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Chad Bryant, *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2007, xv + 378 pp., £32.95 h/b.

In 1930, Ödön von Horváth, author of *Tales from the Vienna Woods*, could still proclaim himself to be a ‘typical mix of old Austria-Hungary: at once Magyar, Croatian, German and Czech.’ ‘If you ask me,’ he considered, ‘what is my native country, I answer: I was born in Fiume, grew up in Belgrade, Budapest, Pressburg, Vienna and Munich, and I have a Hungarian passport; but I have no fatherland... my country is Hungary, my mother tongue is German.’ A decade later, it was no longer so easy for Central Europeans to insist upon their cosmopolitan roots or to deny allegiance to a ‘fatherland’. ‘Amphibians’ (as bilinguals, the children of mixed parentage and others who could claim more than one ‘nationality’ were known), found themselves under increasing pressure to choose sides: Czech *or* German, but not both. Jews, who had once found it relatively easy to integrate, and Gypsies, who had not, were targeted for exclusion not only from ‘national’, but even public, life. Most were later killed. Not only did ethno-linguistic rivalries and hatreds intensify with the experience of war; all across the rapidly expanding German empire, radical Nazi conceptions of race began to displace other, more traditional indices (such as language or religion) as the primary indicator of ‘nationality’.

Nowhere was the radicalization of nationalism more pointed than in the formerly Austrian provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, home to as hopelessly mixed a people as could be found anywhere, and the setting for Chad Bryant’s fascinating, scholarly and highly readable micro-study of Czech and German nationalism from 1939 (the year in which the German ‘Protectorate’ of Bohemia and Moravia was created out of post-Munich Czechoslovakia) until 1947 (the year in which the resurrected Czechoslovak state forcibly expelled its ethnic German population). The dates which frame *Prague in Black* are not accidental. Bryant argues that it was during the Protectorate that ‘nationality’ in Bohemia and Moravia, ‘once something acted out in civil and political society’, first ‘became something that state officials assigned to individuals’ so that ‘Jews, once designated as such by Nazi officials, found their fates sealed’ while ‘other Nazi officials – armed with X-ray machines, photographs of schoolchildren, and absurd confidence in racialist theories – sought out Czechs who could become Germans.’(p.5)

The tragedy of state-sponsored racism did not stop there. After the war, Bryant reminds us, ‘Czechoslovak officials, sometimes relying on methods and paperwork inherited from their predecessors’, applied the principle of collective guilt to Czechoslovakia’s German-speaking citizens and continued to decide ‘the fates of former Czechoslovak citizens of indeterminate nationality’ (p.5) as if there existed objective criteria for doing so. It is not enough to explain away the postwar expulsions of Germans as revenge for the wartime subjugation of the Czechs and persecution of the Jews: the underlying problem lies in the acceptance of the Nazis’ flawed premise that categories like ‘the Germans’, ‘the Czechs’ or ‘the Jews’ are clear, meaningful and objectively verifiable in the first place.

Drawing on a rich collection of (predominantly German- but also Czech-language) archival sources ranging from diaries and memoirs to reports from the Reich Protector’s office in Prague, the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SS intelligence service) in Berlin, and Czechoslovak Communist reports to Moscow, Bryant has uncovered a story

which is more muddled, contradictory and pathetic – in short, human -- than classic accounts of this fraught chapter in Czech-German relations would suggest. This is a tale with ‘few heroes, few straight lines, many tragic absurdities, and many more unintended outcomes.’ (p.11) Instead of triumphant Sudeten Germans lording it over now officially ‘inferior’ Czechs, Bryant lets us hear the hurt and frightened voices of isolated Bohemian and Moravian German speakers unable to get service in local shops or to keep their businesses afloat because of Czech boycotts. Cold-shouldered by Czech neighbours, Protectorate Germans were simultaneously treated with contempt by Reich Germans, who thought of them as country bumpkins and made them feel like ‘second-class Germans’ (p. 49). Not only did Reich Germans complain that the local *Volksdeutsche* were dirty, ‘disorderly’ and ‘lazy’ (p. 54) and could not speak German properly; they also took their jobs, demanded ‘voluntary’ contributions to Nazi causes, and insisted that their menfolk do compulsory military service in the Reich.

The Nazis assumed that it would be perfectly straightforward to divide the population of Bohemia and Moravia into Czech, German and Jewish sections. On paper, ‘citizenship decrees’ may have looked plausible enough; but since each principal ‘nationality’ had its own advantages and disadvantages, not to mention legal loopholes and inconsistencies, locals soon made a farce of the whole business. Bryant has found that, among those presenting themselves to be registered as ‘Czech’ were untold thousands who could speak only German; thousands more who registered as ‘German’ turned out, when bureaucratic procedures were later tightened, to be ‘Jewish’ according to the Nuremberg laws. Later, when it became more advantageous to be ‘German’ than ‘Czech’, the nationality tables swung back the other way.

The farce turned to tragedy only slowly, by degrees. At first, it looked to Czechs and Germans, and undoubtedly to some Jews, as if the old days of ‘nationality politics’ were back. But whereas the old Habsburg game had been to claim as many co-nationals as possible in order to win state funding for a primary school, an opera house or a library, now the stakes were raised grotesquely, so that being categorized one way or another could result in living a normal life; being expelled from one’s country; forced to work in a labour camp; or killed in a gas chamber.

Three cultural and political communities shaped modern Prague: the Czech, the German and the Jewish. Only one – the Czech – survived into the second half of the twentieth century. If Chad Bryant’s brilliant and fascinating *Prague in Black* teaches us anything, it is that even old-style, Romantic nationalism may become toxic when left to a centralized, pitiless bureaucracy, whether under a frankly authoritarian or an ostensibly democratic regime.

Mary Heimann

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