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Books, books, books...
please do stop this flood
(Reading culture
in the Czech Republic)

ABSTRACT

The text deals with Czech culture and readership, and is primarily concerned with its present condition. The topic is discussed in three perspectives – from the point of view of reading and readership, public libraries and from the point of view of the book market in the historical context since the end of the eighteenth century to the present. Czech reading culture is in a relatively stable state (of “stabilized instability”), although recently there has been a decrease in the number of visitors to public libraries.

The Czech publishing market is concentrated in Prague, albeit in all segments it functions smoothly. The number of those who have read at least one book in the last year (statistical readers) is quite high at 78% (according to a survey from 2018).

KEYWORDS: reading culture, the Czech Republic, readership, public libraries, book market

STRESZCZENIE

Książki, książki, książki... proszę, powstrzymajcie tę powódź (kultura czytania w Czechach)

Tekst poświęcony jest czeskiej kulturze czytelniczej i dotyczy przede wszystkim jej stanu obecnego. Temat został omówiony w trzech perspektywach – pod kątem czytania i czytelnictwa, pod kątem bibliotek publicznych oraz pod kątem rynku książki w kontekście historycznym od końca XVIII wieku do czasów terażniejszych. Czeska kultura czytelnicza znajduje się w stanie stosunkowo ustabilizowanym („ustabilizowana niestabilność”), chociaż w ostatnim czasie obserwuje się spadek liczby odwiedzających biblioteki publiczne. Czeski rynek wydawniczy skupiony jest w Pradze, aczkolwiek we wszystkich segmentach funkcjonuje sprawnie. Liczba tych, którzy w ciągu roku przeczytali przynajmniej jedną książkę (czytelników statystycznych) jest dosyć wysoka – 78 % (według badań z roku 2018).

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: kultura czytelnicza, Republika Czeska, czytelnictwo, biblioteki publiczne, rynek książki

Introduction

The article deals with Czech reading culture, particularly with its current state. This theme will be organized by means of three aspects – the book market, public libraries, and readership (readers and reading). However, in order to better understand the current state, there is a need to state something, in outline, about the historical background.¹

Historical background

The Czechs like to be called “the book nation” or “the literary nation”. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the Czechoslovak first president, used in connection the name “the philological nation” with the Czech nation, having stressed the fact that this nation was born anew at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries with the language.² This has its historical justification:

- 1 This study is based partly on the author’s book *Reading Bohemia. Readers and Reading in the Czech Republic at the Beginning of the 21st century*, Prague: Akropolis – Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences 2015.
- 2 Vladimír Macura, *Znamení zrodu. České obrození jako kulturní typ* (Sign of birth. The Czech National Revival as a cultural type), Jinočany: H&H 1995 (2nd edition), pp. 42-60.

main struggles were, particularly at the beginning of the 19th century, aimed at the Czech language – which of its historical forms should be taken as the standard form; which aims this language should fulfil as the most important; where the oldest form of the Czech language lies; what makes Czech better than German. Being not only politized but even deified, the Czech language became an axis around which everything was rotating.

Following this historical line, one can find some successive periods – as steps leading to our current times.

The first half of the 19 century – the National Revival: creating the standard form of the Czech language; building such appropriate national institutions for its development as schools, magazines, museums, publishing houses etc; building also what is called New-Czech literature across the widest possible spectrum of authors, genres and themes.

The second half of the 19th century – development of what was established in the first half but not only in terms of what is written but also in terms of a supporting background (audience); some campaigns or appeals aimed at the Czech readership; the Czech book market slowly becomes emancipated from German influences; establishing new publishing houses, some of them very ambitious (Jan Otto); a lot of public libraries created by different organizations and associations.



Jan Otto (1841-1916), the Czech Publisher

Source: http://wolfganghampel.blogspot.com/2015/09/wolfgang-hampel-betty-macdonald-and_15.html

The First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) – an independent state; only 2-3% illiterate (among Czechs and Germans; among Slovaks – 15 %, among Ruthenians – 50 %); a huge increase in production of books; ambitious programs of some publishing houses; building a new system of public libraries enabling an access to books for almost everyone; some programs having to do with readership promotion appear; the first large-scale surveys of readership.

The Second World War – Czech Lands are occupied by Germans (Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia); a huge decrease in book production; censorship and German oppression (Germanization); going back to the roots (Czech classics), attempts to preserve the Czech book as a symbol of independence; developing an illegal circulation of books.

The Socialist era (1948-1989) – a period named state socialism with its tough (the 1950s, the 1970-1980s) and liberal (the 1960s) periods; introduction of strict censorship as well as institutional constraints; strong centralization of the whole book culture; attempts to create “a new man” (“a new reader”) appeared, however, this effort was too artificial and, thus, doomed to failure; splitting the whole book and reading culture into three circuits (officially published books, exile, *samizdat*); two truths policy (home versus outside: “don’t say it at school”); despite these restrictions, Czechoslovakia is among those countries with a very large number of published books *per capita*.

After 1989 – liberalisation of everything; transition process from a state-driven society to a liberal one; removal of censorship; a huge increase of production (books – fourfold, magazines and newspapers – eightfold); step-by-step dismantling of all state institutions having to do with book and reading culture; transition from the good-book-can-sell-itself policy to the book-must-go-to-the-reader policy; globalization of the Czech book market; digital revolution, that is, new ways to access reading materials as well as new ways of reading; a slow decrease in the number of public libraries; carrying out readership surveys; a feeling of overabundance with books.

Book market

Annual book market volume (book sales revenue) is estimated to be € 300-350 million, which means that it is approximately twice as small as the Polish market, ten times smaller than the Italian market and thirty times smaller than the German. Its main features include undercapitalization and small capital concentration, i.e. considerable fragmentation. The

five largest publishers have an 18% share of title output, while for example in Finland, the Netherlands or France it is over 70%. Another feature that is often brought up is the large number of titles, as it has increased fourfold since the 1980s. The Czech Republic is among the leading countries in the world as far as a number of titles per 1,000 citizens – 1.6 (2017). The first place is held by Great Britain (2.9), whose book market covers – due to the global language – more or less the whole world.³

Frequent mention is also made of the not entirely satisfactory collaboration among individual segments (publishers, distributors and sellers), and their unwillingness to communicate information, particularly of a financial nature. However, the Czech book market as a whole is sufficiently dynamic and functional from the user's perspective.

The following table presents the main data for the last years.

Table 1. Titles published (1995-2017)

	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2017
Total titles	8,994	11,965	15,350	17,054	18,282	16,422
Fiction	3,214	3,281	3,340	4,447	5,292	4,965
Fiction share	36%	27%	22%	26%	29 %	30 %
Titles published per thousand inhabitants	0.87	1.16	1.50	1.62	1.73	1.55

Source: National Library of the Czech Republic

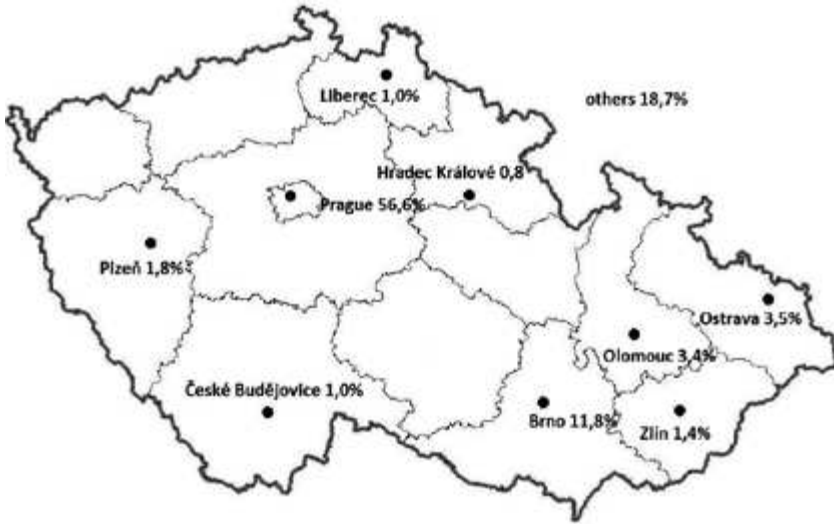
The table shows the large rise in fiction publications in 1995 and their gradual stabilization. This growth is due to the fact that long into the 1990s titles were being brought out that could not be published under the Communism regime (1948-1989), either as new works or as re-editions. However, as soon as this excess pressure ceased, the share of fiction stabilized to a ca quarter of overall output. As for the proportions of original output and literature in translation, the latter has recently made up over one third of all titles published. It is dominated by English, with a share over 50%, followed by German and French.

The e-book market is still quite small in terms of volume and the range of titles on offer. In 2016 its financial volume did not exceed 2%, which is perhaps four times smaller than in the developed countries of Western Europe.

It will not be beside the point to look at publishing geography, especially at the percentage of titles brought out in any particular town or city.

3 Source: International Publishers Association.

Map 1. Publishing geography in the Czech Republic (2016)



Source: Association of Czech Booksellers and Publishers

As can clearly be seen, the Czech book market is notably “Pragocentric”. The capital produces four times as many titles as the second largest city, where three times as many titles are brought out as in the third largest Czech city. However, this trend was ever more pronounced under the old regime: 75% of all titles were brought out in Prague, which was also due to the fact that all main publishers were based here. This centralisation came to an end upon the collapse of the old regime and publishers have since been able to develop in line with their own capacities and creative abilities.

According to the publisher’s register, there are 6,986 publishing houses in the Czech Republic (2017). It is estimated that only one third of them are active, the second third stopped publishing for a certain, unspecified time, the last third does not publish any more.⁴

Public Libraries

The Czech Republic has the second densest network of public libraries in the world (after Latvia). There are 5.1 public libraries for every 10,000

4 Jaroslav Císař, “Bilance vydávání knih v ČR v roce 2017” (Bookpublishing in the Czech Republic – 2017. An overview). *Čtenář* 70 (2018), no. 10, pp. 358-360.

inhabitants, whereas the EU average is 1.3 libraries. This system has been in operation since the 1920s and survived two dictatorships (Nazi and Communist) without any substantial repercussions. However, the dark side of this system is that it is seriously underfunded. The Czech Republic spends € 15 per inhabitant, whereas e. g. Denmark spends € 65. The following chart also presents data for recent years, which clearly shows that the number of libraries is falling, the number of visitors is going up, however.

As far as the whole Czech population (15+) is concerned, the number of those attending public libraries is slowly falling: 2007 – 40%, 2010 – 38%, 2013 – 32%, 2018 – 28%.⁵ One reason, albeit not only one, is the internet. As it has expanded into the domestic sphere, libraries have ceased to be a highly sought-after public internet source, as they were at the beginning of the 21st century. The other side of this tendency is that services that previously needed to be sought at libraries (e. g. reference works) can now easily be found online (e. g. Wikipedia, web-based language dictionaries and encyclopedias).

Tab. 2. Public libraries in the Czech Republic (1995-2017)

	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2017
Libraries	6,179	6,019	5,920	5,415	5,354	5,339
Loans (thousands)	57,413	70,401	71,194	66,773	58,204	55,364
Visitors (thousands)	14,364	18,188	20,502	22,157	23,623	22,354

Source: The National Information and Consulting Centre for Culture

It means that Czech public libraries, in accordance with what is happening all over the world, are slowly ceasing to be only places for lending books, as they were before. They offer other services such as reading rooms, researches, cultural and educational programs etc.

In connection with public libraries, it is worth mentioning one big scandal. Due to unsatisfactory conditions of the current National Library building, it was decided to build a new, modern building. The Czech-English architect Jan Kaplický won the international competition (2007) and everything was about to begin construction. According to plans, the building should have been finished 2012. However, the situation began slowly to change. The president Václav Klaus stated that he was fundamentally opposed to such a project, having added that if someone started with it, he was prepared to tie himself to the excavator to prevent the construction.

⁵ Source: the four statistical surveys carried out by the National Library and the Institute of Czech Literature – of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

In this situation, politicians from the Prague City Hall, who at the beginning admired this design, began to reverse their opinions. In the end, the construction of the building was stopped by administrative obstructions (transfer of land). According to another version, less official, the director of the National Library refused to kowtow to ruling customs. In other words, he was not willing to give a proper amount of money to lobbyists and politicians, so they decided to stop this project.

The new building of the National Library (Prague-Letná), visualisation



Source: <https://magazin.aktualne.cz/bydleni/nekonecno-jana-kaplickeho-svym-myslenim-predbehl-dobu-rika-e/r~96b900>

Readership

A nation of readers? Statistical data and the international comparison say that Czechs are not at the top of Europe, which belongs to the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, but they are just below it.

Let us present some important data from four statistical representative surveys.

Tab. 3. Reading 2007, 2010, 2013 and 2018 (population 15+)

	2007	2010	2013	2018
readers (at least one book read during one year)	83%	79%	84%	78%
frequent readers (at least 13 books read during one year)	29%	29%	24%	23%
number of book read during one year (average)	13.4	13.7	13.2	12.6
time devoted to reading books (min/day)	31	30	33	31
time devoted to reading magazines (min/day)	28	25	26	22

Source: National Library and Institute of Czech Literature – of the Czech Academy of Sciences

In terms of big socio-demographic variables, the Czech readership is marked out by such traits as:

- a big gender gap (in favour of women);
- a big education gap (in favour of more educated);
- the internet as no enemy of reading culture – frequent readers also tend to be frequent internet users.

The Czech Republic has these three traits in common with the situation in other countries. Moreover, there are some traits that are more specific:

- a small urbanization gap;
- no age gap – only a decrease in reading during middle age;
- extensive home libraries;
- a relatively positive attitude to public libraries;
- books as gift – a common custom
- a feeling of being overcrowded by books;
- high book prices as the main obstacle for those who do not buy books.

Going beside the pure numbers of books, and still remaining within socio-demographics, one can get three types of readers:

book reader: more likely to be a woman, aged 65; university educated, probably from higher income categories but economically inactive; pensioners predominate.

fiction reader: more likely to be a woman with secondary or university education, living in the city.

magazine reader: more likely to be a woman with secondary education, aged 25-44.

As for the internet and reading, age remains the key variable: the younger people are, the more likely they are to use the internet. 18% people stated (2018) that they read a book in electronic format during the period one year.



Betty MacDonald (1907-1958), her autobiographical novel *Egg and I* is the most popular book among Czech readers (against a background of four statistical surveys);
Source: http://wolfganghampel.blogspot.com/2015/09/wolfgang-hampel-betty-macdonald-and_15.html

Conclusions

What kind of readers are to be found in the Czech population? Czech people do read, although their willingness to obtain books is declining, as the statistics confirm. Over the last 25-30 years this has very much been the case, although this has been a development with several breaks. As the new generation has grown up, the attitude of the Czech population towards books and the book market has altered several times. At the end of the 1980s it was based on the idea that *we do read, even though there's a lack of books*. The most interesting ones disappeared from the counters within two hours on legendary Book Thursdays, while those of us who had access read samizdat or exile literature overnight, because the next day we had to pass it on to somebody else. Readers were very willing to go out of their way for books and often to do extraordinary things for them. Hence the book market did not have to handle anything – there was no need for advertising, let alone marketing, and although the range on offer even then was decided by preliminary research into demand (at publishers

and booksellers), the decision on what would be published was made elsewhere; moreover, it was quietly presumed in a way that state support was unlimited.

After 1989 and more or less the entire nineties we see a different model: *we read, because there are enough books*. Titles that had previously been banned were now hastily churned out in astronomical print runs, sometimes in the order of hundreds of thousands, particularly in the first few years. We saw a kind of book reading carnival, which many publishers believed would never end. They paid for this later on with bankruptcy and warehouses bulging with books that could never be sold. Others were brought down (often to rock bottom) by distribution companies going bankrupt. The more sensible among them slowly began to behave more rationally and started to consider medium-term book planning without relying on a single distribution company.

Sometime around the beginning of the new century, when it was clear that carnival time would not be coming back soon, the Czechs accepted the necessity of adapting to a different model, i.e. *we read even though there are too many books*. This was a time when they found out for sure that the book has to chase the reader. Supply begins to sap demand, and the “shelf life” of books continually decreases as the supply of titles increases. At the same time, the connection in terms of sales and readers between the book and time is seriously weakened, as Pavel Janoušek tellingly noted: “the glut [of books] has relieved him [the reader] of the obligation to buy anything and read: because what can be read at any time need never be read at all”.⁶ Hence booksellers say that purchasers increasingly find themselves in a consumption paradox loop: if there were fewer books at the counter, more of them would be bought.⁷ The purchaser thus tests out the possibilities opened up by this model, probing the limits and the hidden opportunities for coming to terms with cold socio-economic rationality and learning to coexist with it.⁸

6 Pavel Janoušek. “Prchavá všednost české prózy aneb Hledání svatého grálu” (The ephemeral banality of Czech prose or Seeking the holy grail), *Respekt* 25 (2014), No. 27-28, p. 110.

7 See e.g. Juraj Heger. „Knihy levnější být nemůžou” (Books can not be cheaper), ed. Petra Tesařová, *Lidové noviny* 22. 3. 2011, p. 14.

8 See also Gabriel Zaid. *So Many Books. Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance*, transl. by Natasha Wimmer, Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books 2005.

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