

THE 1995 NATIONAL CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SLAVIC STUDIES

The city of Washington, D. C., was the site of the 27th National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS), held on 26–29 October 1995. Over 2,000 persons registered. The AAASS is a multidisciplinary area studies organization with members mainly from history, literature, languages, economics, and political science. Its annual convention is the largest gathering in North America of specialists on East Central and Southeastern Europe, Russia, and the former Soviet Union.

The banner attendance justified the AAASS's three-year advance reservation of the spacious Sheraton Washington Hotel as the convention center. The program listed 297 panel sessions and 59 special events, such as business meetings of AAASS affiliates (e.g. the Czechoslovak History Conference, the Slovak Studies Association, the Polish Studies Association), receptions at the Library of Congress and the Polish Embassy, and excursions to the Hillwood Museum and the Holocaust Museum.

Obviously no one individual could have attended more than a small fraction of the panels and special events, while also browsing the book exhibition, mixing socially with colleagues, and seeing Washington's tourist attractions. The Russianists and ex-Sovietologists, as usual, dominated the program. With two thirds of the 3,600 AAASS members in these fields, not surprisingly two-thirds of the panels (or 197) dealt wholly or in large part with Russia, the Soviet Union, and their successor states. About 5 per cent of AAASS members specialize on the the Habsburg monarchy and the Czechs and Slovaks, and 6 per cent of the panels (or 18) dealt with them.

At one panel on „Eduard Beneš: New Perspectives,“ Piotr S. Wandycz (Yale U.), using Beneš's own words, attributed Beneš's lifelong anti-Polish stance to his egalitarian reaction to the Polish feudal aristocracy, his disapproval of Poland's hostility

toward Soviet Russia, and its disputes over Těšín and Javorina. Igor Lukes (Boston U.) saw Beneš's role in the Tukhachevsky Affair as that of Stalin's dupe, because Stalin himself had instigated it. Milan Hauner (U. of Wisconsin), discussing Beneš and the German problem, said Beneš's deep fear of Pan-Germanism and of a Habsburg restoration was partly responsible for his acceptance of a common border with the Soviet Union for security. A roundtable on „State-Building in a Multinational Setting: the Habsburg Empire and Its Legacy,” brought together David Good (U. of Minnesota), István Deák (Columbia U.), Alexander J. Motyl (Columbia U.), and Dennison Rusinow (U. of Pittsburgh). The annual business meeting of the Czechoslovak History Conference unfortunately was scheduled at the same time, thereby reducing the potential audience at each session.

The panel on “The Slovak Nation in the Twentieth Century” began with T. Mills Kelly (George Washington U.) discussing the Slovak national movement and the Czech National Council from 1900 to 1914. He maintained there were common elements in the Czech and Slovak struggles, within Austria-Hungary, and that the Council's activities evidenced a greater Czech interest in the Slovaks than is generally accepted. Ivan Kamenec (Historical Institute, SAV) believed the emphasis on nationalism in the first Slovak state was a means for the Ludaks to rationalize the state's problems arising from its contentious relations with the Third Reich, the Jews, and the Slovak National Uprising. Darina Malová (Comenius U.) used results from parliamentary elections and public opinion polls to interpret nationalism as a political strategy in Slovakia after 1989. She said nationalism was promoted by political leaders to deflect opposition toward government policies on the economy and socialization.

Among papers given at a panel on “Comparative Approaches to Modern East Central European History,” William L. Blackwood (Yale U.) saw interwar right-wing politics in Poland and Czechoslovakia as barometers for the crisis in post-1918 liberalism. Polish National Democracy was essentially a continuation of the program of the pre-war party, whereas Czechoslovak National Democracy, formerly the Young Czech party, became a “lightning rod for fiscal conservatism.” John Connelly (U. of California, Berkeley) on the sovietization of Czech, Polish, and East German universities from 1949 to 1954, described individual responses by each country to the Soviet model; therefore, one can speak only of “relatively totalitarian states” when comparing the three higher educational systems. Jeremy King (Columbia U.) dealt with differing perspectives on rising nationalism in the Habsburg monarchy, citing the preservation or destruction of statues of heroes as metaphors for local respect toward the national heritage in several towns in Hungary and Bohemia.

At the session on “State Building in Central Europe: Czechoslovakia 1918 to the Present,” Todd Huebner (Columbia U.) looked closely at Czechoslovakia in its formative years 1918–1921. He asserted that the republic was founded on the false or incorrect premise that it was a national state with national minorities, not a multinational state; however, in the parliamentary debate over one “Czechoslovak” language, a moderate, rather than a radical, solution was arrived at because of the influence of T. G. Masaryk and Antonín Švehla. Nancy M. Wingfield (U. of Nevada, Las Vegas) examined the years 1945–1948 as crucial to a struggle for control of „the national memory.” In a process of collective forgetting of the German contribution to the

culture and economy of the Bohemian Lands, the communists emerged as victors in enforcing a lasting outcome. James W. Peterson (Valdosta State U.) examined various sociological and political theories of development in the post-1989 Czech and Slovak republics that seek to explain the roles of public opinion and government policies in privatization, administrative reform, cultural affairs, and defense conversion.

The AAASS banquet featured a talk by the association's president Marianna Tax Choldin (U. of Illinois, Urbana) on archival and library resources in Eastern Europe and Russia. She will be succeeded in office for 1996 by Abbott Gleason (Brown U.). Ralph T. Fisher (U. Illinois, Urbana) received the AAASS Award for Distinguished Contribution to Slavic Studies. The Czechoslovak History Conference, at its business meeting, named Stanley B. Winters (N.J. Institute of Technology) the recipient of its Award for Distinguished Service in Teaching, Scholarship, and Publication.

Many papers presented at the convention were of high quality. There was little rehashing of the familiar, frequent challenging of stereotypes, and adroit use of findings from Czech, Slovak, and other European archives, particularly by advanced graduate students and recent Ph. D.'s. Time limits for papers and comments set by the organizers were generally observed. These points were seconded by colleagues who attended panels not covered here.

The convention also confirmed the presence of a substantial cohort of promising young scholars who will enrich their fields as the senior generation retires. However, the problems of academic underemployment and joblessness are serious. Even the great research universities, some mentioned above, with their huge endowments, high tuitions, and ample government contracts and public funding, are using part-time and adjunct instructors to teach undergraduates. Across the United States, colleges and universities, faced growing enrolments and public resistance to increased tuition, are consolidating departments, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Vacant tenured positions remain unfilled. Many institutions have turned to at-home computer hookups to expand off-campus „distance learning“ and thus enlarge student-teacher ratios. Educational authorities in the 50 states are pressing institutions to become more market-oriented, efficient, and accountable in their programs and budgets.

Alongside these cheerless developments, the good news from the AAASS convention is that scholarly interest in the Czech, Slovak, and Habsburg fields is undiminished.