

Historein

Vol 1 (1999)

History and Semiotics



The Construction of Czech National History

Miroslav Hroch, Jitka Malecková

doi: [10.12681/historein.129](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.129)

Copyright © 2012, Miroslav Hroch, Jitka Malecková



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Hroch, M., & Malecková, J. (2000). The Construction of Czech National History. *Historein*, 1, 103–112.
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.129>

The construction of Czech national history

Miroslav Hroch

Jitka Malečková

This article follows up a project which aimed at comparing national movements of non-dominant ethnic groups in Central and Eastern Europe in the formative periods of their nation-formation.¹ The project combined a classification of the knowledge of individual national movements with a comparative analysis of selected aspects of these movements in order to stimulate further comparative research. With similar intentions, we have proceeded to an inquiry into the construction of national history.

The contribution is therefore not meant to be an exhaustive description of the development of Czech historiography in the nineteenth century.² Its goal is rather to trace the main tendencies in the construction of historical concepts and to present them in a systematic way which would enable a comparison with other cases.

As a first step, we tried to elaborate a set of criteria which would characterise both the general and the specific features of the construction of national histories. A summary of this "questionnaire" forms the first part of the article. The core of the article then attempts to apply the questionnaire to the Czech case.

Questionnaire

1. Definition: What is "our" national history?

One of the most important factors in the construction of national history was undoubtedly its territorial dimension. How were national boundaries defined in relation to states and their frontiers, to ethnicity and to internal regional units? The latter includes views of the internal structure of the national territory, the relation between center and periphery, and the place of various regional histories.

The second aspect of the definition concerns chronology, namely ideas of the



ethnogenesis, i.e. the origins, of the nation and their dating. In other words, how did patriotic historians answer the questions such as 'Who are we?'; 'Who were our ancestors and where did they come from?'; 'When did our nation emerge to history?' In the narrations of later periods, we are interested particularly in understanding the continuity and discontinuity of the national past.

National history was also defined through "national" values. It is interesting to compare which periods or events were celebrated as glorious moments of the nation – and why – and which, on the other hand, were regarded as periods of decline. The same question applies to the personalities considered important - whether illustrious or notorious; who were they and what features were considered positive or negative? And finally, did historical consciousness reflect a stable system of values which were seen as immanent and permanent characteristics of "our" history?

While in some cases, one concept of national history prevailed among historians and was accepted by the majority of intellectuals and politicians elsewhere, two or more such concepts existed. The analysis should mention both alternative or competing concepts in one period and the changes of the mainstream concepts over time.

2. The location of national history in the European context

It seems reasonable to suppose that the attention paid by national movements to the past which was not "their own" varied. How strong then was the interest in the history of other nations, and, if any, of which nation or nations?

The most likely candidates for this interest were the neighbouring nations and/or the major rivals. Apart from the frequency with which their histories were mentioned or described, one may ask what kind of mutual relations (war, peace, co-operation, treachery) were emphasised and what were the images or stereotypes of other nations.

The history of other nations could also help to establish the specific features of one's own national history. How was this specificity defined and was it compared with that of other nations?

Another set of questions concerns the perception of uneven development. In this context, it is worth noting whether the historical discourse included an idea of a general, European history or a history of mankind. If so, was national history compared with the general historical trend or with the history of individual nations?

3. The history-makers and their audience

The concept of national history was not necessarily a product of professional historians. The analysis should include information on the most influential creators of national history, their social background, profession, education and their involvement in political and cultural life. Similarly, it should mention who were the addressees of their works and how their audience changed over time.

4. History and social communication

Connected with the previous point is the question of how information about national history

(was) spread among the population. The means included scholarly historical works, schoolbooks, historical novels and other narrative sources or pictures and monuments.

1. What is "our" national history?

Territorial dimension

Up to the first half of the nineteenth century, an almost unanimous consensus existed among historians concerning the territorial limits of Czech national history – the borders of the historical Kingdom of Bohemia. The consensus was based on two circumstances: First, since the Middle Ages, the historiographical tradition has focused on the territory of the kingdom of Bohemia rather than on the Czech crownlands which included also Moravia and Silesia. Moravia was always regarded as an appendix to Bohemia while Silesia was completely neglected. Second, the borders of the Kingdom were exceptionally stable; the territorial changes since the Middle Ages were negligible.

It was in this sense that the Bohemian Diet charged the Czech historian František Palacký, one of the most influential personalities of the Czech national movement, with writing a history of Bohemia. However, while writing the third volume of his work in 1848, Palacký introduced an important modification which was symptomatically expressed by a change of the title: instead of "History of Bohemia", the work was now called "History of the Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia".

This change was important particularly for two reasons. It did not define national history primarily by the political territory of the historical lands, but by the ethnic character of its population, while preserving the historical integrity of the kingdom. Giving priority to the ethnic principle, it integrated conceptually the history of Moravia (and Austrian Silesia) and the history of Bohemia into one indivisible whole. This concept of Czech history as a history of the state-nation dominated Czech historiography until recent times. No wonder that – after having accepted the German national identity – the German-speaking historians in Bohemia and Moravia refused for the "Germans" to be a part of this historical concept. Since the 1860s, they started to study "the history of the German nation in Bohemia and Moravia".

Even after the Moravian territory had been included into Czech history, into mainstream historiography, Moravia remained a periphery. The narratives of Czech history focused on Bohemia, especially on Prague, the capital of the kingdom since the early Middle Ages. Regional differences and local histories were neglected in the framework of national history until the end of the nineteenth century.

Chronology

According to both the primordialist understanding of the nation, prevailing in Europe in the nineteenth century, and the Czech historiographical tradition, Czech history started with the arrival of Slavic (Czech) tribes to Bohemia. In fact, however, Czech history was regarded as being national, and not Slavic, only since the formation of a state – the principality of Bohemia – around 900.

Since then, Czech history was seen as a continuous development of a political unit, first a principality, and since the early thirteenth century a kingdom, which never ceased to exist although its sovereignty had been weakened after the 1620s. This concept which historians could prove by historical facts was one of the reasons why historical arguments, formulated in

terms of "historical rights", became a common denominator of Czech political demands in the late nineteenth century.

National values

Until the end of the nineteenth century, most Czech historians, influenced by Palacký, agreed on what had been the peaks and the periods of decline in Czech history. These periods were defined not only by internal (cultural, economic, political) development, but also, and maybe instead, by the position of the Czech nation in relation to other nations, particularly to the empire, understood as a German national body.

The more radical approach which has become the mainstream of Czech historiography saw the peak of national history in the Hussite movement of the early fifteenth century. More conservative historians celebrated particularly the rule of Charles IV in the fourteenth century. Both streams agreed in appreciating the period of strong Bohemian kings in the thirteenth century. Later, another commonly glorified period was added – the national "revival".

Internal fights among the members of the Premyslide dynasty in the twelfth century and the triumph of the Habsburgs following the battle of White Mountain in 1620 represented the periods of decline. The latter, seen as *the* national tragedy, has come to be called the dark age of Czech history.

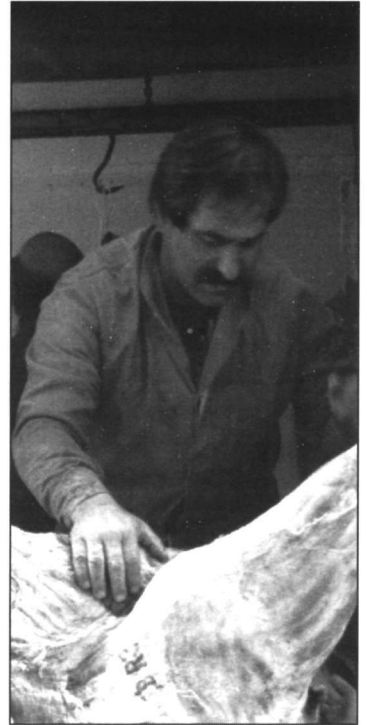
The choice of great personalities corresponded partially to this understanding of peaks and declines. The main criterion, however, concerned the "national qualities" of the celebrated person, such as the merits for the spread and flourishing of Czech culture, defense of national interests, political consolidation of the Czech state or a contribution to Czech glory abroad. These famous personalities included the kings Karel IV and Jiří Poděbradský, the religious reformer Jan Hus and the scholar Jan Ámos Komenský, "the teacher of the nations". None of the positive figures was represented as a conqueror, as a symbol of national expansion.³

Negative figures were selected according to similar criteria and seen as traitors and "malefactors to national interests". This applied particularly to the fifteenth-century king Zikmund, the arch-enemy of the Hussites.

No consistent system of values concerning Czech history has been developed in historiography. However, in attempts at describing the Czech national character, mainly for didactic purposes, some self-stereotypes emerged depicting the Czechs as peaceful, modest, educated and industrious. The image of the Hussite movement did not correspond to this stereotype as it celebrated courage in battle and sacrifice for the national cause. And this was definitely not the only inconsistency.

Alternative concepts of Czech national history

Although the mainstream concept of national history was widely accepted, some alternative concepts should be mentioned as well. The surviving land-based concept was expressed



especially in Beda Dudík's extensive *General History of Moravia* ordered by the Moravian Diet. The conservative national concept differed from Palacký in his high appreciation of the Hussite movement and critical evaluation of the role of the Habsburgs in Czech history. The conservative concept, represented for example by Wáclav Wladivoj Tomek and Anton Gindely, was more critical of the Hussites and more moderate in its attitude towards the Habsburgs. It was this concept which entered official schoolbooks in Austria. The works of German historians of Bohemia and Moravia differed even more substantially, considering the history of these lands as a part of German national history, i.e. of the Holy Roman Empire.

The most important alternative was the critical positivist historiography which in the late nineteenth century started to revise some stereotypes originating from Palacký. Thus Josef Pekar offered a critical reassessment of the origins and cultural consequences of the Hussite movement, even if for different reasons, namely its international significance, the Hussite movement still remained the peak of Czech history. Positivist historiography, influenced by Karl Lamprecht, also brought a shift from political to social and cultural history. None of this, however, has changed the basic concept of state-nation history.

2. The location of national history in the European context

Original research by Czech historians on the history of other nations had hardly existed before 1860, and even later, it was rather scanty. This does not mean that no interest was felt in the information about the history of other European nations, but this interest was satisfied either by German historical works or by translations from French and English. "Foreign" history only appeared as scholarly relevant to Czech historians and intellectuals when it was connected with the Czech past. Under the given historical and geographical circumstances, this applied almost exclusively to German history – as it was the only case which could be directly related to all periods of Czech history.

Here, Palacký's historical concept has to be mentioned again. The history of the Czech nation consisted, according to Palacký, in an age-old contact and rivalry with Germans. In this rivalry, the Czechs as a part of the Slavic community embodied the principle of freedom and democracy, while the Germans represented the principle of authority and oppression. Although this concept has not found an unreserved approval among the later generations of historians it has survived as a stereotype in Czech political culture well to the twentieth century. It influenced also the choice of topics from German history which Czech historians regarded as important. They usually emphasised situations of conflict, of German expansion, while the (rather frequent) cases of peaceful coexistence and of cultural transmission were marginalised.

The negative stereotype portraying arrogant Germans as eternal enemies who had always tried to control, oppress, and harm the weaker Czechs, only prevailed after the 1840s. Until then, some authors had made a differentiation between the Germans from the empire – the foreigners, seen as a dangerous enemy – and "our Germans" – the German speakers of Bohemia, who had not necessarily been included in the negative image.

German history undoubtedly had an exceptional place in Czech historiography. The attitude to another neighbor, the Poles, reflected a more differentiated approach. Czech-Polish relations had included few cases of conflicts and some periods of friendly coexistence and, in contrast

to the German case, the latter was not denied. Thus, for example, the Jagellonian dynasty which had ruled for several decades also in the kingdom of Bohemia was depicted in quite positive, if not highly laudatory terms. At the same time, historians criticised Polish aristocratism, "anarchy" or the lack of economic activities in the early modern period.

The representations of other European nations were influenced by contemporary political sympathies, e.g. for the French and Serbs. The controversial view of Russian history corresponded to the division of the Czech politicians according to their attitude to tsarist Russia. Generally speaking, the idealisation of Russia seems to have been in retreat after the Russian intervention in the revolution of 1848. However, a certain pride in the only Slavic great power, inspired by relics of Pan-Slavism, has persisted much longer and influenced historiography as well.

Up to the late nineteenth century, Czech historians strongly emphasised the specificity and uniqueness of Czech national history. The specific features were formulated above all in comparison to German history and much less in relation to the history of other European nations. The most common claims concerned:

1. the constant necessity to defend the nation against attacks from abroad, particularly from the German lands and to a lesser extent from Hungary;
2. the prevalence of disadvantages and suffering in the course of Czech history – for which external factors were blamed – over times of success, glory and bloom. "We have suffered for 300 years under the Habsburgs," has become the main slogan of the period after 1918;
3. the peaceful character of the Czechs: when the Czechs were involved in wars, it was only because they were endangered by foreign enemies or because the Czech love for liberty was challenged;
4. (after 1848) the important or even decisive role of "the people", understood as middle, or lower middle-classes, in Czech history; kings and aristocrats were regarded as positive figures only as far as they consciously served the interests of the country, i.e. of the Czech people.

This concept of national history and its specificities was to some extent challenged by the positivist historiography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The so-called school of Jaroslav Goll took a serious interest in both European history and historiography and tried to bring Czech history writing closer to contemporary European standards and the Czech past closer to the trends of general history. Goll's disciple Josef Pekař claimed that the main feature of Czech national history was the influence of Western Europe, of the European model or spirit, on Czech development. This concept integrated Czech history into European history, but as its less developed, dependent part – in contrast to the emphasis on the high standards of the Czech culture and education and other qualities of Czech history underlined by Palacký. For Pekař, the evaluation of various periods was based on a quicker or slower acceptance of European ideas and influences in Bohemia. The Hussite period was the peak of Czech history because then, the Czechs felt stronger, more developed than the rest of Europe, and wanted even to influence it.

3. The history-makers and their audience

Before 1880, most mainstream Czech historians worked outside the universities and some of them graduated only at a lower degree of university education. Some depended on their salaries

as secondary-school teachers or employees of such institutions as museums or the Diet. Others were friars. University professors opposed the emerging Czech historical research, and tried to prevent it, even through unfair political denunciations. The concept of Czech national history was thus constructed in opposition to the official academic history.

The situation changed when the Czech University was opened in 1882, and Czech professors occupied the chairs of history. It is interesting to note that it was from the historical seminar of this university that one generation later the positivist "revision" of the prevailing (Palacký's) concept of history originated.

Both academic historians and those who popularised their work were mainly of lower-middle-class origin, from families of craftsmen, small shop-keepers, peasants. Neither academic education nor social advancement were self-evident for them. Their geographical mobility was very limited as well: they usually worked and lived most of their lives in one or two places and the only horizontal mobility they desired was to come from a provincial town to Prague. They were mostly engaged in public activities, particularly in Czech national politics or in patriotic societies for promoting culture or education of the people.

Officially, the first two great historical syntheses, Palacký's for Bohemia and Dudvk's for Moravia, were intended by the decision of the Diets for the elites. Therefore, they were to be written in German. However, both works "failed" to fulfill their original tasks: Palacký changed the concept, and his work was addressed only to the consciously Czech part of the elites. Dudvk did not change the concept, but while he was writing the Moravian elites split into Germans and Czechs, none of whom was attracted by land-patriotism any more.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Czech patriotic intellectuals were not very numerous, but it was natural for them to read historical works, even if neither their education nor their profession were connected with history. With the progressive specialisation of the historical discipline, an increasing number of scholarly works was addressed not to all intellectuals as before, but to colleagues – historians. On the other hand, the flood of historical novels, tales and popularisations found its readership not only among the educated elites but increasingly also among the Czech middle classes.

4. History and social communication

Until the 1860s, information about Czech historical production was spread mainly by popular journals which published, apart from poems and tales, reviews of new books. The journals did not make a distinction between scholarly articles and fiction, and thus general readers could



learn about the results of current research. Later, scholarly works became less represented while historical fiction increased. Since in the nineteenth century the journals were usually still too expensive for the lower classes, newspapers too played some role in spreading the information among this part of the population.

Schoolbooks of history, controlled by the state, either preserved the construct of Austrian patriotic history or included Czech history written in a conservative, pro-Habsburg spirit. The tension between the official school education and the Czech national concept was partially diminished by unofficial readers, published by Czech authors and used above all by teachers, not only in history but also in the history of literature.

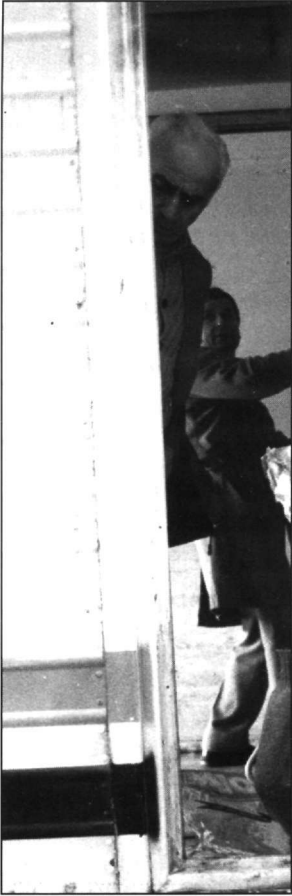
Historical paintings and historical monuments started to serve national goals only in the late nineteenth century. This was due to the fact that these forms of art and communication were rather expensive and depended on the existence of individuals and institutions able to cover their costs. The first important step in this direction was made by the construction of the Czech National Theater in the 1860s-1880s, financed from nation-wide popular collections, and by the decoration of town-halls and other public and private buildings. Among the historical monuments, the statues of Jan Hus gained most political relevance in the 1880s, first in provincial towns, and later also in Prague. The spread of the monuments of Josef II in the German speaking towns of Bohemia in the same period also followed national goals, in this case German: the emperor symbolised the dominance of the German language in all the empire. The differentiation of national identity and separation of the concepts of national history in Bohemia were distinctively illustrated by this dualism of popular monuments.⁴

Conclusion: myth and reality

The construction of national history was obviously not just a result of an interest in learning, although the historians were motivated by a desire to acquire – and to spread – the knowledge of their nation's past. In the earlier period of the national movement, in the stage of "patriotic agitation", the aim of the mainstream concept of national history was to gain adherents to the national cause. The creation of a consciousness of a common past helped to integrate the members of the ethnic group and make them support the national movement. In the period of mass movement when debates focused around the political program, the concept of national history gained a new importance. It served as a basis for the argument of "historical rights", justifying contemporary political demands by references to the constitutions and privileges of the medieval and early modern kingdom, claimed to have been continuously settled by Czechs.

Since the early period, historiography has tried to demonstrate the specificities and qualities of the Czech nation. In this context, it is interesting to note that the rights and freedom of Czech women in ancient Czech history, compared to the oppression of women among the Germanic tribes, were often used to prove the democratic character of the Czech nation. The positivist reassessment of the mainstream concept of history brought an attempt to incorporate Czech history into European history and the Czech nation into Western Europe. Apart from claiming adherence to Western civilisation, this attempt opposed the German interpretation of Czech history as a part of the history of the German empire.

However, the construction of national history was not a mere "invention" serving contemporary



political purposes. It was rather a result of three factors. First, it was directed to the present and influenced by the political interests and conflicts of the time, with all consequent misinterpretations and even falsifications. Second, it was related to the past, it was both inspired and limited by it. Thus, for example, the existence of a medieval Czech state presented "material" for the construction of national history, different from the nations which had never had an independent state of their own. The third factor was the historiographical tradition. The Czech national movement started as a cultural movement based on an ethnic principle and linguistic goals. However, the concept of national history was, since the beginnings of the national movement, a concept of political history embodied by the kingdom of Bohemia. The contradiction between the cultural movement of a nation without a state, and in the early stage also without political claims, and the construction of national history as a political history can be explained by the impact of the surviving historiographical tradition. Since the medieval chronicles, Czech history was the history of the Czechs and their state and this tradition proved to be stronger than the linguistic-cultural-ethnic character of the national movement. In the latter part of the century, when the political program emerged as a program of historical rights, the tension between the ethnic concept of the nation and the political claim connected with the no-longer-existing Czech crownlands was reflected in extensive debates on "the sense of Czech history".

Apart from transferring the reality of the medieval state into the demands of the nineteenth century, Czech historians have done also the opposite. They projected the ideas about the national community formed in the nineteenth century, with its national identity and other characteristics, to the past, claiming that it had existed as such already in the ancient periods of history. This was common in other national movements as well. More important, what was constructed as "Czech national history" was a history of a territory where the Czechs were not the only ethnic group, and where they had not always been politically or even culturally dominant. Presenting this history as the history of the Czech nation based on ethnicity rather than on a territory excluded the German-speaking population and, in a way, parts of the past characterised by German domination.

This concept of national history has had, and to some extent still has, a strong impact on the Czech self-stereotypes. Aiming to support national pride and to show the high standards of the nation, historiography presented positive images of the Czechs. These were further elaborated upon and spread by numerous popular works and despite later criticism, starting with the positivist school and up to the present scholarly works, they still influence the way Czechs conceive themselves and other nations, namely the Germans. The question of stereotypes, however, is a topic for another study.

¹ The research project is made possible by a grant from the Research Support Scheme of the Open Society Institute/Higher Education Support Programme.

² There is no difference in Czech between the terms Czech and Bohemian. The former originated directly from the Czech, while the latter came through its Latin version. The difference started to be relevant in the mid-nineteenth-century German with the differentiation between the ethnic "Czechs" and the "Bohemians", i.e. the inhabitants of Bohemia who could be either Czech or German. Another distinction is geographical-administrative: The Czech Crownlands consisted of three parts, Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. When possible, we try to use the terms in this sense.

³ One should note though that military expansion was rare in Czech history and territorial expansion, if any, was achieved rather by marriages.

⁴ In this context, it should be mentioned that in the mid-nineteenth century, 90% of the Czech population were literate.

A Bibliographical Note

Although this article is not an overview of Czech historiography the following works present the most relevant examples of various historical approaches dealt with in the text. For further information, see particularly František Kutnar, *Přehledné dějiny českého a slovenského dějepisectví* (An Overview of the History of Czech and Slovak Historiography), 2 vols., Praha 1973-1977, and *Literární a publicistické zdroje historického vědomí v 19. a 20. století* (Literary and Publicistic Sources of the Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries), AUC - *Philosophica et historica* 3, *Studia historica* XXXIII, Praha 1988.

Beda Franz Dubík, *Mährens allgemeine Geschichte*, 12 vols, Brünn 1860-1888.

Anton Gindely, *Lehrbuch der allgemeine Geschichte für Ober-Gymnasien*, 5 vols., Prag 1865-1873.

_____, *Lehrbuch der Geschichte für Volks- und Bürgerschulen*, 3 vols., Prag 1876-8 (2nd edition).

František Palacký, *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě* (History of the Czech Nation in Bohemia and Moravia), 5 parts in 10 vols., Praha 1848-1867.

_____, *Geschichte von Böhmen*, Prag 1836-1867.

Josef Pekař, *Smysl českých dějin: O nový názor na české dějiny* (The Sense of Czech History: For a New View on Czech History), Praha 1929.

_____, *Dějiny československé pro nejvyšší třídy škol středních* (Czechoslovak History for the Final Classes of Secondary Schools), Praha 1921.

Wacław Władysław Tomek, *Děje mocnářství raskouského: Ku potřebě na gymnasiích* (The History of the Austrian Monarchy: For the Needs of Gymnasia), Praha 1852.

