

# H-Net Reviews

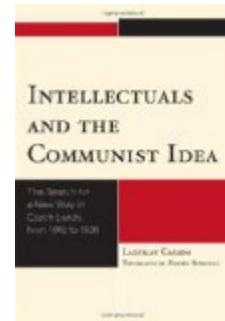
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ladislav Cabada. *Intellectuals and the Communist Idea: The Search for a New Way in Czech Lands from 1890 to 1938*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010. xi + 209 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-4376-6.

Reviewed by Shawn E. Clybor (Utah State University)

Published on HABSBUURG (September, 2012)

Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan



## Intellectuals and the Allure of Communism in Czechoslovakia, 1890-1938

*Intellectuals and the Communist Idea* by Ladislav Cabada is a detailed study of the intellectual and political roots of communism in the Czech lands from the late nineteenth century through the summer of 1938. Cabada offers an overview of the origins and development of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa, or KSČ), which he contextualizes with key debates over “socialist” art and aesthetics among leftist intellectuals. The Czech artistic and literary avant-garde is a central focus of the text, especially in the second half, including the Artists Union Devětsil, the Brno Literary Group, and the Czech chapter of the Surrealist Group.

According to Cabada, the central focus of *Intellectuals and the Communist Idea* is the process by which leftist intellectuals in Czechoslovakia transformed their subversive aesthetic theories into an array of competing political ideologies. He refers to this transformation from cultural to political revolt as a shift from “subcultural positions” to “countercultural positions.” Cabada derives these terms from Daniel Bell’s *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), a Marxist account of how culture produced under capitalism undermines the capitalist system.

Building from Bell, Cabada portrays intellectuals in Czechoslovakia as responsible for undermining the foundations of democracy in the First Republic. This was a long-term process that began decades before 1945, when

leading communists assumed positions in the so-called Košice government, or even 1938, when Czechoslovakia was dismembered at the infamous Munich conference. According to Cabada, “Fascism and communism began shaping the Czechoslovak political scene much earlier, practically right after the establishment of the independent state in October 1918.” In other words, the rise of communism after 1945 was the product of a gradual evolution that stretched back to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. From the earliest days of the republic, communism “significantly affected the thinking of those who, thanks to the democratization [sic] by means of their votes, contributed to the formation and shape of political systems in the interwar era” (p. 185).

I found this argument compelling because it challenges (or perhaps enhances) influential work by such scholars as Jan Gross, who has argued that various “structural modifications” to East European states caused by the Second World War facilitated the establishment of communist regimes. Similarly Bradley Abrams has argued that in Czechoslovakia the Munich Pact and German occupation played a central role in shaping post-war mentalities regarding communism.[1] These arguments are not mutually exclusive to Cabada’s text—when considered together they illuminate a complex range of short- and long-term factors. Cabada, much like Gross and Abrams, is challenging the idea that communism (and communist policies) were not simply imposed from the outside, and thus were not fundamentally *alien*. Al-

though Cabada does not engage this historiography, his intervention clearly coincides with larger historical trends.

*Intellectuals and the Communist Idea* comprises two interweaving narratives. One offers a concise account of the rise of radical socialist, anarchist, and communist political movements in the Czech Lands before World War II; the other considers key intellectual debates between individuals and groups who identified with the international communist movement and/or the KSČ. I appreciate Cabada's attempt to situate intellectual and artistic debates in their broader political context, which he builds from existing surveys.[2] Still, I had hoped for more intellectuals and more ideas: the first sixty-seven pages of this relatively short book (167 pages in total) focus exclusively on politics. As a result, the relevance of Cabada's contextual information is sometimes difficult to ascertain. The best chapters strike a balance between relevant context and intellectual history, such as the sections that focus on the Soviet purges and the increasingly polarized debates they provoked among self-proclaimed "Surrealists" and "Socialist Realists."

The central focus of the book's second half is the decades-long feud between the proletarian poet S. K. Neumann and the avant-garde theorist Karel Teige—leading Czech intellectuals whose legacies fared quite differently under communist rule. Cabada successfully demonstrates the peculiar positions of both men during the interwar period (in addition to other prominent writers, such as Jaroslav Seifert and Josef Hora), whose political engagements tended to belie their portrayal in post-war historical literature. According to Cabada, Teige was not an avant-garde defender of free speech and artistic independence, nor was Neumann a mere servant to the needs and demands of the Communist Party, despite his celebration under communism as the grandfather of Czech socialist realism.

Overall, Cabada does a thorough job mining dozens of different debates between Czech intellectuals, which he culls from periodicals, newspapers, and edited anthologies (he does not use archival sources). On occasion, he undermines his central point that communist intellectuals were consequential, for example, by also asserting that they were "peripheral" to the communist movement, or were "considered to be a foreign and suspicious element" by party elites (p. 188). One might also disagree with his interpretations of specific individuals or groups, for example, that Teige was a "parlor socialist," or that the Czech Surrealist Group was "a close-knit 'commu-

nist' cell" (pp. 138, 158).[3] Especially problematic are the points at which Cabada describes the motivations of his subjects without citing evidence.[4]

Notwithstanding, *Intellectuals and the Communist Idea* does an effective job of presenting different intellectuals as they conceptualized their role as "communists," all at a time when the idea of a communist Czechoslovakia was little more than utopian fantasy. This work is not the final word on the subject, but it is a point of departure for future scholarship.

As a final note, this work is a translation of Cabada's *Komunismus, levicová kultura a česká politika 1890-1938* (Communism, leftist culture, and Czech politics 1890-1938), first published in 2005. To be fair, the difficulties (and costs) of Czech-English translation are many, and any effort to open a broader Czech-English academic exchange is admirable. Nevertheless, the translation suffers from significant problems. For example, while it is perfectly acceptable according to the rules of Czech grammar to use the present tense to describe historical events, it is somewhat jarring in English. Other issues include misspellings, awkward sentence structures, and inconsistent translations (for example, slipping freely between the "Union of Communist Groups" and "Association of Communist Groups"). This is not the fault of the author, but it detracts from the text.

#### Notes

[1]. Jan Gross, "Social Consequences of War: Preliminaries to the Study of Imposition of Communist Regimes in East Central Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* 3, no. 2 (1989): 198-214; and Bradley Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

[2]. Some of these surveys are available in English, including Věra Olivová's work on the interwar republic, which Cabada draws on heavily. See Věra Olivová, *The Doomed Democracy: Czechoslovakia in a Disrupted Europe, 1914-1938* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972). See also Zdenek Suda, *Zealots and Rebels: A History of the Ruling Communist Party of Czechoslovakia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).

[3]. There is also evidence to demonstrate a more fluid interaction between Teige and Neumann, and the groups they represented. For example, when Cabada asserts that Neumann broke with the avant-garde in 1923, he elides further examples of their cooperation in Neu-

mann's journal *Reflektor* (Headlight), or even the communist arts group Left Front, in which Cabada argues the avant-garde "never took part" (p. 157).

[4]. For example, Cabada argues that Teige stepped down from his leading role in the arts group Left Front because he was "probably" unhappy that it was not fully

subordinate to his rule. Other examples include his criticism of the literary group Blok for its "foolish and unreal vision" of independence vis-à-vis the Communist Party, or his criticism of the KSC for failing to "realize" its own "inconsistencies" by welcoming intellectuals into its ranks (pp. 180, 188).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg>

**Citation:** Shawn E. Clybor. Review of Cabada, Ladislav, *Intellectuals and the Communist Idea: The Search for a New Way in Czech Lands from 1890 to 1938*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34394>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.