

Rebirth of Bohemian Rhapsody

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in: The Higher (The Times Higher Education Supplement), 1992, č. 1021, str. 15,19 (29. 5.)

◆ článek, anglicky, vznik: 1992

◆ article, English, origin: 1992

Rebirth of Bohemian rhapsody [1992]

Introducing a special issue on Czechoslovakia, Ladislav Hejdanek looks at how the country is emerging from centuries of strife

The Slavs first lived in the present territory of Czechoslovakia and its surroundings in about the sixth century, and, by the end of the first quarter of the next century, there existed, due to the politically shrewd merchant Samo, an extensive empire called Greater Moravia. This was the first time that the Czechs, Moravians and Slovaks were united in a single state. After the dissolution of this empire, came 13 centuries of separate political development of Bohemia and Moravia on one side and Slovakia on the other.

Although both cultural and personal contacts continued, the close political co-operation of the 7th century which lasted about 35 years, was only renewed at the end of 1918. This then lasted two decades, was interrupted for the duration of the Second World War, was revived in 1945 and suffered 40 years of the communist regime, only to be shaken by the efforts of some political forces in Slovakia that are currently trying to create a wholly independent state not connected with its Czech and Moravian neighbours even in some sort of loose federation.

In 845 in Regensburg (Rejno) 14 Czech dukes were baptised. This may have taken place for political reasons and any influence on the local population was minimal. The ordinary population remained pagan. Only the coming of Konstantin and Method who were invited to come to Moravia in 863 caused a more general spread of Christianity among the people. In the Czech lands, which were at that time not yet united, it seems that Christianity spread more slowly. Here the significant spread of Christianity only happened towards the end of the first millennium.

However, three centuries later, it is clear that this new way of thinking based on Christian teaching had fallen on fertile ground especially in Bohemia and Prague. After the founding of the university in 1348 many remarkable spiritual movements flourished. By then this was no longer the result only of influences coming from the more advanced parts of Europe, but also of home-grown and independent thoughts and tendencies.

These bore clear signs of originality and individuality. Only after the passing of many centuries did it emerge how important for the future development of thought was the understanding by the Czech reformation of non-Greek, ie Hebrew traditions. The strengthening of the unity and integrity of the lands ruled over by the Czech crown by the emperor Charles IV who was born of a Czech mother and became a Czech king was also significant.

The reformation movement started at the beginning of the 15th century by a number of prominent personalities had a profound influence on ideological, moral and spiritual developments. A special place must be given to Jan Hus, who was greatly influenced by John Wycliffe. This early reformation period, the so called First Reformation (ie before Luther and Calvin) aimed at reforms not only of the church but of society and aimed at political harmony; it contained many important prodemocratic ideas. However, the Czech reformation was not allowed a smooth development and had to survive the next 200 years of petty and major wars.

Moral and spiritual reforms do not thrive during a war and even victories can lead to demoralisation. From a strictly Christian viewpoint even the Hussite majority appeared unacceptable, and so many small separatist movements sprang up. These often imposed ever stricter codes of morals on themselves and eventually got into conflicts with the established church. One such group, the "Jednota Bratrska" (Union of Brothers) should be mentioned in particular. This, after an initial period of narrow-mindedness developed despite its small size into a major influential force in the cultural and ideological life of the nation.

The 30 years' war dealt a severe blow to this exciting period of Czech history. After 200 years of continuous and devastating struggle both with an outside enemy of much greater power and with an enemy within, the population grew tired; the countryside was devastated and there was no further

will to fight. Thus a seemingly small defeat (the battle of the White Mountain near Prague) had far more catastrophic consequences than could have been expected. The hasty departure of the king, Friedrich of the Palatinate, increased the rising panic. The subsequent cruel vengeance of the victors forced the upper classes into emigration. The nation thus lost both its aristocracy (mainly protestant), and its intellectuals (also protestant).

Thus the Czech nation was reduced to its basic population of serfs. Only in the countryside did the Czech language survive although in a very reduced and unsophisticated form. The German language became the norm in towns, and Latin in schools and official life. The increase in general educational level that was noticeable throughout Europe since the Renaissance, left no positive traces in the Czech language. It only contaminated it with more and more German. The subsequent Enlightenment relieved some terrible restrictions (forced labour and later serfdom) while at the same time it caused a wave of political centralisation and with it Germanisation. By the middle of the 18th century the Czech language was dying.

In opposition to these germanic tendencies and under the influence of the ideas of Herder, Czech intellectuals of the late 18th century became engaged in a powerful struggle for national reawakening, in fact a rebirth. The movement took two forms. First it concerned itself with revitalisation and modernisation of the language. The basis of the language was taken from medieval Czech, and so not only did old and forgotten phrases and expressions find their way back into the language but in the process, Czech itself (at this point not yet grammatically different from Slovak) was "cleaned up" and thus became the purest of the Slav languages.

In the spirit of this new clean language, extensive specialist terminologies were created, for example chemical nomenclature and the wealth of botanical names that are among the most beautiful in the world. All this had a tremendous influence on the language of philosophy which, like some types of poetry, must originate from language rather than just use language as an instrument.

The second tendency that came out of the process of national rebirth is more problematic because it is connected with the rise and spread of nationalism in central and eastern Europe. Alongside growing national pride based on Czech enterprise which had to compete with German enterprise and which made Bohemia into the most industrial part of the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire, there sounded empty echoes of nationalism that was taking attention away from real issues. Antinationalist tendencies followed quickly. All these trends were very important at a time when the Czech nation started awakening politically and started feeling more confident about itself.

Czech nationalism, in keeping with the ideas of Herder, was based on the ideology of panSlavism, which was created as a weapon against pan-Germanism. The most prominent representatives of the Czech point of view rejected both narrow Czech nationalism and wider concepts of pan-Slavism. An excellent and highly effective formula was found by Masaryk who repeatedly claimed that the question of a new orientation of national feelings cannot be understood only as a national question but as a worldwide problem. Otherwise one must doubt the existence of the question as such. Masaryk understood that the question of nationalism has to be formulated in such a way that it is acceptable by anybody anywhere, ie that it does not exclude other nations. This would of course deal with the real problem of nationalism and not just blunt but remove its sting.

These ideas, although present, were not really influential either at the start of the new political system that came about as a result of the First World War or even after the founding of the new republic due to the collapse of the AustroHungarian empire. There is no doubt that Czechoslovakia between the wars was the most democratic state in central and eastern Europe. It represented an important point of democratic strength in that region. At the same time we cannot but be aware of serious failings that later resulted in the internal disintegration not only of language and national structure, but also of religious and social orders.

The multinational country had a good chance (despite foreseeable losses) to defend itself against Nazi aggression but it did not manage to win internal unity. That was used as one of the excuses in Munich when the western powers gave in to German threats and left this small but democratic and well armed state to its fate. Bohemia and Moravia first lost their border areas with their German population, and a few months later became occupied in what became known as a protectorate. Slovakia broke off, established itself as an independent fascist state and thus survived the war in relative tranquility. The post-war Czechoslovakia became a very different state from the one before the war. The far eastern parts, Ruthenia, were annexed into the Ukraine. With the support of all the Western powers almost all of the German population was repatriated to Germany and at the same time Czechoslovakia lost its tender democratic foundations and joined the rest of the East European states that fell under the influence of the Soviet Union.

The war impoverished Czechoslovakia not only materially and financially but also spiritually and morally. However even that pales into insignificance when compared with the catastrophic decline of the whole society under the communist rule. An industrial country which was economically and technically advanced became backward and unable to compete on world markets. The effect on the cultural, ideological and moral life of the country was even worse. Almost half a century of decline will need a long period of restoration to repair the society that finds facing new and unexpected conflicts. The standards of teaching at schools also declined and time will be needed to remedy this.

Unfortunately this is not perceived as a priority and consequently a lot of valuable time is being lost. The schools are at the moment unable to contribute to moral improvements as there is a shortage of suitable teachers. Neither the staff nor the syllabus of the universities have seen many changes so far. There is plenty of goodwill in politics but we are witnessing a complete lack of professionalism resulting in surprising inability to face the demagogic tendencies that seem to gain prominence much too easily.

In Czech and Moravian intellectual circles the European connection seems more important than the narrow problems of nationalism. In this they differ from their Slovak counterparts which are now experiencing an increase in nationalism. The future of a united Czecho-Slovak state seems today to be very uncertain. If Czechoslovakia were to break up this would probably not be accompanied by the sort of conflict we are witnessing at this point in Yugoslavia. But it would deal a hard blow to the two young states, and could have a catastrophic effect in Slovakia. The real future lies in the political and cultural unity of Europe where there is hope for small nations which seem to be continuously threatened by their large neighbours. While it seems that the west European situation is quite stable, that in central Europe is not. This part of Europe is moreover threatened by serious developments in the East and South east.

This tense situation which is full of old and new conflicts leads one to feel that the future of Europe cannot be founded on the distribution of power or on some new arrangement of the political map which would be based on ethnic divisions. This could not be carried out without large amounts of injustice. As there was (or in some cases hopefully will be) a separation of the State and the Church, there also ought to be a separation of ethnic, national, cultural and language traditions from political arrangements in Europe. Diverse types of political systems and diverse loyalties must learn to live alongside each other. They should not demand political privileges that impinge on the rights of others whether individuals or minorities. It seems that at the moment these sentiments are not appreciated either in Eastern or in Western Europe.

This could be a result of the general trend of Western Europe towards economic and technical integration with very little attention being paid to issues of traditions, ideology, morality and spiritual development. This is probably a difficult concept for western Europeans. However the experiences of the past five or in some cases seven decades have made eastern and central Europeans more aware of problems that the West does not seem to take seriously. It is not going to be enough to base European renewal on purely economic co-operation. And so it is here where the small Central and

Eastern European nations can contribute by pointing out motives that could open new perspectives for Europe of the future. It might be wise to pay attention to these ideas not only by the Europeans but also by states outside Europe. There are such ideas in Czech spiritual thoughts and traditions which are more than just interesting. These could be of importance in the long term.

One of these ideas is the old Jewish concept of truth which was already taken up by the First Reformation and which was interpreted in such a frightening (Jan Patočka) way in this century. This is being mentioned only to demonstrate that the Czech and Slovak cultural and spiritual past and present can be used as a valuable source from which the Europe of the future can draw as if this were her own forgotten source.

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Translation by Anna Fraser.