

Havel, Anti-Communist Hero, Dead

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Former Czech President Vaclav Havel attending a Prague event on Oct. 5. **Petr Jasek**

PRAGUE — Vaclav Havel, the dissident playwright who wove theater into politics to peacefully bring down communism in Czechoslovakia and become a hero of the epic struggle that ended the Cold War, has died. He was 75.

Havel died Sunday morning at his weekend house, comforted by his wife, Dagmar, and a nun, his assistant Sabina Dancecova said.

Havel was his country's first democratically elected president after the nonviolent "Velvet Revolution" that ended four decades of repression by a regime he ridiculed as "Absurdistan."

As president, he oversaw the country's bumpy transition to democracy and a free-market economy, as well its peaceful 1993 breakup into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

A former chain-smoker, Havel had a history of chronic respiratory problems dating back to his years in communist jails. He was hospitalized in Prague on Jan. 12, 2009, with an unspecified inflammation, and had developed breathing difficulties after undergoing minor throat surgery.

Havel left office in 2003, 10 years after Czechoslovakia broke up and just months before both nations joined the European Union. He was credited with laying the groundwork that brought his Czech Republic into the 27-nation bloc, and was president when it joined NATO in 1999.

Shy and bookish, with a wispy mustache and unkempt hair, Havel came to symbolize the power of the people to peacefully overcome totalitarian rule.

"Truth and love must prevail over lies and hatred," Havel famously said. It became his revolutionary motto that he said he always strove to live by.

Havel was nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize, collected dozens of other accolades worldwide for his efforts as a global ambassador of conscience and defended the downtrodden from Darfur to Myanmar.

Among his many honors were Sweden's prestigious Olof Palme Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest U.S. civilian award, bestowed on him by President George W. Bush for being "one of liberty's great heroes."

An avowed peacenik whose heroes included rockers such as Frank Zappa, he never quite shed his flower-child past and often signed his name with a small heart as a flourish.

In an October 2008 interview with The Associated Press, Havel rebuked Russia for invading Georgia two months earlier and warned EU leaders against appeasing Moscow.

"We should not turn a blind eye. ... It's a big test for the West," he said.

Havel first made a name for himself after the 1968 Soviet-led invasion that crushed the Prague Spring reforms of Alexander Dubcek and other liberally minded Communists in what was then Czechoslovakia.

Havel's plays were banned as hard-liners installed by Moscow snuffed out every whiff of rebellion. But he continued to write, producing a series of underground essays that stand with the work of Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov as the most incisive and eloquent analyses of what communism did to society and the individual.

One of his best-known essays, "The Power and the Powerless" written in 1978, borrowed slyly from the immortal opening line of the mid-19th century "Communist Manifesto," writing: "A specter is haunting Eastern Europe: the specter of what in the West is called 'dissent.'"

In the essay, he dissected what he called the "dictatorship of ritual" — the ossified Soviet bloc system under Leonid Brezhnev — and imagined what happens when an ordinary greengrocer stops displaying Communist slogans and begins "living in truth," rediscovering "his suppressed identity and dignity."

Havel knew that suppression firsthand.

Born Oct. 5, 1936, in Prague, the child of a wealthy family that lost extensive property to communist nationalization in 1948, Havel was denied a formal education, eventually earning a degree at night school and starting out in theater as a stagehand.

His political activism began in earnest in January 1977, when he co-authored the human rights manifesto Charter 77, and the cause drew widening attention in the West.

Havel was detained countless times and spent four years in jail. His letters from prison to his wife became one of his best-known works. "Letters to Olga" blended deep philosophy with a stream of stern advice to the spouse he saw as his mentor and best friend, and who tolerated his reputed philandering and other foibles.

The events of August 1988 — the 20th anniversary of the Warsaw Pact invasion — first suggested that Havel and his friends might one day replace the faceless apparatchiks who jailed them.

Thousands of mostly young people marched through central Prague, yelling Havel's name and that of the playwright's hero, Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, the philosopher who was Czechoslovakia's first president after it was founded in 1918.

Havel's arrest in January 1989 at another street protest and his subsequent trial generated anger at home and abroad. Pressure for change was so strong that the Communists released him again in May.

That fall, communism began to collapse across Eastern Europe, and in November the Berlin Wall fell. Eight days later, police brutally broke up a demonstration by thousands of Prague students.

It was the signal that Havel and his country had awaited. Within 48 hours, a broad new opposition movement was founded, and a day later, hundreds of thousands of Czechs and Slovaks took to the streets.

In three heady weeks, Communist rule was broken. Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones arrived just as the Soviet army was leaving. Posters in Prague proclaimed: "The tanks are rolling out — the Stones are rolling in."

On Dec. 29, 1989, Havel was elected Czechoslovakia's president by the country's still-Communist parliament. Three days later, he told the nation in a televised New Year's address: "Out of gifted and sovereign people, the regime made us little screws in a monstrously big, rattling and stinking machine."

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