Jiří Přibáň & Karel Hvížďala

In Quest of History

On Czech Statehood and Identity

KAROLINUM PRESS VÁCLAV HAVEL SERIES

In Quest of History
On Czech Statehood and Identity

Jiří Přibáň & Karel Hvížďala

———

Published by Charles University, Karolinum Press
Translation by Stuart Hoskins
Cover and layout by /3. dílna/
Typeset and printed by Karolinum Press, Czech Republic
First English edition

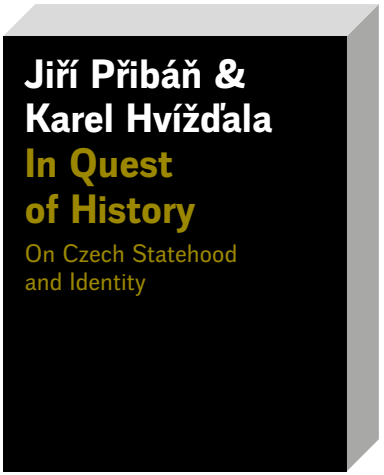
Originally published in Czech as Hledání dějin. O české státnosti a identitě,
Prague: Karolinum Press, 2018.

Reviewed by Pavel Kolář (European University Institute, Fiesole)
Jan Kuklík (Charles University, Prague)

ISBN 978-80-246-4267-3
ISBN 978-80-246-4288-8 (pdf)
ISBN 978-80-246-4290-1 (epub)
ISBN 978-80-246-4289-5 (mobi)

Charles University
Karolinum Press 2019

www.karolinum.cz
ebooks@karolinum.cz



KAROLINUM PRESS

Let us then seek as those who would find, and find as those who would seek.
St Augustine of Hippo

The purpose of history as a science is to enrich and expand human consciousness.
Zdeněk Kalista

CONTENTS

PREFACE

That we are experiencing a cultural watershed is growing into a refrain for our times. Globalisation has assimilated individual national societies into a single world society that we all share. There is no escape from this society; it has become our destiny. We share hopes and fears, technological advances that are groundbreaking and unprecedented in human history, and the classic political, economic and ecological crises that have been dogging us since the dawn of history.

In this global society, modern nations and their states are rapidly and radically evolving, yet remain, in the minds of those who belong to them, an imaginary community where moral ideals and political goals are pursued and attained. For some, the nation state is a tool of globalisation; others see it as a last-chance emergency brake before we crash into globalisation's calamitous fallout.

People are clamouring against the march of global civilisation, but are forced to react to it both within and outside their national cultures because it cannot be pushed aside or sidestepped. We can also see this in the emerging generation's protests and political engagement: unlike the older generation of rapidly globalising professional classes, they believe that global risks are just as serious as the local defence of democracy in their own country. Similar threads run throughout our civilisation: in France and Germany there are the Greens, in the Czech Republic the Pirates and A Million Moments for Democracy, in Hong Kong the student movement, and so on.

Central Europe is a place whose modern history has spawned more cultural watersheds than its inhabitants have been able to cope with by civilised means. The history of the Czech nation and its statehood is no exception. Historians and politicians, idealists and realists, democrats and their enemies all seek to understand these watersheds. Everyone is on a quest for history, even if their minds are set on the present and future. This is also true of our dialogue between a legal philosopher living in Cardiff and a probing journalist from Prague.

While the internet has foisted this idea on today's globalised humanity that speed and concise communication are paramount, we have headed in the opposite direction in this book: we try to amplify the context both territorially and temporally. In our republic's centenary year, we concentrated on key points in our history, ranging from the 9th to the 21st century. This allowed us to peer into the past and ask ourselves how we perceived and understood our history at different times, why this was so, and what it means for our present and future.

In certain respects, this is a quest to stop history from being reduced to a screen on which we project our frustrations. We were keen to return to the public arena those issues that tend to be contained within the walls of academia or that we generally steer clear of.

We extend our gratitude to Pavel Kolář, a comparative historian from the European University Institute in Florence, and Jan Kuklík, a legal historian and the dean of the Faculty of Law at Charles University in Prague, for their valuable advice and comments on the manuscript.

We would like to thank Petr Valo, the director of the Karolinum Press, and his deputies Martin Janeček and Milan Šusta for giving us the impetus to write this book.

KH and JP, 2018

History and National Identity

Karel Hvížďala: Czechoslovakia was proclaimed an independent state on 28 October 1918, yet in the century since there have been only two periods when it was truly master of its own fate: from the time it came into being until 1938, and then post 1989. At the end of 1992, it split into two separate states. If we are serious about discussing the history of Czech statehood and Czech identity, we should perhaps start by taking a look at the first historically documented beginnings of the Bohemian medieval state, which would take us back to the 9th century and the baptism of Duke Bořivoj. I firmly believe that our current gripes and grumbles are rooted far in the past. Can this be attributed to historical events and facts per se, or rather to how they have been interpreted in the accounts we call history?

Jiří Přibáň: National identity, its historical origins, and the political autonomy of each of these themes would make for a work spanning numerous volumes. And each of those volumes could stir up untold heated debates. Nationalism, for instance, can be defined quite simply as an ideology that demands the reconciliation of ethnic and political boundaries and legitimises power via the principle of popular sovereignty, in which the rulers and the rest of society together shape their integral national unity. Note, though, how many political and cultural ideals and disputes hide behind this definition and how this definition has been manifested in the history of various nations. History, including national history, then primarily becomes a matter of storytelling about the past. Through those narratives and stories, we pass on everything that we consider important in our history and that we believe gives it meaning. I am fond of the puristically conceived word *dějepis* [loosely "event-writing"] that we use in Czech to translate *historia*, the Greek term that originally meant a general capacity to become cognisant, through a narrative, of what has been learned. *Histor* generally designated a learned or wise man.

The Czech *dějepis* mirrors that original inner dynamic, where the historian's task is to write down past events and the expectation is that this very description, in itself, is an event and hence forms part of the history from which we should learn and enlighten ourselves. Consequently, unlike Latin's neutralised *historia,* the Czech *dějepis* continues to remind us that every historical narrative is self-referential, by which I mean that, ultimately, it always folds back on itself as part of history, the historical narrative, and the wisdom attached to history. History is the process of hauling yesteryear into the present so that past events acquire meaning and purpose for the current generation. National history has that and more: it is imbued with numerous existential questions such as "who are we?", "where do we come from?", and "where are we going?", which are pivotal, and all the more dangerous for it, because they also conjure up the illusion that nations are special, chosen to take on humanity's historical tasks, and that they have been here since time immemorial as natural groupings of people whose claim to their own existence takes precedence over any other right of an individual or group, or even of any other nation. Likewise, history routinely creates the illusion that the state is some sort of eternal political institution in which a nation finds and confirms its own existence and identity. In point of fact, the state is a product of modern politics, and the nation is an imaginary community devised by political romantics in the modern industrial age. Were every nation to exercise an unconditional right to self-determination in its own state, total political chaos and anarchy would ensue on a global scale.

To be sure, we tend to forget that today's nations are a product of the 19th century, and yet we see politicians in the Czech Republic and surrounding countries increasingly talking about the nation, national interests and national sovereignty as though this were something eternal, ancient beyond memory. What are our chances of extracting ourselves from this trap?

If we are to understand the historical processes behind the formation of the state and the birth of modern nations organising themselves politically into nation states, we must dispense with grand ideologies and established doctrines and, instead, study the specific language and lexicon used by society to describe its own history. Rather than concentrating on general patterns and abstract concepts, we should turn our attention to the specific speech that has been employed and the peculiar forms of power that are associated with it. Words are weapons and the past is littered with countless examples of how historical narratives become battlefields. The modern history of nation states eloquently documents this knack of bygone times to fashion myths and, by then invoking them, to foment wars and mobilise entire populations. This is precisely why we need to stop trying to find any objective rhyme or reason in the course of history, to stop searching for some *Weltgeist* of humanism manifesting itself in the process of human civilisation, or any other straitjackets laced up by philosophy as it seeks to understand human history. The idea that, in history, we will discover some transcendental principle in the form of progress, freedom, reason or humanity is untenable. Instead of the speculative philosophy of history familiar, say, to 19th-century national revivalists or revolutionary Marxists, we need to ponder particular historical situations and periods that may be construed as significant junctions where various relations between the structure of society and its semantics intersect. In other words, it is necessary to understand the processes underlying how society both organises and describes itself. Observe, for example, how modern Western societies describe their structures in crystal-clear terms, such as the state, the nation or sovereignty, while at the same time infusing them with equally clean-cut ideals, such as freedom, equality and fraternity. Our job is to peel back this "clean" description to lay bare the "dirty" and intricate world of economic, pedagogical, moral or legal structures and the most diverse technologies of power. This distinction between "clean" and "dirty" history cannot be viewed in

any moral or philosophical sense, by which I mean we cannot uncover any true essence of history and figure out how it works and where it's headed. That sort of moralism would be as unseemly as any speculative philosophy of history. What we do need to do, though, is expose even the contemporary "dirty" language and lexicon within the seemingly "clean" structures and concepts we use to describe our history. The aim is to grasp how, even under the surface of apparently unambiguous, accepted concepts in the history of modern society and politics, there are always specific conflicts with smudged contours and historically haphazard processes and consequences.

But such considerations are too complicated. Politicians and the media shun them, afraid of alienating voters, readers or listeners. And that flings the door open wide to power-hungry populists and fabulists who have simple pre-cooked solutions for any problem. The internet has helped this shift and decay by marginalising debate with a barrage of emotionally-charged sound bites. Instead of the collective, it gives life to the connective…

The paradox of modern society is that its life is influenced far more by future expectations than past experience and tradition, yet its hunger for historical stories, and thirst for their moral significance, continues to mount. The social predominance of expectations over experience, then, also increases the specific expectation that history has answers to the questions posed by the present. Even the famous end-of-history thesis written by the Russian-born French philosopher Alexandre Kojéve and retold by the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama after 1989 as a historic victory of liberal democracy is nothing more than an attempt to decipher the definitive meaning of human history. Although Fukuyama's thesis provoked the ire of both the left and the right, blazing from their respective ideological positions, I think its most problematic factor is that, in Popper's words, it is merely another example of the "poverty of historicism". Nevertheless, if we were to say that there are no metaphys-

ical or dialectical laws concealed in history, that does not necessarily mean that they are entirely meaningless for us. On the contrary, historical narratives retain importance even in our post-traditional age, with its fixation on future expectations. At the same time, however, these narratives are evidently unable to guarantee the validity of any social contract or general consensus. Has history been relegated to a social pastime, meaning that, in reality, the numbers of books, journals and other periodicals devoted to history paradoxically document the ascent of a post-historical age? Can we even question whether history has meaning if teachers and their pupils, as every generation passes, attach so little importance to historical knowledge? What do we actually expect from "history" teaching?

I think that might be oversimplifying things…

I take your point because, in historical science, sociology and the philosophy of history these days, extreme views denying history *per se* are coming to light. The entirely correct and necessary criticism of the former social-Darwinist or Marxist concept of history as a linear time in which the objective law of human progress and the supremacy of modern times over all past experience and tradition has now been repeatedly turned into a nihilistic assertion that every historical narrative is merely a form of cultural hegemony and elitism, ethnocentric supremacy or political ideology and oppression by the powers that be. This is particularly true of national history, where the original Romantic apotheosis of nations has given way to an equally passionate hatred of any manifestation of national culture. It is as though fanatical nationalism has been replaced by an equally fanatical struggle against everything that has something to do with the nation as a social group and the sense of belonging it engenders. Admittedly, historians have helped to shape the collective memories of modern nations and their myths, but that does not mean that history is "just" a handmaiden in the service of political leaders and elitist interests. Nor does it suggest, in the slightest, that we could

say that nations – because they are "imaginary", or "invented", communities formed in modern times – are only a plaything and consequence of those interests. The imaginariness of nations in no way implies that these communities did not actually exist and that we can shrug them off as the product of a "false" consciousness. The sociological term "imagined communities", encompassing not only the nation, but also, for instance, religious communities and economic classes, certainly doesn't mean that such communities do not exist or are based on ideological lies. It simply denotes large social groups that we, as individuals, can never see in their entirety in our lifetime, but we can imagine them all too well through various symbols, feel a strong bond with them, and share a collective identity with others. What we imagine, and what is therefore imagined, is simultaneously very real and has a major impact on our social life. We must realise that society itself is one such imagined community, and yet, in a very real sense, we experience its existence every day. We need to adopt the same approach to nations and their history, as well as to their very specific forms of social organisation and life, which includes not only the national economy and art, but also the state. Quite a few people these days may feel that this opinion is nothing to wonder at, but in the first half of the 20th century it was routine for many historians, sociologists and ethnologists to adhere to the naturalistic notion that social and cultural differences between various ethnicities and nations were the legacy of biological disparities and inherited characteristics established by a shared biological – read "racial" – origin. When the German sociologist Max Weber claimed that ethnic groups were actually artificial social creations, that is, that they were not *natürlich* but *künstlich*, and that they were based on subjective beliefs about a shared community and its fate, he wasn't exactly voicing the view of the majority. What is more, Weber argued that it was not beliefs that make a community, but that a community forms its own system of beliefs. He also argued that creating a community such as a nation always results in efforts

to monopolise power within it and to secure status. So when we talk of the nation, we have to look not for its natural foundations, but for the socially moulded power constellation and privileges within its political organisation.

This is why we manufactured the Czechoslovak nation, so that we could proclaim a state. But can we then really talk about history as a scientific discipline? Is not this, too, largely just a construct, a fiction, as we have seen it increasingly being discussed?
Some historians really are fighting doggedly against their own scientific discipline, labelling it a science in the service of political power and its ideology, the worst specimen of which is nationalism justifying the repressive policy pursued by nation states and imperial superpowers alike. For example, the controversial Israeli historian Shlomo Sand has recently described history, in his *Twilight of History*, as a science that has always served the nation state and its interests, and calls historians "priests of this official cult", tasked with shaping national identity and maintaining the collective memory in various forms, starting with history lessons at school, then museum exhibitions and, ultimately, all manner of academic institutions and historical institutes.

Essays in the same vein can also be found in our country…
This harsh condemnation of history and historians exemplifies more than historical relativism; it is a form of intellectual reduction and moral blindness that sees only power-driven and ideological context behind every text while completely overlooking the fact that, say, national history these days is typically studied in a global context in which national political interests are just one of many variables. Similarly, the relationship between history and state power is not merely servile, but also critical. For instance, a historian or sociologist who studies police or ministerial statistics does not automatically accept the official interpretation of the data. Historical and social

sciences have their own methods, which are far from just "mythologising"; they are also critical and, above all, independent. Those who assume the mantle of "myth-busters" paradoxically claim that history does not exist, yet they themselves are devising a canon of critical historical science that defines how history is to be written. For example, Sand's conclusion that the rise and fall of modern history is linked to the nation state turns a blind eye not only to the long line of historical studies that do not address the history of the nation state at all, but also ignores the internal disputes and conflicts within historical science that confirm its relative independence of the primarily political creation of national monuments, cults and myths. History, then, does not exist solely to legitimise the myths of a nation state, just as the nation state is not just a perverse institution of mass extermination and ethnic cleansing. This intellectual nihilism masquerading as a myth-buster's pseudo-Romantic moral mission must be rejected along with all self-absorption in national history and the glorification of nations as the only historically natural group for which there is an absolute *raison d'être* in the architecture of the state. Crowding out national identity in the name of universal ideals is just another form of the same fanaticism that once stoked national hatred. Today, that very same hatred is reserved for all those who do not prescribe horror of the nation *comme il faut* and do not regard the nation state as the source of all political evil. A high degree of intellectual balance and civic courage is still required today in order to sidestep these fanaticisms and simplifications.

My generation came of age in the Stalinist 1950s and, without even telling ourselves how important history was, we methodically sought it out in our families' bookcases, in witness accounts and in second-hand bookshops. What we really wanted to know was what was going on in Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1938 and from 1945 to 1948, and what had been wrongly defamed or glorified. How did your generation view history?

History isn't what it used to be! This is how we might flip a sentence by the poet Paul Valéry, who more than a hundred years ago remarked that "the trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be". It would be unthinkable to claim offhand that history doesn't exist, but its intrinsic value, importance and narrative styles do appear to be evolving to the extent that, for example, the political and pedagogical influence of history is steadily waning. Nevertheless, there are historical points of intersection, key events, fateful decisions and protagonists that, for individuals, social groupings, and political communities and clans, such as nations, give meaning to their own existence. Our two bouts of autonomy that you mentioned are, timewise, entirely negligible periods which, put together, make up less than half a century in one nation's history. Yet note the swelling pride (whether or not it is justified is irrelevant) in the First Republic or dismay at the disintegration of the shared state of Czechs and Slovaks in 1992. For my generation, which grew up in the "normalisation" period of the 1970s and 1980s, history was an intellectual alternative to the ideological ballast of the present and also a form of moral resistance, a way of manifesting our contempt for the current situation. History can play an exceptional role of this nature only in historically exceptional times. Today, however, we are faced with the completely opposite question, namely whether history, which is no longer a fateful alternative for present generations, can survive as a literary and moral story. In other words, in this day and age the question is not only "what is the meaning of history?", but also "what is the point of narrating past events – history – at all?"

I'm afraid that, before we consider your question, we will have to go back to what the historians Josef Pekař and his teacher Jaroslav Goll started at the turn of the 20th century, by which I mean take our leave of the revivalist programme and the entrenched stereotypes and symbols that peep out at us from all manner of widely distributed papers.

I agree that we need to deal critically with historical stereotypes and symbols, including those that historians used to – and still do – devise about themselves, referring to themselves as "Masarykians" or "Pekařians", or when someone invokes Rádl's moralist diction in his philosophy of national history. If we remove ourselves from this contemporary tribal warfare between historians and their schools, we find that what interests us today about Pekař's famous 1928 lecture *The Meaning of Czech History* is not so much the dispute over Palacký or Masaryk's concept of national history, as the assertion that our history has the meaning that it has fashioned for itself and that has been imprinted on it by the historiography of one time or another, whether that be the *Chronicle of Dalimil*, the work of Václav Hájek of Libočany, or the writings of Balbín or Palacký. In this respect, the meaning of history lies in its active creation, and we cannot exclude from that Hanka and Linda's forged *Manuscripts* or the modern-day national myths conjured up by Zdeněk Nejedlý or, on film, Otakar Vávra. Pekař was lambasted for his positivist and empirical method and "science for science's sake" or "history for history's sake". However, he wanted to extricate history from the philosophy of history, where Masaryk was containing it by subordinating empirical methods to teleological judgements on the Czech nation's roles in human history and to metaphysical notions that our national history had a profound religious meaning. Besides the important idea that the meaning of history is determined solely by history, i.e. that historical science can rely only on its own methods and observations, rather than on metaphysical ideas and ideals, Pekař's lecture contains another very important and critical idea – that no nation is a chosen people or has a particular historical purpose. The notion that national history has meaning is inextricably linked to belief in the fact that a nation is chosen, i.e. that each nation has a different historical purpose and hence different historical tasks and meaning within human history. This idea can be found, for example, in Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and in certain later

works by Romantic philosophers, who attributed various ideas and creative acts to various nations in various periods of history. It was as though every nation had been chosen by a historical spirit for various tasks, and the purpose of its existence was to accomplish those tasks and thus contribute to the absolute development of humanity. Pekař rejected philosophical speculation in his criticism of both Palacký and Masaryk's concepts of national history, but he realised that national patriotism cannot get by without historical science and that this science contributes to the defence of national existence, even though this is never just a matter of will and decision, but the product of much more complicated contexts derived from historical development.

We have to expound on that a little. In *The Czech Question* (1895), Masaryk criticised the ideological vacuity of Czech politics and pitted the religiously founded humanity of the 15th-century Bohemian Reformation against its pragmatism. Pekař countered that Hussitism and the Unity of the Brethren were purely medieval phenomena that could not be conflated with the later formation of a modern nation steeped in the Enlightenment and liberalism. However, I would say that both stances have remained very important for us to this day. How do you feel about this?
There is a disparity between Masaryk's concept of national history and its historical significance. Masaryk's critical and rational approach to Czech history at a time when many viewed history as the mythologising justification of national existence was of utmost importance for the modern formulation of the Czech question and both the political and cultural programme. Masaryk definitely didn't see the Czech nation as a historically chosen people representing a unique meaning in history or of history *per se*. Eschewing this notion of a culturally or racially chosen people, Masaryk probes the question of meaning as a matter of the political and moral shepherding of national life. The meaning of historical purpose is thus

imposed on a nation on the basis of its present situation and its future direction. In *The Czech Question*, Masaryk literally writes: "We are rising from the dead and the world expects words of redemption from us." The national revival therefore had the historical task of contributing to the moral and political revolution of the modern world. Imposing on the Czech nation the moral task of fulfilling the universal religious ideals of Christianity and embracing it in politics as a mission to establish a democratic society as part of the world revolution – this was indeed Masaryk's revolutionary vision. It contributed, among other things, to the criticism of politics and national identity derived from Slavophile tribal affiliation. However, it should be noted that Pekař criticised Palacký's concept of national history more generally for being based on the idea of autonomous historical development taking place in clashes and struggles with the outer Germanic world. In this historical narrative, the Czechs became the bearers of a higher culture that, in the face of violence and the warlike German spirit, historically advocated freedom and peace, which was supposedly characteristic not only of the Czechs, but of all Slavs. Pekař countered this with the idea that the historical development of the Czech nation was not decided by any original high Old Slavonic culture, but by the ability to open up to foreign influences and to accept them as its own. Pekař also pointed out that the millennium of Czech history from the 10th to the 20th centuries was determined primarily by the extent to which we, too, participated in broader European history. In this sense, for instance, he viewed Hussitism as a period in which the Czech nation was Europeanised to such a degree that it felt so culturally strong that "we ourselves wanted to give guidance to Europe, our teacher and governess". Needless to say, for Pekař this governess was not a chosen continent with an autonomous and historically unique culture and role. Rather, this was a culture whose origins "were shaped enormously by the Orient, Antiquity and the Arab world". Although Masaryk and Pekař's philosophy of history and historical methods are markedly

different from each another, in principle both men were able to dispel strong contemporary prejudices implying that our history was a constant conflict with the world around us, in the face of which we had to distinguish and define our own uniqueness if we were to have any success in defending our right to national existence. In contrast to this, both Masaryk and Pekař agree that the meaning of our national existence is not determined by the nation as an ethnic or racial community, but as a historically formed community that is constantly mutating just as history itself is reshaped. In other words, every era creates its own Czechs, setting them very specific tasks and ascribing specific meaning to their existence.

The historian Dušan Třeštík also drew attention to this in the 1990s when he said that we need to reinvent the Czech nation. What he actually meant was that history is not just positivist knowledge, but also comprises constantly changing value judgements.
I agree entirely that history's job is to explore the past, but the story and narrative are always loaded with a specific value-charged bullet that we use to shape our present and find our bearings in the future. There are moments in the collective memory of any modern nation in which national identity is inherent. It is not important in the slightest whether these events really happened or have been thought up by historians and national revivalists. They may be tragic or heroically celebrated. Through them, modern nations come up with answers to the question of where they come from, what they are, and where they are heading, and, out of these historical events, they compose their own meaningful narratives of history and try to cobble together universally valid canons from them. Historical texts pile up and often contradict each other, but, most of all, they assure us that even products of social imagination, such as modern nations, can share a very specific historical experience and thus confirm that they have a right to exist. As the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs said: collective memory is our lived history. Rather than start at the be-