

Liberal Studies Abroad: Prague 2004
Some Introductory Historical Observations

[The following lecture, which has been prepared by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC (now Vancouver Island University), is in the public domain and may be used by anyone, in whole or in part, without permission and without charge, provided the source is acknowledged. Released April 2004]
This lecture was last revised on April 5, 2004

Introduction

This course of studies we are embarking on, the Liberal Studies visit to Prague and the Czech Republic, marks something of departure for Liberal Studies Abroad programs and for Liberal Studies at Malaspina. The central coordinating theme for Liberal Studies courses up to this point has been the deliberately ambiguous phrase *Issues in Western Culture*, and while this has never meant or led to the exclusion of anything from elsewhere, it has meant that, for the most part, our attention is focused on works obviously relevant to the history and development of what we call Western Culture, loosely defined.

Making Prague and the Czech Republic the focus of a cluster of courses is something of an exception to this tradition simply because until very modern times for most of the history of those countries we normally associate closely with Western Culture, the experience of people living in the Czech lands—and particularly the culture of the Czech-speaking part of that population—has been largely ignored, unknown, or misunderstood. As Derek Sayer points out in his excellent history of the Czechs (a book I am relying on heavily throughout this lecture) Shakespeare gave land-locked Bohemia a coastline, and as late as 1938, in the week when I was born, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain could justify selling out the Czech people to Hitler by speaking about a distant land people in England knew nothing about.

For much of my life, I must confess, my knowledge of and interest in Czech history and culture were virtually non-existent. Yes, I knew a few things about a very short list of some famous Czech names (although for a long time I assumed Alfons Mucha was French and Gregor Mendel an Austrian), I could recite by heart the words to “Good King Wenceslas,” and I was vaguely aware that the Czechs were important in the history of beer making. But that was about it. Reading and studying and teaching works in the Western tradition did not require or encourage any great familiarity with the history of the Czech territories (except for some passing references to Prague when dealing with Mozart and Kafka). Nor, given the strong censorship under the Communist regime, was there much to tempt me to learn about what was going on in contemporary Czech culture.

All this changed very quickly in the past few decades, of course, with the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the eventual emergence of the new Czech Republic eager to create cultural and economic links with the West, and the flood of tourists from Western countries to one of the world’s most beautiful cities, made even more attractive by the exchange rates. This removal of earlier barriers has permitted the gradual emergence of important studies evaluating entire periods of Czech culture we knew little about (e.g., modernism, especially in the 1930’s and 40’s). In addition to discovering things about Czech culture that had long remained hidden, we have had full access to major contemporary contributions made by Czech artists to our own cultural traditions, particularly in fiction and films. This is especially the case in Canada where one of our finest and most internationally acclaimed writers is a Czech who teaches at the University of Toronto. And how could we avoid wanting to know more about the Czechs when they defeated Canada in Olympic hockey?

The fact that the culture of the Czech lands was long isolated, even sealed off, from the West creates some problems for anyone organizing a curriculum for Liberal Studies students. How is one to answer the question: What should one study about Prague? What is there in Prague which might serve as the theme for a coordinated Liberal Studies curriculum based on a visit to the city? What criteria do we use to decide what to read, discuss, and visit? Such questions hardly arise in connection with, say, an educational visit to Florence, Rome, Athens, or London, since the immediate influence of the culture of those places is obvious enough. The major problem with such places is often which particular cultural period to choose—once that choice is made the curriculum virtually organizes itself.

What complicates these questions even more in the case of the culture of the Czech lands is the ethnically diverse traditions of that culture. For almost all of its history, Czech territory—especially Prague itself—has been an arena for competing cultures—Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and others. The name of the territory has changed repeatedly (hence the awkward phrase “Czech lands”)—as has the area defined by the name. In the past hundred years, the generally brutal ironies of history have “solved” most of the long-lasting internal problems posed by these rivalries: World War I got rid of the Austrians, the Nazis got rid of the Jews, the aftermath of World War II got rid of the Germans and Hungarians, and the Velvet divorce in 1998 got rid of the Slovaks. And so now, for the first time in centuries, the Czech people have a country, the Czech Republic, where people of the same ethnic origins make up about 98 percent of the population, and there is one official and uncontested language and a flourishing national culture (a reminder of the ethnic divisiveness of earlier times remains, however, in the Romany minority of about 250,000 gypsies).

In fact, the most salient point about the development of the modern history of the Czech lands is the emergence at last of an independent and democratic Czech-speaking state relatively free of the traditional internal divisions and hostile external pressures, after hundreds of years of subservience to German-Austrian culture and political control, major internal conflicts, and a series of short-lived and often unhappy experiments (to use the mildest word available) with different political systems. It’s worth remembering that in the last century, the Czech people have undergone five major re-definitions of the political foundations of the country, from imperial oppression, to social democracy, to occupation by German fascists, to communism, and now to Western-style democracy (more about this later). And these changes have constantly altered the size and shape of the country. Each of these “experiments” has brought with it radical transformations in all aspects of life, from the forms of government and the understanding of the past to the names of streets and statues on display in public places. Milan Kundera has eloquently evoked a sense of the absurd dislocation this process has brought with it:

The street Tamina was born on was called Schwerin. That was during the war, and Prague was occupied by the Germans. Her father was born on the Černokostelecká Avenue—the Avenue of the Black Chruch. That was during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. When her mother married her father and moved there, it bore the name of Marshal Foch. That was after World War I. Tamina spent her childhood on Stalin Avenue, and when her husband came to take her away, he went to Vinohrady—that is, Vineyards—Avenue. And all the time it was the same street; they just kept changing its name, trying to lobotomize it.

There are all kinds of ghosts prowling these confused streets. They are the ghosts of monuments demolished—demolished by the Czech Reformation, demolished by the Austrian Counterreformation, demolished by the Czechoslovak Republic, demolished by the Communists. (qu. Sayer 287 from *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*)

If we take the emergence of this new country as a starting point for our reflections on the curriculum (and that would seem a logical thing to do), then our emphasis will fall on the closing years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the 20th century, a period when the Czech people argued about, experimented with, and in large part created their modern identity. We will need also to pay some attention to the way in which that process was affected by World War II and the Communist years which followed. That will enable us perhaps to get some sense of how the Czech people are still in the process of defining who they are exactly, given that they have had control of their own destiny for such a short period of time and are still faced with the competing claims of more dominant cultures. It may also help to explain some of the major contradictions and ironies we will encounter in our reading and some of the paradoxes we experience in our responses to Prague itself.

This course is not a history of modern Prague or of the emergence of the Czech Republic—we are still, as in all Liberal Studies courses at Malaspina, centrally concerned with detailed seminar treatment of particular works, without an immersion in contextual matters. We need, however, to take that history into account to the extent that it emerges from or informs the works we study and the places we visit. That is particularly the case with the development of modern Czech culture, because in the forging of the modern Czech identity artists and intellectuals have played a major role and were frequently very conscious of the importance of their work as a contribution to a still-unfolding and contested national story, a narrative in which the very existence of a Czech-speaking culture had become so threatened by the end of the eighteenth century that its recovery required a century of massive effort on the part of historians, linguists, educators, novelists, and artists of all kinds, who were fully aware that they were working in a politically charged climate where the stakes were high.

It’s no accident that the modern Czechoslovakia which emerged from the first World War was seen as an achievement in which intellectuals had played a major role, “a revolution made by professors, and thus romantic in a way that few events in contemporary history have been” as Karel Čapek put it in 1938 shortly before his early death (Čapek 405), reminding us of three key figures in the emergence of the new country—Tomáš Masaryk, the social philosopher, Edvard Beneš, the sociologist, and Milan Štefánik, the astronomer. That “romantic” tradition has continued since 1918 with, for example, the internationally known playwright and political essayist Václav Havel, the first president of a post-communist Czechoslovakia, playwright Milan Uhde, the Speaker of the Czech Parliament, and Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus, a published author and member of the Czech PEN Club (Holy).

Hence, in modern Czech intellectual and artistic life for most of the past century and a half political issues have been deeply involved in a way we do not witness nearly as much in the modern West (how often, for example, has the funeral of an artist here been an occasional of national political significance or even an expression of popular political sentiments or national identity?). These connections are something we need to address. We can, of course, study, say, Mucha’s *Slav Epic* or Hašek’s *Good Soldier Švejk* without reference to their historical context or to the explicitly political-cultural aims of the artists, but that would surely be to miss some important things we need to know in order to understand why these works matter as much (or as little) as they do.

This engagement of artistic and intellectual works in the immediately political climate may be all the more significant in Czech culture because of what some have characterized as the tendency of the Czechs to confront political oppression with passive resistance rather than overt rebellion—a characteristic aptly named *Schweikism* after the country’s most famous modern fictional hero (Parrott xv). In such a climate, so the analysis runs, the artists and intellectuals carry a special responsibility to maintain a spirit of Czech defiance in the face of oppressive political realities and the absence of organized and effective political resistance, if necessary by an effort of underground self-publishing (*samizdat*) in defiance of official

oppressive Communist regime and its close affiliations with the Soviet Union, in 1991 Prague artist David Černý painted a prominent public memorial to the liberation of Prague by the Red Army—Tank 23—bubble gum pink and placed a large finger sticking upright from it (at the time Soviet troops were still stationed in Czechoslovakia). The artist was arrested and the tank repainted green, but then some members of the parliament, in protest against the arrest, re-painted the tank pink. The government released Černý and removed the tank (the story is told in more detail in Humphreys 164). The spirit of Schweikism, incidentally, is still very much alive and well, at least on the Internet (see the following link [Jaroslav Hasek](#)).

Parenthetically, we might briefly note here one of the problems this relationship between the artist and the quest for a Czech nation has created—the issue of the expatriate. For understandable reasons, a number of Czech artists have sought fame and fortune outside the Czech territory (or else have had to leave) and have thus, in the eyes of many of their compatriots, abandoned their important national responsibilities. When such artists become very famous internationally, as in the case, for example, of Alfons Mucha or Milan Kundera, their reputation and reception at home (as we shall see) have sometimes suffered because of an alleged lack of patriotism or engagement in matters of importance to the Czech nation. Kundera, who lives in Paris and has become something of a "darling" of Western intellectuals and critics, is a significant modern case because he has given up writing in Czech and now publishes his novels in French in order to gain a wider audience.

At any rate, the decision to anchor our course of study loosely on the emergence of the modern Czech nation has enabled us to make some important curricular decisions, especially the one to resolve any awkward and difficult choices by favouring the work most closely associated with the modern story of the Czech-speaking people over other notable works by German-speaking or Jewish citizens (e.g., Rilke). For obvious reasons, we could not ignore Kafka and Mendel, but apart from the works of these two, the texts we read and the artists we consider all have, to a greater or lesser extent, some relationship with the political and cultural developments of the modern Czech identity.

Some Historical Background

In Prague, as in so many old European cities, one is surrounded by the past, and it is impossible to divorce from one's responses to the urban culture the presence of a long and deeply ironic history extending back for about 1500 years (the dominating presence of the Castle makes such a presence all the stronger). This is surely one of the most important factors in fostering that curious but often noted ambivalent reaction to the city—a place of "magical" beauty and deservedly a World Heritage Site as well as an urban environment which produces a sense of dread, anxiety, even paranoia. We will not be exploring that history in any detail, but we need to keep in mind a few of its more important features in order to grasp some of the reasons why this history has a direct bearing on our experiences in the city and its culture.

[For a more detailed account of the major events of Prague's history, you should consult *The Rough Guide to Prague*, pages 237 to 261, or for a very detailed study *The Coasts of Bohemia*. What follows below is a very condensed account—a minimal outline—mostly taken from these texts. For a very breezy and colloquial but fairly detailed account on-line try [Czech History](#)]

Early History

The Czech people are Slavs who, along with the closely related Slavic group of the Slovaks, moved from regions in the east into three adjacent territories in central Europe—Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia—in the fifth century AD, where they have remained ever since. These groups were at first dominated by another migrant group, the Avars, but eventually achieved their independence under the leadership of a Frank merchant named **Samo** in the seventh century. The establishment of the **Great Moravian Empire** (in the eighth century) created a political unit in which the Czechs and Slovaks were for a short time united under a common ruler (for the last time until 1918).

The terms Slavs, incidentally, refers to ethnically related groups with a common tribal origin on the fringe of the Eurasian steppes (although the origin is debated)—Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Ruthenes (Ukrainians), Russians, Slovenians, Serbs, and (through later assimilation) the Bulgarians. The tribes ended up settling in what is, in effect, the buffer zone between the imperial powers of Western Europe and the numerous non-Slavic invaders from the Eastern plains (e.g., the Magyars, the founders of Hungary, and the Mongols), and this strategic location has been a decisive factor in the history of all the Slav people. That history has also been significantly affected by the later threat from the south, with the expansion of the Islamic Ottoman Empire across the Bosphorus into Europe (starting in the fourteenth century). Given their geographical position at the collision point between East and West and between Christians and Muslims, it's not surprising that the Slavs have been intimately involved with all sorts of major European conflicts from the Thirty Years War, to World Wars I and II, up to the recent conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, and that all Slav areas have long been characterized by bitter ethnic and religious rivalries.

The Great Moravian Empire came to an end with the invasion from the east by the **Magyars** (Hungarians, who are not a Slavic people) in 896 AD, an event with catastrophic consequences for the union of the Czechs and Slovaks, because the Slovaks were for the next 1000 years subject to Hungarian political control (and often treated very badly indeed), while the Czechs allied themselves (often under compulsion) with the German cultures to the West under conditions very much more favourable than those faced by their Slovak relatives. This long separation of two peoples originally very similar and under a common rule created differences so significant that modern attempts to reunite the Czechs and the Slovaks have been unsuccessful (the Slovaks now have their own country Slovakia).

The presence of the Hungarians also cut Bohemia and Moravia off from the Byzantine Empire to the south and hence led to much closer cultural and political links with the Catholic Christian West (one reason why the Czechs do not use the Eastern alphabet of some other Slavic languages and are Western Christians rather than Eastern Orthodox). It has also meant that for much of their history, the most critical element for the Czech people of Bohemia and Moravia has been the relationship with the Holy Roman Empire, the confederation of numerous Catholic German-speaking territories to the west and south and then later with the imperial power of Austria. By 1000 AD Bohemia was officially a part of the Holy Roman Empire and its leader one of those who elected the Emperor. Prague also had become a Catholic bishopric under the control of the archbishop of Mainz (a German-speaking city on the Rhine).

The First Czech Dynasties: The Přemyslids and Carolingians

The first major Czech dynasty in Bohemia were the **Přemyslids** (starting in the ninth century AD), who, according to legend, originated with someone named Přemysl (meaning ploughman), who was chosen by Princess Libuše (a grand-daughter of Čech, the original leader of the wandering Slavs) to lead her people (see Humphreys 237). They at once began developing three areas which are now part of urban Prague: the castle and the church of St. Vitus, the right bank of the Vltava River near a ford on the river (present day Old Town), and the fortified area of Vyšehrad, an elevated area slightly south of the castle on the other side of the river (in Czech mythology it was here that Princess Libuše prophesied a glorious future for Prague). Shortly after that, the Jewish quarter, Josefov, developed north of the Old Town, where the river makes a bend to the east. In the next three centuries the Přemyslids increasingly fortified sections of Prague, enclosing within walls the area below the castle, now called Malá Strana, and a region around the castle, Hradčany (see Svácha, Chapter 1, for a more detailed account of these events).

The most famous Přemyslid king was **Václav**, who built the first church of St. Vitus. After he was murdered by his brother while taking part in mass (c. 929 AD), he was made the patron saint of Czech territories, and he later became the **Good King Wenceslas**, whom we all know about from the famous Christmas carol.

The Přemyslid rule of Bohemia ended early in the fourteenth century and was followed by the rule of the dynastic family of the **Carolingians**. The second Carolingian ruler, **Charles (Karel) IV** (1346-78) is the first great hero of Prague's golden age, and his rule marks a high point in the Czech's understanding of themselves. He freed the Czech church from domination by Mainz, founded a university, reinforced the importance of the Czech language, and, once he was elected Holy Roman Emperor, turned Prague into an imperial city. His presence continues in the city to this day, not only with the survival of some of the buildings and institutions he established, but in the city's most famous landmark (after the castle)—the Charles Bridge across the Vltava. Given the disastrous historical developments which soon followed and the disappearance of the glory days of Czech culture under Charles IV, his age was for a long time a rallying point for those who wished to foster among the Czech-speaking people a stronger and more unified sense of themselves.

Jan Hus

The disintegration of Charles IV's achievements in the years following his death is closely associated with the most famous name from Czech history, **Jan Hus** (1370-1415), a prominent Prague religious figure, rector of the university, and ardent religious reformer. Hus, in a very real sense, was attempting what Martin Luther worked for a century later—to promote urgent attention to some of the flagrant abuses within the Roman Catholic Church (especially the sale of indulgences, certificates which could "purchase" exemptions from certain purgatorial punishments after death). Hus was expelled from the university, became an itinerant preacher (in Czech), and was eventually summoned to a church council in Constance and burned at the stake (July 6, 1415) on charges of heresy (in spite of having a safe conduct from the Emperor). His ashes were thrown into the Rhine river.

Hus' death launched a series of rebellions and the **Hussite Wars** (1419-1434) in which Hus' reformist followers fought against Catholic landowners and invading armies from Catholic powers outside, as well as among themselves. A famous early event in these conflicts was the **first defenestration of Prague** (in 1419), when a Hussite mob stormed the New Town Hall in Prague and threw some city councillors and the mayor out of the windows. The Hussites armies (made up largely of peasants) prevailed against their Catholic opponents for a number of years, thanks to the military genius of the partially blind Jan Žižka, and a compromise was finally reached in 1434. Bohemia's nobility then chose its first and last Hussite king, **George (or Jiří) of Poděbrad** (1458-1471).

Ever since these conflicts, Jan Hus has been seen by many Czechs as a hero of Czech nationalism and the Hussites, rightly or wrongly, as heroic patriots defending "land and . . . liberty against the Crusader armies sent to crush it from the four corners of the earth" (Capek 401) or, alternatively, as oppressed workers fighting their tyrannical aristocratic masters, something which explains why the Communist rulers of Czechoslovakia, for all their hostility to Czech nationalism and to religion, would restore Hus' church and put pictures of Žižka and Hussite warriors on the bank notes. The anniversary of Hus' death is a national holiday. In fact, however, as Sayer points out, the Hussite period was far from the glorious national celebration later re-interpretations have made of it, for the movement was split by serious divisions between radicals and

moderates, and the constant strife between these factions and with outsiders “seriously weakened the Bohemian kingdom both economically and politically” (43). One important development for the history of Protestant religion in these developments was the group born from the extreme wing of the Hussite movement, the Unity of Brethren or **Moravian Brethren** (many of whom who were forced to scatter beyond Bohemia and who set up communities all over Europe and in America).

The Hapsburgs

When George of Podebrady died, a Polish dynasty (the **Jagiellonians**) ruled Bohemia from a distance, leaving effective power in the hands of the local nobility. And when that family died out in 1526, the Czech nobles elected the Roman Catholic Ferdinand I (1526-1564) as king of Bohemia. This initiated the rule of the **Hapsburg dynasty**, which was to last until the end of World War I (there had been Hapsburg kings before, in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, but the family had not continued to rule for very long). The Hapsburgs were a well-established power in European politics, who through diplomacy, marriage, and force had, by the end of the fifteenth century, gained control over much of Europe (Spain, parts of Italy, the Netherlands, and their traditional regions in Germany and Austria).

By now the Reformation was fully launched, and the Czech lands were, like so many other places, subject to intense and often bloody feuding between Protestants and Catholics. The second Hapsburg king, **Rudolf II** (1576-1611), who was also Holy Roman Emperor, made Prague his royal capital (over Vienna) and initiated a second golden age for Prague, enriching the city enormously with art and bringing some of Europe’s most important scientists to his capital (**Johannes Kepler** and **Tycho Brahe**, who is buried in Týn Cathedral in Prague). He also introduced a measure of religious tolerance.

The Battle of White Mountain and The Dark Ages

Soon after Rudolf was compelled to give up the throne (for reasons of mental instability) the history of the Czechs took a decisive and disastrous turn when the Protestant nobility turned against the Catholic king Ferdinand II. Their hostility led to the **second defenestration of Prague** in 1618, when two Catholic governors and their secretary were thrown out of the windows of Prague Castle (they survived). This launched Europe’s first totally catastrophic international religious conflict, the **Thirty Years’ War** (1618-1648), and led to the most calamitous event in Czech history, the **Battle of the White Mountain** (1620), when the Czech protestants were defeated by the Catholic forces of the Holy Roman Emperor in a battle near Prague. A number of prominent Czech nobles were executed and their heads put on display on the Charles Bridge (where they remained for a dozen years). The devastating effects of the Thirty Years’ War on the Czechs in Bohemia can hardly be overestimated:

An estimated five-sixths of the Bohemian nobility went into exile, their properties handed over to loyal Catholic families from Austria, Spain, France and Italy. Bohemia had been devastated, with towns and cities laid waste, and the total population reduced by almost two-thirds; Prague’s population halved. . . . All forms of Protestantism were outlawed, the education system was handed over to the Jesuits and, in 1651 alone, more than two hundred “witches” were burned at the stake in Bohemia. (Humphreys 244)

The century following the Thirty Years’ War almost witnessed the extermination of Czech culture entirely. German-speaking Catholics (spearheaded by the Jesuits) under the direction of Vienna and Rome took over religious and educational centres and brought in waves of German immigrants. The authorities forcibly transformed the city’s appearance with Baroque architecture as an overt manifestation of their power and wealth and pushed spoken Czech out of education and virtually all civilized discourse. Even the protests against this trend and exhortations for a Czech revival, when these eventually began to appear, had to be written in German to gain an audience. Before that, however, books encouraging Czech patriotism or reminding readers of a national Czech past were placed on the *Index of Forbidden Books*, including Pope Pius II’s *Historica Bohemica* of 1458 (Sayer 49).

What this amounted to was a concerted attempt to redefine the identity of the people of Bohemia to make them obedient Catholic subjects of a German-speaking empire ruled from Vienna. In recounting one of the more significant episodes in the cultural campaign, Sayer (50-52) writes about the attempt of the Catholic officials to replace Jan Hus as the great national hero with **Jan Nepomucky**, who, according to local legends, had been thrown from Charles Bridge into the Vltava three hundred years earlier (in 1393) for refusing to reveal to the king the secrets of the confessional. By exhuming his body, making him a saint, erecting his statue on Charles Bridge (along with other Catholic saints), and promoting an annual Jan Nepomucky festival, the authorities hoped to transform the allegiances of the thousands of Czech peasants who came to the city. The entire hagiography was made up by the Jesuits, a composite of two old stories, and once the fabrication was exposed the Vatican eventually stripped Jan Nepomucky of his sainthood in 1963. Nonetheless, this effort did succeed in making the Czech lands predominantly Roman Catholic (in *The Good Soldier Svejk*, written in the 1920’s, the cult of this saint is still alive and well).

The most internationally famous legacy of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Prague, something no tourist can avoid confronting, is the cult of the *Bambino de Praga* (the Baby Jesus of Prague), a wax effigy of Jesus as an infant, given to the city in 1628. Replicas of the doll are sold everywhere in the central part of the city, and there are many commercial sites on the Internet marketing copies. The original doll itself is on display in the church Panna Maria Vítězná, where thousands of tourists still flock to see it.

The National Revival

The reawakening of Czech culture, the **National Revival**, began during the Enlightenment, when the Hapsburg ruler Joseph II (1780-1790) granted a measure of religious and civil tolerance throughout his empire (while at the same time ironically motivating Czech intellectuals by increasingly making German the language of official business). Czechs participated in the growing demands for political freedoms for ethnic minorities throughout the Austrian Empire (a trend powerfully reinforced by the French Revolution and its aftermath), and many Czechs directed their energies into political efforts to unite the Slavic people (a movement known as **pan-Slavism**).

For people whose language has never come close to facing extinction, it is difficult to imagine the complex difficulties of the task of restoration. Once Czech had all but disappeared as the language of government, education, and most artistic, religious, and intellectual life, those urging its return had, in effect, no literate Czech-speaking audience (often they themselves were not particularly fluent themselves) and had to present their defences of Czech culture in German. They had no rich tradition of printed works written in Czech (literature, history, poetry, or even school books, the essential tools for cultural development). All these had to be produced. A Czech tradition had to, as it were, be invented, so that the National Revival had an effective Czech content. It is an astonishing tribute to the untiring efforts of Czech intellectuals and artists that their efforts in the second half of the nineteenth century were so successful. Their task was all the more urgent because the Czech language, unlike, say, French, German, or English, was confined to the Czech territories and its relatively small population. If it disappeared from there, it was gone forever.

The Czechs were increasingly motivated to re-create their own culture in the face of their disappointments over the **Ausgleich** (meaning *compromise*) in 1867, which was an attempt by the government in Vienna to cope with dissent within the Austrian Empire and with the threat posed by the growing power of the Prussians. The Ausgleich established a dual monarchy in which the Magyar government of Hungary was granted almost equal status with Vienna, and hence Budapest became a much more important political centre than Prague. The autocratic conservatism of the Hungarian government prevented some long-necessary reforms in the Austrian (now Austro-Hungarian) Empire and, according to some interpretations, was a major factor contributing to World War I, initiated by an Austrian attack on Serbia.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Czech National Revival was making important cultural gains—the National Theatre and the National Library, for example, and the growth of some important political groups advocating the cause of Czech nationalism, along with a growing tradition in Czech poetry and prose. A number of artists had turned toward Paris as the inspiration for modern Czech art (away from Vienna), and there was throughout the culture a strong sense (especially among the generation born in the 1880’s) that old traditions and established political structures were on their way out, something which may account for the pronounced note of anxiety and neurosis in many of the early Czech modernists, from Kafka to Gutfreund (see Mansbach, Chapter 1).

The National Revival also made a concerted attempt to create interest in traditional Bohemian and Moravian folk culture as central to the Czech identity (the survival of the language had owed a great deal to its continuing presence in the countryside). Artists celebrated old folk costumes, and musicians deliberately emphasized traditional folk melodies in their operatic and symphonic compositions. This trend culminated in the Czechoslavic Ethnographic Exhibition of 1895 (Sayer 124 ff) based on a reconstruction in a park outside Prague of traditional Czech farms, churches, handicrafts, and peasant work places, all designed to insist upon the uniquely Czech character of the people (most of whom, of course, now lived in large urban centres far removed from such traditional ways of life). At the exhibition there was only one official language, Czech. An important part of the celebrations was a re-creation of the Ride of the Kings, an old village ritual of obscure origin, which had almost died out (I mention this point because the continuation of the traditional ride is an important element in the Kundera novel we will be reading).

World War I

The World War pitted the Czechs (and Slovaks) against their fellow Slavs, the Russians and the Serbs, in the service of their oppressors, the Austrians and Hungarians. Not surprisingly, there was little national enthusiasm for such a cause, as we shall see in the most famous novel to emerge from that conflict, *The Good Soldier Švejk*. The most important Czech military contribution to the war was made by those who defected from the Austrian cause to form the **Czech Legion**, which fought against the Austrians, before getting involved in the Russian revolution. This service made the victorious allies especially receptive to the Czech national cause, and they had little difficulty in agreeing to the formation of the first **Czechoslovak Republic** (declared on October 28, 1918).

The new republic was, relatively speaking, economically prosperous, since it preserved about eighty percent of the industrial capacity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Humphreys 248), and the cultural life of Prague flourished in the 1920’s. But the Great Depression of the 1930’s and the inherent instability of a country marked by major ethnic differences (Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Jews, Poles, Ukrainians) exacerbated the political tensions within Czechoslovakia, particularly the secessionists’ desires of the right-wing German political party.

Munich Crisis and World War II

Once Hitler annexed Austria in 1938, he turned next to Czechoslovakia, particularly to the **Sudetenland** (the predominantly German-speaking area on the borders between Czechoslovakia and Austria and Germany). The Czechs looked toward the English and the French to guarantee their borders, as they had promised, but in September 1938, the British and French, in an effort to appease Hitler, gave into his demands rather than go to war over, in the famous words of British prime minister Neville Chamberlain, "a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing" (quoted Humphreys 250). The Czech government (headed by Edvard Beneš) made a controversial decision not to resist the Germans, so Hitler moved in unopposed, and Czechoslovakia lost one-third of its territories. The Nazis quickly split Czechoslovakia into the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and a separate Slovakia.

In retrospect, the actions of the appeasers are difficult to defend. One might argue that England and France were not ready for war and that this agreement gave them some additional time to prepare for the inevitable conflict with Nazi Germany. In addition, the Sudetenland people did have some genuine grievances against the Czech majority—many of them were unwilling citizens of the country created at the Treaty of Versailles. And some people, no doubt, believed that Hitler might well stop his aggressive expansion once he had created his greater Germany. However, quite apart from a massive betrayal of earlier assurances and the failure even to consult the Czech government, the action handed over an important economic power and its armed forces to the Nazis without a struggle, thus removing a potentially vital ally from the coming war, and it certainly bolstered Hitler's reputation and power in Germany. In addition, the betrayal made some Czechs deeply bitter about the Western European powers and encouraged them to look for leadership after the war to the Communists (Stalin strongly opposed the Munich agreement). The Nazis operated quickly to stifle Czech nationalism or any focus for resistance. They closed the universities, gutted the libraries, and re-imposed the German language on the country, at the same time insisting on celebrating German power by re-naming streets and important state institutions and redecorating public spaces. They carted away would-be protestors to distant concentration camps, including many of the country's most important artists (Josef Čapek among them: he died in Bergen-Belsen).

A major event during the Nazi occupation was the assassination of **Reinhard Heydrich**, the major Nazi official in the Protectorate, by Czech paratroops in 1942 on the streets of Prague. The Nazis responded by the total destruction of the village of Lidice, a major atrocity. Heydrich had earlier ordered the evacuation of the fortress town of Theresienstadt near Prague (now **Terezín**) to create a common collection point for the Jews, and once the extermination program began in earnest, the place was turned into a staging place for victims on the way to the camps (it was something of a "showcase" for the Nazi extermination program, the subject of a propaganda film and the only camp the Red Cross was permitted to visit).

The Communist People's Republic

The Nazi control of Czech lands ended when the Russians armies advanced, reaching Prague in May 1945 (there was a three-day popular uprising against the Germans just before the Russians arrived, and Prague suffered some war damage). The new Czech government, headed again by Edvard Beneš (who had led the country at the time of Munich), with the approval of the allies and the Russian armies, began the forced removal of German-speaking Czechs and the Hungarians from all Czech territory, including the restored Sudetenland. About 2.5 million German-speaking Czechs left the country (Humphreys 252), and their property was re-distributed. Many died or were killed in the process (Sayer suggests as many as 250,000). In addition to getting rid of the German population, successive governments set about erasing the memory of Germans as an important element in the culture of Czechoslovakia (once more re-naming towns, streets, and buildings and re-organizing public spaces).

In the elections of May 1946 the genuinely popular Communist party (which had spearheaded the expulsion of the Germans and Hungarians) emerged as the strongest party (with about 40 percent of the vote in an election where extreme right-wing parties were not allowed to participate). President Beneš appointed the leader of the Communist party, **Klement Gottwald**, prime minister. The new government, which had pledged itself to parliamentary democracy, at first tried to follow an independent course of action, but was pulled into line by Stalin and the army. In 1948 the hard liners in the Communist Party, in effect, carried out a bloodless coup and were in sole control, thanks in large measure to the Party's relatively high popularity. A new constitution was drawn up which enshrined power in the hands of the Communist Party. One consequence of the coup was **the third defenestration of Prague**, when Jan Masaryk, the son of the first president of the republic of 1918 and a prominent non-Communist member of the government (Foreign Minister), fell to his death from a window in a government building. It is still not clear whether he committed suicide due to a temporary mental derangement (the official Communist line) or was murdered. Later investigations into his death have produced different conclusions (see [Masaryk](#)).

The Communist rule of Czechoslovakia became increasingly autocratic and tyrannical. Problematic Party members were arrested and, in the 1950's, a series of Stalinist show trials was put on in Prague, as a result of which many Party members, some of whom had held prominent positions in the Communist government, were executed. In addition, as Sayer points out at length, the Communists set about, like so many before them, to re-write Czech history by purging libraries, controlling all art exhibitions and book publishing, renaming and reshaping the urban landscape (including a colossal memorial to Josef Stalin in Prague), and appropriating Czech memorials for their own purposes.

The Prague Spring, 1968 and Charter 77

Plagued with economic difficulties and the failure of the government's attempts at economic reform, the Czech people grew increasingly restless during the 1960's. The situation prompted debates within the ruling party itself. In 1968 **Alexander Dubček** became First Secretary of the Party and introduced some modest reforms (the most important of which was a relaxation of censorship laws). This measure prompted a mass movement denouncing the strict Stalinist style of the government and calling for important reforms, "socialism with a human face," a time of optimistic hopes after years of harsh repressive rule (the Prague Spring).

In August 1968, however, the Soviet armies invaded Czechoslovakia to reinforce the hard-line faction within the government. Once again, organized Czech resistance was minimal, unlike the response in Hungary some years earlier. The spirit of *Schweikism* manifested itself once more as the people altered all the highway signs so that Soviet army convoys kept getting hopelessly lost on Czech country roads. Dubček was replaced by Gustáv Husák (who was a Slovak with no great love of the Czechs) as First Secretary of the Party, and over the acts of individual protest (like the self-burning of student **Jan Palach** in Wenceslas Square) the government re-imposed the harsh "normalization" of earlier Stalinist rule. Not until the mid 1970's did dissidents let their voices be widely heard again. They produced the important document **Charter 77**, a list of human rights demands which was signed by over 1000 people by 1980 (243 people signed the original document of January 1, 1977, including the popular playwright Václav Havel). Many of the signatories, including Havel, were jailed for long periods of time.

These events led to a significant shift in the general attitude to the Communist Party, which for a considerable period had been genuinely popular among young Czechs, who found in communism an obvious place for their idealistic hopes. The invasion of 1968 and the continuing interference in Czech affairs of the Warsaw pact (culminating in the the issue of placing nuclear weapons in Czechoslovakia in 1983) dramatically increased the disillusionment of the young with their government (Holy).

The Velvet Revolution and the Velvet Divorce

Once Russia, under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, introduced major reforms in the Communist rule in Russia (*perestroika*) and adopted a more open stance toward the West (*glasnost*), the Prague hard-liners came under increasing pressure to reform their rule in Czechoslovakia. In 1989 opposition groups organized the **Civic Forum**, demanding the resignation of the present Communist leadership and amnesty for political prisoners (among other things), in accordance with the principles of Charter 77. On November 20, the first of many mass nationwide demonstrations in support of these reforms took place (with more than 200,000 people in Wenceslas Square). On November 24, Dubček and Havel appeared there together before a crowd of 300,000. Under the intense pressure the government quickly fell apart, and Havel was elected president on December 29.

In the general elections which followed (in 1990), the Civic Forum and its associated party in Slovakia won 60 percent of the vote. The new government faced two urgent problems: economic reform and the issue of Slovakia. Havel was a champion of maintaining a united federation of the two parts of the country, but his efforts were unsuccessful. Many Slovaks were fed up with the economic, political, and cultural domination of Prague, and many Czechs were not particularly enthusiastic about supporting the economically depressed region of Slovakia. On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia officially and peacefully split into two countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (the Velvet Divorce). Since that time, the Czech Republic has increasingly opened itself up to and sought economic ties with Western Europe.

Of all the Eastern bloc countries newly liberated after 1989 and now established as independent countries, the Czech Republic has fared the best economically and politically, thanks in large part to the re-discovery of Prague as a major tourist destination for Westerners and large-scale investments of capital in the new economy (which is not to say that there are not serious economic issues remaining). The Czech Republic is now a member of NATO and is poised to join the European Union within the next few weeks (in May 2004). At the same time, however, the country faces many of the familiar difficulties brought about by a sudden transformation to a market economy in a world of increasing free trade (rising unemployment, poverty, crime, and so on), and the heady optimism which led to a 99 percent voter turn out in the 1990 elections has given way in many quarters to a deep disillusionment with what people see as endemic corruption in the government. In the 2002 elections, there was a 58 percent turn out, with 18 percent of the votes going to the Communist party (Humphreys 261). In addition to this apparent loss of participation in the democratic process, there is a sense, too, that many Czechs, like those in other Eastern bloc countries, are wondering (and worrying) about just what the rapid shift in the country's history to an economy dominated by corporate capitalism and free trade now means for those living in a land which has had more than its share of dislocating transformations.

It seems clear also that events since 1989 have had a serious effect on the prestige and popularity of Czech writers and intellectuals within the country, since they have, in effect, lost much of their social and political role (Holy). Now media entertainments, Western-style magazines and best sellers (like novels of Stephen King or Tom Clancy or biographies of Princess Diana, and so on) dominate the market for reading material (Anyz and Vrba), and the political excitement and challenge of the *samizdat* traditions, which turned writers into national heroes, have disappeared. Given that the forces of market capitalism are the great dissolver of national identities and old traditions (except where the appearance of these can be maintained for commercial purposes) and frequently tend to bring rich local identities down to an international lowest common denominator, it remains to be seen where the long struggle for a distinctively Czech nation will lead next.

Some Reflections on the Narrative of Czech History

To set down some easy connections between such a turbulent history and the works we will be studying is, no doubt, rash. But we can, I think, make a couple of observations. The most important of these is the most obvious: this history has been marked by a strong tradition of national idealism and heady new hopes which have been repeatedly broken by the brutal realities of history, a repetitive cycle which has contributed to a strong sense of paradox and absurdity. Hence, alongside the Slav idealism of Mucha, the fervent hopes for a humanitarian and democratic Czechoslovakia of Karel Čapek and Tomáš Masarík, and the idealistic socialist dreams of two generations of young people in the 1930s and 1940s, we also see the black comedy of Hasek, the extreme sense of alienation of Kafka, and the bitter ironies of Kundera. The latter are not, as so often in the West, merely a fashionable response to personal angst or a convenient protest against conformity, but earned insights into the realities of the world where the secret police can arrive in the middle of the night and arrest and even execute someone for something which was not only permitted but approved of a short while before, all in the name of some ideology announced in the latest "official" language.

The work of Havel is interesting in this respect. He made his name as a playwright inspired by Theatre of the Absurd (especially Ionesco), and some of his best known plays depict the absurdity of a world in which language itself is constantly invented and re-invented to serve some bewildering and oppressive bureaucracy. And yet Havel's political writings have also made him famous as a spokesperson for an enlightened international humanitarian understanding among all people. That idealistic tradition may be (like Havel's reputation) at present somewhat on the wane, and yet Havel remains, even out of office now, a reminder that, for all the absurdity, one has to keep going and hang onto one's faith in the challenge of taking responsibility for life.

There are no exact guidelines. There are probably no guidelines at all. The only thing I can recommend at this stage is a sense of humor, an ability to see things in their ridiculous and absurd dimensions, to laugh at others and at ourselves, a sense of irony regarding everything that calls out for parody in this world. In other words, I can only recommend perspective and distance. Awareness of all the most dangerous kinds of vanity, both in others and in ourselves. A good mind. A modest certainty about the meaning of things. Gratitude for the gift of life and the courage to take responsibility for it. Vigilance of spirit." (Havel upon receiving the Open Society Prize awarded by the Central European University in 1999, trans. by Paul Wilson, quoted in Capp)

What advice like this amounts to in practice amid the new realities of the European Union remains to be seen. One suspects that the Czechs do not need any special urging to maintain a sense of irony, but as the age of international corporate capitalism sweeps through the country what happens to "vigilance of the spirit" may be quite another story.

Works Cited

- Anyz, Daniel and Tomas Vrba. "The Unbearable Lightness of Best Sellers." Available on line at <http://archive.tol.cz/transitions/tunbear1.html>
- Capp, Walter. "Interpreting Václav Havel." Available at <http://www.crosscurrents.org/capps.htm>.
- Holy, Jiri. "Czech Literature since the 1980s." Available on line at <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/staff/Holy.html>
- Humphreys Rob. *Prague*. Rough Guides, 2002.
- Hupchick, Dennis P. and Harold E. Cox. *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of Eastern Europe*. NY: Palgrave, 2001.
- Mansbach, S. A. *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939*: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Parrott, Cecil. "Introduction." *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War*. By Jaroslav Hašek. (Penguin, 1974)
- Sayer, Derek. *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Švácha, Rostislav. *The Architecture of New Prague 1895-1945*. Trans. By Alexandra Büchler. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995.