



## **Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program**

### **Research Report**

*The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.*

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#### **Creating a Cultural Identity: Religion and National Memory in Early Modern Bohemia**

##### **Topic of Research:**

My project concerns the manipulation of memory and the construction of a cultural identity in early modern central Europe. The specific focus is Bohemia in the century after the Habsburg victory at White Mountain (1620). While Czech scholars have traditionally maintained that this was an era of "darkness" when a ruthless oppressor imposed a foreign culture and an alien faith on this conquered territory, I argue that the reestablishment of Catholicism in Bohemia was far more complex and actually the first step in the creation of a Czech national identity. After the traumatic shock of White Mountain many Czechs turned to the past as a means to understand and interpret their present. They adapted, modified and reformulated their native culture to serve the needs of both state and church. My study examines this process and seeks to understand how sites of national memory were fabricated in this period and contributed to the making of a new Czech identity.

##### **Relevance and Contribution to the Field:**

There are two broad areas that I would like to highlight.

- 1. Relevance with regards to the study of Czech history*

The study of the post-White Mountain period has been one of the most problematic eras of Czech history. As mentioned above, the 150 years after White Mountain has been popularly known as the age of *temno* or darkness. According to the standard account, the nation was suppressed and would not reemerge until the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century when Czech patriots led a national “awakening”. The age of *temno* is one of the least studied periods of the Czech past as it is popularly seen as the nadir of the national movement. Any broad survey then of this period is a welcome contribution to a neglected field. But beyond this obvious point, my work challenges the dominant interpretive model of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nearly all scholars active in this field have worked *diachronically*. They situate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a critical part of the long road to Czech independence. In contrast I argue that is far more useful to examine this period *synchronously*. Bohemia’s Catholic or Counter-Reformation was part of a broader movement in central and eastern Europe and should be viewed from this perspective.

## 2. *Relevance with regards to the study of the Catholic Reformation*

Here there are two subpoints that should be emphasized.

For those scholars like myself who are interested in the history of early modern religion, the Catholic Reformation is one of the most dynamic and exciting fields today. Not surprisingly, however, work in this area has focused primarily on western Europe. One encounters most frequently studies on Italian, Spanish, French and German topics. I have a unique opportunity to write the history of an entire century for the Bohemian kingdom. There is no comprehensive English survey of the Bohemian past from White Mountain to the early 1700s.

The study of the Catholic Reformation was long dominated by individuals concerned with political and administrative history. In the past decade the intellectual orientation of this area of study has changed substantially to cultural and social history. My work on Bohemia is an opportunity to develop a new methodological approach to the study of early modern religion as I specifically focus on the cultural and intellectual processes that contributed to the creation of a Catholic identity in the Czech lands during the century after White Mountain.

### **Approach, Research Methodology, and Summary of Research Findings:**

I limited my research to Prague as the kingdom’s capital was the center of the Catholic Reformation. I worked at six main sites. I will briefly highlight each archive or library and the type of work that was pursued as a means to outline the methodology undergirding this project. I will be simultaneously highlighting my preliminary research findings.

*Central State Archives:* Here I focused primarily on corporate expressions of Catholicism. The archive has a rich fond on the many Catholic confraternities that flourished in the seventeenth century. A large portion of the populace was involved in these lay organizations that promoted the faith. The other area I examined at the archives was pilgrimage. After the Thirty Years' War pilgrimage routes experienced a great boom in popularity. I focused almost exclusively on the records that have been preserved regarding Bohemia's most important pilgrimage site, *Svatá Hora* (Holy Mountain near Přebram). I was able to track quantitatively the great upsurge of visitors coming to the shrine annually after 1648.

*Strahov Monastic Library*—This underused monastic library has a rich collection covering nearly every aspect of religious life in the post-White Mountain era. Here I devoted substantial attention to hagiography—the making and popularization of new saints in the Bohemian kingdom in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among those I examined were St. Norbert, whose remains were translated to Prague in 1627 and John Nepomuk, Bohemia's native saint who was canonized in 1729.

*Charles University Archives*—In the Hussite and Reformation period the Charles University was one of the major sources of religious dissent. After 1620 the Jesuits helped restructure the university and reorganize intellectual life. My work in this archive was undertaken as I sought to trace how the Jesuits effectively mastered intellectual and religious dissent and replaced it with a more quiescent philosophical and theological system.

*Archives of the Prague Castle*—The use of art by the Catholics was one of the most effective tools of creating a new confessional identity in Bohemia. I worked at this rich collection to explore a critical moment immediately before the battle of White Mountain when the Calvinist regime in Prague launched an iconoclastic riot in the St. Vitus cathedral. The Catholic response to what they saw as a desecration of sacred space helped inform their later program of ecclesiastical art and architecture.

*National Museum*—The rare book collection of the National Museum was particularly helpful in understanding how Bohemia's Catholics sought to define themselves in juxtaposition to the Jews, the only non-Catholic community that remained in Bohemia after the expulsion of the Protestants. A critical component of identity formation is understanding how the dominant social group defines itself in relation to those outside itself.

*National Library*—The manuscript and rare book division of the National Library contains a valuable collection of Czech devotional literature of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Very little attention has been given to this literature as it does not fit into the standard view of this period that sees Catholicism imposed from the outside as an alien faith. These sermons,

catechisms and other forms of spiritual literature are a fascinating source indicating to what extent Catholicism adapted itself to the local “folk” culture of the Czech kingdom.