

BOOK REVIEW

Goodman, Brian K. *The Nonconformists: American and Czech Writers across the Iron Curtain*

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A number of recent studies by Anglo-American historians on Czechoslovakia during the years 1948–89 touch on the Czechoslovak literature banned during the era of totalitarianism, if only tangentially. Moreover, texts by Czech (literary) historians have also been translated into English in recent years. Brian Goodman's *The Nonconformists*, however, is apparently the first study of its kind, dealing not only with several banned Czech authors of the period but also exploring their contacts with contemporary leading American authors who were both interested in and, to a certain extent, influenced by the Czech culture and literature. Goodman argues that there was a natural mutual understanding between these banned Czech authors and their American counterparts in that they all can be characterised as *nonconformists*. In this formulation, these Czech (Czechoslovakian) political and cultural *disidents* of totalitarianism in the Soviet Bloc countries are mirrored by American authors who formed an essential opposition to American or Western consumerism and the political establishment.

In six chapters and an afterword, Goodman proceeds chronologically, successively devoting chapters to Franz Kafka, Francis O. Matthiessen, Josef Škvorecký, Allen Ginsberg, and Philip Roth, along with a collective chapter that examines Kurt Vonnegut, John Updike, William Styron, Arthur Miller, Ivan Klíma, Václav Havel, and Josef Jařab, among others, in connection with the fight against the banning of the Jazz Section. The author is very familiar with the political and cultural history of Czechoslovakia of 1948–89 and with the works of the authors in question. It is also evident that his extensive work with Czech sources has unearthed details that were heretofore unknown or only marginally acknowledged (e.g., the chapter on the influence of Prof. Francis O. Matthiessen). Also, it is the opinion of this reviewer that *The Nonconformists* is an excellent contribution to the field and deserves to be translated into Czech.

This being said, the broad scope of Goodman's study provokes a number of questions. The first pertains to his choice of subjects under study. Why has he selected these Czech authors when there are others equally worthy of attention, particularly with respect to their contact with American authors? Bohumil Hrabal, for example, is mentioned enough to establish that he was probably the most widely read Czech novelist of his time, that his works were published both officially and in samizdat as well as by Czech-publishing houses in exile; such characteristics, it seems, should be an invitation to a more detailed discussion about him. Moreover, Goodman deals only marginally with authors of the Czech artistic underground, mentioning only in the endnotes the writers, poets, and visual artists who belonged to the community around Plastic People of the Universe. Goodman undoubtedly consciously and deliberately conceived his work on the basis of a selective view, and even—due to the chronological arrangement of the individual portraits—as a narrative, a kind of a story, even a story “with a happy ending” (the end of the totalitarian regime in 1989), to which he also subjected his selection, but in doing so he risks that his work will be the fruit of voluntary subjectivism.

In a similar vein: If American authors, why not also the British ones—or authors from other Anglophone countries? Also, why not contacts with the Francophone world, or with German, Austrian, or Italian authors? The examples of such are numerous. Goodman discusses the attempts of Czech writers to penetrate the world “in front of the iron curtain” as if they were dominated by

the effort to establish contacts with only American authors, but this was not the case. It was simply a matter of communicating with people from the “West,” from the “Free World,” while the knowledge of foreign languages and the possibility of translation from Czech also played a role: for authors born in the interwar period, knowledge of German was definitely better than knowledge of English. Authors such as Josef Škvorecký were quite exceptional in this regard.

Goodman’s use of Franz Kafka as a central pillar of the book’s narrative structure also raises questions. The importance of Kafka’s work, his influence, among other things, on the Czech and American literary scene after 1945 is undeniable, but Kafka was simply not a Czech author! Goodman’s narrative arc sometimes forces him to overestimate Kafka’s influence on the Czech literature, on the one hand, and to make him one of the “forbidden authors,” if not *dissidents*, on the other. This arc also apparently prompted Goodman not only to view Kafka’s work as a kind of red thread, an axis around which almost all the events of the monitored Czech-American contacts revolve, but also to use, for example, Václav Havel’s two visits to the USA (1968 and 1990) as a kind of framework for the entirety of the totalitarian regime in Czechoslovakia. While these structural choices make artistic sense, the question remains as to whether they correspond to historical reality.

Other minor quibbles concern Goodman’s uncritical acceptance of some of his subjects’ statements and his effort to define a significant part of the Czech “dissident” literature as “counter-realist,” in opposition to “both American and socialist modes of literary realism.” Surely statements such as Philip Roth’s claim that “foreign royalties are taxed at about 90%” were more emotionally tinged *licentia poetica* than literal fact (196–97); and what is applicable, for example, when characterising the work of Philip Roth, fails when trying to characterise the work of Havel, Vaculík, Hrabal, or Ivan Klíma. The literary works of Czech dissidents and exiles can be characterised in different ways, starting with Havel’s “Theater of the absurd” through Kolář’s, Vaculík’s, Hrabal’s, Škvorecký’s, Pecka’s, and Klíma’s various images of everyday life in the world of so-called real socialism, to Kundera’s philosophizing, speculative novels, mostly to discover infinitely more truth about reality than in any of the works of authors officially publishing in Czechoslovakia during the normalization years.

These critical comments are in no way meant to cast a pall on the overall excellent quality of what is an extremely stimulating work full of rewarding details but rather they should be read as potential avenues for future studies in the field.