5 Independent Historiography Reborn

‘History has stopped. Nothing exists except an endless present in which the Party is always right.

‘The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc . . . the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it.

‘And yet he was in the right: They were wrong and he was right. The obvious, the silly, and the true had got to be defended . . . Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows.’ – George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (London, 1954, pp. 127, 171, 68).

No one has analysed more brilliantly the moral and spiritual crisis of contemporary Czechoslovakia, and the fate of its history, than Václav Havel, in his now famous letter to Gustáv Husák in April 1975.¹ ‘In a society which is really alive’, he wrote, ‘there is naturally always something happening. . . . Any society that is alive is a society with a history.’ However, in an ‘entropic’ society, as Havel called it, in which ‘the mechanical prevails over the vital’ and ‘order without life’ exists, true history cannot exist. ‘In our country, too, one has the impression that for some time there has been no history. Slowly, but surely, we are losing the sense of time. We begin to forget what happened when, what came earlier and what later, and the feeling that it really doesn’t matter overwhelms us. As uniqueness disappears from the flow of events, so does continuity; everything merges into the single grey image of one and the same cycle and we say, “There is nothing happening”.’ In this situation the ‘disorder of real history’ is replaced by the ‘orderliness of pseudo-history’ which is determined not by ‘the life of society’ but by ‘an official planner’.

Two other authors, writing in samizdat, discussed the theme of ‘a-historicalness.’ The Slovak philosopher, Miroslav Kusý, condemned the ‘ignorant usurper’ who sought to make of historic Bratislava ‘a town pro-Russian and pro-Communist from time immemorial’.² Everywhere there are Lenin statues, Lenin squares, and Lenin streets, and fewer and fewer are the reminders of great Slovaks such as Štúr, Kollár, or Hviezdoslav. Štefánik, the eminent Slovak leader, has
twice lost the street named after him. Goethe has been replaced by Gorky; Liszt by Tchaikovsky; Masaryk by the mundane ‘Main Street’. A central square which once bore the name of Stalin, before that of Hlinka, earlier still that of Archduke Frederick, and was once called The Republic, has become ‘The Square of the National Uprising’. This is the only Slovak event designated as a national holiday (29 August). ‘It is not true,’ Kusý concluded, ‘that there are two histories: the real (the actual, the really happening) and the interpreted (or disinterpreted). There is, alas, only one living history – and that is the interpreted one. Every usurper knows this very well; what he succeeds in wiping out of the consciousness of the nation, what he succeeds in instilling into that consciousness in altered form – all that ceases to be the living national history.’

The Czech political analyst, Milan Šimečka, developed the same theme further in an eloquent afterword to a Czech edition of Orwell’s 1984.³ ‘Our comrade, Winston Smith’, as he called Orwell’s tragic hero, was ‘forced to live in a society without history; better said, without real history, with only a history instrumentally derived from the present’ (p. 275). In Orwell’s 1984, ‘a-historicalness was brought to perfection,’ Šimecka observed. ‘The mass of the proles knew practically nothing of history and the members of the inner party had to put up with doctored history’ (p. 279). History was effectively wiped from the consciousness of most people. Poor Winston Smith could only find some fragments of truth here and there, especially in the forbidden book by Goldstein to which he secured access. Nonetheless he was determined to seek out more of the truth about the past.

Czech and Slovak scholars suffered a fate similar to that of Winston Smith and, like him, sought to extricate themselves from it. ‘We all live in an artificial state of a-historicalness’, wrote Šimečka. At the same time, like Smith, some of them engaged in a sustained effort to escape from this state. ‘The re-thinking, to which Winston, and all of us, devoted ourselves’, observed Šimečka, ‘was not an obsession – it was a simple act of self-preservation, a defense against total disintegration and a striving for human dignity’ (p. 276). It is to this ‘re-thinking’ of history of Czechs and Slovaks that this chapter is devoted.