

CZECHOSLOVAK HISTORY IN GREAT BRITAIN

By Harry Hanak

When in September 1990 former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher addressed the Federal Assembly of the Czech and Slovak Republic, she apologised, so to speak, for British actions at Munich in 1938. She then went on to say that British policy towards Beneš and the Czechoslovaks had changed the moment war broke out. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, one of the reasons for Beneš's pro-Soviet policy line was caused by the tardiness of the British in granting his government full recognition. It was in fact delayed until after the German attack on the Soviet Union. No blame attaches to Thatcher, but much to those who gave her historical advice and wrote her speech.

But historical curiosities like this are not confined to the British. On 25 October Premier Marian Čalfa told *La Tribune de l'Expansion*, that he favoured a Volkswagen rather than a combined Renault-Volvo investment in Škoda on the ground, among others, "that the Germans are our neighbours." As a statement on geography it cannot be faulted. As a statement on economic planning, there is perhaps much to be said for it. As a statement of political intent it may signalise the willing, and even enthusiastic, acceptance of German political influence rather than the influence of other European forces, not least those of the European Community. As a historical statement, however, it must have made the founders of Czechoslovakia of 1918 and the refounders of 1945 turn in their graves.

The third name I would like to introduce here is that of Professor Hugh Seton-Watson. First of all to regret his untimely death five years before the events which transformed the political configuration of the whole of central and eastern Europe. In a lecture that he gave in 1983 "On Trying to be a Historian of Eastern Europe" Hugh identified himself with that generation which experienced the Second World War and then the decolonisation process. These experiences convinced him that "the end of Austria-Hungary seems rather the first act in another process: the disintegration of multinational European empires, of which today only one still remains." Had he lived longer he might have witnessed, as we do, the beginnings of that process of disintegration. He would also have seen that "zlatá Praha" whose beauties, so he complained in 1983, he had not beheld for 36 years¹.

My intention here is not to proclaim my academic piety to Hugh or to familiarise you with his 1983 lecture. It is rather to draw your attention to the view, which he propagated, that there was a fundamental difference between "native" and "foreign"

¹ Hugh Seton-Watson's essay is in D. Deletant and H. Hanak (eds.): *Historians as Nation Builders*. London 1988.

historians. By native must not be taken to mean only those born in the country whose history they study. There are those immigrants, whose perfectly valid desire for identification with those among whom they live, turns them into "native" historians. And foreign, in this sense, does not necessarily mean one born outside Great Britain. The native historians are those who study the history of the country they live in. In England their maximum strength is to be found in the study of the Tudor and Stuart periods, and it is worthy of note that one of these superb historians was born in Austria. In contrast to them the foreign historians cannot hope to produce such studies in depth and in detail. Hugh made the distinction here, made familiar by Sir Isaiah Berlin, quoting the Greek poet Archilochus: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing."² The Tudor-Stuart élite are hedgehogs and proud of it, while the foreign historians are foxes. I need not weary the reader with the reasons for this difference. Questions of time, questions of travel, questions of money have much to do with it. Above all the foreign historian must acquire an intellectual identification with the country he studies, which is a lengthy process and one which does not always succeed. Moreover the English historian of the Czech and Slovak lands, or of any other lands has to divest himself of an Anglocentrism. No wonder that the Tudor-Stuart hedgehogs tend to accuse the foreign historians of dilettantism and journalism. There is much in this. The intelligent journalistic outpourings in Britain about Czechoslovakia in the last year are impressive. The historical enquiry less so. It also is surprising that the 1990 conference to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the University of London, should not in its programme mention its first lecturer, T. G. Masaryk, nor his inaugural lecture on 19 October 1915, "The Problem of the Small Nations in the European Crisis." I am sure he will forgive his old university as the subject of the conference "Towards a New Community. Culture and Politics in Post-Totalitarian Society" has, after all, a Masarykian ring to it.

There are two groups of historians that Hugh did not mention. One of them, in any case, refers only to the Czech Lands. They are the German historians originating from the Czech and Slovak Lands. The second group are the émigré historians. Let me deal with the émigrés first. By émigré I do not mean only those who have left the Czech Lands and Slovakia for political or economic reasons. I also include in this group those who by descent and even by marriage have evolved a personal interest in their origins or in the origins of their spouses. I shall make a very risky judgement here. The socially and psychologically well-adjusted British historian may do research in British history or Empire themes connected with it. One not so well adjusted may become a foreign historian and may thus acquire a foreign wife. Obviously the largest number of these foreign historians are to be found in the United States, though given the immigrant origins of American society, my idiosyncratic views do not apply to them. I think, in any case, that American culture is such, and American historical research is of such a standard, that they are well placed to study and write the history of the Czech and Slovak Lands. But then I do not write here of American historians. Nevertheless, in drawing the boundaries of émigré historians so wide, distinctions

² Berlin, Isaiah: *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. In: *Ders.: Russian Thinkers*. London 1978, 22–82.

must be made. The second or third generation of historians may treat historical subjects differently. In the case of first generation of émigrés differences must be made between the waves of 1939, 1948, and 1968. The last wave being nearest to the events of a generation ago, and seeing these ideals realised now seems the most relevant. Yet most of their work, I think, deals with the recent history of Czechoslovakia. It is an attempt to explain the whys and hows of Czechoslovak communism. The hedgehog Tudor-Stuart group would say that their personal involvement with the events they try to explain robs them of the intellectual insight which distance and time gives.

I can also not speak for those whom for lack of a better word I describe as "German" historians. The Collegium Carolinum has been outstanding in its work in the history of the Czech and Slovak Lands and also in providing a harbour for historians exiled from Czechoslovakia. I am delighted to see that Czechoslovak historians have now recognised their great services³. I would like to say something about this group. I welcome the reconciliation, perhaps I should say, the moral reconciliation, between Czechs and Germans, based as it must be on the recognition that a crime had been committed by Germans in 1938 to 1945 and by Czechs in 1945 to 1946. I quote the war time Czechoslovak Minister of Defence, General Ingr on the BBC on 3 November 1944:

Až přijde náš den, bude celý národ následovat starý válečný pokřik husitů: Bijte je, zabte je, nikoho nenechávejte na živu! Každý by se měl už teď poohlédnout po vhodné zbraně, která trefí Němce nejméně. Kdo nemá po ruce žádnou střelnou zbraň, ať si opatří jakoukoli jinou a uchová ji ...⁴

One cannot read these words without a feeling of shame. Yet, let me admit, that if I had heard these words, living as a teenager in London in November 1944, I would not have disagreed. Let me also tell you that it was the unanimous view of the staff of the British embassy in Prague after liberation that the transfer – an innocuous word like the phrase final solution – was something which was necessary to preserve a viable Czechoslovakia and to safeguard the peace in Europe. However, to come to the present. It seems to me that the German historians, among the foreign historians, have the insight and the opportunities to write Czech and Slovak history. They have the intellectual connection, the geographic nearness which Čalfa mentioned, or which Professor Ferdinand Seibt made the theme of his 1974 book, *Deutschland und die Tschechen. Geschichte einer Nachbarschaft in der Mitte Europas*. They also have the linguistic knowledge. They have the sympathy. They are the ones who, at a time when it was not always possible or easy to do so in Czechoslovakia, have maintained the high standards of Czechoslovak history.

Can British historians play a prominent part in the post-November 1989 Czech and Slovak historical writing? British historical writing as far as it concentrated on non-British and non-Empire subjects has been heavily concentrated on American history and on France. The special relationship between Britain and the United States is not

³ Historický ústav ČSAV. Collegio Carolino ad Honorem. Praha 1990.

⁴ Quoted in Proglas 1 (1990) 69: "When our day dawns, the whole nation will heed the war cry of the Hussites: Beat them, kill them, don't leave anyone alive! Everyone should already now look around for a suitable weapon which will be most useful to hit the Germans. He who has not got a firearm to hand, let him equip himself with any other weapon and keep it ready..."

merely the consequence of the reaction of a declining world power to an unfavourable international environment, but accords well with the cultural and historical interests of the British people. In the case of France, the nearness of the French neighbour or foe, the intermingling of English and French history over 900 years, and the fact that English children do learn French at school made this inevitable. There are, of course, British historians of Germany, but there are not many of them. I believe that I am right in saying that there is not a single chair of German history at any British university. On the other hand the former Masaryk Professor of Central European History, F. L. Carsten, easily filled this gap. Nor should the work of the German Historical Institute in London, with its history seminar, be overlooked. The interests of Russian history are competently maintained by a small number of historians. Inevitably the history of the Soviet Union evokes great interest among academics and students. In addition there is a strong and numerous body of political scientists, students of international relations, who write on the USSR. Yet their number and influence is smaller than that of American Sovietologists. Of the smaller East European nations the interests of Polish history and politics are adequately served. The same cannot be said of the rest of eastern Europe. The historians of Czechoslovakia include Robert Evans, Zbyněk Zeman, Mark Cornwall (Oxford), William Wallace (Glasgow), Trevor Thomas (London), Gordon Wightman (Liverpool), J. F. N. Bradley (formerly of Manchester), Martin Myant, Alice Teichová (Cambridge), and a few others. There are political scientists like Alexander Pravda, Vladimír Kusín, Archie Brown, Judy Batt, and Jaroslav Krejčí. Krejčí has in fact recently written a history, *Czechoslovakia at the Crossroads of European History* (1990). J. W. Bruegel died in 1986, a veritable giant of exile Czechoslovak historiography. The infinitely good Elizabeth Wiskemann, whose study of *Czechs and Germans* entitles her to a top ranking place in British studies of Czechoslovakia, died in 1975. One should also in this context mention those outstanding scholars of Czech and Slovak literature and also of language Robert Pynsent, David Short, James Naughton, and Karel Brušák⁵.

The reader may well ask after the Masaryk chair at the University of London. What has happened to it? From 1922 to 1945 the chair in Central European History, financed by the Czechoslovak government, was held by R. W. Seton-Watson, the author of the most important English history of the Czechs and Slovaks to be written between the two wars. He was succeeded by the medievalist R. R. Betts, whose untimely death deprived Czech history in Britain of its most outstanding scholar. His successor, F. L. Carsten, is equally if not more outstanding but Czechoslovak history is not his field. When Carsten retired, financial exigencies prevented the appointment of a new professor. For many years SSEES had a historian of Czechoslovakia. When he retired in 1989 his post was advertised as covering central European history. In the event a scholar of Hungarian history was appointed. All this in the School whose original aim was to act as a centre of study of "Le monde Slave".

It is also interesting to look at some leading British historical journals and see what has appeared on Czechoslovak history. In the last ten years, unless I have missed

⁵ If I have missed anyone, my apologies.

something, *The Slavonic and East European Review* only carried one article on Czechoslovak history: "Nineteenth Century Bohemia in Contemporary Czechoslovak Historiography: Changing Views." The author is Alfredo Laudiero – an Italian scholar from the University of Naples. The only other recent article I could find was in *The Journal of Contemporary History*, by Kastriel Ben-Arie, an Israeli scholar, on "Czechoslovakia at the Time of 'Munich': The Military Situation."⁶ The subject of Munich and of British appeasement has naturally enough never ceased to occupy British historians and political scientists and indeed the political establishment. It is no exaggeration to say that much of British policy, and American too, has been conditioned by the reaction to the Munich settlement. There has, in fact, been a recent publication to add to those on Munich, *The Eleventh Hour* (1988) by the journalist Robert Kee.

Can anything be done to revive the study of Czechoslovak history? The revolutions of 1989 have created a fresh interest in the affairs of central and eastern Europe. The long series of television programmes on Czechoslovakia early in 1990 are evidence of this. They may even have impressed upon some Englishmen that there are Slovaks and not only Czechs and that the language that they speak is not "Czechoslovakian." Pynsent, Short, and Naughton can teach Czech and Slovak and literature better than anyone I know. Inevitably the number of "takers" will remain small. There is more hope with the study of politics. The study of comparative communist systems has a strong following both among academics and among students. In this context I regard the English translation of Zdeněk Mlynář's book and the numerous books on Czechoslovak communist politics by Karel Kaplan and also Galia Golan and Vladimír Kušín as particularly important in awakening an interest in Czech and Slovak history. Now, I think it is possible to gain a superficial knowledge of the politics of a country without a knowledge of its history. Without it you have journalism. But eventually the experts in politics require a knowledge of history. Here lies perhaps the hope of Czechoslovak history in Britain.

A further possibility exists in the writing of Czechoslovak history at points where it meets general European history. Clearly Munich is such an example but there are many others. It would be useful if our Czechoslovak colleagues would encourage foreign scholars to seek such opportunities in Czechoslovak archives. It is our responsibility to encourage our students to take an advantage of these opportunities. Of course, the primary requirement is linguistic.

Perhaps my pessimism is not justified. The Czech language has provided English with at least one word: robot. Czech history at least one political concept. In October 1990 *The Financial Times* spoke of the former Prime Minister's "defenestration" of her ministers.

⁶ *Journal of Contemporary History* 25 (1990) 431–446.