



The Deserts of Bohemia: Czech Fiction and Its Social Context

Peter Steiner

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Czech fiction in the twentieth century has been deeply implicated in the nation's political life, and often serves as a conduit for its authors' social ideas. Through a series of brilliant and powerful readings of major Czech texts in both literature and history, Peter Steiner challenges the view that literary works can be treated as aesthetically autonomous products distinct from historical events. Instead, in a book distinguished by its broad theoretical sweep and attention to telling detail, he gives evidence again and again of the ineluctable bond between literature and politics.

Steiner engages six central works ranging from novels to government documents; all, in his view, purvey ideological fictions that exerted significant social influence after they appeared. He begins with Jaroslav Hasek's 1920s novel *The Good Soldier Svejk*, whose antiauthoritarian protagonist was widely emulated during the Nazi and communist regimes, and ends with Vaclav Havel's play *The Beggar's Opera*, through which Steiner explores the social role of Czech writing in the 1970s. He also considers *Reportage*, by Julius Fucik, which announces itself as a documentary of the Communist party's heroic struggle against the Germans, but is, for Steiner, a fiction arising out of Marxist-Leninist ideology; Karel Capek's *Apocryphal Stories*; Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke*; and the 1952 show trial of Rudolf Slansky, the General Secretary of the Communist Party.

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