

A Layperson's guide to the THE HISTORY OF THE BOHEMIAN/CZECH NATION & PEOPLES*

--Why do we have two names, Bohemians and Czechs?



--Why is Saint Wenceslaus such a large presence
in our Czech/Bohemian heritage?

--Why and how did Bohemia get subsumed within
the Austria-Hungarian Empire?

(Kingdom of Bohemia Coat of Arms-1350 a.d.)

--How did Bohemia become the independent Czechoslovakia after
World War I?

--Why did Hitler and the Nazis take over Czechoslovakia in 1939?

--How did the Communist Party take control of the country from 1948
until 1989?

--Why has there been nearly a thousand year history of friction with
the Germans?

*Assembled by John Chromy from a variety of publications with the majority of the information coming from:The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown by Professor Hugh Agnew, George Washington University and published by the Hoover Institute Press of Stanford University

I. Earliest Periods

Recent archeological studies have proven that habitation by prehistoric peoples existed approximately 1.6 million years ago in the lands and forests near the Vltava, Elbe, Otava and Morava rivers. In the post-ice age (10,000 years ago) the lands in and around these rivers became heavily forested, contained substantial amounts of raw minerals and were densely inhabited by wild game. At this point neolithic peoples began to settle in small villages near the rivers and lakes to supplement their hunting based food supply with fish and small root crops.

In 300 BC, Celtic tribes moved into the river bottom lands under the leadership of a Prince named Bohi and subsequent Roman documents referred to these Celtic people as Bohemians and the region (roughly the same geographic area as the current Czech Republic) as Bohemia--and so it has been called ever since.

II. How the names Bohemia/Bohemians and Czechs came into being

In the 4th and 5th century AD as the Roman Empire was collapsing and losing control over its northern regions, a new peoples (the Slavs or Slovenes) began seeping into the province of Bohemia, having been pushed out of the Central Asia steppes by the East Asia nomadic tribes. Legend has it that these Slavic peoples were led by a tribal chief named Cech and henceforth his peoples began to be referred as the Czechs. Thus the two names, Bohemians from the land and Celtic people under Prince Bohi in the 4th Century BC-- and Czechs from the Slavic people led by the tribal chief Cech in the 5th century AD.

In 863 AD, the Byzantine Emperor assigned two missionaries (Cyril and Methodius) to initiate the christianization of the Czech people by developing a Catholic liturgy in the slavic language and training of local priests. To this day, Sts. Cyril and Methodius are honored in the Czech Catholic religion and are included in the Roman Catholic Litany of the Saints, for their bringing of the Christian faith to the peoples in the Bohemia Region.

III. 850 A.D.--1400 A.D. Formation of a Bohemian Kingdom and the development of a Bohemian spirit and tradition.

- In the mid-800s, leaders of the Premyslik family/tribe began to exert influence over other Czech tribes and created the first organized dynasty and the rudiments of a “national” leadership. This included the founding of Prague (around 885 AD) on the Vltava River as a center of Premyslik rule from the first castle on Hradcany hill, and as a trade center for goods and services throughout central Europe.
- Amongst the Premyslik family was a high-born woman Ludmilla, who played a key role in supporting the growth of the Catholic church and was dedicated to caring for the poor. In the year 921 Ludmilla (the grandmother of the future King Wenceslaus) was murdered in a palace power struggle.
- When her grandson Vaclav (Wenceslaus) became the new ruler of Bohemia he brought Ludmilla’s body to a place of honor in Prague and sponsored her canonization as a saint of the Christian church. Ever since, St. Ludmilla has been a cornerstone of Bohemian identity and tradition.
- Vaclav (known to us as the “Good King Wenceslas”) reigned from the year 921 thru 935 and was quite successful in gaining control over the other Czech dukes (large land-owners) and began to consolidate the Czech/Bohemian state, expanding into nearby principalities and arranging agreements with various

German rulers to the immediate west. Included in one agreement were the relics of St. Vitus which he installed in his castle chapel and this became the basis for the St. Vitus Cathedral initially constructed in 930 A.D. (expanded in 1060 A.D. with the current cathedral constructed in 1344 A.D.) and remains a national shrine at the heart of the city of Prague to this day.



- In 935 A.D. Vaclav (King Wenceslas) was murdered by his brother Boleslav in a power struggle for control of the Bohemian lands and its Czech communities. The death of Vaclav contributed immensely to the growing sense of a Bohemian nation. He became, along with his

grandmother Ludmilla, one of the Czech patron saints and henceforth one of the emblems of the Czech nation. These two provided a spiritual charisma to the Premyslid dynasty and a Christian legitimacy to the Czech state. *(Thus, 920 years later, when New Prague was founded in 1855 in Minnesota and a Catholic*

parish was established by the Czech settlers, they adopted St. Wenceslaus as the patron of their church and parish).

- Boleslav and his descendants of the Premyslid dynasty ruled the Bohemian nation for most of the next three centuries, with varying degrees of control and a wide range of constant struggles with their neighboring princedoms, and amongst the various Czech and German dukes (large land-holders), as each tried to gain control of more land and peoples. Many of these struggles were with German princes to the West and laid the basis for German/Czech frictions that continued intermittently until the end of World War II in 1945.
- The Premyslids gained control of the lands by constructing fortress towns with wooden castles on key hilltops located along the rivers. From these castles the Premyslid leaders ruled over the local peoples, collected taxes and supplies, built churches and provided a modicum of protection to the local farmers and merchants. In turn, the people tended to construct their houses in villages and towns near these castle/fortresses for protection in a politically unstable countryside and to be near the markets. Thus was established a pattern of farming practices that exist in the Czech Republic to this day---farm families resided in a house and small compound in the town and walked each day with their cattle out to the farm fields.
- Each Premyslid and German duke hired a corps of armed retainers who fought his battles and collected taxes, supplies and other payments from the local people. He also drew on local communities for extra men to supplement his armed corps when needed for larger battles with other princes. Farm boys were frequently dragooned into the various armies and the supplies needed to conduct these struggles were extracted from the farmers and merchants---often times, a heavy price to pay for the security and stability provided by the Premyslid dukes.
- Over the next two centuries the Premyslids struggled frequently with their neighboring German, Hungarian and Polish counterparts--each seeking control of more lands, resources and the Church.
- Internal colonization brought into production large amounts of land, a greater food supply and more revenue from mineral mining. The village farmers did not technically own their land, all the land belonged to the dukes who granted farm families more or less permanent tenure as long they paid the duke and through the duke, the king a substantial portion of their produce (usually 30 to 50%).
- The castles of the dukes attracted merchants, traders, craftsmen to supply the goods and services needed by the expanding noble families. Prague, being the most important of these towns grew in size and population and by the late 1100s had acquired a Jewish community and substantial numbers of German

craftsmen. At this time stone houses were being constructed around what is now called "*Stare Mesta*", the Old Town.

- In 1204 the Czech Duke, Otakar the 1st, obtained international and ecclesiastical recognition of the crown of Bohemia as a Kingdom in its own right, no longer a fiefdom of the Holy Roman (usually German) Emperor.
- Throughout the 1200s there was substantial additional colonization from the German communities to the west---these being peasant farmers, townsmen and craftsmen in the metals and mining trades who were encouraged to come by the Czech dukes who granted them land and created new towns in order to foster economic growth. The addition of these German people stimulated considerable economic development and their descendants often became prosperous, acquiring much land and eventually playing a key role in the inter-ethnic friction and political future of the Bohemian kingdom.
- In the late 1200s the Premyslid dynasty expanded dramatically during the reign of Premysl Otakar II (1253-78) who militarily and diplomatically (including a fair share of bribery) gained control over large chunks of German, Polish and Austrian lands. Otokar's success inspired fear and some uprisings amongst both the other Czech nobles and neighboring kings.
- In the year 1278 Premysl Otakar challenged the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf of the Hapsburg dynasty and was defeated in a legendary battle in which "this most glorious Czech King of Bohemia, died as he lived according to the knights code, Premysl Otakar II, King of Gold and Iron" became an inspiration to the Bohemian nation and its writers, both contemporary and in the future.
- Legends abound that St. Vaclav (King Wenceslaus) was seen, in white robes, riding a white horse and supporting Otakar II in this great battle. These legends contributed to the cult of St. Wenceslaus as the "Eternal Duke" of the Czechs and furthered his importance in the Czech political ideology in the coming centuries.
- Subsequent decades found the Bohemian crown, through a marriage of Eliska Premyslovena to a Luxembourg prince, being placed in the hands of John of Luxemburg who ruled from 1310 to 1346. His reign was one of constant turmoil and some accumulation of additional lands, but most importantly the birth of his son Charles (1316) in Prague.
- **Charles became King of the Bohemians in 1334 and was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1346. Though Charles was not Czech (being of the house of Luxemburg) during his crowning he was given the name of Vaclav (Wenceslaus), the patron saint and very emblem of Czech statehood**

IV. REIGN OF CHARLES THE IV, THE KINGDOM OF BOHEMIA'S GOLDEN AGE

- Between 1346 and 1373 Charles added significant lands to the Bohemian crown including large sections of what is now Poland and parts of northeast Germany including Berlin), extending the Kingdom to its largest extent ever.
- Charles' court residency in Prague stimulated substantial commercial and cultural development as the city became one of the leading administrative and trade centers of central Europe.
- A new stone bridge (today's world famous Charles bridge) was constructed to connect the old town with the new town and Hradcany Castle/St. Vitus Cathedral.
- Education was fostered with schools in every town and parish. Charles University was founded in 1348 as an international school of advanced learning.
- Royal court affairs were conducted in Latin, the use of the German language was common in both the streets and communicating with other parts of Europe. Czech was spoken in the rural villages and also in some of the administrative and judicial documents by the year 1370.
- The Bohemian lands are blessed with many mineral resources and during this period there was a boom in the exploitation of iron ore and silver mines which contributed to the overall prosperity of the Kingdom.

V. THE DECLINE BEGINS

- After Charles death in 1373 misfortune befell the kingdom---the Black Death plague struck in 1380 and eventually killed about 15% of the population and disrupted many of the commercial networks and endeavors---incomes declined, silver mining collapsed, lands were neglected and the common people suffered extensively.
- For several decades waves of immigrants from the western German principalities entered Bohemia seeking land to cultivate and relief from the Bubonic (Black) plague that had struck western Europe in the mid-14th. The arrival of these immigrants increased ethnic tensions in the rural areas.
- Social tensions erupted in rage and violence and on April 18, 1389 Prague's Jewish ghetto was raided with hundreds being killed as rumors had spread that the Jews were causing the plague.
- Religious disputes were flaring up, the Catholic church was in disrepute with three different Popes claiming the Vatican throne simultaneously.
- In the early 1400s Jan Huss, a Czech preacher at the Bethlehem Chapel preached a reform theology which conflicted with the Archbishop of Prague.

- This theological conflict came to a head when the King of Bohemia allowed the Catholic church to sell “indulgences” within the kingdom.
- Huss, who preached a simple religious liturgy based on the bible, was “summoned” to the Council of Constance and given the opportunity to repent and disown his “heresies”. He refused and was sentenced to death--a death which triggered a 70 year Hussite reform movement, centered in Tabor, led to a series of civil wars and anti-Hussite crusades that added to the confusion, turmoil and decline of the Bohemian kingdom.
- A final peace was established in the city of Kutna Hora in 1485 with a treaty that recognized the freedom of worship of both the Catholic church and the Hussite followers. Many of the Czech and German nobility had split on this issue and In all the turmoil about 70% of the people left the Catholic church and much of the church’s property was confiscated and the church’s authority dramatically reduced. Out of this came the construction of the famous Tyn church on the Old town square in Prague--a distinctive monument to this day, fronted by a statue of Jan Huss.
- The religious split triggered by Jan Huss initiated the split from the Catholic church within the Bohemian crownlands that would continue to play out for the next five centuries and continues to this day. *(Editor’s note: one result is that in the 1860s when Czech immigrants came to the New Prague area, there was a group who faithfully followed the Catholic church and founded the parish and school of St. Wenceslaus. Correspondingly, a portion of the immigrants were not supportive of the church---thus today there exists in New Prague, two Bohemian cemeteries, St. Wenceslaus Cemetery(north of the town) for the Catholics and the National Bohemian Cemetery(west of the town) for the others.*

VI. ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF TURMOIL, AND THE COMING OF THE HAPSBURGS.

- The religious turmoil and a series of weak kings resulted in the vast expansion of the powers of the Bohemian and German nobility who were the big landholders and princely rulers of much of Bohemia. These coalesced into a semi-representative body called **The Estates**, whose members gained a voice in the selection of future Kings, became the source of legislation and land laws and totally ruled over the common people in the towns and villages.
- The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, (initiated by Martin Luther and others) came to the Bohemian crown lands and further legitimized the remnants

of the earlier Hussite revolt and solidified Bohemia as a religiously divided state and confirmed the freedom of religions throughout the land.

- In the year 1526 the **Estates**, after much turmoil elected a member of the German/Austrian Hapsburg family, Ferdinand as the new King of Bohemia under the assumption that he was a weak candidate and would be an ineffective ruler thus allowing most of the power to remain with the members of the **Estates**. Thus was launched a fatal pathway which effected the crownlands of Bohemia and the Czech people for the next 392 years, until the dissolution of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, a personal domain of the Hapsburg family, at the end of World War I and the subsequent creation in 1918 of the Republic of Czechoslovakia .
- Though Ferdinand was a weak king, the Hapsburgs were an immensely capable family with family members already ruling nearly half of Europe and included the Holy Roman Emperor, King Charles the Fifth, ruler of Spain, the Belgian and Dutch lowlands, parts of Italy and the sponsor of the Spanish *conquista* of most of Central and South America, Mexico and the Caribbean.
- While in the 17th and 18th centuries the Hapsburg family empire ebbed and flowed its crown ultimately settled into Vienna as the capitol of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, into which were incorporated many of the neighboring lands including the Bohemian kingdom. Bohemia remained a kingdom in name only and was henceforth a secondary region within the A-H empire--- a very productive and valuable region supplying the A-H empire with a substantial portion of its food and mineral/industrial wealth, but definitely second class principality ruled by the Germanic leadership of the Austrian Hapsburgs.

VII. LIFE UNDER THE AUSTRIAN (HAPSBURG) RULE (1626 A.D.--1918 A.D.)

As the Hapsburg family dynasty gained control over the Bohemian lands a number of major changes happened;

- The Hapsburgs were a staunchly Catholic dynasty and though Bohemia remained a religiously divided region, the Catholic church was strengthened and re-organized to focus primarily on the parishes in the towns and villages, where the liturgy remained primarily in the Czech language.
- In general the 18th century was one of economic and cultural progress due in no small part to the infusion of German skilled craftsmen, industrialists, Jewish merchants and the development of significant metallurgical industries based on Bohemia's extensive iron and mineral resources.

- German was the official administrative language of the Austrian empire and most official business. Trade, the arts and higher education were conducted in German, with the Czech language remaining prominent only in the Bohemian towns and villages---though even the common people learned some German in order to comply with government regulations etc.
- Czech farmers and town families all had to pay substantial taxes (in cash or in-kind) to their duke overlords and through them to the central government in Vienna.
- Like all the other ethnic groups in the Austrian empire, the sons of Czech families were subject to being drafted into the Austrian imperial armies, usually for a minimum of three years, which could be and often was extended because the empire was constantly struggling to maintain order in it's very ethnically complex internal country, while regularly having to defend (or extend) its international frontiers. Austria played a key role in defending Europe from invasions by the Turkish empire, was part of the grand coalition which finally defeated the ever expansionist Napoleon (1815 Treaty of Vienna) and later had to guard against incursions by the Russian Czars armies along its northern and eastern borders.
- In 1712 the Hapsburg King ordered a census to be conducted throughout all its lands, to identify and enumerate all of its population and the products they generated. The census had a number of purposes, primarily to ensure that all citizens were providing the proper share of their produce and income to the empire's treasury. *(A benefit from this census is many of our families can now trace their ancestors back to at least 1712, because the administrative bureaucracy of the Hapsburg empire and subsequent governments has maintained the census and birth/death records to this day).*
- Industrialisation came quickly to the Bohemian regions of the Austrian empire, again due to the richness of its mineral base, plus its well educated population and skilled craftsmen. By the mid-1800s steam powered engines drove metal manufacturing, railroads, the printing and garment industries and much more. Significant portions of the population shifted to the urban manufacturing centers attracted by industrial employment, better living conditions and to escape farm land shortages, oppressive taxes and often the boredom of village life.

VIII. AWAKENING OF CZECH NATIONALISM, LANGUAGE AND TRADITIONS

- Throughout the nearly 400 year Hapsburg reign over the Bohemian/Czech lands and people there was friction with the Austrians over land control, political rights, official languages, responsibility for schools and churches, military service obligations and taxes. The latter was a particular irritant given the Empire's need for funds to finance its large military establishment and many military campaigns.

That, plus the Hapsburgs' royal lifestyle (two enormous palaces in Vienna alone) and that of their aristocratic followers required constant replenishment of the treasury mostly by taxing the common people. And Bohemia, with its rich farmlands, substantial mineral resources and growing industrialization provided more than 40% of the empire's revenue in the 18th and 19th centuries.

- While there were numerous attempts throughout these centuries to provide the Czech people some voice in local and provincial governance (and in the mid-1800s in the national councils of the Empire), the Czechs were clearly viewed as second class subjects of the Emperor, and the Hapsburgs never wavered in keeping the overall power in the hands of the German speaking Austrian aristocracy and government administrators.
- Throughout the 1800's there were various waves of political organizing by the Czech population in order to gain some autonomy under the Austrian rule. Much of this organizational effort was plagued by internal disagreements amongst the Czechs and a constant splintering and re-grouping of the political movements.
- In the 19th century there was a growing movement throughout Europe for the common people to have an increased voice in the ruling of their countries. The right of kings, emperors and aristocratic people to rule over all others was being questioned on many levels. In 1776 the American colonies had thrown off the English crown, in 1789 the French people revolted against the Bourbon kings, in 1857 the Indian people rose up against the British colonial system, and more.
- Simultaneously intellectuals began strengthening the Czech language, history and heritage. Czech language newspapers began to be published, writers and playwrights switched their works from German to Czech, musicians re-emphasized Czech folk songs and dances, **composers like Smetana and Dvorak idolized Czech themes in their classical compositions.** In mid-century the Austrians re-authorized the use of the Czech language in local government administration.
- In mid-century an array of Czech social/cultural/economic associations were formed including cooperatives, workers unions, insurance associations to improve the lives of the Bohemian people and to foster a sense of community and Bohemian/Czech national identity---all these became important foundations for Czech independence demands in the coming century.

IX. DRIVE TO THE INDEPENDENCE OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA

- As World War I began the Czech political leaders (along with their slavic cousins in Slovakia and Moravia) were struggling for more autonomy within the Austro-Hungarian empire. When Austria initiated hostilities by declaring war on Serbia, Russia entered the conflict on the side of Serbia which triggered the entrance of Germany in support of their germanic Austrian cousins. Subsequently France and England entered in fulfilling their alliance with Russia against Germany. In the midst of all this belligerence, Czech units of the Austrian army were mobilized and sent to fight the Russians---causing the perplexed Czech soldiers to wonder, "why we are being sent to fight our fellow slavic people on behalf of our Austro-German overlords?"
- In the midst of this struggle, the Czech political parties created a unified National Committee and one of its leaders, the very respected Jan Masaryk went to Paris in 1914 to organize international support for the Czech political movements. **On July 6, 1915 Masaryk issued a proclamation in Geneva calling for "the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the creation of an independent Czech State"**. He was joined by Eduard Benes and together they visited several countries urging the governments of France, England, Russia and the United states to support this move to independence for the Czech people and their Slovak and Moravian cousins.
- On October 27th Austria accepted President Wilson's peace conditions, withdrew from combat operations and requested an armistice. Since one of Wilson's conditions was that ethnic peoples be given an opportunity to govern themselves, On October 28th the Czech National Committee in Prague "asserted the right of Czech and Slovakian people to self determination" **and several hundred thousand people swarmed into St. Wenceslaus square to rejoice in their new freedom.** On November 14th a new government was formed with Jan Masaryk as President and the 392 years of association of the Czech lands (and the Bohemian Kingdom) under the reign of the Austrian House of Hapsburg were formally at an end. **The Democratic Republic of Czechoslovakia was born.**

X. NAZI OCCUPATION AND WORLD WAR II.

Consistent with Hitler's determination to create an indomitable Third Reich, he was determined that all peoples of German background should and would be brought into the German nation. Having annexed the Austrians with the *Anschluss* in March of 1938 he initiated pressure on the Czech government to cede to Germany the western Czechoslovakian province of Sudeten---a province that included nearly 30% of the country's land a similar amount of its productive resources. Sudeten had been the home of many people of German background for centuries and in 1938 roughly 60% of the

population spoke that language and were of the German culture. While the Czech government always included German political leaders in its cabinet and administration, nonetheless many people complained of being treated poorly by the national government. Hitler repeated these complaints and on that basis demanded that Czechoslovakia cede the Sudeten to Germany or face the might of the German army which would take it by force.

Czechoslovakia refused and appealed to its French ally to implement the 1925 mutual protection treaty. The French government, along with its sworn ally Great Britain, was reluctant to risk war with Hitler's Germany and so hesitated to overtly support Czechoslovakia. A similar non-response came from an appeal to the Soviet Union for support should Germany invade and the Czechs choose to fight to defend their country.

To resolve the issue and avoid a costly war, Hitler proposed a meeting with France and Britain in Munich on September 15th in which Hitler made it clear he would accept no compromise, the Sudeten must be handed over to the Reich and if so he promised:

- The rights and property of the Czech people would not be jeopardized.
- Acquiring Sudeten would satisfy the Reich's demands for German populated territory and be the last of Hitler's expansion of the Third Reich.
- There would be no need for a war with France and Great Britain

Thus, without Czechoslovak attendance or representation at the conference, on September 29th, 1938 the "infamous" Munich Agreement was signed, and war appeared to have been avoided. The British Prime Minister Chamberlain triumphantly announced the agreement guaranteed "Peace in our Time"--the whole world breathed a bit easier except the people of Czechoslovakia who were left with the choice of either fight Germany alone and risk nearly certain annihilation, or acquiesce---and acquiesce the leaders of Czechoslovakia did, to save their people from immolation. On October 5th, the great Czech leader President, Eduardo Benes resigned and went into exile, and Germany took control of the majority German areas of western Czechoslovakia.

Following these events the governing of the remaining portions of Czechoslovakia became increasingly difficult, There was much internal agitation and the Slovaks began to demand autonomy if not independence. In February of 1939, Hitler announced that if the Czech government could not restore order he could "not guarantee the frontier borders". The 82 year old Czech President, Emil Hacha, went to Berlin on March 14th and pleaded for Hitler's patience and after a midnite meeting in which Hitler administered a 3 hour "browbeating", Hacha signed a proclamation placing the fate of the Czech nation in Hitler's hands. **On the morning of March 15th, 1939 the German**

army (the Wehrmacht) occupied all the Czech lands and Hitler issued a decree creating a Third Reich protectorate for Bohemia and Moravia. Slovakia subsequently declared independence and signed an autonomous protectorate agreement with Hitler's Reich.

To their eternal credit the people of Czechoslovakia, unlike the people of Austria the previous year, stood in stoic silence as the German army occupied their cities---refusing to cheer the occupation and Hitler's procession through the streets of Prague. An act that bitterly angered Hitler towards the Czech people.

Throughout the following six years the Czech portion of the former Czechoslovakia was overseen by Nazi administrators under military rule and life went on with mostly passive resistance by the Czech people---the exception being three British trained paratroopers who assassinated Deputy Reich Protector Theodore Heydrich, in May of 1942. By then the universities had been closed, 36,000 Czechs were exported to Germany as forced laborers in factories, 40,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps, the Czech industrial and agriculture production was absorbed by Hitler's war machine.

In retaliation for the assassination of Heydrich, the village of Lidice, accused of assisting the assassins, was destroyed---all buildings were razed, the men were shot, the women sent to concentration camps and the children placed in orphanages.-- Church leaders and priests who helped the paratroopers were executed.

Tens of thousands of Czech soldiers fled to Russia, England and France and joined the allied forces in fighting the Nazi regime. Prague and environs were mostly spared war bombardment when in 1945, as the war was rapidly coming to a close and the Allied and Russian armies were closing in on Prague, the Nazis fled *en masse* rather than face the expected devastation by the Russian army and the retribution of the Czech people. On May 9th the Russian army entered Prague and the war was officially over for the Czech people.

From May till August the retribution by the Czech people became a juggernaut and more than 2 million people of German descent, some of whose families had lived in the Bohemian provinces for hundreds of years, were driven out of the country into East Germany. German owned lands and property were confiscated initially by unauthorized Czech militias and later by the Czech government---thus putting an end to nearly a thousand years of friction amongst the Czech and German peoples within the Bohemian lands.

XI. COMMUNIST TAKEOVER OF 1948.

The post-war National Front under the leadership of President Benes undertook to reconstruct Czechoslovakia and did so with great difficulty. The country had lost vast amounts of its resources during the war, political parties and would-be leaders were many and often uncompromising, Slovakia only reluctantly returned as a semi-autonomous region in the new Czechoslovakia and revised borders (with some relocation of people) had to be established with neighboring countries. The electorate had shifted significantly away from capitalism, towards socialism and the communist party, with help from the Soviet Union, had taken control of the several trade unions and was the most effectively organized party. In the elections of 1948 the communists won 40% of the votes and took the leadership role in the new government, a role later expanded to full control and not diminished until 1989.

XII. FALL OF THE SOVIET-COMMUNIST REGIME--The "Velvet Revolution"

The next twenty years were a dreary and dismal time for the vast majority of the people of Czechoslovakia; Industries were nationalized, farms were taken from the people and folded into farming collectives, freedom of speech and press were severely curtailed and production and the economy were at best stagnant. (Editor's note: I visited the country for 8 days in March of 1965 and indeed found the place to be dreary and the people dispirited). The Soviet Union supported communist government controlled all levers of power and maintained a massive internal surveillance and security network that ruthlessly rooted out anyone who spoke ill of the government.

Though only about 14% of the population were members of the Communist Party, the party was well organized, guided by the leadership in Moscow, controlled the army, police/security forces and the Ministry of Finance. However, despite this controlling apparatus there were always artists, writers, young people and some political leaders pushing on the government to allow more freedoms. In 1968 the newly elected President, Alexander Dubcek began a movement towards liberalization, dubbing it "socialism with a human face" that created much excitement, hope and expectations in the country. However in August of 1968 this movement was crushed when the Soviet army and its allies from other Warsaw Pact countries suddenly invaded Czechoslovakia with 500,000 troops and re-established a rigid communist regime which lasted 21 more years.

In 1988 the Berlin Wall fell and in 1989 the Soviet Union backed regime in Poland faced massive strikes by its shipyard workers, and in the face of international condemnation the Soviet Union chose not to send their troops to protect the Polish communist government, which collapsed.

Subsequently a series of anti-government demonstrations were launched in Prague, and though initially suppressed by the police and special forces, in December of 1989 a massive protest in St. Wenceslaus Square proved uncontrollable by the communists without the backing of Soviet troops. On December 29th the government collapsed and in 1990 a democratically elected government took control. The communist regime was pushed aside and the Czech playwright Vaclav Havel led the new government which promptly began dismantling much of the oppressive nationalized institutions. A great joy and hopeful expectations descended on the new Czechoslovakia. This transference of power without a civil war or military intervention is known as "The Velvet Revolution"

XIII. CZECHOSLOVAKIA SPLITS--And Two new countries are created THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

With the return of democracy and the need to restructure the institutions, economy and government organizations, President Havel launched a series of consultations with the leaders of the Slovak and Moravian regions focused primarily on the allocation of authorities and powers between the central government and the regional governments in Bratislava and Brno. These negotiations surfaced a set of longstanding issues between the Slovak and Czech entities.

Ever since the incarnation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, many Slovaks felt they were slighted and treated as second class citizens. Even though Slovak political leaders were included in all the government cabinets and agencies, they were in a minority position. In addition, they felt, with some considerable justification, the Czech leadership was condescending and arrogant towards the Slovaks. In fact, the Slovak region was heavily forested, agricultural and mineral mining region, while the Czech region had the more advanced industry, economic and educational institutions.

While the Czechs and the Slovaks shared a common slavic language, the differences were substantial (similarly as Spanish and Italian are both Latin Romance languages). In addition, the two regions were religiously separated (Catholic and Lutheran in the Czech regions and Eastern Orthodox in Slovakia) and used different writing scripts (Latin and Cyrillic). There also existed remnants of resentments from the Nazi occupation period; The Czechs resisted and seriously resented the Nazi occupation. The Slovak leaders declared independence from Czechoslovakia in 1939 and subsequently willingly became a Nazi protectorate, an act which the Czechs considered an obnoxious political betrayal.

All this led to what has become known as the “Velvet Divorce”. Slovakia demanded independence and the Czech leadership chose to let them go---refusing to use the police or military to suppress Slovak demands, but to rather let them go in peace. The separation was not quite as benign as the term “Velvet Divorce” implies---it came about after more than a year of rancorous recriminations and divorce negotiations.



And so it came about that at midnite of December 31, 1991 the 72 year old country of Czechoslovakia ceased to exist and on January 1, 1992 two new countries came into being, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

N.B. This narrative is not to be considered an official history of the Bohemian/Czech people. It is simply my attempt to narrate in a clear and understandable manner the vast and complex network of events that have affected my peoples over some two thousand years. I am grateful to my daughters Maureen Nichols and Caroline Gort for their editing and production assistance, however any errors or omissions are strictly my own. (last edited in April, 2020)

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