

LIBOR PAVERA

Totalitarianism in the Long Time: Literature as a Seismograph and Its Blind Spots

Abstract: This study proposes a dynamic model of totalitarianism and a method for examining its literary representation. It approaches totalitarianism as a process comprising incubation, seizure of power, terror, normalization, erosion, and the subsequent formation of memory. Using the metaphor of literature as a seismograph, the study identifies both the analytical possibilities and the limitations of literary evidence and derives nine methodological principles for comparative analysis. The model is tested through a Czech sequence of works by Kafka, Čapek, and Petiška, supplemented by Hungarian and Polish points of comparison.

Keywords: totalitarianism; literature; seismograph; Central Europe; comparative literary study; dynamic model; Kafka; Čapek; Petiška; long twentieth century

1. A Moving Target

The concept of totalitarianism is going through a peculiar crisis. Never has so much been written about it, and never have the human sciences been less sure of it. The most recent stocktaking of the historiography of the Soviet bloc brings together objections that historians have been raising against the “totalitarian paradigm” for decades. The model, they say, captures the monolith but not the change. It sees the summit of power but not the society underneath. It registers the command but not what individuals actually do — the evasions, the compromises, the “third paths” that run between consent and resistance.¹ Some conclude from this that the concept has served its time. This study will assert the opposite, demonstrating that the concept has merely been unsuitably measured. A moving object cannot be measured with a motionless instrument.

The study addresses four dimensions of change: the concept of totalitarianism, the historical phenomenon, its literary representation, and the technologies through which power operates. Understandings of the concept have changed substantially between Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* and contemporary revisionist scholarship, as scholars have brought different questions, archives, and interpretive perspectives to the subject.² The phenomenon itself also changes over time: totalitarian societies pass through phases of establishment, intensified repression, consolidation, and possible collapse. Literary representations vary both historically and across Central Europe, taking the form of warning, testimony, coded criticism, celebration, or remembrance in societies whose experiences of totalitarian rule followed different trajectories. Finally, the technologies of power and communication changed repeatedly during the twentieth century. Shifts in the use of print, radio, film, ritual, dossiers, and television altered both the circulation of information and the forms through which authority was exercised.

An approach confined to a single definition, historical moment, national literature, or medium cannot adequately account for these interrelated changes. This study hence argues that the changing forms of totalitarianism require

¹ UNGUREANU, Manuela L. (ed.). *Rethinking the Historiography of the Soviet Bloc: The Totalitarianism Paradigm and Institutional Practices under Communism*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2026.

² ARENDT, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951.

a comparative approach that follows both the phenomenon and its literary representations across national contexts and over an extended historical period. The “long twentieth century” provides the necessary temporal scope. Ending the inquiry in 1945, for example, would exclude the subsequent development of communist regimes and prevent an examination of the full cycle proposed here. Literature offers a means of studying these changes together. A text’s date connects it to a particular phase of the process, while its social and national context locates it within a specific historical trajectory. Its form and circulation also bear the traces of contemporary media, whether the newspaper column, radio broadcast, dossier, or screen. Successive generations interpret these features through changing theoretical frameworks, making the history of a text’s reception part of the inquiry into how totalitarianism has been understood.

The metaphor we have long used for this instrument — literature as society’s sensitive seismograph — has an anthropological core, something close to a deep catechesis. A tremor is a sensation the body knows before the mind can name it. Societies, too, feel the ground shifting beneath their institutions before they have a word for it, and literature is the organ of that pre-conceptual awareness. Yet precisely for that reason the metaphor must not be left uncritically whole. An instrument made of flesh and language has a will — and therefore a guilt. It stands in the epicenter of what it measures. It can be calibrated by power. And it works in the opposite direction, too: it does not only record; it educates. It teaches its readers how to read the record. A seismograph that trains seismologists is unknown to geology; literature has one.

The study rests on two cores that mirror each other. Core One says: *the object is dynamic*. It offers a model of totalitarianism as a complete life cycle, with an internal dynamic (phases, media) and an external one (the history of the concept). Core Two says: *the instrument is dynamic and has blind spots*. It offers a typology of the seismograph’s powers and limits. The two cores meet in a demonstration: on the Czech line — Kafka, Čapek, Petiška — supplemented by Hungarian and Polish points of triangulation, we show that the field measures. The conclusion then turns the instrument over to its other

side: the formative function of literature, and what the record of tremors does to the reader.

2. A Dynamic Model of Totalitarianism

2.1 Internal Dynamics: The Life Cycle

The classic model of totalitarianism, developed by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, identifies six interrelated features: an official ideology, a single mass party, a terroristic secret police, a monopoly on weapons, a monopoly on mass communication, and a centrally directed economy.³ These criteria provide a practical basis for classifying regimes, but they are less suited to explaining how totalitarian rule emerges, changes, or disintegrates. The model primarily describes an established system, leaving the processes of its formation and transformation insufficiently explained. Stephen Turner's recent account places this limitation in its intellectual and political context: the checklist emerged from the scholarly consensus of the early Cold War and reflected Friedrich's own theoretical commitments. Friedrich's subsequent removal of terror from the list by the 1960s also shows that the model itself underwent revision.⁴

Dynamics does exist in classics and is scattered across them in pieces. Giovanni Sartori separated a phase of establishment from a phase of stabilization and assigned terror to the first: a regime, on his account, stays totalitarian even after the bloody stage has settled into routine.⁵ Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan described post-totalitarianism as a type in its own right, the condition into which the Soviet-bloc regimes drifted after Stalin's death.⁶ Czech political

³ FRIEDRICH, Carl J. – Brzezinski, Zbigniew K. *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956.

⁴ TURNER, Stephen. Carl Friedrich's Path to "Totalitarianism." In: Ungureanu, Manuela L. (ed.). *Rethinking the Historiography of the Soviet Bloc*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2026, pp. 42–55.

⁵ SARTORI, Giovanni. *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1987.

⁶ LINZ, Juan J. – Stepan, Alfred. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

science has systematized both.⁷ Nonetheless, each of these moves dynamizes only part of the arc — the beginning, or the late stage — never the whole thing, from birth to memory.

The model proposed here brings these partial accounts together into five phases: incubation, seizure of power, terror, normalization, and erosion, including the subsequent formation of memory. Incubation describes the emergence of totalitarian tendencies within a democracy in crisis, often before contemporaries recognize their significance. Seizure of power occurs through a coup, a formally legal takeover, or external intervention, followed by the rapid suppression of political pluralism. Terror involves systematic repression and dehumanization through institutions and practices such as camps, show trials, and the reduction of individuals to files and numbers. Normalization consolidates rule through routine administration, surveillance, and accommodation in everyday life. Erosion encompasses the weakening of the regime, resistance, and eventual collapse; its aftermath includes the opening of archives and disputes over historical responsibility and memory. These phases should be understood as overlapping processes rather than discrete, inevitable steps. Their boundaries are often identifiable only retrospectively and remain open to interpretation. Their timing and sequence also differ across national contexts. The Czech lands moved from a comparatively strong interwar democracy through Nazi occupation and, later, the communist takeover of February 1948. Poland experienced German and Soviet occupation followed by a Sovietization that remained incomplete, while Slovakia had an internally established wartime dictatorship in 1939–1945. In Hungary, the revolution of 1956 interrupted communist rule before Soviet intervention restored it. A country may therefore experience successive cycles, and the seizure of power may result from annexation or occupation as well as domestic political developments. These differences make comparison across national trajectories essential to the model, as discussed further in subsequent sections.

The model places Nazism and communism side by side on three grounds. First, totalitarianism emerged as a comparative concept: Arendt analyzed

⁷ BALÍK, Stanislav – KUBÁT, Michal. *Teorie a praxe nedemokratických režimů* [Theory and Practice of Non-Democratic Regimes]. Prague: Dokořán, 2012.

Nazism and Stalinism in parallel, as did Friedrich and Brzezinski. This comparison has always been contested, and recent scholarship has explicitly sought to move “beyond totalitarianism.”⁸ Our model incorporates that debate rather than treating the two regimes as unproblematically identical. Second, it compares not their ideologies but their dynamics: the shape of their development and their mechanisms of rule—the use of media, language, fear, and bureaucratic records. Their programs remained distinct, as did the criteria by which they selected their victims: race in one case, class in the other. Third, and most importantly for Central Europe, the two regimes were experienced in succession. In the Czech lands, they passed through the same society and often through the same lives. Offices, buildings, files, and practices of fear carried over; in 1945, the pen barely lifted from the paper. Literature therefore records them as a continuous experience of unfreedom—one that can be measured only along an extended historical axis.

2.2 Internal Dynamics: Media and Codes

In the classic syndrome the “monopoly of the means of mass communication” sits there as a constant, because the state has the media, “full stop”. We turn the constant into a variable — each phase of the cycle has its own dominant code and channel for the transmission of information and messages, and when the channel changes, the nature of power changes with it, and so does the nature of fear.

Incubation speaks through print and radio: through the campaign, the headline, the broadcast that carries the leader’s voice into the kitchen. The seizure of power stages itself through film and ritual: the procession, the congress, the oath, the newsreel. Power puts itself on display; it aestheticizes itself; it performs. Terror writes with the dossier and the camp. Its medium is the file, the card index, the interrogation protocol, the forced confession read out over the radio at the show trial — and the number that replaces the human being, on the forearm and on the cover of the folder. Normalization broadcasts by television and keeps its file quiet: the cadre report, everyday surveillance, fear dissolved into routine. And erosion builds itself a substitute network against

⁸ GEYER, Michael – FITZPATRICK, Sheila (eds.). *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

the monopoly — samizdat, magnitizdat, émigré publishing — while the phase of memory opens the last medium of all: the archive.

The material that flows through every one of these channels is language. Victor Klemperer showed, on the German of the Third Reich, how speech can be militarized and how euphemism can mask a crime.⁹ Michał Głowinski described the Polish *nowomowa*.¹⁰ Petr Fidelius took apart the speech of communist power.¹¹ And Vladimír Macura, following these models, built a semiotics of the “happy age.”¹² What matters for our purposes is one thing: language is the place where the technology of power and the technology of literature touch. Both work in the same material. From this a key consequence will follow for the seismograph metaphor (III.1): the tremor and the instrument are made of one and the same substance.

2.3 External Dynamics: The History of the Concept

The concept of totalitarianism has its own biography. Abbott Gleason called it the “inner history of the Cold War.”¹³ The word is born in 1923, in an Italian liberal polemic against Mussolini. Fascism promptly adopts it as a badge of honor. After the war the concept is canonized — Arendt in 1951, Friedrich and Brzezinski in 1956 — and then corroded by revisionism in the 1960s and 1970s. After 1989 it is raised again by the new institutions of memory, and attacked again by the historiography of everyday life. In the Polish debate the “totalitarian syndrome” has been described as an essentially contested concept in Gallie’s sense.¹⁴ In the Czech context the everyday word *totalita*

⁹ KLEMPERER, Victor. *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI — Lingua Tertii Imperii. A Philologist’s Notebook*. Trans. Martin Brady. London: Athlone Press, 2000.

¹⁰ GŁOWIŃSKI, Michał. *Nowomowa po polsku* [Newspeak in Polish]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1990.

¹¹ FIDELIUS, Petr. *Řeč komunistické moci* [The Speech of Communist Power]. Prague: Triáda, 1998.

¹² MACURA, Vladimír. *Šťastný věk (a jiné studie o socialistické kultuře)* [The Happy Age, and Other Studies in Socialist Culture]. Prague: Academia, 2008.

¹³ GLEASON, Abbott. *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War*. New York — Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

¹⁴ GALLIE, Walter B. Essentially Contested Concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56, 1955–1956, pp. 167–198; BRZECHCZYN, Krzysztof. Totalitarian Syndrome as a Case of an Essentially Contested Concept. In: Ungureanu, Manuela L. (ed.), op. cit., pp. 88 ff.

— a shorthand, not a scholarly term — made a peculiar career of its own, becoming more familiar than the concept it abbreviated.¹⁵

From this biography follows not resignation but a methodical rule. The historicity of the concept is not to be tidied away by a definition in the introduction. It is to be built into the model as the external dynamics. We read each phase with the optics that suit it both historically and analytically: incubation and seizure through the optics of the genesis of movements; terror through the classic model; normalization through revisionism and the study of everyday life; erosion and memory through memory studies and the reflection of the twenty-first century. The succession of optics is itself a datum, not noise. And with that, the objection of anachronism falls. We are not imposing one theory on seventy years. We are watching theory and phenomenon chase each other, sometimes missing, sometimes catching up.

2.4 The Field: Matrix and Probes

The two dynamics can be folded into a single figure (fig. 1).

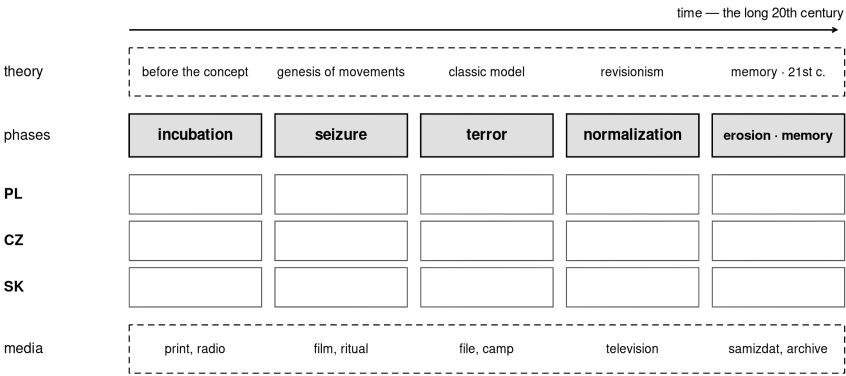


Figure 1: The field: phases of the cycle, three literatures, a band of theories above and a band of media below.

Along the horizontal axis runs the time of the long century, and on it the phases of the cycle. Vertically stand the three literatures — Polish, Czech,

¹⁵ BLAIVE, Muriel. On the Origins of “Totalita”: A Social Epistemology of a Nonconcept. In: Ungureanu, Manuela L. (ed.), op. cit., pp. 271 ff.

Slovak — as the rows of a matrix. Above the matrix runs a band of theories (the external dynamics); below it a band of media (the internal dynamics of II.2). Every cell of the matrix is a place for texts. The whole field is a measuring network. The matrix makes similarities visible without erasing differences in national timing, political context, or literary response. It also guides the selection of probes: individual texts can be located within the larger field and compared across phases, media, and literary traditions.

3. The Seismograph — Powers and Limits

3.1 The Load the Metaphor Can Bear

Why a seismograph — and why for literature in particular? Comparing art to a sensitive recorder of social movements is old, and people do it loosely, about music and painting too. For literature the comparison holds in a stronger, more literal sense, for the reason we prepared in II.2: the tremor and the instrument are made of the same substance. Power shakes society with language — the campaign, the slogan, the decree, the euphemism, the panegyric. Literature measures with language. No other instrument is built from the same material as the quaking it records. That is the source of its unique sensitivity, just as it is the source of its unique vulnerability: what is made of the same substance can be overwritten by the same force.

The corpus includes not only works that warn, resist, or bear witness, but also texts that endorse and celebrate totalitarian rule. The latter require a different mode of analysis: rather than treating them as independent testimony, we examine how they participate in the regime's production of meaning. Literary responses also vary across the life cycle — anticipation is characteristic of incubation, testimony of terror, coded expression of normalization, and remembrance of the period after collapse. These shifts connect literary form to the changing conditions in which texts are produced and received.

3.2 A Typology of Blind Spots

(A) The instrument. The first limit is the deepest. A seismograph records involuntarily; a writer chooses. The instrument cannot refuse to register. The author can — he can keep silent, conform, lie. A literary seismograph is

an instrument with a will, and therefore with a guilt. Its record has an ethics that geophysics does not know. First rule: the silence of a station is not the same as the stillness of the ground. Silence, too, is a datum; it only has to be read as silence.

The second limit: the instrument stands in the epicenter. A real seismograph measures from the outside. A writer is shaken by the very thing he records. And power knows how to calibrate the instrument. Socialist realism was a seismograph wired to draw the prescribed, ascending curve. The most thorough calibration, moreover, is the kind the instrument performs on itself, in advance, “without any mental reservations,” as the period’s formula of scholarly self-criticism had it.¹⁶ Czech literature possesses an image of the calibrated instrument that is four centuries old: Comenius’s pilgrim is given the spectacles of Delusion — but they sit crooked, so he can peer out past the rims.¹⁷ Every calibration has its slack. Literature is that peering past the rim.

Third: there is also the instrument as exciter. The proclamatory, celebratory register does not record tremors; it produces them. It is part of the machine that shakes. The rule: do not read exciters as bad measurements. Read them as data about the source. An ode to the leader says nothing about what society felt. It says precisely what society was being shaken with.

(B) The record. Fourth: a record is not a transmission. A seismogram that no station reads warns no one. Censorship, as a rule, does not stop the writing — it cuts the line. The manuscript goes on arising; it simply does not arrive. The drawer, the letter, the bottle. Samizdat and the émigré press as an improvised substitute network. Here, too, the limit turns into a measurement. The bottle’s time in transit is itself a quantity: it measures the length of unfreedom.

Fifth: registration is not prediction. Seismology records stress and fore-shocks, not dates. Not even the most sensitive literary record of the 1930s named the day of Munich. What it recorded was the accumulation of stress along the fault. We therefore propose, throughout this work, to retire the word

¹⁶ MUKAŘOVSKÝ, Jan. Kam směřuje dnešní teorie umění? [Where Is Today’s Theory of Art Heading?]. *Slovo a slovesnost* 11, 1949, no. 2, pp. 49–59, quoted p. 51.

¹⁷ COMENIUS, John Amos. *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* (1623, printed 1631).

“prophetic” and replace it with the more precise “sensitive.” Literature shows stress, not the calendar. Paradoxically, this benefits the metaphor: it relieves it of a claim it could not carry.

The sixth limit is the most treacherous: aseismic creep. The most dangerous movement of the earth’s plates is slow slippage without quakes. And that is exactly what the normalizing drift of a society is: a catastrophe without an earthquake, a shift that no one feels because it never stops. The classic seismograph fails here. Literature had to develop special instruments for creep — the prose of the everyday, the record of non-events, the poetics of greyness. Theory found a name for this condition only years later.¹⁸ Literature was recording it before it had a name.

(C) The network and its reading. Seventh: the density of the network. Where no station stands, the tremor goes unregistered. The silenced voices, the oral culture, the burnt archive. The map of stations is itself a historical document; the absence of a record is not the absence of a tremor. And one station alone cannot localize. To fix an epicenter you need triangulation — at least three stations. Right here the comparative design PL–CZ–SK stops being a whim and becomes a necessity. Three literatures are the minimal seismographic network. National clocks run at different speeds (II.1). The same tremor reaches each station with a different delay and a different amplitude. Only by comparing the records can you separate what belongs to the source from what belongs to the station: the invariant from the nationally conditioned.

Eighth: the retrospective calibration of reading. After an earthquake, every earlier quiver looks like a foreshock. Retrospective teleology is the occupational disease of anyone who reads old records after the catastrophe. The safeguard is to date the optics: do not lend the text knowledge it could not have had, and own the succession of optics as an axis in its own right (II.3). How such a safeguard works in practice, we show at once on the first case of the demonstration.

¹⁸ HAVEL, Václav. *The Power of the Powerless* (1978). In: Keane, John (ed.). *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*. London: Hutchinson, 1985.

3.3 Sampling Rates

Literature records historical experience at different temporal scales. Bakhtin's distinction between small time and great time helps clarify these differences.¹⁹ Journalism operates in small time: it responds to events as they unfold and preserves details that may later disappear, although its proximity to the present can make broader patterns difficult to discern. Exile writing offers greater distance. It can identify longer historical movements more clearly, but may lose some of the texture of everyday life; the most influential postwar account of the Central European "captive mind" emerged from precisely this position.²⁰ Writing kept in a drawer occupies a third distinct position: it is produced in direct response to its historical moment but addressed to an unknown future reader. Each perspective reveals something the others cannot. A fuller account therefore requires all three — a point demonstrated by the Czech case studies that follow.

3.4 Blind Spots as a Research Program

The limits of the seismograph metaphor provide a set of practical rules for interpretation. Analysis must attend to silences and missing records, distinguish texts that document power from those that help produce it, account for delays between writing and publication, and avoid treating literary works as predictions of specific events. It must also recognize gradual social change, compare records across national contexts, and remain conscious of the historically situated perspective of the reader. Together, these principles turn the metaphor's blind spots into a research program. They also correspond to a typology of voices developed elsewhere: the silenced voice is a broken instrument; the voice within the apparatus is shaped by its calibration; the voice at the threshold records from the edge of the network; and the voice in the drawer

¹⁹ BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

²⁰ MIŁOSZ, Czesław. *The Captive Mind*. Trans. Jane Zielonko. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953.

preserves a record without transmitting it.²¹ The next section puts this method to the test.

4. Demonstration: The Czech Line and Points of Triangulation

The demonstration follows a single Czech line, supplemented by two other national traditions for triangulation. This narrower focus allows the model's three dimensions — the phases of totalitarianism, changes in media, and shifts in theoretical perspective — to be examined across three types of literary record: journalism, drama, and writing withheld from publication. The study thus demonstrates how the instrument and its comparative network operate.

The Czech trajectory comprises two successive cycles rather than one. The first began in 1938–1939, when the state ceased to exist and Nazi rule was imposed through annexation and occupation. The years 1945–1948 brought only a partial and temporary relaxation, as the country remained within the Soviet sphere of influence before the communist seizure of power in February 1948. Within this second cycle, the reforms and growing demands for freedom during the 1960s were abruptly halted by the invasion of August 1968. The normalization that followed did not restore the mass terror of the earlier period. Instead, control was imposed gradually through administrative pressure, selective repression, and repeated accommodation, allowing society to adjust to each restriction before the next was introduced. Figure 2 therefore shows two major peaks separated by a shallow interval from 1945 to 1948, followed by the sharp disruption of August 1968 and a gradual, stepped rise during normalization. The line ends in 1989 because the period under examination has ended, not because the absence of a further record guarantees lasting stability.

4.1 Kafka — The Zero Point

The Trial was written in 1914–1915 and published posthumously in 1925.²² It arises, then, not just before the regimes but before the word. The concept of totalitarianism enters European speech only in 1923. Josef K. is arrested

²¹ PAVERA, Libor. Monograph in preparation; the documentary parallels (incl. *Lidové noviny*, December 15, 1950) and the typology of voices are developed there.

²² KAFKA, Franz. *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*; written 1914–1915, published 1925).

without having done anything. The proceedings run everywhere and nowhere. The file that decides about him he never sees. And all the while he walks free: the trial is not a wall but an atmosphere. For our construction this is the zero point of the scale. This is what the record looks like while the tremor is still potential. The text registers the stress of modern bureaucratic power — the case without guilt, the apparatus without a face, the file as a medium that precedes and outlives the person it describes. It does not register the future camps.

Here the eighth rule proves itself. The postwar generations read *The Trial* with the sensitivity their own experience had given them, and they read it as a prophecy of the camps. We do not inherit that reading. We date it. It belongs to the history of reading (II.3), not to the text. The zero point loses nothing by this. On the contrary, it shows how much of the apparatus of the later totality was already prepared in “normal” modernity, before a regime was found that would assemble the whole thing.

4.2 Čapek — Rising Amplitude

Three texts in three years. *War with the Newts* (1936), *The White Disease* (1937), *The Mother* (1938).²³ Read them side by side and you watch the needle start to swing: a satirical panorama, then a moral duel, then a chamber tragedy. Distance, dilemma, rifle. This is not a change of mind. It is rising amplitude in one and the same record: the closer the source, the greater the deflection. Čapek suits this reading for another reason, too: he wrote at two rates at once. A man of the daily pen — one piece a day in the paper, sometimes more — and at the same time a dramatist and novelist. Poláček, it was said, ought to keep one desk for journalism and another for fiction. A pretty phrase, but linguistically beside the point: the idiolect is one. For measurement, though, the pair of desks is productive. The daily column captures the day. The drama assembles what the years have accumulated. It was the high rate of the newsroom that gave Čapek a resolution nobody without one possessed — and the long waves of great time he then composed at the second desk.

²³ ČAPEK, Karel. *War with the Newts* (1936); *The White Disease* (1937); *The Mother* (1938).

Inside the trio, the axis of media runs on its own, as if the author had laid it out for us. *War with the Newts* is built from the material of the press — reports, protocols, clippings, conference minutes. An instrument constructed from the medium it measures: the press measuring itself. *The White Disease* puts the crowd and the Marshal's spectacle on stage — the ritual of the seizure phase. And into *The Mother* the war enters by radio: the receiver is the last channel by which the public penetrates the most intimate space, and the play's final impulse comes over the air. Print, crowd, radio — in three years of a single pen. The internal dynamics of media (II.2) documented on one author. And the fifth rule one last time: Čapek named no date. He recorded the loading of the fault. The record breaks off in December 1938, when the author dies a few weeks after Munich. That, too, is why “prophetic” is the wrong word even for him. He was sensitive.

4.3 Petiška — The Bottle

The third type of record is the strangest of all: a record made in the knowledge that it would not be sent. *Journey to the Land of Lidivoni* was written in 1951–1952, at the maximum of the tremors. Its author was twenty-seven. By later testimony, he and his friends expected house searches and arrest daily.²⁴ The text protects itself with a triple mask. The motto from Hesiod sets at the gate of the book the hawk with the songbird in its claws — the oldest European emblem of the singer in the grip of the predator, the witness who stands inside the thing he records. The invocation of a “doctor of the liberal arts, Jakub Libertus” turns the narrative into sworn testimony before God — a counter-file set against the forced protocol. And the diction of an old travel relation moves the scene to a safe distance. That the mask was more than a genre game is confirmed by an archival detail: the hidden manuscript bore, for cover, a note identifying it as a translation from an old German original, “Die Reise nach Leuteduften.”²⁵ It is a *pia fraus* in reverse — a forgery that covers not a crime but a witness. Masking, then, runs in two directions. Power covers crime with language, as even the official death certificates from the camps attest.

²⁴ THE preface by E. M. (Eduard Martin) of April 1999 to the first print edition; in: Petiška, op. cit. (n. 1).

²⁵ IBID.

Literature covers the witness with language. Two cryptographies of the same substance.²⁶

Inside the fiction, the text registers with a precision that documents can nowadays confirm. The first institution the castaway encounters on the island is directed historiography: a young historian shows him a royal decree in which the king himself, in numbered rules, prescribes how history is to be written. The satire records the very mechanism that the official sources of December 1950 record in the language of pledges and assignments.²⁷ And the name of the land is a diagnosis: “In the land of Lidivoni, people smell of fear” — and whoever lives there long enough stops noticing the scent.²⁸ The habituation of fear. A sense dulled by duration. Aseismic creep captured in a single image, two decades before theory found a name for the condition. The book’s second motto, from Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, then states the program we called the wager on long time in the introduction: deception profits for a moment; truth profits over the long run. It is not our projection into the text, then. The book carries long time inscribed at its gate. And its own fate fulfilled the wager. Written under the terror, with a preface dated April 1968, its typesetting scattered after August 21, it reached its reader only in another state and another century. The fate of a single manuscript is a seismogram of four phases of the cycle (fig. 2).²⁹

²⁶ ON the Mauthausen death letters, see the author’s study of the Šajtar case (in press / manuscript); on the “two cryptographies” cf. Klemperer, op. cit.

²⁷ PAVERA, Libor. Monograph in preparation; the documentary parallels (incl. *Lidové noviny*, December 15, 1950) and the typology of voices are developed there.

²⁸ PETIŠKA, op. cit. (n. 1), [para. 333 of the e-edition; print pagination]

²⁹ A separate comparative study of Petiška’s *Journey to the Land of Lidivoni* (alongside, among others, Comenius’s *Labyrinth of the World*, which likewise “sees through” the world) is in preparation.

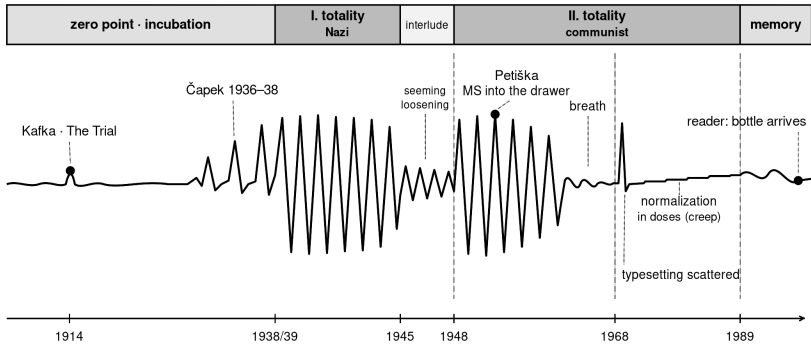


Figure 2: The Czech seismogram: two cycles, the interlude of 1945–1948, and the fate of a single manuscript.

4.4 Points of Triangulation

The seventh rule asks for at least three stations if you want to fix an epicenter. The second is supplied by Hungary. Gyula Illyés wrote *One Sentence on Tyranny* in 1950. It was printed on November 2, 1956, in the middle of the revolution, and then suppressed again for decades.³⁰ A Hungarian bottle: the same arc of fate as Petiška's, shifted by a phase according to the Hungarian clock. The form itself is seismographic — a single sentence swelling over hundreds of lines, an enumeration that cannot stop because tyranny is present in everything the poem names. The third station comes from Poland. Adam Ważyk, a court poet of socialist realism, in 1955 published his *Poem for Adults* and publicly admitted that the prescribed curve had been false.³¹ A rare spectacle: an exciter recalibrating itself back into a recorder before its readers' eyes. The scandal the poem triggered measured the arrival of the thaw in Poland a year before October.

Slovakia measures on a clock shifted by a whole cycle: it went through its first totality during the war. Janko Jesenský wrote anti-regime verses in the years of the wartime Slovak state; they could not appear at home, circulated

³⁰ ILLYÉS, Gyula. Egy mondat a zsarnokságról [One Sentence on Tyranny]. Written 1950; printed in *Irodalmi Újság*, November 2, 1956.

³¹ WAŻYK, Adam. Poemat dla dorosłych [A Poem for Adults]. *Nowa Kultura*, 1955, no. 34.

in manuscript copies, and were printed only after the liberation.³² A Slovak bottle from the older cycle, and proof that the phase shift of national clocks can be measured even twice within one country. The source is the same. The times of arrival differ. And it is precisely the difference of times that comparative study measures.

5. Conclusion: Long Time and the Instrument's Other Side

Let us come back to where we started. Historiography reproaches the totalitarian paradigm with stasis, with blindness to the conduct of individuals, to everyday life, to “third paths.”³³ Our answer has been: these are not defects of the concept. They are defects of measurement — and literature is the instrument park that registers exactly these quantities as a matter of course. The conduct of the individual is its material. Everyday life is its element. The third paths are its plot. Comparative literary study therefore enters the dispute over totalitarianism not as an ornament but as a missing piece of measuring equipment.

The study has offered two cores. The dynamic model (Core One) assembles the full life cycle of totalitarianism — incubation, seizure, terror, normalization, erosion with memory — and builds into it two further variables: the media of each phase and the history of the concept itself. The seismograph (Core Two) is the instrument fitted to this object: a metaphor taken seriously, limping and all — nine blind spots, nine rules, the most important of which is triangulation. One station cannot fix an epicenter. The demonstration then showed both cores at work on a single line and two foreign stations.

From all of this follows the closing thesis toward which the whole construction has been moving: a dynamic object can be measured with a dynamic instrument — it is a possibility, and in truth a necessity, to look at totalitarianism along a great, temporally extended axis, to follow things in long time, to use Bakhtin's term. Nowhere would we see the dynamics so plainly

³² JESENKÝ, Janko. Anti-regime verses of 1939–1945, in book form after 1945 (incl. the collection *Čierne dni* [Black Days]).

³³ UNGUREANU, Manuela L. (ed.). *Rethinking the Historiography of the Soviet Bloc: The Totalitarianism Paradigm and Institutional Practices under Communism*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2026.

displayed as across the long twentieth century. On a shorter surface the graph would simply be missing — the curve of what happens in the two entities we have fixed our attention on: society and literature. Shorten the axis and you lose not data but shape.

The typology has one further implication. The literary record may appear quieter after 1989, but this should not be taken as evidence that the underlying risks have disappeared. Gradual shifts may occur without an obvious rupture, while the incubation of authoritarian tendencies is often recognizable only in retrospect. As follows, it is not possible to treat totalitarianism as a closed historical chapter from that point onward. It remains a possibility wherever trust in democratic institutions deteriorates. The field of observation consequently extends beyond 1989, reminding us that democracy and freedom depend on sustained attention and collective responsibility.

Let us also acknowledge the boundary of our scope. We have been speaking of political totality, or geopolitical totality, and it is not the only kind a human being undergoes. There is an existential totality, personal and inward, with no external cause. There is an economic totality. There are other projections, each of which would need instruments of its own. The zero point of our demonstration, as it happens, knew this before we did: Kafka's trial records a totality that is not yet — or not only — political. The model therefore claims no completeness. To say it with Bakhtin: the last word on totality has not been spoken. Unfinalizability is not a weakness of the description; it is a property of the object and a condition of further inquiry.³⁴

And, at the last, the instrument's other side. A seismograph that trains seismologists is unknown to geology. Literature has one, and that is its formative function — deeper than any didactics. A tremor is something the body knows before it has a concept for it, and literature is the way that knowledge of tremors becomes knowledge that can be passed on. Reading tremors can be learned. It is work that no other kind of record will do in literature's place. Generations that have never lived through an earthquake can learn to recognize foreshocks from an archive of records — and that is the sober, unpathetic point of the whole construction. It holds all the more because the newest techniques

³⁴ BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Trans. Vern W. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

of masking no longer need a monopoly on communication. The network divides the audience by itself. All the more reason, then, to know how to read the records of a century that had the monopoly. Deception, as Diderot already knew at the gate of Petiška's book, profits for a moment. Along the long axis, the record wins. The long twentieth century is the proving ground where this can be shown.

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About the Author

Libor Pavera lives in Prague and works across Central Europe. His research addresses the development of schools and education, aesthetics in the broad sense (the individual arts), and new media — fake news, deepfakes and related phenomena — as well as LTI and “harmful language”, both in theoretical work and in applied studies and projects (liborpavera.cz).

Libor Pavera (Prague)

ORCID 0000-0001-6916-8483

