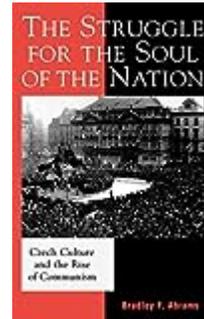




**Bradley F. Abrams.** *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004. viii + 363 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-3023-2.



**Reviewed by** Melissa Feinberg (University of North Carolina at Charlotte)

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## The Battle for Hearts and Minds in Postwar Czechoslovakia

In his new book, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism*, Bradley F. Abrams attacks the Cold War era narrative of how the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC) worked its way into power during the years between 1945 and 1948. In that version of events, Czech and Slovak opposition leaders fought a courageous but ultimately futile battle against a vastly more prepared Communist Party organization that used the might of Moscow to seize control of the government and stifle democracy. Abrams challenges this interpretation, arguing instead that non-Communist Czech intellectuals themselves (his study does not include Slovakia) contributed to the rise of Communism by essentially allowing the Communist party to set the terms of political debate during the years between 1945 and 1948. After ceding the initiative to the KSC, they found themselves unable to offer any real alternative to the Communist program. In short, Czech intellectuals gave legitimacy and credibility to the Communists, helping to “create a context in which the Communist party could and did obtain widespread support, substantially easing its path to total power” (p. 6).

The book arrives at this conclusion by analyzing the published work of both Communist and non-Communist Czech intellectuals. Abrams’s aim is to reconstruct the public conversations these men (only one woman, the Catholic writer Helena Kozeluhova, is included as a regular participant) had over the nature of the Czech nation and its path to a better future. To accomplish this goal, the author uses an exhaustive survey of prominent Czech newspapers and journals from 1945 through early 1948 as his primary source base. From this enormous mass of material, Abrams skillfully plucks the threads that form the basis of his narrative.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which has multiple chapters. The first section sets the scene. Its first chapter usefully summarizes the impact of the Second World War on the region of Eastern Europe as a whole, arguing that the rise of Communist governments after 1945 can only be understood in light of what happened during the war itself, and not just by the position of Red Army units at the war’s end. Abrams also gives this as his reason for concentrating solely on the Czechs, claiming that because the Czech and Slovak lands had such differ-

ent war experiences, each must be considered on its own terms. In the Czech case, for example, as a later chapter in the book explains, the memory of Munich loomed large in ways simply not seen in Slovakia, filtering into a general distrust of the West and creating widespread sympathy for the Communist call to “revise the [Czech] national character” (p. 104).

Further chapters in this section present the book’s cast of characters: four groups of Czech “intellectuals,” a term here broadly defined to include just about all public figures who wrote essays about politics in major newspapers and reviews. The first three groups are constituted mainly around political ideologies. They are the Communists, into which are lumped a few other left-wing Marxists; the “democratic socialists,” drawn mainly from the National Socialist party, who liked socialism but did not approve of Marxism; and the Roman Catholics, who supported the more right-wing People’s Party and did not approve of any sort of socialism. The last group is the Protestants, represented here mainly by the Czechoslovak Church and the Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren, who espoused a progressive politics that drew them close to the Communists. As the book makes clear, however, all four groups shared one goal: the reinvigoration of the Czech nation. All also agreed that achieving this goal required social and economic change, and all except the Catholics believed that the new Czechoslovakia should accept some form of socialism. Where they disagreed, when they did do so, was over the nature and extent of Czechoslovakia’s transformation, not in the need for it.

The remaining two sections of the book chart the debates amongst these four groups of Czech intellectuals over their plans for the nation. The second section considers how Czech thinkers fought over the meaning of both the distant and recent past. Contests over the legacy of Jan Hus or the way to remember the First Czechoslovak Republic were far more than academic exercises in the charged atmosphere of these years. By presenting a new picture of the past, the Communist Party hoped to bolster its claim to lead the Czech nation into its postwar future. To this end, Communist intellectuals created a surprisingly durable version of Czech history that supported both Marxist socialism and an alliance with the USSR over the West. Non-Communist intellectuals found themselves struggling to come up with an equally coherent vision of the past, and they often simply could not provide a good alternative.

As one example, Communist writers tried to appro-

priate the figure of Tomas Masaryk, Czechoslovakia’s first president, by downplaying his well-known criticism of Marx and casting him as a revolutionary and proto-Communist who would have supported the People’s Democracy. Although this might seem a bit far-fetched, Abrams shows how, at the time, non-Communist intellectuals found it hard to counter this interpretation with one of their own. Only the Catholics were able to successfully develop their own claim to be the true inheritors of Masaryk’s legacy, by positing him as a Christian humanist vigorously opposed to Marxism. Their Protestant compatriots largely went along with the Communist version, emphasizing Masaryk’s socialist credentials.

The democratic socialists, who might have had the best claim to Masaryk’s legacy, did try to grab him back from the Communists, but failed in their attempt. They were largely stymied by the fact that they did not want to seem as if they were casting aspersions on the socialist outlines of the postwar Czechoslovak state, of which they approved. Their remarks about Masaryk, therefore, always had to begin from the premise that he would have preferred the “socialist” Czechoslovakia of 1945 to the “bourgeois” Czechoslovakia of 1918, which gave them little room in which to distinguish themselves from their Marxist opponents. This, charges Abrams, was fatal. By endlessly trying to split hairs with the Communists over what kind of socialism Masaryk would want, they effectively gave credence to the larger claim that Masaryk could be a source of legitimacy for a socialist Czechoslovakia.

The third section of the book shifts from debates over Czech history to arguments over the political direction of the country, specifically the Communist plan for a “Czechoslovak road to socialism.” The basic outline of the story here is the same as above. It was the Czech Communist intellectuals who proved most able to present a clear, unique, and compelling vision for the nation, while their opponents were often reduced to simply reacting to Communist ideas. In 1946, the KSC proclaimed that it would follow its own “road to socialism.” The “Czechoslovak road” would essentially mix the existing (and popular) changes that had been enacted since 1945 with the new economic goals of the Two Year plan, while denying any need for a dictatorship of the proletariat or other Soviet innovations.

Protestant intellectuals fell in love with the idea of the “Czechoslovak road,” endorsing it to the point that Abrams claims they were trying to create “Christianity with a socialist face.” (p.255). Once again, the democratic

socialist camp tried to show that it had a better plan for carrying Czechoslovakia to socialism, but its ideas were vague at best, and they were unable to show how they differed from the KSC in any meaningful way. The Catholics fare somewhat better in Abrams's analysis. Unlike the democratic socialists, they could present a clear alternative to the Communist program, one that differed in policy as well as ideology. But their noble efforts, praised by the author, were not enough to create a viable alternative to the KSC, which had otherwise been allowed to create a political culture it could easily dominate.

This book provides a very convincing case for revising Cold War notions of the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia. The author clearly asserts that, in Czechoslovakia at least, the Communists could come to power on the wings of popular support, not merely via the force of Moscow. Ironically, it was opposition intellectuals themselves who helped create this base of support, by contributing to a culture in which socialism was widely accepted as the best path for the Czech nation, leaving the KSC, as the party with the strongest socialist message and the best organization, at a considerable advantage.

The author seems to want us to hold these opposition leaders responsible for the dictatorship that resulted from this. Even though he admits that the KSC did not plan for a totalitarian regime in advance (and did not even have much of a plan at all), he still holds the opposition to task for not being more suspicious of them from the very beginning. The "democratic socialists" in particular are constantly referred to as "naive," "blind," "manip-

ulated," and "vulnerable," while the idea that they might take anything the Communists said at face value is "disturbing," "alarming," "shocking," and "perturbing." While these kinds of adjectives may be warranted from the perspective of those of us who know how the story turns out once the Communists do take power, the book's emphasis on blame shows perhaps how hard it is to truly break away from the mind set of the Cold War, which placed a priority on rooting out and exposing those who supported Communism. While certainly understandable, this need to find and label those responsible clouds other questions that could help us understand these events in a different way.

What was it that made so many Czech intellectuals firmly believe that socialism was the best route for their nation? Where did this remarkable consensus come from? Although this book does occasionally address these questions, its language tends to underplay them, as when the author remarks that democratic socialists supported Communist policies from either "noble conviction, naivete, or blindness" (p. 102). Yet, from the vantage point of 1946, why should they have been so wary of the Czechoslovak Communists, who ostensibly held many of their own ideals and who, at that time, steadfastly declared themselves to be democrats? Perhaps the next generation of research on this topic, even farther removed from the Cold War and the burden of leveling responsibility, will concern itself with critically examining these issues. Bradley F. Abrams has left these future researchers an excellent foundation for their efforts. His work will certainly set the standard on this subject for years to come.

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