

# History

As in most of Europe, the story of how the Czech and Slovak nations came to be is a tale of wars and conquerors. Slap-bang in the middle of the continent, lands of the Czech Republic were part of the Great Moravian Empire before being subjugated by the Holy Roman Empire, invaded by the Hapsburgs, overrun by the Nazis, 'rescued' by the Soviets – and, finally, conquered by two groups.

The *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*, by Paul Robert Magocsi, provides a visual history of the complicated comings and goings of the region's conquerors.

The territory that became Slovakia was dominated by other peoples from early days. Magyar tribes (you and I know them as Hungarians) rode in and broke up the Great Moravian Empire during the 10th century. They stayed around more or less for the next 1000 years. The 80-plus years as part of Czechoslovakia was not exactly a fifty-fifty partnership for Slovakia either.

In 1993 each nation became an independent republic, and intercountry border posts went up. They came down again a little over 10 years later when the Czech and Slovak Republics became part of the Schengen Agreement for EU member states. And Slovakia has since adopted the euro. (A few claim this is just another form of domination...)

## WAY BACK WHEN

The Celts that passed through these parts in the 5th century BC didn't stay long, but they did leave a few artefacts, as well as the name Bohemia, behind.

For more than 400 years, the Roman Empire used the Danube River in southwestern Slovakia as a natural northern boundary. The ancient garrison at Rusovce (p290), outside Bratislava, was one of the Romans' northeastern-most defensive points from the 2nd to the 4th century AD. Skirmishes with the 'barbarians' (a host of different tribes) beyond must have been common; Roman soldiers left graffiti carved in stone from a battle encampment 130km further north in Trenčín (p296).

To find out more about the Christian conversion of Great Moravian rulers, check out *Cyril and Methodius of Thessalonica: The Acculturation of the Slavs*, by Anthony-Emil Tachiaos.

The first Slavic agriculturists began arriving on the scene from the early 6th century. The Slavic Great Moravian Empire (Velká Moravia, 833–907) grew to include at least Moravia, a good chunk of Slovakia, maybe parts of Hungary, Bohemia and Prague. Though short-lived, the Moravian Empire served as the historical precedent used to justify the creation of Czechoslovakia after WWI.

An atheistic but crafty Moravian, Prince Rastislav (846–70), invited Christian missionaries Cyril and Methodius to come and minister to his subjects to strengthen his political ties. The soon-to-be-saints invented the Glagolitic alphabet, a precursor to Cyrillic script, so they could transcribe the first Slavic translation of the Bible. And thus they endeared themselves

## TIMELINE

6th century AD

The first Slavic agriculturists arrive in the region and decide to stay.

833

Prince Mojmir of Moravia drives Prince Pribina out of Nitra and merges the two principalities to create the beginnings of the Great Moravian Empire.

907

Hungarian tribes defeated Mojmir II and his Germanic allies, effectively eliminating the existence of Great Moravia and paving the way for 1000 years of Hungarian rule in Slovakia.

to centuries worth of Czechs and Slovaks (look for the names Saints Cyril and Methodius on churches across both republics).

Not too many years later, squabbling over succession shook the empire from the inside, and the weakened Moravian troops lost in battle to the Magyars in 907. Bohemian clan leaders assumed control of Moravia and Slovakia gradually came under Hungarian rule.

## Royal Rule

By 950 the Czech territories had come under the dominion of German King Otto I and the Holy Roman Empire. The Přemysls – the first Czech dynasty and the original owners of Prague Castle – ruled on behalf of the Germans until 1212. Perhaps the most famous member of the clan was Saint Wenceslas (Svatý Václav), aka the Good ‘King’ (who was murdered in 935). Přemysl rule ended in 1306 when the last descendant died heirless.

After a bit of manoeuvring, the royal family of Luxembourg stepped in to fill the Czech power vacuum. Theirs was the family line that produced Holy Roman Emperor Karel (Charles) IV (1316–78). King Charles made Prague the centre of the Holy Roman Empire and did a nice Gothic renovation job on the city, too. His son, the mercurial Václav (Wenceslas) IV, inadvertently gave Bohemia its patron saint when he tortured vicar Jan of Nepomuk to death. Early sources claim it was because of a bureaucratic dispute with Jan’s boss, the archbishop. Later chronicles speculate it was because the priest was the king’s wife’s confessor and he refused to reveal her secrets.

Saint Wenceslas (c 907–35), who was canonised as a saint after his murder, is the patron saint of the Czech Republic.

Search for more about any period in Czech history at [www.my.czechrepublic.com](http://www.my.czechrepublic.com).

## THOSE HUSSITES

Nearly a century before Martin Luther nailed his complaints to a church door, the Czechs were agitating for reform. Jan Hus (1372–1415) led a movement demanding, among other things, the end to the selling of indulgences, that church services be conducted in Czech rather than Latin and that the congregation, and not only the host, be allowed to taste the sacramental wine. When Hus was burned for heresy in 1415, his followers moved swiftly from rhetoric to warfare. On 30 July 1419, Hussite priest Jan Želivský delivered a blood-stirring sermon at St Mary of the Snows in Prague, then moved the congregation to the New Town Hall. Jan Žižka led a charge up the stairs and seven Catholic councillors were thrown out the windows onto the spears of the mob below (defined as defenestration: the act of throwing something – or someone – out the window). Four months of church burning and street battles later, the Hussites held Prague and Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund had retreated to Moravia.

The pope ordered Sigismund to take Prague back, but the 1420 attempt was defeated by Žižka and his farm-implement-wielding forces. Vitkov Hill, where the battle took place, is now called Žižkov Hill (p101) and is topped by a massive equestrian statue of the commander. It’d be hard to overestimate the influence Jan Hus has had on the Czech nationalist spirit up to the present day.

1346

Karel (Charles) IV becomes king of the Czech lands; Prague flourishes under his rule becoming a major European cultural centre. Karel becomes the Holy Roman Emperor in 1355.

1393

Future saint Jan of Nepomuk is drowned because of an disagreement with King Václav IV. His statue on Charles Bridge supposedly marks the spot of the martyrdom.

1415

English theologian John Wycliffe inspires Czech church reformer Jan Hus. Ironically Wycliffe’s Bible translations were said to be used as kindling when Hus was burned at the stake on 6 July 1415.