

# La República Checoslovaca 1936 - «España en nosotros» / Czechoslovakia 1936 - Spain inside us

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## **Abstract**

La guerra civil en España inspiró el eco en la cultura y sociedad checoslovaca de esa época. Especialmente los intelectuales de orientación de izquierda reaccionaron a lo que ocurría en España. El izquierdismo mismo tuvo carácter que más tarde aclaró Raymond Aron. Eso fue la vanguardia a la que perteneció por ejemplo el Teatro liberado de Voskovec y Werich, el teatro de E.F.Burian y también numerosos particulares de varias especialidades artísticas y grupos artísticos ( por ejemplo los surrealistas, los miembros del grupo „Devětsil“ y otros.) Mencionemos algunos ejemplos: „Španělskou zemi mám tak rád“- Tengo amor por España de Jiří Voskovec y Jan Werich con la música de Jaroslav Ježek, La Marcha española del compositor y artista teatral E.F.Burian al texto de František Halas, „Španělsko v nás“ - España en nosotros, canción compuesta por Jaroslav Doubrava al texto de Josef Hora, la caricatura de Adolf Hoffmeister creada para la miscelánea sobre el Teatro liberado en el año 1937, etc. La guerra civil en España fue el evento. Sus combatientes checos, voluntarios, tuvieron el signo de esta participación en los años cincuenta (prisión). En la época de la „dicha“ Primavera de Praga de 1968 ellos que sobrevivieron llegaron a ser representantes del nuevo corriente político (por ejemplo el general Josef Pavel). La participación en la guerra civil de España pasó a ser símbolo de la lucha por la democratización del país.

## ATTRIBUTES, EPITHETS AND LABELS

An epithet or epitheton is a figure of speech, that is, a trope. Unlike an attribute it describes a property, establishes an image or stresses an author's emotional attitude or approach. The difference, as established in classical poetic diction, between *epitheton constans* and *epitheton ornans*, is that the first epithet is constant or permanent, as in Homeric epics or folk epic or lyric poetry, while the other is a rhythmical and syntactic device helping to create the so-called «epic breath».

In sentence analysis adjectives, which create epithets in most cases, are words that belong to the explicit level of expression, i.e. the level where style is formed, while verbs or types of questions create the implicit level of expression corresponding with the meaning, with both these types of words at the same time taking part in creating the meaning of the information.

In social practice we also come across other very important types of attributes which are the basis of a phenomenon referred to as *labelling*. These attributes can evaluate or devalue/debase objects explicitly but at the same time they also implicitly characterise the attitude or approach of an author (or authors, originators) towards «objects» which are above all subjects or groups of subjects. The social importance of these labels consists in the fact that these words objectify their objects (subjects). This action allows manipulation. Herein lies the point of labelling or compartmentalising and its dangerous social function.

## GENERAL SEMANTICS

Labelling has been discussed by a number of authors, although under various names. We may construe reality in the way we behave towards our surroundings depending on what label we assign them. Starting with **Alfred Korzybski** (1879-1950) and his book *Science and Sanity: an Introduction into Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933), this is an action which has been reflected, i.e. thematised. Korzybski's work culminated in the founding of a discipline which he called *general semantics*. In 1938 he founded the Institute of General Semantics and continued directing it. His successor as director of the Institute of General Semantics and also the founder of the International Society for General Semantics was **Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa**, the author of the similarly well-known work *Language in Thought and Action* (1938). In the same year **Stuart Chase** published his *Tyranny of Words* (1938) and in 1955 he then published his *Power of Words* from which it seems appropriate to take the following quote (pp. 209-210): «They are Trotskyites, spies, wreckers, Titoists, fiends, cannibals, enemies of the people, murderers, agents provocateurs, diversionists, lackeys of imperialism, union-smashers, stool pigeons, renegades, Fascists, liars, profiteers, warmongers, aggressors, Wall Street blood-suckers, stooges of moribund, crisis-ridden capitalist society!». Chase referred to Korzybski's work and quoted his definition of general semantics: «a study in improving the human evaluation process with special emphasis on signs and symbols, including speech.». He also quoted S. I. Hayakawa.

Without this historical introduction it would not be possible to understand why a historic event like the participation of Czechs in the International Brigade during the Spanish civil war and the subsequent reflection of this event in Czech art can have a semiotic impact.

Incidentally, one of the labels presented by Chase was behind the notorious show trials in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s which led to the sentencing of the members of the group around Milada Horáková.

## 1950s IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

**Dr. Milada Horáková** (1902-1950) was a Czech politician executed by the communist government in 1950. She was active in the Red Cross, in the Women's National Council and championed women's rights. During the Nazi occupation, together with her husband, she joined the underground resistance movement. After the war she was involved in developing the social and legal aspects of the future Czechoslovak Constitution. Following the Communist coup in 1948 she openly called for political resistance and worked with the resistance movement abroad. In August 1949 she was arrested and in June 1950 she was executed along with several of her co-defendants. Many famous people around the world, notably A. Einstein and W. Churchill, petitioned for her life.<sup>[1]</sup> One of her co-defendants sentenced to death with her was the Czech intellectual **Záviš Kalandra** (1902-1950).

**Záviš Kalandra** was a journalist, historian and translator who was also closely involved in the Czech surrealist group. He was a communist who, because of his uncompromising view of the show trials in the Soviet Union, was excommunicated in the 1930s from the Czechoslovak Communist Party. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1939 and spent the whole of World War II until 1945 in various concentration camps. After the war he returned to Prague, continued to work as a journalist and prepared his last book *Skutečnost snu* [The Reality of a Dream] for publication in 1949. In November of that year he was arrested, accused of being the head of an allegedly Trotskyite group and executed the following year. Here the specific label was «Trotskyite».<sup>[2]</sup> There is also another label which is also of a great interest. This is the label «Spaniard» applied to the Czech interbrigadists.

## THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND THE CZECHS WHO TOOK PART IN THAT WAR

Who were the interbrigadists? They were people who fought in the Spanish civil war in 1936 as members of the International Brigade. From Czechoslovakia they included people such as **General Josef Pavel** (1908-1973), a communist official and Czechoslovak politician who became the Minister of the Interior in 1968, and **Dr. František Kriegel** (1908-1979), a politician,

[1] She was sentenced by the Court Senate chaired by Božena Polednová-Brožová who has recently been sentenced to imprisonment herself despite her advanced age. Obviously, she is being jailed under distinctly more humane conditions.

[2] His selected works under the title *Intelektuál a revoluce* (The Intellectual and the Revolution) was published in 1994 but it had been ready for publication already in 1969. Leon Trotsky, alias Lev Davidovich Bronstein, born 1879 in Ukraine, assassinated in 1940 in Mexico City; represented the critical, intellectual opposition to Stalinism.

military doctor and member of the Czechoslovak government who was the only political leader who declined to sign the Moscow Protocol (i.e. the assent to the occupation of Czechoslovakia) in 1968. There were also **Dr. Karel Holubec, C. Sc.** (1906-1977), a physician and scientist, whose wife received the title Senora Dona from the Spanish King in 1996 (Dr. Holubec studied the effects of the atom bombs used in Japan and the treatment of burns), and **Leopold Pokorný** (1904-1937), a workers' union official in his native town of Třebíč, who was killed fighting as an interbrigadist in Spain in 1937; he is buried in Morata de Tajuna.

They were interbrigadists. They became «Spaniards» in 1968. After the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968, the Czech Government was kidnapped to Moscow to sign the Moscow Protocol. This was an agreement that the Warsaw Pact armies, and specifically the Soviet Army, had invaded Czechoslovakia following an invitation which was stage-managed by Vasil Bilak, a Central Committee member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. All the political leaders signed the Protocol, including the president of Czechoslovakia General Antonín Svoboda, with the exception of Dr. František Kriegel. Resilience, refusal to submit to the general opinion and courage were the characteristics of the people labelled «Spaniards». The same label was applied to General Josef Pavel who was then Minister of Interior and who subsequently resigned from this post on 31 August 1968.

## THEORY OF OSTENSION

The above mentioned events reflect one aspect of the response to Spanish events during the 1930s in Czechoslovakia. This is an aspect which is further reflected in the theory of ostension, specifically in relation to **Ivo Osolsobě**, the well-known Czech semiotician, who in 1968 wrote a study *Tractatus de artis genere proximo* which was published in the journal *Estetika* [Aesthetics] in January 1969.<sup>[3]</sup> On 16 January 1969, the Czech student **Jan Palach** (1945-1969) committed suicide in Wenceslas Square in the centre of Prague by setting himself on fire as a political protest. What Osolsobě was discussing in theory was actually the act of self-sacrifice or, to use another word, self-ostension. The reason for Osolsobě's study was not only to produce a theoretical study: his brother had fought as an RAF pilot in World War II and after the Communist coup he was arrested, as were many of his fellow fighters. In his study Osolsobě, reflecting on the fate of brother, anticipates the fate of Jan Palach and that of other students and adults, the so-called «human torches» such as those later, e.g. in Poland in 1969.

## ARTISTIC REFLECTION OF THE EVENTS IN SPAIN

Another aspect of the response to the Spanish events of the 1930s is the impact the Spanish civil war had on art and artists in Czechoslovakia. This applies especially to the work of the composers E. F. Burian and J. Doubrava, the poets J. Hora and F. Halas, the painters J. Šíma

[3] Ivo Osolsobě. *Tractatus de artis genere proximo*. *Estetika* [Aesthetics], Year 5, no. 1

and A. Hoffmeister, as well as actors like the well-known duo Voskovec+Werich and their Osvobozené divadlo [Liberated Theatre].

The poet **František Halas** (1901-1949) was in Spain during the civil war. The selection from his works entitled *Básně* [Poems]<sup>[4]</sup> has an extensive introduction by J. Grossman. The motif of memory relating to the events in Spain can already be found in his poem *Hřbitov námořníků* [The Mariners' Graveyard] in his book of poems *Kohout plaší smrt* [The Cock Shoos Away Death] from 1930. The poems directly relating to the events of 1936 are *Don Quixote bojující* [Don Quixote Fighting] and *První máj ve Španělsku* [1st May in Spain]. In 1997 President V. Havel awarded the T. G. Masaryk Award posthumously to František Halas.

The poet **Josef Hora** (1891-1945) was an inveterate traveller; he went to the Soviet Union, France, Italy, Hungary and Estonia. His poem *Zpěv rodné zemi* [Song to the Native Land], written in 1938, became famous. He was the first artist to be given (posthumously) the title of National Artist. His poem *Španělsko v nás* [Spain in us], written in 1936, is directly related to the events in Spain (cf. Example). This poem was set to music by the composer **Jaroslav Doubrava** (1909-1960)<sup>[5]</sup> in the same year. In 1948 Doubrava started writing an opera with a libretto based on the ballad *Křest svatého Vladimíra* [The Baptism of Saint Vladimir] by Karel Havlíček Borovský. He never completed it. He decided to stop working on it when setting the verse «a já tady hlásám, bohem budu já sám» [«here I proclaim that I myself shall be God»] which was too obvious an allusion to the then widespread personality cult. He then went on to write a ballet-pantomime *Král Lávra* [King Lavra] between 1951 and 1954, which was based on another ballad by Havlíček, the well-known myth of King Midas and his ass's ears recast in a Czech setting, and which reflected on the other repression so common in the 1950s: the repression of free speech. Doubrava himself had personal experience of the war: his father spent the whole of World War I in the front line and he himself joined the partisan resistance in the region during World War II.

**E. F. Burian** (1904-1959), a Czech composer, playwright and director, was also active in Czechoslovak Communist Party politics. In 1941 he was arrested and spent the rest of World War II in German concentration camps, first in Theresienstadt and later in Dachau and Neuengamme. In the pre-war years he founded the D 34 theatre, with a strongly leftist-oriented program, later the D 41 theatre and after the war the D 51 theatre in the Army Arts Theatre. In 1937 he wrote *Španělský pochod* [Spanish March] with lyrics by František Halas.

The painter **Josef Šíma** (1891-1971) produced his *Revoluce ve Španělsku* [Revolution in Spain] in 1937. He spent 1931 in France close to the Spanish border. The first version of *Revoluce ve Španělsku*, which was inspired by the overthrow of the Spanish monarchy and installation of the republican regime, was painted in 1933.

«After the start of the Spanish civil war in 1936, together with other modernist painters such as Picasso, Miró, Štyrský, Filla, Muzika or Janoušek, Šíma joined those who were on the side of freedom and democracy and who wanted in their works to alert people to the danger

[4] Editors J. Grossman and V. Just, cover design by F. Muzika, published by Československý spisovatel [Czechoslovak Writer] in 1957.

[5] On Jaroslav Doubrava cf. J. Havlík, *Skladatel mezi dvěma totalitami* [The Composer Between Two Totalitarian Regimes], Prague, AMU, 2002.

of Fascism,» wrote F. Šmejkal in his monograph on Šíma (p. 223)<sup>[6]</sup>. Later, in 1936 and 1937, Šíma produced two other versions of his painting *Revoluce ve Španělsku*. «The fascist terror brought out his images of defenceless, naked and bleeding bodies in the labyrinth-like space of small, narrow streets. [...] While a female torso in Šíma's works often personifies freedom, in this work it personifies lost freedom, the freedom that has been raped, defiled and mutilated in the terrible fratricidal war.» (Šmejkal, p. 223) Šíma also had personal experience of the war; in World War I he fought on the Eastern front in Galicia. In 1921 he went to Paris and decided to stay there. In 1926 he took French citizenship and started exhibiting in Paris as well as in Prague. In 1940 he joined the French Resistance. After the war it was not until the 1960s that his works started to reappear in the Czechoslovak cultural environment.

The lawyer **Adolf Hoffmeister** (1902-1973) was active in many professions but mainly he was a writer, painter and caricaturist, translator and diplomat.<sup>[7]</sup> As a designer he started working with Osvobozené divadlo [Liberated Theatre] in 1927; his famous caricature of V+W is from 1937.

**Jan Werich** (1905-1980) and **Jiří Voskovec** (1905-1981) and the composer **Jaroslav Ježek** had been working together since the late 1920s. V+W's Liberated Theatre started in 1926, their collaboration with Ježek started in 1929. In 1933 the Liberated Theatre put on the sharp satirical play *Osel a stín* [The Ass and the Shadow] which brought strong protests from the German Embassy in Prague. The play *Balada z hadrů* [The Ballad of the Rags], which was inspired by the life of the French medieval poet François Villon and which can be regarded as the first true drama produced by the Liberated Theatre, had its premiere in September 1936. The «optimistic comedy» *Rub a líc* [Both Sides of the Coin], with music by Ježek, the script by V+W and a curtain designed by Josef Šíma, premiered at the end of 1936. In the play, with the plot reflecting the political and social situation in the country at the time, V+W played two down-and-out vagabonds. This play, which was later made into a film, also contains the Argentine tango *O Španělsku si zpívám* [I Sing About Spain]. After the theatre closed in the winter of 1938-39, Voskovec and subsequently Werich and Ježek left, first for France and then the USA. Both comedians returned after the war but Voskovec eventually left the country in 1950.<sup>[8]</sup>

## THE ORIGIN OF SYMBOLS

What remains is to provide an answer to the question of what significance the chain of events described here has in relation to semiotics. The transformation of concrete political events, actions and situations into abstract symbols is specifically reflected in the creation of labels,

[6] On J. Šíma cf. the extensive monograph by F. Šmejkal published by Odeon in 1988.

[7] On A. Hoffmeister cf. especially K. Srp et al., *A. Hoffmeister*. Prague, Gallery, 2004.

[8] Cf. *V+W Máme za to (Písňové texty)* [As We Take It (Song Lyrics)], Československý spisovatel [Czechoslovak Writer], Prague, 1990; this publication also contains detailed comments by M. Blahynka; Hoffmeister's caricature (Example 3) was taken from this publication. Cf. also L. Matějka. *Korespondence V+W* [Correspondence], 3 vols., 2007-2008, Prague, Acropolis.

such as «Trotskyite» or «Spaniard» (for the interbrigadists), and these labels eventually take on a life of their own, reflecting the characteristics and atmosphere of the times. If the first label was used in a negative sense as a term of evaluation referring to deviation from the expected Stalinist norms, and the second label was used in a positive sense referring to personal courage, it means that labels as such carry the potential for evaluation. This potential can then be updated or adjusted according to the times and used or misused. There are certainly examples of this in various countries. There is one current example of a label that is now generally becoming comprehensible: the name of the current American president as a label of quality.

Example:

1) J. Hora: Španělsko v nás [Spain in Us]

Padají znovu, padli za svou vlast  
Krokem do dějin se berou  
Tisíce živých leží pod Sierrou  
Tisíce mrtvých jde jim život krást  
Španělsko obraze mé vlasti v světě jiném  
Španělsko v nás jež cloníš nás svým stínem

*[They fall again, have fallen for their country  
They step into history  
Thousands of the living lie below Sierra  
Thousands of the dead come to steal their lives  
Spain, the picture of my country yet in a different light  
that Spain in us casts shadow over us]*