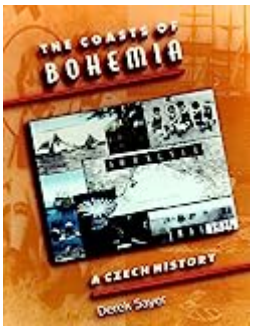
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Derek Sayer. *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. xv + 442 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-05760-6.

Reviewed by Hugh Agnew (George Washington University)

Published on HABSBURG (October, 1999)

Charting the Coastlines of Identity

I admit that when I approached reading this book, I did so with all the head-lowered, hackles-raised, stiff-gaited, deeply-growling hostility of any highly territorial beast who sees his turf invaded by an interloper. By the time I finished Derek Sayer's *The Coasts of Bohemia*, I was convinced that this excursion by a sociologist into aspects of Czech cultural history was stimulating, often provocative, sometimes exasperating, and thoroughly well worth reading.

Sayer's work has the subtitle, "A Czech History" and it is important to note that both the article and the adjective are relevant here. This work is not, in fact, a survey of Czech history, the kind of synthesis our undergraduate and even graduate students could use to replace such well-worn but increasingly dated studies as R. W. Seton-Watson's *A History of the Czechs and Slovaks*. It is not even a survey of the history of Czech culture, but rather an extended, often digressive discussion of aspects of identity, the construction of "Czechness," and its consequences for the people so identified. Though the work does range widely over Czech history, it remains only a partial discussion of certain aspects–one Czech history among many potential ones. Of course it has been decades since even the most ambitious historian thought he could produce a complete survey on the scale of, say, Palacky's *History of the Czech Nation in Bohemia and Moravia*,[1] so Derek Sayer's vision of aspects of Czech cultural history is on the whole a welcome addition to other Czech histories.

It is also a very *Czech* history. While Sayer is certainly conscious of the mythological aspects of Czech identity, his sympathy for and identification with his subject is palpable, to the extent of his adopting certain attitudes and even the language of the Czech national discourse itself. For example, he speaks of nation and nationalism during the Hussite period in ways that–at least since the works of such scholars as Gellner, Hobsbawm, Anderson and others–few even among Czech historians would dare. He stresses the significance of the cultural caesura wrought in Czech history by the famous Battle of the White Mountain and subsequent Catholic Reformation and Habsburg centralization, in ways that somehow evoke the nationalist characterization of the "time of darkness" (*doba temna*). Yet he does it while criti-

cally analyzing the way this era has been interpreted by nationalists. Even his stated aim, to remove "Bohemia" from the periphery of European historical imagination–where William Shakespeare had even endowed it with a seacoast–and return it to the "center," echoes the Czech nationalist cliche (shared with the Poles) of being the "Heart of Europe" (as Gordon Pynsent points out in his review: see *Slavic Review*, 58/1 (Spring, 1999): 203-204).

The Czechness of Sayer's history is reinforced by an overwhelming reliance on Czech-language sources. The bibliography reveals no German-language sources, either primary or secondary, with one exception. Surely this is to ignore a large body of literature that, if one is to explore questions of identity in Bohemia fully, cannot safely be left out of consideration? The single exception is the German text of the proclamation establishing the Bohemian Museum (later the National Museum) in Prague, which is contrasted in the work with Josef Jungmann's contemporary–and significantly altered–translation into Czech. It is ironic that, having made the point that this kind of translation can create important shifts in meaning, Sayer's reliance on Czech translations of other texts lands him in precisely the same sort of situation. While discussing Bernard Bolzano's "Ueber die Verhaeltnisse der beiden Volksstaemme in Boehmen," delivered as sermons in 1816 but published (in German) only in 1848, Sayer quotes from the Czech translation edited by Jan Novotny in 1979. In one passage this leads to a confusion of at least minor significance, since Sayer remarks that Bolzano shifts between the concepts "nation" and "nationality" (*narod* and *narodnost*). He quotes Bolzano urging his listeners to consider what Bohemians would be like "if we strove to merge both nationalities (*obe narodnosti*) into one, so that in the end they would form one nation (*jeden narod*)?" (p. 61). In fact the original German uses *Volksstamm* (nationality) throughout this passage, without the shift Sayer mentions. Another minor hiccup caused by lack of familiarity with German (or geography?) is a reference to Count Kinsky's position as director of Maria Theresa's military academy in "Vienna's New Town," which is of course Wiener Neustadt, quite distinct and some distance away from Vienna, unlike Prague's *Nove mesto* (p. 53).

Among the Czech sources, Sayer has integrated a staggering amount of material, and used it quite effectively. Several "naturals" were missing from his bibliography, most notably Jiri Rak's *Byvali Cechove: Ceske historicke myty a stereotypy* [2] and Vladimir Macura's *Znameni zrodu: Ceske obrozeni jako kulturni typ* (though he did include the author's *Stastny vek: symboly, emblemy, a myty, 1948-1989* [3]. Pynsent points to the absence of Albert Prazak's *Narod se branil* to which I might also add the same author's *Ceske obrozeni*.[4]

Sayer has chosen to present his material in only a loosely chronological fashion, beginning with the recent past (important funerals: Karel Capek's in post-Munich but pre-occupation Prague, paired with Karel Hynek Macha's in the Nazi-occupied city–without letting the reader in on the fact that Macha's funeral was a reburial, since he had died over a century earlier, until two-thirds of the way through the description–a nice touch!). He then goes back to medieval, Hussite, and early modern times, then gives a section to the national renascence, one to the interwar years, one to the years of World War II, and one to the Communist period, ending in some undefined "future perfect" in the 1960s. But this is to impose too stark a structure on a narrative that flits tantalizingly from one period to another when it suits, casting references forward and backward at will. For those who stay with him, Sayer's text does provide English translations, frequently of quite long passages, from Czech writers that otherwise would not be available to those without a knowledge of Czech (the translations are the work of Sayer's Czech wife, Alena). This is not a negligible contribution, and would widen the appeal of *The Coasts of Bohemia* to include those English-speaker scholars interested in identity and nationalism who are not area specialists.

In general, though, Sayer's narrative structure does make demands on the reader, and this raises questions about who will benefit by using the book. Certainly it can be read with pleasure by specialists in the field of Central European history, though much of what is in it will be familiar. A student or more general reader seeking orientation in an area that all-too-often seems dauntingly complicated will not find this text an easily-followed map. It is instead more like a series of vignettes, of images, within a loosely-defined overall structure. In fact, Sayer is at his best when discussing images, and the sections on the Czech avant-garde and its twentieth-century fate were for me one of the most successful parts of the book. (Given this concern with image as well as text, it seems odd that the caption to the photograph of Charles Bridge and Old Town of Prague on page 51 misidentifies the Church of the Crusaders with the Red Star as the Jesuit Clementinum). I would assign *The Coasts of Bohemia* to graduate students, but recommend it only with some cautionary advice to more general readers or undergraduates.

The theme from *The Coasts of Bohemia* that stays with the reader after closing the covers is that the definition of Czech identity–the providing of Bohemia with a coastline that separates it from all other islands, and sometimes also entraps those within it–must *include* the period of Communism, and not try to see those forty years as some kind of aberration, a new "time of darkness" that can be selectively forgotten and removed from Czech history. For this, as well as for many memorable juxtapositions of image and text, Derek Sayer's charting of the rugged coastlines of Czech identity will be worth the challenge of reading. But the world will still need historians.

Notes:

[1]. Frantisek Palacky, *Geschichte von Boehmen: Groesstentheils nach Urkunden und Handschriften* (5 vols., Prag: In Commission bei Kronberger und Weber, 1836); in Czech as *Dejiny narodu ceskeho w Cechach a w Morawe: dle puwodnich pramenu* (5 vols., Praha: J. G. Kalve a Ceske Museum, 1848-76).

[2]. Jiri Rak, *Byvali cechove: Ceske historicke myty a stereotypy* (Praha: H&H, 1994).

[3]. Vladimir Macura, *Znameni zrodu: Ceske narodni obrozeni jako kulturni typ* (Praha: H&H, 1995) and *Stastny vek: Symboly, emblemy a myty 1948-1989* (Praha: Prazska imaginace, 1992).

[4]. Albert Prazak, *Narod se branil: Obrany naroda a jazyka ceskeho od nejstarsich dob po pritomnost* (Praha: Sfinx, 1945) and *Ceske obrozeni* (Praha: E. Beaufort, 1948).

Citation: Hugh Agnew. Review of Sayer, Derek, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History.* HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3483