

The Czech Nation in the 19th & 20th Centuries: Myths, Victims & Heroes

Lecturer: Maevea Chargros

5 ECTS

Winter Semester

The long 19th century is known as the one that saw the rise of nations and nationalism, eventually leading to the fall of a multi-ethnic and multi-national empire that had organised the political, diplomatic, social, economic, military life of Central Europe for centuries: the Austrian Habsburgs lost their throne.

How was the Czech nation shaped during this crucial period? By whom? Which stories were used? Which events were the focus of this new identity? Was it really new, by the way?

From Palacký to Masaryk and Denis, the first part of this course will introduce you to the thinkers and architects of the Czech nation, their vision of a federalist Habsburg monarchy, their hopes for a regained Bohemian influence in Central Europe, and their disillusionments.

The second part of the course will involve some map wandering – from inside the classroom, though. The First World War brought a new dimension to the Czech nation: it became Czecho-Slovak, and then Czechoslovak, without the hyphen. How did this transformation happen? How did the United States of America, France, but also Italy and Russia get involved in this process? This part will cover the founding myths of the First Czechoslovak Republic, as well as its challenges – one of them being the inclusiveness of this new state.

The third and last part of this course will give an overview of how the myth(s) of the Czech nation fell apart as Nazism and then Communism ruled over the Czech lands. It will also shortly show how the end of the 20th century saw the rebirth of certain myths – and even the re-interpretation of some of these in a completely different context.

Students will be encouraged throughout the course to critically discuss the different topics from their own perspectives.

All these topics will be approached from the perspective of national myths and discourses, as well as specific narratives of these discourses. Therefore, some of the assigned readings will consist of texts from archival sources (newspaper articles, letters, telegrams, short excerpts of books...), translated into English for this course. Other readings will include more classic secondary literature from various fields. Indeed, nationalism is an interdisciplinary topic and this aspect will be highlighted throughout the semester – for instance through the analysis of the Czech case of victimhood nationalism. Therefore, this course could be interesting primarily for students from disciplines such as history, cultural studies, international relations, political sciences, literature, and media studies.

Besides lectures, discussions will be a significant part of the course. Active participation in these discussions (20%), weekly readings (20%), a short essay (40%) as well as a final test (20%) will be necessary to pass the course.