

Filipová, Marta: *Czechoslovakia at the World's Fairs: Behind the Façade*.

CEU Press, Budapest/New York 2024, 290 + xii pp., 66 figures, ISBN 978-963-386-766-2.

When the 1939 New York World's Fair – optimistically (or defiantly) entitled *The World of Tomorrow* – opened on 30 April, it was already outdated. Czechoslovakia had been dismembered a little more than a month earlier by expansionist Germany, but it had a national pavilion all the same. The exhibit featured extracts from a text by writer Karel Čapek describing the country as a land of contrasts, with a modern and highly industrialised west and an authentic and traditional east, and as a cross-roads of the new and the old. This suggestive geography was illustrated with a large mural in the shape of Czechoslovakia's former territory mounted above Čapek's quotation in the pavilion's main hall. It represented the inhabitants of the state in stereotypical fashion, from *Sokol* gymnasts and urban newspaper readers in the west to folk-costumed mountain dwellers in the east.

It is telling of the importance assigned to international diplomacy and trade by the Czechoslovak elites that even after the 'betrayal' of Munich, which undermined the reputation of the country's western allies among Czechs and Slovaks, the state invested in its representation at New York (as well as at the exhibition in San Francisco in the same year). Indeed, as Marta Filipová writes in her new book, Czechoslovakia was the only Habsburg successor state to take part in all major international exhibitions during the interwar period (p. 17). In this sense, Filipová argues, the Czechoslovak exhibits were successful, conveying an image of "democracy, stability, and modernity". At the same time, as Čapek's mental mapping indicates, this narrative "was built and visualised on flawed and simplified attributes which suppressed the multi-ethnic aspects of the state" (p. 258).

As such, these conclusions are not new. At least since Andrea Orzoff's now classic 2009 book on the myth created by Czechoslovak state-builders around President Masaryk and Foreign Minister Beneš, there has been a rising tide of revisionist historiography that complicates the image of interwar Czechoslovakia as a liberal island of democracy.¹ But the evidence Filipová gleans from the national pavilions – a fascinating, complex, and contradictory exhibition genre – offers an instructive global history of the country between the wars. Czechoslovakia was represented with national pavilions at the world's fairs from Rio de Janeiro in 1922 to New York and San Francisco in 1939–40. Following a survey of these events in the first chapter, Filipová delivers an analysis of Czechoslovakia's pavilions based on the spaces of the exhibits and their art and design in chapters two and three.

Devised as a means to represent national culture and industry, the goal of the national pavilions was to create a coherent narrative. This intent failed, however: Filipová shows that the exhibitions were instead highly contingent. A good example is the Czechoslovak pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris, which featured a striking steel building by Jaromír Krejcar with a terrace extending over the Seine. The modernist exterior contrasted with a positively reactionary main interior hall by Josef Gočár clad in dark, heavy wood and decorated with "anachronistic" tapestries by František Kysela (p. 117). On the one hand, this strange blend reflected conflicts between artists and on questions of artistic representation. Filipová discusses the dispute between the relatively conservative representatives of the Prague School of Decorative Arts (including Kysela) and the avant-garde. It is not surprising that avant-garde theoretician Karel Teige delivered scathing criticism of the Czechoslovak exhibitions for their alleged elitism. After myriad compromises, what was left in stylistic terms was a kind of tame modernism (p. 252).

An even more important reason for the vague narrative was the competition of a great many actors and interests within each exhibition. Different ministries wanted to foreground culture or trade, companies like Baťa wanted to advertise, and – especially at fairs in the United States – representatives of the Czech and Slovak diasporas disagreed ideologically (they were, for instance, often opposed to the state ideology of Czechoslovakism). Given that there was no central body responsible for coordinating the Czechoslovak pavilions, these contradictory interests often led to cluttered and less than coherent exhibitions. In the push and pull of demands, little remained of theoretical approaches such as Ladislav Sutnar's concept of "flow of visual information" (p. 82).

If the exhibits were not particularly clear about what Czechoslovakia was, they certainly were clear about what it was not. The exclusivity of what the pavilions represented as Czechoslovak is a central theme in the book, especially in chapter four on the role of businesses like Baťa and Detva and in chapter five on the "people of the fair". Women were strongly underrepresented outside of service roles; the few female artists on display were almost exclusively craftswomen like embroiderers rather than fine artists. Furthermore, there was a clear geographical hierarchy: Like

¹ Orzoff, Andrea: *Battle for the Castle. The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914-1948*. Oxford 2009.

in the 1939 mural, Slovakia was associated mainly with agriculture, folk art, and landscape painting. Even Detva, the most prominent Slovak company to exhibit at the fairs, was known primarily as a producer of folk crafts. Carpathian Ruthenia barely figured at all. Overall, Czechoslovakia at the world's fairs looked like a masculine Czech industrial nation-state with a Slovak rural appendix, led by its charismatic 'President-Liberator' – a bust of Masaryk was obligatory.

This exclusivity in practice grated against the state's theoretically liberal democratic ideology. In the final chapter on "race, science and ethnicity", Filipová further connects this discrepancy to the race science and eugenics that were widespread in the interwar period. These pseudo-scientific concepts, she suggests, underpinned the representation of health, hygiene, and modernity at the world's fairs. Scientists like the Bohemian-born American Aleš Hrdlička propagated a racist anthropology that differentiated between groups of people using physiological characteristics. While intriguing and in parts convincing, this chapter's focus is only partially on the world's fairs and Czechoslovakia; it thus departs substantially from the theme of the book.

Some passages of the book that deal with historical context could have been clearer. For instance, Filipová seems to suggest that Czechoslovakism was rooted entirely in pragmatic considerations (pp. 5–6), even though it was also based on serious scholarship and a significant part of the elites fervently believed in it. It is hardly accurate to say that Slovakia was "swiped under a larger entity" before 1918 (p. 153), given that its territory was an integral part of Hungary, not a province or county, since the early Middle Ages. While Filipová regularly offers comparisons to other national pavilions, these sometimes feel perfunctory and could have been more detailed.

But these are minor squabbles. *Czechoslovakia at the World's Fairs* is a welcome, richly illustrated book that demonstrates the complexity of interwar Czechoslovakia's global representation behind a glossy façade.