Czech Republic, The

History

To understand the country what we call today the Czech Republic, it is vital that we look at its history first. A country with a relatively short history, Czechoslovakia was created in 1918 by the brief unity of the two major ethnic groups: the Czechs and Slovaks. Czechoslovakia, as the name implies, is a state with two nationalities. The ancestors of the Czechs and Slovaks date back to the fifth century. In the ninth century, the two tribes were united under the Great Moravian Empire, but for the next Millennium, the Czechs and Slovaks were two peoples that followed their own course. The Bohemian Kingdom in the tenth century, which later became a part of the Holy Roman Empire, had many aspects of a national state. This Empire meant the Czechs were subjected to a strong Roman Catholic influence, but at the same time retaining their distinct national identity.

During the Hapsburg Rule in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, the differences between the Czechs and Slovaks became more pronounced. The Czechs’ owned land had an intellectual elite and an urban middle class, in addition, to its workers and peasants. The Slovaks remained a primarily agrarian society, untouched by what had influenced the Czechs. These differences, to a lessor degree, remain today in the twenty-first century.

Location

The Czech Republic lies in between two superpowers - Germany and the Soviet Union. Today the Czech Republic, according to most Europeans, is in “central Europe”
or “east-central Europe”. Fifty years ago, under communist rule, Czechoslovakia was located in “east Europe”. More geographically, the city of Prague is located 14°E, 50°N and is the capital and largest city. The size of Czechoslovakia is approximately 127,905 sq. km. Today as the Czech Republic, it has shrunk to only 78,864 sq. km. It boasts an irregular terrain. Near its capital in the west, it is much like its neighbor country of Germany, part of the north-central uplands, and the eastern region with the Carpathian Mountains and Danube Basin lands. A land caught in between struggles of ethnicity and ideology, the Czech Republic has endured more than any Westerner could imagine, and its location is probably its worst attribute.

**Climate**

The Czech Republic has a mostly European continental climate. However, the winters can be cold, cloudy, and humid. Light rain and snow occur often. The mountains are covered with snow from about early November to April and in some areas accumulations are deep. The summers are best described as pleasant, rainfall is heavy, but it occurs mostly in showers. The winds are westerly and usually light. Average temperatures in Prague ranges from 1°C to 19°C, spring tends to start late, and autumn can occur abruptly in September. If you were to compare typical weather patterns of Columbus, Ohio, and Prague, Czech Republic, they would be very similar. The weather in Prague might be only a little cooler year round, but aside from the temperature, the two cities have very similar climates.

**Demography**

As stated earlier, the Czech Republic and the earlier Czechoslovakia are made up of two large ethnic groups, the Czechs and the Slovaks. At the end of 1992,
Czechoslovakia desolved. The Czech Republic, today, has now separated from Slovakia and Czechs are the main ethnic group. Hungarians, Germans, Ukrainians, Poles, and a very small portion of Gypsies and Jews are included in these groups. These other groups only constitute about 5% of the Czech republic’s minorities. Today, the large percentage (70%) of people in the Czech Republic resides in small towns or cities. Communism urbanized the lands, heavy industry was forced on the country of Czechoslovakia, and quickly the land turned from a more agrarian society to a semi-competitive economy that could nearly sustain itself.

Economy

Since the Czech Republic was created in 1992, a further look back into Czechoslovakian history is necessary to understand the troubles the country has had in recent years with its “shock-therapy” adoption. When in 1918, Czechoslovakia first appeared on the map, it incorporated a highly centralized democracy with tight control over its local government. It was a stable government, however, and no less than five different political parties were in existence. During the 1920s, the Czechoslovak National Democratic Party and the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia battled for control. What ultimately caused the fate for a democratic county was that parties’ inability to unite the many different minorities the country had. Meaning, the communists accepted everyone as long as you were a communist. The democratic centralized political structure might have been well adapted for a single-nation state, but not a multi-national state like Czechoslovakia. After World War Two, Czechoslovakia re-emerged as a state as the result of allied policies, and basically the ideology of the Soviet Union pressed communism on Czechoslovakia. Stalinization meant rapid heavy
industrialization, centralization, and collectivization for the country. While collectivization of farms wasn’t a huge success in Czechoslovakia, the Soviets did modernize and industrialize the country. Secondary education was increasing and a white-collar class emerged.

But as time wore on, resistance to the state became apparent. Destalinization wasn’t occurring in Czechoslovakia like it had been in other east European. There was a sort of peaceful passive resistance that occurred in Prague against the communists’ rule in that country. The protestors wanted out of the soviet model, so the Soviets sent their tanks into Prague and then it was over. A new chapter began. Gustav Husak was the new communist leader in 1969 and made sure that the word “reform” was never to be used again. The economy began to slip into a slow recession much like the rest of the Soviet-bloc countries.

One of the Czech Republic’s major natural resources is coal of all types such as hard coal, brown coal, and lignite deposits. Iron ore continues to be mined in the Slovak region, but is almost gone. Other natural resources include some lead, copper, salt, mercury, tin and antimony. In 1985, agricultural land accounted for 55% of the total land in Czechoslovakia. Acid rain has been and is a problem today in the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic followed a fairly typical economic pattern much like other former east European countries during their communist rule. However, the Czech Republic has transformed from a highly centralized inefficient economy to a market economy very well. Some of this was due to the fact that Czechoslovakia carried little debts to Western nations like many other east European countries did in the 1980s. Today, the Czech Republic is moving towards an international economy. It knows that to do well, an economy must be able to compete globally.
Languages

Czech and Slovak were the two major languages of Czechoslovakia. The two languages are similar, but separate languages. They are so close that they are mutually intelligible, and the media uses both languages. Today, in the Czech Republic, the major languages are Czech, Moravain, and Slovak. All of these languages use the Roman alphabet, with only slight differences. Russian has made a strong influence in modern Czech, and so has English. Some English words that have made headway into Czech language include vikend (weekend) and diskzokej (disc jockey). Since the emergence of Nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century, and in an attempt to avoid foreign vocabulary, many old Czech words have been revived as far back as the fourteenth centuries.

Currency

In Czechoslovakia, the national currency is based upon the koruna or crown. The crown consists of 100 halers. In 1987, the official commercial exchange rate was 5.4 koruna to one U.S. dollar. The tourist or noncommercial rate was 10.5 koruna to one U.S. dollar. Of course everything was centralized and run by the state in these years. Price controls and budgets continued to operate and generally avoided the troubles that were now plaguing the Soviet Union like devaluation, inflation, and shortages. Today, in the Czech republic, the crown is still used, and in Slovakia, the Slovak crown is used. Today (2002), about 35 koruna equals one U.S. dollar. The value of the crown is likely to fall due to the political and economic uncertainty in the country.
Tourism

Despite all of the economic struggles and name changes the Czech Republic has gone through, it has been and is one of the most popular European travel areas. For most people, Prague is a must when you are visiting the Czech Republic. Especially popular for English-speaking tourists, Prague is one of the most remarkable cities in Europe. The city has been hardly touched by the two World Wars, Baroque palaces and churches and gothic pinnacles stick out of the landscape. The city has also been a magnet for younger travelers, making it a very vibrant, youthful city. There is hiking and skiing with plenty of resorts from which to choose. The best way to get around is by train, and if that’s not convenient, take a bus (more expensive and slower usually.) Taxis are available everywhere. They are cheap and plentiful, but sometimes can take advantage of tourists.

Camping is just as popular as skiing and hiking, so if you prefer to rough it, this might be an option. Tourism has long been a major source of income for the Czech Republic, even under the communism years; Prague was a very popular destination point. It’s easy to see why. It is a beautiful city with a great history and is relatively cheap as compared to Paris or Rome.

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