank furore was still raging. Since the producers of this film are themselves threatened with prosecution for spurning the state distribution system and using an independent network instead, it is double fitting that the poster advertising their film around the country should also have featured a prominent pink tank.

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LIKE THE best Prague fables, however, the story of the pink tank also has a darker side, as I found in Slovakia, the eastern province of Czechoslovakia which has seen a dramatic

rise of nationalist and separatist ambitions since November 1989, and stands in increasingly troubled relationship with Prague. Here too, the pink tank was quickly caught up into a web of arcane speculation of the sort that used to proliferate under communism, where it was difficult to establish that anything was quite what it seemed, and where people became accustomed to weaving great skeins of interpretation around even the most prosaic appearances in a public domain full of deceptions and snares.

To begin with, Slovakia seemed to share in Prague's joke. A Slovak photographer cleaned up by marketing postcards of the pink tank, and there was amusement in the Slovak National Assembly, in Bratislava, when communist deputies tried to pass a motion of censure against those of their fellow deputies who had gone out to repink the tank. They were promptly asked to specify what law insisted that a tank should always be green. It was, surely, a basic principle of military camouflage that a tank should take the colour of its environment: green in woodland and fields; sand-coloured in desert; white in snowy terrain. Since Tank No. 23 stood among flowers in a Prague square, it should obviously have been pink all along.

But in Slovakia tanks are not just symbols to be loved or reviled; they also constitute the living of tens of thousands of people. This dates back to the late 1940s, when Stalin turned Slovakia into a logistical zone dedicated to the supply and equipment of his expanding war machine. Vast steel and aluminium works were developed, along with a massive heavy armaments industry which manufactured Soviet-designed tanks and other weapons, both for the Warsaw Pact and also for export to liberation struggles, terrorist groups and pro-Soviet forces throughout the world (the huge ZTS factory at Martin, from which the activities of 38 armament factories were coordinated, has the word 'Welcome' written over its door in a suggestive assortment of languages).

When Vaclav Havel became President he announced that the new Czechoslovakia would be beating its swords into ploughshares, calling for an end to tank manufacture, and committing his government to programmes of 'conversion', which would diversify this chain of centralised factories into a wide range of civil engineering projects carried out in partnership with Western companies. Tank production stopped for a number of months but, faced with the prospect of mass unemployment in Central Slovakia, together with an alarming upsurge of nationalist sentiment in the area, he and his government have since buckled.

In March 1991, Havel visited Slovakia to warn army officers against allowing their forces to be abused by separatists in support of their demands; but although he stressed, on that occasion, that 'the picture of tanks in the streets' was truly horrifying, there was apparently little that could be done to prevent the stricken armaments industry from drifting back to its old ways. A factory in Detva has broken away under new non-communist management, converting most of its capacity to civil use and successfully marketing itself in the West, but this is a rare exception. Over in Martin, a heavy metal town right down to its graffiti ('Iron Maiden', 'Slayer' etc), pragmatism has already triumphed over Havel's symbolic promise, and 200 tanks are being made for export to Syria.

This reversion to old ways is on a small scale and quite insufficient to stop the industry's decline, but it has filled many with a sense of shame and the air has bristled with accusing fingers. As a Deputy in the Slovak National Assembly, Martin Krajcovic has called for action claiming that, even though the first conversion schemes pre-dated the revolution of 1989, the old communists who still control the majority of these colossal factories, have been deliberately sabotaging attempts to progress in this direction.

After listening to a torrent of allegations, plausible even while being utterly fantastic in the measure of corruption they suggested, I asked Krajcovic what he thought about the pink tank in Prague. He laughed at the mere mention of it, replying that, of course, he liked David Cerny's work, and promptly describing it as perfect illustration of his thesis about the ongoing 'rotation of the pink *nomenklatura*'. For him there could be no doubt: the pinkness of the tank reflected the persistence and continued immunity of communist power within Vaclav Havel's Czechoslovakia. The General Prosecutor's decision to charge Cerny so quickly proved that, within the Prague legal establishment just as in the Slovakian armaments industry, the pink *nomenklatura* held on to power. While he threw the book at David Cerny, the Prosecutor had failed to act against the countless, far more serious offences of the old communist regime.

Meanwhile, Jan Budaj had a different way of identifying the pinkness of Tank No. 23 with the colour of Vaclav Havel's insufficiently post-communist regime. When I first met him in 1981, Budaj was at once a stoker, an environmentalist and a happenings artist whose disruptive acts of street theatre took considerably more risks than David Cerny ever needed to. In 1989 he was among those who took the revolution to the streets of Bratislava; indeed, he emerged as leader of Public Against Violence and a national hero. Yet a few minutes before the polls closed in the first democratic elections, he was obliged to resign his candidature with the party he had just led to victory. Budaj had failed to pass the controversial 'lustration' process, designed by the federal government to prevent former secret police agents establishing themselves in political office. As critics have said of this procedure, it absolves former communists on the basis that they were simply doing their job, and then uses old secret police files to come down especially hard on their persecuted former victims, including some people of remarkable probity. It was also, as Budaj himself found out, subject to political manipulation.

As a former avant-gardist, Budaj appreciated David Cerny's action, but he had serious reservations about the 15 deputies from Civic Forum and Public Against Violence who had gone out to repeat it. The event may seem like a mere gambol, a light-hearted moment of release from the grind of government, but it was far from this. To begin with, the time for dissident 'happenings' had surely passed, and rather than indulging in a nostalgic reprise of the days when the powerless dissident would enact Lennonist gestures against the corrupted Leninist state, these deputies should have hesitated before breaking the law. As Budaj put it, 'it is a serious matter when the state refuses to obey its own law'. Indeed, they should have recognised that their responsibility now is to change the law, not mock it or flout it for the sake of dramatic effect. Rather than resorting to easy gestures, they would have done better to bring about the repeal of Article 202.

But Budaj wasn't going to let the matter rest there. Indeed, he ventured that the real achievement of the deputies who had repinkened Tank No. 23 had been to transform this machine into 'a political weapon rather than a weapon of war' — one that was only too good at reflect the ambiguities of Vaclav Havel's regime. The pink tank served as diverting camouflage; it put a joke where there was actually another government setting itself above the law. Budaj pointed out that Jiri Ruml, who led the deputies who repainted the tank, had been a prominent communist in the 1950s. He had later become a reform communist and then a dissident, but he was now playing a central role in the lustration process; indeed, he was chairman of a committee which stands in judgment over men who had been rotting in prison, or slaving in uranium mines while Ruml himself was still a loyal party man. Meanwhile a law is due to be enacted that will extend the lustration procedure into new spheres. It will prohibit those who have had any connection with the secret police from working in the media: a decision that, as Budaj sees it, contravenes natural justice, and will certainly, given the unusual degree of pressure that the communist authorities used to exert in this area, assist those who want to limit the independence of the press.

For Budaj, an accused man who still doesn't know when he will get a chance to clear his name, the pink tank was indeed a story of 'magical Prague'. It suggested an alarming convergence between the Prague of Kafka and that of Vaclav Havel - a city of doors behind doors, unanswerable accusations, and of authority that, even if it is no longer entirely inscrutable, is apparently still prepared to play games with the law.

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