Modern Czech Literature

Writing in Times of Political Trauma

Edited by

Andrew M. Drozd
University of Alabama

Series in Literary Studies

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I would like to thank all the contributors for their participation, suggestions, and feedback, but I want to highlight the special contribution of Karen von Kunes to this volume. As the chair of the original conference panel, I was the one contacted by Vernon Press and asked to edit the volume. However, von Kunes was the organizer of the panel. In addition, I have consulted with her extensively throughout the entire process. She read the initial call for papers I produced, she helped to recruit contributors, I consulted with her on possible names for the volume, she has read the introduction more than once, and so forth. I also thank Jan Čulík for providing the requested bibliographic material. In an attempt to prepare for all possible contingencies, I ordered an *extremely* large number of materials via the Inter-library Loan Service at the University of Alabama. I am grateful to the staff at ILL for getting me these materials in a timely manner. Finally, the contributors and I would like to thank the three peer-reviewers for their efforts and their suggestions.

Introduction

Andrew M. Drozd
University of Alabama

With the proclamation of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, as the First World War was winding down, the Czech nation experienced much euphoria and hope. Despite some problems and disappointments, the first fifteen years of the First Republic were relatively stable.[1] This period saw the productive unleashing of many previously restrained cultural forces and it would later be perceived nostalgically by many Czechs. However, with the rise of the Nazis in neighboring Germany in the 1930s, dark clouds began to appear on the Czech horizon, setting off a long series of traumatic events. Because of the numerous traumas experienced by the Czechs, Derek Sayer has characterized Prague as the capital of the dark twentieth century.[2]

The current collection of articles, which originated in a panel ("Betrayal, Anxiety, and Rebellion in Milan Kundera and in Contemporary Czech Literature") at the 52nd Annual ASEEES Convention in 2020, seeks to provide treatments of some of the responses to these traumas in Czech literature.[3] The

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[1] For those unfamiliar with the vicissitudes of Czech history, see Hugh LeCaine Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2004). For a treatment of Czechoslovakia from its inception until the Communist takeover, see Victor S. Mamatey and Radomír Luža, eds., *A History of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1918–1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[2] Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century. A Surrealist History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 8–12. In recent decades Czech scholarship has been devoting more attention to the theme of trauma. Jan Matonoha, one of the contributors to this volume, would like to draw the reader's attention to the following: Alexander Kratochvil, ed., *Paměť a trauma pohledem humanitních věd. Komentovaná antologie teoretických textů* (Prague: Akropolis, 2015); Alexander Kratochvil, *Posttraumatické vyprávění. Trauma – Literatura – Vzpomínka* (Brno: Host, 2023).

[3] While no comprehensive survey of Czech literary history is available in English, the combination of Novák's survey with Holý's will provide the necessary coverage for those readers in need of more background. Arne Novák, *Czech Literature*, trans. Peter Kussi, ed. William E. Harkins (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976); Jiří Holý, *Writers*

chapters in this volume help shed further light on the various responses by Czech writers when confronted with often very trying circumstances. One of the earliest responses to the time of trauma was the work of Karel Čapek, who was one of the leading Czech prose writers in the first half of the twentieth century. Čapek's novel *The War with the Newts* (*Válka s mloky*) was very much concerned with the growing Nazi menace and has been much discussed by scholars. In her chapter, Karen von Kunes focuses on Čapek's play *The White Plague* (*Bílá nemoc*), which was also a response to the Nazi pressure. While von Kunes recognizes the importance of the immediate context of the play, she focuses on the larger theme of the issue of personal responsibility which remained central to Czech (and Slovak) intellectuals and artists in subsequent eras. Her analysis connects the pre-1948 period of Czech literature with developments after the Communist takeover. In particular, von Kunes connects this theme as it appeared in Čapek's play with its presence in the Slovak-language film *The Shop on Main Street* (1965). Not only is there a connection in theme, but there are direct parallels between characters in Čapek's play and characters in the film, which is set in a Slovak village. Von Kunes also ties the theme of responsibility to Václav Havel's call for a better future by awakening a sense of responsibility as well as its appearance in other works by Čapek. In short, von Kunes demonstrates a consistency in response to totalitarianism that transcended the particular traumas of one regime.

The current collection contains three essays that are concerned with the recently deceased Milan Kundera. This is quite justified since he was one of the major Czech prose writers of the twentieth century, the only one to have acquired a sizable international audience. Above and beyond this fact, Kundera is a good example of an individual response to the traumas of Czech history. As Jan Čulík has stated, "His story is that of many Czech intellectuals of his generation: it is the story of freeing oneself of Marxist dogma and of gaining and communicating important insights based on the traumatic experience of life under totalitarianism in Eastern and Central Europe."[4] In response to the Nazis, Kundera started out as a Communist true believer who came to be very

under Siege. Czech Literature since 1945, trans. Jan Čulík and Elizabeth S. Morrison (Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2008). For readers seeking a very concise summary of Czech literary history but which also provides extended coverage of many of the most significant writers of the last century, see Chapter Six in Craig Cravens, *Culture and Customs of the Czech Republic and Slovakia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006).

[4] Jan Čulík, "Milan Kundera," in *Twentieth-Century Eastern European Writers. Third Series*, ed. Stefan Serafin, Dictionary of Literary Biography (Detroit: The Gale Group, 2001), 210.

much disappointed with the reality of Communist-controlled Czechoslovakia. His disillusionment was so profound that he emigrated from the country in 1975, settled in France, began to publish his work in French translation before the Czech original appeared, and even began to write in French. There was a distinct sense of wounded pride on Kundera's part after he left the country. Whereas the pop singer Karel Gott, who went abroad in 1971, was invited by the Communist regime to return without penalty, Kundera was not.[5] Instead, the regime deprived him of his citizenship in 1978. Kundera's alienation from his homeland was so profound that not only did he not return after 1989, but he was reluctant to allow publication of his works there.

The theme of responsibility also appears in the work of Milan Kundera, demonstrating further continuity between the different eras in which Czech authors operated. In Kundera's work, responsibility is unbearable for most human beings. In her chapter, Mary Orsak explores the theme of the "lightness of being" as found in Kundera and Leo Tolstoy, but within the context of the ideas of Nietzsche and Parmenides. Kundera's relationship with Russian literature was not necessarily a harmonious one: despite his obvious familiarity with it, he tried to distance himself from it.[6] Nevertheless, the relationship between Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is impossible to miss. Not only is Tereza identified by her heavy copy of Tolstoy's novel, but Tomáš and Tereza name their dog Karenin. Michael Heim apparently viewed Kundera's novel as a playful response to *Anna Karenina*.[7] Orsak argues, however, that the tie with Tolstoy goes much

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[5] In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera purports to quote a letter from Gustáv Husák to Karel Gott, in which Husák begs Gott to return. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Knopf, 1981), 181. Such a letter seems to be a mystification on Kundera's part, although an oral invitation to return was given to Gott. See Jan Čulík, "Mystification as an Artistic Strategy in Milan Kundera's Work," *Slavonica* 23, no. 2 (2018): 121–22.

[6] Arguably, he owed much to Tolstoy for his novel *The Joke*. The idea that life is a cruel joke played on mankind is found in Tolstoy's "Confession": "My mental condition presented itself to me in this way: my life is a stupid and spiteful joke someone has played on me." Leo Tolstoy, "Confession," in *The Portable Tolstoy*, ed. John Bayley (New York: Penguin, 1978), 679.

[7] In her study Banerjee refers to a paper given by Heim on the topic. As far as I have been able to determine, Heim never published this paper. Maria Němcová Banerjee, *Terminal Paradox. The Novels of Milan Kundera* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 285. Throughout her study, Banerjee makes repeated comparisons between the classics of Russian literature and Kundera's works although she does not necessarily argue for direct influence.

deeper than just *Anna Karenina*. She demonstrates that there are extremely close correspondences between Kundera's phrase "unbearable lightness of being" used in two of his novels (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Immortality*) and passages involving Andrei Bolkonsky in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Orsak also examines further ties between Kundera's fiction and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, specifically, the theme of suicide. However much he might protest otherwise, Kundera's work reveals a deep connection to Russia and its literature.

In the Western world, Kundera has become infamous for the misogyny and sexual violence contained in his novels. Much discussion of these themes has been produced by critics and literary scholars. For his part, Kundera was rather unapologetic on this point and in his works written with a Western audience in mind, he threw down the gauntlet. For example, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, one of his characters declares that "only the best of men are misogynists" and that "a woman can be happy only with a misogynist."[8] In his chapter, Jan Matonoha argues for a reassessment, focusing particularly on Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* and *The Farewell Party*. Matonoha accepts much of the results of prior scholarship, particularly the work of John O'Brien (*Milan Kundera & Feminism: Dangerous Intersections*), but argues for the need to expand the scope. Matonoha concludes, contra O'Brien, that there is a more complex, triadic structure to Kundera's sexism. Matonoha agrees with O'Brien that there is an overt level of misogyny in Kundera's novels, which is then deconstructed on a less overt level. Where Matonoha disagrees with O'Brien, however, is that there is yet a third level to Kundera's fiction, which ultimately reaffirms the misogyny.

In response to the traumas of the twentieth century, some dissident Czech intellectuals developed the concept of an inner metaphysical freedom. In his chapter, Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield examines both Milan Kundera's and Bohumil Hrabal's engagement with this concept. Dronsfield's chapter is much more philosophical in nature. That is, he examines Kundera's and Hrabal's use of philosophy in their fiction. While both writers introduced material from philosophy into their respective works, they resisted the notion that works of literature are philosophical tracts. Kundera, in particular, was insistent that literature, especially the novel, has its own form and that approaching a fictional work as a philosophical treatise impoverishes it. Rather, both writers subscribed to the notion of polyphony, the multitude of voices within a literary work, and the philosophical content is merely one of those voices without any

[8] Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 132.

claim to the ultimate truth. Finally, Dronsfield considers both Kundera and Hrabal to be dissidents, despite the fact that they were not comfortable with that label. Indeed, Kundera explicitly rejected it as yet another ideologization and politicization of art. Nevertheless, because they rejected the concept of an inner metaphysical freedom under totalitarianism, Dronsfield concludes they were still dissidents. In effect, the Communist insistence on the intimate tie between the personal and the political forced them to be "reluctant dissidents."

Daniel Webster Pratt's chapter is transitional in two senses. First, in chronological terms, it transcends the divide of 1989, focusing on the work of the Topol brothers, Filip and Jáchym, before and after that date. The essay also transcends fields in that it is concerned not only with literature but also with the rock music scene. Pratt challenges the conventional narrative regarding the music scene, both the exaggerated role assigned to it in bringing down Communism as well as the typical view that the musicians involved faded into obscurity after the Velvet Revolution. Pratt stresses that the Topol brothers, like others in the so-called second generation of dissent, never knew the freedom of the Prague Spring, and their experience was, therefore, fundamentally different. The period of Normalization and its associated traumas, however, were very much a part of this generation's experience. Their response was an almost total nihilism, a rebellion against existence itself. In contrast to the usual names of Havel, Kundera, Hrabal, and Škvorecký, this group is less well-known in the West. Pratt's chapter will serve as a valuable introduction to them for many readers. Pratt stresses that there were significant differences between the music underground and the dissidents. This became clear whenever the dissidents, or even the music underground itself, came to be seen as a new "establishment." Pratt's essay also points to the issue of moral responsibility, a theme that continued to engage Czech artists and intellectuals across the decades.

In Marek Lollok's chapter, the fictional treatment of the period of the Normalization is the primary concern. Whereas Pratt examines how these themes were handled by authors writing during that period, Lollok is focused on post-Communist treatments. Indeed, Lollok insists that fiction written after the Velvet Revolution was created in a very changed set of conditions and, therefore, is fundamentally different. Not only was the censorship no longer a factor, but the Normalization was now history, not the lived present. Lollok divides the material into five different narrative modes. Since he focuses on more recent authors, the chapter covers writers who are lesser known in the English-language world; some of their works not yet translated. As a result, this chapter will be a valuable first introduction to these authors for some readers.

Lollok's chapter effectively demonstrates that the trauma of the Normalization is an integral part of the Czech collective memory and has strongly influenced the society. Finally, as the earlier essays have indicated, Czech prose of the post-Communist period continues to be engaged with moral issues.

In the last chapter, Hana Waisserová focuses on Eda Kriseová, who published much of her work in the post-Communist era. Her career is a good example of what has been referred to as writing for one's own desk drawer. That is, some of her texts were written well before the Velvet Revolution but were published only in its aftermath. Kriseová was closely tied to Václav Havel, and her work reflected his, as well as the general Czech intellectual, focus on moral issues like truth, love, and responsibility. Kriseová is not a figure well-known to the English-language world and Waisserová's chapter provides a good introduction to her fiction. Many of Kriseová's works deal directly with the traumas of Central Europe and the multigenerational pain arising from them. In the middle part of the chapter, Waisserová argues for a new framework in which to approach women's fiction. While Kriseová is acknowledged as a dissident, she and other women dissident writers have been marginalized within this narrative. In the later part of the chapter Waisserová chronicles Kriseová's transition in the post-Communist era into being a writer concerned with and treating global issues.

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About the contributors

Andrew M. Drozd is an Associate Professor of Russian at the University of Alabama, where he has taught for 30 years. He is the author of *Chernyshevskii's* What Is to Be Done?: *A Reevaluation* (Northwestern UP, 2001), co-editor of *Reading Darwin in Imperial Russia* (Lexington Books, 2023), and co-editor of *Revisiting Russian Radicals* (Lexington Books, 2024). In recent years, much of his research focus has been on Czech-Russian literary interrelations, and he has been working on a monograph with the working title of *The Russian Echo of František Ladislav Čelakovský*. For several years he was the manager of the SEELangs discussion list and currently maintains the Czech Studies discussion list (Czech@listserv.ua.edu) and the Russian Radicals discussion list (Chernyshevsky@listserv.ua.edu).

Karen von Kunes has been in charge of Czech studies at Yale University for years. Prior to Yale, she taught at Harvard University, the University of Texas, Tufts University, and Boston College. Dr. von Kunes is the author and co-author of a number of books and publications in the fields of literature, language, film, and culture. In 2019, she published *Milan Kundera's Fiction: A Critical Approach to Existential Betrayals*. With the late Oxford scholar, James Naughton, she co-authored Routledge's *Czech: An Essential Grammar*. Another manuscript, *Milan Kundera Known and Unknown,* is currently in print, and her interdisciplinary monograph on Milos Forman is scheduled to be published in 2026. Dr. von Kunes was a Contributing Editor to Plamen Press, and has been contributing to *Literary Encyclopedia*, a reviewer for *Slavic Review*, the *Czech Science Foundation, Comparative Literature Studies*, and *Slavic and East European Journal,* and for years she was a weekly contributor to *The Prague Post*. She also published an award-winning novel on diaspora, *Among the Sinners*, and her innovative manuscript on the structure of Czech is due for submission in 2024.

Mary Orsak is a Rhodes Scholar and DPhil student at the University of Oxford in the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, focusing on issues of gender in Czech, Slovak, Polish, and Russian modern and contemporary literature.

Jan Matonoha works at the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences. In 2008, he received his Ph.D. from Charles University, Prague, and his M.Phil. from the University of Glasgow, UK. In the years 2012-2014, he received a Newton Fellowship from the British Academy (University of Sheffield, the UK). He has taken part in several grant projects from both the Czech Republic and the EU, and he has participated in a number of conferences both abroad (Cambridge, Nottingham, Manchester, Sheffield, Dublin, Boston, San Francisco, Toronto, Brussels, Zurich, Vienna, Hamburg, Leipzig, Warsaw, Budapest, Tallinn) as well as in the Czech Republic (Prague, Brno, Olomouc, etc.). He has published several articles (both in Czech and English), two books (*Writing Outside of Logocentrism. Discourse, Gender, Text*, 2009; *Beyond / For (De)Constructivism. Overview of Critical Concepts of Literary and Cultural Theory*, 2017, both in Czech by Academia Publishing, Prague), and participated in several others, including *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism. Expropriated Voice*, edited by Hana Havelková and Libora Oates-Indruchová (Routledge, 2014). One book (in Czech) entitled *Parallel Anatomy. Injurious Attachments, Discursive Emergence of Silence and Gender in Czech Literature in the Period of 1948-1989* is to be completed in early 2024 (most likely issued by Academia Publishing). He has delivered several courses in both Czech and English for domestic as well as US and Erasmus exchange students at Charles University, Prague and in Brno. His research interests are the theory of literature, twentieth-century Czech and Central European literature, feminism and gender studies in literature, and non-human animal studies in literature.

Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield wrote his chapter whilst a Dobrovský Research Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague. Dronsfield is currently researching philosophies of dissent. Recent publications on dissent include "The Language of Inner Freedom for Dissent: Müller and Liiceanu Before and After the Revolution," in Wohl & Pacurar (eds.), *Language of the Revolution: The Discourse of Anti-Communist Insurgencies in the "Eastern Block" Countries* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), "Dissent Non-dissenting: 'Resistance through Culture,'" *Journal of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 55(5) 2023, "The Rhetoric of Inner Freedom," *Journal of Romanian Studies* 4(2) 2022, and "Dissonant dissent: Du Bois and the Terrible Beauty of Rap Music," *Humanities Bulletin* 5(1) 2022.

Marek Lollok studied Czech language and literature at Masaryk University in Brno, currently works at the Department of Czech Language and Literature of

the Pedagogical Faculty of Masaryk University, and also cooperates with the Institute for Czech Literature of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. He specializes in stylistics, contemporary Czech prose and drama, and literary and theater criticism. He published the monograph *Critique in motion: Literary criticism and meta-criticism of the 1990s* (Masaryk University 2019); he is also the co-author of the anthology *Czech Surrealist Drama* (Academia 2023; co-editors T. Kubart and J. Šotkovská).

Daniel W. Pratt is an assistant professor of Slavic culture in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at McGill University. He works on Central and Eastern European culture, specifically Czech, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, and Austrian. He did his undergraduate education at Princeton University, spent two years in the Czech Republic, and then completed his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. He is a comparativist, broadly interested in the intersection of literature, history, and philosophy. He has written on the meaning of history in Central Europe, Socialist World Literature, and the philosophical connections of Gilles Deleuze and Witold Gombrowicz, amongst other topics. He is currently finishing his book manuscript *Against Narrative: Non-Narrative Temporalities in Central Europe*, while working on a second book on Bruno Jasieński, socialist world literature, and the pursuit of internationalism.

Hana Waisserová is an associate professor of practice of Czech and Central European Studies and an affiliate of the Harris Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She earned a Ph.D. in Anglophone transnational literature from Palacký University, Olomouc, and a Gender Graduate Certificate from Texas A&M University. She has co-authored the book, *Women's Artistic Dissent. Repelling Totalitarianism in Pre-1989 Czechoslovakia* (Lexington Books, 2023). She has published articles concerning South Asian and Central European women's transnational literature, women's totalitarian experiences, women dissidents and their activism, medieval Czech literature, and Czech-American culture in Nebraska with *Litteraria Pragensia, Kosmas: Czechoslovak and Central European Journal, Czech Language News, Literature, Media and Cultural Studies, American and British Studies Annual, Great Plains Quarterly, Fema.*

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