

## Introduction

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With history it is possible to do almost anything – only to elude it is not possible.

František Graus (ed.), *Naše živá i mrtvá minulost* [Our living and dead past]  
(Prague, 1968), p. 8.

### I

This collection appears later than planned for reasons that afflict multi-authored publications whose individual chapters are delivered at different times. As it happens, *Bohemia in History* is published in the year of memorable anniversaries. That is, 650 years after the foundation of the University of Prague, the oldest in Central Europe; 380 years after the (Second) Defenestration of Prague which led to the end of Czech statehood and the beginning of the Thirty Years War; 150 years after students of the University of Prague with the more radical sections of the population had urged the need for fundamental political and social changes in the existing feudal order; 80 years after the establishment of the First Czechoslovak Republic and 60 years after its demise; 50 years after the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia achieved monopoly of power and 30 years after the unsuccessful attempt to reform the system within – towards ‘a socialism with a human face’.

The starting point of this volume was a letter from Prague that I received in Cambridge in December 1989 – a month after the events in Czechoslovakia described as the ‘Velvet Revolution’. The letter came from the Historical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences where I had been a research worker since 1954 until my leaving the country into a

virtually enforced emigration in 1968.<sup>1</sup> In the letter this was acknowledged, an apology offered for the wrongs that had affected my life professionally and privately, and a wish expressed to put them right. I was invited to come to Prague to discuss these matters, including possibilities of future co-operation with the Historical Institute. After Alice Teichova obtained a similar letter of apology from the Paedagogical Faculty of Charles University (where she had been Head of the Department of History), we travelled to Prague following an absence of nearly twenty-two years at the end of January 1990. Since then, old contacts with Czech colleagues have been renewed and new ones established. On the one hand, this paved the way for close co-operation of Czech economic historians with Alice Teichova, including their participation in the international research project 'The economic role of Austria in interwar Central Europe' under her direction. On the other hand, the visit eventually actuated collaboration of social, political and cultural historians in taking stock of 'the state of the art' in the manner of the previous remarkable attempt *Naše živá i mrtvá minulost*, a collection of eight essays on Czech history published in 1968. It was edited by František Graus who wrote the introductory essay, bearing the same title as the book, from which the chapter quotation has been taken.

Notwithstanding that thirty years have passed since its appearance, the slim volume remains valuable reading for the content, thematic treatment and quality of its individual essays. Its purpose was to readdress critically the enduring mythicization of some themes in Czech historiography: the beginning of statehood (D. Třeštík); the Hussite movement (F. Šmahel); the aftermath of the Battle of the White Mountain (J. Petrání); the national revival (M. Hroch); the formation of the nation without a state (J. Kořalka); right-wing radicalism and the First World War (B. Loewenstein); the First Republic, 1918–1938 (V. Olivová). The contributions were ostensibly influenced by and committed to a discerning Marxist method of interpreting the past. *Naše živá i mrtvá minulost*, so to speak a scholarly introspection, should be taken account of by serious students of the intellectual underpinnings of the process in Czechoslovakia, which culminated in what has become known as 'Prague Spring of 1968' and whose history has yet to be written.<sup>2</sup> Significantly František Šmahel, who discusses the Hussite movement in both books, begins his contribution to *Bohemia in History* as follows:

It does not always pay to be the first or to refuse to toe the line. History displays a host of cautionary examples of both these cases. Bohemia did not pay for non-conformity in 1968 alone. An anomaly *sui generis* was constituted by the Hussite movement, this Reformation before the Reformations and revolutions before the revolutions.

## II

Neville Chamberlain's notorious reference to 'a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing' (27 September 1938) has occasionally been viewed as a folly of an ignorant provincial English businessman, turned into a politician who by chance became a prime minister. Be that as it may, in Britain and elsewhere the state of affairs regarding knowledge of Czech and, for that matter, Slovak history has not changed materially for the better since Chamberlain's fateful pronouncement sixty years ago.

The eighteen informative and interpretative essays assembled in *Bohemia in History* should help to redress the balance. They are based on synthesis of authors' and other scholars' work. Chiefly along socio-political lines they identify major moments in the past of the Czech Lands from the time the Přemyslide dynasty began to rise to power in the ninth century to the fall of socialism in 1989. Four essays focus broadly on the arts, sciences and education in interaction, as the case may be, with political, economic and other spheres. Of these, two concentrate on the reigns and courts of Charles I/IV (1346 [1355]–1378) and Rudolf II (1576–1612) respectively. Two further essays consider the worlds of university and science. One discusses them in the framework of the higher educational system of the Habsburg monarchy from about 1800. The other looks at the world of science in the context of Czech–German bilingualism, from about 1800 to 1930, pervading the political and cultural atmospheres of the Czech Lands drawing into its wake the threat of their division or outright dismemberment along blurred ethnic lines. The coexistence and the encounters of Czechs and native Germans are embedded in the history of the Czech Lands and, as such, are paid attention to in the essays of the volume throughout. The conflicts between them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are examined in a separate contribution. Lastly, pursuing the 'ethnic' theme, there are two essays on the little explored Czech–Jewish relationship and the consequential 'Slovak Question'.

The first essay by Jiří Sláma sheds light on the origin of 'Bohemia' and its Czech equivalent 'Čechy' which, in fact, is a plural. Bohemia, which embraces the western part of the present-day Czech Republic, derives its name from the Celtic tribe Boii whose members appeared to have resided on the territory of Bohemia between the first century BC and the first century AD only to be pushed out by successive waves of Germanic and Slavic settlers. 'Bohemia' is recorded in Frankish annals since the ninth century. As to 'Čechy', the expression appears earliest as 'česki muži' (Czech men) in an Old Slavic tenth-century source.

Between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, Bohemia and Moravia were transformed under the Přemyslides into an important medieval state. In the second essay Zdeněk Měřínský and Jaroslav Mezník trace this by no means linear process involving, among others, alignments as well as tensions with the throne of the Roman (German) Empire. The rising influence of the Přemyslide state derived from the availability of silver which began to be mined in the thirteenth century. Silver mining brought German-speaking miners, thus reinforcing the influx of German colonists which began in the twelfth century and decisively affected the ethnical composition of the Czech Lands.

After the extinction of the Přemyslides (1306), influential magnates turned to Emperor Henry VII of Luxemburg. His eldest son, John, after being married at the age of fourteen to Elizabeth, the youngest sister of the last Přemyslide, was elected King of Bohemia (1310–1346). Though due for reappraisal – Měřínský and Mezník speak of him as this ‘knightly and intelligent king’<sup>3</sup> – it is the reign of his eldest son Charles (dubbed ‘the golden age’ by older historiography) which attracts attention.

It is František Kavka who focuses on Charles’s consummate political and diplomatic acumen. Beyond that, he brings out that Charles was the driving spirit that animated the immense artistic, architectural and urban planning activities that were to transform Prague into a northern Rome. Such a town had to be home to a university which, as expressly stated in the Founding Charter of 7 April 1348, was to serve the intellectual needs of the denizens of the Kingdom of Bohemia:<sup>4</sup>

So, in order that our loyal inhabitants of the realm, incessantly hungering after the fruits of learning, may not be constrained to beg for alms in foreign countries, but may find set out a welcoming table in our realm, and also that those who are distinguished by natural sagacity and talent may through knowledge and science become skilled in learning and may no longer be obliged, but hold it even superfluous in their pursuit of learning, to travel about in far-off lands of the world, to seek out foreign nations, or to beg in foreign countries for the satisfaction of their aspirations for knowledge, but in order that they may reckon it for their own glory to summon others from abroad to the sweet savour and bid them share in their pleasure.

Within five decades or so, the situation that the Masters and students from Bohemia had only one vote in the administration of the university against the three votes of the Masters and students from abroad became a major issue, involving national, political and doctrinal concerns. In 1409 a royal act, known as the Decree of Kutná Hora, inverted the existing status in favour of the *natio Bohemorum*. At the centre of the university party, demanding the change, was Jan Hus (c. 1370–1415) whose name is insepa-

rably linked with ‘the Reformation before the Reformations and revolution before the revolutions’ which is the point at issue raised by F. Šmahel. After examining the multifarious dimensions of the Hussite movement – social, national, revolutionary, doctrinal, spiritual and cultural – Šmahel discerns ‘contours of long-term processes’ which, within 100 years of Hus’s death at the stake in Constance, transformed the Kingdom of Bohemia into ‘a monarchy of the estates’.

‘Until recently’, writes Josef Macek, ‘the contribution of the estates to the Czech statehood and culture has been played down’. He saw it as his task to remedy the situation by providing a comprehensive seven-part account of the period 1471–1526, known as the ‘Jagiellon era’ in the history of the Czech Lands.<sup>5</sup> Josef Macek completed his offering to *Bohemia in History* literally just before his death, and thus it may be read as a summary of his seasoned *magnum opus*. The period was one of political change. In the absence of prelates in political life, burghers became the third political force besides lords and knights. Macek notes that there were 190 meetings of the Diet between 1471 and 1526 in which the lesser nobility and burghers took active part. ‘If one assumes democratization’, he continues, ‘to mean the gradual awakening to political and public activity of these sections of the population previously (partially or completely) excluded from it, then the meetings of the Diet in Bohemia were doubtless a form of a process of democratization.’ The meetings of the Diet (and the sittings of the Land Court) took place in the largest state room in Europe – in the vast Late Gothic Vladislav Hall of the Prague Castle, built between 1481 and 1500. Macek’s verdict: political power and the ambience in which it functioned were in accord.

From the fifteenth century, in keeping with the major role they played in state affairs, the estates were calling for the King of Bohemia to live permanently in Prague. Perhaps because he wished to comply with this demand or for more personal reasons, Rudolf II took up residence in the Prague Castle in 1583. ‘Around 1600 – after two centuries – Prague regained its significance as an important political and cultural centre in Europe.’ This is how Josef Válka begins his far-ranging essay in which he reclaims the failed ruler and unlucky military man to a paramount position as a patron of the arts and learning. In Rudolf’s perception, artistic and scientific pursuits were no disparate quests. Indeed, as Válka shows, the major and minor painters, sculptors, architects, astronomers and alchemists who served Rudolf II and other patrons were realizing his programme (or they believed that they were doing just that): to penetrate into the hidden meaning of the Cosmos. This ambition provides the clue, for example, to the efforts of the Imperial Astronomer to Rudolf II and one of the very great figures of the Scientific Revolution, Johannes Kepler

(1571–1630), to search for the mathematical harmony of the Universe. It illustrates that in Bohemia, as elsewhere in Europe, science and magic were by no means separate spheres in the time of transition of the Renaissance to the Baroque.

In his major work on the emergence of the Habsburg monarchy Robert Evans describes the Defenestration of Prague (23 May 1618) as ‘that tragicomic charade which hoped to eliminate by medieval means the two chief representatives (Martinic and Slavata) of a king (Ferdinand II) so recently elected with an overwhelming majority.’<sup>6</sup> Moreover, he finds it somehow absurd to call ‘an hour-and-a-half’s skirmishing between makeshift armies on a featureless plateau just west of Prague’ (8 November 1620) the ‘Battle of the White Mountain’.<sup>7</sup> The problem is that, apart from the Hussite movement, no other event in the history of the Czech Lands has attracted more scholarly and popular attention than the uprising/rebellion of the estates and the war 1618–1620. Addressed by Josef Petráň in *Naše živá a mrtvá minulost*, in this volume he returns at length, with Lydia Petráňová, to the Battle of the White Mountain. The authors discuss how the defeat of the rebel armies in the Battle of the White Mountain has lent itself to myth-making as a medium for history-centred Czech patriotism/nationalism from the seventeenth century to the present. The authors’ underlying approach is summarized as follows:

A society which needs to define itself almost purely in terms of its past – either because it feels threatened or because it is uncertain of its own strength – seeks support in ideology or historical myth. The myth of the White Mountain and every other myth as a historical fact possessed in various historical situations and in different societies an adaptive function, whether in a positive or a negative sense.

Although Bohemia and Moravia (the eastern part of the Czech Republic named after the river Morava rising in the Sudeten Mountains and flowing south to the Danube) have coexisted in a common state for nearly 900 years, there are particular political, cultural and other aspects of the history of Moravia which historiography has tended to neglect. This applies, for example, to the study of the Enlightenment from the Moravian perspective which is the topic of Jiří Kroupa’s contribution. His concern is not so much whether the Moravian Enlightenment possesses distinctive features but to provide evidence for its institutional, scholarly and literary existence, including ideas which had moved the Moravian *Aufklärer*, such as patriotism, virtue and happiness. What Kroupa offers is an additional mosaic in the build-up of Europe’s Enlightenment.

In Czech historiography, the period from about 1800 to about 1850 has been associated with the process of ‘national revival’ (*národní obrození*), which



laid the foundations of modern Czech culture. It has often been described as a near miracle – a notion which Vladimír Macura approaches in his essay iconoclastically. For one thing, Macura stresses that the national revival has not only narrow native roots but has to be looked at in its wider Josephinian and French Revolution contexts. For another thing, Macura points to the contrast between the high cultural aspirations of the national(ist) project and the low level of national consciousness of Czech interest-groups which a small band of ‘revivalists’ strove to influence. ‘This problem’, Macura finds, ‘led to

an orientation towards language, towards the production of culture in the sphere of philology, and hence to the primacy of the verbal form over the content of a message, over originality in the realm of ideas. This trend resulted naturally in the artificiality of cultural production and, with it, a blurring of the boundaries between the true and the false, between illusion and reality.

For Otto Urban, Czech society comes into its own as a functional modern national and civil society between 1848 and 1918. He examines this process through its social, economic, political, ethnic and cultural aspects and their actual relationships in the context of domestic and international problems of the Habsburg monarchy. The change was striking: economically the Czech Lands became the most important region of the Habsburg monarchy. No less conspicuous was that by 1900 illiteracy, among both ethnicities, virtually disappeared. Urban notes that this gave emphasis to the viewpoint, before 1914, that ‘Czech society became gradually “rooted” in Austria and learned to use the existing possibilities of the system’. It underlined the conduct of ‘official’ Czech politics whose spokesmen, by and large, possessed neither the willingness nor the ability to formulate a programme of state independence, in accord with the undoubtedly existing national feeling and aspirations of the Czechs.

The Great War 1914–1918 transformed the situation. Among the few politicians who believed that there was more to it than a rivalry between the great powers and that it opened a window of opportunity for the establishment of an independent state was Tomáš (Thomas) Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937). He was professor of philosophy at the independent Czech branch of the University of Prague and founder of the tiny Czech People’s (Realist) Party (1900) – metamorphosed into the Czech Progressive Party (1906) – which he represented in the Reichsrat (Imperial Parliament). After the outbreak of the Great War, Masaryk left Prague and went abroad in December 1914 only to return four years later in December 1918 as President of the Czechoslovak Republic – an independent state. What happened in the intervening years Urban describes as follows:

[Masaryk] assumed the war to be a great conflict between the modern democratic and republican principle and the old aristocratic and monarchistic principle. In this spirit he reformulated, in the summer of 1915, the Czech political programme along decisively maximalist lines . . . For a long time, this programme was only an idea and its realization depended on the result of the war, on the attitude of the victorious parties and on a number of other circumstances. The collapse of Russian tsarism in 1917 and the revolutionary chaos that followed in Russia, influenced pervasively further developments, and also contributed in the end to the fall of the Central European monarchies and their political systems. After 1917, therefore, Czech political activity abroad grew substantially. But, at the same time, the Czech domestic political scene was becoming gradually active and the maximalist political programme was gaining more open followers. By the time of the defeat of the Central Powers in the autumn of 1918, this programme was accepted by all decisive political forces in Czech society.

In keeping with Maria Theresa's dictum about education always being a political matter, the Austrian state exercised control over it to a degree which included the universities. Did this extend to imposing breaks on the academic freedom to research and publish? It is Jan Havránek's contention that this was not the case. He ascribes the academic liberties to the rise of the social prestige of university professors and examines the factors which helped to produce this change during the nineteenth century. They enabled university professors – who were state officials – to make *ex cathedra* political statements 'which was tolerated by the state, and attempts to restrain this liberty were as a rule resisted by the academic community as a whole'.

In 1961 a book appeared on the history of mathematics, astronomy, physics and chemistry in Bohemia and Moravia up to the end of the nineteenth century. It was co-authored by six scholars who in their accounts fully respected the bilingual framework within which science in the Czech Lands had evolved.<sup>8</sup> Irena Seidlerová, who participated in the earlier collaborative venture, explores in the present volume the pursuit of science in bilingual institutional and academic settings in the Czech Lands into the 1930s when, as she deplores in her conclusion, the mutual ignorance of the Czech-speaking and German-speaking scientific communities was total. Thus

a science student at the Czech Charles University in Prague did not know who lectured in his discipline at the German University in Prague, whose building was sometimes less than 100 metres away. Even Czech university teachers and researchers often had no idea that in their works they actually cited a colleague from the Brno German Technische Hochschule. Not only from the viewpoint of science was this a very sad affair.

As brought out by Robert Kvaček, there were two 'national question' issues which became festering sores that continued to debilitate



Czechoslovakia from its beginning in 1918 to her crippling in 1938. They concerned the attitude to the new state of indigenous Germans who found themselves to be a 'national minority', and of Slovaks pronounced to be 'Czechoslovaks'. Officially, Czechoslovaks made up, during the period, about 67 per cent of the total population (under 15 million) of Czechoslovakia which, though established as a nation-state and consecrated by the Versailles settlement, was only slightly less variegated ethnically than Austria-Hungary from which it descended as the sole enduringly democratic successor state.<sup>9</sup>

The German-speaking population constituted the largest minority but was it a minority if one acknowledges that the concept of a unitary Czechoslovak nation ('Czechoslovakism'), realised from two – Czech and Slovak – branches, proved to be unsustainable? Given that Czechs made up about 52 per cent and Slovaks about 16 per cent of Czechoslovakia's total population, the German-speaking populace constituted hardly a minority (over 22 per cent). Be that as it may in retrospect, there can be no doubt that democratic Czechoslovakia, more than any other state that signed the Minority Protection Treaty (1919), had observed the conditions laid down by it.

Behind the flawed conception of Czechoslovakism stood President Masaryk who exercised paramount influence on the affairs of the state from a position of authority which he held continuously for seventeen years of its twenty-year existence. Czechoslovakism had much to do with Czech 'appropriation' of Czechoslovakia which, as Kvaček notes, 'gave rise to conflicts and misunderstandings which could have been avoided, or at least diminished and blunted, had there been a greater degree of sensitivity on the Czech part towards the other nationalities'.

Yet what emerges from Kvaček's account is that the claim to self-determination by Germans and Slovaks in democratic Czechoslovakia was 'instrumental' rather than 'pivotal' to developments that culminated in the Munich Agreement, heralding her doom. While mobilizing broad sections of the German and Slovak population, the principle of national self-determination – fuelled by economic and social grievances – became a weapon in the hands of the authoritarian leaderships of the Sudeten German Party and the Slovak People's Party, lastly intent on the undermining of the democratic political structure of Czechoslovakia.

It was their right-wing orientation that created the lines of contact with Hitler Germany, determined to nullify the Versailles system of which Czechoslovakia constituted an integral part. Kvaček observes that Hitler's Germany assailed Czechoslovakia

with campaigns designed to demonstrate oppression of ethnic minorities and danger of bolshevism. The propaganda met with international response where it

suiting one's own enmity towards Czechoslovakia, or where it could be used in bringing political pressure to bear on her government.

Bowing to the pressures of democratic Great Britain and France accommodating Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, the Czechoslovak government, which was not consulted, accepted the Munich Agreement signed by Neville Chamberlain, Edouard Daladier, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini on 29/30 September 1938.

As a result of the dictate, Germany annexed about 37 per cent of the Czech Lands with more than 3.5 million people; nearly one fifth were ethnic Czechs. But, as Robert Kvaček concludes,

There was more to it than depriving Czechoslovakia of a part of her territory. The blow dealt to Czechoslovakia at Munich had as a consequence the setting off an internal transformation which marked the end of democracy in Czechoslovakia. 'Munich' also badly hit Czechoslovakia's economy and robbed her of independent foreign policy. Reaching beyond the Czechoslovak context 'Munich' did severe damage to democracy worldwide and finally disrupted the international order established after 1918. In the climate 'Munich' had ushered in, Germany found no difficulty to destroy Czechoslovakia completely in March 1939.

According to Richard Overy, the distinguished authority on the Nazi economy, Hitler was primarily instrumentalist in his approach to economic policy. 'For him the economy', Overy writes, 'was not simply an arena for generating wealth and technical progress; its *raison d'être* lay in its ability to provide the material springboard for military conquest'.<sup>10</sup> For this statement Alice Teichova provides chapter and verse in her article on the German economic policy in the 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia'. This was the name given to truncated Czech Lands after their occupation by German troops entering Prague on 15 March 1939. The Protectorate existed for over six years until remnant German military units withdrew to the West confronted, as they were, with a rising of Prague citizens (5 May 1945) and the arrival of the Red Army (9 May 1945) but not before killing many Czechs.<sup>11</sup>

The choice to declare the Czech Lands as a Protectorate was deliberate. As Teichova points out, the creation of the French Protectorate in Tunisia (1881) and its administration served the Nazis as a model for a semi-colonial regime in the Czech Lands. In the short term the Czechs were to be tolerated as long as they were prepared to carry out the directives of the German masters in the interest of the war effort. 'Fundamentally', she emphasizes, 'economic realities – the crucial importance of Czech war production – set limits to mass terror and, in conjunction with ruthless strikes against opposition and resistance, led to a stick-and-carrot policy.' With regards to the Czechs the racial programme, implemented *vis-à-vis* the Jewish population