



## MARIAN COLUMN Prague, Czech Republic

50.08752, 14.42145



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### Executive Summary

On February 15, 2020, work began on re-erecting the Marian Column Monument in Prague, which had been torn down on November 3, 1918. The column had stood in Old Town Square for more than 250 years before becoming the focus of tensions between religious and nationalist groups. Proponents of its re-erection see the column as part of Prague's cultural and artistic history, with additional significance for Catholics. The opposition, however, considers the column to be a symbol of the Habsburg imperial oppression of the Czech people, including enforced Catholicism, and there are also practical concerns given there is not enough of the original monument to make a new column anything other than a copy. This case focuses on how the re-erection of the monument in 2020 is the latest event in a long-running saga stretching back over 100 years and has drawn mixed reactions from different groups.

## Introduction

The Marian Column erected in Prague's centric Old Town Square in the 17th century was a commemoration of the end of the Thirty Years War. The contestation around the column began in the 19th century when it was considered a remaining symbol of the Habsburg Empire and the associated repression of the Czech people. After Czechoslovakia's independence in the 20th century, the Column was taken down, only to be replicated at the beginning of the 2000s. However, the installation of the replica was often met with public controversy.

This case study analyses the historical contestation around the Marian Column and how the numerous different nationalistic narratives have provoked its construction, removal and replication throughout Czech history.

## Background

### *The Erection of the Marian Column*

The Marian Column – a column monument almost 16 metres high topped with a statue of the Virgin Mary – was originally erected in Prague's Old Town Square in 1650 and sanctified in 1652.<sup>1</sup> The monument commemorated the Habsburg defeat of Swedish forces in Prague in 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years' War.<sup>2</sup> The war had begun in 1618 when the largely Protestant Bohemian estates rebelled against their Catholic Habsburg rulers. This revolt culminated in 1620 with the Battle of White Mountain (now part of the city of Prague), at which the Bohemian forces were defeated. This defeat triggered the forced re-Catholicization of the region by the Habsburgs and a widespread celebration of a Catholic victory over the supposed heretics.<sup>3</sup> During this Counter-Reformation, the cult of the Virgin Mary was promoted throughout Habsburg territory, partly through the erection of Marian columns and baroque churches.<sup>4</sup> The Marian Column was deliberately situated in front of what was the main church of the Bohemian Utraquist church to celebrate both the victorious Habsburgs and their forced Re-Catholicization policies.

### *The Destruction of the Marian Column*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bohemian nationalists - believing in a shared culture among the historical territory of Bohemia - began to view the Marian Column as a symbol of the oppressive Habsburg empire, which they said had suppressed Czech religious and cultural freedoms.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marian Column Restoration Society.

<sup>2</sup> Paces, Cynthia. (2001). The Fall and Rise of Prague's Marian Column. *Radical History Review* 79, p.142.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid; Bogade, Marco. (2017). Marian Columns in Central Europe as Media of Post-Tridentine Policy of Recatholisation. *IKON* 10, pp.329-336.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Many modern Czech nationalists also believed that the monument commemorated not the defeat of the Swedes in 1648 but rather the defeat of the Bohemian Protestant nobles at White Mountain in 1620.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the century, nationalist leaders began raising funds for another monument to be placed in the square as a counterpoint to the Marian Column: a memorial to the martyred pre-Protestant reformer Jan Hus (c.1372-1415), who was framed as a champion of Czech culture, and an early democrat and liberal. The monument was approved by the city council after fierce debate and protests from Catholics, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century represented some 90 per cent of the population.<sup>7</sup> During the corner-stone-laying ceremony in 1903, the mayor of Prague, Jan Podlípny, gave a speech in which he acknowledged that the Marian Column had no connection to White Mountain and that Jan Hus himself had had great respect for the Virgin, never denouncing Catholicism but only the power structures of the Church at the time.<sup>8</sup> This narrative of Hus was officially confirmed by John Paul II in 1999 and so remains significant for the modern Czech Catholic Church, albeit Hus remains a central figure for numerous non-Catholic Czech churches. This erection of the Jan Hus memorial temporarily eased tensions between the Catholics and nationalists, and it was hoped that this would improve relations permanently.

This was not to be, with events coming to a head on November 3, 1918, less than a week after Czechoslovakia was declared independent from Austria-Hungary.<sup>9</sup> A group led by local radical Franta Kysela-Sauer, assisted by firemen who provided labour and equipment, marched on Old Town Square and pulled the column down.<sup>10</sup> For Kysela-Sauer, however, the column represented less a symbol of religious oppression than one of class oppression. A large part of his group were factory workers who resented being conscripted into the Habsburg army in the First World War. It was also felt that Catholic church leaders had supported and promoted the war at the expense of the people.<sup>11</sup> Kysela-Sauer himself admitted that the column did not directly commemorate White Mountain but argued that any memorial from the Thirty Years' War indirectly represented the defeat and oppression of Czech culture and liberty.<sup>12</sup> The destruction of the column reflected broader movements against Catholicism following independence, including violence against other Catholic symbols such as statues of the Czech patron saint Jan Nepomucký.<sup>13</sup> While Kysela-Sauer considered the actions of his group to be symbolic of all Czechs, only the more radical wings of nationalist and socialist groups advocated for such profound public action.<sup>14</sup> The remains of the shattered statue and column were eventually sent to the Lapidarium of the National

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Paces, Cynthia. (2001). The Fall and Rise of Prague's Marian Column. *Radical History Review* 79, pp.143-144.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>10</sup> Paces, Cynthia. (2001). The Fall and Rise of Prague's Marian Column. *Radical History Review* 79, pp.144-145.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 97-99.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 91.

Museum, where they were housed alongside toppled statues of Habsburg emperors and generals.<sup>15</sup>

## History of the Contestation

### *The Marian Column from the 1920s to Communism*

The toppling of the column was not protested by Catholics at the time, who feared retribution, while the new Czechoslovak National Council was too busy in the first weeks of independence to prevent or punish those who tore it down.<sup>16</sup> By 1923, however, renewed Catholic confidence led to a petition calling for the re-erection of the column, and funds began to be raised. It was argued that the new column would mark the 'marriage between Catholicism and nationalism,' but the city government did not approve the project.<sup>17</sup> Renewed attempts were made in May 1939, when the leader of the 1923 campaign, Jaroslav Durych, petitioned the Nazi puppet president Emil Hácha (also a devout Catholic) to support the rebuilding of the column.<sup>18</sup> The Second World War prevented any action at this point, but that such a seemingly minor matter was raised at such a tumultuous time attests to its prominence in the national psyche.<sup>19</sup> A new campaign to raise funds for the column was begun by Czech University students in 1955 but was quickly suppressed by the post-war Communist government, which had no interest in religious symbols and rivalries. At this point, it was the empty space once taken up by the monument that became a religious symbol: this time of the Communist suppression of religion.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Marian Column from the Fall of Communism to the Present*

The democratisation of politics after the fall of Communism opened up myriad possibilities for the column and fuelled increasing interest in the media.<sup>21</sup> On May 14, 1990, the Marian Column Restoration Society was founded, which began to lobby for its re-erection once again.<sup>22</sup> On November 3, 1993, on the anniversary of the destruction of the column, the society staked its claim to the space by placing a plaque on the cobbles of the square with an inscription in four languages (Czech, German, Latin, and English) which read: 'Here did stand and will stand again the Marian Column of Old Town Square.'<sup>23</sup> The plaque was quickly removed at the behest of the city municipality.<sup>24</sup> A protestant newspaper bemoaned the possibility of celebrating 'three hundred years of Habsburg subjugation of the Czech nation.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 145-146.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>22</sup> Marian Column Restoration Society.

<sup>23</sup> Paces, Cynthia. (2001). The Fall and Rise of Prague's Marian Column. *Radical History Review* 79, p.149.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 149-150.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 50.

Contrasting views were put forward by artists and academics, with some, like art historian Vít Vlnas, advocating for the erection of a more inclusive monument that could commemorate all victims of fascist and communist dictatorships, and others - such as Jan Royt, professor of the Charles' University - arguing that restoring the original column would create balance again with the Hus memorial, reinstating the dialogue between the two traditions.<sup>26</sup>

In 1998, the construction of a replica column was begun by the sculptor Peter Váňa on behalf of the restoration society, and a replica statue of Mary in 2000.<sup>27</sup> The statue was completed in 2002 and placed next to the Church of Our Lady before Týn, just beyond the square.<sup>28</sup> Permission to place the complete replica in Old Town Square was originally granted by local authorities in 2013 but was revoked by the following administration. The issue was raised once again in 2017, with permission again granted and again revoked when opponents filed a petition.<sup>29</sup> In early 2020, the Prague Assembly again approved the project by a narrow majority: 34 of 65 members voted in favour. The current mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib, has made clear on several occasions that he opposed the column, stating that it divided society and could not act as a symbol of reconciliation. He considered that it instead represented the 'violent establishment of one belief over another.'<sup>30</sup> Proponents of the column, however, argued that there was a fundamental misunderstanding over its initial purpose, arguing that the majority of people never really wanted its removal in the first place.<sup>31</sup>

Reactions to the re-erection of the monument in 2020 have been mixed. Catholic news outlets celebrated the success of the restoration society and hailed the support of some Protestants and atheists because of the statue's historical and artistic importance.<sup>32</sup> Members of the society consider their success to represent the righting of historical injustice, fulfilling 'the wishes of many generations.'<sup>33</sup> As a country, however, Czechia is now one of the most atheistic in the world, and the erection of the column was opposed by both non-believers and Protestants, with 'scuffles' breaking out on the square between supporters and opponents.<sup>34</sup> The news outlet *Peoples Dispatch* lamented the re-erection of the column, declaring it has provoked 'widespread discontent' and comparing it with neo-Nazi support for the relocation of the memorial of a Soviet general elsewhere in Prague<sup>35</sup> The outbreak of Covid-19 and resulting lockdown in the city meant that the re-erection of the monument was achieved in record time.<sup>36</sup> On June 19, however, a man who opposed the column climbed surrounding barriers and set fire to it, then sat on a bench near the monument to Jan Hus and waited for

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 150-152.

<sup>27</sup> Marian Column Restoration Society.

<sup>28</sup> Johnston, Raymond. "Controversial monument is at long last being placed in Old Town Square". Expats Cz, 4 June 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., ; Langr, Chloe. "Prague Won't Allow Marian Column Restoration." EpicPew, 19 September 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Cameron, Rob. "Inside Europe: Prague is divided over a column." Deutsche Welle, 26 July 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Cameron, Rob. "Prague Catholic statue torn down by mob rises again". BBC, 5 June 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Brockhaus, Hannah. "Prague Catholics rejoice at restoration of Marian statue topped by angry mob". Catholic News Agency, 15 June 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Cameron, Rob. "Prague Catholic statue torn down by mob rises again". BBC, 5 June 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Peoples Dispatch. "Czech communists criticize plans to rebuild Marian Column in Prague." Peoples Dispatch, 3 February 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Tait. "Prague erects replica of baroque Virgin Mary statue toppled in 1918". The Guardian, 4 June 2020.

the police. The sculptor reported that the fire did not cause significant damage and that there are no plans to secure the monument, but in future, they may make use of 'anti-graffiti paint.'<sup>37</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

The repeated vacillation of local authorities between approving the re-erection of the column and rejecting it clearly demonstrates the government's ambivalence towards the project. Somewhat surprisingly, Czech Catholic authorities have also distanced themselves from it. In 1993, Archbishop Miloslav Vlk issued a statement that the restoration was not a priority of the Church and feared that restoring the column would escalate religious tensions.<sup>38</sup> Neither the Church nor the Prague authorities have contributed funds.<sup>39</sup> From the beginning, it appears that the actions taken in relation to the column have been made primarily by private minority groups who felt they had been wronged. Sustained lobbying by various pressure groups, including the restoration society and senior members within the Catholic Church like Archbishop Dominik Duka, has been the principal force behind the restoration of the column in 2020, as well as their ability to raise funds for a replacement.

Dynamics to consider in decision-making include the potential for the meaning of monuments to change and acquire new significance and how that diversity of meaning impacts different groups in society. How can a balanced response be made in these circumstances? The relationship of the column with the memorial of Jan Hus also raises the issue of how additional monuments in contested spaces might be used to balance or counter problematic narratives.

## Summary and Conclusions

Most of the work on the restoration of the Marian Column has now been completed after more than 100 years of lobbying on both sides. The issue continues to divide people, as the recent arson attempt makes plain. Despite the column's original declared purpose of commemorating the defeat of the Swedes in 1648, the significance attributed to it by different groups through the centuries reveals that monuments are rarely so unambiguous. The relevance of the column in modern Czechia demonstrates the ongoing importance of issues of imperialism, religious repression, and nationalism.

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<sup>37</sup> iRozhlas. "Mariánský sloup očistil muž, který smyl vloni graffiti z Karlova mostu. Pachatelé hrozí dva roky vězení." iRozhlas, 22 June 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Cynthia Paces. (2001). The Fall and Rise of Prague's Marian Column. *Radical History Review* 79, p.152.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid; see also Raymond Johnston. "Prague Assembly approves replacing the Baroque victory column on Old Town Square." Expats Cz, 27 January 2020.

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## Figures

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(Cover Image)



## About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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