

A Very Brief Outline of Czech History and Literature

It is barely 100 years since the concept 'Czech' began to come into common usage in English. For hundreds of years before that the English word for the Slavonic-speaking peoples and the language of what is now the Czech Republic was 'Bohemian'. The present Republic encompasses Bohemia, Moravia and a small part of Silesia.

Bohemia itself was christianised by Irish monks operating from Ratisbon (now Regensburg) and Germans. Irish and German missionaries had also penetrated Moravia before SS. Cyril and Methodius reached Moravia with their Eastern Christianity. Czech literature consisted entirely of liturgical words until the last two decades of the thirteenth century, when a literature in most genres began to blossom, chronicles, verse romances, Bible translations, lives of saints, short stories, sermons, and spiritual and secular lyric verse. The prose romance of proto-novel did not take off until the end of the fourteenth century. The Church Reform movement of the early fifteenth century, inspired by John Huss (Jan Hus) did inestimable damage to Czech literary culture. The movement did produce sophisticated philosophy written in Czech, especially by Petr Chelčický, but also, for example, by the erudite Jacobellus of Mies. On the other hand, didacticism largely took over from imaginative writing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In 1526 a Habsburg was elected to the Bohemian throne and from then on, with a break of just under a year, up to 1918 the Habsburgs remained on the throne, Bohemia was, to a great degree, Protestant, but in the 1550s the Jesuits started work in Prague and after the defeat of the Protestant Estates in 1620 and a new set of laws imposed in 1627, the Counter-Reformation became the main cultural force in the country. It brought with it a revival of Czech lyric verse, which in the mid-to late seventeenth century reached aesthetic heights it was not to reach again until the third decade of the nineteenth century.

In the last thirty years of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Czechs began assuaging the ideas of nationalism in what has been known since the 1890s as the Czech National Revival. By far the greatest writer of the Revival was Mácha, whose narrative poem *Máj* (Spring/May, 1836) was better understood in the 1830s and 1840s than it was later, until the 1930s; none-the-less, by the 1860s it had become, so to say, the 'national poem'. All genres flourished during the nineteenth century, but it was not until the 1890s that young Czech completely liberated themselves from competing with the Germans, that is, from nationalism and an unnatural veneration of the rural.

With the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, the multi-ethnic state of Czechoslovakia was founded, based on the political fiction of a thousand-year-old 'Czechoslovak' nation that spoke in two dialects, Czech and Slovak. In the 1920s a lively Avant-garde movement arose whose style was derived largely from the French Avant-garde, from German Expressionism and Czech Decadence. In 1938 Britain and France sold Czechoslovakia down the river with the Munich Agreement. Germany took German-speaking areas, and soon Poland and Hungary joined in Czechoslovak land-grabbing. A rump Czechoslovak state survived until March 1939, when the Germans occupied Bohemia and Moravia and Slovakia became a puppet state of Germany.

Munich and the experience of German occupation laid the foundations for a pro-Soviet politics, and, after liberation by the Americans and Soviets in 1945, Czechoslovakia became a Soviet-dominated state, and declared its total allegiance to Stalin with the Communist Party take-over of February 1948. The attempt at 'reform-Communism' of 1968 came to an end as a result of Soviet occupation, followed by the Party leader Alexander Dubček's fall from power in April 1969 and the last public demonstrations against the new 'consolidating' politicians and their Soviet masters took place in the late summer and autumn of 1969. A small, but intellectually effective, dissident movement, represented most publicly by Charter 77, kept the West aware of the gloomy and arid nature of Czechoslovak culture and politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1989 the Changes came and 1993 saw the 'Velvet Divorce' and the creation of the Czech Republic. Czech post-war literature is best known in the West for the witty plays of Václav Havel and the novels of Milan Kundera. Josef Topol was a more sophisticated, and often funnier, playwright than Havel and Alena Vostrá, a livelier and more original novelist than Kundera. So far, the twenty-first century has been dominated by another highly original woman writer, Petra Hůlová.

Czech literature is the only central and east European literature to have an unbroken literary tradition from the mid-Middle Ages to the present. It has had a large number of imaginative, lively writers who remain unknown in the West, despite the endeavours of Czech and Western literary historians. This will eventually change and the growing body of undergraduates and graduates who have read and are reading Czech at British universities will help bring about the change.