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Mary Heimann. *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 432 pp. $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-17242-3.

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Debunking the Whig History of Czechoslovakia: Mary Heimann and the Czechs' Dirty Laundry

Trained in the unrelated field of British religious history, Mary Heimann became interested in Czechoslovakia while teaching a seminar on twentieth-century Europe.[1] Hoping to avoid undue focus on great powers, she asked her students to consider twentieth-century European history from the perspective of "a relatively obscure Central European country which had little influence in international affairs" (p. xx). While she initially found Czechoslovak history inspiring, Heimann later became disillusioned with what she calls the "Whig interpretation of Czechoslovak history" (p. 324), ultimately concluding that neither Czechs nor Slovaks have been "immune from the temptations of authoritarianism, bigotry and cruelty" (p. xxi). The resulting book, *Czechoslovakia: The State the Failed*, is a revisionist political history for non-specialists.

Heimann struggles with some success against the near-universal tendency of Czechoslovak historiography to neglect non-Czech perspectives, yet retains a Czech focus. The early chapters of the book resemble a history of Czech imperialism, describing Czech interactions with colonial possessions. Subcarpathian Ruthenia, for example, appears in the book either struggling for autonomy or succumbing to centralization; it disappears from the narrative entirely after Soviet annexation removed it from the Czech orbit. Heimann deftly handles both the triangular relationship between Czechs, Germans, and Jews, and that between Czechs, Bohemian Germans, and Germany. She usefully discusses Czech-Slovak relations through a narrative of Czech imperialism, but also finds time to describe Slovak discrimination against non-Slovaks, particularly emphasizing wartime anti-Semitism (pp. 114-115, 136) and postwar anti-Hungarian chauvinism (pp. 163-164). She mostly neglects Hungarian perspectives, however, and wholly ignores the complications of Silesian ethnic identity.[2] A high-political focus means that Roma appear mostly as victims of genocide.

Heimann dwells on unsavory episodes in Czech(oslovak) history as a corrective to national myth-making. The chapter on the Nazi protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia covers the 1939 execution of Czech students, Reinhard Heydrich's assassination, and the resulting liquidation of Lidice and Ležáky. Nevertheless, she concludes that during Nazi occupation "the great bulk of the Czech population … worked reliably and productively, sometimes to their own enrichment as well as to the benefit of the Reich" (pp. 130-131). Unlike Bohemia's Germans, who had to perform military service, wartime Czechs could "stay at home with their families, making money and enjoying themselves" (p. 117). She explicitly compares the treatment meted out to Bohemian Germans after the war to Nazi behavior, specifically mentioning inadequate food rations (p. 157), the obligation to wear armbands (p. 158), and even the inscription "Work makes you free" (!) on the gate of Příbram forced labor camp, which opened in 1947 (p. 162). Yet while Heimann's account of Czech "torture, rape and murder" (p. 158) is highly unflattering, it cannot be described as slanderous. Since at least one scholar has attacked Heimann's "biased view" and "skewed history" before actually reading her book, it may be worth pointing out that Czech(oslovak) history has no obligation to sympathize with the Czech(oslovak) cause, however imagined.[3]

Perhaps the most thought-provoking chapter discusses the six months between the Munich Agreement and the full Nazi occupation. Heimann locates the origins of Czechoslovakia's postwar authoritarianism in this neglected period, suggesting that despairing Czechs rejected democracy along with the legacy of the seemingly discredited Edvard Beneš. She places the increased persecution of Jews and Roma (pp. 100-101) in the context of general national chauvinism, also visible in

German-Czech, Czech-Slovak, and Czech-Ruthenian relations. Heimann speculates that, had the occupation not taken place, it would "only have been a matter of weeks before Bohemia-Moravia would have followed the Slovak and Ruthenian examples and gone completely fascist" (p. 98).

The chapters covering the Communist period hold fewer surprises. Heimann's high-political approach yields a very readable account of factional maneuvering during the Slanský trial and the Prague Spring, but her treatment of the Velvet Revolution suffers from an excessive focus on dissidents and goverment elites. The final chapters may lack sting because Václav Havel proves immune to Heimann's reflexive urge to push national heroes off their pedestals. Heimann compares the behavior and adulation of T. G. Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's first president, to that of a Habsburg emperor, particularly emphasizing Masaryk's use of "a special intelligence service ... whose primary purpose was to keep tabs on party-political activity" (p. 68). She depicts Alexander Dubček using "popular resentments to establish his own power base ... rather than adopting 'reformist' positions from conviction" (p. 231). In a passage about the 1967 fourth writer's congress, she characterizes both Milan Kundera and Ivan Klíma as "former Stalinists" (p. 255). Yet Heimann finds nothing to say against Havel. Indeed, she spends a page and a half (pp. 290-291) uncritically summarizing the famous parable of the greengrocer from Havel's "The Power of the Powerless."[4]

Though Heimann derives the tragedies of Czechoslovak history from "a particularly Habsburg way of conceiving of national identity–as tied to language and culture even more than to race or religion" (p. 324), she neither contributes to nor engages with theoretical studies of nationalism. Her analysis rests largely on an unsatisfactory dichotomy between "the French model" and "the German model, derived largely from Herder" (p. 14). She also fails to take contingency seriously. While aware of the contested quality of Rusyn/Ukrainian national identity (pp. xvi, 34, 64), she treats the concept of unitary Czechoslovak nationality as a "dubious assertion" (p. 60) and "legal fiction" (p. 68), thus regrettably dismissing the significant 1945 decision to abandon Czechoslovakism as "meaningless" (p. 145). Other Czechoslovak experts, including the contributors to this roundtable discussion, have found similar difficulties with Heimann's coverage of their particular subfields.

Heimann's account relies on English-language secondary sources. She apparently reads no German or Hungarian, and cites no Czech or Slovak secondary literature. She quotes from several Czech primary sources: police reports, legal documents, and the memoirs of prominent figures. Her treatment of interwar Slovakia rests on Dorothea El Mallakh and James Felak, and thus overstates the importance of Andrej Hlinka's Slovak People's Party.[5] The chapter on the Prague Spring similarly draws heavily from Kieran Williams.[6] Any work covering a century will lean on other scholars, but Heimann's book, however original its narrative, must be seen as a work of synthesis.

Heimann has nevertheless synthesized from other scholars an original narrative that contributes something new to Czech(oslovak) historiography. Heimann's detractors have attacked her on several fronts: some find Heimann's work biased or inaccurate; others declare Heimann's work derivative. These two criticisms strike me as incompatible: how could rehashed errors possibly provoke such anger and controversy? Heimann connects the dots in a new way, and the results left this reviewer, at any rate, pondering whether and to what extent he has internalized the "Whig" interpretation of Czechoslovak history. Any book that prompts a re-evaluation of familiar material contains value, whatever its factual errors, historiographical incompleteness, or other shortcomings.

As might be expected from a book inspired by teaching experiences, Heimann's book seems best suited for undergraduate classrooms. It is written in accessible prose, and contains a healthy share of memorable anecdotes. Most chapters are helpfully given a miniature introduction and conclusion, facilitating their use as standalone readings. Undergraduate students might first need an introduction to the traditional "Whig" interpretation of Czechoslovak history to appreciate that Heimann has made an important and overdue contribution to the popular telling of Czechoslovak history.

Notes

[1]. Mary Heimann, *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[2]. Tomasz Kamusella, *Silesia and Central European Nationalisms: The Emergence of National and Ethnic Groups in Prussian Silesia and Austrian Silesia, 1848-1918* (Purdue: Purdue University Press, 2007), especially chapters 4 and 9.

[3]. Peter Hruby, comment of March 24, 2010 on Matthew Reisz, "The Mythbuster," *Times Higher Education* (December 3, 2009), http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?-storyCode=409340&sectioncode=26. The Czech magazine *Fronta* also published an unjustly hostile review; see

"Mary Heimann: Czechoslovakia–The State That Failed," (January 8, 2010), http://www.fronta.cz/kniha/heimann-czechoslovakia-the-state-that-failed.

[4]. Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless," trans. Paul Wilson, in John Keane, ed., *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 23-96.

[5]. Dorothea El Mallakh, *The Slovak Autonomy Movement, 1935-1939: A Study in Unrelenting Nationalism* (Boulder: East European Quarterly, 1979); James Felak, *"At the Price of the Republic": Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, 1929-1938* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995).

[6]. Kieran Williams, *The Prague Spring and Its Aftermath: Czechoslovak Politics, 1968-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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