




4-25-2017

Peter Demetz, *Prague in Black and Gold: Scenes in the Life of a European City*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1997.

William McGaughey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McGaughey, William (2017) "Peter Demetz, *Prague in Black and Gold: Scenes in the Life of a European City*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1997.," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 76 : No. 76 , Article 23.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol76/iss76/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

**Peter Demetz, *Prague in Black and Gold: Scenes in the Life of a European City*.
New York: Hill and Wang, 1997.**

Reviewed by William McGaughey

Peter Demetz, a retired professor of comparative literature at Yale, has written a comprehensive, detailed history of his home town, Prague, in the Czech republic. A Yale graduate in the class of 1964, I remember Demetz as an occasional lecturer in the “Directed Studies” program given freshmen and sophomores in the humanities.

The book is not easy reading because of the great number of unfamiliar names and places that enter into the story. Our world history tends to neglect nations not neighboring the Mediterranean Sea or the North Atlantic. Prague is in central Europe as a kind of bridge between Germanic and Slavic cultures. Yet it has a fascinating history which Demetz brings to life.

The city of Prague begins with Duke Borivoj, a Christian ruler of the late 9th century A.D., around the time when two missionaries from Greece, Cyril and Methodius, invented the Slavic script. He belonged to the Premyslid clan. A virgin soothsayer named Lubussa had rescued Czech people from the plague and, on her advice, they built a castle called Praga.

Lubussa then married a clever plowman named Premysl who became the ruler of people living in that area. She is the mythological founder of Prague, prophesying that it was destined to become “a great city whose fame will touch the stars.”

Demetz describes how the city of Prague was initially a collection of villages on both sides of the Vltava (Moldau) river. The Prague castle was constructed on the Hradcany plateau to the northwest. It became an early seat of power and center of various churches and communities. Another ancient community was Vysehrad, near the junction of the Vltava and Botic rivers. The royal residence shifted between these two places. North of Vysehrad and east of Hradcany was the “Old Town”, a much larger community. A “New Town”, south of the other, was settled later. The settlements consisted of Czech, German, Jewish, and Italian peoples. Their principal landmarks were churches, synagogues and monasteries.

The first noteworthy ruler of Bohemia was Otakar II, 1233-1278, whose mother was a granddaughter of the Byzantine emperor. By strategic marriages and divorces he built a powerful kingdom which extended between the Baltic and Adriatic seas. Otakar’s nemesis was Rudolf of Hapsburg, who outmaneuvered Otakar in the election for Holy Roman emperor and later defeated him in battle.

Demetz’s book focuses upon the principal Bohemian monarchs of late medieval times. The ongoing struggle between Popes and Holy Roman Emperors or, as they were called, the Guelf (pro-pope) and Ghibelline (pro-emperor) factions, became a distinguishing feature

of European politics. Otakar's kingdom attracted Italian refugees from the Ghibelline camp.

Czech political power may have reached a peak during the reign of the 14th century monarch, Vaclav, who was later named Charles. Prague went through a period of political turmoil after Otakar's death in 1278. An agreement was reached for the youngest son of King Henry of Carinthia, John of Luxembourg, to marry Eliska of the Premyslid family and become the future king of Bohemia. King John was not much interested in Prague or its people. John sent his son, Vaclav (Charles), to France to be educated. Later, Charles was sent on diplomatic missions for his father. Before long, Charles and his father became political rivals.

After Charles ascended to the throne, he embarked upon an ambitious building project for Prague. He established a New Town south of the Old Town, replete with new churches, monasteries, and markets. He also renovated the Vysehrad area. Charles ordered the fortifications dividing the New and Old Towns to be demolished but then, after turmoil, ordered the old division to be restored. Most notably, in 1347, Charles established a university, authorized by Pope Clement VI, to serve the Bohemian people. This was to become politically important. The university was organized in separate blocs or "nations" for the Bohemians, Poles, Saxons, and Bavarians.

Charles took an interest in literature and in codifying law. He became a patron of Petrarch, the Italian humanist, and also became acquainted with the political visionary, Cola di Rienzi, who wanted to restore the Roman Empire. As Holy Roman Emperor, Charles had much political influence at a time when the Papacy was divided between Avignon and Rome. Under Charles, Prague became a center of European culture. The King cultivated the political legacies of Charlemagne and of his Premyslid forbearers.

In the second half of the 14th century, cracks began to appear in the structure of culture and power. The Inquisition became more aggressive. In 1389, eleven years after Charles' death, Jews were massacred in Prague after Jews were supposed to have abused a priest. Charles' son, Vaclav IV, was not much interested in his royal duties, preferring to hunt game, carouse with his friends, or get drunk. He also had to contend with rebellious barons.

The Hussite revolution of 1415-1422 completely upset the political order. Jan Hus was a well-respected scholar and preacher at the Bethlehem church. John Wycliffe's influence was becoming strong. Passions were aroused by corruption in the church. Hus himself condemned the selling of papal indulgences. King Vaclav ordered Hus to leave the country. Pope John XXIII convened a grand council at Constance to reform the church. Jan Hus went to Constance hoping to participate in the reform but was instead arrested. After refusing to recant his heretical beliefs, Hus was burned at the stake.

The treatment of Hus at Constance galvanized his supporters in Prague. A group of powerful barons came to his defense. Soon preachers were speaking to audiences at mass

rallies. Church loyalists and the Hussites engaged in battles in and around Prague. By trickery, the Old Town alderman lured the principal Hussite general, Jan Zelivsky, to his death and displayed his severed head to crowds before they themselves were killed. Eventually, peace was restored.

The Hussite rebellion was a precursor to Luther's successful protest a century later as well as to similar events in 17th century England, 18th century France, and 20th century Russia and China. So, in a way, these early events in Prague laid the foundation for future revolutionary or democratic governments.

A number of Bohemian kings followed Vaclav - the Polish king Louis, Ferdinand of Hapsburg, Ferdinand II, and Maximilian II. Demetz focuses, however, upon Maximilian's son, Rudolf, who had a Spanish mother. Rudolf was an active and effective ruler in the early part of his life. He was also a notable collector. He collected paintings, writings, and even scientists.

King Rudolf was a patron to the Danish astronomer Tycho Brache and to Brache's assistant Johannes Kepler. Alchemists, including charlatans, also gathered at Rudolf's court. This was a golden age of Jewish culture. Rabbi Lowe, best known for his association with the golem, was a leading intellectual. After 1600, Rudolf became increasingly detached from his public duties. A revolt broke out between religious factions in 1618 which led to the Thirty Years war.

The book goes on to describe Mozart's time in Prague, the counterrevolution of 1848, and the career of T.G. Masaryk around the time of World War I. This review does not do justice to Peter Demetz's magnificent work, more productive than grading papers at Yale. The book *Prague in Black and Gold: Scenes in the Life of a European City* is recommended.