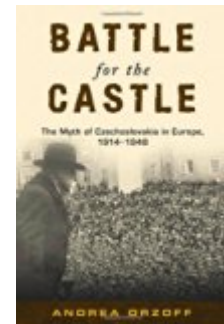


Andrea Orzoff. *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe 1914-1948*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. xi + 286 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-536781-2.

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The “Mythology” of Interwar Czechoslovakia

As a historian of interwar Poland, whose area of study often comes up on the short end of comparisons with Czechoslovakia, I cannot deny that despite my best efforts to remain “objective,” I experienced a certain amount of satisfaction when I first opened Andrea Orzoff’s *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe*. “Finally,” I thought to myself in a rare unguarded moment, “someone has taken on the task of bringing interwar Czechoslovakia down from the pedestal and back to earth.” The myth of interwar Czechoslovakia as an oasis of stability, democracy, tolerance, progress, and other “Western” virtues amidst the chaos, turbulence, and general “Eastern” backwardness prevailing in the rest of East-Central Europe is indeed a powerful one and informs not only mainstream renditions of Czechoslovak and East-Central European history but also, in a somewhat more subtle form, many academic studies.

It is precisely this myth that Orzoff’s work sets out to challenge and historicize. In taking on this challenge, the author focuses on the “Castle,” a group of politicians, journalists, and intellectuals who coalesced around Czechoslovakia’s first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and his protégé and successor Edvard Beneš. Her primary argument is that in reality interwar Czechoslovakia was not the rational, democratic, and “Western” place it tried to sell itself as, and had “more in common with its neighbors ... such as Piłsudski’s Poland, Horthyite Hungary, and even late Weimar Germany’s ‘authoritarian democracy’” than the myth implies (p. 21). While I would argue that in the end Orzoff

does not quite succeed in defending this argument, in the process she nevertheless offers us a fascinating cultural and intellectual history of interwar Czechoslovakia’s political class.

With the exception of the first and last chapters, the book is laid out thematically rather than chronologically. This certainly helps Orzoff present her thesis, but occasionally makes for a choppy narrative structure. A certain familiarity with the chronology of interwar Czechoslovak politics is helpful in following along. The first chapter, which covers the events leading up to Czechoslovakia’s creation in 1918, is a fascinating study of how prewar Czech political culture and Masaryk’s and Beneš’s wartime diplomatic experience interplayed to leave these two giants of Czechoslovak politics with the certitude “that their cosmopolitan, enlightened interpretation of Czech history and nationalism had always been right, that the prophetic moral rectitude and intransigence manifested by Jan Hus and the Czech brethren had been theirs as well, and that the Great Powers had borne out the correctness of their vision” (p. 55). Thus, the admirable Western values, such as rationalism, tolerance, and civic nationalism, found at the core of Czechoslovakia’s myth, were underpinned by the country’s founding fathers’ attitude of moral superiority, elitism, and condescension towards their foes. Without saying so explicitly, Orzoff portrays these qualities as the “original sin” which was responsible for the Castle’s failure to fully embrace the democratic process and which informed the further development of the “myth.”

The second chapter analyzes the institutions, political groups, and intellectual milieus that formed “the Castle.” The latter term, defined as “an informal but extremely powerful nexus of institutions and allies” supporting Masaryk and Beneš, is somewhat overused throughout the book (p. 9). While Orzoff occasionally hints at conflicts *within* the Castle, for the most part the word takes on all the attributes of a monolithic or unitary historical actor with an agency of its own. This criticism aside, the chapter is in fact a fascinating study of Czechoslovak political culture and of the Castle’s triumph over the Petka, a quarrelsome quasi-oligarchic grouping of the five major parliamentary parties. Orzoff also demonstrates that Czechoslovakia was in reality “a democracy of small rooms” (p. 93), and does an admirable job of taking the reader inside these rooms and showing how the Castle was able to exercise power outside the framework of constitutionally defined democratic institutions.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Castle’s efforts to propagate its own myth. At the heart of the latter, according to Orzoff, was the attempt to “link the Castle, its leaders, and its ideas to the best in the Czech and European traditions” (p. 131). In order to achieve this goal, the Castle and its allied intellectuals waged a concentrated struggle over the meaning of Czech history (and their own place in it) and created a powerful leader cult of Masaryk. While Orzoff’s description of how the struggle over history was waged and the myth created is fascinating, her account, at least in my reading, actually *confirms* the Castle’s claims that it represented the best traditions of Czech and European history. Despite Orzoff’s portrayal of them as elitists who distrusted the populism of mass politics, Beneš and Masaryk ultimately emerge as moderate, enlightened, and reasonable statesmen, infinitely more sympathetic than both their domestic rivals and their East-Central European counterparts.

The fourth chapter analyzes Czechoslovakia’s international propaganda or, as Orzoff says, the Castle’s efforts to “persuade Europeans that Czechs were Europeans” (p. 172). One of the strongest chapters, it makes a powerful contribution to European history and cogently argues for the importance of “the myths and counter-myths at work in European cultural politics” (p. 157). Some of these battles over mythology, such as the Czechs’ and Hungarians’ respective efforts to influence public opinion in England, as well as the struggles over the Czechoslovak P.E.N. Club, which pitted Czechs against Germans and Hungarians, are among the richest sections of the book. The activities of Karel Čapek on the Castle’s behalf highlight the interplay of culture and politics,

and the crucial role of writers and intellectuals in proping up the Castle’s agenda. Finally, the chapter makes a persuasive case for the high degree of interdependence between domestic politics and foreign relations in constructing and propagating a national mythology.

The final chapter, which covers the twilight years of the First Republic, the short-lived Second Republic, World War II, and the communist takeover, is perhaps the least satisfying. The chronological treatment is somewhat rushed, and the myth’s metamorphosis during this series of monumental transformations is not developed as fully as it could be. I also found the author’s treatment of Beneš and the Castle elites to be unnecessarily harsh at times. For example, Orzoff finds Beneš’s view that “Czechs during wartime had been victims at the Germans’ hands” to have been “stark and simplistic” (p. 203). Even today many scholars would hesitate to call such an assessment “simplistic,” and to expect a more nuanced or dispassionate pronouncement on the issue of German culpability in wartime atrocities from *any* wartime European leader seems, to me, to be unrealistic.

The Battle for the Castle concludes with a discussion of the legacy of the Castle’s myth-making efforts. Orzoff is persuasive in pointing out the importance of the Castle’s myth for the development of “the twentieth-century Czech national consensus—or at least discourse—about the value of democracy, cultural tolerance, and many other values said to be represented by the West” (p. 220). Indeed, Orzoff’s depiction of Masaryk as a “philosopher-president” immediately reminds one of Vaclav Havel and other dissident “philosopher kings” who helped topple communism throughout East-Central Europe. In the end, then, the legacy of the Castle’s myth-making efforts is, by our standards, salutary and even admirable.

In my view, the book does not fully live up to its initial billing. While Orzoff is persuasive in her argument that interwar Czechoslovak democracy was “managed” by an unelected elite grouped around Masaryk (who himself *was* elected), in her presentation the First Republic nevertheless emerges as having more in common with the Western democracies of the period than with Poland’s or Hungary’s authoritarian regimes. And while Orzoff is clearly annoyed by the whitewashed, saintly image of Masaryk presented by Czechoslovak propaganda, in her own account the Czech president is depicted as a liberal (if sometimes tough and uncompromising) civic patriot, infinitely less problematic than Józef Piłsudski, let alone Miklós Horthy, and only slightly less admirable than the “myth” would have it.

In sum, I came away from reading the book with a conclusion that the mainstream or “mythical” account of Czechoslovakia’s history may need some correctives, but not a fundamental overhaul. But this judgement, if indeed correct, should not distract the reader from the tremendous value of Andrea Orzoff’s book. *Battle for the Castle* presents a well-written and exciting cultural and intellectual history of interwar Czechoslovak politics and makes a broader contribution to our understanding of the role played by propaganda or “mythology” in interwar European politics. Anyone interested in these subjects will be well advised to read it carefully.

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