In the 1960s, almost the whole cultural community within Czechoslovakia was actively involved in pushing for a liberalization of the Communist system. Its efforts were temporarily very successful, culminating in six months of almost total freedom during the Prague Spring of 1968. The Warsaw Pact invasion followed, and at a stroke the Czech cultural community — almost in its entirety — was removed from public life and became “un-persons”.

The 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion was also very successful. The invasion cast Czechoslovakia into a timeless, neostalinist zone for almost two complete decades. When the post-1968 purges “cleansed” the Czech cultural scene of some four hundred writers, their place was taken by authors of third or fourth rank. Many of these people were still in possession of the high ground of the Czech literary scene two decades later, although in the meantime some new, younger authors had emerged. These younger writers naturally did not want to destroy their chances of publication from the outset and so they could not risk identifying with the liberal values of the dissident community. They avoided blatantly political or otherwise “subversive” topics.

Some Czech writers left Czechoslovakia in the wave of emigration that followed the 1968 Soviet-led invasion and set up émigré publishing houses in the West in the early 1970s. It is important to emphasize that the post-1968 émigré community as a whole came from the same roots and shared the same mindset as the dissident community of around four hundred Czech writers who had stayed behind. Both Czech émigrés in the West and the dissident community in Czechoslovakia were children of the 1960s liberalization process and its culmination, the 1968 Prague Spring.

There existed a relatively weak Czech émigré literary tradition in the West between 1948, the Communist take-over of Czechoslovakia, and 1970. The arrival of new émigrés after 1968 gave Czech émigré cultural life a very strong boost.

From the late 1970s onwards, Czech émigrés in the West cooperated with their dissident colleagues within Czechoslovakia very intensely, with a considerable unity of purpose. The dissident community in Czechoslovakia coalesced in 1977 into the human rights movement Charter 77. People of widely differing political views made up the Charter 77 community. They were united
by the common purpose of upholding human rights, thereby fighting for freedom in a totalitarian state. The Charter 77 community learned to work together very effectively, in an atmosphere of absolute tolerance. The same applied to the mainstream Czech émigré cultural community in the West, which closely cooperated with the Charter 77 activists and disseminated their ideas.

In brief: it is very difficult to talk about émigré literature as such in the Czech context because the Czech émigré publishing houses brought out not only works by Czech authors living in the West, but also a considerable amount of literature by dissident authors living within Czechoslovakia. Notwithstanding a controversy over Milan Kundera's émigré work, both the émigré and the dissident writers were broadly in agreement politically, philosophically and aesthetically. Both these literary strands now more or less merge under the heading of Czech "independent literature".

In a narrower sense, it would be possible to define Czech émigré literature as that kind of writing which attempted to compare and contrast life in Czechoslovakia with life in the West, to map out the process of psychological adjustment of people who left Czechoslovakia for the West and to broaden the horizons of Czech literature by enriching it with international experience. However, Czech independent literature has not been studied in any great detail from this angle.

After the fall of Communism in 1989, the economic and social foundations of Czech culture were seriously shaken. "All areas of national culture were beset with problems, some the result of long years of neglect, others brought about as an unexpected consequence of social and political change", Igor Hájek wrote in his article "Czech Culture in the Cauldron" (Europe-Asia Studies, vol. 46, no.1 [1994], p. 133), analysing in detail the situation in the arts in Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s.

Soon after the 1989 revolution, a need seems to have been felt by many Czech dissidents to show that their activities were fully independent of help.


2. For a brief discussion of this approach, and a list of Czech authors whose work should be studied from this angle, see Jan Čulík, "Tschechisches Literarisches Leben im Exil 1971-1989. Versuch einer Bestandsaufnahme", in Im Dissens zur Macht, herausgegeben von Ludwig Richter und Heinrich Olschowsky (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), pp. 69-83. For an outline of Czech émigré publishing from 1948 to 1989, see Jan Čulík's article "Pozapomenutá kultura: Česká literatura v exilu za komunistické říši", written in February 1998 for the catalogue of an international travelling exhibition of samizdat literature in former Communist countries, organized for 1998-2000 by the institute Forschungsstelle Osteuropa at the University of Bremen. The text is available on the internet in Czech at http://blisty.internet.cz/9804/19980414e.html#03.