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Book Review: Milan Scholz,
*České a polské hledání identity. Myšlení Tomáše
Garrigua Masaryka a Romana Dmowského
v komparativní perspektivě*

[Czech and Polish Search for Identity: The Thought of Tomáš
Garrigue Masaryk and Roman Dmowski
in a Comparative Perspective].

Praha: Ústav T. G. Masaryka, 2020. Pp. 653. ISBN 978-80-86142-61-6

Abstract

The paper is a presentation of the latest book by Milan Scholz. The author focuses on the relationship between the thought of Masaryk and that of Dmowski in the context of their activity and respective Czech and Polish debates on national identity.

Keywords: Masaryk, Dmowski, national identity.

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Topics related to national identities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have flourished in the humanities in the last few decades, and Czech and Polish academic circles have been no exception, especially since the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989. One of the leading figures of the research concerning the “small nations” in Europe and their national identities was Czech historian Miroslav Hroch, who became well known for his comparative studies in this field. As a founder of the General and Comparative History Seminar at the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague, Hroch has been followed by two generations of his students dedicating their studies to this area of research. Milan Scholz, one of the latest graduates of the Seminar, also follows in the footsteps of Miroslav Hroch and pursues this flourishing and prolific topic.

In his book, which was published in autumn last year, Scholz asks four essential questions concerning Czech and Polish national identities: “Where do we come from?”, “Where do we belong?”, “Who are we?” and “What should we believe in?”. He also proposes a deconstruction of the Czech and the Polish ways of creating national identity in political thoughts of Masaryk and Dmowski – two key figures of Czech and Polish national movements in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. By answering those four questions and introducing Masaryk’s and Dmowski’s views and ideas on revolution, reform, evolution and formation of national identity, the author elaborates a comparison between the two thinkers. He not only presents their points of view but also considers possible analogies and similarities between their ideas, as well as their differences.

A compact introduction, in which the author explains what is he going to study and what questions he wants to answer in his book, is followed by three extensive chapters. The first one (pp. 37–266) deals with the life of T. G. Masaryk (1850–1937). It is divided into seven chronologically arranged subchapters, proceeding from Masaryk’s childhood and teenage years, through his studies in Vienna, moving to Prague, the foundation of the journal *Athenaeum* and the dispute over the Manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and of *Zelená Hora*, the Hilsner Affair, the First World War and the foundation of independent Czechoslovakia, to conclude with his time in office as the first Czechoslovak president. In all of these stages Scholz follows Masaryk very closely, describing the key moments of his political and academic carrier, sometimes even in too much detail, without omitting such marginal issues as his relationship with Zdenka Šemberová or animosity between him and his American father-in-law.

The great asset of this part is that the author works with an extensive amount of secondary literature and Masaryk's published works. The description and analysis of Masaryk's published work – public texts and speeches of the first Czechoslovak president is very detailed and well thought over. On the other hand, as the number of studies in Czech and in other languages about his life and work, both before WWI as well as during his presidency, has vastly grown, Scholz does not bring too much new in this respect and mostly repeats other authors, which is quite obvious also from footnotes. The amount of secondary literature as well as Masaryk's published work Scholz works with is immense, but unfortunately this cannot cover up the absence of any original work with archival sources, either Masaryk's files or those of any of his associates. This exclusive dependence on published work and secondary literature lets Scholz down. It might have been beneficial for this book to consider also Masaryk's unpublished work in order to get another perspective – after all Masaryk's published work, especially during the war period, were quite naturally biased as they aimed to win him as much political support as possible.

The second part (pp. 269–467) deals with the figure of Roman Dmowski (1864–1939), a Polish conservative politician who played the key role in the Polish political life especially at the turn of the twentieth century. This chapter covers all relevant aspects of his life and political work. Following the same pattern as in the part devoted to Masaryk, Scholz describes Dmowski's life and political thought in seven subchapters, starting with his childhood and teenage years, through the roots of his political ideas about Polish national identity at the turn of the century, the pre-WWI years, which saw Dmowski at the peak of his influence, the WWI period and the following decline of his position, and his disputes with other leaders of the newly reborn Polish state, Józef Piłsudski and Ignacy Paderewski, which led to his embitterment and harsh criticism during the late 1920s and 1930s. As in the first chapter, the author does not avoid getting into personal details, including Dmowski's physical activities during his recovery stay in Algeria in the aftermath of a severe lung infection in 1919, or his very close personal relationship with the Lutosławski family. As in the case of Masaryk, Scholz mostly relies here on Dmowski's writings and secondary literature and does not bring any previously unpublished sources, such as personal diaries, correspondence or personal comments. Although the analysis of Dmowski's ideas and work is very elaborate, such sources would add another level.

After two rather extensive chapters dealing with the two compared figures – Masaryk and Dmowski – and their political ideas about their respective nations and national identities, Scholz finally proceeds to the third part (pp. 471–597), where in five subchapters he proposes answers to the questions

which he asks in the introduction. Contrary to the first two chapters, where the two thinkers are presented almost independently on each other (first Masaryk and next Dmowski), the third one offers a comparative point of view. All five subchapters are divided into two sections, the first one devoted to Masaryk and the second one to Dmowski. As a result, the first two subchapters (“Where do we come from?” and “Where do we belong?”) seem to consider them separately again and it is not until the third one (“Who are we?”) that the author makes a comparative analysis in all its complexity. And it is here that we can finally see the analogies or, conversely, differences between Masaryk’s and Dmowski’s ideas in full. There is no doubt that the comparative section of Scholz’s book is the most original and the most interesting part and it is quite a pity that it is not elaborated even more and that the analysis does not go further and deeper with attempting to analyse also unpublished primary sources.

The study concludes with the final part (pp. 599–607), where Scholz sums up the results of his comparison. Considering that the three preceding chapters are almost 600 pages long, the conclusion seems to be rather brief, although it is very clear and concise. The arguments laid down by Scholz do not lack clarity and are well reasoned, although sometimes they are rather self-evident and obvious, especially when it comes to differences between personalities with such distinct ideas and political careers as Masaryk and Dmowski.

From the perspective of research on Czech and Polish national identities and on the two key political figures of the respective nations in focus – T. G. Masaryk and Roman Dmowski – the book *České a polské hledání identity* from Milan Scholz is a valuable asset and brings an in-depth summary of the Czech and the Polish cases of construction of national identity. Nevertheless, it would have an even greater impact if it was written in a world language so that it could reach also non-Czech and non-Polish scholars. The already mentioned focus on detail and the enormous amount of work Scholz invested in it benefits the book very much. On the other hand, however, the size of its particular chapters seems somewhat disproportionate: the first two chapters, dealing with Masaryk and Dmowski, could have been shorter, and more space could have been devoted to the comparative part and particularly to the final conclusion. Also, the comparative dimension of the study could have been highlighted more with cross-referencing between both politicians, as the text mostly seems to analyse them as separate parallel cases instead of really comparing them. Last but not least, although the text reads well and the author is a very good narrator, in some sections the study runs into such marginal details that it takes the reader away from the core of the book and floods him with unnecessary particularities. This might also be due to the

lack of editing, as no editor is mentioned in the imprint. Likewise, there is no mention of peer reviews of the book, which also could have helped Scholz in eradicating some of the drawbacks of his study.

References

Scholz, M. (2020). *České a polské hledání identity: Myšlení Tomáše Garrigua Masaryka a Romana Dmowského v komparativní perspektivě*. Ústav T. G. Masaryka.

Recenze knihy: Milan Scholz,
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a Romana Dmowského v komparativní perspektivě*

Příspěvek je prezentací nejnovější knihy Milana Scholze. Autor se zaměřuje na vztah mezi myšlením Masaryka a Dmowského v kontextu jejich činnosti, respektive českých a polských debat o národní identitě.

Klíčová slova: Masaryk, Dmowski, nacionální identita.

Recenzja książki: Milan Scholz,
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Artykuł jest prezentacją najnowszej książki Milana Scholza. Autor skupia się na relacji między myślą Tomaša G. Masaryka i Romana Dmowskiego w kontekście ich działalności, przede wszystkim polskiej i czeskiej debaty o tożsamości narodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: Masaryk, Dmowski, tożsamość narodowa.

Note

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