
Not Preaching from the Pulpit, but Marching in the Streets: The communist use of Jan Hus

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This article focuses on the way Hus and the Bohemian Reformation, or more specifically its first phase, the Hussite Revolution, were evaluated in the period of communism in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989. Most attention will be paid to the initial phase of the communist dictatorship and its image and use of the Bohemian reformer and his followers. Communist ideology developed the image of a proto-communist movement with a founder who was essentially not a religious leader but a social protester. However, this historical design was nothing new to the period after the Second World War, but, rather, had its roots in the nineteenth century. In the writings of František Palacký, Marxist historians could find arguments that were of great importance to them. Socialist intellectuals of the second half of the nineteenth century were another source as they also searched for revolutionary predecessors in Bohemian history. And finally, leftist intellectuals prepared the way for the communist interpretation of history during the inter-war period. Zdeněk Nejedlý, an academic played the main role in this and, not surprisingly, became the Minister of Education in the first communist government after the coup of February 1948. Nejedlý managed to combine František Palacký, Tomáš G. Masaryk and Marxism into one system of historical interpretation which would be the basis of the official ideological concept of Czech history between 1948 and 1989. We will be able to conclude that there was no disparity between the historiography of the First (democratic) Czechoslovak Republic and that of the communist dictatorship. The communists could easily draw on the line of historical development from the First Republic and that, at the level of historical self-reflection, there is a direct continuity between pre-war free Czechoslovakia and post-war communist rule.

Rehabilitation of Communism

The end of Communist isolation from the political process was brought about in 1935.¹ In that year both parliamentary and presidential elections took place in an atmosphere of mounting uncertainty about neighbouring Germany (now two years under Hitler) and of increasing tensions with the ethnic German minority – of which a significant portion would vote for Konrad Henlein and his fascist Sudeten-German Party. In the election campaign, the communist party changed its strategy from a refusal of the democratic “bourgeois” rule to forming a “people’s front” against

¹ Zdeněk Kárník, “KSČ – úspěchy a neúspěchy v klíčově významných parlamentních volbách v roce 1935,” [KSČ – the successes and failures in the key parliamentary elections of 1935] in: Zdeněk Kárník and Michal Kopeček, *Bolševismus, komunismus a radikální socialismus v Československu*, [Bolshevism, communism and radical socialism in Czechoslovakia] (Prague, 2003) 1:15-42. See also Jacques Rupnik, *Histoire du Parti communiste tchecoslovaque (des origines à la prise du pouvoir)* (Paris, 1981).

fascism. The argument was formulated by the leader of the party, Klement Gottwald who wrote, in an article in the party newspaper entitled "Communism – The Only Rescue", that the real danger for the country came from Henlein and his party, not from Masaryk or other capitalist representatives. In 1934 the Czechoslovak government entered into official relations with the Soviet Union (which it had not recognised till then) and moreover, shortly before the elections, a military treaty between the two countries was concluded which was seen as the answer to the growing danger of Hitler's Germany. In this constellation with a new, powerful communist ally in the East, the Communist Party at home could play the national card and present itself as the defender of the independence of the Czech nation. Politically this was the beginning of a communism with a nationalist touch in pre-war Czechoslovakia.

The process of intellectual rehabilitation that would connect the communist ideology to Czech national traditions and history went more incrementally. The key issue here was how communism could be aligned to what was perceived as the Golden Age of Czech history, the period of Jan Hus and the Bohemian Reformation. Without this connection, communism would be regarded as a foreign ideology with no roots in the Czech environment. Only through the Bohemian Reformation could communist ideology be domesticated and legitimised in the eyes of the larger public.

The meaning of the Bohemian Reformation for the Czech present had been discussed at length since 1912 when the historian Josef Pekař published his strongly critical review of Masaryk's analysis of the Bohemian Reformation. In 1895 Masaryk had published his *Česká otázka* [The Czech Question] which was much more a political manifesto than an historical analysis. Following Palacký, Masaryk described the period of the Bohemian Reformation as the Golden Age of the Czech nation, emphasising the values he saw present in the Reformation. To him the best of the Reformation was to be found in the Unity of Brethren who, to him, represented true humanity.

By humanity, fully and truly conceived, we join the best of our times with the past, by humanity we bridge the spiritual and moral slumber of several centuries, by humanity we have to forge ahead with human progress. Humanity is for us our national task, as it has been prepared and bequeathed to us by our Brotherhood: the ideal of humanity holds all meaning for our national life."²

To Masaryk the content of the Bohemian Reformation was an issue of morality through which the human race could reach its best shape and fulfilment. As a result, he stressed the social aspects and responsibilities of modern society which, in his view, were the indication of modernity. According to him the social question was one of the key issues of the present day.

In the polemic Pekař³ used the obvious argument that Masaryk used history selectively in order to proof his argument. History had to be researched in an objective way by making use of the proper methods and instruments. Many

² T.G. Masaryk, *Česká otázka* [The Czech question](Prague, 1895) 220.

³ The contributions to this polemic are collected in Miloš Havelka, *Spor o smysl českých dějin 1895-1938* [The struggle over the meaning of Czech history, 1895-1938] (Prague, 1995).

historians, philosophers and other intellectuals made their contributions to the debate, which lasted until the end of the inter-war period. Most of them – like Emanuel Rádl, František M. Bartoš or Jindřich Vančura – expressed their sympathy with the vision of Masaryk in which they found the reflection of the foundations of the new Czechoslovak state. Pekař found himself in a rather isolated position as he was often accused of defending the old world of the Habsburg past. As we will see later, the one to play a key role in linking the Masarykian understanding of the Czech past with a communist interpretation was Zdeněk Nejedlý.

For an interpretation of the Bohemian Reformation in terms of ideals or slogans close to the French Revolution Czech intellectuals did not have to go far. Palacký, the founder of modern Czech historiography (also called the Father of the Czech Nation because of his nationalist emphasis in historiography), stressed in his opus magnum *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a na Moravě* [The history of the Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia] the values of democracy, equality and liberation that he distinguished as the foundations of the Bohemian Reformation. Comparing the Taborite movement with Hussite Prague, he wrote:

From the very beginning of the Hussite unrest we have witnessed the founding and developing of two centres, almost two birthplaces, not only of dogmatic difference, but also of military power, one in Prague and one in Tabor; national unity was split in two – two independent fixed entities, almost two suns seized all other powers straying into their gravitational force, who did not meet in unity unless against both of them a third sun struggled to burn them both. To Prague everything associated itself that acknowledged and invoked the principle of authority as the main shield of civil and religious society; to Tabor was associated that which wanted more to use its reasoning and personal freedom in public life; there the aristocracy predominated, the teachers of learning and the patriarchate of the town with people dependent on them, here the towns, the lower nobility, the peasants and the democratic element in general.⁴

It is one of the sentences leftist intellectuals could easily use for a concept of history in terms of revolution, though Palacký himself might not have approved of it. We find this judgment on the difference between aristocratic Prague and democratic Tabor in the evaluation of the events of May 1434 with the defeat of the Taborites on the fields of Lipany. Palacký certainly did not intend to write Czech history from the perspective of socialist ideals, let alone the struggle of classes, the oppressors and the oppressed. Instead, in his fundamental work he distinguished historical events along several other lines: one of Czechs and Germans, another of protestantism and catholicism. The difference between the second pair, Palacký presupposes, is to be found in their relation to authority. Where catholicism is characterised by its principle of subjection to the given authority of the pope, the church or the hierarchy, protestantism is based on the idea of the freedom of the human mind.⁵ Protestantism should lead to a liberation from any kind of oppression, catholicism has oppression encoded in its very substance. It is clear: to Palacký protestantism is

⁴ Palacký, *Dějiny národu českého* (Prague 1968) III:555, my translation.

⁵ See e.g. T.G. Masaryk, *Palackého idea národu českého* [Palacký's idea of the Czech nation] (Prague 1898).

much more sympathetic, especially because he sees its liberating power in the history of his own people.

Early Marxism: Karl Kautsky

The emerging Marxist movement of the nineteenth century made use of parallel, if not directly related, events in its interpretation of history. To Marxist thinkers like Paul Lafargue or E. Balfort Bax alternative or heretical approaches to Christian doctrine in the Middle Ages were part of ongoing revolutionary efforts to bring about social change. In that framework they mentioned the Hussite movement as a force against the oppression of the ruling classes of church and nobility. According to Bax, these movements were an echo of the primitive communism of the early Christian church which, despite the oppression of the powerful, was never extinguished from the memory of the ordinary people. Consequently, the longing for freedom and equality was the meaning that held together uprisings and revolts such as the Jacquerie in France, the Wat Tyler revolt in England, revolts in Flanders and North Germany, the Hussite movement in Bohemia, the rebellion of George Doza in Hungary and the social movements of Reformation Germany. Essentially they considered these movements as forerunners of Marxism.⁶

We find this paradigm more extensively in the work of Karl Kautsky who was a high representative of the Socialist Internationale. Kautsky was born on 16 October 1854 in Prague of a German speaking family. During his studies in Vienna, he joined the Socialist movement and became a close collaborator with personalities like Eduard Bernstein, Friedrich Engels, Kurt Eisner and Rosa Luxemburg. In 1883 he became founder and editor of *Die Neue Zeit*, the leading socialist journal in Germany. He spent most of his life in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. After the 1938 Anschluss of Austria with Nazi Germany he fled to Amsterdam where he died on 17 October of the same year.⁷

In 1895, the same year as Masaryk published his analysis of Czech history, especially the Bohemian Reformation, Kautsky published a study called *Die Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus*. Parts of it appeared in an English translation in 1897 under the title *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*.⁸ The book, which is the first volume of a comprehensive study on the history of socialism, starts with Plato and early Christianity. In the chapter on the Bohemian Reformation Kautsky made extensive use of Palacký's *History* in its German version *Geschichte von Böhmen*, especially of the third volume which discusses Tábor. In the introduction to the Bohemian situation Kautsky first gave a negative assessment

⁶ See e.g. Paul Lafargue, Campanella, in: *Le Devenir Social*, Nr.4–6, July–September 1895 and Ernest Balfort Bax, *German Society at the Close of the Middle Ages*, (London, 1894 reprint: New York, 1967).

⁷ For more on his life, see Gary Steenson, *Karl Kautsky 1854-1938. Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh, 1978) and Massimo L. Salvadori, *Karel Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution 1880-1938* (London, 1979).

⁸ The German original was published in 1895 in Stuttgart, the English translation in 1897 in London. The English version is available on the internet: <http://www.marx.org/archive/kautsky/1897/europe/index.htm>.

of Charles IV, whom he believed was very much under the influence of the pope and his quest for power. The Italians, he notes, called him the *Pfaffenkönig*.⁹

In the following period, under the reign of Wenceslas IV, tensions in society continued to increase, with the university in the zenith in the year 1409. The essence of the unrest, according to Kautsky, was the struggle of the poor class of the Czechs against the privileged and rich upper class of the Germans. This led to a nationalist hatred:

In this way the mass of the nation – the lower classes of the cities, the lower clergy, the entire population of the countryside, peasants, knights and lords – encountered the Germans everywhere as exploiters or as competitors in exploitation. The struggle against the exploitation by the church on the one hand and the desire for ecclesiastical properties on the other drew together in a struggle against German exploitation and a desire to confiscate German riches.¹⁰

Kautsky understood the differences between Prague and Tabor in the same manner as did Palacký. Prague stood for the moderate, aristocratic party, whereas Tabor represented the democratic, even communist, element. Tabor became the refuge for all movements and persons from European countries that were persecuted by the ruling powers of emperor and pope because of their radical criticism.

While the antagonism between the Bohemians and the Church was gaining strength, the opponents of the latter were not only tolerated but received encouragement; the communistic heresy naturally reared its head and proscribed communists from adjacent countries sought safety in Bohemia. Communism could be the more easily developed, as, in its arguments, and even in many of its claims, it was in sympathy with the other heretical movements. They were unanimous in wishing for a return to primitive Christianity, and the restoration of pure Christian doctrine. Disagreements regarding the manner in which this was to be consummated did not begin until later.¹¹

In Tabor radical preachers announced their visions of the thousand-year reign of Christ, when Prague would be destroyed and Tabor would become the place of the rule of the free spirit. Communist ideals were realised when, in Písek, Vodňany and Tábor, a form of common property was practised. The leaders of this school of

⁹ Kautsky, 177-179; see also Čornej, *Lipanské ozvěny* [Echos of Lipany] (Prague, 1995) 113.

¹⁰ So traf die Masse der Nation – die niederen Klassen der Städte, der niedere Klerus, die ganze Landbevölkerung, Bauern, Ritter und Herren – überall auf den Deutschen als Ausbeuter oder als Konkurrenten in der Ausbeutung. Der Kampf gegen die kirchliche Ausbeutung auf der einen Seite, das Verlangen nach den Kirchengütern auf der anderen Seite floss zusammen mit dem Kampf gegen die deutsche Ausbeutung, mit dem Verlangen nach den Reichthümern der Deutschen. Kautsky, 203 [my translation; this section is not in the English version].

¹¹ Als der Gegensatz zwischen Böhmen und der päpstlichen Kirche sich entwickelte und Gegner der letzteren in Böhmen nicht nur geduldet, sondern sogar begünstigt wurden, da erhob natürlich sich die kommunistische Ketzerei ihr Haupt und die verfolgten Kommunisten aus den umliegenden Ländern suchten in Böhmen ihr Heil. Der Kommunismus konnte sich um so leichter entwickeln, als er in den Argumentationen, ja vielfach auch in den Forderungen äusserlich sich mit den anderen ketzerischen Richtungen begegnete: sie alle sollten die Rückkehr zum Urchristentum, die Wiederherstellung der reinen Lehre; über die Auslegung derselben fing man erst später zu streiten an. Kautsky, 212 [Translation from the English version].

thought could not present their views in modern terms but had to use forms and words of their own time. Therefore, to them the models of original Christianity as described in the book of the Acts were natural forms for their hopes, ideals and protests.¹² Here Kautsky used an argument that we will meet more often: while the Hussites used religious language, in fact they meant something different, i.e. a social protest against exploitation. “It was natural that in its realisation communism should assume the forms handed down by tradition from primitive Christianity, and that it should accord with the existing conditions of production.”

A full sharing of property in Tabor was not possible because the economic conditions and way of production did not enable this. Therefore, a milder form of communism remained in which individual families contributed to central common finances, from which, for example, the clergy, education and the armies were paid. Radical forces rejected this and went even further than the initial phase of the Taborite revolution. They demanded – and practised – the end of both celibacy and matrimony, but they were a very small group that was later violently destroyed by Žižka.

This kind of avoidance of marriage was too much opposed to the moral views of a period when monogamy and individual family life (institutions handed down from antiquity, and deeply rooted in the popular feeling) were most imperatively demanded both by the needs of society and the existing methods of production. The abolition of marriage was, it is true, a logical consequence of the communism of the time, but this very fact shows that this communism was not in accordance with the wants of a society in which monogamy was a necessity, and itself proves that the communism of the day was condemned to be confined to small associations and communities. The bulk of the Taborites offered a most determined resistance to the efforts of the extreme party.¹³

The final defeat of Tabor reflects the re-emerging of the conservative powers in the country; Kautsky continues in the line of Palacký's judgment of the battle of Lipany: “Tabor ceased to rule Bohemia. Democracy was overthrown and the nobility, in union with the upper merchant classes, thereupon set about re-arranging for the exploitation of the country.”¹⁴ Again, a basic feature of later Marxist historiography of the Hussite Revolution was formulated: democracy was crushed and the revolution was reversed. Between the French and Hussite Revolutions we

¹² This communism was “natürlich verwirklicht in den Formen, die das Urchristentum geliefert hatte und die dem damaligen Stande der Produktion noch gut entsprachen.” Kautsky, 215.

¹³ Diese Ehelosigkeit widersprach zu sehr den sittlichen Anschauungen ihrer Zeit, in der die Einzelehe und Einzelfamilie, eine von Alters her überkommen und im Volksbewusstsein tief eingewurzelte Einrichtung, auch durch die Bedürfnisse der bestehenden Produktionsweise und der bestehenden Gesellschaft aufs Gebieterischste gefordert wurde. Die Ausschliessung der Ehe war wohl eine logische Konsequenz des damaligen Kommunismus, aber gerade sie bewies auch, dass dieser selbst noch keinen Halt in der Gesellschaft hatte, welche der Einzelehe bedurfte; gerade sie bewies, dass der Kommunismus jener Zeit verurtheilt war, auf kleine Korporationen und Gemeinden beschränkt zu bleiben. Die Masse der Taboriten wendete sich auf das Entschiedenste gegen die Bestrebungen des strengeren Kommunismus. Kautsky, 216-217 [translation from the English version].

¹⁴ Tábor hörte auf, Böhmen zu beherrschen. Die Demokratie war unterlegen und der Adel im Verein mit der Prager Ehrbarkeit konnte daran gehen, die Ausbeutung des Landes von Neuem einzurichten. Kautsky, 226.

find a similarity in that the radicals, who were in fact the fathers of the revolutions or their true heirs, were defeated by the more moderate parties that were prepared to make compromises on the principles of the revolution. It happened to the Jacobines in France and it happened to the Taborites in Bohemia. Subsequently things were given back to the early capitalists who turned Bohemia back into a feudal society.

This pitiful termination of a once lofty communistic commonwealth, before which half of Europe had trembled, hardly makes it possible to suppress the wish that, like Munster, Tabor had not fallen in the brilliancy of its communistic youth, and had not languished in the wretchedness of bourgeois senility. With the overthrow of Tabor, the last asylum of democracy in Bohemia was destroyed. The fate of the Taborites, exhibiting as it does many analogies with that of the Jacobins, resembles the latter also in the circumstance that it was they who by their reckless heroism saved the revolution – not for themselves, but for the exploiters of that revolution. In France, these were the great capitalists and knights of industry; in Bohemia they were the upper nobility, who acquired an almost unlimited mastery both in state and society. The petty nobility gained nothing by the Hussite wars, which accelerated rather than checked their downfall, as the upper nobles, to whom the lion's share of the Church's possessions fell, enriched themselves also at the cost of the lower ranks of their class by buying up their properties.¹⁵

To Kautsky, the Bohemian Reformation was basically a class struggle, a prefiguration of the struggle of his own time. As such, his argumentation might not be very surprising but, nevertheless, two elements make his study more significant. In the first place it is clear that Kautsky borrowed extensively from Palacký for his knowledge and understanding of the Bohemian Reformation in its early stages. The German edition of Palacký's history provided him with important information and, moreover, gave him the basic design of Czech history that he could develop more in terms of socialism. Kautsky did not have to construct his own image of history, but could use the foundations of a protestant, moderate nationalist historian.

In the second place, in this way Kautsky delivered the structure of the later Marxist view of Czech history which, in fact, continued along Kautsky's lines. Later communists could point out that they did not bring anything new but, rather, that their views reflected the continuity of the Czech people and their history.

¹⁵ Angesichts dieses jämmerlichen Ausganges des einst so stolzen kommunistischen Gemeinwesens, vor dem halb Europa zitterte, kann man kaum den Wunsch unterdrücken, Tabor wäre gleich Münster im Glanze seiner kommunistischen Jugend gefallen und nicht in der Erbärmlichkeit bürgerlicher Altersschwäche dahingefiecht. Mit der Niederschlagung Tabors war die letzte Freistatt der Demokratie in Böhmen beseitigt. Das Schicksal der Taboriten, welches in manchen Beziehungen Analogien mit dem der Jakobiner aufweist, ähnelt diesem auch darin, dass sie es waren, die durch ihren rücksichtslosen Heroismus die Revolution retteten, aber nicht für sich, sondern für die grossen Ausbeuter der Revolution; in Frankreich für die Grosskapitalisten und die grossen Industrieritter, in Böhmen für den hohen Adel, dem in Staat und Gesellschaft eine fast unumschränkte Herrschaft zufiel. Der | kleine Adel gewann nichts in den Hussitenkriegen, diese hielten seinen Niedergang nicht auf, sie fördeten ihn vielmehr. Der hohe Adel, dem der Löwenantheil an den Kirchengütern zugefallen war, bereicherte sich auch auf Kosten des niederen Adels, dessen Sitze er zusammenkaufte. Kautsky, 227-228 [translation from the English version].

Communists in Power: Zdeněk Nejedlý

The concept which Czech communist ideology developed of the Hussite Revolution and the Bohemian Reformation was most profoundly influenced and shaped by Zdeněk Nejedlý, historian, musicologist and politician. His statue in his home town of Litomyšl, where he was born in 1878, is one of the few that survived the iconoclasm of the early 1990s after the Velvet Revolution, but the authorities in Litomyšl added a kind of footnote to the statue: "He multiplied and damaged Czech culture. He brought honour and harm to his home town, which recognises his good, but condemns his evil deeds." Apparently, the new democracy after 1989 could not find an unambiguous picture of Nejedlý, but the positive elements of the ambiguity were large enough to keep the statue. Nejedlý is praised for his efforts in the field of his scholarly engagement, more precisely in historiography and musicology, but is rejected for his political efforts as he was a part of the communist regime and its repression. In the background of the ambiguity lingers the question of how an intellectual with a position close to the humanist traditions of the First Republic and its president (although he followed a leftist orientation) could become a part of a totalitarian, oppressive system. It is necessary to point out that this ambiguity is the assessment of Nejedlý by a generation which saw the collapse of communist rule. Today we sense a paradox in his life and work.

For Nejedlý himself, his life was one of continuity and consistency in choices and orientation in times that were uncertain and full of change.

Nejedlý was born on 10 February 1878 into a family that was very much a part of Litomyšl society. One of Nejedlý's father's friends was Alois Jirásek (the writer of patriotic novels about the Hussite times and the re-catholicisation) who lived for some years in Litomyšl before he left for Prague. Nejedlý received his basic education in the local Piarist school where he wrote his first work on the Hussite period. In 1896 he began his studies in Prague with Jaroslav Goll, where he was trained in positivist historiography. He also studied music with the composer Zdeněk Fibich and, perhaps more important, aesthetics with the renown critic Otakar Hostinský. In Prague, Nejedlý also met with Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, at the time professor of social philosophy at the Czech university in Prague.¹⁶

Nejedlý published his first large study, which dealt with the history of his home town Litomyšl, in 1903. Between 1903 and 1913 he published three extensive

¹⁶ For more on Nejedlý's life and work see Josef Teichman, *Zdeněk Nejedlý* (Prague, 1938); F. Červinka, *Zdeněk Nejedlý* (Prague, 1969); Jaromír Dvořák (ed.), *Zdeněk Nejedlý, doba-život-dílo* [Zdeněk Nejedlý, his times, life and work] (Praha, 1975); Jiří Křestán, *Pojetí české otázky v díle Zdeňka Nejedlého* [The understanding of the Czech question in the works of Zdeněk Nejedlý] (Prague, 1996); Jiří Křestán, "Zdeněk Nejedlý a Komunistická strana Československa v letech 1921-1925, Příspěvek k historii vztahů mezi KSČ a levicovou inteligencí, [Zdeněk Nejedlý and the Communist party in Czechoslovakia in the years 1921-1925: a contribution to the history of relationships between KSČ and the left wing intelligensia]" in: Zdeněk Kárník and Michal Kopeček, *Bolševismus, komunismus a radikální socialismus v Československu* (Prague, 2003) 1:15-42; Jiří Křestán, "Intelektuálové bez rozumu? Učenec Zdeněk Nejedlý a fascinující půvab komunismu," [Intellectuals without reason? The scholar Zdeněk Nejedlý and the fascinating beauty of Communism] in: Zdeněk Kárník and Michal Kopeček, *Bolševismus, komunismus a radikální socialismus v Československu* (Prague, 2005) 5:15-41.

studies on the Hussite period from the viewpoint of art history.¹⁷ These are Nejedlý's main academic contributions to the study of Bohemian history and retain the status of standard works in the field. From 1905 Nejedlý worked as a musicologist at Prague University and became an important critic of the cultural life of his day. In this respect he was involved in the controversy in the Czech cultural environment over Dvořák and Smetana. To Nejedlý, Dvořák was too traditional, whereas Smetana – who was born in the same town as Nejedlý – was a composer of the people. In his operas and other works Nejedlý believed that Smetana had decisively contributed to the Czech national identity.

In 1918 Nejedlý supported the fall of the Habsburg Empire and the establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia. In the inter-war republic he became a member of a leftist intellectual group that had high expectations of the new circumstances. Changes did not take place as quickly or profoundly as many had hoped for, and the events of social unrest – riots and even shootings with casualties in 1919 – were a great disappointment for Nejedlý. He became very critical of the political system and the governments of the Czech interbellum. Another expression of this position was his warm sympathy for the Communist Party which, however, he did not join until 1939. At the same time he never lost his kind of admiration for Masaryk, of whom he wrote a detailed four-volume biography between 1930 and 1937. In the same years he also published a large biography of Bedřich Smetana.

The occupation of the Czech Lands in March 1939 brought an end to Nejedlý's academic career. He fled to Moscow and joined the Communist Party, where he regularly addressed the Czechs through the broadcastings of radio Moscow. After the war he became minister of Labour and Social Affairs for the Communist Party. After the coup d'état of 1948 he became minister of Education, Science and Art, in which function he would stay until shortly before his death in 1962. In 1952 he founded the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.

For a closer understanding of Nejedlý's development from a positivist to a Marxist interpretation of (Hussite) history we need specifically to focus on the years between 1900 and 1920.¹⁸ During his studies, Nejedlý was heavily influenced by Jaroslav Goll who attempted to liberate Czech history from the nationalist bias of František Palacký by starting from positivism. Nejedlý had the ambition to write a concise history of the Hussite reformation, mainly by focussing on the great personalities of the movement. In the first period of his studies he saw the phase of Jan Rokycana as the most mature in Hussitism as here the theological crystallisation of the period after the death of Jan Hus took place. For that reason Nejedlý first concentrated mainly on theological questions as he saw there the most important discussion of the Hussites. Nevertheless, in this period he did not publish the great work he originally envisaged.

¹⁷ Nejedlý, *Dějiny předhusitského zpěvu v Čechách* [The history of pre-Hussite song in Bohemia] (Prague, 1904); *Počátky husitského zpěvu* [The beginnings of Hussite song] (Prague, 1907); *Dějiny husitského zpěvu za válek husitských* [The history of song during the Hussite wars] (Prague, 1913).

¹⁸ Petr Čornej, "Vývoj názorů na husitství v díle Zdeňka Nejedlého v letech 1898-1920," [The evolution of opinion on the Hussite movement in the works of Zdeněk Nejedlý] *Česká literatura* 26 (1978) 235-247.

Instead, under the influence of Otakar Hostinský, Nejedlý started to study Hussite history from the perspective of cultural history. His three main studies on the Bohemian Reformation were a result of this change in understanding of the Bohemian Reformation. While writing them he showed a certain development in terms of where he saw the importance of the Bohemian Reformation. Hereafter he identified the Taborites as the main line of the Hussite revolution and as the most distinguished part of it: thus following Kautsky and other leftist intellectuals.

Another aspect of Nejedlý in historiographical orientation is found in his contribution to the polemics about the meaning of Czech History between Masaryk and Pekař. Nejedlý published his study *Spor o smysl českých dějin*, [The Dispute over the Meaning of Czech History] in 1913 as a separate pamphlet.¹⁹ It was an attempt to find a kind of compromise between Pekař and Masaryk, between positivist historiography, interested only in facts, and a philosophy of history, which gave first place to the interpretation of facts from a moral point of view. Equally eminent scholars, the former was a philosopher the latter an historian, Nejedlý sympathised with both who, according to him, basically agreed with one another but only spoke on different and incompatible levels.

Nejedlý did not agree with Masaryk's idea that the Hussite movement and its aftermath occurred on a purely moral and religious level. It was primarily a progressive national movement, as he called it. It was progressive because of its moral implications, which Nejedlý refused to identify as religious. We have to take away the religious packaging from Hus's thinking to find his pure humanity, his love for the nation, his ideas about society, freedom and responsibility. The thrust of the Hussite movement did not allow for agreement with the church or with religion itself. Its nature was anticlerical because of the oppression of the nation by the church. It was an attempt to reform public life on a basis different from that used by the church and the secular powers until that time. Its ethical claims concerned not exclusively or even primarily the church but, rather, the whole of society – including the church. Since the church appeared to be an enemy of the reform efforts, the rupture between the Czechs and the church became definitive. In the course of history, the Czech nation abandoned religion as such, which became obvious later, especially at the time of the National Revival. The religious freedom of the nineteenth century did not result in a massive return to the Protestant churches, but rather led to a secularisation due to the anticlericalism of Czech thinking and self-understanding.

For Nejedlý the meaning of Czech history was primarily the split between the nation as such and religion. According to him, secularisation belongs at the heart of the national heritage and began in the late Middle Ages. In his opinion, the national tradition of progressive liberation from authoritarian and oppressive forces found its natural continuation in the socialist movement, which proclaimed the end of bourgeois rule and the beginning of the new age of the proletariat.

In his work written before the Second World War, Nejedlý laid the foundations for his later claim that the communists were the true followers and successors of Hus and the Hussite Revolution. As Jiří Křestán, specialist on Nejedlý, writes:

¹⁹ (Prague, 1913) and also included in *Havelka*, 321-360.

It would be possible to deduce a similar view from as early as Nejedlý's inter-war writings. Primarily from the perspective of the coalescence of the line of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and of the scholar, who honoured, above all, the traditions of the National Revival and of Hussitism and who was at the brink of the First Republic a sincere follower of Masaryk (he retained his respect for the first president until the end of his life). Although this peculiarity is in his selectivity of national traditions (he chooses only that which he interprets as popular elements) and his qualification of the monopolist heir and interpreter of these traditions which, together, gives a foundation for the possibility of casting out the "aristocratic" elements of the nation and their ideologists.²⁰

As we have seen, during these years the strategy of the Communist Party also changed from a strong rejection of the capitalist bourgeois republic that needed a revolution to a basic acceptance of the system, albeit with a strong criticism of weak social policy. This turn was made under the influence of the Comintern – i.e. under the influence of Moscow – as a matter of tactics to gain more voter support. Therefore, in the crucial years between 1935 and 1938 – the years of increasing tensions between the German minority and the central government – the Communist Party presented itself not as a party of revolution, but as a party that would defend the Czech nation and its independence.

Nejedlý's final concept found its expression in a pamphlet which he published in 1946 with the title "Communists, the Heirs of the Great Traditions of the Czech Nation." The bearers of the Czech national traditions have always been the people, is his statement;²¹ never the aristocracy nor the church. That was especially true for Hussite times when the people under the leadership of Hus and his successors rose against feudal lords and the king. The crisis of the Czech nation after the Battle of White Mountain was not only a national one, as Palacký or others stated, but was primarily a social one, because feudalism was reinstalled, bringing suffering to the peasants and the poor – those who truly stood for the Czech nation.

In this way, the communist Nejedlý could adapt Palacký's concept of Czech history without changing its foundations. Also for Nejedlý the Hussite period was the culmination of Czech history, especially Tabor and its radical democratic spirit. Conversely, the period of re-catholicisation was the lowest point in Czech history because it saw the oppression by the ruling classes of mainly German speaking nobility and the Roman Catholic Church. He only added an extra argument to the concept of Palacký, that is, that the real struggle was not about religious issues, but about social justice. The Hussite period is a central period in Czech history because Tabor came so close to communist values. In a sense, Nejedlý managed to hijack Palacký's concept of Czech history – which had become the foundation for the new Czechoslovakia – for the purpose of legitimising communist rule.

Hus, therefore, was not seen so much as a religious person: today he might have marched in the streets with the communists instead of preaching from the pulpit.

²⁰ Křesťan (2005) 31 [my translation].

²¹ *Komunisté dědici velikých tradic českého národa* [The Communists – inheritors of the great traditions of the Czech nation] (Prague, 1946) 15.

It constantly amazes me to see how little of a theologian Hus indeed is; how rarely he concentrated on the existence and the accidents of God. Instead, he is moved by and interested in the people and their poverty. He speaks forcefully about the differences between the life of the people and of the lords, especially of the higher clergy. (...) Without doubt it is anachronistic to think that today Hus would be a priest as he was then. Today Hus would be a leader of a political party and his platform would not be the pulpit, but the Prague Lucerna Hall or Wenceslaus Square. And his party would be very close to us Communists – about that we can be convinced.²²

Nejedlý's analysis of Czech history in relation to communism had an eschatological connotation. He wanted to prove that communism is the fulfilment of Czech history and tradition. In this sense Czech history calls for communism, it is its logical and one and only legitimate result. The bourgeois, capitalist system was not able to satisfy the desires of the people for truth, sincerity and patriotism, therefore a new system – a peoples' democracy – is needed under the leadership of the Communist Party, which will lead the nation into a bright future.

[There is] a common line that runs through and links these historical elements and phenomena in one chain, from the lesser nobility in the Middle Ages, through the Hussite peasant and artisan and the national revivalists, up to today's proletariat.²³

We, Czech communists ... are the most recent phase in this development of the nation. ... All of this is, therefore, no chance occurrence, nor is it or can it be only some kind of mask. It is ... deeply historically logical that precisely the communists feel so nationally close to our people. ... We truly are the transmitters and inheritors of the best and most national strivings and yearnings of the popular strata – and therefore the best elements – of our nation.²⁴

In his study on the rise of communism in the years after the Second World War, Bradley F. Abrams points out that the communists were rather successful in convincing the public about the national and patriotic nature of their ideology. They went so far as to depict Hussitism as an anti-German, Slavic phenomenon just as communism linked the Czechs to their Slavic identity, connected to the great Slav brother nation in the East. Nejedlý himself called the soldiers of the Red Army liberating Czechoslovakia the "new warriors of God" in an allusion to the famous song of the Hussite warriors against the crusaders. It is Abrams' conclusion that, with this patriotic strategy, the communists were able to address a wider section of Czechoslovak society. Not only communist intellectuals but also democratic socialist and protestant intellectuals largely agreed with this interpretation of Czech history and therefore failed to make solid arguments to refute the claims of communist ideology. Only catholic intellectuals were, in his view, able to develop an alternative

²² Ibid. 46-47.

²³ Ibid. 17-18. Translation of Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation, Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Oxford, 2004) 98.

²⁴ Ibid. 40. Translation of Abrams, 98.

vision of the future of Czechoslovakia as they denounced, from the very beginning, the totalitarian nature of communist ideology.²⁵

As proof of the true Czech patriotic character of the communist dictatorship, the regime had the Bethlehem Chapel reconstructed in 1952. It was largely the result of the efforts of Nejedlý as minister. On that occasion he published another pamphlet, this time specifically on Hus.²⁶ Entirely in the spirit of the pamphlet of 1946, Hus was presented as a revolutionary who fought against the church and the aristocracy. Much attention was paid to the character of the church which was, in his opinion, primarily an institution of power. In these lines we see a reflection of the oppression of the churches by the communist regime which started most openly in 1950.

Hus was not a filthy heretic of early Christianity, nor a silent medieval sectarian, nor a learned reformer behind a university chair. Hus is the first revolutionary of modern times. Therefore, the results of his appearance were entirely different. No one of his predecessors invoked a revolution. Hus did. And one that shocked the whole world of his time and which continues to shock even after half a millennium.²⁷

Hus's programme, according to Nejedlý, had three main points. First, Hus announced the law of collectivism, which is the principle that everything must be for the well-being of all, not just of one person. The second principle concerns property. Hus's criticism of the riches of the church called for a reform of property which had to be executed with the presupposition that property is not just there for the benefit of the individual, but for the benefit of all those who need it. The third point is the equality of the people, especially of the poor as opposed to the ruling classes. Hus was not just a source of new religious insights, but also the propagator of a new social order very similar to the socialist order.²⁸ In the ideological eyes of the former historian, now politician, Zdeněk Nejedlý, Jan Hus was a communist *avant la lettre*.

Conclusion

As our first conclusion we might state that there is much more continuity between interwar Czechoslovakia and the communist regime after the Second World War on the intellectual level than often thought. The communists could make use of a broad reservoir of ideas and thoughts of a different background in order to convince people that they were good Czechs. It does not, of course, mean that their explanation of history was right, but it means that a substantial part of the roots of communism are to be found in the intellectual world of the First Czechoslovak Republic where, at least from 1935 onwards, communists were not on the side lines but integrated in politics, culture and society.

²⁵ Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation, Czech culture and the Rise of Communism* (Oxford, 2004).

²⁶ Nejedlý, *Hus a naše doba* [Hus and our time] (Prague, 1952).

²⁷ Ibid. 21

²⁸ Ibid. 31

Secondly, communists were rather successful in their campaign to show that they were a part of what Nejedlý called the best Czech traditions, including Jan Hus and the Taborite movement. They managed to use Hussite history for legitimating their claim on power. The three historical films of Otakar Vávra about the Hussite movement (*Jan Hus*, *Jan Žižka* and *Proti všem*) from the years 1954 to 1957 – and, perhaps, more important, their continuing popularity – are a symbol and affirmation of the success of this effort.

One of the strengths of the Czech communists before and after the Second World War was that they managed to convey a picture of communist ideology that was rooted in Czech history and the Czech national tradition. In this way they succeeded, primarily, in legitimising themselves in the eyes of larger circles of Czech society, even though most of this group would never vote for them. Secondly, it ended the political isolation in which they found themselves because of their ideological stances. They were able to reach a much larger public than they had ever dreamt of by showing that they were a reliable alternative within the political and ideological arena of the time.

In the 1950s, the communist regime was successful with this interpretation of the history of the Bohemian Reformation in dividing the churches among themselves. They achieved a basic agreement on the side of the Czech Protestants who, in general terms, recognised themselves in the concept of Czech history used by the regime. It would take them a long time to rid themselves of this seduction. It could sell the suppression of the Roman Catholic Church and the abolition of a part of its structures with the argument that the role of that church (from the time of Jan Hus) had always been against the Czech cause – something the communists would themselves correct now and for ever.