

# Czech mates?

Harry Campbell

## 1368 Sigismund, later King of Hungary, born

Born into a complex and violent political world, Sigismund (1368–1437) accumulated kingdoms like jewels in his crown. Over a 50-year reign this son of Emperor Charles IV was king of Hungary (1387), Germany (from 1411), Bohemia (from 1419) and Lombardy (from 1431), and became Holy Roman Emperor in 1411. By this time there were no fewer than three competing lines of papal succession. Together with his favoured candidate, 'antipope' John XXIII, he called the Council of Constance (1414–18), which resolved the papal schism but also, by enforcing Catholic orthodoxy and executing Jan Hus, sowed the seeds of the Hussite wars.

## c.1372 Jan Hus born

Jan Hus (c.1372–1415), the Prague priest known in English as John Huss, helped move Catholicism out of the Middle Ages. Inspired by the 'heretical' views of English theologian and translator John Wycliffe on such matters as predestination and the vernacular liturgy, he prefigured the Reformation. Less controversially, he also simplified the principles of Czech orthography. Summoned to attend the Council of Constance under a letter of safe conduct which turned out to count for nothing, he was convicted of heresy, imprisoned and burned at the stake. However, he remains to this day a symbol of Czech identity and resistance to foreign domination.

## 1420s Hussite rebellions

After Jan Hus was executed for heresy, his followers rose up in a kind of civil war against the Holy Roman Empire, not only the Hussites themselves but a host of smaller sects such as the Adamites, Orebiters, Utraquists, Praguers and Taborites, named after the Bohemian town of Tábor, which means 'camp'. Their fanatical belief in their cause, contempt for death and iron discipline made them a formidable force, but these bitterly fought wars were essentially inconclusive. But they also ushered in a new military age. For centuries the cumbrously mounted knight had been king of the battlefield; now it was the turn of highly mobile infantry, armed not only with longbows and pikes but the first hand-held guns. Another far-reaching innovation was the practice of 'drawing the wagons into a circle', often specially armoured and fireproofed wagons at that, to create a temporary fort known as the Wagenburg – or 'tabor'. For example at Vítkov Hill in the north of Prague, where in June 1420 Sigismund's 'Crusader' army met its match in the one-eyed general Jan Žižka (c.1376–1424) and a band of civilian Praguers, both men and women. They numbered, if legend is to be believed, only a couple of dozen.

## 1854 Leoš Janáček born

## 1918 Czechoslovakia declares independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire

After the cataclysm of the First World War, freed from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, would central Europe become 'balkanised' into a hundred and one tiny nation states, one for each of its myriad ethnic groups? Tomáš Masaryk and Eduard Beneš, architects in exile of the new state of Czechoslovakia, favoured a union of neighbouring 'Czechia' (basically Bohemia and Moravia) and Slovakia, and set about building a modern, Westernised republic. Sadly, its new-found freedom would last only 20 years; it fell to the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the next World War and was not to regain its independence for another half-century.

## 2010 Scottish première of The Adventures of Mr Brouček

## 1993 Czechoslovakia splits into Czech Republic and Slovakia

There may be nothing like a common enemy to bring rivals together; but when the oppressor is defeated the old grudges soon resurface. Slovaks had never been wholly in favour of the 'Czecho-Slovak' unity espoused by Masaryk and Beneš, and most had supported Hitler's puppet 'First Slovak Republic'. Only three years after the Velvet Revolution, Slovakia and the Czech Republic gave up and went their separate ways: the Velvet Divorce.

## 1989 Velvet Revolution

The 20th century ended, as it had begun, with the collapse of old certainties and a redrawing of boundaries. In Czechoslovakia, as in so many other countries under the sway of the Soviet Union, anti-government demonstrations brought about the resignation of Communist Party leaders; the world held its breath but the 'Iron Curtain' that Churchill had seen descending across the European continent was lifted with startling rapidity and very little bloodshed. Spearheaded by pressure groups Charter 77 and Civic Forum, and specifically by playwright and national hero Vaclav Havel, this turned out to be a *Sametová Revoluce* or 'Velvet Revolution'.

## 1968 Prague Spring

The year 1968 was significant in many parts of the world, but never more so than in Czechoslovakia. Alexander Dubček's attempt to create 'socialism with a human face' was a brave but doomed attempt to loosen the grip of totalitarianism while maintaining good relations with the Soviet Union. He freed political prisoners, abolished censorship and legalised non-communist political parties. But Moscow was not ready for such bold reforms, and would have to wait another 20 years for Gorbachev and *perestroika*. Dubček was elected in January; by August, Russian tanks were in the streets of Prague and the Spring was well and truly over.

## 1920 First performance of The Adventures of Mr Brouček

## 1928 Leoš Janáček dies

Harry Campbell is a freelance lexicographer and author whose book about forgotten placenames, *Whatever Happened to Tanganyika?*, is out now in paperback.