

# S Teaching of Marxism-Leninism in Czechoslovakia 1948–1989

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**Abstract** The article deals with one of the key tools of forming a socialist-minded intelligentsia at universities, the teaching of Marxism-Leninism. The author summarizes results of her research in which she focused, apart from a factual account, also on constituent actors and their mutual interactions. On the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the objectives it had in the beginning of the project and which it was pursuing and adjusting for decades afterwards. On teachers of Marxism-Leninism, who kept the project

going and were also looking for some space for their own concepts in it, and naturally also on students' attitudes and approaches to the teaching of Marxism-Leninism.

**Keywords** Czechoslovakia 1945–1989, universities, Marxism-Leninism, education, ideology

The article intends to present the teaching of Marxism-Leninism at universities as a historical phenomenon throughout its long duration.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, it is not related only to the periods of Stalinism or normalization, as research projects on its introduction after the advent of the Communist regime (Connelly, 2000, pp. 205–225 et passim; Urbášek & Pulec, 2012, pp. 217–220, 380–389; Gabzdilová, 2018, pp. 111–125) or after the 1967–1970 crisis (Urbášek, 2008, pp. 76–92)

1 The article is an output of the Czech Science Foundation project *Concept and Implementation of Communist Education in Czechoslovakia 1948–1989* (GA16-07027S). It draws from already published texts, particularly on a recent study (Devátá, 2020). The results of the research have not yet been published in English.

accomplished so far may suggest.<sup>2</sup> The text is structured chronologically and outlines principal development tendencies against the background of broader political developments in Czechoslovakia. The article aims points out that the teaching of Marxism-Leninism was in fact a comprehensive socio-political project with multiple levels and functions. Their common purpose was to fulfil the fundamental political task, namely the identification with the regime and its ideology.

The teaching of Marxism-Leninism at universities was not something that was specific for Czechoslovakia – since 1945, they had been gradually adopted by all Central and Eastern European countries in transition to socialism, which, in doing so, were more or less inspired by the Soviet Union (Connelly, 2000; Iacob, 2011, pp. 184–207; Horváth, 2017). Since the takeover in February 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPCz), until then systematically educating only its members and sympathizers in Marxism-Leninism, started spreading its ideology mandatorily throughout the society, and the university milieu was no exception (Hermann, 2020). The teaching of Marxism-Leninism served as a tool to form (and subsequent to reproduce) new intelligentsia that will take over the role of “old intelligentsia”, a period term coined and routinely used by Communist ideologists. Its successful mastering was considered a key task of the “socialist school” by the CPCz.

Initially, the introduction of Marxism-Leninism lectures into the university curricula was not very systematic, as the CPCz had not been quite prepared for the takeover of universities. The “reactionaries” among lecturers and students were to be expelled from universities, to be replaced by “progressive” teachers and students who were supposed to strengthen progressive elements and to make the social and political structure of students and academia consistent with that of the whole society, in which the workers’ population had a majority.<sup>3</sup>

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2 See Devátá, 2020, pp. 174–178 et passim for a detailed analysis of the current state of knowledge.

3 According to census results between 1950 and 1970, workers (in all employees’ positions) accounted for three fifths of the total population. KUČERA, Milan, 1994.

This requirement represented one of the long-term axioms pursued by the CPCz education policy. Repressive measures (which period terms labelled “democratization” or “cleansing”) were implemented – just like all across the society – by so-called action committees, which expelled several dozen lecturers and over 11,000 students from Czech and Slovak universities (Urbášek & Pulec, 2012, p. 100; Gabzdilová, 2018, pp. 56–76). The introduction of the university admission procedure (since 1948), which prioritized entrants from worker’s and peasant’s families, admission of workers directly from factories, who needed only a minimum amount of preparation in worker courses (1949–1953) to become university students, and adoption of a new University Act (1950) eliminating the traditional autonomy of universities were the most important tools of the transformation and of assuming control of the hitherto “bourgeois” university milieu. As well as Marxism-Leninism lectures for students, schooling teachers in Marxism-Leninism and their political training (Connelly, 2000, pp. 260–266, 126–132, 190–192).

In the autumn of 1951, the courses in Marxism-Leninism were given a proper systematic framework copying the Soviet model. This marked the end of the transitional period when the teaching of Marxism-Leninism was more or less the same as general political training and was in fact organized along party lines (Devátá, 2020, pp. 177–90). A resolution of the CPCz Central Committee changed both.<sup>4</sup> The curricula were based on Marxist social science, i.e. Marxist philosophy (dialectic and historical materialism), political economy, and history of the Communist Parties of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. The last item was ascribed extra importance, in accordance with the tenet that “the history of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik) is Marxism-Leninism in action”. At the same time, the teaching of Marxism-Leninism was made a matter of extraordinary importance for universities as such, as the Central Committee transferred the responsibility

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*Populace České republiky 1918–1991*. Praha: Sociologický ústav AV ČR, p. 76.

4 CPCz Central Committee, 1951. *Resolution of the Political Secretariat on the Teaching of Marxism-Leninism at Universities*. Coll. 1261/0/22, Vol. 10, Unit 67, Item 13. National Archives, Prague.

for the quality and efficiency of political/ideological education to the rectors and deans and relevant ministries as well, but had retained decision-making powers, in particular conceptual or those concerning school personnel. The resolution also institutionalized the teaching of Marxism-Leninism – special departments were established or completed at universities. Compared to teachers of so-called vocational/expert (i.e. non-ideological) subjects, their lecturers were selected according to more stringent criteria; however, the Marxism-Leninism departments as such became gradually integrated as a standard part of universities. By 1955, there were already more than fifty Marxism-Leninism departments with 650 lecturers<sup>5</sup> at Czechoslovak universities (Devátá, 2020, pp. 191–201).

After the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), there was an outburst of dissatisfaction at many universities. Serious effects of Khrushchev's speech were mainly indirect; students started talking about Stalinist deformations in the policy of the CPCz, Czechoslovak political processes, inadequate and demeaning manifestations of the country's loyalty to the Soviet Union, banned books etc. They were also criticizing the teaching of Marxism-Leninism – the excessive amount of hours per week, its propagandistic nature etc. – and their resolutions were demanding a remedy. The party leadership was particularly concerned about the fact that the revolt of students, who were in some cases even boycotting Marxism-Leninism lectures, was taking place with a tacit consent of a part of lecturers teaching vocational/expert subjects and that it had also found its way into the public space in the form of caricatures presented during restored traditional students' carnival known as Majales. In Bratislava, students mocked the essential Marxist concept of base and superstructure by a banner reading "The base is strong, but the house is falling apart", while the Majales procession in Prague was led by "King Marxism" and "Queen Russian" (Matthews, 1998; Marušiak, 2009).

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5 For more information see *Přehled vědecké a pedagogické práce kateder marxismu-leninismu*, 1965, a monothematic volume, Příloha 2, pp. 46–51.

There were two types of reactions: a harsh one aimed at activists among students – and resulting in the expulsion of several dozen students from universities, in spite of the resistance of leaders of some of the universities – and a conciliatory one towards others, resulting in some changes in the curricula of and lecture time allocated to Marxism-Leninism. Some of the changes were necessitated by circumstances, such as the reading of the essential compendium, *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*, dating back to 1938. That was naturally no longer possible after the 20th CPSU Congress. However, teachers of the history of the CPCz or those with an active and beyond-the-official-line attitude to changes of the political course also had problems and were severely punished. Exemplary sanctions, including losses of jobs and expulsions from the party, which were implemented, for example, against lecturers of the University of Economics in Prague (Devátá, 2014, pp. 75–79) and the Mining University in Ostrava (Biolková & Kašing, 2012, pp. 54–56), also overtly served as a warning for others. It was confirmed, in many respects, that Marxism-Leninism lectures were much more an ideological indoctrination (as critically claimed by students) than an interpretation of Marxism-Leninism as an integral science (as claimed by the regime). If not for anything else, then because of the fact that it always included a political training element which the CPCz saw as having the key educational function.

The examination of causes also revealed that the essential political and social change desired by the CPCz leadership in the late 1940s had not materialized as much as expected, as demonstrated by universities in Prague. It is true that, by 1959, a half of lecturers had become members of the Communist Party, but most of them had come from white-collar families and “old intelligentsia”, and there were still many teachers from prominent entrepreneurial (“capitalist”) families at technical universities. Over 50% of students also came from white-collar or intelligentsia families, while students whose parents were workers accounted only for 30%. A half came from Communist families,

but only less than 4% of students were organized in the CPCz themselves.<sup>6</sup> Compared to 1949, when students-Communists had accounted for a full fifth of all students during the revolutionary wave and the rule of studentocracy, i.e. the control of universities by their students (Connelly, 2005), it was indeed a significant decline.<sup>7</sup> The CPCz was trying to counter the trend by a renewed emphasis on positive discrimination of candidate students from working-class families during the admission procedure and a continuous recruitment of students into the party, closely tied to the teaching of Marxism-Leninism.

In the early 1960s, the Ministry of Education started cautiously supporting the opinion that the excessive time devoted to Marxism-Leninism limited the teaching of vocational subjects, particularly at technical universities. The amount of time allocated to the teaching of Marxism-Leninism was thus reduced to the previous 1951 level, i.e. 4 hours a week, as part of an overall restructuring of university education. The teaching process was gradually stabilized, especially as new, freshly written and translated Soviet textbooks, *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* and *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1959), were introduced and *History of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia* (1961) was published. The CPCz expected the most significant change in the attitude of students from the introduction of a new course in scientific Communism. The new course explained the substance of scientific socialism in a broader and up-to-date context. It thus also presented a current “set of instructions and actions to build socialism and Communism” and it was also supposed to “win students for the policy of the CPCz” (Devátá, 2014, pp. 22–29). In addition to Marxist philosophy and political economy, scientific Communism was permanently integrated in the curricula as the third segment of the Marxist-Leninist teaching, while the history of the CPSU, which scientific Communism

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6 CPCz Municipal Committee in Prague, 1959. *Report on the Ideological Life at Universities*. Coll. KSČ-MV Praha, Vol. 32, Unit 381, Inv. No. 730. Prague City Archives.

7 However, that was an exceptional situation in a long-term view. There were still some older students at universities in the 1948/1949 school year, who had not been able to study during the occupation, when universities were closed.

was partly replacing, was incorporated into a historical course interpreting the history of the international workers' movement and the history of the CPCz. This curricula structure of Marxism-Leninism remained practically unchanged until the fall of the regime (Devátá, 2020, pp. 201–212).

The most renowned Majales, which saw Allen Ginsberg, the American poet of the Beat Generation elected the king of the students' fete, took place in 1965 and was again an opportunity to caricature over-used ideological slogans by students' own creations ("Soviet Majales – Our Model" or "Ginsberg the Majales' King – A Manifestation of Proletarian Internationalism"). However, there were also more serious displays of dissatisfaction, in particular the overall air and final resolution of the university conference (1965), which again concerned, inter alia, the teaching of Marxism-Leninism and recommended to reduce or even replace its subjects "in favor of modern social science disciplines", such as sociology or political science, and to add contemporary Western philosophy and economy to the curricula. The low efficiency of ideological influencing was also revealed by a number of sociological surveys focusing on attitudes and opinions of university students, including those examining specifically their attitude to the teaching of Marxism-Leninism.<sup>8</sup> Students made their distaste for the official policy of suppressing religion, and an appreciable part of them viewed the teaching of Marxism-Leninism as something they could do without. Low optimism among lecturers of Marxism-Leninism (the total number of whom had reached over 1,100 by 1965) was even more worrying; some of them even did not regard their own teaching job adequate and interesting. A significant part of them thought that students did not see their subject as something indispensable, and that the same attitude is shared by other lecturers at universities, mainly because Marxism-Leninism was taking up the place and time that could be put

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8 See articles in *Přehled vědecké a pedagogické práce kateder marxismu-leninismu* and *Sociologický časopis* journals, 1965–69.

to a better use by vocational subjects.<sup>9</sup> Their skepticism was indeed something to be considered; although the CPCz always declared that the so-called political education work with students is a task of every lecturer, it never made any secret of the fact that the statement was addressed mainly to teachers of Marxism-Leninism, including their key role in recruiting students for membership in the party. At the same time, the average percentage of Communists among students dropped again after a temporary rise; in 1965, it was 6% nationwide and 5% in Prague (Devátá, 2020, pp. 212–219).

Simultaneously, a group of those who were pushing for changes and modernization was distinctly forming among Marxism-Leninism lecturers. Just like their students, they wished to make the teaching process more attractive by adding new approaches in social sciences which, having been officially outcast for many years, started returning to academia. The Ministry of Education did not oppose, and the necessity of changes was cautiously admitted even by the party. In 1966, experimental curricula bringing a more significant diversification of disciplines (e.g. between technical disciplines and humanities) and also new subjects, such as political science, sociology, anthropology etc., took effect. Several years of movements of ideas, including the academic year of 1968/1969, when universities enjoyed basically full autonomy as to what they will teach their students and how, were terminated by the process of a so-called consolidation and normalization. It hit Marxism-Leninism departments very hard, particularly at Czech universities, where they were summarily disbanded and universities ordered by the Ministry of Education to terminate employment contracts of the lecturers. The Slovak Ministry of Education did not resort to such unprecedented measures; still, to lecturers of Marxism-Leninism were paid special attention in a complex vetting process. The decision of the Presidium of the CPCz Central Committee ordering a temporary suspension of Marxism-Leninism lectures and a vetting of its lecturers was

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9 See *Přehled vědecké a pedagogické práce kateder marxismu-leninismu*, 1967, a monothematic volume, Příloha 2, pp. 211–213, 284.



based on a political position according to which “perhaps 90% of them betrayed principles of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism during the Prague Spring”.<sup>10</sup> It was a coerced confession that the entire project temporary ended in a fiasco (Devátá, 2020, pp. 220–227).

At the beginning of the normalization period – just like everywhere else throughout the society – vetting processes involving both party members and politically non-affiliated personnel took place at universities. Unlike after February 1948, when most people expelled from universities had been students, the post-1968 repercussions affected mainly lecturers. Political/ideological education and renewed lectures of Marxism-Leninism hinged on the acceptance of and identification with a keynote political document approved in December 1970. The *Lessons from the crisis development in the party and society after the 13th CPCz Congress* (i.e. after 1966) presented an indisputable and forced interpretation of the reform period as an attempted counterrevolution, which had to be suppressed by adequate means. The CPCz used the *Lessons* to demonstrate that it would decide how the social events would be interpreted and also how those who had been responsible, in its opinion, for the “crisis development” would be dealt with. New departments/institutes of Marxism-Leninism at Czech universities accepted 56% of lecturers of disbanded departments, who had passed a “professional-political” vetting; they had to undergo a subsequent party vetting, which was explicitly viewed as the final stage of the vetting process and which reduced their share to 27%. New Marxism-Leninism departments at Slovak universities accepted 77% of lecturers in the first stage. The CPCz viewed personnel of former departments as a “risky cadre factor” and was watching their numbers (Devátá, 2020, pp. 228–236).

The curricula were “cleansed” to produce a basic structure comprising Marxist philosophy, political economy, scientific Communism, and history of the international workers’ movement and of the CPCz;

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10 CPCz Central Committee, 1969. *Measures Proposed to Deal with the Overall Political Situation at Universities*. Coll. 1261/0/5, Vol. 109, Unit 181, Item 6. National Archives, Prague.

domestic textbooks were replaced by new translations of Soviet and East German ones. Initially, some lecturers of Marxism-Leninism were confronted by senior students who had experienced the Prague Spring already as adults. The CPCz viewed rejecting reactions as something to be concerned about, one of the reasons being that they were not aimed at specific persons – university students were perceiving the lecturers as representatives of the party. With the arrival of younger students, however, the manifestations of negation were getting weaker and the attitude of students toward the teaching of Marxism-Leninism gradually returned to normalcy. Students viewed the subject as something to be put up with to successfully graduate, while the Communist Party was dissatisfied that it was denied essential importance. As a matter of fact, complaints about students viewing Marxism-Leninism as just another subject wind like a red thread through all party documents from the very beginning. However, the development of the percentage of students organized in the CPCz offered some reason for cautious optimism; dropping below 1% in 1972, it increased to 6.7% five years later. In 1978, when the number of lecturers of Marxism-Leninism departments reached more than a thousand again, the Ministries of Education issued new curricula structured according to fields of study and with considerably different time allocations which obviously corresponded with the ideological importance assigned to the future qualifications of the graduates. So, for example, students of philology had to put up with 390 hours of Marxism-Leninism (which was the basic allocation, also applied at technical universities), while the time allocation applying to students of history was 1,140 hours. For all fields of study producing teachers and journalists, the basic portfolio of subjects was expanded by the addition of scientific atheism, which soon started to be lectured at all universities (for most disciplines as a facultative course). Scientific atheism was being introduced since the first half of the 1970s, e.g. at faculties of education, although the so-called education toward scientific atheism and its development had been a topic for the CPCz since the late 1950s (Cuhra, 2020). At the same time, Marxism-Leninism curricula for postgraduate students were standardized,

accounting for approximately 10% of all lectures. Marxism-Leninism was also added to final master's and doctoral exams (initially only for some fields of study, since 1981 for all).

If another measures as opening the boarding secondary schools for working people in 1973 (until 1979), whose graduates were supposed to strengthen the workers' elements at universities, and mandatory training of all university lecturers in evening schools of Marxism-Leninism (according to CPCz resolution adopted in 1977) are taken into account, we will get a picture of all-embracing ideological indoctrination, similar to the attempted total reeducation in the 1950s. It also shows that the CPCz used the same tools over and over again when facing a crisis, without reflecting causes of the long-term inefficiency of the so-called political education work, which in fact continued to be identified with and deemed tantamount to the teaching of Marxism-Leninism. Its lecturers were expected to give more attention to students coming from worker's and Communist families and functionaries among students for two reasons: first, such students were a priori expected to be more "ideologically mature", and hence more identified with objectives of the Marxist-Leninist education; second, they were also expected to help lecturers break up the "false solidarity" of students and their resistant attitude. However, even this tool did not prove too effective in practice. On the other hand, responsible party officials naturally realized that students passed Marxism-Leninism exams successfully without necessarily identifying with it. They were also aware that social sciences were falling behind, which fact was largely attributable to mechanisms that the CPCz implemented in the early 1970s to prevent a repetition of the previous shock. Lecturers of Marxism-Leninism had to follow strict curricula, their publishing activities were subject to censorship of the Central Committee. The effort to prevent any activity from below resulted in the lectures' content being sterile and also in a formalistic approach of lecturers to teaching, which some of them admitted to have (Devátá, 2020, pp. 236–57).

It was only the Soviet perestroika and the more open criticism it had permitted which brought some movement of ideas into the project.

The CPCz was complaining about continuing stagnation of social science research and inefficiency of Marxism-Leninism courses. When the Central Committee discussed party work at schools in November 1988, supporting documents stated that the percentage of Communists or party candidates among students had again dropped below 5% (while the share of Communists among university lecturers had increased to a half). The decline of party members recruited among students of pedagogic disciplines, subsequently reflected in decreasing numbers of Communists among teachers at elementary and secondary schools, was viewed particularly unfavorably. The CPCz was, as always, seeing a remedy in strengthening the “educational function” of Marxism-Leninism lectures.<sup>11</sup> Lecturers of Marxism-Leninism were criticizing rigid curricula, limited access to information and censorship of publications. There were also some reservations aimed at so-called 1970s cadres, i.e. members of the party apparatus who were transferred to universities to teach Marxism-Leninism after Prague Spring, but did not have proper education (and refused to finish it). Together with certain unrest in the society, there was also an increasing level of criticism among students who considered the schematic and formalistic teaching untenable and kept asking why its contents and curricula were not the sole responsibility of the Ministries of Education (as in the case of all other subjects) and why they had to be supervised by the party (Petráň, 2015, p. 658 et seq.). Parallels between the Soviet perestroika and the Prague Spring, as seen and articulated by the public opinion in the West and the domestic opposition, made the position of the CPCz problematic, and this fact also affected decisions concerning changes in the teaching of Marxism-Leninism. On the one hand, these changes seemed inevitable; on the other hand, it clearly reminded of the situation in the late 1960s. Before November 17, 1989, the CPCz was trying to find some understanding among students for alleged objective obstacles preventing a full implementation of the perestroika program

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11 CPCz Central Committee, 1988. *Experience from Party Work at Nursery, Elementary, Secondary Schools and Universities after the 17th CPCz Congress*. Coll. 1261/0/20, Vol. S 79/88, Item 1. National Archives, Prague.

in Czechoslovakia. Marxism-Leninism lectures were terminated when university students started a strike, and lost any reason of existence on November 29, when the Parliament passed a Constitutional Act repealing the leading role of the Communist Party in the society and of the Marxist-Leninist ideology in cultural policy and education. The Ministries of Education formally cancelled the lectures immediately thereafter and decided to disband Marxism-Leninism departments. However, they also anticipated that the teaching of social sciences, of something like an “education minimum” in philosophy, economy, political science, sociology, ethics, etc., would continue in new social conditions. Nevertheless, this concept did not find support during the transformation process (Devátá, 2020, pp. 257–262).

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia introduced the project of teaching of Marxism-Leninism to universities as a part of broader social changes; officially, it was derived from the program statement of the 9th CPCz Congress in 1949, on the education of new, socialist intelligentsia. It was basically a carbon copy of concepts and objectives of the party’s own educational program and took some time to achieve academic level, i.e. courses in Marxist social science. In a long-term view, however, it was its educational and indoctrination function aiming at the formation (and later reproduction) of intelligentsia agreeing with the Marxist ideology which was of key importance for the CPCz. But students never actually accepted the ideological segment and educational level of Marxism-Leninism lectures. Since 1956 at the latest, i.e. after the 20th CPSU Congress, there had been clear signals that the education structured along the above mentioned lines is devaluated to the level of propaganda and politics in the students’ eyes. The CPCz did not want, or could not, react to this, and rejected any “softening” of the ideological indoctrination at universities. A proof of this was the party’s 1969 decision to disband Marxism-Leninism departments, demonstrating the party’s power over universities and fundamentally changing its attitude to the lecturers. Until that time, the latter had been regarded as builders of the Marxist science and education

system and as a part of the party's intellectual layer participating in the formulation of policies. When they were tagged as the cause of the project's destruction and two thirds of them were replaced, their role was in fact limited to reading prepared explanations and interpretations. They still held important ideological positions at universities, but they themselves were under continuous surveillance and their intellectual activities were curtailed (Urbášek, 2008, pp. 76–92). In the 1970s and 1980s, the task of forming a new generation of intelligentsia consensual with the policy of the CPCz became important again, as a substantial segment of the previous generation had fallen victim to normalization purges. However, the emphasis it placed on the *Lessons from the crisis development* made it untrustworthy for many students, as narratives of the Prague Spring experience in families and other social environments were different. As soon as a new external impulse, namely the Soviet perestroika, appeared, students started publicly criticizing the teaching of Marxism-Leninism again (Devátá, 2020, pp. 263–265).

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