

“Czechness” Then and Now

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Abstract:

What does it mean to be Czech? In this article Chad Bryant argues that “Czechness,” rather than a set of values and ideas, might be seen as a framework for action. Before World War I, to be Czech meant speaking a certain language, attending certain schools, joining certain clubs, voting for certain political parties, and marking the correct category at census time. It meant acting individually within civil and political society. Now, more than fifteen years after the fall of Communism, important questions about identity, nationhood, and multiculturalism have emerged as inhabitants of the Czech Republic come to terms with radical political transformations, a slow influx of migrants, and integration into the European Union. This article concludes that Czechs might take a page from the past and see “Czechness” as something individual, malleable, and chosen as well as something acted out within the structures of a democratic society.

Like so many Americans, Eva Hoffmann took a trip to the former Soviet bloc soon after the fall of Communism. Unlike most of them, she wrote a travelogue detailing her experiences. The Polish-Jewish émigré and former editor of the New York Times Book Review first noticed Prague’s stunning Renaissance and Baroque buildings. Public eroticism, hip tourists, folk music, and Soviet barracks caught her eye. Artists, politicians, eager businessmen, disappointed idealists, and surly waiters crossed her path. Near Český Krumlov she met a group of so-called Gypsies. Outside of Bratislava she heard about the “problem” of Vietnamese refugees. “[B]oth the realities and the consciousness of ethnic and religious pluralism were strictly suppressed in Eastern Europe in the last decades,” she wrote. “This is terribly ironic in a part of Europe that used to be a veritable bouillabaisse of languages and nationalities. But the memory of a former multiculturalism—of the original Central Europe—has been effectively erased in Czechoslovakia in the last decades.”¹ Hoffman’s “exit into history” was a trip to the recent past in which the talk revolved around

¹ Eva Hoffman, Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 141-142.

transitioning to democracy, exorcising political ghosts, and redefining the country's place in Europe. As she saw it, the pre-Munich world had disappeared without a trace.

After the 1993 Velvet divorce, the Czech Republic counted, along with Poland and Hungary, among the ten of the most ethnically homogenous countries in Europe. Little has changed over the past ten years.² The language of common usage has been Czech, and, increasingly, English. Hoffmann's brief glance at pre-1939 Czechoslovakia envisioned a lost era of multicultural give-and-take that produced, among other things, the "brooding, brilliant modernism" of Franz Kafka and Max Brod: "I imagine that there was some interplay of difference and familiarity, of proximity and otherness among these centuries-old neighbors that gave the old Mitteleuropa its peculiar energies."³ Her picture is no doubt over-romanticized. By Kafka's time, Czech and German political parties routinely played on cheap anti-Semitism in order to win votes. Kafka and Jewish writers in Prague, Scott Spector suggests, might have been inspired to creativity thanks their isolation, not engagement, with larger society.⁴

Significantly, however, Hoffmann put an emphasis on practices, and she did not imagine a world of passive actors. Nor did she imagine homogenous, clearly defined national units. Taking her vision a bit further, we might think of the nation not as an object

² According to census results from 1950, Czechs made up almost 94 percent of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia's population. *Statistická ročenka Republiky československé* (Prague: Orbis, 1957), 42. During the March 2001 census 94 percent of the Czech Republic's more than ten million citizens declared themselves to be "český" (which doubles as both "Czech" and "Bohemian" in the Czech language), Moravian, or Silesian. The next largest nationality group consisted of Slovaks, with 193,190 people. Less than 40,000 citizens counted themselves as Germans. The Czech Statistical Office's tables on nationality counts are at http://www.czso.cz/eng/redakce.nsf/i/population_and_housing_census. For a description of the preliminary 2001 census results, which differed only slightly from those published on the Statistical Office's website, see Radio Prague's project report "Minorities in the Czech Republic" at www.radio.cz/en/article/26138.

³ Hoffmann, *Exit*, 142.

⁴ Scott Spector, *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Kafka's fin de siècle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

of analysis but as a category of practice.⁵ Rather than an entity, a thing, with certain characteristics we might see the nation as a collection of people performing actions charged with various and multiple (national) meanings. Instead of asking what it means to be Czech, we might ask how people acted, and still act, Czech. We might ask how people created, and continue to create, “Czechness.” A comparison across time proves instructive, even hopeful. More than a hundred years ago a remarkably civic-minded Czechness existed within one of the most modern and democratic societies in Europe. Returning to the present reveals a wholly different context and a wholly different attitude toward Czechness, yet a time pregnant with possibilities to transform once again how and why people act Czech.

Let’s jump back to the turn of the nineteenth century, when the Bohemian crownlands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesian still belonged to the Austrian half of the Habsburg monarchy, and when millions of Germans still inhabited a region at the height of modernity. Around this time, the first telephones, phonographs, and trucks appeared in Prague. The secession movement was revolutionizing the art world, and from Vienna Moravian-born Sigmund Freud introduced words like “id,” “ego,” and “oedipal complex” into the European vocabulary, transforming how Europeans thought about science, the mind, and sexuality. The Bohemian crownlands, and especially Bohemia, were home to one of the most industrially advanced economies in Europe. By 1910 half the jobs in the Bohemian crownlands were in the industrial, trade, and transportation sectors. The population of Prague had ballooned from 150,000 in 1851 to over 500,000 at the turn of

⁵ Brubaker, in fact, prefers the word “nationness” to “nation,” which he describes as “an event ... something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops ... a contingent, conjecturally fluctuating and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action rather than a relatively stable product of deep developmental trends in economy, polity, or culture.” Rogers Brubaker, “Nation as Form, Category, Event,” in Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 19.

century. Its space had expanded, too, past the old walls of the city, creating new working-class suburbs where there used to be trees and fields. Plzeň had 83,000 people in 1900, Ostrava 167,000 people by 1910. Only decades earlier both had been sleepy little towns with about 25,000 people. In 1890, over ninety-five percent of the Bohemian crownlands' male population, and over ninety-three percent of its female population, could read and write.⁶

Politically speaking, too, Austria and the Bohemian crownlands were quite modern—despite later claims by Masaryk and others that the monarchy was a repressive, absolutist, and antedated regime. Slowly, over time, the Austrian half of the monarchy extended the suffrage and entered the age of mass politics. In 1896, a reform law created a universal curia to which all literate men over age of twenty-one could elect representatives to Vienna. Eleven years later, elections to choose representatives to the Reichsrat in Vienna were conducted under laws that allowed for equal, direct, and universal manhood suffrage. At that time, the only other European countries with similarly broad suffrages were Greece, France, Germany, Spain, Norway, and Finland. In Great Britain, only six out of every ten men could vote as late as 1911. In practice, eleven southern states excluded African Americans from the vote in the United States.⁷ The 1866 Austrian Commune Law provided for elected provincial, district, and commune officials to rule at the local level with the aid of Habsburg-appointed district captains. In reality, most district captains kept their distance, allowing locally elected leaders complete control of the most basic issues of government—roads, railways, sewer and water systems, public health, commerce laws, and education, to

⁶ Otto Urban, České a slovenské dějiny do roku 1918 (Prague: Aleš Skřivan, 2000), esp. 253; Derek Sayer, The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 84, 89.

⁷ Margaret Lavinia Anderson, Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5-6.

name just a few. Local elections were just as heated, if not more so, than Austrian-wide ones. All over the region, party memberships skyrocketed. Political discourse filled newspapers. In 1905, over a hundred thousand people marched in the streets of Prague demanding electoral reform, which they got. Associational life thrived as perhaps never before. The Sokol, for example, had more than 119,000 members by 1912.⁸

People acted Czech, or German, within these modern structures. Clubs were divided along national lines; cultural heroes were appropriated by one side or another. Parties claimed to represent their respective nations. True to their time, Czech and German nationalists often employed vicious Social Darwinist rhetoric to attack each other, and the Jews. As Peter Bugge writes, the relative weakness of the politicians in the Reichsrat gave “greater incitement to prove one’s importance with spectacular manifestations of national zeal.” Their increasingly mad statements and obstructions hurt chances for even more expansive reform at the highest levels of government.⁹ Women got the vote only after the dissolution of the monarchy. Yet, despite its ugliness, democracy in the Bohemian crownlands had never been so direct, nor would it ever be again. The extension of the suffrage sparked the rise of mass parties and mass politics and brought even more people into the political process. In 1911 thirteen Czech parties earned seats in the Lower House of the Reichsrat. They included a confusing mixture of clerical-conservatives, liberals, “Realists,” socialists, and Christian Socialists—many possessing mirror-image, German counterparts.¹⁰ At election time the national colors—black, red, and gold for Germans, red

⁸ Claire E. Nolte, The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation (New York, 2002), 185.

⁹ Peter Bugge, “Czech Nation-Building, National Self-Perception and Politics 1780-1914” (Ph.D. dissertation, Aarhus 1994), 316.

¹⁰ Bruce Garver, The Young Czech Party, 1874-1901, and the Emergence of a Multi-Party System (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 357-358.

and white for Czechs—hung more prominently as patriots marched, electioneered, and sang on the streets. Growing population numbers, a rising middle class, and extended voting rights translated into Czech political power. In České Budějovice Czechs obtained control of the city council in 1906. Olomouc fell in 1910. In the 1880s Czech parties gained control of municipal affairs in Prague. In 1893 the city council removed German-language names from some of Prague’s street signs. To add insult to injury, the lettering was now in red and white, instead of black-in-yellow.¹¹

To be Czech meant to act publicly, and acting nationally represented a choice of sorts. Being Czech meant financing the creation of the national theater and then attending its performances, reading certain party newspapers, joining a party’s trade union, or sending your children to certain schools. For some people acting Czech was as simple as buying from Czech stores or, in mixed regions, choosing to speak Czech instead of German. Being Czech was not something that someone took for granted. Many people, in fact, had parents who were “Germans” but decided later in life to become “Czechs,” or even “switched” nationalities according to situation. Censuses provoked marches, public campaigns, and chest-beating intended to convince people of indeterminate nationality to claim the “correct” nationality. “Czechness” was something created thanks to an all-encompassing—sometimes ugly, sometimes beautiful—national project that energized hundreds of thousands Habsburg citizens. To be “Czech” meant acting Czech within civil

¹¹ On České Budějovice and Olomouc, Jeremy King, Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948 (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 132; and Bruce M. Garver, “A Comparison of Czech Politics in Bohemia with Czech Politics in Moravia, 1860-1914,” in M.B.B. Biskupski, ed., Ideology, Politics, and Diplomacy in East Central Europe (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 12. On Prague, see Gary Cohen, The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861-1914 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Sayer, The Coasts, 102.

and political society. Chauvinism was rife, but so were genuine attempts to work for the interest of the “national” good.

Jump now to 2005. Few Germans remain, and the Czech Republic is almost entirely inhabited by Czechs. Ever since the federalization of Czechoslovakia in 1968 a person’s identity card has included his or her nationality. Now, under the Czech Republic, to be Czech, in many ways, means to be a Czech citizen. Czechness, once something acted out in public, is today a legal category. It is still a label with cultural, regional, and historical overtones, but, unlike before, it is taken for granted. Or, as Vladimír Macura wrote, it is tacit, something that is only discussed during times of crisis, not something, as before, that involved a choice participate in the national project.¹² No longer is there a choice among nationalities. Being Czech means voting for a party that claims to have the “national interest” in mind, but non-Czech parties but few non-Czech parties that do exist are miniscule and are not well-known to the general public. Czechness does not require any sort of struggle, let alone active involvement. Being Czech is now intricately bound up with the omnipresent culture of consumption. In these ways, Czechs are typically European. As Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny write, “We are ‘national’ when we vote, watch the six o’clock news, follow the national sport, observe (while barely noticing) the repeated iconographies of landscape and history in TV commercials, imbibe the visual archive of references and citation in the movies, and define the nation day by day in our politics.”¹³

¹² Vladimír Macura, “Tak vlast si tvoří,” *Masarykovy boty a jiné semi(o)fejetony* (Prague: Pražská imaginace, 1993): 11-13.

¹³ Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, “Introduction: From the Moment of Social History to the Work of Cultural Representation,” in idem eds., *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 29.

Traces of the past do remain, however. Other traces of the past might be reworked for the present. Although we tend to remember the humanistic values associated with Czech nationalism, there is also a disturbing strain in Czech nationalist discourse that, especially in the 1870s and 1880s and then again under the right-wing Second Republic, was characterized by myopia, chauvinism, and a Manichean world view.¹⁴ At its worst, being Czech in the twenty-first century means demeaning others, like the Roma, or continuing in the long tradition of hating the Germans. Close-minded Czech nationalism survives, and, as before, its public proponents distort the region's history for political gain today. "I am convinced that today's ideology of multiculturalism, which is an anti-liberal ideology, is highly collectivist and group-minded, [and] is immensely wrong," President Václav Klaus declared shortly after the London bombings. "It is a tragic mistake [committed by] contemporary Western civilization, it was brought in from the outside and we are paying the price."¹⁵ As many political scientists and demographers have predicted, the Bohemian crownlands will inevitably become more ethnically diverse. European Union integration will mean loosened borders with the West. An aging population, and shrinking workforce, will require that more laborers enter from the East, South-east, and elsewhere. Those who want to preserve Czechness must confront globalization and an emerging European identity. They must confront the reality of difference.

¹⁴ Jan Rataj, O autoritativního národní stát. Ideologické proměny české politiky v druhé republice 1938-1939 (Prague: Karolinum, 1997), 93-96

¹⁵ Petr Šimůnek and Robert Časenský, "Klaus: Paroubek ukazuje, že myslí jen na sebe a ne na stát," Mladá fronta dnes, 16 July 2005, p. 6.

"Jsem přesvědčen že obecná ideologie multikulturalismu, která je antiliberální ideologií, je navýsost kolektivistická a skupinová, je hluboce mylná," President Václav Klaus declared shortly after the bombings in London. "Je tragickým omylem současné západní civilizace, byla sem vnesena zvnějšku a všichni na ni doplácíme."

In this new era the best—and oft-forgotten—elements of Czech nationalism might be called upon again: political activism and a vibrant associational life. Rather than being seen as a society of distinct, homogenous, and contained national units, multiculturalism might be seen as a give-and-take among individuals acting nationally in the public sphere. This time, however, the give-and-take might aim to preserve a sense of Czechness while working toward the common, supranational good. Hoffman's imagined multicultural past never truly existed. But it might be something toward which Czechs, and Europeans, can strive.