

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

AN UNFAMILIAR HISTORY

The great irony of a trip to Prague is that though the city is steeped in history, it's a history that is unfamiliar to many visitors. London, Paris and Rome can feel instantly recognisable because their stories and myths have played such an important part in the way that Western culture has traditionally been taught. Prague is not like that. A tour of Prague Castle, for example, reveals a bewildering array of Sigismunds, Bořislavs, Boleslavs and, especially, Václavs. If you're not a grad student in Slavic European history, you're not likely to recognise many of the names or grasp much of their significance. That's a shame. Not just because Czech history is filled with gripping characters and stories, but also because it's an integral part of European history as a whole.

Visitors may be surprised to learn, for example, that Prague, under Charles IV and subsequent rulers, was once the seat of the Holy Roman Empire. Not Nero's empire in Rome, of course, but the empire that had evolved by the 14th and 15th centuries into a network of Christian kingdoms and principalities. Prague, under Rudolf II, was also for a time the seat of the sprawling Habsburg Empire, with territories as far flung as modern-day Italy and Poland.

Indeed, the city was once so tied into what we now consider to be Western Europe that all it took was for two Catholic councillors and a secretary to be flung out of a window at Prague Castle in the 17th century to ignite a war – the Thirty Years' War – that would subsume the entire continent.

All this, of course, won't help you get through the Boleslavs and Václavs, but it should be enough to persuade you to look past those unpronounceable names and see the connections. A little knowledge can make a big difference and help make that slog through Prague Castle much more rewarding.

THE RECEIVED WISDOM

Before getting started, a few words are in order regarding how history has traditionally been taught and told in the Czech Republic. For decades now, under the communists and in the years since the Velvet Revolution, an orthodox version of history has held sway that tends to see the Czechs as victims in their own national drama. Czech history, in this view, is a straightforward narrative of a small but just nation struggling to emerge from under the thumb of much bigger and more powerful adversaries. These included, over the years, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Rome, the Habsburgs in Vienna, the Germans in more modern times and, most recently, the Russians. This theme still permeates popular attitudes and forms the subtext behind descriptive information presented at museums and exhibitions. It also forms the fodder for guidebooks and newspaper and magazine articles.

That's not to say it's false. In fact, there's much truth in it. The Czechs have endured long periods of war and hardship, suffering foreign invasions that were not of their choosing. It's

TIMELINE

500 BC–AD 400

Celtic tribes thrive in the territory of the modern-day Czech Republic, building settlements whose remains will later be discovered in and around Prague.

AD 500

Slavic tribes enter central Europe during the period of the Great Migration, forming settlements along the Vltava River. Recent excavations indicate that the largest of these may have been near Roztoky, northwest of Prague.

Early 600s

Princess Libuše, the fabled founder of the Přemysl dynasty, looks out over the Vltava valley and predicts that a great city will emerge there someday.

true that remarkable personalities, such as the religious reformer Jan Hus (see the boxed text, p23), were ultimately betrayed outside the country; indeed Czechoslovakia itself was in a sense betrayed by the West even before WWII. The Czechs also suffered greatly under both Nazism and a repressive, Soviet-style communism.

But this view of history tells only part of the story. The Czechs have always been closer to the centre of their own history – both in good ways and bad – than some of their history books would like to believe. Just as the communists could not have ruled so long without the active engagement of some Czechs (and the quiet acquiescence of many), so too did the Germans, Austrians, Catholics and others over the years join willing locals to do their bidding. This is part of ‘Czech history’, too.

It would also be misleading to characterise foreign influences as invariably negative. Prague, to its great benefit, has always been a cosmopolitan place – we need only look at a handful of architectural masterpieces to make the point. The Charles Bridge (p75) and parts of St Vitus Cathedral (p64) were designed by a German, Peter Parler. Many of the statues that line the bridge were sculpted by Austrians. The baroque masterpiece of St Nicholas Church (p79) in Malá Strana was the work of a father and son team from Bavaria; much of the rest of Malá Strana’s baroque splendour was built by Italians. When President Tomáš Masaryk commissioned the renovation of Prague Castle (p61) in the 1920s, he selected a Slovenian, Jože Plečnik, as chief architect. The list could go on and on.

There are encouraging signs that this orthodox view is starting to give way to a more nuanced perspective. One example could be seen in a new history magazine that appeared on newsstands in 2008 with the intentionally provocative cover asking whether Jan Žižka – the revered Czech Hussite commander from the 15th century – was ‘a hero or a traitor’. Though the title may have been aimed more at selling magazines than challenging historical dogma, it’s hard to imagine such an article appearing even as recently as five or 10 years ago.

THE EARLY YEARS

There’s been human habitation in and around Prague for some 600,000 years and permanent communities since around 4000 BC, but it’s the Celts, who came to the area around 500 BC, that have aroused the most interest. The name ‘Bohemia’ for the western province of the Czech Republic derives from one of the most successful of the Celtic tribes, the Boii. Traces of Boii culture have been found as far away as southern Germany, leading some archaeologists to posit a relation between local Celts and those in France and possibly even further afield to the British Isles. It’s also spurred playful speculation – more wishful thinking than historical fact – that the Czechs are actually the modern-day offspring of these historic warriors.

Celtic settlements have been unearthed in several parts of Prague. During the construction of metro line B in the 1980s, a large Celtic burial ground was discovered at Nové Butovice, and evidence of early iron furnaces has been found not far away in Jinonice. Some even think there was an early Celtic settlement where Prague Castle now stands, but there’s no physical evidence to support the claim.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SLAVS

It’s unclear what prompted the great migration of peoples in the 6th and 7th centuries, but during this time large populations of Slavs began arriving in central Europe, driving out the

870s

Prince Bořivoj begins construction of Prague Castle on Hradčany to serve as the seat of his Přemysl dynasty – as it will for kings, emperors and presidents for centuries to come.

26 August 1278

King Otakar II is thrashed by the Habsburgs at the Battle of Marchfeld (Moravské Pole in Czech) at the height of the Přemysl dynasty’s influence.

4 August 1306

The last Přemysl king, Wenceslas III, is murdered, leaving no male heir. The dynasty passes to John of Luxembourg, who will give Bohemia its greatest ruler, his son Charles IV.

Celts and pushing German tribes further to the west. The newcomers established several settlements along the Vltava, including one near the present site of Prague Castle and another upriver at Vyšehrad (p115).

Archaeologists working near the town of Roztoky, northwest of Prague, recently unearthed what may be the largest and oldest of these settlements, dating from the first decades of the 6th century.

THE MYTH OF LIBUŠE

Fittingly for a city that embraces so much mystery, the origins of Prague are shrouded in a fairy tale. Princess Libuše, the daughter of early ruler Krok, is said to have stood on a hill one day at the start of the 7th century and foretold of a glorious city that would one day become Prague. According to legend, Libuše needed a strong suitor who would yield sturdy heirs to the throne. Passing over a field of eligible bachelors, including some sickly looking royals, she selected a simple ploughman, Přemysl. She chose well. The Přemysl dynasty would go on to rule for several hundred years.

In the 9th century, the Přemysl prince, Bořivoj, selected an outcropping on Hradčany to build Prague Castle, the dynasty's seat and the locus of power in this part of the world ever since.

Christianity became the state religion under the rule of the pious Wenceslas (Václav in Czech), Duke of Bohemia (r c 925–929), now the chief patron saint of the Czech people. Wenceslas was the 'Good King Wenceslas' of the well-known Christmas carol, written in 1853 by English clergyman John Mason Neale. Neale, a scholar of European church history, had read about St Wenceslas's legendary piety, and based his carol on the story of the duke's page finding strength by following in the footsteps of his master. Wenceslas's conversion to Christianity is said to have angered his mother and his brother, Boleslav, who ended up killing the young king in a fit of jealousy.

In spite of the occasional fratricide, the Přemysls proved to be effective rulers, forging a genuine Slav alliance and governing Bohemia until the 14th century. Until the early 13th century, the Přemysl rulers were considered princes, but in 1212, the pope granted Otakar I the right to rule as a king. At one point, Přemysl lands stretched from modern-day Silesia (near the Czech–Polish border) to the Mediterranean Sea.

THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

It's hard to imagine Prague will ever exceed the position it had in the 14th century, when for a time it became the seat of the Holy Roman Empire under King and later Emperor Charles IV (Karel IV).

The path to glory began predictably enough with the 1306 murder of Přemysl ruler Wenceslas III, leaving no male successor to the throne. Eventually, John of Luxembourg (Jan Lucemburský to the Czechs) assumed the Czech throne through his marriage to Wenceslas III's daughter Elyška, in 1310.

Under the enlightened rule of John's son, Charles IV, Prague grew into one of the continent's largest and most prosperous cities. It was at this time that the city assumed its handsome Gothic look. Charles commissioned both the bridge that now bears his name and St Vitus Cathedral, among other projects. He also established Charles University as the first university in central Europe.

26 August 1346

Charles IV becomes Bohemian king on the death of his father; later, he adds the honorific Holy Roman Emperor to his list of titles. Prague booms as the seat of the empire.

6 July 1415

Religious reformer Jan Hus is burned at the stake at Konstanz, Germany, for refusing to recant his criticisms of the Catholic Church. His death enrages supporters and enflames decades of religious strife.

30 July 1419

Angry Hussite supporters rush into the New Town Hall and toss several Catholic councillors out the window, introducing the word 'defenestration' to the world.

CZECH VERSION OF 'THE TROUBLES'

In contrast to the 14th century, the 15th century brought mostly hardship and war; much of the good of preceding years was undone in an orgy of religion-inspired violence and intolerance. This period saw the rise of the Church reformation movement led by Jan Hus (see the boxed text, [opposite](#)). Hus' intentions were admirable, but his movement ended up polarising the country.

In 1419, supporters of Hussite preacher Jan Želivský stormed Prague's New Town Hall on Wenceslas Square and tossed several Catholic councillors out the windows. This act not only hardened attitudes on both sides but also introduced the word 'defenestration' (tossing someone from a window in order to do bodily harm) into the political lexicon.

The Hussites assumed control of Prague after the death of Holy Roman Emperor Wenceslas IV in 1419. This sparked the first anti-Hussite crusade, launched in 1420 by Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund. Hussite commander Jan Žižka successfully defended the city in the Battle of Vítkov Hill, but religious strife spilled into the countryside. The Hussites themselves were torn into warring factions: those wanting to make peace with the emperor and others wanting to fight to the end. The more radical Hussite faction, the Taborites, were ultimately defeated in battle at Lipany in 1434.

Following Sigismund's death, George of Poděbrady (Jiří z Poděbrad) ruled as Bohemia's one and only Hussite king, from 1452 to 1471, with the backing of the moderate Hussites known as the Utraquists. The damage, however, had been done, and once-prosperous Bohemia lay in ruin. The rest of the century was spent in an uneasy balance between the Protestant Czech citizenry and the Catholic nobility.

ENTER THE AUSTRIANS

Though it took time for the country to recover from the Hussite wars, the latter part of the 16th century is generally viewed as a second 'golden age' under Habsburg Emperor Rudolf II (the first being the reign of Charles IV in the 14th century). Austria's Habsburg dynasty generally gets a bad rap in Czech history books, largely because of the repressive means, including public executions, that the Habsburgs used to enforce their rule after the Czech defeat at Bílá Hora in 1620. But it's generally forgotten that it was the Czech nobility, in 1526, who invited the Habsburgs – in the person of Ferdinand I – to rule in the first place. Ferdinand endeared himself to the mostly Catholic nobility, but alienated large sections of Czech society.

His grandson Rudolf preferred Prague to Vienna and moved the seat of the Habsburg Empire here for the duration of his reign. Today Rudolf is generally viewed as something of a kook. It's true he used his patronage to support serious artists and scientists, including noted astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, but he also had a soft spot for more esoteric pursuits such as soothsaying and alchemy. The English mathematician and occultist John Dee and his less well-regarded countryman Edward Kelly were just two of the noted mystics Rudolf retained at the castle in an eternal quest to turn base metals into gold. Rudolf was also a friend to Prague's large Jewish population, who enjoyed a great period of prosperity during his reign, despite being crowded into a tiny ghetto just north of the Old Town (see the boxed text, [p25](#)).

The end of Rudolf's reign in the early 17th century was marked by renewed strife between Protestants and Catholics, culminating in 1618 in what became known as the 'second defenestration of Prague'. A group of Protestant noblemen stormed into a chamber at Prague Castle and hurled

Early 15th century

The Hussite wars – pitting radical reformers against Catholics and, ultimately, different Hussite factions against each other – rage throughout Bohemia, laying waste to the country.

1583

Habsburg Emperor Rudolf II moves the dynasty's seat from Vienna to Prague, ushering in a second golden age. It lasts only until Rudolf dies three decades later, when tensions between Protestants and Catholics start boiling over.

23 May 1618

A Protestant mob pushes two Catholic councillors and their secretary from a window at Prague Castle. This 'second defenestration' pushes the Habsburgs into starting the Thirty Years' War.

JAN HUS

Jan Hus was the Czech lands' foremost – and one of Europe's earliest – Christian reformers, anticipating Martin Luther and the Lutheran reformation by more than a century.

Hus was born into a poor family in southern Bohemia in 1372. He studied at the Karolinum (Charles University) and eventually became dean of the philosophical faculty. Like many of his colleagues, Hus was inspired by the English philosopher and radical reformist theologian John Wycliffe. The latter's ideas on reforming the Roman Catholic priesthood meshed nicely with growing Czech resentment at the wealth and corruption of the clergy.

In 1391 Prague reformers founded the Bethlehem Chapel (p101), where sermons were given in Czech rather than Latin. Hus preached there for about 10 years while continuing his duties at the university. Hus' criticisms of the Catholic Church, particularly the practice of selling indulgences, endeared him to his followers but put him squarely in the pope's black book. The pope had Hus excommunicated in 1410, but he continued to preach. In 1415, he was invited to the Council of Constance to recant his views. He refused and was burned at the stake on 6 July 1415. An enormous statue of Hus stands in Old Town Square (p87).

two Catholic councillors and their secretary out the window. The men survived – legend has it they fell onto a dung heap that softened the blow. But the damage was done. The act sparked a decades-long war – the Thirty Years' War – that eventually consumed the whole of Europe and left Bohemia once again in tatters.

For the Czechs it was to get even worse. Following the second defenestration, the Czech nobility elected a German Protestant – Frederick V, Elector Palatine – to be their leader in a looming battle with the Habsburgs. Frederick's rule was dogged by poor morale, and most of the European powers sided with the Habsburgs. In the end, the Czechs were routed at the Battle of Bílá Hora (White Mountain; p142), on the western edge of Prague, on 8 November 1620. The fighting lasted less than two hours. The 'Winter King' (so called because he ruled Bohemia for just one winter) fled, and in 1621, the 27 nobles who had instigated the revolt were executed in Old Town Square.

The defeat slammed the door on Czech independence for three centuries. Czechs lost their privileges, rights and property, and almost even their national identity through enforced Catholicisation and Germanisation as part of the wider Counter-Reformation movement. During the Thirty Years' War, Saxons occupied Prague from 1631 to 1632, and the Swedes seized Hradčany and Malá Strana in 1648. Staré Město, though unconquered, suffered months of bombardment (the Old Town Tower on Charles Bridge still shows the scars of battle). Prague's population declined from 60,000 in 1620 to 24,600 in 1648. The Habsburgs moved their throne back to Vienna, reducing Prague to a provincial backwater.

REVIVAL OF THE CZECH NATION

Remarkably, Czech language and culture managed to hold on through the years of the Austrian occupation. As the Habsburgs eased their grip in the 19th century, Prague became the centre of the Czech National Revival. The revival found its initial expression not in politics – outright political activity was forbidden – but in Czech-language literature and drama. Important figures included linguists Josef Jungmann and Josef Dobrovský, and František Palacký, author of *Dějiny národu českého* (The History of the Czech Nation).

8 November 1620

Czech soldiers, united under Protestant leader Frederick V, Elector Palatine, lose a crucial battle at Bílá Hora, west of Prague, to Austrian Habsburg troops. The loss brings in 300 years of Austrian rule.

21 June 1621

Twenty-seven Czech noblemen are executed in Old Town Square for their part in instigating the anti-Habsburg revolt. Their severed heads are hung from the Old Town Tower on Charles Bridge.

29 October 1787

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, already far more popular in Prague than in Vienna, serves as conductor at the premiere of his opera *Don Giovanni*, staged at the Estates Theatre near Old Town Square.

While many of the countries in post-Napoleonic Europe were swept up in similar nationalist sentiments, social and economic factors gave the Czech revival particular strength. Educational reforms by Empress Maria Theresa (r 1740–80) had given even the poorest Czechs access to schooling, and a vocal middle class was emerging through the Industrial Revolution.

Prague joined in the 1848 democratic revolutions that swept Europe, and the city was first in line in the Austrian empire to rise in favour of reform. Yet like most of the others, Prague's revolution was soon crushed. In 1863, however, Czech speakers defeated the German speakers in Prague council elections and edged them out of power, though the shrinking German-language minority still wielded considerable power until the end of the century.

INDEPENDENCE AT LAST

For Czechs, WWI had a silver lining. The 1918 defeat of the Axis powers left the Austro-Hungarian Empire too weak to fight for its former holdings. Czech patriots Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš had spent much of the war in the United States, where they lobbied ceaselessly with Czech and Slovak émigré communities for a joint Czech and Slovak state. The plea appealed especially to the idealistic American president, Woodrow Wilson, and his belief in the self-determination of peoples. The most workable solution appeared to be a single federal state of two equal republics, and this was spelled out in agreements signed in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1915 and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1918 (both cities having large populations of Czechs and Slovaks).

As WWI drew to a close, Czechoslovakia declared its independence, with Allied support, on 28 October 1918. Prague became the capital, and the popular Masaryk, a writer and political philosopher, the republic's first president.

THE FIRST REPUBLIC & WORLD WAR II

Czechoslovakia in the two decades between independence and the 1939 Nazi invasion was a remarkably successful state. Even now Czechs consider the 'First Republic' another golden age of immense cultural and economic achievement.

Czechoslovakia's proximity to Nazi Germany and its sizable German minority in the Sudetenland border area, however, made it a tempting target for Adolf Hitler. Hitler correctly judged that neither Britain nor France had an appetite for war. At a conference in Munich in 1938, Hitler demanded that Germany be allowed to annex the Sudetenland. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain acquiesced, famously calling Germany's designs on Czechoslovakia a 'quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing'.

On 15 March 1939 Germany occupied all of Bohemia and Moravia, declaring the region a 'protectorate', while Slovakia declared independence as a Nazi puppet state. During the war, Prague was spared significant physical damage, though the Nazis destroyed the Czech resistance – and killed thousands of innocent Czechs in retaliation for the assassination in Prague of SS general and Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich by Czech patriots in 1942 (see the boxed text, p115).

Prague's pre-WWII Jewish community of around 40,000 was all but wiped out by the Nazis. Almost three-quarters of them, and 90% of all the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia, died of disease or starvation or were exterminated in camps from 1941 to 1944.

On 5 May 1945, with the war drawing to a close, the citizens of Prague staged an uprising against the Germans. The Red Army was advancing from the east and US troops had made it

3 July 1883

German-Jewish writer Franz Kafka is born just off Old Town Square. He'll go on to lead a double life: mild-mannered insurance clerk by day, harried father of the modern novel by night.

28 October 1918

A newly independent Czechoslovakia is proclaimed at the Municipal House (Obecní dům) in the final days of WWI. Crowds throng Wenceslas Square in jubilation.

1920s

The heyday of the First Republic, now seen as another golden age. Prague intellectuals are heavily influenced by modern movements in art, architecture, literature and photography.

THE JEWS OF PRAGUE

Prague's Jews first moved into a walled ghetto in about the 13th century, in response to directives from Rome that Jews and Christians should live separately. Subsequent centuries of repression and pogroms culminated in a threat from Ferdinand I (r 1526–64) to throw all the Jews out of Bohemia.

Official attitudes changed under Rudolf II at the end of the 16th century. Rudolf bestowed honour on the Jews and encouraged a flowering of Jewish intellectual life. Mordechai Maisel, the mayor of the ghetto at the time, became Rudolf's finance minister and the city's wealthiest citizen. Another major figure was Judah Loew ben Bezalel (Rabbi Loew), a prominent theologian, chief rabbi, student of the mystical teachings of the kabbalah and nowadays best known as the creator of the mystical creature, the Golem – a kind of proto-robot made from the mud of the Vltava River.

When they helped to repel the Swedes on Charles Bridge in 1648, the Jews won the favour of Ferdinand III to the extent that he had the ghetto enlarged. But a century later they were driven out of the city, only to be welcomed back when city residents missed their business.

In the 1780s Habsburg emperor Joseph II (r 1780–90) outlawed many forms of discrimination, and in the 19th century the Jews won the right to live where they wanted. Many chose to leave the ghetto for nicer parts of the city. At the end of the 19th century the city decided to clear the ghetto, which had become a slum. In place of the ancient buildings they built the beautiful Art Nouveau apartment houses found there today.

The ghetto, renamed Josefov in Joseph's honour, remained the spiritual heart of Prague's Jewish community, but that came to a brutal end with the Nazi occupation during WWII. Today the entire city is home to roughly 5000 Jews, a fraction of the community's former size.

as far as Plzeň (90km west of Prague), but were holding back from liberating the city in deference to their Soviet allies. The only help for Prague's lightly armed citizens came from Russian soldiers of the so-called Vlasov units, former POWs who had defected to the German side and now defected in turn to the Czech cause. Many people died in the uprising before the Germans pulled out on 8 May, having been granted free passage out in return for an agreement not to destroy more bridges and buildings. Most of Prague was thus liberated by its own citizens before the Red Army arrived on 9 May. Liberation Day is now celebrated on 8 May; under communism it was 9 May.

In 1945 Czechoslovakia was reconstituted as an independent state. One of its first acts was the expulsion of the remaining Sudeten Germans from the borderlands. By 1947, some 2.5 million ethnic Germans had been stripped of their Czechoslovak citizenship and forcibly expelled to Germany and Austria. Thousands died during the forced marches.

Despite a 1997 mutual apology for wartime misdeeds by the Czech Republic and Germany, the issue still brings emotions to the boil. Many Sudeten survivors feel their citizenship and property were taken illegally. Many Czechs, on the other hand, remain convinced that the Sudeten Germans forfeited their rights when they sought help from Nazi Germany, and that a formal apology by President Václav Havel in 1990 was unwarranted.

FROM THE NAZIS TO THE COMMUNISTS

For many Czechs, WWII had tarnished the image of the Western democracies for sanctioning Hitler's rise to power and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Communist appeals for world peace and economic justice found a receptive ear in a war-torn country. In the first elections

30 September 1938

European powers, meeting in Munich, agree to Hitler's demand to annex Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland region. British PM Neville Chamberlain declares they have achieved 'peace in our time'.

15 March 1939

German soldiers cross the Czechoslovak frontier and occupy Bohemia and Moravia. Czechoslovak soldiers, ordered in advance not to resist, allow the Germans to enter without firing a shot.

27 May 1942

Czechoslovak patriots succeed in assassinating German Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich. The men are later found hiding in a church in Nové Město. Trapped by Nazi soldiers, some take their own lives; the others are killed.

WHEN 'BIG BROTHER' WAS REAL LIFE

Twenty years on from the Velvet Revolution, it seems as if communism never happened. Prague has taken its place among Europe's colourful capitals, and on a sunny day it can feel like all is right with the world. But memories of a darker period still run deep. Anna Siskova, a Czechoslovak by birth, was a high school student in Bratislava in 1989 when communism fell. She now lives in Prague, where she works in communications for an international company. She told us a little bit about life with 'Big Brother'.

What's your strongest memory when you think back to communist times? Everything suddenly turns grey: grey streets, grey houses, shops that had identical goods all over Czechoslovakia no matter what city you lived in. I think about our family trips to the Black Sea. We went to Bulgaria, the only country easily accessible to citizens of the communist camp. To get to Yugoslavia, you needed a special grey passport. The Bulgarian coast was full of Hungarians, East Germans, Slovaks, Czechs and Poles. You could tell where someone was from by his or her swimsuit!

Do you remember where you were when you first heard about the Velvet Revolution? I remember exactly. It was 16 November, the day before. We were sent home from school early (normal procedure if there was a demonstration planned). We were told to go straight home and not to go to the centre. There was a student protest at the Ministry of Education and, surprisingly, state TV reported the students' complaints. On 17 November, when news came in from Prague, it was very surprising. I was excited. Older people kept saying we shouldn't be too enthusiastic – remember what happened with the Prague Spring? But I didn't care. I stood on the square every day. It was amazing.

Give us a feeling for how it was back then to live. How was it buying food or clothes? One of the best jobs was to work in a vegetable or a meat shop. If you knew someone from a *zeloovac* (fruit and veg shop), you could at least get bananas and tangerines. And clothes – everyone was wearing the same. There was no choice, and if the shops got something special – I remember once [there were] clothes from Greece – there was an enormous line in front. There was always some kind of shortage, though. When the paper factory burned down, there was no toilet paper in the whole country.

Is there anything from that period you really miss? What is worse now than it was then? People used to read more. They loved going to the theatre as they could always find some political hints in the plays. It was a strange atmosphere. I don't miss it, but it brings back nostalgic memories. As kids we were motivated to learn German and English, just so we could understand Austrian TV and radio, and English songs.

after the war, in 1946, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC) became the republic's dominant party, winning 36% of the popular vote.

As relations between wartime allies the US and the Soviet Union deteriorated, Soviet leader Josef Stalin tightened his grip on Eastern and Central Europe. In February 1948, with Stalin's blessing, Czechoslovak communists staged a bloodless coup, proclaiming a workers' state, with the government and economy to be organised along Soviet lines. KSC leader Klement Gottwald announced the coup to euphoric crowds from the balcony of the Goltz-Kinsky Palace (p92) on Old Town Square.

By the 1950s the initial enthusiasm had faded as communist economic policies nearly bankrupted the country and a wave of repression sent thousands to labour camps. In a series

5 May 1945

Prague residents begin an armed uprising against the Germans and liberate the city after three days of fighting. The Germans are given free passage out in exchange for agreeing not to destroy the city.

9 May 1945

The Soviet Army formally liberates the city, though most of the German soldiers are already defeated or gone. Under the communists, this will be recognised as the official day of liberation.

25 February 1948

Communists stage a bloodless coup. Party leader Klement Gottwald proclaims the news on Old Town Square. Crowds cheer, but the coup ultimately leads to four decades of oppressive communist rule.

READING UP ON CZECH HISTORY

Prague and the Czech Republic are not lacking in well-written historical accounts in English. The selection is particularly strong on books about the Nazi occupation and somewhat weaker about life under communism. Timothy Garton Ash's *The Magic Lantern* remains the gold standard for accounts in English of the Velvet Revolution.

- *Magic Prague* (Angelo Maria Ripellino, 1973) – Italian professor Ripellino breathes new life into historical figures through the ages in this inventive and highly entertaining blend of fact and fiction. With characters like Rudolf II, the Golem and Franz Kafka to work with, it's hard to see how he could miss. Out of print but possible to find used.
- *Prague: A Cultural History* (Richard Burton, 2003) – A beautifully written cultural history by an English professor obviously in love with Prague and its myths. The first chapter, 'How to Read Prague', is especially helpful for visitors. The chapters are arranged around stories and characters – both real and fictional – that have shaped the city.
- *Prague in Black and Gold* (Peter Demetz, 1998) – The first of two books by émigré Czech and literary historian Peter Demetz. This volume is a sweeping history of Demetz's hometown, with a keen eye for the absurd. It's a challenging read if you don't have a background in Czech or Central European history, but those who do will find it enriching.
- *Prague in Danger* (Peter Demetz, 2008) – Demetz's second (and more accessible) work is partly a classic history and partly a lively and moving chronicle of his own family – Demetz's mother was Jewish and died at Terezín. These personal remembrances are especially strong and give a first-hand feel for what life in Prague was like during the Nazi occupation. It's also a good general primer for historical markers like Reinhard Heydrich's assassination in 1942.
- *Prague in the Shadow of the Swastika* (Callum MacDonald and Jan Kaplan, 1995) – Part serious history and part powerful picture-book focusing on Prague during the Nazi occupation. Hard to find, but usually stocked by English booksellers in Prague, such as Big Ben Bookshop (p146).
- *So Many Heroes* (Alan Levy, 1980) – Gripping account of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion and the immediate aftermath through the eyes of an American journalist who witnessed it. Levy was eventually banned by the communists from living here and was allowed to return only in 1990. He served as editor-in-chief of the *Prague Post* until his death in 2004. Originally published under the title *Rowboat to Prague*.
- *The Coast of Bohemia* (Derek Sayer, 2000) – Broad historical treatment follows the rise of Czech national consciousness in the 19th century, through independence, the First Republic, WWII and the communist period. The title alludes to an oft-quoted line from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*: 'Thou art perfect then, our ship hath touch'd upon the deserts of Bohemia?' – either proof of the Bard's appalling geography or a poetic reference to Bohemia's mythical seacoast.
- *The Killing of Reinhard Heydrich* (Callum MacDonald, 2007) – Absorbing account of the killing of Nazi Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich in 1942 by Czech patriots who had parachuted in from Britain. The act remains highly controversial. The assassination helped burst the myth of Nazi invincibility, but resulted in reprisal attacks that cost thousands of lives.
- *The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of 1989 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin, and Prague* (Timothy Garton Ash, 1993) – Some historians just seem to live right. Oxford professor Garton Ash had the professional and linguistic skills to interpret history as it was unfolding during the tumultuous months of 1989 – and the presence of mind to write it all down. Looks at the major anticommunist revolutions in Central Europe but is strong on the Velvet Revolution.
- *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941–1968* (Heda Margolius Kovály, 1997) – One of the few books to forge a link between the Nazi and communist periods. The author, Jewish and born in Prague, had the double misfortune of being sent to Terezín and Auschwitz during WWII, only to survive the war and marry an up-and-coming communist who was executed in the 1950s show trials. This remarkable book is unfortunately out of print and hard to find, but worth the effort.

20 November 1952

In a Soviet-style purge, communists accuse several of their own party functionaries, including General Secretary Rudolf Slánský, of treason. The prisoners are executed at Prague's Pankrác prison.

20–21 August 1968

Warsaw Pact forces, led by the Soviet Union, invade Czechoslovakia to put an end to reforms known as the Prague Spring. Reforming communist leader Alexander Dubček is replaced by hard-liner Gustáv Husák.

16 January 1969

Student Jan Palach immolates himself at the top of Wenceslas Square to protest the Warsaw Pact invasion. Thousands come to the square in the following days to mark his memory and attend his funeral.

of Stalin-style purges staged by the KSČ in the early '50s, many people, including top members of the party, were executed.

In the 1960s, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a gradual liberalisation under reformist party leader Alexander Dubček. The reforms reflected a popular desire for full democracy and an end to censorship – ‘Socialism with a Human Face’, as the party called it.

But Soviet leaders grew alarmed at the prospect of a democratic society within the Eastern Bloc and the potential domino effect on Poland and Hungary. The brief ‘Prague Spring’ was crushed by a Soviet-led Warsaw Pact invasion on the night of 20–21 August 1968. Prague was the major objective; Soviet forces, with the help of the Czechoslovak secret police, secured the airport for Soviet transport planes. At the end of the first day, 58 people died. Much of the fighting took place near the top of Wenceslas Square, where the façade of the National Museum still bears bullet scars.

In 1969 Dubček was replaced by the hard-line Gustáv Husák and exiled to the Slovak forestry department. About 14,000 party functionaries and another 280,000 members who refused to renounce their belief in ‘Socialism with a Human Face’ were expelled from the party and lost their jobs. Many other educated professionals became manual labourers and street cleaners.

In January 1977 a group of 243 writers, artists and other intellectuals signed a public demand for basic human rights, Charter 77, which became a focus for opponents of the regime. Prominent among them was the poet and playwright Václav Havel (see the boxed text, [below](#)).

VELVET REVOLUTION & DIVORCE

The year 1989 was a momentous one throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Czechoslovak communist officials watched nervously as one by one the neighbouring regimes toppled, cul-

PLAYWRIGHT-PRESIDENT VÁCLAV HAVEL

The Velvet Revolution produced at least one great name known around the world. Václav Havel – playwright, dissident and the country’s first postcommunist president – was born on 5 October 1936, the son of a wealthy Prague businessman. His family’s property was confiscated in the communist coup of 1948, and because of his bourgeois background, he was denied easy access to education. He nevertheless finished high school and studied for a time at university before landing a job as a stagehand at the Theatre on the Balustrade ([p203](#)). Nine years later he was its resident playwright.

His enthusiasm for the liberal reforms of the ‘Prague Spring’ and his signature on the Charter 77 declaration made him an enemy of the communist government. His works, which typically focused on the absurdities and dehumanisation of totalitarian bureaucracy, were banned and his passport seized. Altogether he spent some four years in jail for his activities on behalf of human rights.

The massive demonstrations of November 1989 thrust Havel into the limelight as a leading organiser of the non-communist Civic Forum movement, which ultimately negotiated a peaceful transfer of power. Havel was swept into office as president shortly after, propelled by a wave of thousands of cheering demonstrators holding signs saying *Havel na hrad!* (Havel to the castle!)

In 2003, after two terms as president, Havel was replaced by former prime minister Václav Klaus. Since leaving office, Havel has finished at least two memoirs and recently returned to the stage as the author of a new and acclaimed play, *Odcházení* (Leaving).

1977

Life in Prague after ‘normalisation’ reaches a political and cultural nadir. Václav Havel and other dissidents sign Charter 77, a petition calling on Czechoslovakia to meet its international obligations on human rights.

17 November 1989

Police use violence to halt a student demonstration along Národní třída. The action shocks the nation, sparking days of demonstrations that culminate in the communists relinquishing power – soon to be called the Velvet Revolution.

12 March 1999

The Czech Republic formally enters the NATO military alliance along with Poland and Hungary. The move angers Russia in spite of assurances from NATO that the alliance is purely defensive.

STUDENT SACRIFICES

Throughout Czech history, from the time of Jan Hus to the Velvet Revolution, Prague's university students have not been afraid to stand up for what they believe. Many of them have even sacrificed their lives. Two student names that have gone down in 20th-century Czech history are Jan Opletal and Jan Palach.

On 28 October 1939, shortly after the start of WWII and on the 21st anniversary of Czechoslovak independence, Jan Opletal, a medical student, was shot and fatally wounded by police who were trying to break up an anti-Nazi rally. After his funeral, on 15 November, students took to the streets, defacing German street signs, chanting anti-German slogans, and taunting the police. The Nazi response was swift and brutal.

In the early hours of 17 November, now known as the 'Day of Students' Fight for Freedom and Democracy', the Nazis raided Prague's university dormitories and arrested around 1200 students before carting them off to various concentration camps. Some were executed and others died. Prague's universities were closed for the duration of WWII.

Thirty years after Opletal's death, on 16 January 1969, university student Jan Palach set himself on fire on the steps of the National Museum (Národní muzeum; p110) in protest against the Warsaw Pact invasion of Prague. He staggered down the steps in flames and collapsed on the pavement at the foot of the stairs. The following day around 200,000 people gathered in the square in his honour.

It was three days before he died, and his body was buried in the Olšany Cemetery (p128) in Žižkov. His grave became a focus for demonstrations and in 1974 his remains were exhumed and moved to his home village. By popular demand he was re-interred in Olšany Cemetery in 1990. A cross-shaped monument set into the pavement in front of the National Museum marks the spot where he fell.

The street in Staré Město called 17. listopadu (17 November; Map pp88–9) was named in honour of the students who suffered on 17 November 1939. Exactly 50 years later, on 17 November 1989, students marching along Národní třída in memory of that day were attacked and clubbed by police (there's a bronze memorial at the spot; see p111). The national outrage triggered by this event pushed the communist government toward its final collapse a few days later.

minating in the breaching of the Berlin Wall in early November. There was a growing sense of excitement within the population that the leadership would not be able to cling to power, but there was also palpable fear over how the transfer of power would take place.

On 17 November Prague's communist youth movement organised an officially sanctioned demonstration in memory of the students who were executed by the Nazis in 1939 (see the boxed text, above). But the peaceful crowd of 50,000 was cornered on Národní třída. Hundreds were beaten by police, and around 100 were arrested.

Czechs were electrified by this wanton police violence, and the following days saw nonstop demonstrations by students, artists and finally most of the population, peaking at a rally in Letná (p131) that drew some 750,000 people. Leading dissidents, with Havel at the forefront, formed an anticommunist coalition, which negotiated the government's resignation on 3 December. A 'government of national understanding' was formed with the communists as a minority. Havel was elected president by the Federal Assembly on 29 December. These events later became known as the Velvet Revolution because of their nonviolent nature.

Almost immediately after the revolution, problems arose between Czechs and Slovaks. The Slovaks had for a long time harboured grievances against the dominant Czechs, and many Slovaks dreamed of having their own state. The Czech side was deeply divided: some wanted to keep Czechoslovakia intact while others were willing to see the economically weaker Slovaks go their own way.

14 August 2002

Several city districts and the metro tunnels are inundated as the flooded Vltava River reaches its highest level in modern times. The damages cost several billion euros and spark redevelopment in hard-hit areas.

1 May 2004

The Czech Republic achieves its biggest foreign policy objective since the Velvet Revolution and joins the EU, along with several other former communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe.

15 February 2008

By a narrow margin, the Czech parliament re-elects conservative economist Vaclav Klaus to his second five-year term as President of the Czech Republic.

On 1 January 1993, amid much hand-wringing on both sides – especially from Havel, who refused to preside over the splitting up of the country – the Czechs and Slovaks peacefully divided into independent states.

POST-'89 PRAGUE

It would be impossible to summarise in a few paragraphs the changes that have taken place in the 20 years since the Velvet Revolution. The big-picture view is largely positive, though. The Czech Republic achieved its two major long-term foreign policy goals, joining the NATO military alliance in 1999 and the EU in 2004.

When it comes to local politics, the country continues to ride a knife-edge. Neither major centrist party, the right-leaning Civic Democratic Party (ODS) or the left-leaning Social Democrats (ČSSD), has been able to cobble together a lasting consensus. In 2006, wrangling between the major parties left the country without a government for several months, leading local wags to declare the Czech Republic the world's largest nongovernmental organisation.

Havel finished 13 years as president in 2003 and was replaced by his rival, conservative Václav Klaus (formerly the prime minister). Klaus was re-elected to a second five-year term in 2008, though the president remains largely a figurehead.

In terms of the economy, Prague has prospered since the Velvet Revolution, becoming one of the biggest tourist draws on the continent. Unemployment is minimal, the shops are full and the façades that were crumbling a decade ago have been given facelifts.

It would be stretch, though, to say the economic transformation from communism to capitalism has gone off without a hitch. The complex process of selling off state-owned assets to private buyers was rife with corruption. And even now there's a lingering sense that wealth is concentrated in far too few hands and that while the communists may have lost the political game, they have prospered through their former positions and connections.

ARTS

Ask anyone outside the Czech Republic to name a famous Czech artist, musician or writer, and odds are he or she will come up with Alfons Mucha, Antonín Dvořák or Franz Kafka. But to the generation of Czechs that have grown up in the 20 years since the Velvet Revolution, these are names from the very distant past. Even relatively recent cultural icons like writers Milan Kundera or Ivan Klíma (both still alive and writing, by the way) seem out of touch with new realities. Václav Havel was only recently able to salvage his ageing reputation as a playwright with a hit play in 2008 – his first since 1989.

Enthused by romantic notions of the Czech National Revival, Art Nouveau or outdated notions of the noble dissident struggling against an oppressive communist regime, visitors to Prague all too often overlook the vibrant arts scene that has arisen here since 1989. Prague's major art galleries are complemented by dozens of small, independent and commercial galleries, where you can begin to appreciate the artistic energy that bubbles away beneath the city. And the many concert venues, jazz clubs and rock bars are fun, affordable and easily accessible.

MUSIC

Praguers have eclectic tastes, ranging from the ever-popular Mozart, who conducted the premier of *Don Giovanni* here in 1787, to Tom Waits, who sold out the Kongresové Centrum (Congress Centre) in a matter of hours for two concerts in July 2008.

The rock and pop scene has evolved greatly since 1989, when it was dominated by dissident-era rock bands and highly influential (but well past their prime) international acts like the Velvet Underground and the Rolling Stones. Those bands were soon drowned out by a flood of international acts and newer trends like electronic music, trance, techno, hip hop, rap, world and indie. One of the surprise bands to emerge in recent years has been Čechomor, which combines harmonies and Czech folk traditions in songs that are simple and yet hauntingly beautiful.

At the classical end of the musical spectrum, mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kožená (b 1973) is a leading light in the younger generation of opera singers. She has carved out a career as a major concert and recital artist – performing at the Salzburg, Glyndebourne and Edinburgh

festivals, among others – and has recorded best-selling albums of Mozart arias, French opera and Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.

Classical

Classical music is hugely popular in Prague, and not only with the crowds of international aficionados who flock to the Prague Spring and Prague Autumn festivals – the Czechs themselves have always been keen fans. Under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Czechs were always considered to have discriminating tastes and even embraced Mozart's music long before the composer achieved any measure of respect in Vienna.

Distinctly Czech classical music first blossomed in the mid-19th century, when the National Revival saw the emergence of several great composers, who drew inspiration for their work from traditional Czech folk music. Bedřich Smetana (1824–84) incorporated folk motifs into his classic compositions. His best known works are *Prodaná nevěsta* (The Bartered Bride), *Dalibor a Libuše* (Dalibor and Libuše) and the six-part symphonic poem *Má vlast* (My Homeland), which contains his most famous composition outside the Czech Republic, *Vltava* (The Moldau).

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) is the best-known Czech composer internationally. He spent four years in the US, where he lectured on music and composed his famous *Symphony No 9, From the New World*, a copy of which was taken to the moon by Neil Armstrong in 1969. Among his other well-known works are two *Slavonic Dances* (1878 and 1881), the operas *Rusalka* and *Čert a Kača* (The Devil and Kate) and his religious masterpiece *Stabat Mater* (a 13th-century Latin hymn; the title means 'The Mother was Standing').

Moravian-born Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) is widely considered the leading Czech composer of the early modern period, though he was never as popular as Smetana and Dvořák in his native country. His discordant violin pieces are hard to listen to at first but mellow with familiarity. His better-known compositions include the tricky-to-pronounce-fast *The Cunning Little Vixen* and *Káta Kabanová*, as well as the *Glagolská mše* (Glagolitic Mass) and *Taras Bulba*, based on Gogol's short story of the same name. Other well-known Czech composers include Josef Suk (1874–1935), Dvořák's son-in-law and author of the *Serenade for Strings* and the *Asrael Symphony*; and Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959), famed for his opera *Julietta* and his *Symphony No 6*.

Among contemporary composers, the most widely known is probably Milan Slavický (b 1947), who teaches at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts. His most famous piece, *Requiem*, premiered in Prague in 2005. Other modern composers worth looking out for include Petr Eben (1929–2007), a survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp during WWII who is known for his choral and organ music, and Marek Kopelent (b 1932), who made his name with avant-garde compositions in the 1950s and '60s.

Both locals and visitors can choose from a rich programme of concerts performed by Prague's three main resident orchestras: the [Prague Symphony Orchestra](#) (Symfonický orchestr hlavního města Prahy; www.fok.cz); the [Czech Philharmonic Orchestra](#) (Česka filharmonie; www.czechphilharmonic.cz); and the [Czech National Symphony Orchestra](#) (Český národní symfonický orchestr; www.cnso.cz).

Jazz

Jazz was already being played in Prague in the 1930s and retains a strong grip on the city. Czech musicians remained at the forefront of the European jazz scene until the communist takeover in 1948, when controls were imposed on performing and publishing jazz. Even so, in the late 1950s Prague Radio still had a permanent jazz orchestra, led by saxophonist Karel Krautgartner (1922–82).

Restrictions were gradually lifted in the 1960s. One of the top bands of this period was SH Quartet, which played for three years at Reduta, the city's first professional jazz club and still going strong (though no longer the centre of the jazz scene). Another leading band was Junior Trio, with Jan Hamr and brothers Miroslav and Allan Vitouš, all of whom left for the US after 1968. Hamr became prominent in American music circles as Jan Hammer and even composed the *Miami Vice* soundtrack (which sold some 4 million copies in the US alone).

Today, the scene is not quite as vibrant, but on any given night you can still catch a number of decent shows. One of the most outstanding musicians is Jiří Stivín, who produced two excellent

albums in the 1970s with the band System Tandem and is regarded as one of the most innovative jazz musicians in Europe. Two others to watch for are Emil Viklický and Milan Svoboda.

Rock & Pop

The rock scene in Prague today is deeply divided into genres and subgenres, each with its own distinct fan base, groups and clubs. Electronic music, including techno and drum 'n' bass, is standard fare in many dance clubs. Other popular styles include indie rock (a catch-all for bands who don't fit a label), classic rock, revival, pop, folk rock, and even a budding Czech hip-hop scene.

Rock, in the form of American-style rock 'n' roll, took the country by storm in the 1950s. It was officially frowned upon but more or less tolerated. Even today, Czechs retain a fondness for '50s rockers like Elvis, Chuck Berry and Little Richard, and Czechs of all ages can still cut a rug much more skilfully than their American or Western European counterparts. Czech dancers like Roman Kolb regularly win world rock 'n' roll dance championships.

Popular music blossomed during the political thaw of the mid-1960s and Western influences from acts like the Beatles, Beach Boys and Rolling Stones were strongly felt. The 1967 hit single 'Želva' (Turtle) by the band Olympic bears the unmistakable traces of mid-decade Beatles. One of the biggest stars of that time was pop singer Marta Kubišová (b 1942). Banned by the communists for two decades after the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, she still occasionally performs in Prague; for many Czechs, her voice still captures something of the ill-fated optimism of the '68 period.

The 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion silenced the rock revolution. Many bands were prohibited from openly performing or recording. In their place, the authorities encouraged singers like Helena Vondráčková (b 1947) and Karel Gott (b 1939), who admittedly had beautiful voices but whose recordings lacked any originality. Many popular songs from those days, like Gott's classic 'Je jaka je' (She Is as She Is), are simply Czech covers of the most innocuous Western music of the day (in this case the Italian song 'Serenò'). Vondráčková and Gott are still recording and remain highly popular. Most Czechs by now have forgiven them their collaboration during the 1970s and '80s, and their songs today invoke powerful feelings of nostalgia for what many now see as a simpler time.

Rock became heavily politicised during the 1980s and the run-up to the Velvet Revolution. Even the 'Velvet' part of the name owes a partial debt to rock music, in this case the American band the Velvet Underground, one of Havel's favourites and a strong influence on underground Czech bands at the time. Hardcore experimental bands like the Plastic People of the Universe were forced underground and developed huge cult followings. Another banned performer, Karel Kryl (1944–94), became an unofficial bard of the people, singing from his West German exile. His album *Bratříčku, Zavírej Vrátku* (O Brother, Shut the Door) came to symbolise the hopelessness that the Czechs felt during the Soviet invasion and the decades that followed.

The Velvet Revolution opened the door to a flood of influences from around the world. In the early days of Havel's presidency, rock icons who had inspired the revolution, like Frank Zappa, Mick Jagger and Lou Reed, were frequent visitors to the castle. Zappa was even referred to as the unofficial 'Culture Minister'. Early '90s Czech bands like rockers Lucie and Žlutý Pes soon gave way to a variety of sounds from the Nina Hagen-like screeching of early Lucie Bílá to the avant-garde chirping of Iva Bittová, in addition to a flood of mainstream Czech acts. The best of these included Psí Vojáci, Buty, Laura a Její Tygři, Už Jsme Doma, Support Lesbiens, and many more. Currently two of the most popular acts include hard rockers Kabát and the softer folk band Čechomor.

Prague has also become a more important concert venue for touring Western acts. In the first years after the Velvet Revolution, big names were few and far between, but did include the Rolling Stones (on several occasions), Pink Floyd, REM, U2, Bruce Springsteen and Guns N' Roses. Axl Rose legendarily opened his 1992 concert at Strahov stadium with the words, 'OK, you ex-commie bastards, it's time to rock and roll!' In recent years, everybody from Madonna to Green Day to Tom Waits has paid a visit, and every summer seems to bring a richer concert schedule.

LITERATURE

There's no shortage of new Czech literary talent. Names like Jáchym Topol, Petra Hůlová, Michal Viewegh, Magdaléna Platzová, Emil Hakl, Miloš Urban and Hana Androniková are already taking their places among the country's leading authors. They are pushing out the old-guard figures like Milan Kundera and Ivan Klíma, who are now seen as chroniclers of a very different age.

Increasingly, though, younger writers are looking outside the Czech Republic for themes and ideas. In the past, writers like Kundera or Klíma could ruminate for whole books on a character's internal motivations, but many newer writers are setting their novels further afield to win over readers hungry for adventure. One of the best recent titles, Hůlová's *Paměť mojí babičce* (Memories of My Grandmother; 2002), is set in Mongolia and tells of three generations of Mongolian women. Similarly, Platzová's *Sul, ovce a kamení* (Salt, Sheep and Stones; 2003) alternates between the Czech Republic and the Dalmatian coast. Another younger writer, Iva Pekárková, seems at home anywhere except the Czech Republic, placing stories in locations like New York, Thailand and India (see the boxed text, p37).

The bad news for English readers is that, with notable exceptions like Pekárková's *Truck Stop Rainbows*, Topol's stream-of-consciousness epic *City Sister Silver*, two titles by Michal

THE EXPAT CONTRIBUTION

Expat writers have had it rough in Prague. It's hard enough to be a successful writer, but thanks to the late American editor Alan Levy, expat scribes in Prague have laboured under almost unbearable levels of expectation. It was Levy who, writing in the first issue of the *Prague Post* in October 1991, coined the phrase that Prague was the 'Left Bank of the '90s'. He went on to write that future Isherwoods and Audens were already hard at work chronicling the course.

Yeah, right. In the first decade after Levy's pronouncement, it was easy enough to dismiss it as self-serving hype. It's true that Prague at the time was crawling with wannabe writers, but the actual combined published opus was thin indeed. With 20 years' hindsight, though, it's now possible to say the critics were maybe too quick to pounce. The Prague expat pond has actually spawned more than its fair share of decent writers. A partial list would include the following:

- Gary Shteyngart, a student at Charles University in the early 1990s and author of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2003) and *Absurdistan* (2006), the former set partially in Prague in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution.
- Jonathan Ledgard, a long-time Prague correspondent for *The Economist*, is the author of the acclaimed novel *Giraffe* (2006), based on the story of the slaughter of Central Europe's largest giraffe herd by the Czechoslovak secret police in 1975.
- Maarten Troost was a reporter in the early days of the *Prague Post* and the subsequent author of two hilarious titles: *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* (2004) and *Getting Stoned with the Savages* (2006) – books that could have been written about Prague but are actually about his later adventures in the South Pacific.
- Olen Steinhauer spent time here in the mid-'90s before decamping to Budapest to write five acclaimed Cold War spy thrillers. The fourth book, *Liberation Movements* (2006), opens in the Czech Republic, and shades of Prague can be seen throughout the series.
- Robert Eversz has lived off and on in Prague since 1992, and his 1998 novel *Gypsy Hearts* is set here. He's written several popular noir thrillers, including *Shooting Elvis* (1997), which explores America's obsession with celebrity culture.
- Arthur Phillips apparently never lived in Prague but still managed to write the best-known expat novel to come out of Eastern Europe, called simply *Prague* (2002) – though confusingly set in Budapest. Phillips does have a legit Prague connection, though: his short story 'Wenceslas Square' was printed in the 2003 anthology *Wild East: Stories from the Last Frontier*.

No discussion of expats would be complete without mentioning the growing genre of 'I Lived Here and This Is How It Was' books. Gene Deitch's *For the Love of Prague* is one of the most enjoyable. Deitch is a former Hollywood animator who moved to Prague in the late 1950s and worked on cartoons like *Tom and Jerry*, *Popeye* and *Krazy Kat* from behind the Iron Curtain. Douglas Lytle's *Pink Tanks and Velvet Hangovers* was written not long after the expat 'Golden Age' (from 1991 to 1995) and recounts the major events of the day filtered through the eyes of a young American journalist. One of the newest entries in the genre is Rachael Weiss's wide-eyed *Me, Myself and Prague*, the well-crafted story of an Australian woman who leaves the modern comforts of Sydney in 2005 to move to cold and cranky Prague. Not to spoil the ending, but she winds up loving it.

BOOKS FOR YOUR BACKPACK

Not much new Czech literature is available in translation, but there are still plenty of decent Czech writers available in English. Some of the best titles:

- *Bringing Up Girls in Bohemia* (Michal Viewegh, 1996) – Humorously captures the early years of newly capitalist Prague. The movie of the same name stars Czech actress Anna Geislerová and opens with Geislerová relaxing at the old Globe Bookstore & Coffeehouse in Holešovice – a classic intersection of art and real life.
- *Closely Watched Trains* (Bohumil Hrabal, 1965) – Hrabal's novella tells the story of a young man coming of age at a railway station during WWII. The screen adaptation won the Oscar for best foreign film in 1967.
- *City Sister Silver* (Jáchym Topol, 1994) – Translator Alex Zucker modestly describes this rambling, words-on-speed novel as 'the story of a young man trying to find his way in the messy landscape of post-communist Czechoslovakia'. Dense, deeply meaningful, and probably hard as hell to translate.
- *Daylight in the Nightclub Inferno* (edited by Elena Lappin, 1997) – Decent anthology of the best young Czech writers working in the years immediately after the Velvet Revolution. Includes selections from Jáchym Topol, Michal Viewegh, Daniela Fischerová and Michal Ajvaz, among others.
- *I Served the King of England* (Bohumil Hrabal, 1990) – Czechoslovakia's tortured history provided fodder for some brilliantly funny novels in Hrabal's capable hands. In this one, a vertically challenged waiter named Ditie rises, Švejk-like, to wealth and prominence under the German occupation, only to lose it all after the war.
- *Life with a Star* (Jiří Weil, 1949) – Jewish writer Weil survived the Nazi occupation by faking his own death and hiding out for the duration of the war. This highly moving account from that period tells the story of an ordinary bank clerk whose life is turned upside down when he's forced to wear the yellow star.
- *Mendelssohn is on the Roof* (Jiří Weil, 1960) – This classic from the Nazi occupation opens with an absurd account of SS workers ordered to remove a statue of the 'Jew composer' Mendelssohn from the Rudolfinum's roof. They can't figure out which one is him, so they pull down the statue with the biggest nose – which turns out to be Richard Wagner!
- *My Merry Mornings* (Ivan Klíma, 1986) – Klíma is a quietly powerful writer with an impressive collection of books from both the pre- and post-1989 period. Collections like *My Merry Mornings* or *My First Loves* capture the kind of quirky magic the city had before it was inundated with 'Prague Drinking Team' T-shirts.
- *Prague: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (edited by Paul Wilson, 1994) – Indispensable collection of excerpts and short stories from a range of Czech writers through the ages and conveniently organised according to districts of the city.
- *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (Milan Kundera, 1979) – Kundera wrote this poignant and very funny collection of thematically related short stories from his Paris exile in the 1970s. It immediately established his reputation as Central Europe's leading writer.
- *The Castle* (Franz Kafka, 1926) – Though Kafka was a quintessential Prague writer, very few of his books actually mention the city by name. *The Castle* is no exception. Poor K never makes it inside, and the novel ends 280 pages later in midsentence. A work of genius or simply frustrating? You decide.
- *The Good Soldier Švejk* (Jaroslav Hašek, 1923) – Hašek's WWI novel about an amiable Czech oaf who manages to avoid military service has fallen out of favour – Czechs resent the portrayal and foreigners don't get the humour. Still, for anyone with a fondness for the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, it's a must-read.
- *The Joke* (Milan Kundera, 1967) – Kundera's first novel was published in Czechoslovakia in 1967 in the brief thaw that preceded the Soviet invasion. It's a tragicomic love story of what happens when a spurned lover sends a dumb joke to his ideologically blinded girlfriend.
- *The Trial* (Franz Kafka, 1925) – 'Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K, for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.' Kafka wrote these words in 1914, but they were eerily prophetic of the arrests of Czechs and Jews to come during WWII or of communist show trials after the war.
- *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Milan Kundera, 1984) – Kundera's best-known novel because of the 1988 movie starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Juliette Binoche. The novel's elixir of Prague during the 1968 invasion and a highly likeable womanising character named Tomáš combined to cement Kundera's genius rep in the 1980s. It's still highly readable.

Viewegh and a couple of anthologies, not much new literature has been published in English. Excerpts of Topol's second book, *Anděl* (Angel Station), can be found on the internet (www.postroadmag.com), but his third book, *Nemůžu se zastavit* (I Can't Stop), is unlikely to appear in English anytime soon.

It's not clear why international publishers are shunning new Czech literature. Maybe it's the fact that much of it isn't so different from modern literature anywhere else in the world.

Or maybe they feel that with communism out of the way, Czech literature lacks a big theme to define itself against. Whatever the reason, for the moment at least, non-Czech speakers will have to content themselves with classics from the communist era and earlier. Fortunately, these are still widely available and have held up remarkably well.

Kundera remains the undisputed champ of Czech literature and was even – grudgingly – awarded the Czech state prize for literature in 2007 for a new translation of his classic *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The word ‘grudgingly’ is in order because Czechs, perhaps unfairly, have never forgiven him for leaving his homeland in the mid-’70s just as they were suffering under the Russian occupation. For visitors to Prague, this book, along with *The Joke* and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, remains the most rewarding (see the boxed text, [opposite](#), for recommended titles). Kundera’s later works, including 2007’s *The Curtain*, tend toward drier, more clinical divinations of the novel and are best left to hardcore fans and grad students.

Other giants who came of age during the period from the Soviet-led invasion in 1968 to the Velvet Revolution include Ivan Klíma, Bohumil Hrabal, Josef Škvorecký and Václav Havel (as an essayist and playwright; see the boxed text, [p28](#)). Klíma, who survived the Terezin camp as a child and who still lives in Prague, is probably best known for his collections of bittersweet short stories of life in Prague in the 1970s and ’80s like *My First Loves* and *My Merry Mornings*. He also wrote a series of very good novels after 1989 exploring the conflicting moral climate of post-Velvet Prague, including *Waiting for the Dark*, *Waiting for the Light* and *No Saints or Angels*.

Ask any Czech who their favourite author is: chances are the answer will be Bohumil Hrabal, and it’s not hard to see why. Hrabal’s writing captures what Czechs like best about their society and culture, including a keen wit, a sense of the absurd and a fondness for beer. He’s also a great storyteller, and novels like *I Served the King of England* (which was made into a movie in 2006) and *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still* are both entertaining and insightful. Hrabal died in 1997 in classic Czech fashion – by falling from a window.

Josef Škvorecký emigrated to Canada shortly after the 1968 invasion and, like Kundera, his writing is dominated by themes of exile and memory. Look for *The Cowards*, *The Swell Season* and *The Engineer of Human Souls*.

No discussion of Czech literature would be complete without Franz Kafka, easily the best-known writer to have ever lived in Prague and author of the modern classics *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Though Kafka was German-speaking and Jewish, he’s as thoroughly connected to the city as any Czech writer could be. Kafka was born just a stone’s throw from the Old Town Square and rarely strayed more than a couple of hundred metres in any direction during the course of his short life (see the boxed text, [p83](#)). The Nazi occupation 15 years later wiped out any vestiges of Kafka’s circle of German writers, which included his friend and publicist Max Brod and journalist Egon Erwin Kisch.

Kafka’s Czech contemporary and easily his polar opposite was the pub scribe Jaroslav Hašek, author of the – in equal measures – loved and reviled *The Good Soldier Švejk*. For those who get the jokes, the book is a comic masterpiece of a bumbling, good-natured Czech named Švejk and his (intentional or not) efforts to avoid military service for Austria–Hungary during WWI. Czechs tend to bridle at the assertion that an idiot like Švejk could somehow embody any national characteristic. Admirers of the book, on the other hand, feel in this instance that perhaps the Czechs doth protest too much.

The Czech language is highly inflected, giving grammatically gifted writers ample ammo to build layers of meaning simply by playing with tenses and endings. The undisputed master of this is the interwar writer Karel Čapek, an essayist and author of several novels, including the science fiction *RUR (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*, from where the English word ‘robot’ (from the Czech for ‘labour’) derives.

Czech contributions to literature are not limited to fiction. Czech poet Jaroslav Seifert (1901–86) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1984. The American publisher Catbird Press has come out with an excellent collection of his work in English, *The Poetry of Jaroslav Seifert*. The irony is that Seifert is not universally considered by Czechs to be their best poet. Depending on whom you ask, that distinction often belongs to poet-scientist Miroslav Holub (1923–98).

VISUAL ARTS

Ask about visual arts in Prague and many visitors will probably draw a blank, perhaps conjuring up some Art Nouveau images by Alfons Mucha (see the boxed text, p40). But the city has much more to offer than Mucha's sultry maidens. Prague has both a long tradition of avant-garde photography and a rich heritage of public sculpture, ranging from the baroque period to the present day. There is always something new and fascinating to see at the Veletržní Palace or in one of the private galleries around town.

Photography

Czech photographers have always been at the forefront of the medium. The earliest photographers, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, worked in the pictorialist style, which viewed photography as a kind of extension of painting. Photographers were encouraged to use various shooting and printing techniques to introduce imprecision, much like an Impressionist painting.

It was after independence in 1918 and during the 1920s and '30s that early modern styles captured the Czech imagination. Local photographers seized on trends like Cubism, functionalism, Dadaism and Surrealism, turning out jarring abstracts that still look fresh today. Two of the best photographers from that time are František Drtikol and Jaroslav Rössler. Drtikol was a society portraitist who mainly shot nudes poised against dramatic, angular backdrops. Rössler spent several years in Paris, refining a style of powerful abstract imagery that draws on constructivist trends.

During communism photography was enlisted in the service of promoting the workers' state. Picture books from that time are comically filled with images of tractors, factories and housing projects. Serious photographers turned inward and intentionally chose subjects – like landscapes and still lifes – that were, at least superficially, devoid of political content.

Arguably the best Czech photographer from this period was Josef Sudek. During a career that spanned five decades until his death in the mid-'70s, Sudek turned his lens on the city of Prague to absolutely stunning effect. Sudek exhibitions are relatively rare, but collections of his photography are widely available at antiquarian bookshops around town.

Current Czech bad-boy photographer Jan Saudek (b 1935) continues to delight his fans (or appal his critics) with his dreamlike, hand-tinted prints that evoke images of utopia or dystopia – usually involving a nude or seminude woman or child. Saudek is unquestionably the best-known contemporary Czech photographer and his works are frequently on display, but the jury is still out on whether the pictures – especially those involving kids – don't transgress the boundaries.

Sculpture

Public sculpture has always played a prominent role in Prague, from the baroque saints that line the parapets of Charles Bridge to the monumental statue of Stalin that once faced the Old Town from atop Letná Hill (see the boxed texts, p80 and p93). More often than not, that role has been a political one.

In the baroque era, religious sculptures sprouted in public places; they included 'Marian columns' erected in gratitude to the Virgin Mary for protection against the plague or victory over anti-Catholic enemies. One such Marian column stood in Old Town Square from 1650 until 1918. The placing of the statue of St John of Nepomuk on Charles Bridge in 1683 was a conscious act of propaganda designed to create a new – and Catholic – Czech national hero who would displace the Protestant reformer Jan Hus. As such it was successful. John of Nepomuk was canonised in 1729, and the Nepomuk legend, invented by the Jesuits, has passed into the collective memory.

The period of the Czech National Revival saw Prague sculpture take a different tack: to raise public awareness of Czech traditions and culture. One of the most prolific sculptors of this period was Josef Václav Myslbek, whose famous statue of St Wenceslas, the Czech patron saint, dominates the upper end of Wenceslas Square (p105). He also created the four huge statues of the historic Czech characters Libuše, Přemysl, Šárka and Ctirad that grace the gardens in Vyšehrad fortress (p115).

CZECH RENEGADE WRITER IVA PEKÁRKOVÁ

Iva Pekářková (b 1963) is part of a generation of Czech writers who came of age as communism was ending but who had no intention of sticking around to see how it turned out. She left the country in 1985, spending some time in a refugee camp in Austria before finally winding up on the mean streets of New York, where she drove a cab. Placing her stories in settings as far away as India, Nigeria and Thailand, she projects strong female characters and draws energy from the clash of cultures. Her books include, in English, *Truck Stop Rainbows* (1992) and *Gimme the Money* (1996). She's won praise internationally for her tough subjects, but gets tweaked occasionally by Czech critics as not being 'Czech' enough. We caught up with Iva in London, where she lives these days, driving a cab and contemplating her next move.

So what are you working on? I've been living in London for two years now driving a minicab. (I just started a blog about it: <http://pekarkova.blog.idnes.cz>.) Meanwhile, I am getting ready to write a book about a phenomenon that's only come into focus the past few years: namely, the twisted relationships between older, and even very old, white women and young black men from Africa. If I do it right, it should be funny. I've just published a collection of short stories from London called *Love in London* (Láska v Londýně).

One might say Czech writers, these days, are grasping for original themes. Would you agree? The book business is actually exploding, with something like 50 to 80 new titles hitting the shelves each week. But booksellers and distributors haven't learned to distinguish between shit-lit and actual literature. No wonder readers get discouraged. When it comes to themes, I think it was Czech author Zuzana Brabcová who said, 10 years ago, [that] 'there were no stories in the Czech Republic'. I've taken a softer approach. I do believe there are stories, but they all seem to me to be recycled. All of the phenomena the Velvet Revolution brought and which Jáchym Topol calls 'the explosion of time' in his novel *City Sister Silver* – namely, chain stores, fashions, music, drugs and feminism – have been in the world for a long time, though they're still relatively new to us. They can be 'discovered' only within the context of the Czech Republic, and good writers always want to be discoverers. No wonder they are frustrated.

What's your favourite Czech book published in the past five years? That's tough. I like *Fříša* by journalist Petra Procházková, set in Afghanistan, Petra Hůlová's *Paměť moji babičce*, set in Mongolia, and, thank god, one set in the Czech Republic: *Svatava Antošová's Dáma a švihadlo*, a tough, poetic, self-described 'killer-novel'.

Do you have a favourite author? I'm afraid it's still Bohumil Hrabal, though he's been dead a long time. Only a genius could squeeze wonderful and eventful stories out of a sleepy little village like Kersko.

Are there any new talents on the horizon? Petra Hůlová, though she's already been around a while.

The Art Nouveau sculptor Ladislav Šaloun was responsible for one of Prague's most iconic sculptures, the monument to Jan Hus that was unveiled in the Old Town Square (p87) in 1915 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Hus being burned at the stake. The figure of Hus – standing firm and unmoving, while the events of history swirl around him – symbolised the Czech nation, which, three years later, would be fully independent for the first time in history. For three short years Hus stared across the square at the statue of the Virgin Mary – symbol of the Habsburg victory over the Czechs – until a mob toppled her soon after independence was declared in 1918. Šaloun's works also grace the façade of the Municipal House (p99), the Grand Hotel Evropa (see the boxed text, p112) and Prague City Hall (one block west of the Old Town Square on Mariánské náměstí). He created the bust of Antonín Dvořák that adorns the composer's tomb in Vyšehrad cemetery (p117).

Probably the most imposing and visible sculpture in Prague is the huge, mounted figure of Hussite hero Jan Žižka – reputedly the biggest equestrian statue in the world – that dominates the skyline above Žižkov, the city district named after him. Created by sculptor Bohumil Kafka (no relation to writer Franz) in 1950, it was originally intended to form part of the National Monument (p125) in memory of the Czechoslovak legions who had fought in WWI. It was instead hijacked by the communist government and made to serve as a political symbol of Czech workers and peasants.

The city's long tradition of politically charged sculpture continues today with the controversial and often wryly amusing works of David Černý (see the boxed texts, p39 and p137).

Painting

The luminously realistic 14th-century paintings of Magister Theodoricus, whose work hangs in the Chapel of the Holy Cross at Karlštejn Castle (p230) and in the Chapel of St Wenceslas in St Vitus Cathedral (p64), influenced art throughout Central Europe.

Another gem of Czech Gothic art is a late-14th-century altar panel by an artist known only as the Master of the Třeboň Altar; what remains of it is at the Convent of St Agnes (p95) in Prague's Old Town.

The Czech National Revival in the late 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the revival of a Czech style of realism, in particular by Mikuláš Aleš and father and son Antonín and Josef Mánes. Alfons Mucha is well known for his late-19th- and early-20th-century Art Nouveau posters, paintings and stained glass (see the boxed text, p104). Czech landscape painting developed in the works of Adolf Kosárek, followed by a wave of Impressionism and Symbolism in the hands of Antonín Slaviček, Max Švabinský and others.

In the early 20th century, Prague developed as a centre of avant-garde art, concentrated in a group of artists called Osma (the Eight). Prague was also a focus for Cubist painters, including Josef Čapek and the aptly named Bohumil Kubišta. The functionalist movement flourished between WWI and WWII in a group called Devětsil, led by the critic and editor Karel Teige. Surrealists followed, including Zdeněk Rykr and Josef Šima.

Visual arts were driven underground during the Nazi occupation, and in the early years of the communist period painters were forced to work in the official Socialist Realist style, usually

ART TALK WITH GALLERY OWNER CAMILLE HUNT

Long-time expats and Prague residents French-Canadian Camille Hunt and Czech-American Katherine Kastner opened Hunt Kastner Artworks in 2005 after seeing a gap for a gallery focused on contemporary art and a growing need for professional representation of young Czech artists abroad. Camille filled us in on the contemporary art scene over lunch at Fraktal (p187), a couple of blocks from her gallery, found in an up-and-coming residential neighbourhood behind Letná Park.

What do you see as some of the main trends in Czech art? Do artists follow international fashions or are there also local developments? Generally, Czech art follows international trends. The art world has become a global village and influences are broadly shared. One local development we see in younger artists is mixing art with social activism. The 'Ladví' group of artists, for example, makes art by doing things like planting trees and fixing broken glass in the housing projects near Ladví in Prague 8 (www.ladviweb.ic.cz).

Who are some of the most exciting names in Czech art today? I would say Josef Bolf, a painter with strong, affective imagery about innocence and violence; Kryštof Kintera, who does sculpture and installation work on consumer society that forces us to reconsider our relation to everyday objects; and the Guma Guar artists' collective, who do political art, criticising the powers-that-be but with humour – always a good thing!

What's it like to run a gallery in Prague? What are some of the problems? It's great fun, and the public's reception has been gratifying. It's also challenging, as there isn't yet a developed market in this country for contemporary art. Most local collectors are focused on modern, not contemporary, art. Also, there are only a limited number of collectors interested in younger artists, and they're not used to buying through galleries. This is one of the reasons it's essential we participate in international art fairs.

What about prices? Are there any bargains to be had? Unfortunately, prices for contemporary art are not any lower here than anywhere else, especially as the Czech crown has been so strong.

Aside from your gallery, where are some good places to see contemporary art? The best galleries around town include Jiří Švestka (Map p106; Biskupský dvůr 6, Nové Město); the Rudolfinum (p97); Tranzit/Display (Map pp108–9; Dittrichova 9, Nové Město); NoD (Map pp88–9; Dlouhá 33, Staré Město); and Karlín Studios (Map pp126–7; Křižkova 34, Karlín).

You can see more contemporary Czech art at [Hunt Kastner Artworks](#) (Map pp132–3; ☎ 603 525 294; www.huntkastner.com; Kamenická 22, Letná; 🕒 1–6pm Tue–Fri, 2–6pm Sat or by appt; 📍 1, 8, 15, 25, 26 to Kamenická).

DAVID ČERNÝ: ARTIST-PROVOCATEUR

Czech artist David Černý (b 1967) first made international headlines in 1991 when he painted Prague's memorial to the WWII Soviet tank crews bright pink (see the boxed text, p93). Since then he has cultivated a reputation as the *enfant terrible* of the Prague art scene – his works often turn into major media events, occasionally with police involved. Like others of his generation, he is virulently anticommunist. When the Rolling Stones played Prague in 2003, Keith Richards wore a Černý-designed T-shirt with the words 'Fuck the KSČM' (the initials of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia).

Since the 'Pink Tank' episode, Černý has become internationally famous. He lived for a time in the US, and his art has been exhibited in New York, Chicago, Dresden, Berlin, Stockholm and London, among other places. Many of his works are on display in Prague (see the boxed text, p137).

He's also heavily involved in promoting cross-cultural links with artists abroad through his sprawling 'Meet Factory' (p137) artist-in-residency project in Smíchov. You can find more details on Černý's work and the Meet Factory on his website at www.davidcerny.cz.

depicting workers and peasants building the workers' state. Underground painters included Míkuláš Medek (whose abstract, Surrealist art was exhibited in out-of-the-way galleries) and Jiří Kolář, an outstanding graphic artist and poet whose name when pronounced sounds something like 'collage' – one of his favourite art forms.

CINEMA

For a small country with a minuscule box office, the Czech Republic has an active film industry, producing 15 to 20 features a year. Nearly all features receive some monetary support from the state and sponsors such as Czech TV, but it helps that Czechs are avid moviegoers. Hollywood films account for the majority of movie receipts, but Czech features still bring in around a quarter of the total box office.

Czechs were some of the earliest pioneers in movie-making, with the first Czech films – silent, American-style slapstick comedies – arriving at the end of the 19th century. Movie-making really took off during the interwar First Republic. American westerns were highly popular and even responsible for kicking off a Czech obsession with living in nature and the 'Wild West' that endures to this day. The first film ever to show full-frontal nudity was Gustav Machatý's *Exstace* (Ecstasy; 1932). Revealing it all was one Hedvige Kiesler, who went on to later stardom in Hollywood as Hedy Lamarr.

American films retained their popularity until the US entered WWII at the end of 1941 and the Nazis banned them. Even during the difficult years of the war, Czechs continued to go to the cinema, substituting American dramas and comedies with German ones. The communist coup in 1948 shifted the focus of movie-making from entertainment to education, and films were placed in the service of the state to foster the class consciousness of the workers. The result was predictable mediocrity that didn't end until the political thaw of the 1960s, when a younger generation from the Prague film academy, FAMU, crafted tragicomic films that slyly criticised the communists and garnered rave reviews around the world.

These 'New Wave' films, as they became known, took the world by storm. Czechoslovak films won the Oscar for Best Foreign Film twice in the 1960s, for Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos' *Little Shop on Main Street* (Obchod na korze) in 1965 and Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* (Ostre sledované vlaky) in 1967. Miloš Forman was the acknowledged master of the New Wave, kicking off with the spare but absorbing *Black Peter* (Černý Petr) in 1963, and then creating classics like *Loves of a Blonde* (Lásky jedné plavovlásky; 1966) – which was nominated for an Oscar but didn't win – and *The Fireman's Ball* (Hoří, má panenko; 1967) before moving to the US after the Warsaw Pact invasion. Forman went on to win Oscars for Best Picture for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Amadeus*. Other prominent directors to emerge during the Czech New Wave included Ivan Passer, Věra Chytilová and Jan Němec, among others. Many of these directors' films are now available on DVD.

Since the Velvet Revolution, Czech directors have struggled to make meaningful films, given their tiny budgets and a constant flood of movies from the US. At the same time, they've had to endure nearly nonstop critical demands that their output meet the high standards for Czech

THE UNDERAPPRECIATED ALFONS MUCHA

Alfons Mucha (1860–1939) is probably the most famous visual artist to come out of the Czech lands, though his reputation within the Czech Republic is less exalted than it is abroad.

Mucha's life and career changed almost overnight after a chance meeting in a print shop led him to design a poster for famous actress Sarah Bernhardt, promoting her new play *Giselda*; you can see the original lithograph in the Mucha Museum (p104). The poster, with its tall, narrow format, muted colours, rich decoration and sensual beauty, created a sensation.

Mucha quickly became the most talked about artist in Paris. He signed a six-year contract with Bernhardt during which he created nine superb posters in what became known as *le style Mucha*. He also designed jewellery, costumes and stage sets, and went on to produce many more posters promoting, among other things, Job cigarette papers, Moët & Chandon champagne and tourism in Monaco and Monte Carlo.

Although firmly associated with Art Nouveau, Mucha himself claimed he did not belong to any one artistic movement, and saw his work as part of a natural evolution of Czech art. His commitment to the culture and tradition of his native land was expressed in the second half of his career, when he worked on the decoration of the Lord Mayor's Hall in Prague's Municipal House (p99), designed new stamps and banknotes and created a superb stained-glass window for St Vitus Cathedral (p64).

He devoted 18 years of his life (1910–28) to creating his *Slovanské epeje* (Slavic Epic), which he later donated to the Czech nation. The 20 monumental canvasses encompass a total area of around 0.5 sq km and depict events from Slavic history and myth. Although very different in style from his Paris posters, they retain the same mythic, romanticised quality, full of wild-eyed priests, medieval pageantry and battlefield carnage, all rendered in symbolic tints. In the artist's own words, 'black is the colour of bondage; blue is the past; yellow, the joyous present; orange, the glorious future'. (The *Slavic Epic* is on display in the town of Moravský Krumlov, near Brno, about 200km southeast of Prague.)

When the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939, Mucha was one of the first to be arrested by the Gestapo. He was released but died a few days later, shortly before his 79th birthday. He is buried in the Slavín at Vyšehrad Cemetery (p117).

Mucha's granddaughter, Jarmila Plocková, uses elements of his paintings in her own works. Those interested can check out Art Décoratif (p146).

films set during the 1960s. Given the high expectations, the newer Czech directors have largely succeeded, settling for smaller, ensemble-driven films that focus on the hardships and moral ambiguities of life in a society rapidly transiting from communism to capitalism. If the Czech New Wave was mostly about making light of a bad situation, it wouldn't be a stretch to say today's films strive to make bad out of a comparatively light situation.

Films like David Ondříček's *Loners* (Samotáři), Jan Hřebejk's *Up and Down* (Horem pádem), Sasha Gedeon's *Return of the Idiot* (Návrat idiota), Bohdan Sláma's *Something Like Happiness* (Štěstí) and Petr Zelenka's *Wrong Way Up* (Příběhy obyčejného šílenství) are all very different, yet each explores the same familiar dark terrain of money, marital problems and shifting moral sands. Running against this grain has been director Jan Svěrák, who continues to make big-budget films that have attracted more international attention; he even took home the country's first Oscar since the 1960s, for the film *Kolja* in 1996.

In addition to Czech films, the country has managed to position itself as a lower-cost production centre for Hollywood films. Part of the pitch has been the excellent production facilities at Barrandov Studios, to the south of Smíchov. The effort has paid off, and dozens of big budget films – including *Mission: Impossible*, the James Bond film *Casino Royale* and the first two *Chronicles of Narnia* movies – have all been filmed here. Whether Prague can continue to lure big-time productions remains in doubt, however, as the Czech crown has appreciated and cheaper facilities in Hungary and Romania have opened up.

Animation and Fantasy

It's not surprising for a country with such a long tradition of puppetry that Czechs would also excel at animation. The centre for much of this activity was Prague's famed Krátký Film studios.

Czechs are especially well known in Central and Eastern Europe for animated films and shorts aimed at kids; the most popular character is doubtless 'Krtek', the little mole, created by animator Zdeněk Miler in the 1950s. You'll recognise Krtek puppets in shops by his big white eyes, red

nose, and three strands of hair on his head. Krtek has starred in dozens of films over the years, starting with the 1957 classic *How the Mole Got His Trousers* (Jak krtek ke kalhotkám přišel).

Czech painter and illustrator Jiří Trnka won worldwide recognition for his evocative puppet animation films, beginning in 1946 with *The Czech Year* and continuing until his death in 1969. His best works include a parody of American westerns called *Song of the Prairie*, *The Emperor's Nightingale* (narrated by Boris Karloff in a 1951 American version), *The Good Soldier Švejk* and, finally, 1965's *The Hand* – a highly politicised work illustrating the struggle of the artist against totalitarian authority, portrayed by a simple, white-gloved hand. That film was initially tolerated by the government but banned from theatres shortly after Trnka's death. It wasn't rereleased until after 1989.

Czech Jan Švankmajer is celebrated for his bizarre, surrealist animation work and stop-motion feature films, including his 1988 version of *Alice in Wonderland*, called *Alice* (Něco z Alenky), and the 1994 classic, *Faust* (Lekce Faust). His 1996 *Conspirators of Pleasure* (Spiklenci slasti) is an over-the-top take on fetishism and self-gratification. There's no dialogue, making it accessible (if that's the right word) in any language.

THEATRE

Theatre in Prague remains a popular and vital art form, in spite of rising competition from the internet, film and TV. Openings for key performances, such as Tom Stoppard's riveting play *Rock 'n' Roll* at the National Theatre (Národní divadlo; p201) in 2007 or Václav Havel's acclaimed *Odházení* (Leaving) at Divadlo Archa in 2008, are often sold out months in advance and duly debated in the papers and by the public for weeks after.

In addition to the main venues, including the National Theatre and the Estates Theatre (Stavovské divadlo; p199), there are dozens of smaller theatres scattered around the centre and in nearly every one of the city's neighbourhoods and districts. Unfortunately for non-Czech speakers, much of the action remains inaccessible. Occasionally, big theatrical events will be subtitled in English, but the bread and butter of Czech drama is performed in Czech only. Two theatres, Archa and the Švandovo divadlo in Smíchov (p203), are committed to English-friendly performances and occasionally host English drama in the original language. Additionally, the annual Fringe Festival, held at the end of May and early June, brings a week of nonstop drama, comedy and sketch performances, much of it in English.

Theatre has always played a strong role in the Czechs' national consciousness, both as a way of promoting linguistic development and defending the fledgling culture against the dominant Habsburg, German and, later, communist influences. Czech-language (as opposed to German) drama found an early home in the late 18th century at the Nostitz Theatre, now the Estates Theatre. Historical plays with a nationalist subtext flourished during the 19th century as part of the Czech National Revival. The decade-long construction of the National Theatre and its opening in 1881 was considered a watershed in Czech history. Tragically, the theatre burned down shortly after opening but was completely rebuilt following a public outcry just two years later.

Drama flourished in the early years of independent Czechoslovakia, but suffered under the Nazi occupation, when many Czech-language theatres were closed or converted into German theatres. Under communism, classical performances were of a high quality, but the modern scene was stifled. Exceptions included the pantomime of the Cerné divadlo (Black Theatre) and the ultramodern *Laterna Magika* (Magic Lantern), founded by Alfréd Radok and still going strong.

Many fine plays during this period, including those by Havel, were not performed locally because of their antigovernment tone, but appeared in the West. In the mid-1960s, free expression was briefly explored in Prague's Theatre on the Balustrade (Divadlo na zábradlí; p203), with works by Havel, Ladislav Fialka and Milan Uhde, and performances by the comedy duo of Jiří Suchý and Jiří Šlitr. The centrality of theatre to Czech life was confirmed in 1989 during the Velvet Revolution, when Havel and his Civic Forum movement chose to base themselves at the *Laterna Magika* for their epic negotiations to push the communists from power.

While theatre remains a vital art form and is well attended, there are concerns for its future as prices for performances rise and cultural budgets remain under pressure. One of the main issues facing the city government is how to finance cultural establishments, and many in City Hall are

GREAT CZECH FILMS

- *Amadeus* (1985) – Until the Velvet Revolution, the biggest Hollywood production to be filmed here. Director Miloš Forman chose Prague for his Oscar-winning tale of composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart because it looked more like ‘18th-century Vienna’ than Vienna – he even got to film inside the Estates Theatre, where *Don Giovanni* premiered in 1787.
- *Beauty in Trouble* (Kráska v nesnážích; 2006) – By acclaimed director Jan Hřebejk, who holds a mirror up to Czech society, showing it warts and all. Czech actress Anna Geislerová plays a woman whose life collapses after the 2002 Prague floods and who takes up a hesitant relationship with a wealthy Czech émigré living in Italy.
- *Black Peter* (Černý Petr; 1963) – This early Miloš Forman film wowed the New York critics on its debut with its cinematic illusions to the French New Wave and its slow but mesmerising teenage-boy-comes-of-age storyline. Also called *Peter and Pavla*.
- *Bony a Klid* (1987) – Vít Olmer’s communist-era classic looks at Prague in the pre–Velvet Revolution years, when a corrupt secret police and organised crime were one and the same. Banned on release, it was widely circulated underground on video and features arguably the best-ever use of a Frankie Goes to Hollywood soundtrack.
- *Closely Watched Trains* (Ostre sledované vlaky; 1966) – Jiří Menzel’s adaptation of Bohumil Hrabal’s comic WWII classic won an Oscar in 1967 and put the Czech New Wave on the international radar screen. Watch for young Miloš gently broaching the subject of premature ejaculation with an older woman as she lovingly strokes a goose’s neck.
- *Cosy Dens* (Pelišky; 1999) – The story of two neighbours on the eve of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion with radically differing political views. Czech directors have yet to make the definitive film about communism, but this attempt – sad and funny in equal measures – comes close.
- *Czech Dream* (Český sen; 2004) – Arguably the finest Czech documentary in recent years. Two local wags fake the opening of a new hypermarket, handing out flyers promising the lowest prices ever, and then film the result. The ending is both predictable and sad, an allegory of the newly capitalist Czech Republic.
- *Divided We Fall* (Musíme si pomáhat; 2000) – Jan Hřebejk and Petr Jarchovský’s comic but unsparing view of the German occupation and the Czechs who collaborated. A couple hides a Jewish refugee in their house and must take convoluted steps to conceal their actions – including publicly embracing the Nazis.
- *Kolja* (Kolja; 1996) – Jan Svěrák’s Oscar-winning tale of an ageing Czech bachelor and a cute Russian kid was originally cheered for helping salvage Czech films’ international reputation. It hasn’t worn well with time and is now considered syrupy. Still worth a look for the sumptuous shots of what was intended to be prerevolutionary Prague.
- *Loners* (Samotáři; 2000) – David Ondříček’s hugely influential film set the standard for the ensemble-driven, life-of-a-20-something chronicles that have become the staple of post–Velvet Revolution Czech cinema.
- *Loves of a Blonde* (Lásky jedné plavovlásky; 1965) – Miloš Forman’s bittersweet love story of a naive girl from a small factory town and her more sophisticated Prague beau. Arguably Forman’s finest film, effortlessly capturing both the innocence and the hopelessness of those grey days of the mid-1960s.
- *Panel Story* (Panelstory; 1979) – Věra Chytilová’s classic from communist times about young families who buy apartments in the new high-rise apartment blocks going up all over town, only to discover how bad they are. It’s mesmerising from the opening shot on.
- *Something Like Happiness* (Štěstí; 2005) – Bohdan Sláma’s bleak film is similar in tone to *Beauty in Trouble* and also stars Geislerová, but this time around she plays an emotionally disturbed mother on the verge of a breakdown in the northern city of Most. The movie is redeemed by level-headed Monika, played by Czech actress Tatiána Vilhelmová.
- *The Ride* (Jízda; 1994) – Hugely influential Czech road movie starring a young Geislerová, who hitchhikes her way to hopeful freedom. Captured something of the optimism and spirit of those early postrevolutionary years.
- *Up and Down* (Horem pádem; 2004) – Director Jan Hřebejk’s highly regarded film is one of several in recent years that takes a hard look at the new realities of post–Velvet Revolution Prague, where money talks and age-old hatreds are given more-or-less free rein.

calling for substantial cuts to subsidies. Former president and playwright Václav Havel took the controversial step in 2008 of calling on Prague residents not to support the ruling right-of-centre Civic Democratic Party (ODS) because of the party’s position on cultural funding.

Havel’s play, *Odcházení*, his first major dramatic work since 1989, opened to nearly universal acclaim in May 2008. It’s a parody of life in postcommunist Prague, involving a compromised politician, Vlastik Klein, who bears at least a superficial resemblance to Havel’s political rival, President Václav Klaus (even having the same initials). Havel wrote the female lead for his second and current wife Daša, but she fell ill shortly before the play’s premiere and was not able to perform. An English version of the play was being readied for debuts in London and New York.

In addition to traditional drama, Czechs have a long history of puppet and marionette theatre going back to the Middle Ages. A major figure of this art form was Matej Kopecký (1775–1847). Marionette theatres opened in Prague and Plzeň in the early 20th century. Josef Skupa's legendary *Spejbl and Hurvíněk* (a Czech version of 'Punch and Judy') attracted large crowds then, and still does.

ENVIRONMENT & PLANNING

Prague has gone a long way towards improving the quality of its air: restricting coal burning within the city, capping factory emissions, and pulling ageing lorries, coaches and cars off the streets. Still, much of this good work has been undercut by a massive increase in automobiles on roadways. The authorities are now in the midst of building an ambitious ring-road system to reroute long-haul traffic around the city, and are even considering introducing a London-style congestion fee to limit the number of drivers in the centre.

Sprawl remains a potentially more vexing problem. The Velvet Revolution sparked a 20-year building boom that shows no sign of letting up. Every year sees thousands of acres of orchards and farmland paved over to make way for new housing developments and shopping centres. These in turn create new traffic patterns and problems of their own. Attempts by the city to limit or plan development have so far had only limited success.

THE LAND

Prague's Old Town (Staré Město) and Malá Strana – along with the districts of Smíchov to the south and Karlín and Holešovice to the east and north – sit along a low-lying bend of the Vltava River, the longest river in the Czech Republic. The position leaves the districts prone to flooding, and over the years the city has seen a series of serious floods, beginning with the deluge of 1342, which wiped out Judith Bridge, precursor to Charles Bridge.

Until relatively recently, the flood of 1890, which broke away part of Charles Bridge, was considered an insuperable deluge, but the devastating flood of 2002 was worse. Heavy rains swelled the Vltava's tributaries and caused officials to make the fateful error of opening levees upriver to release the pressure. The result was a wall of water that cascaded into the city on 13 August 2002, inundating Malá Strana as well as Smíchov, Karlín, Holešovice and the Prague Zoo at Troja.

The surface of the Old Town was spared destruction by last-minute metal barriers that were erected along the banks, though the groundwater rose to nearly street level, flooding out the old Gothic cellars. Some 19 people were killed and many of the zoo's animals were drowned or intentionally destroyed to put them out of their misery. The damage was estimated at €2.4 billion. The flood had a silver lining for formerly industrial districts like Smíchov, Karlín and Holešovice, though – hundreds of millions of crowns in flood relief and development money have been channelled into the districts, transforming them from borderline slums into highly desirable residential neighbourhoods.

The city centre is surrounded on three sides by high hills: Petřín and Hradčany to the west, Letná to the north and the Žižkov bluff to the east. This creates some lovely vistas, but in practical terms restricts the number of roads and access ways that can be built and forces traffic onto a few very heavily congested trunk roads. It's also hampered efforts to promote cycling. While much of the Old Town is flat, the hills present considerable obstacles for potential bicycle commuters coming in from the western, northern and eastern sides.

GREEN PRAGUE

When it comes to large-scale recycling, sustainable energy and organic farming, the Czech Republic still lags far behind Germany, the UK and Scandinavia. All the same, Czech industry has cleaned up its act considerably since the fall of communism, with the annual production of greenhouse gases falling to a fraction of pre-1989 levels.

Czechs have been recycling waste for a long time; you'll find large bins for glass, plastics and papers all over Prague. Most glass bottles are recyclable, and the prices of many bottled drinks – beer, too – include a deposit refundable at supermarkets.

Property developers are finally seeing the economic and marketing potential in making sustainable buildings, and several new projects now tout their 'greenness'. Two developments on opposite sides of the city – the Park, next to the Chodov metro station in the south, and the River City-Amazon Court development in Karlín – are being touted as pioneers in 'green' architecture.

One intractable problem that bedevils green planners is what to do about the *paneláky* – the high-rise public-housing projects that ring the city and are home to a majority of Prague's population. The projects are notoriously environmentally unfriendly, allowing residents to bake in the summer while leaking valuable heat in the winter. Many of them are now being fixed up with the help of public funding and mortgage financing.

URBAN PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

Since the 1989 Velvet Revolution, city authorities have tried to strike a balance between promoting economic growth while preserving green areas that surround the city and contribute greatly to the quality of life.

The jury is still out as to whether they've succeeded, but the consensus is they've not done enough. Critics point to the recent explosion in hypermarket shopping complexes that ring the outskirts in all directions. The pattern has been the same nearly everywhere, with developers buying up large tracts of land – usually near metro terminuses – and then constructing mixed-use commercial and residential zones, drawing shoppers and commuters to areas that just a few years ago were farmers' fields. The full impact is not yet clear, but there's concern that the new developments are siphoning off money and vitality from the centre.

To be sure, city authorities inherited a highly dysfunctional planning system from the previous communist government. The roadways and retail spaces were woefully inadequate. One need only look at the city's main highway, the *magistrála*, that ploughs through the heart of the city and severs the National Museum (p110) from the rest of Wenceslas Square, to see how poor the planning was during those times.

Along with this boom in private development, the city has embarked on the largest public-works build-up in its history, the centrepiece of which will be an enormous ring-road system of roads, bridges and tunnels that will allow traffic to bypass the city centre. Crews in late 2007 broke ground on the Blanka Tunnel (Prague's 'Big Ditch'), which will eventually run from the district of Břevnov in Prague 6 all the way to near the Prague Zoo in Troja, including stretches below Letná and Stromovka parks. At a cost of €800 million, it's one of the most expensive construction projects in the EU. The tunnel is scheduled to be finished in 2010. In addition, authorities have announced plans to build a rail link between the centre and Prague Airport and have committed themselves to a massive expansion of the metro system until the year 2100, including starting construction of a new D line in 2010. The year 2008 saw the opening of three new metro stations along the northern portion of the C line, which now runs all the way to – what else? – a major shopping centre at Letňany.

Plans by Czech Rail, the public railway authority, to upgrade stations and improve services have languished, though. Major renovations set for both the main station, Hlavní nádraží, and the chief station servicing key destinations like Budapest, Vienna and Berlin, Nádraží Holešovice, are proceeding slowly, and both are likely to remain eyesores for years to come. In an apparent literary in-joke, the wags at Czech Rail in 2007 formally renamed Nádraží Holešovice as 'Nádraží Franze Kafky' (Franz Kafka Station), unfortunately linking Kafka's name to one of the most decrepit train stations in the country. (Thanks, guys!)

Meanwhile, work is continuing on long-overdue repairs to Charles Bridge. Sections of the bridge are likely to remain closed to visitors, though the span itself remains open across its length.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

As capital of the Czech Republic, Prague is the seat of the government, parliament and the presidency. The city itself is governed separately. The mayor is Pavel Bém (b 1963), a trained medical doctor and one of the most popular politicians in the country. Bém has worked hard

(Continued on page 53)

(Continued from page 44)

to clean up the city's image, including once famously posing as an Italian tourist in a taxi to see whether he would get ripped off. He did.

The national government is plagued by near constant instability, resulting from the fact that neither of the large centrist parties, the centre-right Civic Democratic Party (ODS) or the centre-left Social Democrats (ČSSD), will form a government with the main Communist party, the KSČM. In practice, that means fragile coalitions have to be stitched together with the two remaining smaller parties, the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL) and the Greens (SZ). The current coalition – always rumoured on the verge of toppling – links the ODS, KDU-ČSL and the Greens.

President Václav Klaus won re-election to a second five-year term in February 2008. Klaus, a noted sceptic of the EU and vocal critic of efforts to slow global warming, remains a highly polarising figure. His high-profile critiques of environmental efforts to cap greenhouse gases have made him the darling of the conservative think-tank crowd but have embarrassed many Czechs who see climate change as a serious issue.

MEDIA

Czechs are newspaper junkies, and you'll see people with their noses buried in the latest rag in bars, on trams, on park benches, and even walking on the street. Sadly, the overall standard of newspaper journalism today is low compared with the interwar years, any lingering tradition of quality investigative reporting having been thoroughly stamped out during the communist era.

There are five major national dailies; most are now in the hands of German and Swiss media magnates. The biggest seller is the tabloid *Blesk*, controlled by the Swiss Ringier group. Also popular are the centre-right *Mladá fronta DNES* and the former communist paper, the left-leaning *Právo*. In addition to the dailies, free papers handed out each morning at tram and metro stations, such as the ever-popular *Metro* or the more recent *24hodin* (24 Hours), have made huge inroads in readership. These are generally of execrable quality, though, and have helped encourage newspaper standards ever further downward.

As far as English-language media go, the venerable *Prague Post* (now in its 17th year) continues to publish in spite of rumours that it's on its last legs. The quality of the writing ebbs

TOP MEDIA WEBSITES

Leading Czech dailies:

- *Blesk* (www.blesk.cz, in Czech only)
- *Lidové noviny* (www.lidovky.cz, in Czech only)
- *Mladá fronta DNES* (<http://zpravy.idnes.cz/mfdnes.asp>, in Czech only)
- *Právo* (<http://pravo.novinky.cz>, in Czech only)

English-language media:

- *aktuálně.cz* (<http://aktualne.centrum.cz/czechnews>) – Overview of politics and economics published in conjunction with the Czech online newspaper.
- *Czech Business Weekly* (www.cbw.cz)
- *Czech Happenings* (www.ceskenoviny.cz/news) – English-language news magazine operated by the Czech News Agency, CTK.
- *The New Presence* (www.new-presence.cz)
- *Prague Post* (www.praguepost.com)
- *Prague Daily Monitor* (www.praguemonitor.com)
- *Radio Prague* (www.radio.cz) – Useful translations of news and cultural features broadcast by the international service of Czech radio.
- *Provokátor* (<http://provokator.org>) – Online 'zine, strong on the club scene, music and lifestyle. Excellent online timetable for club bookings.
- *Think Again* (www.thinkagain.cz) – Latest incarnation of what must be the longest-running alternative magazine in post–Velvet Revolution Prague. Fun and often witty articles on alternative culture, fashion and happenings.

CZECH TONGUE TWISTERS

Forget Sally's seashells or Peter Piper's pickled peppers. With a language in which vowels appear to be optional, Czechs have a tradition of world-beating tongue twisters. Practise these a few times if you want to impress your Czech hosts:

- Strč prst skrz krk (literally, 'Put your finger through your throat')
- Třistatřicet tři stříbrných stříkaček stříkalo přes třistatřicet tři stříbrných střech (Three-hundred-thirty-three silver sprinklers were spraying over 333 silver roofs)
- Šel pštros s pštrosáčaty pštrosi ulici (The ostrich went with its baby ostriches through Ostrich Street)

If you're really good, try this one (courtesy of Wikipedia – though we've never heard anyone attempt it):

- Prd krt skrz drn, zprv zhlt hrst zrn (A mole farted through the grass, having swallowed a handful of grain)

and flows depending on the staff, but the tabloid insert *Night and Day* remains an excellent weekly guide to restaurants, movies, happenings, concerts and galleries. Competing with the *Prague Post* in the internet space is the *Prague Daily Monitor*, a lively mix of original stories, supplemented by translations from Czech papers, wire-service pickups, and links to other news sources, including local blogs. *The New Presence* is a quarterly English translation of the Czech *Nová přítomnost*, with features on current affairs, politics and business; on the serious business side, the *Czech Business Weekly* is a comprehensive look at economic issues, real estate, stock trading and other pursuits that make the country tick.

The situation is bleaker when it comes to 'zines. Over the years, Prague has supported dozens of English-language start-ups, alternative weeklies and general rant rags, but their number has dwindled in recent years. This probably reflects the shift in the expat community from slackers to older professionals and the influence of the internet, which makes printing on dead trees seem increasingly old-fashioned. One that's still holding on is the cheeky bimonthly *Think Again*, available around town in bars and coffee shops.

LANGUAGE

The Czech language is strongly bound up with the country's cultural and ethnic identity. Czech was squelched for centuries in favour of German during the Habsburg occupation and re-emerged as a literary language only in the 19th century. By the end of that century the number of Czech speakers in the city exceeded German speakers, and by 1939, when the Nazis rolled in, German speakers were a distinct minority (though Prague was still technically bilingual). During the war the Nazis attempted to reinstall German as the leading language, and after WWII, the Russians took their turn at cultural hegemony, making classes in learning Russian compulsory in schools.

Against this backdrop of struggle for linguistic supremacy, it's not surprising that Czechs sometimes appear unwilling to simply chuck it all and just speak English. That said, you're unlikely to have any major problem in central Prague, where residents are accustomed to fielding basic queries in English. The situation changes outside the centre or in the rest of the country. In general, younger people can muster a bit of English. Older people usually know some German.

Czechs take a perverse pride in the difficulty of their tongue. Even compared with other Slavic languages like Polish and Russian, Czech is usually considered a notch harder. To give you an idea, nouns have four genders (masculine inanimate, masculine animate, feminine and neuter) and each is declined differently depending on its position in a sentence. If you assume around a dozen different noun types and at least half a dozen possible endings for each, you've got over 70 possible spellings – and that's just nouns. It's no wonder that even the most well-meaning visitor eventually shrugs his or her shoulders and falls back on the standard *Mluvíte anglicky?* (Do you speak English?)

For more information, see the Language chapter, [p257](#).

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