
In 1932, zoologist Jiří Baum and his friend sculptor František Foit undertook an eight-month automobile journey from Cairo to Cape Town in their Czechoslovak-made Tatra wagon. One highpoint of the trip was retracing the steps of pioneering Czech explorer Emil Holub to Victoria Falls nearly sixty years after he had been there, but this was hardly the only moment of national significance during their adventure. The Czech nation was everywhere: they saw Africans wearing Bat’a shoes, their Czechoslovak car outperformed the ubiquitous Renaults and Citroëns across desert and jungle terrain, and they unexpectedly met hospitable compatriots in Khartoum, at the foot of Kilimanjaro, and on the border of Rhodesia-and South Africa. At the same time, they were sometimes hard pressed to explain to “natives” and western Europeans where in the world Czechs and Czechoslovakia were located. When Baum released a carrier-pigeon with a message in Czech in Cairo, the pair was investigated for espionage for having used a “secret alphabet” (p.261). Baum and Foit were ambivalent about the colonial system, which denied non-European peoples the right to self-determination, a right which Czechs had only relatively recently been able to assert and of which they were staunch champions. Yet they expressed relief, not least for the sake of their comfort, that Europeans were in charge in Africa.

Baum and Foit’s journey and their published reflections on it are at the heart of Sarah Lemmen’s book *Tschechen auf Reisen: Repräsentationen der außereuropäischen Welt und nationale Identität in Ostmitteleuropa 1890–1938*. These men, along with 51 other Czech travelers to the extra-European world (Africa, Asia, Australia, Latin America, and Oceania), produced 91 travelogues which, Lemmen argues, shaped Czech self-understandings in the years between 1890 and 1938—a critical era in both the history of globalization and the nationalization of European societies. Lemmen follows Sebastian Conrad’s work on the global origins of Kaiserreich-era German nationalism to argue that the Czech nation was, in important ways, constituted in its encounters with the non-European world. Unlike scholars who explain the rise of modern nations and nationalism with reference to internal national or European dynamics or indeed to more general processes, such as socio-economic modernization and the spread of print capitalism, Conrad and others inspired by postcolonial studies and global history have suggested
that, in their decisive phase (i.e. after 1870), European nations and nationalisms were produced through globalization, of which overseas colonies were a key component. The need to situate oneself and one’s purpose in a globalized world gave distinctive content to nationalisms around the world. But what are the implications of this recent scholarship for small nations like the Czechs, who were stateless until 1918 and who never possessed colonies?

The originality of Lemmen’s book lies in her answer to this question. In imagining the Czech nation’s place in a globalized world, travelers tended to seek a “third way” (p.240) between the western European colonial powers and the colonized peoples themselves. This combined assumptions of European superiority—often predicated on notions of “civilization” and its non-European Other—with criticism of the colonial powers, particularly the rigidity of the system they imposed on their colonies and the conspicuous (sometimes enviable) wealth of their representatives and metropolitan travelers. On the one hand, Czechs identified strongly with the project of European modernity, embodied above all in technological infrastructural improvements and perceptions of “order.” Research institutions devoted to understanding the extra-European world, such as the Prague Oriental Institute (which enjoyed Masaryk’s largesse), lent scientific credibility to notions of European superiority. Many of Lemmen’s travelers were associated professionally or philanthropically with such endeavors. The euphoria which accompanied Czechoslovak independence in 1918 even led some to entertain the possibility of Czech overseas colonies. Colonies were envisaged as a convenient way for the Czech nation to prove its maturity by spreading civilization, to secure raw materials for its sizable industry, and to provide a destination for emigrants who would remain Czech instead of assimilating to the host society.

On the other hand, the colonial world discomfited many Czech observers. While they remarked admiringly upon the luxury hotels frequented by colonial elites and British, French, and American travelers, they usually lacked the means to stay there themselves and felt more comfortable in guesthouses run by fellow Slavic expatriates, who were often from Yugoslavia. Colonial hierarchies also grated on their sensibilities as members of a “naturally democratic” nation who had only recently escaped from the Habsburg “prison-house of peoples.” The establishment of the Czechoslovak state marks a turning point in this study since before independence, Czech travelers tended to identify more strongly with a Central European and even Austro-Hungarian identity. After 1918, by contrast, Czechs compared themselves more readily to west European nations...
and regarded themselves as potential players on the global stage. Although they rued the fact that knowledge of Czech culture was generally limited or nonexistent in the regions they visited, there were signs of hope. Czech beer (a quintessentially national product) was served in far-flung exotic locales, and Baťa shoes opened a branch in Dakar and advertised on a billboard near the pyramids. The “Czechification of the world” (p.244), based especially on the robust Czech export economy, seemed within grasp.

The reader might question the extent to which pronouncements by Czech travelers shaped the broader self-understandings of Czech national society in this era. While travelogues of journeys in faraway places undoubtedly sold well and their authors frequently gave well-attended lectures upon their return to the homeland, Lemmen provides scant evidence of how this “basic interest of Czech society in engagement with the extra-European world” (p.78) recast other, less global Czech national self-perceptions. But perhaps that is a topic for future study. Certainly, Lemmen’s enjoyable book provides an important corrective to the “all too western European image of Europe” (p.160) that emerges from scholarship on European entanglements with the non-European world in the age of empire. The pressing need to rethink the undifferentiated ideas of “Europe” that feature in much postcolonial and global history could be emphasized in even stronger terms than she does. If the jury is still out on whether European nationalism may be most profitably seen as an effect of “colonial globality” (to use Sebastian Conrad’s term), Lemmen’s claim that in this era the non-European world became a potential site of Czech national history is a persuasive one. It is a claim that would likely have made Jiří Baum, whose life ended tragically in a Nazi death camp in 1944, very proud.

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