

Zdeněk V. David, *Realism, Tolerance, and Liberalism in the Czech National Awakening*. Washington D.C. and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. 479 pp.

Zdeněk V. David's massive study of intellectual sources of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Czech national awakening takes up a long-standing and fiercely debated question: did the Counter-Reformation, which took particularly zealous form in the Bohemian lands following the Habsburg victory at the Battle of White Mountain (1620), represent a decisive break with the Czech culture that had preceded it? At the turn of the twentieth century no less a figure than T. G. Masaryk had argued that the national awakening indeed drew on the legacy of the Czech Reformation, and in particular of the Czech Brethren. Josef Pekař, perhaps the leading historian of that time, countered that the historical break was too deep, that Masaryk's scheme was too speculative, and that the sources of the national awakening must be sought in the centuries that directly preceded it, that is, in the Counter-Reformation itself. David presents an original response to this question: he agrees with Masaryk that the Czech Reformation constituted a fundamental source for the national awakening, but identifies Czech Utraquism rather than the Brethren or any of the more radical factions of Hussitism as the primary inspiration.

This may sound like a point of detail, but the implications are considerable. First, it is a matter of historical record rather than abstract speculation that the Czech awakeners embarked on a vast programme of recovering and translating the textual legacy of the late fifteenth through early seventeenth centuries, which they identified as a 'Golden Age' and in which they sought norms for their own linguistic and cultural practice. David brings extensive erudition to bear in documenting this process. Second, he combats what

might be termed the ‘linguistic fallacy’, which sees in the recovery of ancient literary and religious texts written in Czech merely a desire to celebrate the language itself. David portrays the awakeners as displaying a ‘pragmatic attitude towards language use’ (p. 71) and as more interested in particular ideas than in the language in which those ideas are expressed; this constitutes a direct challenge to most accounts of nineteenth-century national movements, which attribute signal importance to language. Third, David presents a particular interpretation, and impassioned defense, of late medieval and early modern Bohemian Utraquism as a ‘middle way’ between Roman Catholic orthodoxy and radical Lutheran Protestantism, which allows him to posit a kindred spirit uniting Utraquism with the Catholic Enlightenment of the later eighteenth century. Religious tolerance and relatively free discussion of religious questions, an emphasis on the individual over community, and an anti-elitist, vernacular impulse constitute this shared heritage. David thus characterizes the Czech national awakening as a product of universalist Enlightenment rationality and contrasts it sharply with the particularist ‘emotional romanticism’ (p. 115) of other national movements.

This last claim is both one of the boldest and most problematic of the book. Extolling the central importance of figures such as Karl Heinrich Seibt, Franz Exner, and especially Bernard Bolzano, David relentlessly denies the significance of Herder. Standard accounts of Herder’s influence are, indeed, often too simplistic. But David’s own account of Herder (and of Hegel) is woefully one-sided, and his refutations of the significant evidence of the awakeners’ interest are not convincing. Moreover, ‘Herder’ is not the same as ‘Herderianism’—a European phenomenon that emerges during the Napoleonic period and is based on a particular, contentious understanding of Herder’s

thought—and the influence of ‘Herderianism’ cannot be measured or denied by adding up the number of times Herder’s work is cited or his name mentioned. Further, David’s forceful claim that only the Slovak awakeners (many of whom wrote in Czech) were susceptible to the excesses of Herderian nationalism and quasi-mystical pan-Slavism, which the more sober and culturally confident Czechs regarded as a ‘puerile infatuation’ (p. 110), is surely debatable.

Overall the book is more persuasive in what it recovers than in what it feels compelled to reject. In particular David’s discussion of anti-Hegelianism in Bohemia, and his defense of the progressive philosophical legacy of the Catholic Enlightenment, present important counterbalances to prevailing scholarly presumptions. But the overriding characterization of a liberal, tolerant and rationalist Austro-Bohemian Utraquist tradition combating the murky mysticism of ‘German’ Romanticism and Idealism is overly schematic. Moreover, couching the analysis of historical influences in such value-laden terms makes the argument too partisan. (The figure who represents perhaps the greatest challenge to this scheme is Josef Jungmann, whose attitude towards language was hardly just ‘pragmatic’; Jungmann receives surprisingly light treatment in this study, and his conflicts with Josef Dobrovský and contrasts with Bolzano are not discussed.) Further, David’s presentation of the (Czech) national awakeners as confident, yet modest and tolerant, rationalists leaves too many of their claims unquestioned. Their denigration of post-1620 literature, for example, downplayed or ignored the significant cultural contributions of Jesuit figures such as Fridrich Bridel (1619-80), one of the most important Czech-language poets of the Baroque era. One might also wonder whether it is simple coincidence that exalting the Utraquist period allowed the awakeners to criticize

the post-1620 Counter-Reformation but still to identify their ‘Golden Age’ primarily with the Habsburg dynasty, rather than, say, the Luxemburg or Přemyslid period. In short, intellectual trends are rarely without blind spots and ulterior motives, and more critical scepticism in this respect would be welcome. Finally, historical influence is not a zero-sum game: emphasizing how the Utraquist legacy and figures such as Bolzano have not received due consideration need not require denying that Herder (or rather, Herderianism) was also a crucial factor in the national awakening. The insistence that one legacy simply displace the other stands in contrast to the careful and intricate erudition that lies behind this book.

Thus, as is often true of revisionist arguments, David overstates his case and dismisses potential counter-arguments too hastily. For that reason this book (especially its closing claims) will doubtless generate debate. None the less, exaggerations notwithstanding, David has done a remarkable service by opening up these questions with a level of thoroughness and learning that are truly impressive.

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—Peter Zusi