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# One Hundred Years of the Czech Question

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**Abstract:** The Czech question arose as a result of Masaryk's decision to create different politics and affect the thoughts of Czech people. For this purpose, he wanted to establish how the Czech nation lives culturally. He wanted to grasp the meaning of Czech history. It was an attempt to present the Czech nation as a European nation, and Masaryk wanted to contribute to the process of identification of the Czech nation with Europeanity. Masaryk's real message resides in realism as both direction and method. Part of it was the concept of a democratic state, and the struggle to realise it, on the basis of the character of the Czech people. With the first Czechoslovak Republic, the link was constituted between Czech national life, European and world democracy. The borders within the state never divided the Czech nation and other national groups, but did divide democrats and opponents of democracy. A determining factor in maintaining democracy and the basis for later efforts for its renewal was the democratic political culture. Today's expression of realism is Václav Havel's establishment of the „time of the eternal search for the truth“ in Czech-German relations. At the end of the road is the possibility of identifying both nations with the European idea.

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In order to determine whether one hundred years after its first publication, Tomáš G. Masaryk's *Česká otázka* (Czech Question) has maintained its validity as originally formulated, or whether it has lost its topicality, it is necessary to answer some related questions and analyse several problems.

## The Czech Question

What was the Czech question, both when it first arose and later? The answer to this question, as in many other cases in Czech history, is to be found at the very source, i.e. Masaryk's *Czech Question* (this, even though the creator of the stereotypical interpretation of the Czech question was the critical historian Josef Pekař),<sup>1</sup> who queried the role of the Czech question as an account of Czech history, finally to reject it. But indeed, was the Czech question really an account of Czech history? The attentive reader will not fail to note Masaryk's full attention to the reformation and its role in Czech history, nor his indications that certain parts of its history should be modified, and that the anti-reformation epoch had not yet been satisfactorily processed. The main emphasis, however, relates to the present of those days, later, and, indeed, our times. This is why the Czech question remains topical today, a topicality we shall illustrate. The outer indication of its validity is the publication of the *Czech Question* at a difficult time in Czech history, a time in which Masaryk's appeal to the rootedness of the contemporary situation in the reformation would have been insufficient.

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<sup>1</sup>) Josef Pekař (1870-1937), the important Czech historian, who strove for objective historical knowledge.

## Nation-natio

According to Masaryk himself, the work *The Czech Question* was born of his decision to „make a new, revivalist history, to affect the thinking of our people“ [Čapek, K. 1968: 94]. He wanted to „**discover (...) how, as a distinct nation, we live culturally, what we want, what we hope for.**“ (E. B.'s emphasis). He thus sought to define the meaning of Czech history [Masaryk 1969: 7]. It was an attempt to present the Czech nation as a European nation and to distance himself from the nation-people, a delineation which, in Ortega y Gasset's typology, signifies „...a society constituted by a series of traditional habits that have their origin in chance and historical changes“ [Ortega y Gasset 1993: 5]. A European nation, on the other hand, signifies a nation which „became a ,nation' (*natio*) (...) because the *particular life* of the traditional habits (...) has included life forms that – though merged with the traditional – wished to represent ,a method of being a person' in an elevated sense; meaning to precisely demonstrate a better way to be a person, and which is thus thoroughly argued and prepared for the future.“ The aim was to find the individual way in which a particular nation expresses „the unified European culture (...) experienced by every nation (...) in its own way“ [Ortega y Gasset 1993: 383]. The year of the publication of *The Czech Question* was also the period in which it became necessary to establish whether the „village people, labourers, craftsmen“ of 1704, who alone did not abandon the Czech language (Frozín, A.: Obroviště mariánského atlanta) [Broklová 1992: 12], and who in the following two hundred years underwent huge changes, could now consider becoming a European nation. Eventually too, it was time to establish what it was still lacking in such a process and answer the disturbing questions posed by the present.

## The meaning of Czech history

Masaryk analysed the social and literary development up until his own time in order to clarify those relations within the national existence which were to form the basis for his active contribution to the process of identification of the Czech nation with Europeanity. This was best recognised in 1968 by Professor J. B. Čapek, who, in his orientation, was very close to the reformation: „Masaryk, however, was not only concerned with the question of historical continuity, but also with the philosophical and at the same time topical and programmatic **question of the meaning of Czech history.**“ He considers Masaryk's **intense relationship to the spiritual and moral message of the Czech reformation** to be significant [Čapek, J. B. 1968: 17] (E. B.'s emphasis). Of further significance is the meaning of the Czech reformation to the creation of a democratic value system.

The historian, Josef Pekař, Masaryk's main opponent in the question of the meaning of Czech History [Pekař 1990: 383-405], postulated that there is no meaning to be found in history. Entire human generations, however, formulated the goals of their acts and vested them with meaning. The historian then encounters these orientations and (here one can agree with Pekař) „...will hesitate to give a straight-forward answer to the question: what is the meaning of Czech history“. An interpretation opposing Masaryk's is presented in *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* by Th. Lessing, where it is proposed that „history has neither meaning, nor development, nor goals, nor laws; all this is invested into it by the present, the myth of history creating and through the evaluation thereof fulfilling...“ [Pekař 1990: 385]. This, however, does not negate the fact that his-

tory is the future of the ever-growing body of the past, which, from the point of view of historical actors, has been anticipated in gradual goals.

Indeed, Masaryk numbered among those who repeatedly placed the present in future history, actively creating it. Pekař's error was that he polemicised with Masaryk as with a publicist or philosopher „whose knowledge of the development of historical facts is not so deep or at least, consistent“ [Pekař 1990: 384], while Masaryk was, above all, a politician. Pekař was finally to realise, if only partially, that „the whole of Masaryk's concept related in its creation to the need for propagation, to the need for decision in the fight of the born thought“ [Pekař 1990: 383]. He himself understood Czech history not as the work of autonomous Czech development, but as „a part (...) of European life“ [Pekař 1990: 387]. In this he did not differ substantially from Masaryk. The difference was rather in what and how the historian Pekař and the politician Masaryk gave expression to their respective concepts.

Pekař seeks the meaning of history as something „primary or eternal in history“ [Pekař 1990: 385], rejecting perceptions which propose that „individual nations would be the carriers of given ideas“. Pekař supports this thesis by arguing that he never encountered such formulations. However, the historiography of such ideas, or the programmed direction of individual nations at given times can, for instance, be identified in the leading representatives' formulation of these nations or, indeed, in the realisation of these nations by the people, even if not given a priori. It depends more on use, on agreement, as to which, among the possible goals, will be accepted, and which of them will become an historical force. The degree of its visibility furthermore varies from nation to nation.

In the end, Pekař concludes that the meaning of our history is national thought [Pekař 1990: 402], as opposed to Masaryk's religious thought. The opinion that „nicely, surprisingly“, Masaryk changed his older theory [Pekař 1990: 402] demonstrates the misunderstanding as to Masaryk's conception of the Czech question. Nevertheless, to be content with enumerating the differences between the author of the *Czech Question*, Masaryk, and his opponent, the historian Josef Pekař, would be an unsatisfactory answer to the question raised above : it would give little credit to the author. We would thus be avoiding „our true and great history“ [Masaryk 1969: 182].

### Our two questions

How did Czech society of the time address the question of its history? In 1886, public opinion was recorded in response to Hubert Gordon Schauer's two questions: *What is the purpose of our nation? What is our national existence?*. Having opposed the militant nationalists and supported Schauer's article, T. G. Masaryk was thought to be the author – this despite his reservations about it. It therefore became necessary either to answer the question or to take a position on the problem raised by Schauer: „*The nation will be insured if its striving is in accordance with the ideal world order*“ [Opat 1990: 164]. The first programme of the Czech question as a political question dates from this period [Opat 1990: 183-4], and is contained in Masaryk's works of the 1880s. As a result of Masaryk's role in the written debate, „the practical effect of his programme effort was (...) actually more effective and far-reaching in its consequences than (...) texts of a decade later [Opat 1990: 184].

What, then, is the issue Masaryk expresses through the *Czech Question*? The work deals with problems of the present, which Masaryk clarifies through interpretation of the past. He does, however, consider that „we need above all an understanding of the present

and this we do not gain sufficiently from Palacký and his direction. Historicism has lead even Palacký down the wrong conservative tracks“ [Masaryk 1969: 159]; „...we see only our past greatness“ [Masaryk 1969: 159]. „...Havlíček has already shown how we should immerse ourselves in the present and draw our national strength from the awareness of facts“ [Masaryk 1969: 159]. He approves of Havlíček, who stated that „our life is more important through future generations and closer than the life of our far ancestors“ [Masaryk 1969: 159]. He called both for comparison with other nations and self-knowledge [Masaryk 1990: 183]. However, we would do an injustice to Palacký if we failed to mention Masaryk's observation about him: at the beginning of his scientific work, he attempted to deepen the „supreme idea of humanity“ and „show (...) in his History of the Czech Nation“ an ideal of humanity: „...through love for my nation I still always value human and scientific good over national good“ [Masaryk 1990: 20]. In Palacký, „he found his own conception of the Czech question, the evaluation of the Czech reformation and the humanitarian ideal.“ [Čapek, K. 1969: 101].

### Realism

Masaryk's real contribution, though, is what he understood by realism: „...**realism** is not and does not intend to be (...) a party alone, it is a **direction and a method**. (E. B.'s emphasis) Realism resists historicism, excessive historicism [Masaryk 1969: 171]. Things are the motto of realism, including, for Masaryk, not only the national but also the philosophical opinion and the philosophical method. „Conflicts with journalism on their own lead realism onto political ground. (...) Political tactics must correspond to the idea of humanity, thus carefully making use of all modern steps in all areas of social administration. Conservatism turned towards the past, towards historicism (...) is its substance, radicalism does not look to the past, through logic, and through a frequently false logic corrects the present – realism does not give up the past, but ties it to the knowledge of things, particularly the present... We want a reasonable and honourable tactic, just as honourable to ourselves and to others. Czech politics must cease to be ‚political‘. No flattery, because there will be no extravagance.“ [Masaryk 1969: 174-175]. In Masaryk's eyes, it was a fatefully deluded notion that „all our history is nothing more than a constitutional fight against the Germans and the (Austrian) government. (...) We developed positively as well, our development has its own content in which the antagonism against Germans played an important, but secondary role. In this way realism, in the most important question of all, differs from (...) today's common politicising. It is a requirement of politics to be absolutely active and positive, let us finally allow ourselves to be bigger – we are not as small as our patriotic snivellers claim.“ [Masaryk 1969: 176.] According to Masaryk, it was also necessary to struggle against validated obsolescence.

### Realism in politics

Through his own activities during the First World War, particularly in his orientation towards democratic power, programme concepts and finally the *Declaration of Independence* of October 1918, Masaryk demonstrated that he understood the needs of the nation and its contemporary possibilities, both conceptually and as a political tactic. The twenty years of the first Czechoslovak Republic constitute the proof thereof. The Czechoslovak Republic was the basis of what was to be the future Czechoslovakia. This state cannot be omitted from any formulation of the Czech question as a political programme of the Czech nation. It was one of the most stable democracies in Europe, if we

consider the results of comparison among four western European states, Germany and Austria. The average duration of government in the Czechoslovak Republic (over one year) was reached in only two of the six mentioned states: the United Kingdom and the Netherlands [Berg-Schlosser and Müller-Rommel: 252]. Conversely, the importance of political culture is increased by the fact that this instability led to the collapse of the democratic political system in Germany and Austria alone, whereas it expressed itself as an insufficient reason for collapse in France and Belgium. Majority support for democracy was not even affected by the threat of fascism in Czechoslovakia. Problems related to the crisis of democracy were not solved by Czechoslovak politicians on the basis of the empirical requirements of change, but rather on the basis of democracy (for instance, against the excessive split of political parties by the reduction of their number through electoral reform). They did not allow the political self-destruction of democracy through undemocratic steps against anti-state and disloyal forces oriented towards authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

With exceptional skill, Masaryk evaluated the possibilities and needs of his nation, its need for democracy. With regard to the structure of the Czech nation, which, through misfortune, was robbed of its intellectual elite and most of its nobility, he could consider the significant reduction of differences in the population as an existential democratic measure, as it was in Tocqueville's account of American democracy [Tocqueville 1992: 39]. A certain level of nivelisation, achieved in most nations through anti-feudal revolutions [Nipperdey 1990],<sup>2</sup> the success of democracy contingent upon dealing with feudalism or even by means of national socialism [Steinbach 1993: 5], was thereby made possible. The people of a nation in a democracy are equal, they are not differentiated in the political system.

It was only after the Munich agreement that the parliamentary democracy gave way to totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia. The arrival of left-wing totalitarianism occurred in a very different manner to the arrival of fascism in Germany. The German voters went to the poles, which they knew were to be the last, and gave the party which had informed them this was to be so almost 44 percent of their votes. In contrast, the success of the Communist Party in 1946 was, to a considerable extent, based on the votes cast by the „May“ Communists, who voted for the former on the basis of the connection they perceived it to have had with the liberation of Czechoslovakia in May 1945 [Broklová and Brokl 1991]. Besides, there was nothing in the KSČ (The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) programme that spoke of communism: it was a programme for the construction of a „happy society“, in accordance with post-war radicalism; nor were those to be the last elections [Broklová 1991, Broklová 1993b]. At the outset of 1948, the Moscow Kominform continued to accuse the Czechoslovak Communists of parliamentary fetishism for their attempts to achieve power through parliamentary means. This too was a result of the political culture originating from the first republic.

The failure to solve questions of nationality in the pre-Munich Czechoslovak Republic is a matter of vision. The results of the parliamentary elections (1920, 1929, 1935, but also 1925, when the Luda Party entered the governmental coalition) and the municipal elections of March 1938 demonstrate the consensus of Slovak voters for a common Czech and Slovak state (for details, see [Broklová 1993a]). Furthermore, German activism, which was, to a certain extent, the result of Masaryk's realism (giving E. Beneš, as

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<sup>2</sup>) Nipperdey, Th. (1927-1992), probably the greatest contemporary German historian.

early as October 29, 1918, the task of negotiating with the Germans, and initiating later negotiations as well), saw favourable election results, until the German national socialist organisation developed. Even after that, the border was no longer one between Germans and Czechs, but between democrats and non-democrats, as is demonstrated by the admission of German immigrants from Hitler's Germany into Czechoslovakia.

### **An independent state**

1918 – the year of the establishment of the Czechoslovak state – was the peak of the modernisation process, particularly in the area of state politics. It saw the death of feudalism, which had lasted throughout the Austrian era, particularly in the acquisition of political rights in a democratic state denied the Czech nation by the Hapsburg monarchy. A compromise allowing participation in political rights in Austria was granted the German but not the Czech bourgeoisie. The Austrian elite was not bent on compromise in these matters. The classical bourgeoisie, however, requires a political democracy to strengthen its economic position [Dahrendorf 1961]. The basis was the establishment of the Czechoslovak state, which solved the problem of equalising the rights of the Czech people in relation to other nations and, internally, the equalisation of their rights as people in a democracy. For this reason, democracy is considered to be a necessary condition for the existence of the Czech nation, in the sense of a European nation (*natio*).

With the first Czechoslovak Republic, the relationship between Czech national politics and European and world democracy was constructed. „...The nation (...) included in its specific life of traditional habits, (...) such life-forms as to represent, a means to be a person, albeit blended with tradition“ [Ortega y Gasset 1993: 6]. The idea of the Nation – the Czech Nation, participating in the ideas of European humanism and democracy – and the idea of a Czechoslovak nation – in the western European sense – as a political nation, was a „vigorous programme for the future“ [Ortega y Gasset 1993: 6]), and represented the possibility of a civilised solution to nations and nationalities (according to Ernst Nolte it permitted the construction of the state [Nolte 1968: 295]), whose identity was ensured by a high level of tolerance – respect for one's neighbour and their different culture.

Whereas European nations-nationes sometimes remained without future, without further projects, without creative aspirations prior to the Second World War, from the second half of the 1930s the Czech nation was obliged to mobilise its strength for the defence of democracy and nation. The crisis of European democracy reached its culmination in the sacrifice of this democratic state to Nazi Germany. The Czech question remained an integral part of the European question even during the Second World War [Masaryk 1990], also because „the fate of individual states is to a great extent tied to the development of conditions in other states“ [Záděra 1933: V, 5]. Society did not look on passively at the changes in conditions, but, in accordance with its possibilities, in struggle abroad and at home, participated actively in the renewal of democratic conditions in the world. After a short democratic interplay, in a situation of internationally dominant totalitarian forces, a communist regime was installed in this part of Europe.

### **1968, 1989**

Society turned to the requirement of the renewal of democracy in 1968. Among others, playwright Václav Havel formulated the requests of the opposition party [Havel 1968]. After the demise of all forms of democratic forces, intellectuals adopted an attitude of

protest. Indeed, it is part of the democratic tradition of the Czech nation that Czech intellectuals always managed, to paraphrase Benedetto Croce [Croce 1938: 168], „at least (...) theoretically or only mutely protest and show the way towards the future“. In contrast to this, after the dissolution of the Frankfurt parliament, educated Germans „almost all changed their sympathies, or even their political and historical criteria“. According to Croce, their damage to the political education of the nation was greater than that of the rulers. Until November 1989, these intellectuals set the example for the nation with their attitude, just as they have done throughout the entire course of Czech history. If hesitantly at first, Czech society finally joined them. The material conditions in which this society lived in real socialism believed no serious deficits and could thus be a stabilising factor for the regime, as it was, for example, in neighbouring Germany.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Czech society chose to renew the democratic structure of society. In the elections that followed, it first expressed its „No“ to the communist regime, and then gave its votes to parties which promised to take strong measures for the renewal of democracy.

### **Realism today**

According to J. B. Čapek, Masaryk became „a living argument for his philosophy of history, and not only history“. If it is our aim to understand Masaryk's concept of the Czech question, we must, even today „immerse ourselves (...) in the present,“ as Masaryk and Havlíček did, for „...our life is more important...“ [Čapek, J. B. 1968].

After various adventures, Václav Havel fully took upon himself, as President, the yoke of the Czech nation's status in Central Europe. In the preceding period, he had tried to formulate the contemporary Czech question, striving to express what of the nation-people, after fifty years of both totalitarianisms, constitutes the contemporary nation-natio. He thereby reminded other European nations of their past, what they were and what they should be according to their perceptions. This is yet another reason for Václav Havel's intellectual and political success, abroad as well as at home.

The last attempt of this type was the effort to mobilise Czech-German relations, which have always acted as an indicator of Germany's intentions in Europe. Part of these relations is the definition of borders, which the politician Václav Havel established after five years of expressing regret over the expulsion of the German inhabitants from Czechoslovakia. He established the „time for the external search for truth“ as an expression of realism. After Václav Havel's expression of regret at the crimes linked to the „wild expulsion“, the German side should logically have answered with some gesture, probably in the form of compensation to the Czech victims of fascism during the Second World War (compensation long since extended to Poland). The German side, however, expected concession from the Czech side, particularly after the division of the Czechoslovak state. As a political principle, however, democracy is not divisible into policy put into effect towards larger and policy towards smaller or small states. Both states enjoy

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<sup>3</sup>) The abovementioned comparative research of four western European states, Germany and Austria, shows that in the countries with a political culture appropriate to democracy, socio-economic factors do not carry such weight as in Germany. Holland of the mid-1930s was one of the countries the hardest hit by economic problems. Unlike Germany, however, this did not prove to be a factor working against democracy in Holland [Berg-Schlosser and Müller-Rommel 1987: 252]. Peter Steinbach also emphasises the significance of economic reconstruction for the stability of democracy in post-World War Two Germany [Steinbach 1993: 5].

the possibility of identifying themselves with the European idea. It is difficult to estimate what would follow if this opportunity had not been seized: The last time such an opportunity arose was in the period following the First World War, but was to flounder with the collapse of parliamentary democracy in Germany.

History provides more than one warning against the disrespect harboured by Czech neighbours or co-inhabitants of the late Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The unwillingness of the landed nobility to accept the unifying role of the Czech lands in the person of Přemysl Otakar II might once have caused the demise of a longer central-European order,<sup>4</sup> better organised than the blind anti-Turkishness of the Hapsburg dynasty, in which the Germans later feared democracy because of the Slavs' numerical dominance. It would be a shame if the current aim of European co-operation were once again to flounder – this time due to the unwillingness of the Germans to respect the opinion of its central European neighbour, a disrespect no doubt based on their business with larger neighbours and their indifference to smaller ones. We would do well to keep the opinion of the young Dutch generation in mind.<sup>5</sup> For until now, we have resisted perceiving behind this attitude an effort by Germany to achieve by peaceful means what it did not achieve through war (including support for Turkey's participation in the European Community).

The most recent address of president Václav Havel addressed the question of the intellectual's role within a democracy. The warning provided by the Weimar democracy, where intellectuals were unable to participate in the population's identification with the democratic regime and therefore became disappointed critiques of the regime, belongs to a different cultural area. And an intellectual who takes upon him/herself the formulation of the positive political goals of a democratic regime cannot be intellectually disqualified.

**Conclusion:** the Czech question is the formulation of a political programme of democracy for the Czech nation. As the question of a democratic programme and a human ideal was and is still valid, it pervades Czech history, the Czech nation returns to it continuously, because it is both internally and externally existentially tied to democracy. Masaryk's efforts brought about the first Czechoslovak Republic, through which the relationship between Czech national life and European and world democracy was renewed. From the point of view of the structural securing of democracy, the example of Masaryk's democratic republic has, until now, not been fully appreciated – this republic, which was exceptional for its political culture which bridged the many deficits in the construction of the political system, in the sense of Masaryk's postulate: „We shall not have democracy if we rely on laws alone.“ In this too, the Czech question was a programme and realism a method. In fulfilling this statement, the Czechs set themselves apart from most central European and eastern European nations, the latter of which es-

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4) Přemysl Otakar II was a strong representative of the landed principedom in Austria, who wanted to break the dominance of noble landlords. He succeeded, though often only through violence, to get back prince land rights and territory. He was a talented financial and administrative politician, of high organisational aptitude. After his death, he was celebrated especially by the Viennese. Nonetheless, G. F. Litschauer concludes that the establishment of the state by Otakar ultimately solved nothing. The particular significance of the Czech lands was the connection between North and South, and not that the Czech space would acquire leadership [Litschauer 1965: 55-57].

5) Only two percent of the younger Dutch generation consider Germans to be enemies.



tablished democracies after the First World War, but failed to maintain them due to their insufficiently developed democratic political cultures. After the Second World War, democracy set up mechanisms – that worked only thanks to political culture – into the structure of the system (here, in the Czechoslovak Republic, the constitutional inclusion of political parties with definitions of their obligations functioned as delineations of the politicians' responsibility for the democratic state).<sup>6</sup>

The mainstream of Czech national organisation could live with limited nationalism thanks to its humanitarian content. This content was provided by Masaryk, who thus linked the Czech nation with European life. It is up to us to renew and maintain this tradition.

Even our current „realism does not abandon the past, but ties it to the awareness of things, particularly the present...” [Masaryk 1969]. It was and is necessary for the future of the nation to specify what the nation lives by, what it wants and what it hopes for. This is the message of Masaryk's *Czech Question*. This is where its continuing validity originates.

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<sup>6</sup>) Paradoxically, Hitler set down certain prerequisites for the establishment of democracy in Germany by limiting the rights of the nobility and the levelisation of the population (authoritative fascist version of modernisation). The land reform was carried out in Germany by the Allies, and meant the implementation of similar measures to those taken in the Czechoslovak Republic after 1918, which did not meet with much sympathy abroad: the abolition of the nobility's privileges and land reform.

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