H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Cynthia Paces. *Prague Panoramas: National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009. xv + 309 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-6035-5; $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4375-4.

Reviewed by Shawn E. Clybor (Utah State University)

Published on H-Urban (August, 2012)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari

The Politics of Memory in Prague's Twentieth-Century

What makes history so compelling is the ability of its practitioners to construct and recount narratives that command our attention while teaching important lessons about the past. Although the narrative "fiction" of history has undergone academic scrutiny in recent years, texts such as Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (1980) or Jeremy King's *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans* (2005) have captured a permanent place in this reviewer's thoughts and lectures because they tell emotionally engaging stories. On these grounds Cynthia Paces' *Prague Panoramas* offers to anyone interested in Czech history the most compelling thing a historical text has to offer: a fascinating (occasionally quite humorous) series of narratives on the relationship between religion and nationalism in Prague from the late nineteenth century through the collapse of communism in 1989.

Prague Panoramas is a study of the complex negotiations underlying the construction of Czech national identity, which it illuminates through the rise and fall of religious monuments in the once multinational capital city of Prague, a city of "panoramas," housing "fragmented and paradoxical views." (p. 8). According to Paces, historical studies of Czech national identity have heretofore focused on conflicts "between Czechs and outside groups or political entities: Slovaks, ethnic Germans, the Habsburg Monarchy, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union" (p. 2). What these discussions take for granted is a monolithic conception of Czechness that has "obscured the contestations within the community of those trying to assert Czech national identity" (p. 2).

Paces argues that the "religious dimension" of Czech identity uniquely illuminates "the internal fissures within the Czech national movement of the Czechoslovak state" (p. 6). To this end she focuses on a century of religious conflicts that embroiled a wide range of different social and political groups in Prague, including Protestants, Catholics, secularists, and socialists. These debates were especially polarizing because they involved the sacralization of public spaces, where nationalists "sought to inscribe Czech identity" through the commemoration of influential religious personas deemed emblematic of the Czech nation (p. 3).

Paces' book proceeds chronologically, drawing upon archival documents (primarily from the National Archive and Prague City Archive) alongside a range of published and secondary sources, including both memoirs and periodicals. Each chapter focuses on important public monuments in Prague and their shifting meanings through seven different political regimes–from the Austrian monarchy to the era of postcommunist independence. The introduction does an excellent job framing the work within larger historiographic trends in a range of different fields–national studies, religious studies, gender studies, urban history, and Czech studies. The conclusion offers a commentary on nationalist discourse in contemporary Czech society, and the "emptiness" that surrounds "those whose voices have been silenced" from this discourse–minorities, communist victims, and women, among others (p. 254).

The central narrative thread of *Prague Panoramas* is a decades-long battle over the symbolic meaning and legacy of Jan Hus, a late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-

century religious reformer from Prague who was burned at the stake for heresy. For Czech nationalists in the late nineteenth century Hus became a rallying symbol of religious tolerance and freedom against Catholic Habsburg domination, which they linked (whether explicitly or implicitly) to German language and culture. For many, however, Hus was anything but a symbol of national "unity." The promotion of a religious heretic deeply offended not only Bohemian Germans but also Czech Catholics, who offered counter-symbols of Czech national greatness, including the medieval Bohemian King Wenceslas and the semi-mythical martyr Jan Nepomucký.[1] Socialists and later the communists offered their own interpretation of Hus, portraying his early followers as "the first socialists" for advocating communal property and social egalitarianism (p. 31).

The "culture wars" over Hus as an icon of Czech national identity centered originally on the historic Old Town Square, the site of his monument (first proposed in the 1890s and unveiled in 1915) and a baroque Marian column, which was torn down by an anticlerical mob following Czechoslovak independence in 1918. Before long, these battles to define the Old Town Square, a "sacred space" at the heart of the city, quickly spread to other sites of symbolic importance. By the mid-1950s, an array of monuments with competing ideological agendas (oftentimes built with state and municipal assistance) dotted the Prague cityscape: a Secessionist memorial to the historian and Hus enthusiast František Palacký, a statue of Catholic King Wenceslas on Wenceslas Square, a massive modernist memorial to the sixteenth-century Hussite general Jan Žižka, and a reconstructed chapel on Bethlehem Square where Hus once preached his reforms. All the while, these various "places of memory" underwent continuous symbolic transformation as political elites and the broader public battled over their meaning–complex negotiations shaped by revolution, foreign occupation, and regime change.

What I appreciate most about *Prague Panoramas* is the insight it offers into the Czechs' gradual break with Catholicism to become one of the least religious peoples in the world.[2] Although scholars tend to emphasize Czechoslovak independence in 1918 and Catholicism's association with the Austrian Habsburgs as a watershed moment in the region's shifting confessional status, Paces demonstrates that prominent intellectuals and the Catholic Church mounted a formidable challenge to representations of the Czech nation as Protestant and/or secular during the interwar era. Far from marginal figures, Catholic leaders used their political strength and cultural influence under the republic to "promote Catholic-inspired national symbols," for example with public festivals celebrating Nepomucký and Wenceslas, and a campaign to rebuild the Marian column (p. 100).

Ultimately the interwar republic, led by its "Liberator President" Tomáš Masaryk (a longtime Hus proponent), failed to promote an inclusive civic identity that embraced different ethno-linguistic and confessional groups, not least because it drew upon polarizing symbols central to the more exclusivist Czech national movement under the Austrian Empire. Meanwhile, with the rise of Nazi Germany and the outbreak of the Great Depression, political Catholicism lurched towards the right. This radicalization culminated in 1939 with the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, thereafter divided into a Slovak puppet state led by a Catholic priest and a Czech protectorate nominally headed by a deeply religious Catholic lawyer. Paces thus intimates through the larger framework of the text–although she could have addressed this point more explicitly–that the wartime occupation played a crucial role in the decline of Catholicism, which fairly or not suffered the stigma of collaboration. In turn, this offers a compelling explanation for the relative lack of resistance against communist anticlericalism after 1948, which was especially radical compared to other Catholic strongholds such as Poland.

Regarding the communist era, Paces does an excellent job detailing how the regime and its intellectual proponents redefined national symbols such as Hus to fit their dialectical framework of social revolution. One might expect that an account of national symbols under state socialism would emphasize the crassness of communist elites, who legitimated their place in the national trajectory by appropriating historical monuments to their own ends. Breaking with this pattern, Paces convincingly demonstrates that the efforts of communist ministers such as Zděnek Nejedlý to reinterpret the meaning of Czechness were not dissimilar from those of nineteenth-century Czech nationalists or interwar republicans insofar as a unified, uncontested, and nonpolitical national essence was never more than a myth. Communist attempts to harness nationalist symbols in order to legitimate their political rule were hardly unique, notwithstanding the violence and radicalism behind these attempts.

From a broader perspective, the larger significance of Paces' central argument is that regardless of the ideological orientation of a specific political regime and the attempts of social and political elites to articulate a specific

conception of national unity, everyday individuals maintained the agency to reject or reappropriate these narratives as they saw fit. Jan Hus was never a universally accepted symbol of the Czech nation, nor was his symbolic meaning fixed. That Hus's legacy signifies to contemporary audiences the triumph of truth and democracy against tyranny, embodied by the motto "truth prevails," stands as a testament to the ongoing cultural influence of Masaryk and the dissident-turned-president Václav Havel. However, this interpretation is neither more nor less "true" than the communist-promoted view that Hus was a proto-Marxist reformer who battled on behalf of the medieval working classes against the exploitation of the Catholic Church and Bohemian nobility. In both instances, "Political and cultural leaders employed the Czech past–mythologized, modified, and manipulated for use in the present–to lead their people towards new futures" (p. 248).

Cynthia Paces deserves recognition for producing a long-term study that spans the momentous political transformations of twentieth-century Czech history. She provides the background information required to push her narrative forward but without dwelling too long on specificities that might encumber her central focus on sacred spaces. I also appreciated her sense of humor. For example, in her discussion of the communist government's efforts to expropriate homes and offices built over the ruins of Hus's demolished medieval chapel, she notes dryly that the local District National Committee informed one family that their monetary compensation would be lower than anticipated since "the prices for domestic housing had fallen considerably, since property ownership was no longer legal" (p. 202). Indeed, Prague is truly the city of Kafka.

This returns me to my initial point about engaging stories. Although I have been to Prague many times, I wish I had read Paces' book while there. I would have enjoyed traveling to the different sites detailed in the text, some of which I never knew existed (such as the replication of the Marian column buried within the gardens of the Strahov monastery, or the reconstructed Bethlehem chapel). The stories behind these sacred spaces are now central to my own understanding of Prague, and will be for years to come.

Notes

[1]. According to the legend Nepomucký was thrown from the Charles Bridge by the royal guard into the Vltava/Moldau river in 1393. As Paces notes, scholars continue to dispute whether Nepomucký actually existed or whether his tragic fate combines a mixture of different stories.

[2]. "Obyvatelstvo podle náboženského vyznání a pohlaví podle výsledků sčítání lidu v letech 1921, 1930, 1950, 1991 a 2001," Český statistický úřad, last modified February 23, 2003, czso.cz/csu/2006edicniplan.nsf/t/3D00462B10/$File/4032060119.pdf.

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

https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Shawn E. Clybor. Review of Paces, Cynthia, *Prague Panoramas: National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35637

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