

Foreword

The Czechs are not one of Europe's unknown nations, but in spite of their central position on the continent, they are hardly among the most familiar European nations. This work will help remedy that situation. Twentieth-century events only brought Czechoslovakia to public attention episodically, if dramatically, from Tomáš G. Masaryk's visit to the United States in 1918 to Václav Havel's apotheosis at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York in 1990. On a grimmer note, the Munich Conference of 1938 paved the way for World War II, and Jan Masaryk's death in 1948 marked a new nadir in the chill of the Cold War in Europe. The Prague Spring of 1968 made Czechoslovakia and its peoples front-page news once more, for a time, and by 1988 coverage of the tottering communist system returned Czechoslovakia to the newspapers and television screens. Now, as the Czech Republic joins the European Union and thousands of American tourists flock to Prague, a reader interested in getting beyond the headlines and tourist destinations to learn more about this people and their land would do well to pick up this book.

The author follows the historical development of the Czechs and their lands from the emergence of a Bohemian duchy under the Slavic

Přemyslid dynasty in the ninth century to the threshold of the European Union in the twenty-first. The volume traces the shifting fortunes of the Czechs and the lands of the Bohemian crown, from periods of power and prestige such as the age of Charles IV in the fourteenth century, to tumultuous episodes like the Hussite Reformation and ensuing wars of the fifteenth century or the Bohemian Rebellion and Thirty Years' War of the seventeenth century. Further chapters cover the Czechs and the lands of the Bohemian crown as part of the Habsburg empire until its collapse at the end of World War I. The second half of the book focuses on twentieth-century Czechoslovakia, from its birth out of the war, through its destruction by Nazi Germany and postwar reconstitution, to its subsequent submergence within the Soviet bloc. The concluding chapters provide one of the first analyses by a historian of the fate of post-communist Czechoslovakia, the "Velvet Divorce" that led to the breakup of the Czechoslovak Federative Republic (ČSFR), and the first decade of the existence of the Czech Republic. The author's close engagement with Czechoslovakia and Czech history for a quarter-century has given him the linguistic tools and the historiographical knowledge to produce a survey that is both scholarly and readable.

A central theme in this work is the connection between history and identity or self-image. The author shows how the way the Czechs interpret their past is closely tied with their present perceptions of and arguments over who they are and where they belong on the map, both literally and figuratively. History is not simply a record of the past; it also matters for how it is interpreted in the present and what "lessons" can (or cannot) be drawn from it in the future. Are the Czechs a small, weak nation, doomed to be dominated by more powerful (usually German) neighbors? Or has their physical smallness been compensated for by intellectual or moral greatness, as possessors of a history that made them the heralds of universal values, be it the Hussite vision of Christianity or Masaryk's ideal of Humanity? Are they an integral part of a European civilization transmitted to them from Latin and Germanic sources, or do they, as the westernmost outlier of the far-flung Slavs, represent a different, younger, better alternative to "Europe"? Variations on these themes of identity and history have been played by many different political forces among the Czechs and their neighbors over the centuries. As they enter the European Union the Czechs will most likely continue to draw from their storehouse of historical images and themes to assert and argue over their proper place in the new Europe.

A broader theme that emerges from this book is the impact of modern nationalism and the idea of the nation-state on a part of Europe ill suited by history, geography, and linguistic variety for the realization of that idea. For much of their history the Czechs have not only formed part of larger political units such as the Habsburg empire, they have also shared their lands with others, be they Latins, Germans, Jews, or, in twentieth-century Czechoslovakia, also Slovaks, Poles, Ukrainians/Ruthenians, and Roma (Gypsies). Yet the course of roughly the last two centuries has seen both the destruction of the larger, multinational political units to which the lands of the Bohemian crown belonged, and the ethnic variety of the Czech lands themselves. The division of the ČSFR into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in one sense completed a process of creating a (relatively) homogeneous nation-state, a process that at its ultimate stage impressed observers with its peacefulness and relative civility. But earlier stages of that process were accompanied by violence and injustice from many sides, in spite of Czechoslovakia's interwar reputation as an "island of democracy" in Central Europe. As a counterpoint to the trend toward creating the homogeneous nation-state, the period since the collapse of the Soviet bloc has seen the Czechs and their post-Soviet neighbors strive to join the institutions of a Europe that seems to have moved back toward a wider, more integrated political ideal, without completely surrendering the form of the nation-state. The Czech experience, and the consequences of the historical development that has brought them to where they are today, will continue to influence their approach to the European Union. They may also serve as instructive case-studies in the interactions between processes of integration and differentiation in contemporary Europe.

The appearance of this book is a welcome event. The author's training and experience have left him with a deep affection for the people and land he studies, without compromising his critical distance as a historian. His work should be accessible to anyone interested in the fascinating history of this nation at the "heart of Europe," and would also serve well as a textbook in courses on Central and Eastern Europe, or on nations and national identity.

Wayne S. Vucinich