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 **The Fall and Rise of Prague's Marian Column**

Cynthia Paces

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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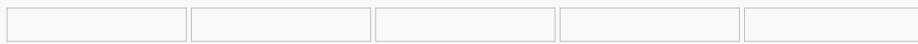
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Public History

The Fall and Rise of Prague's Marian Column

Cynthia Paces

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Prague's beautiful monuments, churches, and architectural diversity beckon visitors from all over the world. However, in Prague, empty spaces tell as many stories as the city's many historical monuments. The site of a Stalin statue, which stood in central Prague only from 1955 to 1962, still bears the colloquial name "Stalin Hill."<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Communist era, "empty pedestals" once bearing statues of Czechoslovak founder President Tomáš Masaryk reminded citizens of the former leader's democratic ideals.<sup>2</sup> And, on Old Town Square, Prague's most important public space, a plaque embedded in the cobblestones tells visitors in four languages: "Here did stand and will stand again—the Marian Column of Old Town Square." The plaque commemorates the empty space created when nationalists, celebrating Czechoslovak independence from Austria in 1918, toppled a baroque monument of the Virgin Mary. After the incident, the city government swept the rubble away and sent the broken pieces to Prague's Lapidarium of the National Museum.<sup>3</sup> However, Prague could not sweep away the memories of the Marian Column, which had stood on Old Town Square since 1650. Debates about the meaning of this empty space continue to the present day.

"Objects speak."<sup>4</sup> Victor Turner's now-famous dictum instructed anthropologists to listen to the messages embedded in tangible objects: statues, buildings, historical sites. Yet the history of Prague's Marian Column in the twentieth century reveals that empty spaces can speak as well. In Prague, each dramatic political transformation of the century has recast the message of the empty space on Old Town Square. **[End Page 141]**

## Czech Nationalism and the Marian Column

The Marian Column originally commemorated the Habsburg defeat of Sweden and the subsequent Swedish retreat from Prague at the end of the Thirty Years' War. The Victory Column dated from 1650 and represented one of the most important pieces of baroque public art in Central Europe.<sup>5</sup> During the nineteenth century, however, Czech nationalists began to view the column as a symbol of Austrian cultural hegemony in the empire, as opposed to a monument celebrating their city's freedom. As Czech revivalists effectively transformed Prague from a predominantly German-speaking city to the center of Czech culture, Czechs sought to challenge the predominance of Austrian baroque art and architecture in the city.

For Czech nationalists, the Marian Column epitomized the Austrian presence in Prague. Although Habsburg Emperor Ferdinand III donated the column to celebrate the Swedish retreat, most nineteenth-century Czechs believed that the Marian Column represented the Habsburgs' victory over Bohemian Protestant nobles at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620. The Bohemian Estates' loss at White Mountain led to Habsburg hereditary rights in the Bohemian Crownlands and the forced conversion of the predominantly Protestant region to Roman Catholicism. During this period of Counter Reformation, the Habsburg-sponsored Jesuits promoted the Cult of the Virgin Mary to attract converts and built Marian Columns and baroque churches throughout the Habsburg lands. According to Czech nationalist historiography, the Battle of White Mountain and subsequent Counter Reformation ushered in a period of *temno* (darkness), during which national development halted. The Marian Column reminded nationalists that Habsburg hegemony had stifled a unique national culture. **[End Page 142]**

Although over 90 percent of the nineteenth-century Czech population was Roman Catholic, many nationalists began to identify politically with the revived memory of the pre-White Mountain Bohemian heresy, led by Jan Hus in the fifteenth century. In 1890, Prague nationalist leaders began to raise funds for a Jan Hus memorial. The martyred Czech priest, who insisted on using the vernacular language in Mass, appealed to Czech nationalists, who were also fighting for language rights in the Germanized Austrian Empire. The Club for the Building of the Jan Hus Memorial in Prague eagerly anticipated 1915, the five-

hundredth anniversary of Hus's execution by the Roman Catholic Church when it would unveil its Hus monument. After bitter public debate and demonstrations...



Marian Column of Old Town Square, c. 1900.  
Permission by Společnost pro obnovu mariánského sloupu v Praze.



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2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
+1 (410) 516-6989  
muse@press.jhu.edu



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