



Prague—Panoramas of History

ON A November day in 1995, I walked through Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí) to the City Archives, then housed in the baroque Clam-Gallas Palace. The weather was discouraging. A proverb in the morning newspaper warned that St. Martin rides into town on a white horse on November 11 and brings snow every day for the rest of the winter. St. Martin's day was still a week away, but it had been snowing—a wet, heavy snow—for days. Not the magical dusting captured in black-and-white photographs of Prague, but thick splashes that melted into mud.

The cobblestones on the square felt slippery, so I walked carefully, looking down. Had it not been for the precipitation, I might have missed the makeshift site of memory on the south side of the square. Among the cobblestones, in a heavily trafficked section of the square, was a marble plaque with writing difficult to decipher. Flowers and nubs of burnt down candles lay upon the wet circular center of the plaque, but the four triangular corner slabs remained visible. Some of the words on the small memorial had been chiseled out and cemented over, but with effort I made out the inscriptions. Each of the four corner pieces declared—in Czech, German, English, and Latin—the prophetic words, “Here did stand and will stand again the Marian Column of Old Town Square.”

This site of memory embodies the main arguments of this book. A group of Czech Catholics had recently placed the plaque in Old Town Square, at the spot where in 1918 Czech nationalists and others pulled down a baroque column and statue of the Virgin Mary. Soon after the plaque appeared, an unknown group or individual scratched and cemented over the words “will stand again.” Prague Catholics then returned to the site and laid flowers and candles, once again marking the cobblestones as their own. The Prague media took up the question of whether a replica of the baroque monument should again stand in Old Town Square: a wide range of opinions emerged, revealing divisions among the population about how public places in the capital city should be



Site of the Marian Column, 1995. Photo by author.

represented. This controversy echoed the debates about public spaces in Prague that resounded throughout the twentieth century.

The definitions of what it meant to be part of the Czech nation or its capital city have never been fully agreed upon, and debates on this have often played out in Prague's public spaces, through temporary commemorations, such as parades and protests, or through permanent sites of memory: statues, monuments, or buildings. Historiography has often emphasized conflicts between Czechs and outside groups or political entities: Slovaks, ethnic Germans, the Habsburg Monarchy, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union. These conflicts have been crucial in understanding the history of the Czechs, but they have often obscured the contestations within the community of those trying to assert a strong Czech identity. Looking closely at attempts throughout the twentieth century to mark the landscape of Prague with "sacred spaces," intended to form emotional bonds between citizens and "the nation," reveals the impossibility of locating a single definition of the Czech nation.

The complex religious history of Prague and Bohemia dominated Prague's newly created sacred spaces during the twentieth century; in particular, a history of conflict between an early Protestant movement and the domination of Catholic Austria played out on the cobblestones, monuments, and parade routes of the capital city. Although Prague became an increasingly secular city, its leaders still turned to its religious history for the themes of national com-

memorations. This choice can appear strange or ill advised. In the early part of the twentieth century, rather than search for neutral national symbols, leaders chose Protestant heroes from the national past, angering Czech Catholics; later in the century, even atheist Communists held onto the powerful national narrative of religious independence, lauding Christian figures from the medieval era. Why were these controversial choices made? One answer lies in the power of the sacred in human societies. Religion relies upon emotion and faith. Past stories of martyrdom and sacrifice fit well into a developing national narrative emphasizing independence and defiance against authority. Further, religion and nationalism both inscribe codes of moral behavior for their constituents. As Paul Hanebrink suggests, many twentieth-century European leaders believed that religion “could also be a modern world view, a set of moral absolutes that guided an individual to act publicly in a hostile world.”¹ To convey these principles, national leaders introduced religious rhetoric and iconography into the public sphere.

The use of public space has a strong religious dimension. As authors of a recent volume on sacred space have explained, “Space and place inscribe communities of faith and practice in specific locations.”² Nationalists in Prague sought to inscribe Czech identity into the multinational landscape in a similar way. In urban settings, physical monuments or buildings were built to gather people for a specific reason, and fell into three categories: civic, religious, or commercial. . In many public spaces, the civic and the religious were united, thus attracting more people and adding to the power of the places. The religious imagery in the civic sites helped forge the emotional bond between the Czech community and the specific locations.

These debates about national and religious identity, arising in the nineteenth century, remained present throughout the twentieth century. Czech historiography has often marked the annexation of Bohemia and Moravia–Silesia by Nazi Germany as the end of the national narrative. From that moment until 1989, the Czech(-oslovak) state was marked by occupation and political domination by outside forces. Yet the Second World War and Communist eras did not stamp out the national discourse; the same debates reemerged in surprising and fascinating ways. Both dissidents and government leaders sought meaning and legitimacy for their movements through these religious–national debates.

As the capital city and the seat of government, Prague was at the heart of the debates of what it meant to be Czech in the twentieth century.³ From the urban elite of the Habsburg era, to the leaders of the First Republic, to the Nazi Protectorate, and the Communist and post-Communist governments of the late twentieth century, leaders had a strong stake in demonstrating that the capital city was a Czech city and the arbiter of what the nation represented. Further,



the city's singular beauty, architectural diversity, and relative wealth fostered an emotional, almost sacred bond prized by national leaders. Last, political decisions made in Prague, as the capital city—decisions such as legislation on state holidays or responses to unrest in the provinces—affected the entire state.

The City of Memory

Many accounts of the early days of the Czechoslovak Republic, in autumn 1918, mention briefly that a mob tore down the Marian Column, a treasured baroque monument. Yet, few studies have thoroughly explored the conflicting mentalités and collective memories of Prague citizens that created such passions, both angry and loving, for a public sculpture. Three quarters of a century after the Marian Column was felled—years of world war, revolution, and authoritarian rule—there were still citizens who cared enough to chisel out words of a plaque declaring their desire to resurrect a fallen memorial, or to light candles and lay flowers to claim this public space for their beliefs. As scholars of religion have shown, “religion and memory are connected . . . to place and to violence.”⁴ In the case of the Marian Column site, Prague citizens remember a century of religious violence—the destruction of the column itself but also Nazi, Communist, and even Republican violence against religious communities, practices, and sites throughout the century. Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht have argued that “Central places, holy places, sacred places, memory places are those in which time is concentrated, thickened.”⁵ When Prague residents today lay flowers at the Marian Column site they are only in part commemorating the 1918 destruction of a baroque monument; the site has absorbed a broader meaning and range of time.

Prague's public spaces helped define the culture of a country and capital city. A city is more than a physical location; the Latin root, *civitas*, connotes citizenship, the political and cultural connection between people and the place where they dwell. Therefore, to understand the history of twentieth-century Prague is to delve into the mentalités (the conflicting attitudes, beliefs, and memories) of the inhabitants. Authors have frequently remarked on the attachment of Prague residents to their city. Prague German-Jewish writer Franz Kafka's sentiment about his city, which nearly every study on Prague cites, explains, “Prague does not let go, either of you or of me. This old mother has claws. There is nothing for it but to give in.”⁶ In this atmosphere—where citizens foster emotional relationships with religiously coded objects like the Marian Column, Jan Hus Memorial, or St. Wenceslas Monument on Wenceslas Square—place, memory, and the sense of sacredness contributed to citizens' self-perception. In turn, the city's denizens created new places to transmit their ideals.

Architectural critic Christian Norberg-Schulz considers Prague a prime example of a place that successfully fuses physical markers and social characteristics in a spirit of place. He points out the linguistic relationship between space and events, citing that occurrences are said to “take place” and “In fact it is meaningless to imagine any happening without reference to a locality.”⁷ Indeed, political events in Prague are intrinsically linked in collective memory to specific “sacred” places: Klement Gottwald, first Communist president, declaring the 1948 Communist victory from a balcony overlooking the Hus Memorial on Old Town Square, or Charles University student Jan Palach immolating himself in 1969 before the Wenceslas Memorial to protest continued Soviet military presence in Prague.

Place, indeed, infuses events with meaning. Yet, writing a history of places poses particular challenges for the historian. The importance of historical actors in creating and interacting with public space cannot be overstated, but often studies of memory focus more on the objects remembered than on the subjects who are remembering. Further, Alon Confino, a prominent scholar of historical memory, warns that studies of collective memory often become overly insular, noting that “the history of memory is useful and interesting not only for thinking about how the past is represented in, say, a museum, but also about, more extensively, the historical mentality of people in the past, about the commingled beliefs, practices, and symbolic representations that make up people’s perception of the past.”⁸

Prague’s physical markers are vehicles for understanding the values, often conflicting, of a range of citizens. Naturally, political leaders and intellectuals play roles in determining how the past should be commemorated. But, it is the common people who pull down statues, attend festivals, and cross Charles Bridge over the Vltava (Moldau) River each day, “past the statues of saints with their faint glimmer of light.”⁹

Prague’s manifold statues of saints, described by Norberg-Schulz, convey an overarching theme. Religion—not usually formal institutions, but symbolic gestures and beliefs—emerged as a common and controversial subject of debates and discussions about collective memory, and thus public space, in Prague. Although the famous religious landmarks of Prague—Gothic St. Vitus looming over the river, baroque St. Nicholas guarding the Little Quarter, dozens of saints lining Charles Bridge—obviously date to earlier eras, religious motifs nevertheless dominated twentieth-century debates about the city’s ever-shifting identity. Religious Catholics and Protestants did participate in these discussions but, surprisingly, freethinking liberals of the first half of the century and Communist leaders of the second half were the leaders of movements to create spiritual sites of memory. Religious imagery was power-



ful for both the faithful and the secular. There were certainly nonreligious sites erected in Prague, but they often reflected the external conflicts in which the Czechs engaged: for example, Czechs and Germans in Prague competed by building separate theaters or by attacking or protecting Habsburg statues.¹⁰ The religious dimension exposes, rather, the internal fissures within the Czech national movement of the Czechoslovak state.

Scholars have created a rich historiography of national memory, invented traditions, and national monuments. Pierre Nora, noted French scholar, popularized the idea of *lieux de memoire*, (“sites of memory”), which proposed that physical markers and public spaces are the sites where collective memory resides, making it possible for people to engage with and contest ideas about the past.¹¹ Scholars of East and Central Europe are particularly engaged in the ongoing conversations about history and memory, beginning, two decades after Communism’s demise in the region, to understand how the Cold War era represented both rupture and continuity with the past. After years of state control over historiography, Czech scholars have started to investigate the impact of totalitarian rule on the country’s collective national memories; historians and semioticians such as Jiří Rak, Vladimír Macura, Zdeněk Hojda, and Jiří Pokorný have sought to understand the impact of the nation’s past on modern mentalités.¹²

The City of Change

Within one hundred years, Prague citizens witnessed seven major political transformations. The fall of the Habsburg Monarchy and its Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 ushered in a national democracy led by scholar turned politician Tomáš G. Masaryk. After years of dissatisfaction by ethnic minorities who felt underrepresented in a nation-state that privileged “Czechoslovak” ethnicity, this democracy unraveled when the 1938 Munich Pact, negotiated among Germany, Italy, Britain, and France, ceded the Sudetenland, the predominantly German-inhabited borderlands, and other territories to Nazi Germany. The short-lived, authoritarian Second Republic was established when President Edvard Beneš abdicated and formed a London-based government in exile. Within six months Bohemia and Moravia had been incorporated into the German Third Reich, and Slovakia was created as an independent puppet state. The country—absent Subcarpathian Ruthenia—reunited under Beneš after the war, and three years later many Prague residents eagerly welcomed the Communist Party to power, only to be repressed by an undemocratic, authoritarian regime. In 1989 crowds on Wenceslas Square called for the end of Communist rule and embraced playwright Václav Havel as president. Then in 1993 their city was



capital no longer of Czechoslovakia but of the Czech Republic, as the Czech Republic and Slovakia peacefully parted in the so-called Velvet Divorce.

As a result of these political upheavals, the population of the city—and of Czechoslovakia as a whole—became increasingly homogenized. In the late Habsburg period and during the interwar years, many Prague Germans assimilated into the now dominant Czech linguistic community. But during the years of the Second World War the diversity of Prague and of Czechoslovakia was violently ended. Most Prague Jews were exterminated in the Holocaust, and German speakers were expelled collectively by vengeful Czechs immediately after the war's end. From a vibrant multiethnic urban culture, Prague has become a Czech city, albeit full of foreign tourists and expatriots from all corners of the earth.

Nevertheless, during the tumultuous twentieth century, Prague's landscape remained remarkably stable. Unlike most major cities in Central and Eastern Europe, Prague's panorama was left virtually unscathed by the Second World War, and the Communist Party did not interfere with the architectural heritage of the city. Prague Castle, perched above the Vltava River, has been the seat of government since 1918, and the city has retained its moniker of the "city of one hundred spires."

Yet, even as the overall look of the city remained constant, many new monuments appeared in Prague during the twentieth century. Many groups within Prague's Czech society—nationalists, conservative landholders, historical preservationists, modern artists, feminists, socialists, Communists, Catholics, Jews and Protestants—debated about monuments that would properly represent the capital and, thus, the Czech nation. And in particular, Czech leaders attempted to adorn parts of the city with monuments and buildings that would reflect a national, rather than a multiethnic, culture.

The City of Panoramas

In the craft kiosks on Old Town Square and in stalls on the Charles Bridge, tourists can find panoramic photographs and sketches of Prague. The long, rectangular scenes carry the viewer through time as a single image takes in a thousand years of architecture: Romanesque, Gothic, renaissance, baroque, neoclassical, and modern. The Roman Catholic heritage of the city is readily apparent: it would be difficult to buy a panorama that did not display a Catholic cathedral, church, or religious statues.

Before the age of photography, the term panorama implied a long painting, such as a Chinese scroll painting, that is rolled out for the viewer. Usually the subject of the painting is a landscape, aspects of which are revealed to the spec-



View of St. Vitus Cathedral from Charles Bridge, with baroque statues in foreground. Postcard from the author's collection.

tator slowly: if the observer gazes at an unfurled panorama, he or she inevitably misses details, but by focusing on one segment at a time, the observer may discover special features of the place. In the present book, each featured statue, church, or memorial is examined in great detail—from the expressions on a figure's face to the tilt of a head, from the faded frescoes on a wall to the wooden beams buttressing a roof. Each is described „thickly“ (using Clifford Geertz's method) to uncover the meanings and the conflicts ingrained in marble, granite, or brick. Similarly, thick descriptions of commemorative events (such as national festivals) elucidate ways that citizens have related and responded to public space. A panorama requires tactile interaction, just as public monuments and architecture demand human contact.

Architectural historian M. Christine Boyer has called the twentieth-century city a panorama. Although her description of a modern city of skyscrapers does not fit Prague, she reminds us that all twentieth-century cities housed „fragmented and paradoxical views. . . . Space itself became a focus of social concern and object of fascination.“¹³ The panoramic city can be viewed from above—from an airplane or the top of a tall building—or from a tramcar or automobile. Something once viewed as stationary has become for modern urban dwellers a constantly moving image. According to Boyer, these shifting perspectives have allowed viewers to experience space from many angles and therefore to realize that supposedly static objects continually change in appearance and meaning.

Indeed, early twentieth-century cubist painters experimented with the metaphoric and tangible fracturing of space, and Prague was the center of cubist architecture, a city where architects like Josef Gočar and Pavel Janák took Picasso and Braque's ideas and transferred them to a third dimension. Buildings such as Our Lady of the Black Madonna and the Legiobanka building challenged traditional architectural forms with series of broken lines and planes.

This modern way of seeing encouraged a multiplicity of viewpoints about space itself. Citizens began to view their environment as malleable, and invested time and resources in its representation. In Prague, the accession of a Czech middle class enabled active citizens to use their newfound economic power to influence their surroundings. The turn of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of voluntary organizations that raised funds for new memorials, churches, and cultural institutions. Naturally, these associations did not always find common ground, and engaged in a war of words over both theme and design of their competing national representations. Later in the century, the Communist Party reasserted an imperial approach to monument building, imposing structures and symbols onto the city landscape. By then citizens had grown accustomed to their own involvement in such projects, and the new era's symbols faced cynicism and scorn, which would emerge into the public sphere during periods of protest and after the fall of Communism.

Although Prague did not adopt a consistent architectural style in the twentieth century, as did some of the panoramic cities described by Boyer, a thematic link emerged among the city's new and old sites of memory. Ironically, in a modern, secular era, this theme was the conflicted religious history of the city. The theme was not embraced only, or even particularly, by religious citizens or clergy, but by secular nationalists who described themselves as freethinkers, and later by the Communist Party, which espoused atheism.

The Spiritual City

That religion became such a popular theme in the collective memory of Prague may date back to the late medieval history of the city, when Catholic priest and Prague University rector Jan Hus began to preach for church reform. For his efforts, he was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415. Erupting into civil war following Hus's death, the Bohemian Lands were among the earliest Protestant regions in Europe, but the Austrian-sponsored counter-reformation of the seventeenth century forcibly reconverted the population to Roman Catholicism. In the nineteenth century, Czech patriots created a national revival, claiming Prague as a Czech city and Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia as Czech lands. Historical research and writing of the period generated a nationalist history characterized by centuries of conflict between Germans and Czechs;



further, the rediscovery of Hus's proto-Protestant ideas led to a historical interpretation that delegitimized Austrian Catholic power over Bohemia. Honoring Jan Hus became a way for Czechs to create a national narrative that distanced Czech history from Austrian rule.

Thus nineteenth-century nationalists revived the figure of Jan Hus as an avatar of the modern Czech nation: because Hus advocated the use of the Czech vernacular and criticized the hierarchy of the Church, his image could evoke the contemporary quest for a national identity separate from the enforced Catholic and German culture of Imperial Austria. Yet, in a region nominally over 90 percent Catholic, the choice of a condemned heretic as the unifying symbol of the nation enraged many, who protested the use of the Hus icon and proposed their own religious heroes, such as national (and Catholic) saints Wenceslas and Jan Nepomucký (John of Nepomuk), as the true symbols of the Czech historic past. The tension between the Protestant and Catholic symbols in Prague is particularly complicated by the fact that few nationalists who revered Hus and Žižka were religious reformers. They were raised in a Roman Catholic environment and substituted Protestant characters into a Catholic landscape of saints and elaborate churches. Scholars of sacred space have pointed out that Protestantism is the least spatially oriented contemporary religion;¹⁴ still, in Prague, a city filled with markers of Roman Catholicism, Protestant and Catholic figures competed for public spaces.

Focusing on the now-defunct multinational nation-state of Czechoslovakia, scholars have often drawn a distinct line between the secular Czechs and the devoutly Catholic Slovaks. Yet it is necessary to question the traditional interpretation of religion in Czechoslovakia and to reassess the dichotomy of the religious and the secular. By focusing on the Czech community in the capital city, we may avoid such historiographical tendency to pit Protestant/secular Czechs against Catholic/clerical Slovaks. The inclination to focus on such a Czech-Slovak dichotomy presupposes that there were two, clear-cut positions on national identity, but in fact the debate was multifaceted and ongoing both among Czechs and between Czechs and Slovaks.

As Catholics and Hus supporters feuded over the meaning of Bohemian history, Prague's Jewish community remained on the margins of debates over national identity. Because most Prague Jews were German speakers, Czech nationalists rarely considered them part of the Czech community. The smaller population of Czech-speaking Jews, however, was sometimes recruited by early twentieth-century Czech nationalists to demonstrate widespread support of the "Hus Cult" even by non-Christians.

Yet Jewish citizens were ignored or mistreated when their presence conflicted with nationalist goals. As late-nineteenth-century Czech nationalists sought



to modernize the city they finally controlled politically and economically, the city council approved the razing of much of the Old Jewish Quarter. This project, extensively researched and analyzed by historian Cathleen Giustino, coincided with the movement to place a Jan Hus Memorial on Old Town Square, which bordered the Jewish Quarter.¹⁵ Many Czech nationalists celebrated the replacement of the narrow alleys of Josefov with Paris Boulevard, a wide elegant avenue that provided better access to the square and the memorial. When the Czechoslovak Republic held its first census in 1921, “Jewish” was considered a distinct ethnic category; Czechs and Slovaks were not listed separately, so a citizen could be Czechoslovak, German, Polish, Hungarian, Ruthenian, Jewish, or other. So, from the beginning of the Czechoslovak state, there was an implication that Jews stood apart. The anti-Semitic culture that ostracized the Jews from the nation continued even after the Nazi genocide of European Jews, when the Communist Party purged and executed many of its most prominent Jewish leaders.

In general, though, the most common approach to the Jewish question was silence. Over the centuries, Prague Jews made important contributions to the commercial and literary advances of the city. Prague’s Jewish community gave rise to many of the city’s stories and collective memories, such as that of the Golem, a creature said to have been brought to life by the sixteenth-century mystic Rabbi Judah Loew to protect the Jewish quarter from anti-Semitic attacks. However, in debates in twentieth-century Prague about new monuments, the Jewish contribution to the city’s history was generally ignored. As the national question in the late nineteenth and entire twentieth century centered on the Bohemian reformation, the Jews were rarely considered.

The National City

Contemplating conflicts among Czech nationalists—not between Czech speakers and German speakers, or between Czechs citizens and Austrian leaders—uncovers a continuum of opinion on national identity and the role played in it by religion. Many studies have discussed the city’s German and Jewish communities. Gary Cohen’s classic *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914*, and Scott Spector’s more recent *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka’s Fin de Siècle* tell the stories of how German speakers (including German-speaking Jews) preserved culture within a sea of Czech nationalists.¹⁶ Few scholarly studies attempt to characterize the diversity of Czech nationalists in Prague itself, but to focus on Prague Czechs enables a deeper reading of the multiple efforts to create a singularly Czech capital in the twentieth century. Further, understanding the process by



which Czechs fought over an increasingly narrow definition of “the nation” enables us a better understanding of the dissatisfaction of Czechoslovakia’s minorities, some 30 percent of the country’s prewar population, who did not often see themselves reflected in their capital’s narrow definition of the nation.

Historians of Bohemia and Czechoslovakia have often turned to a famous son of Prague, Ernest Gellner, for understanding nationalism in Central Europe. This Bohemian Jewish philosopher and sociologist, who spent most of his academic career in Britain, demonstrated the importance of national symbols and language for creating the sense of community essential for the development of national consciousness. He wrote, “Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating.”¹⁷ For Gellner, nationalism constituted the means by which people came to share that culture, to understand themselves and to recognize others as belonging to a group called a nation. Newer scholarship characterizes the nation as more fluid and shifting, rather than fixed. Historian Prasenjit Duara has theorized that “nationalism is rarely the nationalism of *the nation*, but rather marks the site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other.”¹⁸ Although Duara uses “site” metaphorically, Prague, like many modern capitals, became an actual site, a physical space, where nationalists created tangible signs of an intangible concept. Indeed, urban history allows us to witness how citizens navigated through public space that presented them with multiple meanings of the nation.

A nation exists somewhere between the “imagined community” described by Benedict Anderson and the real category of identity depicted by Gellner.¹⁹ For, nationalists certainly accept the nation as something real, and develop institutions (cultural, political, religious, and military) around that concept. Scholars such as Rogers Brubaker and Jeremy King have argued that studies of nationalism have to illustrate the process of reification by which people come to see and act upon the abstract nation as something material, institutional, and real.²⁰ Tracing, in this volume, the continual redefining of public space seeks to locate these interstices between the “imagined” and the “real.”

Urban history enables us to examine objects constructed for the purpose of making something abstract into a tangible set of symbols and images. Building monuments is an effective way to physically transform the imagined to the real. Eric J. Hobsbawm identified the “invention of traditions” as development of: “a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.”²¹

The continual search for a national memory," a shared interpretation of a nation's past, was striking in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Prague. Czechs sought the unifying power of collective memory as they struggled through political uncertainties, such as their minority status in the Habsburg Monarchy, their newly independent state, or the aftermath of world wars and authoritarian rule. As John Gillis has stated, "National memory is shared by people who have never seen or heard of one another, yet who regard themselves as having a common history."²² Indeed, an array of groups that defined themselves as nationalist—from feminists to educated Czech-speaking Jews, from liberals to Communists—sought to show how their modern movement had its roots with Jan Hus. In contrast, those who could not tie themselves to Hus (namely, Roman Catholics) sought to delegitimize this view of national history and invent a different set of symbols that would prove that their religious heritage was not incompatible with patriotism. The idea of the nation carried a tremendous emotional weight that mimicked religious fervor, for many nineteenth- and twentieth-century citizens. Philosopher Ernst Renan wrote in the late nineteenth century that "the nation" was replacing religion as the primary place of belonging and of identity for Europeans.²³ Although he was correct that nationalism became a powerful ideology, this change was not a true replacement: not all Europeans abandoned their religious beliefs or practices in favor of the nation; instead, the two forces often became intertwined, with nationalists reaching for the tools of religion to create emotional bonds, sacred spaces, or senses of community.

Czechs, who declared Prague the capital for their nation, had never reached a definitive consensus about the meaning of Czech nationalism. The struggle became even more contentious with the creation of the Czechoslovak state in 1918: Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Poles, and Ruthenes were brought together under the rubric of a Wilsonian nation-state, but one that had no clear national majority. For minority groups seeking equality in Czechoslovakia, the location of the capital in Prague, the city that Czech nationalists viewed as the heart of Czech history, was an obstacle. The contentious redefining of "nation" in this single city offers insights into a troubling trend in East Central Europe during the twentieth century: the question of who should occupy particular cities and regions became based upon reified and ever-narrowing concepts of national identity. ww

The Gendered City

Feminist scholars have built on the scholarship of national memory and urban history to analyze the manipulation of gendered imagery within national movements. In an issue of *Gender and History* devoted to the intersections of gender and nation, Beth Baron explains: "The idea of nationalism was dissemi-



nated through oral expression, rituals, and symbols. . . . Gender played an important role in this process. Through the use of the metaphor of the nation as a family, popular notions about family honour and female sexual purity were elevated to a national ideal. . . . Yet women were often not ‘imagined’ as part of the nation. Rather, they were used as subjects and symbols around which to rally male support.”²⁴

Nationalism in Prague exemplifies Baron’s thesis. The mythical founder of the city was Libuše, a wise princess who foretold the creation of a “great city.” Moreover, the Czech word for Prague, *Praha*, is a feminine noun. The beauty of the city and its feminine grammatical identity inspired generations of Prague writers to write love poems to this beloved city. Lawrence Wechsberg, the author of *Prague: The Mystical City* opens his book, “Prague is a feminine city. Not a glamorous young woman, like Paris, but *matička* (little mother) to her troubadours.”²⁵ The only Czech writer to receive a Nobel Prize in literature, Jaroslav Seifert wrote that, although Prague was “often scorched by the flames of war, . . . we still like to find in this city a certain feminine charm, the smiles and gentleness of woman.”²⁶ In Czech literature, Prague can be a maiden to protect and to fight for, a sage, or a fierce warrior, themes that appeared in the public spaces created during the twentieth century. Princess Libuše established the Czech capital with her consort, a peasant turned king, Přemysl; another myth tells of Šarka, who led women into battle against their demanding husbands; another speaks of a woman who courageously defended Prague during the Hussite Wars. *Praha*, in short, is at once delicate and invincible.

Even though abstract feminine symbols are abundant, it is male historical heroes that dominate the town squares and hilltops of Prague. The symbolic female and the historical male represent their nation and city as a stable and legitimate family. Although Czech nationalists often took progressive stands on women’s rights, traditional ideals about gender and family influenced the way Prague artists portrayed their national subjects. In the earlier part of the twentieth century, balancing masculine and feminine symbols was key to the design of art nouveau monuments. Under Communism, the masculine heroic image prevailed, but the national mother did not disappear from the landscape. These gendered symbols were one way nationalist movements used art and symbolism to create strong bonds to the national community and Prague’s sacred spaces.

The City in Time

In the waning years of the Habsburg Monarchy, which historians Zdeněk Hojda and Jiří Pokorný have dubbed Prague’s “era of monument fever,” Czech nationalists, having wrested control of the city government from German

speakers, imbued the city with markers of a “Czech identity.”²⁷ The nationalists’ dream to create a monument to their national hero, Jan Hus, caused many Czechs to empty their pockets for the sculpture, but the city’s active Catholics protested vehemently.

The artistic movements that contributed to the new monuments ranged from classic monumental form to art nouveau, which became popular among Prague artists after Rodin showed his 1902 exhibit throughout Bohemia and Moravia. As modern artists became more eager to express themselves, rather than merely to reproduce their commissioners’ visions, conflicts again arose about whose view of the nation was more correct. In the midst of World War I, Prague leaders silently unveiled their Hus Memorial on the five hundredth anniversary of his death, while many of their colleagues were imprisoned or exiled for anti-Austrian activity.

During the First Czechoslovak Republic, the era between the World Wars, Prague served as the capital of a fledgling multinational nation-state. The Czechoslovak First Republic’s birth was celebrated by an angry mob that tore down the most prominent Catholic, Austrian symbol in the city, the ill-fated Marian Column of 1650.

In the ensuing years, festivals and new church architecture fused religious memory with the new nation’s identity. In 1925, the government compensated for the subdued ceremony to unveil the Hus Memorial by staging a lavish national celebration, which ended with the Papal Nuncio breaking diplomatic ties with the fledgling state. Four years later, the state appeased the Catholics with a millennium celebration for Saint Wenceslas. The Prague Catholic archdiocese and individual parishes also contributed to Prague’s interwar environment, with new architecture and a lavish outdoor mass for Czechoslovakia’s multiple “nations” in Wenceslas Square. With the coming of the Second World War, Nazi occupation of the city became the dominant influence on national culture.

The rise of the Czechoslovak Communist Party did not signal an end to discussions of religion and national identity. Rather, the Party joined the debate and took up the cause of Jan Hus and his followers, as a means to establish its legitimate connection to the historic nation, while still assailing the Roman Catholic Church, a traditional enemy. During the 1950s, the Party, even as it destroyed the lives of innocent citizens in show trials, rebuilt Jan Hus’s Bethlehem Chapel and completed the monument to Hussite General Jan Žižka on Vitkov Hill, site of a fifteenth-century victory by Protestant forces. anti-Communist dissidents, both religious and secular, joined the debate in their poetry and prose; the Marian Column rose again in this literature as a symbol for lost freedoms under Communism. In the post-Communist era, existing sites of memory were reexamined for new meaning and new monuments reflected the emptiness felt by many Prague citizens.

The City and Place

Prague's tramway No. 22 crosses the Vltava River and offers a stunning panorama of Prague Castle and St. Vitus Cathedral. A history professor at Charles University once remarked that passengers instinctively look up toward the castle: "No matter how long we live here, and what we live through, we love our city." To acknowledge the beauty of the city, though, is not to idealize or glorify it. Another son of Prague, literary scholar Peter Demetz, a German-speaking Jew who lost his mother in the Holocaust, has convincingly argued that the popular image of Prague as a magical, mystical place obscures the difficult questions that Prague citizens—as well as visitors—must ask themselves.²⁸ Did Czechoslovakia truly succeed as a democracy between the wars? Why was the Czech resistance so weak during the Second World War? Has Prague come to terms with its treatment of its Jewish residents? Heda Margolius Kovaly, a Holocaust survivor, whose husband was wrongly accused and executed for treason in the anti-Semitic Communist Party purges of 1952, warned her readers that the city's beauty offered a false sense of security and perhaps even engendered complacency. Yet, Kovaly admitted her unwavering ardor for Prague.²⁹ This paradox contributes, too, to Prague's mentalités.

The fervor with which Prague citizens involved themselves in debates about their city's monuments surprises many. Yet it is Prague's *genus loci*, its spirit of place, that provoked angry letters to newspapers about a national memorial, melancholy poetry about a statue, feuds with the Pope over a national festival, and chiseled-out words that once promised the return of a monument. For the past in Prague is ever present. When Italo Calvino described his fictional city of Zaira in *Invisible Cities*, he could have been writing about Prague, which also "soaks up [memories] like a sponge."³⁰ As Calvino wrote about his city of memory:

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.³¹