

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Susie Lunt, ed. *Prague*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Clio Press, 1997. xvii + 185 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85109-252-9.

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Library Pragensia

In the front of this book there is a list of the almost two hundred volumes already published in this ABC-CLIO series. It appears from this list that the company, having exhausted the world's countries, land masses, and even bodies of water, has turned its focus to its cities. Excluding special cases like Hong Kong or Berlin, the first such effort focused on London, number 189 in the series. The volume under review is the second.

The literature on Prague is certainly enormous, and would lend itself to a critical overview. The reader is informed at the outset that the entries will be "principally in English or major West European languages," with "some in Czech, and occasionally Slovak," although this reviewer did not find a single work in Slovak among the 533 cited. It is further stated that books were favored over articles, and that efforts were made to include recent works, rather than older volumes, except "where they shed light on the life of the city, such as guide books, memoirs and collections of photographs" (p. xvii). The entries themselves are divided into twenty-nine categories, some of which have numerous subheadings, and all of which are presumably standard for this series. For example, the forty-six entries under Guidebooks are divided into General, Specific, Historical, Individual Places and Districts, Pocket Guides, and Walks in Prague. Each entry includes a brief description of contents, along with complete bibliographical information. The book concludes with separate indexes for authors, titles, and subjects, and a small map of Prague.

Modern computer technology has made it much simpler to access bibliographical information. A brief foray into the Library of Congress online catalog under the heading "Prague" will yield hundreds of titles, but the actual content of each book can only be surmised. For this reason, there will continue to be a need for annotated bibliographies of the type produced by ABC-CLIO. Unfortunately, this volume falls far short of this purpose. The compiler is described as an English instructor who worked and lived in Prague for two years after the Velvet

Revolution, and is currently there as an employee of the Thomas Cook Agency.

For the specialist in the field, a red flag appears already in the introduction, when it is claimed that the Old Town, with its glorious secessionist architecture, "reflects the Middle Ages" (p. xiv). The assertion that the inhabitants of Prague historically "include not only Czechs, but also Slovaks, Romanies, Germans, Russians, Hungarians, and Poles" reveals a basic ignorance of the history of the region (p. xiii). While perhaps correct in a technical sense, this description understates the important historical role of the Germans in Prague, which was a center of German culture for centuries. It is noted, somewhat inaccurately, that the city was "absorbed by the Third Reich on 15 March 1939," but the subsequent expulsion of the Germans from Czechoslovakia after the war that transformed the ethnic makeup of the city is never mentioned.

The bibliography itself contains only a handful of works in German, a curious omission considering the vast literature on the subject in this language. This oversight may reflect the compiler's own linguistic shortcomings, evident in the translation of the title *Vaeterliches aus Prag* as "Fatherly towards Prague" (p. 109). The descriptions of Nikolaus Martin, the author of an English-language memoir called *Prague Winter*, as "a Sudeten German/Czech" (p. 37), and of Franz Werfel as "a Jewish, German, and Slavic [sic] writer" (p. 34) further undermine confidence in the compiler's grasp of the ethnic divides which have historically informed the culture of the city.

Here and elsewhere the author appears to be poorly grounded in historiography. A brief look at the "History" section shows only the most superficial awareness of the basic literature. These limits may be the result of the "severe pruning" which the compiler claims the history section sustained (p. xvi). In any event, only forty-one entries made the final cut, among them some rather curious choices. For example, there are only two books in English

on Czech history: The pamphlet-sized *Fundamentals of Czech History* by Petr Cornej, familiar to anyone who has visited the souvenir shops of Prague, and a 1938 book with multiple authors, including most importantly Karel Capek, entitled *At the Cross Roads of Europe: A Historical Outline of the Democratic Idea in Czechoslovakia*, presumably a propaganda piece against the policy of appeasement. More scholarly approaches, either newer ones like Carol Leff's *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation versus State* [1], or Derek Sayer's *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* [2] are missing, as are older, traditional accounts, like that edited by Victor Mamatey and Radomir Luza, *A History of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1918-1948*. Only one history of the Habsburg Empire, which formed the context for the evolution of the city, is cited, which has not yet appeared in English translation: Francois Fejto's *Requiem pour un Empire defunt: Histoire de la destruction de l'Autriche Hongrie*. [3] It is listed under a subheading of the "History" category entitled "Early Modern Period to the End of World War II (1848-1947 [sic])".

The failure to crosslist titles from one category to other relevant headings limits the usefulness of this book for scholars or anyone else. To further complicate matters, the process of categorization appears to have been carried out according to quite singular principles. For example, a biography of Franz Werfel, *A Life Torn by History*, inexplicably appears under "Travellers' Accounts" rather than "Biographies"; Robert Pynsent's study of Czech literary nationalism, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* [4] appears under "Population," rather than "Literature" or "History"; and the only two books on Masaryk included in the compilation, H. Gordon Skilling's biography *T.G. Masaryk: Against the Current, 1882-1914* and the anthology of Masaryk's writings edited by George Kovtun, *The Spirit of Thomas G. Masaryk, 1850-1927* mysteriously appear under the subheading "Pre-Twentieth Century" in the category "Politics and Government" rather than in "History" or even "Biography." One can only surmise why a book entitled *Alphonse Mucha* appears under the heading "Art Galleries" rather than "Visual Arts," where

other books about this painter are located. Is it because the book is a catalog from an exhibit held in the Barbican Art Gallery, although it is located in London and not Prague?

The most useful parts of this book are its opening sections, where the explosion of guidebooks and coffee table picture albums about Prague, the product of the current tourist craze for the city, are brought into some kind of order. It is indicative of the book's priorities that these sections encompass ninety-eight entries, compared to only forty-one under "History." To her credit, the compiler implicitly acknowledges the shortcomings of her efforts in the introduction, when she declares that she would be "most grateful for suggestions of useful, if not vital, entries by readers in preparation for the next edition" (p. xvi). One can only hope that many readers will respond to this plea.

Notes

[1]. Carol Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republics: Nation versus State* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), reviewed on HABSBERG: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=8923901564720>.

[2]. Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), soon to be reviewed on HABSBERG.

[3]. Francois Fejto, *Requiem pour un empire defunt: histoire de la destruction de l'Autriche-Hongrie* (First edition: [Paris]: Lieu commun, 1988).

[4]. Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality*, Central European University Press Books, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), reviewed on HABSBERG: <http://h-net2.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=24830863533645>.

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