

BÁRTA, Miroslav – KOVÁŘ, Martin et al.: *Lidé a dějiny. K roli osobnosti v multidisciplinární perspektivě / People and History. The Role of Personality from a Multidisciplinary Perspective /* Academia, Prague 2017, 861 pages

When I started to study history at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague in 1991, a selection of lectures entitled *Creators of History* took place in the main building on Palach Square. They were very popular amongst students, and continued over the semesters that followed. They were coordinated by Professor Aleš Skřivan. The lectures were given by major historians, and not only historians from the faculty; each time a different lecturer would speak about a different personality.

Perhaps only the truly well-informed know that a series of books of the same name was published in interwar Czechoslovakia.¹ The books served as an introduction to distinctive figures in world history from antiquity to the present. Several of them were written by a high school geography and history teacher named Jaroslav Kosina (1862–1928), an almost forgotten historian who made a significant contribution to the popularisation of history. During the same (interwar) period, Kosina also wrote several volumes of world history, including a book on important personalities of Czech and Slovak history.² Mladá fronta, meanwhile, came up with a similar although rather more modest “creative” concept just over a decade ago.³

The Academia publishing house has now reopened the discussion on the role of personality in history in a new series of publications comprising the work of 34 authors in total. It follows up on two previous successful titles⁴ and has so far completed a number of exceptional collective monographs. The majority of the publications are devoted to modern personalities from the 20th century – with fifteen of the 33 biographical works on 20th century figures. Of the remaining 18 historical personalities, two deal with figures from prehistory and antiquity, four from the Middle Ages, six from modern times and six from the 19th century. Each biographical study is followed by a list of cited and recommended literature.

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- 1 *Tvůrčové dějin. Čtyři tisíciletí světových dějin v obrazech dob a osobností. Díl první – Starověk / Creators of History. Four Millennia of World History in Portraits of Ages and Personalities. Part One – Antiquity /* L. Mazáč, Prague 1934; *Díl druhý – Středověk / Part Two – The Middle Ages /* L. Mazáč, Prague 1934; *Díl třetí – Novověk / Part Three – The Modern Age /* L. Mazáč, Brno 1935; *Díl čtvrtý – Přítomnost, část 1 / Part Four – The Present, Section 1 /* L. Mazáč, Prague 1936 and *Díl pátý – Přítomnost, část 2 / Part Five – The Present, Section II /* L. Mazáč, Prague 1936.
 - 2 KOSINA, Jaroslav: *Velikáni našich dějin. Obrazy životopisné a kulturní / The Greats of Our History. Biographical and Cultural Portraits /* Josef R. Vilímek, Prague 1926. Several editions were published until 1940.
 - 3 *Hybatelé dějin. Encyklopedie světových osobností od prehistorie po současnost / Movers of History. An Encyclopaedia of World Personalities from Prehistory to the Present /* Mladá fronta, Prague 2007.
 - 4 BÁRTA, Miroslav – KOVÁŘ, Martin et al.: *Kolaps a regenerace. Cesty civilizací a kultur / Collapse and Regeneration. Paths of Civilizations and Cultures /* Academia, Prague 2011; BÁRTA, Miroslav – KOVÁŘ, Martin et al.: *Civilizace a dějiny. Historie světa pohledem dvaceti českých vědců / Civilization and History. The History of the World Through the Eyes of Twenty Czech Scientists /* Academia, Prague 2013.

In his introductory study, Jakub Rákosník attempts to define the current debate about the role of personalities in historiography and other scientific disciplines. Here he formulates a number of important questions, including the so-called individualisation of history, reflecting on the seriousness and risks of applying such a concept. In addition to discussing “creators of history”, it is primarily about the knowledge that a historian can gain and how successfully he is later able to communicate his conclusions to the wider public. While it is important to focus on a list of major events and a description of the details of a single human destiny, it is also important to pay attention to the wider historical and social context.

In the following thirty-three studies, a series of well-known, less well-known and completely neglected personalities, rich and poor, highly educated and self-educated, parade in front of the reader. Personalities who tend to be regarded more positively strike a marked contrast to those who now have negative connotations because they are associated with violent or totalitarian regimes. There are important members of noble families and religious orders, royal advisers, theorists of war, founding fathers of great state ideas, philosophers, writers, politicians, diplomats, heroes and traitors, athletes and scientists.

Only two chapters deal directly with women. The first is Petr Koura’s study of Inka Bernášková (1904–1942), an unjustly forgotten patriot and heroine of the anti-Nazi resistance, executed in August 1942 in Berlin-Plötzensee. The second is Josef Opatrný’s study of the Argentine icon Eva (Evita) Perón (1919–1952), a girl who achieved extraordinary standing and power, and who is still celebrated in South America as someone who fulfilled the dream or fairy tale of a poor girl who found happiness. And this despite the fact that so-called Peronism – of which she was an important part – did not exactly follow democratic goals and ideals.

We also realise from the individual texts how significant is the role of the media in all its forms today. Much of what is happening on the other side of the world can be followed virtually live thanks to modern technology. With the help of sophisticated methods, we can reconstruct life thousands of years ago with such precision that it does not always invoke pleasant associations. Many of the conclusions and findings obtained as a result are very interesting and indeed topical; see, for example, the chapter (by Otakar Foltýn) on the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu (544–496 BC), author of *The Art of War*, in which he says that goals can be achieved through ingenious non-military means instead of war. This can be considered one of the main principles of so-called hybrid warfare.

Several of the other personalities presented here are also very interesting. I do not want to even suggest that those I have not mentioned somehow represent a weak part of the book or are not worthy of attention. However, I admit that I rather tend towards modern history and therefore I pay more attention to the modern era. Although it is possible to trace minor differences in style and presentation with individual authors, I consider all the studies to be successful, which is proof of the authors’ great professional erudition.

I was intrigued by Miroslav Bárta’s contribution about Johann Gutenberg (1397/1400–1468), the inventor of the printing press, which enabled the massive

spread of new ideas, including the ideas of the Reformation. I also evaluate positively Martin Kovář's captivating study of James I Stuart (1566–1625), the ruler of pre-revolutionary 17th century England, who demonstrated his ability to maintain stability and peace; moreover, the author concludes that if his son and successor Charles I (1600–1649) had continued his policy, the English Revolution would not have been inevitable. Marie Šedivá Koldinská's study of (dare I say) the largely unknown Martin Fruwein of Podolí (?–1621), a prominent lawyer, diplomat and participant in the Czech Estates uprising who eventually chose a voluntary death rather than face public execution in the Old Town Square. I read with interest the fate of Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), author of the popular novel *Robinson Crusoe*, a journalist and unfortunately also serial bankrupt, who often resorted to media manipulation and what we would now call dissemination of fake news (the author of this work is Václav Cílek).

I also consider very inspiring the study of Alois Leopold Johann Baptist Lex, Count von Aehrenthal (1854–1912), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria-Hungary between 1906 and 1912. Following the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 this experienced diplomat was heavily criticised by the then deputy of the Imperial Parliament in Vienna, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. The author of the study, Aleš Skrivan Sr., rightly points out that he was considered to be the most important foreign minister since the time of Prince Metternich, and also belonged to the circle of close friends of the heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand d'Este. Would von Aehrenthal, with his undoubted political abilities and talent, been capable of preventing the outbreak of the First World War or the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy if he had lived a few more years? This question remains unanswered, so all we can do is speculate.

Of the most abundant 20th century characters represented in the book, I would like to draw attention to five, in my opinion, extraordinary fates. The British politician Oswald Mosley (1896–1980) went through traditional political parties – he was a member of both the Conservatives and the Labour Party. This excellent orator and unabashed anti-Semite eventually became head of the British Fascist Party. He admired the regimes of both Hitler and Mussolini. As Jakub Drábik⁵, the author of this portrait, rightly judges, if Mosley had more character and had shown more patience within the traditional political parties, then he would probably have received both admiration and fame. However, his ambition and narcissism led to him ending up as an outcast in British politics.

It is hard to believe the repulsive personality of Trofim Děnisovič Lysenko (1898–1976), the absolute ruler of Soviet science, who (as in other areas of his life) completely obeyed the ideological directives of Stalin's Soviet leadership (this study is by Jan Konvalinka). This charlatan would never have been able to assert himself to the degree that was possible in the USSR. Lysenko, a dangerous individual to those around him and later a proven fraudster, basked in the warmth of Bolshevik affection, campaigning against so-called bourgeois science (such as genetics or molecular

5 For more, see DRÁBIK, Jakub: *Fašista. Příběh siru Oswalda Mosleyho /Fascist. The Story of Sir Oswald Mosley/*. Academia, Prague 2017.

biology) and claiming that it was possible to transform rye into wheat or a cuckoo into a nightingale! The absurdity of such thought structures is evident today. However, at the time of Stalin and, to a limited extent Khrushchev, Lysenko's ideas were regarded as the official doctrine of the party.

George Frost Kennan (1904–2005), an American diplomat and international relations theorist, was also well acquainted with the Soviet regime. Kennan was an expert in Soviet life and the most important active foreign policymaker in the United States. Above all, his famous Long Telegram, in which he defined the nature of Soviet Communism and on the basis of analysis of mutual relations and the beginnings of conflict outlined the absolute necessity of a change in the attitude that still regarded the USSR as a wartime ally, marked in 1946 a major breakthrough in Soviet-American relations. It was then that the Cold War between East and West started, and Kennan lived long enough to see the end of this conflict and the collapse of the Communist regimes of Central and South Eastern Europe.

One of the greatest traitors in modern Czechoslovak history, Jaroslav Nachtmann (1915–1995), began life as a traffic warden. In his case I am not afraid to use the term monster. He was one of the most powerful members of the Gestapo in Prague, responsible for the deaths of dozens, perhaps hundreds of Czechoslovak patriots, many of them caught after being lured into joining fictitious anti-Nazi resistance organisations. At the same time, he had an over-active imagination. He claimed, for example, to be a dentist, offering an evidently falsified university degree. Even after the Second World War, when everyone who was familiar with his case would have expected harsh punishment for collaboration and a direct role in the deaths of many resistance fighters, he made a living in the USSR as a dentist (both in the Gulag and later as a free man). When in 1963 he was finally extradited from the USSR to face criminal prosecution in Czechoslovakia (in October 1964 he received 14 years in prison for the death of at least 200 Czechoslovak citizens during the occupation), he defended himself, among other things, with the extremely positive evaluations and references of his patients. According to the study's author Jiří Padevět, in the years 1967–1968, the Czechoslovak secret police (StB) registered him as a person of interest. However, after considerable publicity in 1968, he lost his value to the StB. In 1974, he was allowed to emigrate legally to Germany.

The Italian book magnate Giangiacomo Feltrinelli (1926–1972) is proof that the possession of great wealth does not necessarily mean conservative attitudes (this study is written by Mikuláš Pešta). On the contrary, Feltrinelli, a member of the Communist Party of Italy and a strongly left-to-anarchist-oriented man, was one of the major sponsors of terrorist groups in Western Europe (such as the RAF). He believed that through organised guerrilla fighters, i.e. a special resistance movement, he could weaken the traditional democratic system and bring about a change in the social order, for example in Italy (here he supported the separatist movements in Sardinia and Sicily).

The last portrait (by Tomáš Vojáček) offered by the publication is dedicated to the Swiss gentleman of tennis, Roger Federer (born 1981). Perhaps it is right that the team of authors decided to include in the book a profile of this exceptional sports-

man who respects the principles of fair play and is a very well-grounded man. I would like to believe that the positive energy spread by him is a sign that that the 21st century will be determined by such high-quality personalities.

I am pleased to note that few books have moved me as strongly as this one. I believe it is a great and inspiring professional work. This is certainly due to the choice of authors and themes. The fates of the prominent personalities offer us a moral lesson with a timeless validity. It is still true that those who do not understand history (including its actors), are condemned to make same fatal mistakes. The book already enjoys a place of honour in my library. I have no doubt that I will return to it.

I commend the publication unequivocally and recommend it to the wider public. It should be required reading especially for our current politicians.

◆ Jan Kalous