Chapter 19

Choice: Václav Havel Chooses Dissent

This activity corresponds to the “Václav Havel Chooses Dissent” feature in your textbook. The following questions are designed to help you recall the story of the Czech dissident playwright, Václav Havel. Once you have answered the questions in the Comprehension section, submit your answers and move on to the questions in the Analysis and Outside Sources sections. Each section is designed to build upon the one before it, taking you deeper into the subject you are studying. After you have answered all of the questions, you will have the option of emailing your responses to your instructor.

Introduction

The notion of the philosopher kings comes from Plato's Utopian Kallipolis in Book VII of *The Republic*. Alexander the Great, Marcus Aurelius, Frederick the Great, and Catherine the Great have all been characterized as having followed the Platonic ideal. In our own century, Václav Havel is probably the closest fulfillment of the Platonic ideal that we have seen, at least in the last half of the twentieth century. Havel came from an intellectual family and upbringing, and made his career as a philosophically-minded playwright. However, his role, in the 1980s, as a political dissident in the waning days of the communist regime of Czechoslovakia wedded his credentials to the idea of political rule.

Comprehension

1. What choice did Václav Havel make early on about how to live his life? Who did Havel believe had the power to change the world?

2. What was the Prague Spring of 1968? What happened to the changes experienced in the Prague Spring?

3. What was Charter 77? What was Havel’s role in the creation of Charter 77?

Analysis

1. The changes in regimes throughout Eastern Europe in the period from 1989–1991 became known as the Velvet Revolution? What kind of revolution was this event? Why didn’t the Soviet Union suppress the revolution?

2. How did Václav Havel’s career as a public intellectual prepare him for the presidency of Czechoslovakia? Was he successful?

3. Why was the struggle for human dignity and rights essential in the struggle against communist rule in Czechoslovakia?
Outside Sources

1. Read the English text of Charter 77 at http://libpro.cts.cuni.cz/charta/docs/declaration_of_charter_77.pdf. Discuss the philosophical underpinnings of the document. What do the writers of Charter 77 see their organization as being? What rights are considered to be essential to human existence?

2. Read about Václav Havel’s life at the website of Radio Praha (Prague) at http://www.radio.cz/en/article/36022. What kind of perspective does this home grown website have about its former president?