

1968: A Global Perspective

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Destiny as Alibi: Milan Kundera, Václav Havel and the "Czech Question" after 1968

Milan Kundera's December 1968 article "Czech Destiny" is an encomium to a battered Czechoslovakia. It waxes nostalgic about the August street battles, it scolds as "weak" those who had recently emigrated and it traces the origins of the Prague Spring to an ostensibly unique and tragic role assigned to the Czechs in Europe eleven centuries earlier. Its publication was met by some "with pleasure and with the awareness that this was meant as an idyllic Christmas meditation." To Václav Havel, however, the article represented a tendency among reform Communists to seek historical alibis for their party's crimes, betraying a complacent eagerness to "trade vigorous engagement with the open present for the mawkish reliving of the closed past."

The ensuing dust-up, remembered largely for Kundera's scurrilous indictment of Havel as a self-serving exhibitionist, poses questions that remain topical in the Czech lands and elsewhere: How does a civilized society properly balance civic freedoms and social welfare? What is a fair price to pay for preserving the extraordinary and the idiosyncratic in the face of increasing global uniformity?

"Czech Destiny" is an important chapter in the (then) century-old debate over the merits of the struggle for Czech self-determination. Its thesis – that the Czechs are the protagonists in a Darwinian contest that pits rationalism and creativity against raw, brutish hegemony – is accompanied by a stunningly modest political program that promises few rewards and demands exceeding restraint. This paper seeks a tool for examining the stylistic and thematic paradoxes of Kundera's article in Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Epic and Novel" and it contends that, by invoking an imagined destiny for the Czechs, Kundera became complicit in its realization.