
Around 1900 a debate on the spiritual roots of a process that had started in the late eighteenth century and is generally described as the awakening of a modern Czech national consciousness was causing waves in Prague, and not only among scholars, but also in political circles. Two figures confronted each other: on the one side Tomáš G. Masaryk, sociologist, philosopher, and politician, born in 1850 and a Hussite Protestant; on the other the highly ambitious historian Josef Pekař, twenty years younger than Masaryk and a professing Catholic. To simplify, in this controversy Masaryk assumed that there had been a transfer of ideas from the period of the Bohemian Reformation to the nineteenth century, a process that had been interrupted but not stopped by the counter-Reformation during the Baroque period. In Masaryk’s view, the Catholic phase was merely an episode and had no real impact whatsoever. Pekař, by contrast, was interested in integrating and revaluing the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in which he discerned the spiritual and political origins of the later national awakening. The dispute about the ‘meaning of Czech history’ occupied large sections of the intellectual public for generations, and the same could be said of the quarrel about the periodization of their history, which gained a new dimension in 1918 with the establishment of a common state for Czechs and Slovaks. The master narratives relating to the whole state adopted a division into periods oriented by the year 1620 which followed Bohemian developments. Czech national historiography logically subdivides the modern history of Bohemia and Moravia into two major periods: the brilliant era before the Battle of the White Mountain (doba předbělohorská), when the Kingdom of Bohemia is seen as a model of status group and aristocratic representation which achieved religious freedom for Protestants; and the time of the Temno, the dark period after 1620 (doba pobělohorská) associated with absolutism, a change of elites, and counter-Reformation.
The period of the Bohemian Baroque, long neglected in the research, has held a special interest and fascination for historians since the reorganization of Czech historiography after 1989–90. This applies to research on religious and cultural history as much as to investigations of the aristocracy and the political system. Also new is the interest in neighbouring regions, as are attempts to approach them comparatively. Not what separates but what connects, it seems, is now the main object of interest and investigation. As always in historical research, arguments, concepts, and methodologies from an outside perspective are stimulating. This research does not have to concern itself with the ramifications of an intricate and complicated national history and, as a rule, is not suspected of having its own agenda of legitimating or conferring meaning on the present. In addition to the advantages of this sort of outside perspective, of course, there are also many dangers inherent in maintaining a spatial and personal distance to the subject of investigation. Where, for example, are the boundaries of a space to be drawn if one is not looking at classical entities defined by national, regional, or local history? What chronological framework and what turning points does one select for investigation? And how representative is the individual case, or the person or group of people selected, if one aims to generalize from it? The two books under review here offer good examples of the benefits and dangers of taking a view from outside in this way.

Howard Louthan, Associate Professor in the History Department of the University of Florida, has spent many years studying the comparative religious and cultural history of central and eastern central Europe in the late medieval and early modern periods. His special ability to relate different types of sources to each other, especially textual and visual ones, and productively to integrate the findings of research on art, literature, and cultural history also characterizes his most recent monograph on a period of Bohemian history that the term ‘re-Catholicization’ is much too sober and factual to describe. It looks at the century after the infamous 1620 Battle of the White Mountain in Prague when, within a few generations, a whole territory underwent an almost wholesale change of confession. In Louthan’s view, violence and force, the main factors mentioned in the existing historiography when accounting for this radical change, were less important than negotiating skill and the power of persuasion. In Louthan’s account the scene is populated not by politicians,
generals, and strategists, but by painters and preachers, missionaries and musicians, scholars and architects. Everyday Catholic life and faith of an astonishingly colourful, rich, and charming diversity awaits the reader in the century between the moving of the relics of Saint Norbert from Magdeburg to the Premonstratensian Abbey of Strahov in Prague in 1627 and the canonization of John of Nepomuk in 1729.

Louthan is extremely well versed in both the older and the newer research literature. One could have wished, however, for a more precise and better documented account of how the specific Catholicism found in Bohemia fitted into the wider European context. And an important work such as Peter Hersche’s two-volume study *Muße und Verschwendung* (2006) about European society and culture in the age of the Baroque should unquestionably have been evaluated, not just the earlier work of the now retired Berne historian on the intentional backwardness of Catholic communities. On the whole, however, Louthan provides a stimulating and balanced overview which is an exciting read and clearly expands our knowledge of how Bohemia grew into the system of the Habsburg monarchy.

While Louthan’s study investigates individual aspects of confessional identity, Rita Krueger, Assistant Professor of History at Temple University, raises the question of the national identity of Habsburg Bohemia in her dissertation, also published in 2009. The title is rather vague and does not clearly specify a timeframe but, despite numerous digressions into earlier eras, the main focus is on what is known as the period of national rebirth, that is, from the late eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century. Krueger’s book is much more politically oriented than Louthan’s, and must therefore confront problems arising out of the specific order of the (early) modern Habsburg Monarchy, a composite state with a variety of overlapping traditions, loyalties, and feelings of belonging which partly reinforced each other, but could also work against each other, and cannot be reduced to a simple formula. In retrospect, this was a highly durable polity, although until well into the modern period it was more a monarchical association than a fully formed state.

Krueger’s book centres on the cultural role of the nobility in Bohemia, its behaviour within and towards the Monarchy, and the development and objectives of its patriotic intentions, actions, and discourses. It looks at the problems, already widely debated by con-
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temporaries, of backwardness and progress, loyalty and resistance, and national formation and cultural and social self-confidence. But who is ‘the nobility’ in Bohemia? That this social group is, in practice, restricted to the high aristocracy, while the lower aristocracy hardly rates a mention, is the least of the problems. The fact that the book largely concentrates on one family within the high aristocracy, the Sternbergs, and at most draws on other aristocrats with similarly progressive views, is much more problematic. However informative many of the detailed threads of the narrative and the individual analyses are, the whole context is not totally convincing. To take just one example, too much is known and too much has been published in recent years on the activities of the aristocracy in the area of culture, architecture, gardening, and many other fields for this account to be satisfying. Whether, and to what extent, this (Czech-language) research is not only cited, but has really been digested is questionable, at least in individual but highly prominent instances. The book’s greatest weakness, however, is its lack of conceptual precision. The main concepts are vague, and methodologically the reader can never be sure whether or not the terms used are backed by far-reaching theoretical considerations.

It is a great pleasure to note that both books carefully select, analyse, and discuss large numbers of archival sources, printed source editions, and secondary literature in Slavic languages. The time when it was possible to write the history of eastern central Europe without having command of the languages is definitely past. One difficulty and weakness of both accounts, however, is their concentration on Bohemia, here understood as the core of the Bohemian lands, while regional subsystems are largely ignored. Even the big Catholic reform which, in many respects, was generally uniform, displayed completely different features in Moravia and Bohemia, not to mention the other Crown lands. And similar specificities will certainly also be found in the development of the aristocracy and the aristocratic identity. This is not to defend legal and constitutional history, but it reminds us that all the individual processes of formation which are discussed in both books occurred within a specific framework which will have to be taken into account by other historical subdisciplines.
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