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## Living in Peace? Degenerate Art and Czech Modernism in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia

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On 30 September 1938, at 2:30 in the night Central European Time, an agreement was signed in Munich in which Neville Chamberlain (Great Britain), Edouard Daladier (France), Adolf Hitler (Germany) and Benito Mussolini (Italy) agreed that Czechoslovakia must cede the border territory inhabited by the (Sudeten) Germans to Germany by 10 October. Representatives of Czechoslovakia were not invited to these talks. Czechoslovakia was merely informed of the result of the meeting, in spite of the fact that it had a representative in Munich in the person of Ambassador Mastný. On that same day, Czechoslovakia accepted the Munich diktat in the face of the clear military superiority of Germany and the isolation of Czechoslovak territory. It did so in spite of the fact that since 1935, Czechoslovakia had been expending considerable amounts on the construction of a system of fortifications in the border areas against the hostile surrounding states of Germany, Austria, Poland and Hungary. In 1940, the Germans valued these fortifications, which were never used in battle, at 50 million imperial marks (an imperial mark was worth around 3.5 euros, making the value around 175 million euros).

As the result of the Munich Treaty, Czechoslovakia lost its historic territory bordering Germany, which had belonged to the lands of the Czech Crown since Medieval times. After the abdication of President Edvard Beneš, the new president to be elected was Emil Hácha. The castrated republic, also known as the 'Second Republic', was called Czecho-Slovakia. It did not last long. With the declaration of independent Slovakia on 14 March 1939, and the occupation of Transcarpathia by the Hungarians, Czecho-Slovakia ceased to exist. On 15 March 1939, Adolf



1. German troops invade Prague, 15 March 1939

Hitler announced to President Emil Hácha and the foreign minister František Chvalkovský that he had ordered his troops to occupy Czech territory and annex it for the German Reich (Fig. 1). Hitler dictated the conditions, and Hermann Göring threatened mass bombing of Czech towns. Hitler's threats and pressure to sign a treaty of surrender to Germany continued until Hácha suffered a heart attack. He was finally broken, and he and Chvalkovský signed a declaration in which it was stated, among other things, that 'he placed the fate of the Czech nation with full confidence in the hands of the Leader of the German Reich.'

The Protectorate Government of President Emil Hácha became a puppet in the hands of Hitler. At the same time, the occupying bureaucracy wished to preserve the illusion, while usurping absolute power, that this was a 'normal' state with a large degree of autonomy. Life in the Protectorate was described by propaganda as being problem-free. The impression was to be preserved that nothing was really happening, and life was continuing as usual. In his book *Prague in Black, Nazi Rule and*

*Czech Nationalism*, Chad Bryant characterised the duplicity of the Protectorate state with the phrases ‘Surrounded by War, Living in Peace’. In the illegal periodical *V boj* (In Battle), in the 19th issue from September 1939, extracts were published from the report of a British journalist who visited the Protectorate in the summer months before the outbreak of the war:

Prague gave the external impression of a busy, peace-loving and affluent city. But I found that, under this splendid surface, life had changed for the Czechs. They had lost their homeland with the arrival of the interlopers [...] In the whole of Bohemia and Moravia there is not a single Czech official who can make a responsible decision without asking some German [...] Wherever you go, when you penetrate the facade of Czechs, you will find a German [...] When we sum up all the realities of the Protectorate we can see that it is nothing more and nothing less than a colony, the first Nazi colony.

The British journalist perceived that in the Protectorate the facade of a normal world was a simulacrum, something that looked like a ‘peace-loving’ world, but behind which there was something evil and sinister. Another record points to the fact that for many visitors, the Protectorate had the character of a problem-free oasis of calm. One German visitor wrote: ‘A trip to Prague at the end of 1942 was a trip to peace. Surrounded by war, a truly worldwide blaze, the Protectorate was the only Central European country living in peace.’<sup>1</sup> In addition, the unclear constitutional nature of the Protectorate, which was intended to create the illusion of an independent state (think of the protectorate government), and also some of the privileges which the inhabitants of other occupied territories did not have, were aimed at the creation of a Potemkin village. Behind the scenes, of course, were the clear traits of the Nazi occupying force, which was systematically considering the ‘final solution’ not only of the Jewish population, but also of the Czechs.

Especially in the exhibition policy and the publishing strategy of art periodicals, a similar situation arose to that which appeared in the top-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. Bryant, *Prague in Black, Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism*, Harvard University Press, 2007, pp.179-207.

level politics of President Emil Hácha during the Protectorate, referred to by the people as ‘Hácha-speak’. On the one hand, there was the effort not to offend or provoke the Protectorate authorities with too much radicalism; on the other hand was the effort to smuggle at least partial values of Czech modern art through to the public. This was most successful in the trends which did not cause too much outrage, in the various forms of expressive or symbolic realism. Completely excluded from public exhibition were Cubism and Surrealism.

The Germans did not, of course, consistently apply the term ‘degenerate art’ to the Czech situation. No exhibition of ‘degenerate art’ took place either in Bohemia or in Moravia during the Protectorate. It was only the recent archive investigation of Milan Pech, published in the catalogue of the exhibition entitled *The End of the Avant-Garde?*, which showed that such an exhibition was considered by an obscure society called Den (Day) in the autumn of 1942, but naturally without success.<sup>2</sup>

The position which seemed the most radical and most ‘modern’ of the officially tolerated trends under the Protectorate was represented by Magic Realism. In the period in question, it was developed in particular by Alois Wachsmann (1898–1942), Zdeněk Tůma (1907–1943) and Alois Fišárek (1906–1980), and also, in certain cases, by Jan Benda (1897–1967), František Tichý (1896–1961), and others. Also included here was the Magic Realism of Skupina 42 (Group 42), especially the paintings of František Hudeček (1909–1990) and František Gross (1909–1985), a position that was, at the time, certainly the most radical within the framework of the officially ‘permitted’ tendencies. During the period of the Protectorate, the Mánes Artists’ Union supported the exhibition policy of younger artists, especially Karel Černý (1892–1965), who exhibited there solo in 1942 (Fig. 2), and again in 1944, in the worst time of the occupation, and the members of the *Sedm v říjnu* (Seven in October) group: Václav Hejna (1914–1985), Arnošt Paderlík (1919–1999), Zdeněk

<sup>2</sup> M. Pech, ‘Zvrhlé umění’ v protektorátu (‘Degenerate Art’ in the Protectorate), *Konec avantgardy? Od mnichovské dohody ke komunistickému převratu* (The End of the Avant-Garde? From the Munich Agreement to the Communist Takeover), Hana Rousová ed., Řevnice, 2011, p. 106.



2. Karel Černý. *The Garden Restaurant (The Garden of Sadness)*. 1942

Seydl (1916–1978), František Jiroudek (1886–1967) and Josef Liesler (1912–2005).

One of the most significant defences of modernism under the Protectorate was the exhibition of the work of Pravoslav Kotík (1889–1970) in the Topič Salon in Prague in 1941. His Neo-Cubism or Post-Cubist Realism might very well have been categorised as ‘degenerate art’ (Fig. 3).

The war paintings of Jan Zrzavý (1890–1977), of which there were not many, concentrated on a spiritual statement about landscape and objects. Particularly characteristic is the painting *Studna v Kermeru* (The Well in Kermer, 1940) (Fig. 4), which is a reminiscence of the painter’s trips to Brittany before the war. The bare stone buildings without a human presence have a monumental effect on the one hand, but on the other hand look horribly like a dead town. At that time, Zrzavý also painted *Vodňanský rybník* (Vodňany Fishpond, 1942), a landscape of melancholy

3. Pravoslav Kotik. *Faust in the Village*. 1942.



4. Jan Zrzavý. *The Well in Kermer, Brittany*. 1940.



charm and internal isolation, but also *Geometric Still Life – Shapes in Space* (1943). In this there was a presentation of the elementary geometric forms from which spring all imaginable material forms of the natural world. As in the case of Karel Černý, who also had a great respect for Zrzavý's work and whose paintings were later described by Zrzavý himself as being 'of my school', a still life can be understood as the visualisation of law and order (geometric), which thus contrasts with the 'dis-order', despotism and illegality of the unnatural world, the world of the occupation. Zrzavý's suggestive pastel entitled *Ticho* (Quiet, 1942) might be a sketch for a scene in a special drama, awaiting the actors. The deserted room with a laid table, chairs and a crucifix at its head is waiting in tense silence for someone to come. Who?

In 1940, Zrzavý had a large exhibition on the occasion of his 50th birthday in the Obecní dům (Municipal House) in Prague. This was one of the most important overviews of modern art during the occupation. It was reviewed and commented on in the press. In 1941, the Arts Guild (Umělecká beseda), together with the editorial house Družstevní práce, published a miscellany entitled *Dílo Jana Zrzavého 1905–1940* (The Work of Jan Zrzavý 1905–1940). This artist, whose style would have been designated as 'degenerate' if he had lived in Germany, continued to work in Bohemia, and even exhibited a tremendous volume of work, and also designed sets for the National Theatre. According to the authoritative art critic Jindřich Chalupický (1910–1990), the work of Jan Zrzavý undoubtedly belonged to the category of 'degenerate art'. 'In spite of this, the exhibition gave a complete picture of the work of this painter. And the Prague public understood that this was a quite evident protest against all the Nazi attempts to regulate and destroy their culture.'<sup>3</sup> His work was nevertheless reproduced in periodicals.<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Míčko described Zrzavý as 'a painter of the invisible'.<sup>5</sup> He anticipates the concept of

<sup>3</sup> J. Chalupický, *Kultura za okupace* (Culture during the Occupation), *Listy*, vol. 1, 1946, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, *Imaginární podobizna Karla Hynka Máchy* (Imaginary Portrait of the Poet Karel Hynek Mácha) *Panorama*, vol. 18, 1940, p. 61; *Smrt Abgarova* (The Death of Abgar), *Panorama*, vol. 19, 1941, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> M.M. (Miroslav Míčko), *Svět Jana Zrzavého* (The World of Jan Zrzavý), *Život*, vol. 18, 1942–1943, pp. 42–44.



5. Jiří Trnka. *Design for a Christmas Poster*. 1940

Chalupecký from 1943, emphasizing the ‘simplicity, the austerity’ of the civilian world, in which the artist lives like ordinary people. Through the identification of hidden things and objects, such an artist realises the ‘realism of the invisible’.

Zrzavý in the Protectorate in Bohemia had a status similar to that of Pablo Picasso in occupied Paris. Just like the author of *Guernica*, utilising ‘degenerate’ Cubism and Surrealism, he was not persecuted by the Nazis. It was not in the interest of the Nazi Kulturträger to mechanically transfer the campaign against ‘degenerate art’ to countries that the Reich required for various reasons.

In 1941, the painter Jiří Trnka (1912–1969), later a famous creator of animated and puppet films, created a Christmas poster for Melant-rich publishers (Fig. 5). One Prague newspaper attacked him with an article entitled *Impudence and Degenerate Art*, in which it stated: ‘Either gentlemen of this type should behave themselves and carry out their profession with responsibility and love, or they should give it up and go somewhere where their work will be more useful and beneficial and where they will not insult the public.’ We can gain some idea of the degeneracy from a reproduction of the design.

A strong attack on ‘degenerate art’ came in 1944 thanks to the activity of the minister of culture, the collaborator Emanuel Moravec.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Emanuel Moravec (1893–1945) was a professor at the higher military school in prewar Czechoslovakia. During the Nazi occupation, he became a joint minister of education and national enlightenment in the puppet government of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. As a propaganda minister, he painstakingly persuaded the Czechs to be loyal to Nazi Germany.



He set himself up against the ‘artistic freedom of creative spirits’, whose ‘insolent eccentricity’, according to Moravec, terrorised the soul of the average man. They do not know how to paint a proper female nude, close to nature and spiritual beauty. They are aesthetically ‘degenerate’, and therefore, according to Moravec, it must be made clear in Bohemia and Moravia what true art is. He encouraged them to paint like the classics of Czech painting Josef Mánes (1820–1871), Mikoláš Aleš (1852–1913) or Antonín Slavíček (1870–1910). Until now, he stated, he had protected Czech artists, but at a time of total mobilisation and severe punishment for saboteurs in factories, it was essential to treat people working in the ‘field of the spirit’ according to the same terms. ‘Therefore, today’s Czech mud, which calls itself artistic, must be fired until it becomes a hard brick that will last for ages. We shall see to the temperature.’<sup>7</sup>

It was Emanuel Moravec who initiated the Czech version of the list of ‘degenerate art’ in 1944. Moravec was indignant that artists did not react to his repeated appeals for cooperation with the Germans. As Pech showed in his article *Degenerate Art under the Protectorate*, in the catalogue of the exhibition *The End of the Avant-Garde?*, two lists were prepared at the instigation of Moravec, one more chaotic than the other.<sup>8</sup> The first list, a shorter one, divided up artists according to their degree of degeneracy, and according to whether painting or sculpture was their main activity or a sideline. Thus there appeared in the list categories such as *Entartete Maler im Hauptberuf* (Degenerate painter, main profession, inter alia Karel Černý, František Hudeček, Kamil Lhoták, František Muzika, Arnošt Paderlík and Jan Zrzavý), *Teilweise entartete Maler im Hauptberuf* (Partly degenerate painter, main profession, inter alia Toyen, the Slovak painter Cyprián Majerník, Karel Teige, František Gross and František Tichý), and the same categories with the note *Nebenberuf* (secondary profession). A further list in two examples only increases the chaos: the second appendix is headed *Entartete und teilweise entartete/*

At the end of the war, he committed suicide. He is known as a collaborator, and as such is sometimes called the ‘Czech Quisling’.

<sup>7</sup> E. Moravec, *Sabotážníci hlav* (Saboteurs of Heads), *Lidové noviny*, 2 July 1944.

<sup>8</sup> M. Pech, op. cit., pp. 99–112.

*vor allem aber schlechte* (Degenerate and partly degenerate/but above all bad). The first part of the document even lists dead artists (such as the Cubist-oriented Bohumil Kubišta, who died in 1918), and one who was a prisoner in a concentration camp (again a Cubist, Emil Filla, 1882–1953). The second lists artists who were degenerate and simultaneously bad. From this group, the writer recommended the selection of such artists for total deployment, including Vojtěch Tittelbach (1900–1971), Jiří Trnka (1912–1969) and Jindřich Wielgus (1910–1998).

In conclusion there was, of course, a list of artists who ‘are not in any respect degenerate, as they are excellent artists’. Here, he paradoxically included, for instance, Jan Bauch (1898–1995), who was nevertheless totally deployed, and Jiří Krejčí (1899–1977). The chaotic system of evaluation is demonstrated by the fact that Miloš Malina (1904–1991), for example, is listed in the group of degenerate and poor painters, and simultaneously among those who, according to the author of the list, have exceptional artistic qualities. Further confusion is demonstrated by the fact that, apart from Karel Teige (1900–1951), Toyen (1902–1980) and František Muzika (1900–1974), all the others referred to in the above-mentioned lists mostly exhibited their works normally, sometimes even in the official exhibitions of the Cultural Council of National Conviviality.

A direct result of Moravec’s ‘raising the temperature’ was the total deployment (*Totaleinsatz*) of ‘degenerate’ modern artists in industry (those affected included Zdeněk Sklenář, Jan Bauch, František Gross and Josef Liesler).

It was the work of Zdeněk Sklenář (1910–1986) in particular, the artist himself was in the list described as *Entartete Maler im Hauptberuf*, that balanced on the edge between the permitted and the forbidden. His paintings of artificial flowers, still-lives and sinister or deformed landscapes (*Dobrodíní luny*, The Benefaction of the Moon, 1944) (Fig. 6) became the most extreme position in which the spectator could clearly read the connection with the officially quite inadmissible Surrealism.

A further artist included in the lists of ‘degenerate art’ and who balanced on the very edge of the permissible was Vojtěch Tittelbach. His



6. Zdeněk Sklenář. *The Benefaction of the Moon*. 1944

solo exhibition in Mánes in 1943 was sharply criticised by the fortnightly publication *Zteč* (Attack), which was founded and led by Emanuel Moravec. On 15 April 1943, Dalibor Janků published the article *Free Trends?* in which he launched an attack on the 'Czech-speaking Bolsheviks' in the Mánes society. The critic leafed through the contemporary art journal *Volné směry* (Free Trends), where he saw alongside reproductions of the Old Masters 'in insulting proximity, disgusting Cubist pictures, the crudity of which hit one in the eye'. He asked how it was possible that such depravities could still be exhibited. As an example, he selected Tittelbach, who 'instead of a beautiful woman paints a swollen monster, the

sight of whom makes us feel sick and leaves us with an unpleasant feeling of ugliness', and in the writer it evokes 'disgust like the very thought of Bolshevism'. The *corpus delicti* is a reproduction of Tittelbach's painting of a *Madonna* from 1941, a work without any Cubist or Surrealist distortions.

The lack of interest or the inability of the German authorities to promote the concept of 'degenerate art' in the Czech art world completed the picture of the degree of exclusivity enjoyed in cultural life under the Protectorate. The archive documents published by Pech are evidence rather of hesitancy and chaos regarding how to apply this term to Czech artists. Partial attacks on artists of Jewish origin or on the Mánes Union of Artists, mainly from the pens of Czech collaborating journalists, then demonstrate the absence of clarity in dealing with this concept in Bohemia. The indecision and inconsistency in promoting the concept



7. Reinhard Heydrich. Ca. 1942



8. The *Deutsches Reich Böhmen und Mähren* stamp with the death mask of Reinhardt Heydrich. 1942

of 'degenerate art' is a sign of the more benevolent attitude of the German *Kulturträger* to the Czech environment than was the case in Germany, which was probably due to their interest in not riling the artistic and cultural public too much. After all, 'living in peace' was, according to the German ideologists, the foundation for the arms and food production of the Protectorate for the Reich. But of course, the fiction of 'living in peace' had already ended in September 1941 when Reinhard Heydrich, 'the face of evil'<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 7), was appointed as the *Reichsprotektor* in Bohemia and Moravia. He introduced himself with a secret speech on the liquidation of the Czech nation, and increased the transport of Jews to the concentration camps. He did not, of course, demand germanisation immediately, because Germany needed peace in the area of the Protectorate so that Czech workers could deploy their manpower for the German war effort. Heydrich ensured this through martial law. In 1942, after an assassination attempt on *Reichsprotektor* Reinhard Heydrich (27 May) (Fig. 8), martial law was again declared and executions and even the liquidation of entire villages (Lidice, Ležáky) got under way. This was 'living in peace' in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the 'first Nazi colony' ...

<sup>9</sup> M.R. Dederichs, *Heydrich. Das Gesicht des Bösen*, München, 2005.

V o j t ě c h L a h o d a

## Taikus sugyvenimas? „Išsigimęs menas“ ir čekų modernizmas Bohemijos ir Moravijos protektorate

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje analizuojamas Čekijos dailės gyvenimas nacių okupacijos metais. Aneksijos ir okupacijos pradžioje (nuo 1939 iki maždaug 1942 m.) Vokietija siekė pademonstruoti, kad Bohemijos ir Moravijos protektorato gyventojai yra nepriklausomi nuo Berlyno valdžios, tuo pačiu metu pakankamai stipriai laikydami įtemptas valdžios vadžias ir taikydami Reicho įstatymus. Vis dėlto tokia padėtis kultūros gyvenimui suteikė tam tikro liberalizmo, kurį liudijo viešai rodomi čekų modernistų kūriniai, ypač darbai, turintys ekspresionizmo ir simbolinio realizmo bruožų, neerzinusių cenzorių akies. Pagrindinės čekų modernizmo kryptys – kubizmas ir siurrealizmas – iš viešo dailės gyvenimo buvo pašalintos, nors Išsigimusio meno paroda Prahoje ir neįvyko (Milano Pecho tyrimai, susiję su pasirengimais 2011 m. Prahoje surengtai parodai „Avangardo pabaiga?“, patvirtina, kad tokių ketinimų būta).

Moderniausių protektorato laikų dailę reprezentuoja Magiškojo realizmo tapyba, kurios autoriai buvo dailininkai Aloisas Wachsmannas (1898–1942), Zdeněkas Tůma (1907–1943), Aloisas Fišárekas (1906–1980) ir tam tikrais atvejais Janas Benda (1897–1967) bei Františekas Tichý (1896–1961). Su šios krypties daile galima sieti ir grupuotės Skupina 42 narių kūrybą, ypač Františeko Hudečeko (1909–1990) ir Františeko Grosso (1909–1985) darbus. Viena svarbiausių modernizmo parodų buvo surengta 1941 m. Prahos galerijoje Topič Salon. Tai – Pravoslavo Kotíko (1889–1970) kūrybos paroda. Jo neokubistinės ir postkubistinio realizmo stilistikos darbai nesunkiai būtų galėję patekti į „išsigimusio meno“ juoduosius sąrašus. Lygiai taip pat Vokietijoje būtų buvę įvertinti vieno reikšmingiausių čekų modernistų Jano Zrzavý (1890–1977) darbai, 1940 m. dailininko 50-mečio proga eksponuoti Prahos Rotušėje (Obecní dům), o 1941 m. Dailininkų gildijos iniciatyva išleisti atskiru leidiniu (*Dílo Jana Zrzavého 1905–1940*). Dar daugiau, Zrzavý kūriniai ne tik buvo viešinami; jis buvo kviečiamas kurti scenografiją Nacionalinio teatro pastatymams, kuriuos lankė ne vien čekų, bet ir vokiečių kilmės publika.

Zrzavý statusas Bohemijos protektorate prilygsta Picasso padėčiai okupuotame Paryžiuje ir liudija, kad naciai dėl įvairių priežasčių neskubėjo mechaniškai perkelti „išsigimusio meno“ kampanijos į okupuotas teritorijas.

Tikroji kampanija prieš „išsigimusį meną“ protektorate prasidėjo 1944 m. ir inicijavo ją ne vokiečiai, bet vietiniai kolaborantai, o tiksliau – protektorato „propagandos ministras“ Emanuelis Moravecas. Pareiškęs, kad modernistai nemoka

vaizduoti nei gamtos, nei žmogaus, nei dvasios grožio, jis pasiūlė jiems semtis įkvėpimo iš čekų meno klasikų Josefo Máneso (1820–1871), Mikolášo Alešo (1852–1913) ar Antonína Slavíčko (1870–1910). Priminęs, kad nors visą laiką gynė čekų dailininkus, Moravecas davė suprasti, kad visuotinės mobilizacijos ir griežtų bausmių darbo prievolės sabotuotojams laikais „dvasios srities“ darbininkams bus taikomi tie patys kriterijai kaip ir kitose srityse. Nepatenkintas, kad čekai neatsiliepia į jo nuolatinius raginimus bendradarbiauti su vokiečiais, Moravecas, kaip atskleidė savo straipsnyje parodos „Avangardo pabaiga?“ kataloge Milanas Pechas, pradėjo sudarinėti netinkamų dailininkų sąrašus. Į juos buvo įtraukti net mirę (Bohumil Kubišta) arba įkalinti koncentracijos stovyklose (Emilis Filla) kūrėjai. Kai kurie minimi dviejose – blogųjų ir gerųjų menininkų – sąrašo dalyse, tačiau įdomiausia, kad visi, išskyrus radikalius modernistus ir / arba kairiųjų simpatikus, kaip kad Karelas Teige (1900–1951), Toyen (1902–1980) ir Františekas Muzika (1900–1974), visą okupacijos laikotarpį ramiai dalyvavo viešajame dailės gyvenime, nors kai kurie patyrė tam tikrų apribojimų, sulaukė aštrios kritikos (kaip Vojtěchas Tittelbachas po 1943 m. Maneso draugijos galerijoje įvykusios asmeninės parodos).

Palyginti taikaus gyvenimo iliuzija, kurią tarsi pristato protektorato meninio gyvenimo apžvalga, iš tikrųjų sutrupėjo 1941 m. rugsėjį, Reicho protektoriumi paskyrus Reinhardą Heydrichą, kuris savo karjerą pradėjo nuo „žydų klausimo“ sprendimo ir neviešo pareiškimo apie planus ilgainiui eliminuoti čekų tautą. 1941 m. ir kurį laiką po to ji dar buvo reikalinga Reichui kaip darbo jėga ir papildoma Vermachto kareivių atsarga.