



Christoph Reinprecht. *Nostalgie und Amnesie: Bewertungen von Vergangenheit in der Tschechischen Republik und in Ungarn*. Wien: Döcker Verlag, 1996. 288 S. DM 43,- (cloth), ISBN 978-3-85115-206-7.

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East Central Europe's Ever-Present Past Since 1989

The title of this book, translatable as *Nostalgia and Amnesia: Valuations of the Past in the Czech Republic and Hungary*, could have served a different and better work. After the fall of the Wall in 1989, high schools and universities throughout the former Eastern Europe tossed out dozens of history textbooks in favor of new ones with interpretations at odds with the old. Professional historians, both in the periodical press and in journals and books, launched themselves into impassioned and revealing debates over long taboo topics. In some countries, the outcome of this new struggle over the past remains uncertain even today.[1] But in the Czech Republic and Hungary (as well as in Poland and Slovenia), the trained eye can by now discern patterns likely to characterize the writing of history for some time to come. The time is ripe for summation and analysis of the latest phase in the perpetual politics of memory.

In the Czech case, an account of post-Communist developments in professional historiography might begin with *Blank Spots in Our History?*, a thin book published in Prague in the first half of 1990.[2] The author was Jan Kren, a historian who had demonstrated promise in the 1960s, then struggled under Gustav Husak, Czechoslovakia's President of Forgetting after the Prague Spring, to keep a job as a laborer at a provincial waterworks. In the essay, Kren laid out a program for wholesale historiographical revision; other Czech historians wasted no time in contributing to that program or framing rivals to it. Over the next year or two, in keeping with one of East Central Europe's nineteenth-century traditions, several historians-turned-politicians took time off from their new pursuits to publish sweeping reassessments of the past.[3] Non-historian intellectuals, headed by philosopher-president Vaclav Havel, did their share as well to spur a public, even mass discussion of controversial issues—above all the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia after the Second World War. Nationalists of the old school struggled to hold the line; lacking

the bully pulpit (or, with regard to Husak's era, simply the bully) of the presidency, they failed. Recent publications by Vladimir Macura, Jiri Rak, Zdenek Hojda, and other Czech social scientists have confirmed that more skeptical and less national, teleological readings of history now are in the ascendant.[4]

Hungary, whose regime was less repressive than Czechoslovakia's during the 1970s and '80s, has undergone less radical revision to its historiography in the 1990s. But Hungarians are now revisiting and re-evaluating the interwar regime of Admiral Miklos Horthy, the Communist takeover of the late 1940s, and the Revolution of 1956 with a thoroughness and frankness impossible before 1989. Remarkable collections of primary sources are appearing regularly.[5] As in Prague, genuinely new publications have been joined in Budapest by facsimile or reprint editions of pre-Communist works, studies translated for the first time from Western languages, books originally published in exile presses, and essays previously available only as samizdat.[6]

A comparative study of these Czech and Hungarian historiographical developments, whether through the prism of scholarly publications, of textbooks, or of some other medium (public monuments, for example, or reburials of national martyrs), would have much to offer: perspective on how this most recent upheaval compares with the upheavals of the 1940s and the years after 1918, 1867, and 1848; closure to a sizable corpus of scholarly studies, many valuable, published under the old regime; illustration of how the present can shape interpretations of the past; and analysis of what all this means—about the institutional control of memory, about Czech and Hungarian society, and about coming trends. Such a study might include among its conclusions that the parceling up of East Central Europe's past into discrete national units—Czech, Hungarian, German, and so on—has obscured at least as much as it has revealed.

Behind the title of *Nostalgia and Amnesia*, however,

Christoph Reinprecht has placed a book that touches hardly at all on the issues sketched out above. This is strange, for he seems aware of them. The theme of his study, Reinprecht states in his introduction, is

the role of memory in connection with the change of [political] systems in East Central Europe. [The book] discusses the interplay of individual and collective interpretations and valuations of the past, and attempts to show how people attempt to loose themselves from entanglements with the old regime—and yet are constantly overtaken by the past. (p. 12)

This promising, if vague, statement is followed not by substantive discussion, but by a confused theoretical ramble. Reinprecht, a sociologist based apparently in Vienna, suffers from a bad case of cititis, or the need to cite authorities even on the most obvious of matters. In one four-page section (pp. 48-51), he manages, without ever making his own point clear, to cite fifteen scholars and philosophers; the first three—Adorno, Benjamin, and Freud, no less—speak together, providing weighty support for the assertion that “that which is past intrudes [hineinragt] on everything new.”

Problems multiply when the author moves from theory to the background of the Czech and Hungarian cases at hand. The nearly complete absence of works in Czech or Hungarian from the bibliography, as well as the cavalier sprinkling of diacritical marks over Czech and Hungarian words, indicate that Reinprecht carried out his research—as he admits indirectly, in an appendix—through the good graces of local assistants. What is more, Reinprecht seems to possess only a superficial acquaintance with the history that so interests him; Professor Istvan Deak of Columbia University will probably be more dismayed than flattered to learn that he has been confused, in print, with Ferenc Deak, the Hungarian statesman of the mid-nineteenth century (p. 172). More subtle is Reinprecht’s error of emphasizing repeatedly the diversity of East Central Europe, yet organizing his discussion of politics in the region so as to downplay certain Czech and Hungarian differences.

Only in the final fifty pages of the book, when Reinprecht turns at last to a discussion of his research, do its outlines become clear. He and his assistants carried out 120 interviews, sixty in Prague and sixty in Budapest, during the winter of 1992-93. “For the selection of those questioned,” Reinprecht writes in the body of the book, “the categories of age, education, and sex were of central importance [massgebend].” Yet on the preceding page, he concedes that “[t]he study has...an explorative character. It does not aspire to representativity...” (pp. 138-

39). The methodological appendix—whose paucity of detail squares poorly with the fact that it was penned by a sociologist—contains further hints at unscientific compromises. More men participated than did women, and many more high school graduates than did individuals with no more than the state-required minimum education. Reinprecht’s data come from a population too small, too urban, too male, and too educated to allow for any generalization about the Czech Republic and Hungary as a whole; his data, however, reveal nothing about any particular elite either. Despite Reinprecht’s focus on generational differences, he constructed three age cohorts in which the children (born between 1964 and 1972) outnumber the parents (1937-1942, with no explanation for the shorter time span) by more than two to one. And despite his acknowledgment in his theoretical chapters of the importance of institutions in the molding of memory, he approached the members of his Czech and Hungarian groups largely as atomized individuals. Reinprecht inquired after political party affiliation, but did not consider ministries, historical institutes, schools, or clubs as structuring agencies.

Although Reinprecht asked more than forty questions of his informants, he devotes much of his discussion to a few questions centered on the identification of historical role models, golden ages, and episodes associated with national pride or shame. Here lies interesting—if not surprising—material. Some Czechs, for example, when asked about shame, hung their heads over collaboration with the Communist and Nazi regimes and over the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia. Hungarians often seemed baffled by the very question; they had no trouble, on the other hand, naming several heroes from the national past. (Neither of the Deaks received mention.) Czechs sometimes had difficulty naming anyone (pp. 153-71).

Such questions, and Reinprecht’s treatment of them, allow the reader to realize as the book nears an end that Reinprecht pursues “history” at its most diffuse and elementary. George Washington, most Americans have heard, chopped down a cherry tree, then could not tell a lie—some time before the Second World War. This is no joke; millions of people understand history in this totemic, mythological, and fuzzy fashion. But the trick to making meaningful study of totems, myths, and all fuzzily potent phenomena lies in finding appropriate research tools and techniques. Someone interested, for example, in how the American masses appropriate for themselves today the heroism of Washington and his immediate successors might want to start by learning English. Multiple methodological questions would follow.

To whom does Reinprecht's book speak? Scholars from the Czech Republic or Hungary, as well as outsiders who know the two countries well, will prefer works based on more intimate knowledge and closer study. Historians will find the lack of narrative or detail annoying, while sociologists of substance will bristle at methodological shortcomings. Both native and non-native speakers of German will balk at the cumbersome prose, while readers who do not also know English and French will stumble over occasional passages inserted into the text without translation. All right-thinking people will take exception to Reinprecht's tone of slight condescension toward East Central Europeans. At best, this book will challenge someone to show that compelling things *can* be said about nostalgia and amnesia among Czechs and Hungarians since 1989.

NOTES

[1]. For details on the rewriting of textbooks and its recent politics in Slovakia, see Burton Bollag, "Nationalist Group Gains Power over Slovakian Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 28, 1997), p. A49.

[2]. Jan Kren, *Bila mista v nasich dejinach?* (Praha: Lidove noviny, 1990).

[3]. See, for example, "Podiven" [Petr Pithart, Petr Prihoda, and Milan Otahal], *Cesi v dejinach nove doby* (Praha: Rozmluvy, 1991).

[4]. See Vladimir Macura, *Masarykovy boty a jine semi(o)fejetony* (Praha: Prazska imaginace, 1993); Jiri Rak, *Byvali Cechove: ceske historicke myty a stereotypy*

(Jinocany: H&H, 1994); and Zdenek Hojda, *Pomniky a zapomniky* (Praha: Paseka, 1996).

[5]. See, for example, Lajos Izsak and Miklos Kun, eds., *Moszkvanak jelentjuk... Titkos dokumentumok 1944-1948* (Budapest: Szazadveg, 1994), and more recently Janos Kenedi, ed., *Kis allambiztonsagi olvasokonyv. Október 23. – március 15. – június 16. a Kadar-korszakban*, 2 vols. (Budapest: Magveto, 1996).

[6]. A sampling of such works follows. In Hungarian: Gyula Szekfu, *Harom nemzedek es ami utana kovetkezik* (Budapest: AKV-Maecenas, 1989); Istvan Borsody, *Europai evek* (Budapest: Szazadveg, 1991); Peter Gosztonyi, *A kormányzó, Horthy Miklos* (Budapest: Teka, 1990); Saul Friedlaender, *A naci antiszemitizmus. Egy tomegpszichozis tortenete* (Budapest: Uranusz, 1996); Gyorgy Konrad and Ivan Szelenyi, *Az ertelmiség utja az osztalyhatalomhoz* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1989); and Tamas Gaspar Miklos, *Idol a tribus* (Budapest: Magyar fuzetek, 1989). In Czech: Arne Novak, *Ceska literatura a narodni tradice* (Brno: Blok, 1995); Karel Kaplan, *Nekrvava revoluce* (Praha: Mlada fronta, 1993); Bedrich Loewenstein, *O nacionalismu a revolucich* (Praha: Lidove noviny, 1991); Pavel Tigrid, ed. *Svedectvi* (Praha: Melantrich, 1990); and Vaclav Havel, *Moc bezmocnych* (Praha: Lidove noviny, 1990).

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