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Vanished history: the Holocaust in Czech and Slovak historical culture

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BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Vanished history: the Holocaust in Czech and Slovak historical culture, by Tomas Sniegon, New York, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2014, 248 pp., US\$79.71 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-782-38294-2

In his pioneering work *Vanished History: The Holocaust in Czech and Slovak Historical Culture*, Tomas Sniegon, a historian of European studies at the University of Lund, studies the “historical consciousness” and “historical culture” of the Holocaust in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in “the long 1990s”, between 1989 (the fall of communism) and 2004 (entry into the European Union). He analyzes the Holocaust’s incorporation, or lack thereof, into Czech and Slovak historical consciousness based on four case studies: the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1990–1992; the release of Steven Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List*; the debate around the sites memorializing the Roma genocide (the *Porrajmos*); and the discussions concerning the most prominent Slovak historical museum in Banská Bystrica. In Sniegon’s words, “the book concerns the role of history during the two societies’ development from dictatorship to democracy, when both were forced to redefine themselves both internally and in relation to the wider world” (1).

Sniegon argues that during the post-communist transformation when the Czech Republic and Slovakia aspired to become “European”, there was an urgent need to deal with their history, including the Holocaust. In post-1989 Europe, the history of the Holocaust took centre stage as an alleged litmus test of “restored humanity”¹ and thus a vital building block in a new European identity. As a result, one might have expected that the Czech and Slovak historical cultures integrated the Holocaust as “a *borderline event*, a trauma considered necessary for the construction of historical narratives that make sense of national history” (215). However, Sniegon argues, that was not the case. In the Czech Republic, the Holocaust continued to be seen as an external phenomenon which had nothing to do with Czechs, while in Slovakia it was used to underline the heroism of ordinary Slovaks and the absolute power of the Tiso regime.

The first part of Sniegon’s argument is not new. Tony Judt has already posited the role of memory of the Holocaust for post-communist East European nations. By and large, Holocaust memory is a well-established and intensely examined field, albeit admittedly not in Czech or Slovak studies. Sniegon’s work importantly fills in that gap. Sniegon is most convincing and original in his main thesis: the failure of the incorporation of the Holocaust into Czech and Slovak national histories in the 1990s. Instead of the theory of collective memory, Sniegon uses the theory of historical consciousness and historical culture. He theorizes historical consciousness in Karl-Ernst Jeismann’s terms as “a mental capacity that helps human beings to orientate themselves temporarily in life and to create meaning out of their experience of the past and expectations for the future” (212). Historical culture – artefacts, textbooks, scholarly monographs, exhibitions, films, and public debates – is a tangible manifestation of historical consciousness. Sniegon skilfully and convincingly uses Czech and Slovak historical culture, mainly press articles, monographs, and films, as empirical evidence to support his thesis.

The end result is a fascinating journey into the Czech and Slovak historical narratives of the 1990s that is dotted with only minor shortcomings. Occasionally, Sniegon misses important historiographical contributions, such as Hasia Diner's debunking of the postwar "myth of silence".² A lack of adequate copy-editing makes his narrative difficult to follow at times. These are, however, minor weaknesses in an otherwise important and original contribution to the growing field of Czech and Slovak Holocaust studies.

Notes

1. Judt, *Postwar*.
2. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence*.

References

- Diner, Hasia. *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.
- Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*. London: Heinemann, 2005.

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