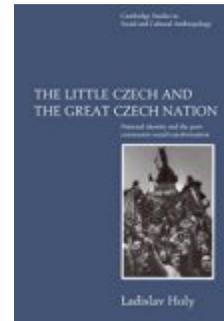




Ladislav Holy. *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Social Transformation*. Cambridge, England, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. x + 204 pp. \$44.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-55584-5; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-55469-5.

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Was Svejk a Whig in Disguise?

Those familiar with Czech political history can almost recite the Whig version of events in their sleep: the oppressed Czech people waged a struggle first for autonomy and then for independence from the Habsburgs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in 1918 Tomas Masaryk and his loyal minions Edvard Benes and Milan Stefanik founded Czechoslovakia, the only democracy in interwar East Central Europe; following the triple tragedy of Munich, the war, and the Communist coup d'etat, the Czech people were relegated to forty years of domination by a Communist regime controlled from Moscow.

In 1989 the oppressed Czech people, this time led by Vaclav Havel and his younger and more numerous loyal minions, conquered communism through the purity of their moral purpose. Despite the best efforts of Havel and others loyal to the idea of Czechoslovak unity, the Republic foundered in 1992 on the rocks of resurgent Slovak nationalism. Throughout it all, the Czech love of democracy and freedom was like a shining beacon that even in the darkest years of the Communist era beckoned the nation to its ultimate destiny as a great, if small, member of the European family.

Ladislav Holy's study of modern Czech national identity manages to set aside at least some of this idealized version of events by using the methods of social anthropology to come to grips with modern Czech society. Thus, the book is not concerned with Czech history ex-

cept as symbols from the idealized past (Hus, Masaryk, Wenceslaus, etc.) that are important to the construction of present-day nationalist discourses. The author's analysis of the ways Czechs manipulate these historical symbols to construct their national identity is a refreshing change from the version of Czech history that sees the present as the inevitable result of "the glorious history of a nation which has pursued democracy and humanism from time immemorial" (p. 118).

Holy, a professor of social anthropology at the University of St. Andrews, began doing field work in his native Czech lands in 1986. The current volume is the result of this work, especially a research trip in Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic from July 1992 to January 1993. In this book the author claims a role for anthropologists in the study of nation-states (p. 15), a field previously the primary domain of historians and political scientists. Although Katherine Verdery plowed much of this same ground previously in her work on Romania[1], Holy's work is the first book that attempts to come to grips with Czech national identity using anthropological methods. Like Verdery's work, Holy's book demonstrates how distinctive a national culture can be and how it is sometimes necessary to isolate that culture from those nearby if we are to make sense of it.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is the author's analysis of the often chaotic public discourses that emerged in late 1989. One of Holy's main goal is to

demonstrate that the events of November 1989 in Prague were not simply the almost spontaneous boiling over of long-simmering Czech dissatisfaction with the Communist regime. Instead, the author argues that the Prague demonstrations were expressions of a specific Czech nationalism represented in demands for freedom from what the demonstrators conceived to be a government imposed upon the nation by outside forces (p. 55). By arguing that nationalism never disappeared during the Communist era and did not “reemerge” to fill an ideological vacuum created when the Communists left the central sphere of power vacant, Holy is not exactly making a revolutionary claim. However, the author presents his argument in a clear and concise manner, providing convincing evidence of the importance of Czech nationalism in the events of 1989.

As long as he confines his analysis to the components of Czech national identity and to the Czech nationalist discourse, Holy is on solid ground. For example, his discussion of the “Little Czech” and this construction of the Czech nation as “a nation of common, ordinary, and unexceptional people which generates a feeling of egalitarianism” (p. 62) is particularly well done. Similarly strong is the author’s contrasting of Czech descriptions of themselves as envious and intolerant with their simultaneous perception of themselves as highly cultured carriers of the Western rational tradition. Readers unfamiliar with Czech culture will find the author’s discussion of the ecological and gender discourses of the pre- and post-1989 periods very enlightening as well. For the non-specialist, Holy’s overview of the events leading to the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1992 is more than adequate, although his discussion of Czech/Slovak differences would have been improved by a brief evaluation of what makes the two languages distinct from one another and by a more careful consideration of the economic factors involved.

One reason Holy finds it so necessary to demonstrate the existence of Czech nationalism in the post-1989 period is the all but universal denial of its existence by those he interviewed. As Holy points out, “Denial of Czech nationalism is part of the construction of a positive image of the Czech nation.... Nationalism is something that plagues others—Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, and the various nations of the Soviet Union—but not the Czechs” (p. 189). While the specialist in Czech politics will not find this conclusion startling, the non-specialist, more accustomed to an idealized construction of Czech culture and history, will find much in this part of the book eye-opening.

Holy goes to great lengths to demonstrate the importance of laudable elements such as the emphasis on freedom and equality in the Czech nationalist discourse. Unfortunately, he all but completely avoids the less than desirable aspects of Czech nationalism in the twentieth century, most notably anti-Semitism and anti-Roma racism. The most detestable purveyors of these attitudes, Czech skinheads, are not mentioned, even in passing. Given the author’s emphasis on the continuing resonance of the past in the Czech present it is lamentable that he fails to mention the radical nationalist and overtly anti-Semitic Czech parties of the Habsburg era and the First Republic, especially the National Socialists and the Czech fascists. These two groups helped define the outer limit of Czech nationalism, a limit that today Czech skinheads and the Republican party test daily.

Anyone who doubts the anti-Semitism of prominent leaders of the First Republic need only read the speeches of Karel Baxa (1863-1938), mayor of Prague throughout the interwar period, during the Hilsner ritual murder trial of 1899.[2] By omitting all but the most cursory discussion of these aspects of Czech nationalism, Holy contributes subtly to the perpetuation of the Whig version of Czech nationalism as being democratic, positive, and polite. The truth is that Czech nationalism, just like Serb, Slovak, or Croat nationalism, has its unpleasant side as well.

A second problem with this work, and perhaps the underlying cause of the lack of discussion of the less than positive aspects of Czech nationalism, is the author’s almost total reliance on members of the Prague elite, many of them his personal friends, as his informants (pp. 11-12). To be sure, Holy does attempt to reach out beyond this small circle of intellectuals by doing field work at a Prague locomotive depot and an unnamed village in northern Bohemia, and by utilizing some of the many public opinion surveys available. However, his limited sample of informants is problematic. It is neither geographically representative, even for Bohemia (Holy apparently did no field work in Moravia), nor is it representative of different generations or social classes. One can hardly speak of “the nation” based upon data gathered from such a small sample. Even the author’s extensive review of Czech newspapers is not sufficient, given that opinions expressed in print are similarly derived primarily from the elite of Czech society.

The book also suffers from a number of simple historical errors. One example among several is the author’s statement that the Czech people “were taught

democracy almost single-handedly by this philosopher-president [Masaryk]" (p. 167), a contention not borne out by the historical record. When only slightly more than 10,000 out of more than one million Czech voters cast ballots for Masaryk and his party in the parliamentary elections of 1911, one can hardly claim that Masaryk was responsible for teaching the Czechs democracy.[3] By accepting the Masaryk legend in this way, Holy demonstrates how even the most careful analyst finds it difficult to break free from the national culture in which he was raised.

In the final analysis this book is a good read and has both much to recommend it and much to regret. Specialists in the field will find its analysis thought-provoking and frustrating at the same time. Non-specialists will learn a great deal about Czech national culture, although the picture painted by Holy is still incomplete. Both audiences will have to wait a bit longer, it seems, before they get an in-depth study of Czech political life that reaches beyond the views of the Prague elite and which manages to cast off the Whig interpretation once and for all.

Notes

[1]. Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism; Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). See also Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996). A review of the book by H-SAE appeared on HABSBURG in December and is now archived at <gopher://gopher.ttu.edu:70/00/Pubs/lijp/HABS/Books/verdery>.

[2]. Baxa's atrocious behavior is described in detail in Frantisek Cervinka, "The Hilsner Affair," *The Blood Libel Legend. A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 135-61.

[3]. Another simple example is the author's statement that during the Habsburg period, "Czechs made no attempt at any democratization of the existing political system" (p. 82). This contention is similarly incorrect.

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