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# МАССОВЫЕ ОПРОСЫ, ЭКСПЕРИМЕНТЫ, МОНОГРАФИЧЕСКИЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

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## THE CZECHS AND THEIR HISTORY: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS\*

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This article aims to provide the first complete overview of the nature and content of the historical consciousness of the Czech population on the basis of sociological methods. Historical consciousness is understood not only as a body of knowledge, impressions, and images of the past, but, above all, as an awareness of certain connections between the past (stored in collective memory), present and future; as a consciousness which has contributed to people's attitudes to the present and the future. The issue of historical consciousness is examined with the tools provided by sociological methods, in particular, quantitative methods. First, the size of the population interested in the history of the Czech Republic as such is assessed; then the focus is shifted to some general aspects of historical consciousness, particularly the ideas of people concerning the importance of the forces shaping the course of history, and their assessment of the general importance of history. In conclusion, the authors present the evaluations by the Czech population of their national history, its key stages and major events. In the final discussion there is a comprehensive interpretation of the empirical data in terms of the existing theoretical research models. In this discussion attention is paid to patterns of historical changes in people's perception of their past, as well as the selectivity of historical consciousness and its influence on the political situation, social changes and personal life experience.

**Key words:** historical consciousness, collective memory, knowledge, Czech national history, questionnaire survey.

In the 19th and the early 20th century, there was a widely shared notion that history has a meaning and a purpose. This period was dominated by what is often referred to as 'historicism' [10. P. 35]. People identified trends in the past that seemed to cut across epochs and move in the direction of a particular goal, which, once attained, would mark the fulfilment or culmination of some historical plan. In the minds of people at that time, the horizons of the past and the future — and of historical consciousness — differed in appearance and depth from what they are today. Nowadays, enlightened by the events and disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such faith in the meaning of history and what especially post-modernist theorists have identified as its 'grand narratives' is es-

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\* This article was prepared as part of work on the project "A Sociological Study of the Historical Consciousness of the Population of the Czech Republic". GAČR 403/09/0862.

entially non-existent [14]. For people in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century the past represents something else, and their historical consciousness is different in nature.

For a long time, historical knowledge was the research domain of history and philosophy. Sociology remained somewhat on the sidelines in this regard. In the project this article is based on we have tried to address this situation. There are many reasons to take an interest in historical consciousness. One of them is that it provides an opportunity to reflect on the contemporary state of European culture, modernity and post-modernity, the transformation processes in central and eastern Europe, European integration, identity issues, and, by no means last of all, the new electronic media. Another important motivation for studying historical consciousness is provided by the events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that set in train important political and social changes and with them the need to reassess shared interpretations of the past. The instalment or defeat of undemocratic political regimes has always been accompanied by a redefinition of the way in which history should be viewed.

In the humanities and the social sciences ‘historical consciousness’ is similar to the concept of ‘collective memory’, but these two terms are not interchangeable (1). Jürgen Straub provides a definition that can serve as our starting point. He identifies historical consciousness with historical-narrative constructions and representations of historical understandings in the area of human thought [23. P. 48—49]. Peter Seixas defines historical consciousness as both the individual and the collective understanding of the past, which is influenced by cognitive and cultural factors [22. P. 10]. The fundamental point is that historical consciousness also encompasses a historical understanding of the present and the future. This was highlighted by Jörn Rüsen, who describes historical consciousness as a specific orientation that is applied to deal with present-day situations in life [21. P. 65].

This article examines the historical consciousness of the population of the Czech Republic. In Czech scholarship, historical consciousness has tended to be described in two different ways. One view interprets it as the sum of knowledge about history possessed by a particular group or community of people. It sometimes distinguishes between historical knowledge, based on scholarly findings, and historical consciousness as the sum of that knowledge which is not historical or scholarly in nature. The second view understands historical consciousness broadly as a kind of general impression of history, the state of mind of society, which is something that depends on the character of the given age and is consequently variable (2). The approach used in this paper is based on the second, broader conception of historical consciousness, which strikes us as more sustainable for research. We interpret historical consciousness as not just an aggregate of the knowledge, impressions, and ideas about the past, but above all as the knowledge that exists about certain relationships (of continuities, discontinuities, and changes) between the past (lodged in collective memory), the present, and the future; as a form of knowledge that co-shapes people’s attitudes towards the present and the future.

Our approach to historical consciousness is inspired by the concept of the sociology of knowledge, specifically its wider interpretation as formulated by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, according to which the sociology of knowledge should encompass everything that a given society considers to be knowledge [3. P. 21]. For us this means not so much the great bodies of knowledge embodied by religion, ideologies, utopias, art and science, but rather the kind of (general) knowledge or historical know-

ledge possessed by 'ordinary people' as the actors in everyday social life. We are mainly interested in how people view history and what significance they ascribe it. Understood this way, historical consciousness to us is more than just a matter of theoretical reflection, it is also the subject of empirical research.

At the outset it is important to note that as yet no comprehensive, well-developed theory of historical consciousness that we could reliably draw on exists. What is available in this field at present is a certain set of assumptions that on the level of empirical research could be used to formulate research questions and working hypotheses. The first assumption we proceed from is that historical consciousness can be understood as an entity (an element of human knowledge) that has a certain content, selected aspects of which can be observed and measured in particular parts of the population with the aid of sociological research instruments. Four assumptions we use are: a) the character of historical consciousness is fundamentally dependent on the interests and knowledge that inform the relationship people have to history; b) a constituent part of historical consciousness is certain (often relatively vague) ideas about the nature of the historical process (the forces that influence history and the nature of its course) and about the links between the past, the present, and the future in general; c) an evaluative view of the history of one's nation or country forms an important part of historical consciousness; d) historical consciousness is not a constant entity, but rather is itself historically variable and is above all influenced by general socio-political circumstances.

There are few empirical findings available on the historical consciousness of the Czech population. If any attention was devoted to this in the past at all, it was usually just in the form of several simple questions posed as part of a public opinion poll. Therefore, in addition to these older sources this paper draws mainly on findings from the questionnaire survey *Aktér 2009* (3), complemented in places with selected findings from focus groups that we conducted over the course of 2009 (4).

This article aims to provide the first more comprehensive overview of the nature and content of the Czech population's historical consciousness based on sociological findings. It presents an analysis of historical consciousness from the following perspectives. First we chart the Czech population's interest in history as such. Then we look at the general aspects of historical consciousness and especially at people's ideas about what forces are important in shaping the course of history and how people assess the significance of history in general. Thus framed, the account will culminate in an analysis of the assessments of national history and of the individual stages and important events in that history. The concluding discussion presents a summary interpretation of empirical findings in the context of existing theoretical concepts.

### **The interest of the Czech population in history**

One of the essential requirements for understanding the historical consciousness of the population of a given society is to know something about their interest in their past, that is, to what extent and in what way the population takes an interest in history, where they get their information, and what level of knowledge they possess. On a general level, our research findings show that only few Czech citizens claim in their own words to have a strong interest in history (in the *Aktér* survey only 4% indicated they are very interested in history). Roughly two-fifths indicate a moderate interest, which can also be interpreted to mean that these two-fifths view their interest as average. Another two-

fifths admit having little interest in history, and one-fifth declares no interest at all. Students, people with higher education, people who identify themselves as upper-middle class, and religious people are those who more often profess an interest in history. People with basic education more often declare no interest in history than other groups of the population. The figure below presents a more detailed overview of the population's interest in history defined by theme.

The Czech population's interest in history is structured along thematic lines. Domestic history ranks as the top interest, and this can refer either to the history of the Czech Republic as a whole or to the local history of the region or town a person lives in; historical monuments to some extent also fall within this category. The second most popular theme relates more to particular historical points of interest, events, or places, and includes biographies of famous people, myths and legends, and the above-mentioned interest in historical monuments like castles and chateaus. The third most popular historical theme relates to the history of places that are in some way remote to contemporary Czechs, either geographically (the history of the world, Europe, or non-European civilisations) or in time (the history of past civilisations). The last two thematic areas the Czech population shows an interest in are both specific: one of them could with some license be called the history of cultural development (the history of everyday life, art, ideas, religion), and the other is the history of civilizational progress (science, technology, the military, war, economic and political history).

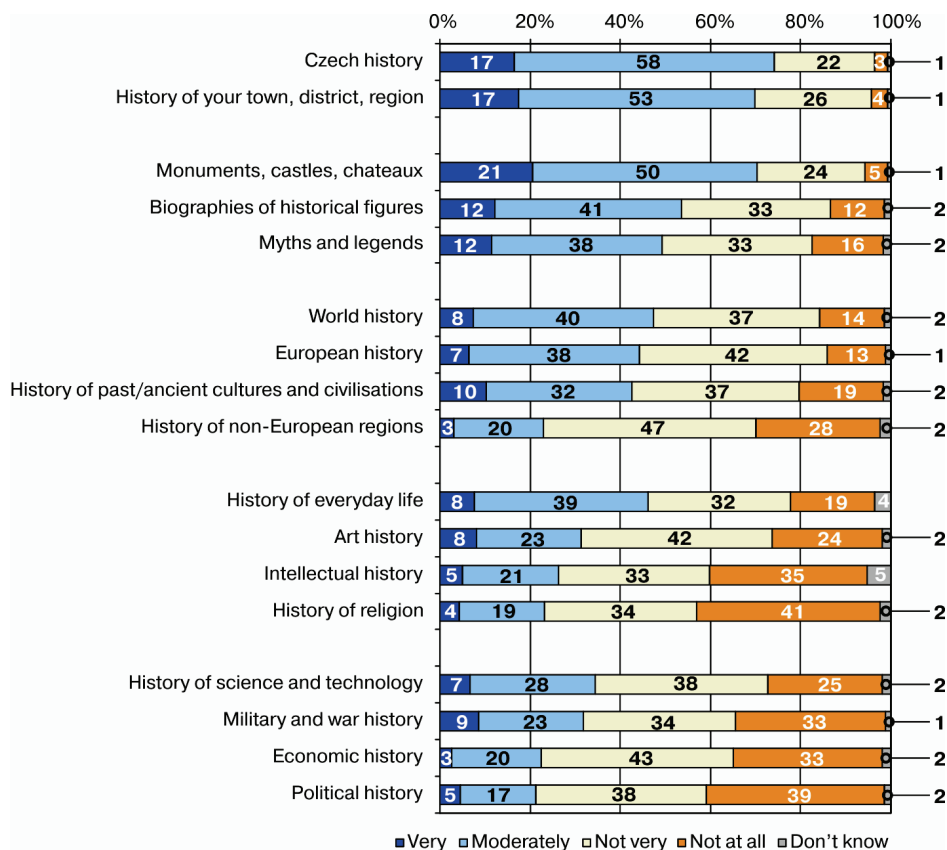
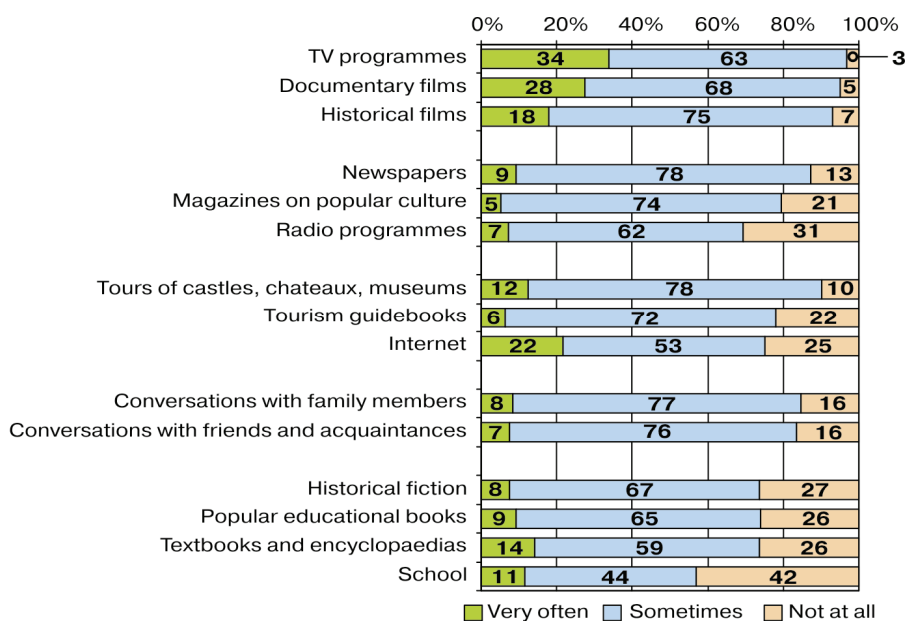


Fig. 1. The interest of the Czech population in different historical themes (5)

As in the case with the question about the population's general interest in history, here again it is more often students who express a stronger interest than other parts of the population in the historical areas described above, and people with higher education show more of an interest than others in Czech history, European history, world history, and the history of monuments. There are no really significant differences between levels of interest by any other key socio-demographic characteristics, perhaps with the exceptions of the stronger interest shown by people over the age of 60 in Czech history and regional history and the generally stronger appeal that military and war history holds for men than women.

Not too surprisingly the most commonly used source of information on history are the media, in particular television and film (television programmes, documentary films, historical films), and the internet. The least used sources are radio programmes, which conforms to the comparatively lower radio listenership ratings, and popular education books and historical novels. Education at school occupies a somewhat specific position, as understandably in the sample of respondents as a whole it ranks somewhat low as a source of information, but among students and people with a university education naturally it is cited much more often. Similarly, for analogical reasons a much larger proportion of students and people with higher education get their information from textbooks and encyclopaedias. Finally, a distinct role is played by the internet, which is not used at all as a source of historical information by a large group of the population (mainly older people, who generally use the internet less), but by a similarly large group it is used as a source very often (in this case mainly by younger people, who generally make more use of the internet). Alongside these differences it is also worth mentioning that students more often than others get information not just from the internet, school, textbooks, and encyclopaedias, but also from conversations with family members. Conversely, television is more often the main source of information for people over the age of 60 than it is for others.



**Fig. 2.** Sources of information on history used by the Czech population

The Czech population's assessment of their own historical knowledge seems to conform to the relatively weak interest they show in history and their relatively infrequent use of sources of historical information. Less than one-tenth of Czechs assesses their knowledge of history as above-average (8%), around one-half as average (48%), and two-fifths as below-average (42%). Understandably students and people with higher education tend more often to regard their level of historical knowledge as above-average, while people with basic education more often than others define their level of knowledge as below average. The findings from the focus groups conducted indicated that there is no particularly strong interest in history. When people do express an interest it tends to be directed at a particular area of history, and only rarely do those people actively look for more information to further their knowledge.

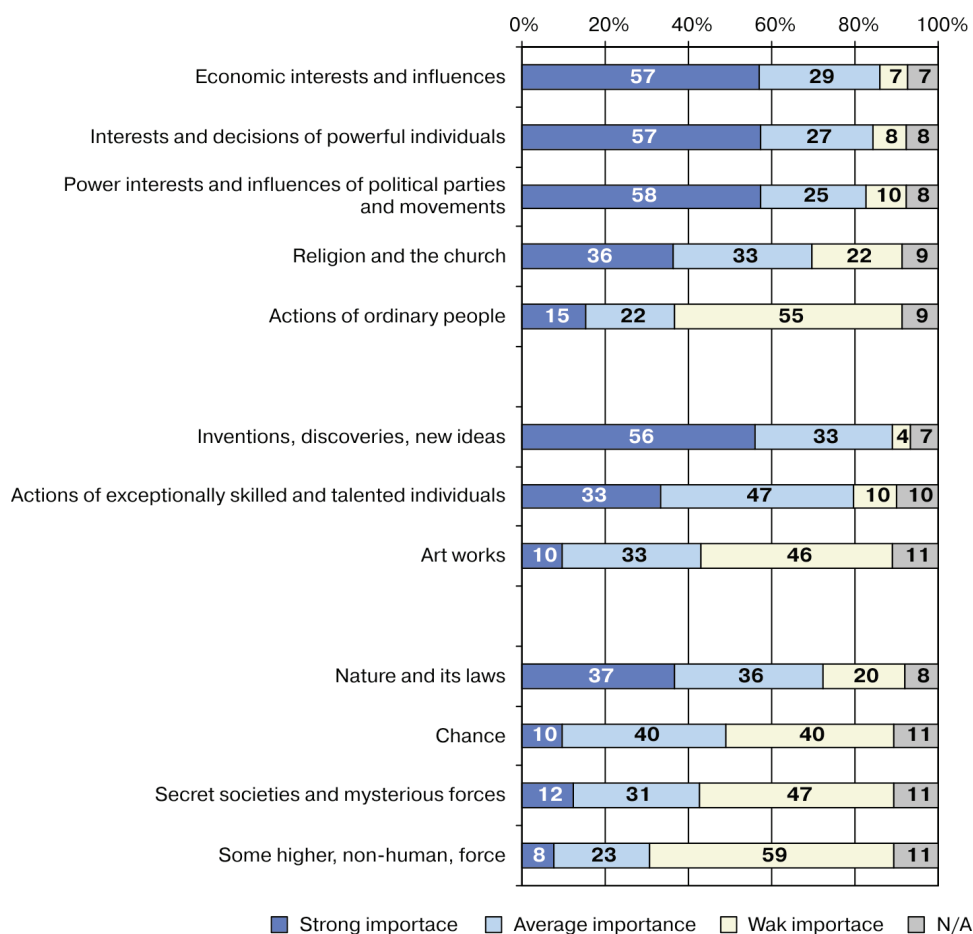
### **General aspects of the historical consciousness of the Czech population**

However much information about a population's interest in history is essential to understanding the context of the historical consciousness of that population, a low real level of interest is not an indicator of the absence of historical consciousness as such. A member of a society will have some idea about the course of history or the significance of history even if he or she has no or little interest in or knowledge of actual history.

In the introduction it was mentioned that we consider an important part of historical consciousness to be people's notions about what the overall course of history may have been like and what forces shape history and their opinions about the meaning of history as such and especially in relation to the present and the future. These significant aspects of the Czech population's historical consciousness will be presented below with the help of findings from research questions on this theme posed as part of the above-mentioned Aktér 2009 survey. The first relevant findings, however, were produced by the focus groups held over the course of 2009 before the questionnaire survey was carried out.

The focus group findings primarily show that a deeper reflection of historical processes is rarely encountered among the general population. Nevertheless, in the focus groups on this theme a frequently occurring view was that history follows a regular course marked by elements of randomness, and another was that all events are in some way connected and tie in with each other, but not necessarily in a certain direction. A standardised question, intended to categorise the basic findings from the qualitative part of the project in generalised arose from the results of the questionnaire survey. This shows that, with regard to how people view the course of human history, almost three-quarters of respondents associate it with the image of the motion of waves, where good and bad times alternate with each other (59%). Only a small portion of the population view history as a gradual, forward movement in the direction of progress (15%) or, conversely, as a gradual backward movement in the direction of decline (6%), or see it moving in a continuous cycle (12%). What is interesting is that this structure of views on the nature of the historical process is almost universally shared by the Czech population and there is in principle little variation between groups of the population in different age categories or with different levels of education.

There are however some small differences between population groups over what factors in their view propel history. Generally people tend to identify ‘power’ as having the biggest influence on the course of history, be it political, personal, or economic power, which corresponds to the belief the ordinary people have little influence on the historical process. Alongside power the prevailing view is that inventions and discoveries also play a significant role, but this is the only area where the creative influence of humanity is deemed to have a role comparable to that of power, and, for instance, art or individual human enterprise are regarded by the Czech public as playing a less important role. Accordingly, a not very strong influence is also assigned to those aspects/factors that do not involve conscious human effort, such as chance, mysterious forces, or a higher power. The laws of nature are ascribed a somewhat stronger role than this in the historical process. Although the Czech public’s opinions are on this point relatively consistent across various groups, people over the age of 60, for instance, less often regard the actions of ordinary people as significant and conversely refer somewhat more than others to the importance of the influences of power and politics, powerful individuals, religion, and the church; the influence of religion and the church is also more often highlighted by people with higher education.



**Fig. 3.** The Czech population’s opinions on the factors/forces that influence the course of history (6)

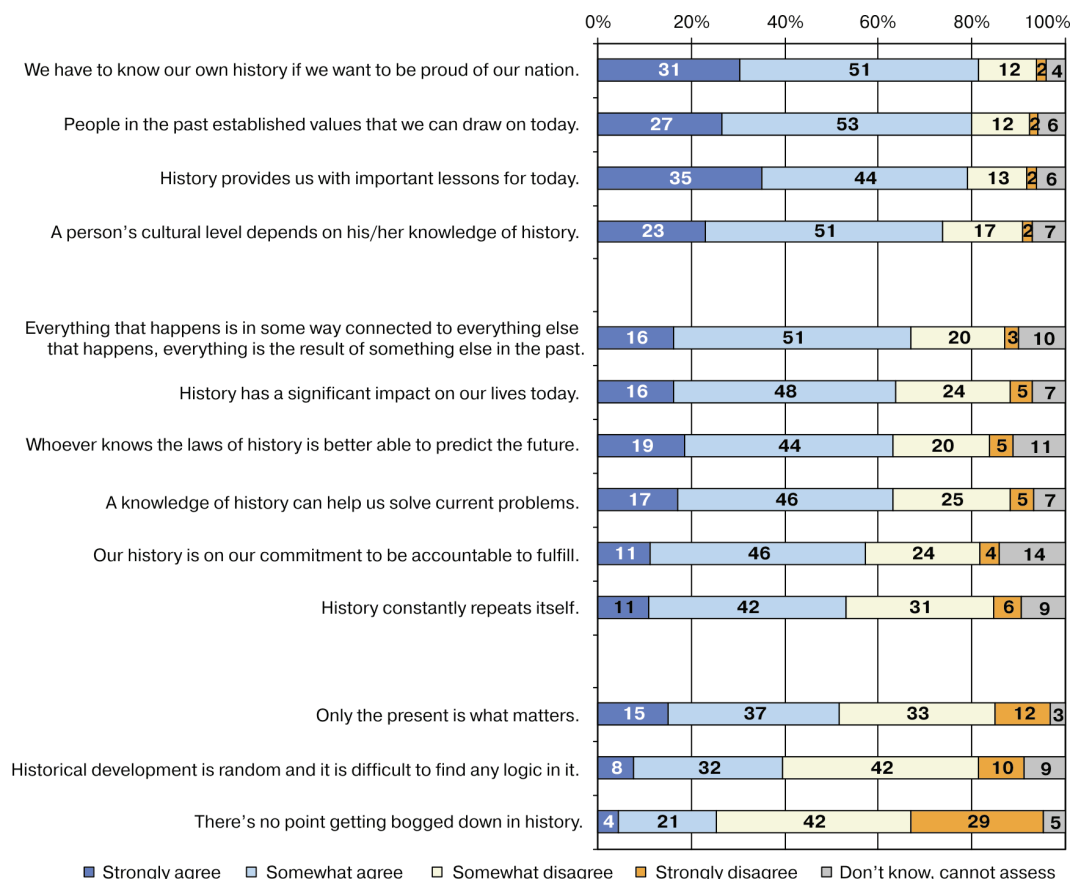


Fig. 4. The Czech population's opinions on history and its significance (7)

With regard to the nature of historical consciousness, a summary analysis of the full series of statements reveals three important types of concepts into which people's ideas of the past can be organised, which are then reflected in three more general viewpoints. The first viewpoint can be summarily referred to as the positive affirmation approach, the second as the noetic-instrumentalist approach, and the third as the idea of historical nihilism.

Positive affirmation mainly describes statements that ascribe strong value to history and historical knowledge in the sense that history constitutes an important part of the cultural heritage passed down to us from previous generations and it is our responsibility to ensure its preservation. Typical statements of this type include: 'A person's cultural level depends on his/her knowledge of history'; 'People in the past established values that we can draw on today'; 'We have to know our own history if we want to be proud of our nation'; 'History provides us with important lessons for today'.

The noetic-instrumentalist approach can be summarily described as a tendency to see history as a logical process and to perceive historical knowledge as important for practical reasons and as a form of knowledge that can be employed instrumentally — with some exaggeration — as a kind of 'know-how'. This concept is expressed in state-



ments like: 'History constantly repeats itself'; 'Everything that happens is in some way connected to everything else that happens, everything is the result of something else in the past'; 'History has a significant impact on our lives today'; 'Whoever knows the laws of history is better able to predict the future'; 'A knowledge of history can help us solve current problems'.

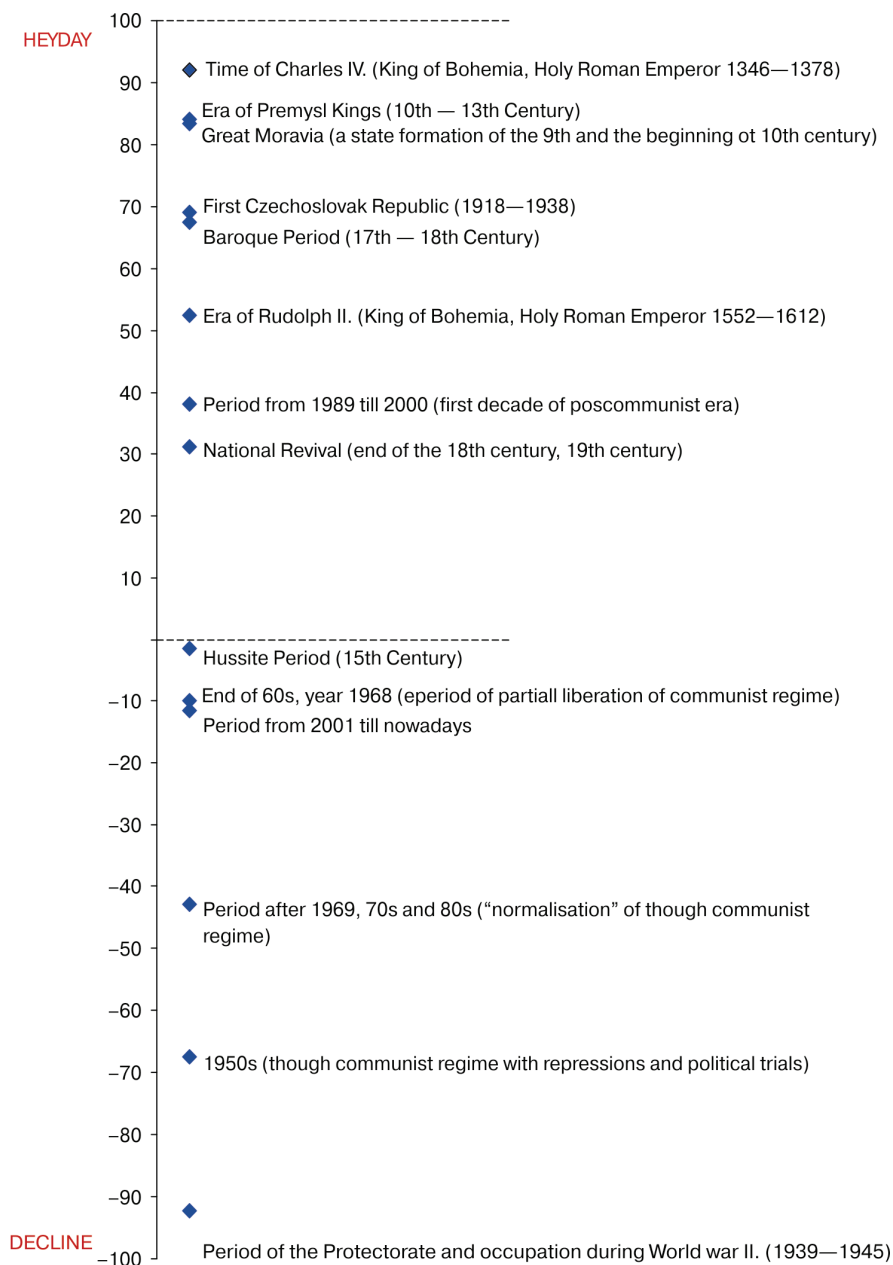
If the first two outlooks represent a positive orientation in relation to history and historical knowledge, the third, which we specify as historical nihilism, represents the opposite tendency and one that characteristically rejects or questions the significance of history. Typical examples are statements like: 'The course of history is random and little logical can be found to it'; 'Only the present is what matters'; 'There is no point getting bogged down in history'. 'Historical development is random and it is difficult to find any logic in it.'

Although there are no apparent differences by sex or age category as to which of these views of history people embrace, each of the three operates somewhat differently in relation to education and the interest in history as such. The first analyses show that the noetic-instrumentalist approach to history is held to roughly equal degrees by every educational group and by people with different levels of knowledge or interest in history. However, there are some differences with regard to the other two approaches. The higher the level of education, the stronger the interest in history, and the greater the level of knowledge of history, the more often we find the positive affirmation viewpoint on history. Conversely, the less interest in and knowledge of history and the lower the education level the more often people are inclined to adopt the historical-nihilist viewpoint (8).

### **The Czech population's assessment of Czech national history**

In the following sections we turn our attention to how Czechs view and assess their national history and how this assessment has changed since the end of the Second World War. A general expression of how Czechs relate to their own history is whether or not they feel a sense of pride in their history, which was examined by one of the questions in Aktér 2009. The results show that Czech society has a relatively lukewarm relationship to its history: just slightly more than one-half of the population claim that they feel a sense of pride when they look at the past of the Czech nation (57%), while only around one-tenth of the population definitely has this feeling (11%). Conversely, more than one-third (36%) do not feel this way, and the remainder do not know how they feel (7%). Students, people with higher education, and people over the age of 60 profess the strongest sense of pride in Czech history (9).

However, a closer look at how people assess the course of Czech history produces a more colourful picture than the responses to the general question might suggest. Aktér 2009 also posed more specific questions on selected historical periods. The figure below presents a basic overview of how people assessed the significance of various periods in Czech history.



**Fig. 5.** The population's assessment of different periods in Czech history (10)

The figure shows the prevailing positive assessments assigned to the period of Great Moravia and the period of the Premyslid dynasty, the ages of Charles IV and Rudolph II, the era of the National Revival, the First Czechoslovak Republic, and, in modern history, the period from 1989 to 2000. Negative assessments predominate for the period of the Protectorate and the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany, the 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1980s (normalisation), and even the present.

There are, however, some differences by age and education group in how people assess individual historical events. People over the age of 60 somewhat more often than

others cited the Hussite and National Revival periods and the late 1960s as good times. People with higher education somewhat more often mentioned the age of Rudolph II, the Baroque, the National Revival, and the First Republic. People of faith more often than non-religious people identified the era of Great Moravia, the age of Charles IV, and the National Revival and the First Republic as good times in history. It is also worth mentioning that no major differences were observed between religious and non-religious people's assessments of the Hussite and Baroque periods.

In order to discover more about how deeply the Czech population reflects on its history and to obtain a more complex picture of their historical consciousness, the selected periods in the above-cited research were also examined from other perspectives. In an effort to take in the full expanse of Czech history, the results of the previous part of the research, and an analysis by experts on Czech history, the following periods were examined: the periods of Great Moravia, the Přemyslid kings, Charles IV, the National Revival, the Hussite movement, the First Republic, the Protectorate and the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, socialism in 1948—1989, and the period after 1989. Each of these periods was then examined with respect to four dimensions: what level knowledge Czechs profess to have of the given period (good — bad), the significance they ascribe to each period in the context of Czech history (positive — negative), the degree of attention it generally receives (little — too much), and the scale of the given period's impact (local — international).

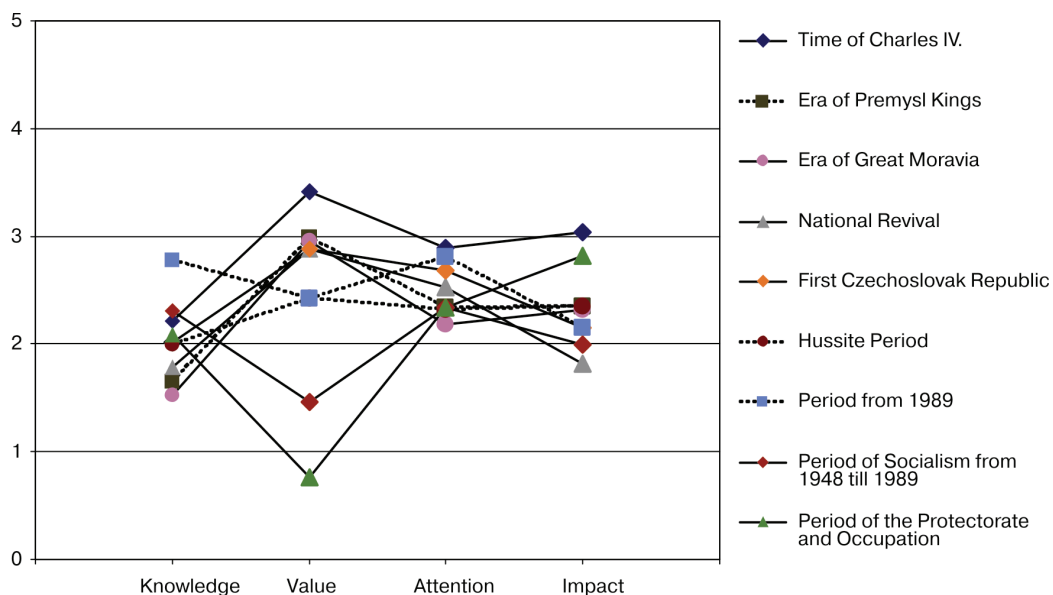


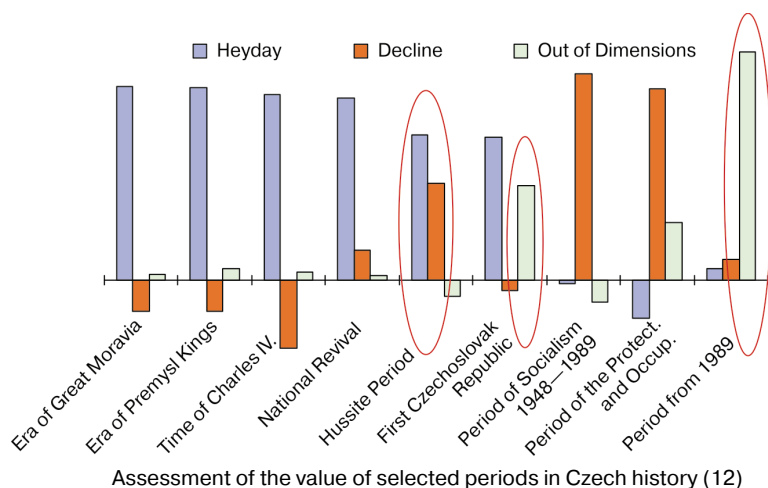
Fig. 6. Assessment of selected periods from different perspectives (11)

The basic results show that Czech citizens do not exhibit much ability to differentiate in detail between the selected periods. This is apparent on the one hand from the fact that with respect to the criteria of knowledge, attention, and scale of impact the assessments of every period are very similar, and on the other hand from the fact that the average values of the individual dimensions are found to be very close to the neutral centre of the scale. This concentration effect is most apparent in the case of knowledge of the given historical periods, which are assessed almost identically, even when the peri-

ods are very close to each other in time or even concurrent. This phenomenon may result from the fact that the centre of the scale evidently served here as an anchor point from which to determine the ‘optimal’ response, which is a common strategy used to answer questions when a respondent is unsure about where an item should be ranked on a scale [29].

It should be noted that this identified uncertainty applies to every group of respondents, regardless of their education level or whether or not they are interested in history. The only dimension by which the different periods are distinguished relatively well is, once again, that of the significance of the period in Czech history. With the exception of the above-mentioned minor differences, however, even this assessment does not vary significantly between groups of the population defined by age, education, or level of interest in history, which on the whole attests to the population having a more general and not too detailed view of national history.

Behind the assessments of individual periods we could expect to find a more general common denominator that people use to systematise and organise their view of individual periods of history. As already noted, basically the only one of the four examined assessment dimensions that the Czech population proved capable of using to distinguish between periods was that of assessing the positive or negative significance of a period in Czech history. This dimension reveals a relatively clear and universally shared picture of Czech history (the periods are relatively clearly divided and generally perceived as either a period of ascent (good times) or a period of decline (bad times), but this evidently does not apply to all the stages and episodes in history (see Figure 7). Within the limited capacity of the research/survey this was apparent in the case of the First Republic, the present day, and the Hussite period. Exploratory factor analysis has the capacity to reveal the hidden, more general dimensions behind the assessment of individual cases, and the findings of such analysis showed that the present period does not fit in the constellation of assessments about the period’s significance for Czech history, the First Republic does only to some extent, and the Hussite period, unlike the others examined, is not viewed by the public in either positive or negative terms.



Assessment of the value of selected periods in Czech history (12)

The positive field of the dimension is illustrated by the area above the axis and the negative field by the area below it; the height of the column below the axis illustrates the negative field of the given dimension; this means, for instance, that the period of Charles IV. is strongly viewed as a period of prosperity (good times) and relatively strongly viewed as a period of decline (bad times)

With regard to the present, we may safely assume that people do not view it through the same prism of assessment as that through which they view the past. The present is by definition the present, and assessment of its significance for Czech history is irrelevant because it is not yet a part of history. In the case of the First Republic, an important role is undoubtedly played by the fact that in the years following the Second World War the public image of this period changed under the pressures of political climate, propaganda and education. This is also the case of the Hussite period. The historical interpretation of the Hussite movement has changed in the past century and with it evidently also the public perception of it. This was moreover confirmed in the findings from the focus group. While according to some people certain aspects of the Hussite period (the attempt to reform circumstances in society, the Hussites' victories on the battlefield) rank it in the category of periods that can be regarded as famous moments in Czech history, in other respects (its destructiveness, violence) the Czech public at the same time sees it as a period of negative significance. Among the historical periods the public distinguishes more clearly the Hussite period thus occupies a very controversial position, and it hard to assume that at present any strong initiative might emerge to solve this issue comparable to the discussions around the significance of the Hussite period that formed part of the debate over the meaning of Czech history at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Changes in the perception of Czech history over the past 65 years**

The concept of historical consciousness presumes that the way in which people view history is not static in nature, but rather changes historically and from one generation to the next. This occurs partly in connection with how historical periods or events gradually move from the sphere of personal experience to the sphere of mediated experience, and partly in connection with the socio-cultural changes that occur in society as a whole, which to a large degree determines how people view history. This assumption can to some extent be verified in the example of the Czech Republic, as simple questions about the perception of the past have been posed here since the beginning of public opinion research in the country in 1946.

#### **The 1946 survey**

The Czech public's views on Czech history were first observed in a survey carried out in December 1946 by the Czechoslovak Institute for Public Opinion Research at the Ministry of Information [1] on a sample of approximately 1000 respondents from Bohemia and Moravia (the survey was not conducted in Slovakia) (13). One of the key questions posed in the 1946 survey read: 'What in your view was the greatest period in Czech history?' (14). The responses were as follows:

*Table 1*

**What in your view was the greatest period in Czech history? (in %)**

	December 1946 (N = 1000)
Hussite Wars (1419—1437)	19
Time of Charles IV (Charles IV, King of Bohemia, Holy Roman Emperor 1346—1378)	17
Contemporary Period (i.e. 1945—1946)	16

End of Table 1

	December 1946 (N = 1000)
Time of St. Wenceslas (St. Wenceslas, Czech prince cca 924—935)	8
First Czechoslovak Republic (1918—1938)	8
Time of George of Poděbrady (George of Poděbrady, King of Bohemia 1458—1471)	7
National Revival (end of the 18th Century, 19 <sup>th</sup> Century)	3
Baroque Period (17th—18th Century)	0
Don't know	22

Source: [30. P. 49]

In 1946 respondents most often declared the greatest period in Czech history to have been the Hussite Wars, the era of Charles IV, and the contemporary period (around one-fifth of respondents answered ‘Don’t know’). Asked at what time in history the Czech nation experienced its greatest decline, the most common answers were the Protectorate 1939—1945 (54%), the Thirty Years War 1618—1648 (26%), the period of Brandenburg rule in Bohemia 1278—1283 (4%) and the Second Republic 1938—1939 (3%); 13% of respondents said they didn’t know [30. P. 49].

Although it would be risky to interpret these findings retrospectively without further substantiation (15), it seems that those generations that experienced the trauma of the Munich Agreement, capitulation, and six years of subjection to the Nazis were mainly impressed by those historical periods in which the Czech nation was powerful and proved itself in battle. The Hussite Wars were a period frequently highlighted during the 19th-century National Revival, and in the 1950s, Communist ideology also embraced it and interpreted it as a foreshadowing of the revolutionary movement. The third most common response — referring to the time people were currently living in — is a characteristic expression of the post-war optimism linked to the end of the war and liberation. In 1946 the First Czechoslovak Republic was not cited very frequently by respondents, and obviously one of the reasons for this was that the economic crisis of the 1930s and especially the end of the republic in 1938 following on the Munich Agreement, otherwise known as the Munich Dictate, were events still within living memory.

We should add that there was a certain methodological and practical problem attached to the poll in 1946 that also appears in all the later surveys, namely that it asked questions about the modern past and the more distant past side by side and in comparison. The survey questions talk actually about two types of periods. The first type (‘the First Republic’ and ‘the contemporary period’) refer to a time that in one way or another most of the respondents had experienced personally. The second type covers all the other periods and relates to epochs so far in the past that they were beyond the living memory of any of the respondents. Clearly, in an historical assessment, historical events which respondents know of only indirectly from lessons at school, or as rendered in literature or film, have a different role and weight in people’s consciousness than events which they had the opportunity to experience and live through. However, this difference is not absolute, as even the ‘present’ is not unmediated; actors interpret it through socially determined frameworks (16). Nevertheless, in the case of the first type of events, the lived experience and strong emotional involvement in the events have a corrective effect

on historical consciousness that cannot be expected, for instance, in relation to the period of Charles IV. How and whether periods more remote in time are present in an individual's historical consciousness depends much more on the individual's formal education and personal interest in history, as information about such events are less present in the mass media and less a part of everyday conversation.

### The 1968 survey

The Public Opinion Research Institute of Czechoslovakia functioned up until the Communist coup in 1948. Subsequently this kind of research was not conducted at all for a long time. It was not until 1966 that the Public Opinion Research Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences was founded, which two years later, in October 1968 (shortly before the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops) conducted a poll titled 'The Relationship of Czechs and Slovaks to History'. Below we will present a brief outline of the findings obtained for Czech regions based on a sample of 662 respondents (17).

In this survey a key theme again was the public's assessment of selected periods of national history. The survey question read: 'When you think about the history of the Czech nation, which period do you regard as its most famous, as a period of progress and development?' The responses are presented in the following overview:

Table 2

**When you think about the history of the Czech nation, which period do you regard as its most famous, as a period of progress and development? (in %) (18)**

	October 1968 (N = 662)
First Czechoslovak Republic (1918—1938)	39
Hussite Period (15th Century)	36
Time of Charles IV (Charles IV, King of Bohemia, Holy Roman Emperor 1346—1378)	31
Period after January 1968 ('Prague Spring')	21
National Revival (end of the 18th Century, 19 Century)	15
1945—1948 (the so-called Third Republic)	9
Time of George of Podebrady (George of Poděbrady, King of Bohemia 1458—1471)	5
Time of Ottokar II. of Bohemia (Přemysl Otakar II., King of Bohemia 1253—1278)	5
Greater Moravia (a state formation of the 9th Century and the beginning of the 10th Century)	3
Period after February 1948 (establishment of Communist power)	3
(St. Wenceslas, Czech prince cca 924—935)	1
Other Answers	7

**Note:** The question was posed as an open question, the respondents were able to give two answers, so the sum of percentages is greater than 100%.

**Source:** [30. P. 7]

An interesting point about the results from 1968 is not just the reaction to the Prague Spring and August 1968, but above all the fact that the First Czechoslovak Republic is now highlighted and its qualities seem to have been assessed as though the period were more remote in time. Moreover, the interim had been filled with years of the build up of socialism'. Along with the First Republic also its founder, T.G. Masaryk, was reha-

bilitated in the late 1960s, only to be condemned for many years to oblivion again in the ensuing normalisation era (as a representative of ‘bourgeois ideology’).

In 1968 respondents also answered the question ‘What period do you consider to be the least glorious in Czech history, as an unhappy period for the Czech nation?’, and gave the following responses:

*Table 3*

**What period do you consider to be the least glorious in Czech history, as an unhappy period for the Czech nation? (in %) (19)**

	October 1968 (N = 662)
Protectorate, Occupation (1939—1945)	59
Period of ‘Darkness’ after the Battle of White Mountain (1620)	51
August 1968	31
1950s	20
Munich Agreement and Second Republic (1938—1939)	11
Battle of Lipany (1434)	3
Hussite Wars (1419—1437)	1
Foreign invasions (other)	1
Other Answers	4

**Note:** The question was posed as an open question, the respondents were able to give two answers, so the sum of percentages is greater than 100%.

**Source:** [30. P. 10]

The period that ranked top among the least glorious periods in history was that of the Protectorate, which at the time of the survey still fell within living memory of most of the respondents. Second place was occupied by the ‘dark’ period following the Battle of White Mountain, which, as noted above, figures differently in historical consciousness. In the next spots we find the ‘August 1968 invasion’ and ‘the 1950s’, which indicates that in the late 1960s a certain portion of the public was typically able to speak critically about certain periods and events that occurred under the Communist regime.

The conclusion to the research report on this survey in 1968 was written by the historian Jan Křen, who in it focused largely on a comparison of the findings from the polls in 1946 and 1968. One of the points he made in the report is that the biggest difference between the two polls is how the responses relate to the First Republic, which in 1968 was assessed much more positively than in 1946. He commented on this as follows: ‘Is there an illusion about this period in effect here, or is it simply the influence of the passage of time, which embellishes the past or alters criteria and its general appearance? It is hard to answer and make a distinction: perhaps all these factors are acting together’ [30. P. 39].

### **The 1989 and 1992 surveys**

The normalisation era was inauspicious for public opinion and opinion research. The climate of opinion only began to change in the late 1980s, mainly under the effect of Gorbachev’s Perestroika policy. T.G. Masaryk began to be spoken of again, albeit very cautiously, in connection to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic. In September 1989 (i.e. two months before the November revolution), an open question was introduced into an opinion poll to ask which event in the history of the nations and nationality of Czechoslovakia citizens consider the most significant (20).



Table 4

**Which event in the history of the nations and nationalities of Czechoslovakia do you consider to be the most significant?  
(September 1989, in % for each of the country's two republics)**

	Czech Republic (N=1154)	Slovak Republic (N=951)
The foundation of Czechoslovakia 1918	34	22
The liberation in 1945	18	8
Events up to 1918	8	4
February 1948 (the establishment of Communist rule/government)	7	7
The end of the Second World War	7	3
The events of 1968	3	4
Slovak National Uprising (1944)	2	22
Nationalisation	1	1
Federalisation of Czechoslovakia in 1969	1	7
Other	5	7
No event	1	1
Don't know	14	13

**Note:** The percentages have been rounded out so the sum of percentages may not equal 100%.

**Source:** IVVM survey, September 1989.

The responses again reveal a shift in public opinion. In the second half of 1989 the Czech public regarded the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 to be the most significant event, while in addition to this event the Slovak public regarded the Slovak National Uprising in 1944 as equally significant. These differences in the responses of Czech and Slovaks at that time signalled a discrepancy of opinion that after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 grew stronger and became a force contributing to the break-up of Czechoslovakia.

Other interesting findings were produced by a survey conducted in September 1992, in the atmosphere of the approaching break-up of Czechoslovakia. In this survey the Public Opinion Research Institute in Prague asked respondents about the 'most glorious period, the period of progress and development' in this history of the Czech and Slovak peoples. The responses were as follows (the question was open):

Table 5

**When you think about the history of the Czech/ Slovak nation, which period do you regard as its most glorious, as a period of progress and development?  
(in % for each of the two republics)**

Czech Republic (N = 537)		Slovak Republic (N = 503)	
Charles IV	29	1948—1989 Period	21
First Republic	23	Slovak State (1939—1945)	11
Hussite Wars	9	National Revival	8
Period since 1989	4	Slovak National Uprising (1944)	8
1948—1989 Period	3	Current Period	7
1945—1947 Period	2	1945—1947 Period	7
National Revival	2	Great Moravia	6
Premyslid Dynasty	2	First Republic	5
Great Moravia	1		
Other	4	Other	1
A nation has no history	1	A nation has no history	4
Don't know	19	Don't know	22

**Note:** The percentages have been rounded out so the sum of percentages may not equal 100%.

**Source:** [19].

In 1992 the Czech population selected the era of Charles IV more often than the First Republic as the greatest period in history, which to some extent can be explained by the fact that the Czechoslovak Federation was on the verge of breaking up and that cast a shadow over the 'Czechoslovak' concept of its founder and First President, T.G. Masaryk. Conversely, in the early 1990s in the eyes of the Czech public the period of Charles IV represented a time when the Czech lands played an important role in European history. Consequently, it is no surprise that the transformation process under way at the time, which was accompanied by the motto of 'rejoining Europe', led people to emphasize this, it could be said, very 'pro-European' period in national history.

The differences in the opinions of Czechs and Slovaks captured in this survey again clearly attest to their different perspectives on the assessment of the pre-war and post-war stages of the joint statehood of the two nations. In 1992 Slovaks assessed the period 1948—1989 much more positively than Czechs did and conversely the First Czechoslovak Republic was not assessed as highly. But when analysing such differences we need to take into account the fact that the survey was conducted during a period of tension, when debates over the division of the federation were in progress. Furthermore, the survey contained a number of other questions touching on this theme, which may have influenced respondents' answers in the course of the survey. Events of the past also tend to have a different instrumental nature for contemporaries: they serve to express identification with current events or conversely to express a distancing of oneself from them. That is why, for instance, highlighting the significance of the Slovak National Uprising or the Slovak State need not necessarily be interpreted as an expression of firm preferences for these periods, as they may also have been a way of expressing a sense of detachment towards the current federal state and an affirmation of Slovak identity (21).

### **Conclusion**

In this article we attempted to show how historical consciousness can be studied using the instruments provided by sociological methodology and particularly quantitative methodology. The research data we had available to us revealed several significant aspects of historical consciousness.

The first such aspect we examined relates to the Czech population's interest and knowledge of its own history. The findings obtained at the end of 2009 indicate that the majority of Czech citizens declare relatively little interest or knowledge of history. Czechs' interest in history is moreover often selective in character and follows thematic lines: domestic history is the most popular, followed by individual historical curiosities, world and European history, and finally the history of individual components of cultural and civilisational development, which are the least popular areas. The most commonly used sources of information about history include TV programmes and documentary films, the least common are literature of fact and fiction and radio programmes.

The second aspect of historical consciousness we looked at are people's notions about the nature of the historical process and about the relationship between the past, the present, and the future. In Czechs' eyes the course of history is influenced most by the exercise of power and political interests, the decisions of powerful individuals, inventions, discoveries, and economic forces, and most people associate the course of history with the image of waves, where good times alternate with bad times. At the general level

three streams of opinion relating to historical consciousness were identified: the positive affirmative view of history (the view that values history and historical knowledge as being an important part of the cultural heritage passed down from previous generations and it is our duty to see that it is preserved), the noetic-instrumentalist view (history is seen as a logical process and knowledge of history as a form of knowledge that can be practically applied to solve contemporary problems) and the historical-nihilistic view (the significance of history and historical knowledge for today and the future is rejected or questioned).

The third aspect of historical knowledge this article looked at was how people assess national history. The findings show that Czech society has a relatively detached relationship to its own history. While Czech history inspires just over one-half of the population with a sense of pride, more than one-third has no such feeling (22). The population also shows relatively little ability to differentiate between the different stages in Czech national history.

Questions designed to observe how people assess individual periods in Czech national history were in some rare cases also posed in sociological research conducted in past decades. However, these questions were formulated in a different way, so they cannot be compared statistically, but they do tell us something about how the historical consciousness of Czechs has changed over time. The most common answers given in these surveys — we can provisionally refer to them as ‘the dominant events in national memory’ — follow the following pattern, which shows how the collective view of the past has changed over the course of the observed period.

Table 6

**The dominant events in national memory**

Survey year	What was significant for the given time of the survey	Periods of history most often identified as the most significant in the given survey		
1946	First post-war years	Hussite Wars	Period of Charles IV	
1969	Waning of the reform period	First CS Republic	Hussite Wars	Period of Charles IV
1989	Period leading up to the Velvet Revolution	Foundation of the CS Republic	The year 1945	
1992	The early stages of the social and economic transformation	Period of Charles IV	First CS Republic	Hussite Wars
2009	‘The Present’	Period of Charles IV	First CS Republic	

This overview represents suggests a certain interpretation, but it also raises a question of a deeper, philosophical and theoretical nature. What this comparison indicates may partly be explained by the hypothesis that the public always assesses history through the prism of the given context of a certain period of time and from selects from history mainly those phenomena and events that symbolize a certain currently relevant ideal or value favoured by the public at that time. This means that shortly after the end of the Second World War the emphasis may have been placed on the period of the Hussite Wars because it symbolized the nation’s militant determination to defend national interests and build a new society. Later, in 1968, the emphasis was on freedom and democracy, which in the public’s eyes was symbolized by the First Czechoslovak Republic. After 1989 the question of the country’s European identity moved to the fore and with it the period in which the country played a strong role in Europe, namely, that of Charles IV.

However, this hypothesis points to another question: how is it possible that an event that definitively and irreversibly occurred in some particular way in the past does not remain firmly established for later generations but instead can change considerably. The American philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead has pointed out that people continuously alter their ideas about the past (and also of the future) [15]. This happens because circumstances emerge that cast what happened or what may have happened in a new light. The acting subject exposed to a new experience returns to the past and looks at it with different eyes and accordingly adjusts his or her future actions and expectations. Peter L. Berger has made a similar argument, stating that we reconstruct the past to conform to the present, to our current opinions [2. P. 56]. The past is, as Berger says, malleable, pliable, and constantly changing in relation to how we interpret it and re-explain it again and again.

Selectivity is one of the characteristic features of historical consciousness, the content of which is not constant and unchanging in nature, but rather inconstant and changeable over time. Historical consciousness and collective memory typically squeeze out unpleasant experiences and ordeals and eliminate certain themes, but, for instance, they also tend to rewrite the biographies of individual historical figures, create new myths, and revive old wounds and resentments.

However, there are other factors at play here, too. Research on this theme indicates that historical consciousness is often the subject of coercion and manipulation. Tzvetan Todorov, like many others, notes that memory is vulnerable, susceptible, and in undemocratic societies especially it can become the target of manipulation by political and power influences and often tends to suffer from such abuse [28]. This is a kind of variation on the theme of the relationship between knowledge and power elaborated in French theory by Michel Foucault. According to Todorov, the tyrannical/despotic systems of the 20<sup>th</sup> century understood that 'lands and people are conquered by conquering information and communication'. Therefore, they systematically strove to take control of historical consciousness and collective memory.

Conversely, Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of symbolic power, that is, power that acts not through coercion but by asserting itself as the power of institutionalised truth or morality, and as such is not even recognized as power. The clearest example of the effect of symbolic power is the process of compulsory state education (according to Bourdieu the state has a monopoly on legitimate symbolic force [4]). It is through the educational process, which means today increasingly through the mass media, that historical consciousness is constructed and, in conformity with the demands of the given time, reconstructed.

The historical consciousness of the Czechs is the complex outcome of processes to which all of the above-mentioned theories can be applied. It is a consciousness that in each of the post-war decades was shaped by the influence of major social changes, by pressures from the sphere of power and politics, and by dramatic life experiences. It is therefore the task of future sociological research to try to uncover and analyse these complicated processes.

#### NOTES

- (1) In the humanities researchers currently engaged in the study of the theory of historical consciousness include Jörn Rüsen [21], Peter Seixas [22], Jürgen Straub [23], Christian Laville [12]

and others. Czech historiographers that used this term include J. Křen, Miroslav Hroch, Z. Beneš and many more. The concept of collective memory, which was developed by Maurice Halbwachs [8], is primarily the domain of French researchers, such as Jacques Le Goff [13], Gérard Namer [16], Pierre Nora [17], Danièle Hervieu-Léger [9], Paul Ricœur [20], Marie-Claire Lavabre [11], etc. (for more, see [14]). In our project we interpret historical consciousness as an 'entity' that is shaped out of the interplay of effects of certain components. One such component is historical experience (history experienced personally or passed on through interpersonal contact). Another component is ideology, especially the ideology of the state, because states and their regimes use history and historical arguments to legitimise themselves. The third component (in order but not in significance) is the knowledge produced by historians and historiographers. The fourth is what in sociological research has come to be called collective memory. Alongside these components, other factors can be taken into account: the family, school, religion, art, the media — whose effects can however be incorporated into the above-mentioned components, as it is by means of these that knowledge in the form of historical experience, ideology, expert or scholarly findings, and collective memory actually spreads. These components are not wholly disjointed entities. The boundaries between them are not clearly marked, but rather are somewhat blurred; individual areas overlap with each other. For the purposes of analysis, however, it is however useful to distinguish between them [25].

- (2) As yet these discussions in Czech scholarship have not resulted in (if we leave aside texts published before 1989) any representative published outcome attempting to offer a more precise definition of historical consciousness that we could refer to here. Traces of these discussions can, however, be found on websites.
- (3) The questionnaire survey 'Aktér 2009' formed one state in the course of research on the team project 'Actors, Risks, and Trust in Society', which is part of a research project of the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague titled 'The Development of Czech Society in the European Union: Challenges and Risks'. In this survey respondents were asked a battery of questions relating to historical consciousness. Field data collection was performed by the research agency STEM between 13 and 21 December 2009, using a quota sample of 1071 respondents representative of the Czech population aged 18 and 65.
- (4) During 2009 13 focus groups with representatives of the general population were conducted as part of work on the project 'A Sociological Study of the Historical Consciousness of the Population of the Czech Republic' (GAČR 403/09/0862), which were held in Prague, České Budějovice, Brno, Olomouc, Ústí nad Labem, Ostrava and Pilsen). For details, see [18].
- (5) This thematic structure and its description are based on the results of exploratory factor analysis (Principal Component Analysis, Varimax rotation, exhausted variance: 69.9%, min. eigen value: 0.91)
- (6) For a better orientation the three forces/factors are divided into three hypothetical dimensions: 1) power, 2) creativity/creative influence, and 3) developments independent of humans/outside human influence.
- (7) This battery of questions was introduced with the sentence: 'I will now read you several statements relating to history, and for each one please tell whether you agree or disagree with it.'
- (8) These viewpoints were revealed using an exploratory factor analysis of the data from the series of questions on history and its significance. A more detailed identification of the deeper psychological factors that shape people's viewpoints of history will be the subject of future analyses in our research using a question formulated on the basis of the above findings.
- (9) A similar question posed with regard to the present reveals that far fewer people feel pride in relation to the present than in relation to the past: while 57% of the population feel a sense of pride in past Czech history, only 21% feel a sense of pride in the present. People with basic education are those who express least pride in the past and the present.
- (10) The figure is based on findings from a battery of items referring to historical events that respondents assessed on a four-point scale ('very good time', 'somewhat good time', 'somewhat

- bad time', 'very bad time'). The value of the index corresponds to the prevalence of positive assessments over negative assessments and derives from the simple difference between the share of positive assessments (very good time + somewhat good time) and negative assessments (very bad time + somewhat bad time) while excluding all responses that indicated 'Don't know'.
- (11) The figure presents the average values for individual periods on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 means the given dimension is low and 5 means the given dimension is high.
  - (12) The data correspond to the results of the exploratory factor analysis (Principal Component Analysis, Varimax rotation, exhausted variance: 64.7%, min. eigenvalue: 1.0)
  - (13) The results of the 1946 survey can be found in several sources. The first source is issue no. 8 of the journal *Veřejné mínění* (Public opinion) published in 1947 (Pp.13—15). The second is a book published in the United States in 1951, and the editor of the lengthy volume presenting an overview of the basis results of public opinion research carried out between 1935 and 1946 was Hadley Cantril. The book mainly published the results of research conducted in the United States, but it also contains information from other countries, including data from the survey conducted by the Czechoslovak Institute for Public Opinion Research at the Ministry of Information of Czechoslovakia. The third source is a publication titled *Vztah Čechů a Slováků k dějinám* (The relationship of Czechs and Slovaks to history, edited by Č. Adamec et al.), which was published by the Public Opinion Research Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences in October 1968.
  - (14) We do not know the exact wording of the question, as it is not cited in any of the sources. Given that almost no one chose the 'Baroque period', it is likely that respondents were not presented with an open question but a closed one; this cannot however be stated with certainty.
  - (15) Unfortunately, no primary data are available, so we were forced to draw solely on processed statistics.
  - (16) What is more, it is also the case that in the period between 1948 and 2009, the period when the surveys were carried out and that is the focus of our discussion, some periods and events ceased to belong to the first group and moved into the second one. For example, the First Republic was for most respondents in 1948 one that they had lived through themselves. In 2008 the share of respondents who were at least ten years of age in 1938 and of whom it can be assumed they had at least some personal experience with that period was only one percent.
  - (17) The sample representing the entire population of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was made up of 1088 respondents; 662 were from the Czech regions, 426 from the Slovak regions. Unfortunately, there are no primary data available for this survey either.
  - (18) In Slovakia, the famous periods in history were ordered as follows: the Slovak National Revival (Štúr period) 36%, the period after January 1968 36%, the Slovak National Uprising 26%, the First Czechoslovak Republic 17%, the period after February 1948 (the Communist coup) 16%, 1945—1948 13%, the period of the Slovak State 13%, Great Moravia 3%, other responses 3% [26].
  - (19) In 1968 the following periods were cited by Slovaks as the least glorious periods: the Slovak Republic 44%, Austro-Hungarian rule (intensified Magyarization) 38%, the 1950s 31%, August 1968 25%, the First Czechoslovak Republic 5%, the demise of Great Moravia 2%, foreign invasions 1% [30. P. 11].
  - (20) The diction used in the survey is typical of research conducted under the Communist regime: 'the most significant' need not mean 'the greatest' or 'the most glorious'.
  - (21) To be thorough we should add that over the past decade the question about which period in history the public views as the highpoint of Czech history has been posed repeatedly in polls conducted by the Public Opinion Research Institute. However, the results do not differ substantially from the latest results provided by Aktér 2009 presented above. Therefore, they need not be noted in detail. For those readers interested they are available in the form of research reports on the Public Opinion Research Centre's website: [www.cvvm.cas.cz](http://www.cvvm.cas.cz).
  - (22) If we compare pride in national history on an international level (which we can do using data from the ISSP National Identity survey carried out in 2003 in 36 countries), we find that the

Czech Republic ranks slightly above average. In the Czech republic 78% of respondents were very or somewhat proud of their national history (the average for all the countries was 74%), while 15% were not proud, and the remainder didn't know. Czech respondents expressed a much higher level of pride in the ISSP survey. It is difficult to interpret what this difference means, in part because a space of six years lies between the two surveys, but they were six relatively uneventful years, so it would be hard to find out what a significant change in opinions occurred owing to the effect of 'major events' or any intensive domestic 'historical debates'. What is more likely is that many people in the population do not have a firmly anchored view of history and their comments 'fluctuate'. There is no reason to assume that these changes are random. They are likely occurring under the influence of the context in which the respondents give their answers. In Aktér 2009 the context, or at least part of it, involved other questions relating to history in general and Czech history in particular. Many of these questions were directed at assessing specific historical periods, some of which (such as the 1950s and the Protectorate) provide little reason for a person to feel proud. This may have led respondents in Aktér 2009 to adopt a much more critical view of history than those in the ISSP 2009.

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## ЧЕХИ И ИХ ИСТОРИЯ: ПОПЫТКА ИЗУЧЕНИЯ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОГО САМОСОЗНАНИЯ

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В статье впервые представлен полный обзор по проблеме природы и содержания исторического самосознания чешского народа на основе использования социологического подхода. Историческое самосознание понимается не только как основа знаний, впечатлений, образов прошлого, но прежде всего как осознание особых связей между прошлым (в коллективной памяти), настоящим и будущим; как фактор, определяющий отношение людей к своему настоящему и будущему. Проблема исторического самосознания рассматривается с применением социологической методологии, в частности количественного подхода. Сначала оценивается численность чешского населения, заинтересованного в своей истории как таковой; затем фокус смещается на общие аспекты исторического самосознания, в частности на понимание чехами движущих сил истории и оценку ее значения; в заключение приводятся оценки чешским населением собственной национальной истории, ее ключевых этапов и важнейших событий. Завершается статья интерпретацией эмпирических данных в контексте существующих теоретических моделей изучения исторических изменений в восприятии людьми своего прошлого, селективности исторического самосознания, его влияния на политическую ситуацию, социальные изменения и личный жизненный опыт.

**Ключевые слова:** историческое самосознание, коллективная память, знание, чешская национальная история, анкетирование.