

Tomas Sniegon, *Vanished History. The Holocaust in Czech and Slovak Historical Culture*, New York: Berghahn Books 2014. 248pp.
ISBN: 978-1-78238-295-9

The book under review, titled *Vanished History. The Holocaust in Czech and Slovak Historical Culture* by Tomas Sniegon, represents a major contribution to the field of collective memory and Holocaust studies in the Czech and Slovak republics. Tomas Sniegon offers a thoughtful analysis of the Holocaust's position in Czech and Slovak historical culture during 'the long 1990s'. The author's goal is to understand how exactly both societies embraced their problematic past on a national and European level. In his research, Sniegon tries to understand "*why the same regime that had defined itself as being consistently anti-Nazi and anti-fascist avoided a debate of the Holocaust [...]*". (p. 6) In the 1990s, the historical consciousness was molded into desired narratives that were dictated by political needs in Czech and Slovak societies. Both societies were searching for a new identity and faced the pressure of Europeanization. In the face of the need to construct a 'supranational' European identity, memory became a natural target and eventually a vying for the locus of power. Whereas the EU, in accordance with the 'unity in difference' principle encouraged the post-communist states to come to terms with their own problematic fascist and communist past, nationalists perceived memory as a realm of 'refuge', a modern fortress where national identity is preserved. Each post-communist succession state faced the trauma of identity confusion and struggled to find its own way of dealing with the pressure of Europeanization. In this regard, the European Union's interest in issues of memory and remembrance posed some serious problems.

The book revolves around four examples of different historical positions in Czech and Slovak societies – cases which, in Sniegon's view, "[...] reflect the essential features of Czech and Slovak historical cultures in relation to the Holocaust". (p. 6) The first debate focuses on the division of Czechoslovakia in 1990–1992 with questions about the past and the search for a new identity in the early 90's. The second debate concerns the Czech reaction to Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, as examined within the context of the "*Americanization of the Holocaust*". (p. 7) The third debate deals with the memorial sites Lety and Hodonín u Kunštátu, where two concentration camps for Roma were formed in World War II. The last debate in the book concerns the ways the Holocaust has been presented in the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising, which is the most prominent World War II museum in Slovakia.

Methodologically, Sniegon operates with the notion of historical consciousness as defined by Karl-Ernst Jeismann in 1979. In particular, Sniegon embraced historical consciousness as "*an effective weapon in the struggle for political power in a country.*" (p. 8) Since it is impossible to approach historical consciousness as an object, Sniegon is left to study its artefacts in order to understand its inner mechanism. The Slovak and Czech case studies presented in the book are set within the frame of the larger processes of Americanization and Europeanization of the Holo-

caust. In terms of the Americanization of the Holocaust, it was primarily the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and the *Schindler's List* movie that had a far reaching impact on the perception of the Holocaust, especially in Czech Republic. (p. 14) As far as the process of Europeanization is concerned, the European Union was struggling to find a common denominator that would embrace European member states on a ideological platform. Sniegon has demarcated four dominating historical narratives that cover the period from the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 up until the split of Czechoslovakia in 1992. In their search for identity in the 1990s, the Czech Republic and Slovakia struggled to master their past and developed their own respective narratives. The Czechoslovak communist narrative, the Czech national-liberal narrative, the Slovak national-Catholic narrative, and the Slovak national-European narrative strove to "[...] legitimize different interests and power positions in Czech and Slovak societies". (p. 27) Whereas all of these narratives are almost exclusively concerned with World War II, the interpretation of this historical event and scenarios for future developments alter significantly.

The Czech national-liberal narrative is built on the tradition of the first Czechoslovak Republic, which was established in 1918. This historical narrative underlines the betrayal of Czechoslovakia by Western states in Munich and also acknowledges the responsibility of Slovak autonomists for the destruction of the common states of the Czechs and Slovaks. The responsibility for all the atrocities of 1939–1945 is ascribed to the German occupiers. Within the frame of the Czech national-liberal narrative, reference to the Jews or the Holocaust is generally absent. The only exception, when Jews were brought to the center of attention, was an effort to emphasize Czechoslovakia's unique position in Central Europe between the wars. As this narrative goes, the absence of persecution of Jews and the overall wellbeing of Jews in the region is proof that interwar Czechoslovakia was the only island of democracy in the region. Although this stream occasionally attacked the communist regime's 'forgetting' of the Holocaust with the aim of undermining communism, the leading intellectuals of the national-liberal narrative, such as President Václav Havel and the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier, bypassed the topic of the Holocaust in silence.

The Slovak national-Catholic narrative is centered on the establishment of the wartime Slovak state in 1939. The reasoning behind the national state was to make concessions to the powerful Nazi Germany in order to avoid the fate of Bohemia and Moravia, to avoid the threat of being divided between Hungary and Poland and finally, to become free of Hungarian and Czech oppression. (p. 41) In this narrative framework, the Slovak National Uprising of 1944 was an uprising of traitors, and the USSR was not seen as a liberator but rather as an enemy. After the fall of communism, this stream strove to revive an independent Slovakia where the Slovak language and Catholicism would represent, again, the core values of Slovak national consciousness. The Slovak national-Catholic narrative was directly linked to the Slovak World Congress in Canada and the Catholic Church in Slovakia, which promoted their interpretation of the past with the help of some ultra-nation-

alists, the Matica Slovenská and the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). Sniegon brings to the fore a few events to confirm that the Catholic Church and the Slovak World Congress (SWC) developed efforts aimed at defending the problematic historical figure of Jozef Tiso. The SWC, which was established in 1970 mostly by the pro-Tiso émigrés from the wartime Slovak state, supported Slovak nationalistic aspirations financially and symbolically. It did this, for example, by awarding The National Prize to Jan Chrysostom Korec – the bishop who defended the wartime Slovak state and its priest-president Jozef Tiso. (p. 49) Sniegon then goes on to inform the reader about the activities of the émigré historians Milan Ďurica and František Vnuk – the subject that receives the most attention in comparison to the author’s previous descriptions of the major actors in the selected narratives. The followers of the Slovak national-Catholic narratives avoided the painful issue of the legitimacy of the Slovak wartime state and more importantly, the Holocaust of Jews in Slovakia.

The task of the Czechoslovak communist narrative was to justify the links between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union and other communist countries – a task that broke apart after the fall of communism. According to this narrative, the Western, i.e. capitalist, countries betrayed Czechoslovakia in Munich, and thus the only genuine ally of Czechoslovakia was the Soviet Union. (p. 43) To defend communist regimes, this narrative blamed the personal qualities of communist leaders, rather than the system itself, for being responsible for the crimes committed after the war under Stalinism. The Prague Spring was seen as a plot by counter-revolutionaries to get rid of communism and the country’s brotherly ties with the Soviet Union.

The Slovak national-European narrative is described by Sniegon as “*stand[ing] in opposition to both the communist and the national-Catholic narrative.*” (p. 44) Its starting point is the Slovak National Uprising, which is interpreted as an event that paved the way to democracy. In the eyes of many Slovaks, the uprising is the symbol of Europeanization, i.e. the effort to conquer dictatorship and to build new democracies.

In chapter II Sniegon aims to scrutinize the approaches to the Holocaust after the war. Although the immediate postwar period saw some attempts at bringing public attention to the Holocaust, the situation changed dramatically in 1949 when the Soviet bloc lost control of the situation in the newly established State of Israel. Clearly, Soviet foreign policy in Israel had a direct and far-reaching impact on Czech-Jewish relations in Czechoslovakia. As a result of the deteriorating Soviet-Israeli relations, the 1950s were marked by a purge of high-ranking communists of Jewish origin. Sniegon concludes that “*the development during the 1950s not only erased the victims’ ethnicity but also changed the perpetrators’ clearly defined national features*”. (p. 63) The interpretation of fascism, too, acquired a new meaning in the 1950s: it was embraced “*as the creation of American capital creation but also, paradoxically, as the Jewish product of ‘cosmopolitan capital’*”. (p. 63)

In the second part of this chapter, Sniegon reflects on the process of “*the individualization of the war and the Holocaust*” in film and literature of the late 1950s.

Authors such as Jozef Škvorecký, Arnošt Lustig, Jan Otčenášek and Ladislav Fuks focused on individuals who failed to fit into the mainstream representation of the past, thus raising some unpleasant questions that resulted in a series of heated debates. According to Sniegon, about thirty films were made during the 1960s with the aim of addressing the tragic events of 1939–1945. In particular, war films – an extremely popular genre during communism – represented an experimental terrain against which contemporary societal concerns were often negotiated. Often erasing the boundaries between the established categories of the perpetrator and the bystander, these films questioned forms of resistance and tackled a variety of moral issues. In so doing, they not only questioned the conscience of Czechs and Slovaks, but more importantly, they served as a platform for a debate about their painful past. The thriving of this new culture was abruptly halted by the period of normalization in the 1970s.

In Slovakia, the so called ‘diaspora’ – i.e. the generation of émigrés who defended the legacy of the wartime Slovak president Jozef Tiso – had an important impact on the reconstruction of the past in the early 1990s. Tomas Sniegon’s reflections on the role of the Slovak World Congress – among whose founders were Jozef Kirschbaum, the former General Secretary of Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party and Ferdinand Ďurčanský, Tiso’s former foreign minister – represent a valuable contribution to our understanding of the formation of the collective memory in the early 1990s. Composed of both moderate and radical representatives, the SWC displayed some inner rifts in terms of embracing their painful past. Regardless of these differences of view, it was the radicals’ views that dictated the SWC’s policies. The major ideological lines promoted by the SWC included a defence of Jozef Tiso’s legacy, a presentation of Slovaks as victims of Nazism, an unwillingness to admit Slovak complicity in the Holocaust, and ‘Slovakia for Slovaks’. Sniegon then goes on to reflect on the controversial views of two diaspora historians – František Vnuk and Milan Ďurica. Both of these historians, who grew up in wartime Slovakia and emigrated after World War II, shared the view that formed the backbone of the Slovak national-Catholic narrative: *“Tiso was ‘deceived’ by Hitler and ‘persuaded’ by the Jews to keep his post as the Slovak President, he was [...] a relatively naive man who could be deceived and manipulated. However, the same Tiso appeared as a clever strategist and very determined politician who would compromise a little in certain tactical matters, but who would never compromise in his strategic goal to do what was best for Slovakia.”* (p. 81) More importantly, this narrative bears the anti-Semitic stereotypes of the interwar period (Jews were not loyal to the Slovak state; Jews steal from Slovaks; Jews are Christ-killers). Such views circulated among senior political representatives who, on certain occasions, expressed their views in public. Sniegon further brings into the picture the so-called ‘discreet nationalists’ or ‘mild nationalists’ (The ‘Christian Democratic Party’, and its leader, Ján Čarnogurský, and the Slovak Catholic Church, Matica Slovenská, and the representatives of the leading political party HZDS) who supported Tiso’s legacy but were not necessarily deniers of the Holocaust as such. (p. 85) The Slovak Catholic Church’s approach to the wartime Slovak state was also

problematic. As Sniegon reminds us, “*the Church never directly referred to the Holocaust in either a national, religious or any other context. Moreover, its leading representatives, with their Tiso-friendly stance, were never forced to explicitly explain how they viewed the Holocaust.*” (p. 87)

One of the most controversial Holocaust movies *Schindler's List* had an impact on the Czech national identity building process in the 1990s. (p. 108) In particular, the commemoration of the rescue work of the Sudeten German Oscar Schindler polarized the opinions of Czech historians and politicians. Given the problematic relations between the Germans and Czechs in the past and the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia during the war, the commemoration of Schindler's rescue work turned out to be a sensitive issue. Although Schindler's story had roots in the Holocaust, the debate itself hardly touched upon the Holocaust context of Schindler's rescue of Jews and, instead, ossified around Schindler's ethnic identity. In fact, the attacks against the commemoration of Schindler's rescue of 1,200 Polish Jews came from the right and left of the political spectrum. Sniegon further highlights the general unwillingness of historians and politicians to break with the ‘good Czech’ versus ‘bad German’ dichotomy. Such an unwillingness to scrutinize the ‘grey zones’ of their past resulted in a failure of Czech self-reflection in the 1990s. (p. 118) More importantly still, the Jews occupied an ambivalent place in the debate. According to Sniegon, “[...] *the Jews were used as an argument against Germany and Germans, but when such a use had fulfilled its role, Jews and their memory of the Holocaust were denied or criticized without any deeper analysis.*” (p. 117) Overall, the Holocaust played a secondary role in the Czech debate about *Schindler's List*. On the part of the Czechs, there was no real effort to come to terms with their problematic past. Hence, the behavior of ‘ordinary Czechs’ during the Holocaust and the experiences of the Czech (or former Czechoslovak) Jews at times of persecution were never subjects of major discussion. Instead, the Czechs further embraced their status as the collective victims of the Germans and reinforced the old perceptions of the past.

In chapter V, Sniegon targets one of the most heated debates in the Czech Republic – the painful history of Lety in the Písek district about 100 km south of Prague. Roma citizens suffered and were murdered in the Lety concentration camp, which was guarded by Czechs. After the war, the Roma *Porrajmos* was not only bypassed in silence, it was desecrated in the 1970s when the communist authorities built a pig farm on the site of the former camp in Lety. American researcher Paul Polanski, who brought the painful history of Lety to the general attention of the post-communist Czech government, was stunned by the overall level of ignorance and racism of the Czech authorities, who refused to pay respect to the Roma victims of the Holocaust. Sniegon scrutinizes how the dominant Czech historical narrative was always brought to the fore in the course of “*the most comprehensive, heated and longest Czech debate (1994–1999) on the Holocaust after the fall of the Iron Curtain*”. (p. 135) Within the frame of this debate, Sniegon traces several major ways of using history: the moral use of history (Václav Havel, Paul Polansky), the manipulating use of history, the existential use of history and the

ideological use of history. The moral use of history “[...] *primarily rejected a more or less open conflict and tension between, on the one hand, the foreign users, i.e., Polansky, Pape, some U.S. institutions and the EU – and, on the other, the Czechs. The main victims of the Porrajmos, Czech Roma, ended up in the shade.*” (p. 148)

While Czech and international actors developed an effort to utilize Lety’s problematic past for their respective purposes, the Roma’s minority as a central figure of the discussion was left out of the debate. This lack of response on the part of Roma has its roots in the Roma perception of history, which, according to Barany, was “[...] *an alien concept in Romani culture, where the dead are rarely mentioned and seldom become the subjects of commemoration.*” (p. 152) Roma are often seen as the ‘children of the moment’ who live for the present and ignore both the future and the past. Such a perception of one’s past poses a number of challenges in the culture of memory politics. Sniegon raises a series of poignant questions that have yet to be answered: “*If the Roma’s historical culture is not bound to history in the same way as many others are, what notion of the Roma’s future would this reflect? And if the Roma’s thoughts about the future were different, to what purpose would they use history at all? There is hitherto very little research on this topic, but if this were the case, for whom would the monument in Lety actually be intended?*” (p. 153) Sniegon makes it clear that the Czech nation’s rejection of the Roma’s right to their own history, and the denial of the *Porrajmos*, stem from the mass oppression of Roma in the Czech milieu. (p. 158) The claims that “*the Czech Roma died as the result of illnesses and the bad hygienic situation in the camp*” or the argument that “*the camp was not guarded as intensely as ‘real’ concentration camps*” tried to relativize the responsibility of the Czechs for the persecution of the Roma minority in Lety.

The main focus of chapter VI is the Múzeum SNP (the ‘Museum of the Slovak National Uprising’) and its attempt to embrace the problematic past in relation to the Holocaust. The Slovak National Uprising as a key historical event in the Slovak past needed to be ‘mastered’ for the Museum’s current political and existential needs. Sniegon sides with the view of the Slovak sociologist Silvia Miháliková, that the mastering of this historical event in the 1990s has clearly demonstrated “[...] *the Slovak transition from the cross (which was the symbol of Catholic nationalism) to a Slovak star on the EU flag.*” (p. 167) In the early 1990s, the Museum abandoned its former communist ideology, later turning from the Czechoslovak to the Slovak context and steering towards the project of a unified Europe. In 1998, when a new government coalition in Bratislava sought to bring Slovakia into the EU and NATO, the Holocaust made its way into general public awareness and returned to the exhibitions and conferences that were organized by the Museum. However, the attempt to master their problematic past turned out to be a rather challenging task. Sniegon brings to the fore several problematic issues that prevent a connection being made between the Slovak National Uprising and the Holocaust in a way that the Museum wished for. Establishing a meaningful connection between the Slovak National Uprising and the Holocaust aimed to undermine the na-

tional-Catholic narrative of the past. The history of the uprising, however, failed to establish such a link, since none of the groups involved in the uprising were pleased with the participation of the Jews who often joined the uprising as the only means of escape from the Holocaust. The claims that the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising was “[...] a *milestone in the Slovak Jews’ position in society*” thus stood on shaky ground. (p. 183) In 1998, with a change of government and a new course towards the Europeanization of Slovakia, the Slovak National Uprising was placed in new ideological frameworks. In particular, parallels were drawn between the uprising as a vehicle towards a postwar anti-fascist Europe and the uprising as a vehicle towards a new Europe, i.e. the European Union. However, as Sniegon notes, “*the Holocaust did not either fit into this Slovak ‘Europeanised’ historical picture*”. (p. 188) Placing the Holocaust at the center of public attention was to underscore the Slovaks’ siding with the anti-fascist coalition rather than the Slovaks’ loyalty to the wartime clerico-fascist state. (p. 196) As in the Czech debate about *Schindler’s List*, the Jews were never discussed as victims, and neither was there discussion about the perpetrators and bystanders. The discussion about the victims and their experiences would ultimately lead to the discussion about the perpetrators and the complicity of the Slovaks in the Holocaust. Such a debate might have a serious impact on the efforts to Europeanize Slovakia, since one of the major denominators of the European Union project was also anti-fascism. As Sniegon reminds us, “*neither Jews nor the Holocaust have fitted into the picture of the active Slovak resistance to ‘fascism’ [...]*” (p. 196) It was difficult to reconcile the Museum’s interpretation of the Holocaust and the EU’s interpretation of the problematic past.

The last chapter reflects on the lack of historical culture in Slovakia and the Czech Republic with regard to the Holocaust. Czech historical culture was almost untouched by the Americanization of the Holocaust; instead, it was preoccupied with its own role as a victim. In comparison, Slovak historical culture was more pre-occupied with the Holocaust due to the historical context of 1939–1945. The Holocaust was used for a variety of political goals. While the national-Catholic narrative used the Holocaust “*to explain away the Slovak guilt*”, the ‘anti-nationalists’ utilized the Holocaust “*to compromise the group of people that had managed to assume power over the Slovak state and the nation.*” (p. 206)

The main conclusion of Sniegon’s study is “*that neither in the Czech nor the Slovak historical cultures has the Holocaust become what German historian, Jörn Rüsen, calls a borderline event, a trauma considered necessary for the construction of historical narratives that make sense of national history.*” (p. 215) The Czech Republic and Slovakia failed to challenge their ethno-national narratives and replace them with a common European historical narrative that promotes ethnic and religious tolerance and the struggle against racism. Tomas Sniegon’s *Vanished History* is an insightful study that offers a solid contribution to our understanding of memory politics in the Central European milieu.

Nina Paulovičová