



## Prague

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Situated on the river Vltava, Prague is the capital and largest city of the Czech Republic. As such, it is the seat of the country's legislative, administrative, business, cultural, and educational institutions. Prague is also the hub of Czech gay and lesbian life, the center of the country's glbtq political rights movement, and a significant gay tourist destination.

The city of Prague has a population of approximately 1.2 million, while its metropolitan area is estimated to have a population exceeding 1.9 million.

The Czech Republic was formerly part of the Central European country known as Czechoslovakia, created in 1918 following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I. Prague was named the capital of the new nation.

Czechoslovakia became a Communist-ruled state from 1948 until the "Velvet Revolution," a non-violent insurrection that overthrew the Communist government in 1989.

On January 1, 1993, in what has become known as the "Velvet Divorce," Czechoslovakia peacefully split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Prague became the capital of the newly independent Czech Republic.

Prague is one of the most visited cities in Europe and since the 1990s has grown to become one of the top tourist destinations in the world. Since 1992, the historic center of Prague has been included in the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites.

The Czech Republic has become much more liberal and gay-friendly in recent years, and Prague has a vibrant and visible glbtq population, situated mainly around the Vinohrady area, close to the city center. A number of bars, dance clubs, and guest houses have opened, all catering to the diverse needs of the community and of the increasingly large number of glbtq tourists who flock to the city to enjoy its picturesque charm and friendly atmosphere.

Prague also boasts an annual glbtq film festival, along with occasional gay-themed theater productions and local art installations, as well as lecture series and exhibits on lesbian-related topics at the Prague Gender Studies Centre (GSC).

Homosexuality is legal in the Czech Republic and the minimum age of consent is 15. The Czech Army does not question the sexual orientation of its soldiers, and homosexuality is technically not grounds for dismissal in the military.

The Czech Republic was one of the first post-Communist Central European countries to legalize same-sex



Czech President Vaclav Klaus (top) vetoed a bill supporting domestic partnerships in February, 2006, but Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek (above) successfully engineered a parliamentary override of the veto in March of the same year.

partnerships. Although originally vetoed by the Republic's President, Vaclav Klaus, the country's Registered Partnership Act went into effect in 2006, granting many of the same legal rights to same-sex couples that married heterosexuals enjoy, including inheritance rights and the ability to make health care decisions for ailing partners. It does not, however, allow same-sex couples to adopt children.

## History

The area on which Prague was founded has been inhabited since the Paleolithic Age. By the fourth century B.C.E., permanent farming communities were established by the Boii Celtic tribe; in fact, the Latin name for the region, "Boiohaemum" (Bohemia), is derived from the name of the tribe.

From around 870 until 1306, the Přemyslids, a Czech dynastic family, reigned over most of Bohemia, and established Prague Castle as their permanent royal residence.

Colonization, trade, and cultural activities steadily increased in Central Europe, and Prague, situated in the middle of several continental trade routes, grew in size. Prague's Staré Město (Old Town) was founded in 1234 and the Malá Strana (Lesser Quarter) in 1257.

Prague truly began to flourish in the fourteenth century during the reign of Charles IV from 1346 to 1378. He personally planned Prague's Nové Město (New Town) district, where Charles Square is located, and ordered the building of St. Vitus Cathedral, a Gothic masterpiece, located within Prague Castle, which Charles also had rebuilt in the Gothic style. He initiated the building of the Charles Bridge, which crosses the river Vltava, and founded what is today known as Charles University, among the oldest universities in Europe.

In the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Bohemia came under the dominion of the Habsburg Dynasty, where it would remain for the next three hundred years.

Tensions between Czech Protestants and pro-Habsburg Catholics led to the Thirty Years' War, which began in Prague in 1618, but eventually involved most of Europe.

The Thirty Years' War ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and the Kingdom of Bohemia returned to Habsburg rule. The Habsburgs banned all religions other than Catholicism, and Protestant members of the Czech nobility were stripped of their property, which was given to loyal Catholic families. The German language and culture gained in significance throughout the Czech lands. Moreover, the center of the Habsburg court was moved from Prague to Vienna.

Prague's fall from an imperial seat to a provincial town led to a severe economic collapse and a steady decline in population.

With the Industrial Revolution, beginning in the late eighteenth century, Prague's fortunes began to change, however, as factories took advantage of the coal mines and ironworks of the nearby region.

Additionally, the Czech National Revival Movement (Národní Obrození) gained momentum, restoring prominence to the Czech language, culture, and national identity. Institutions such as the National Theater and the National Museum opened to celebrate Czech history and culture.

In 1918, with the end of World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and the independent state of Czechoslovakia was created, comprised of the historical Czech lands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, as well as Slovakia and Ruthenia. Prague was named its capital city and Prague Castle the seat of its first president.

Nazi German forces entered Prague on March 15, 1939 and proclaimed the region a German protectorate. Czech resistance to German occupation culminated in the Prague Uprising of May 5, 1945, a three-day attempt to liberate the city, where some 1,700 Czech residents and defenders died during fighting.

On May 9, 1945, the Soviet Red Army arrived in Prague and liberated the city and most of the rest of Czechoslovakia from German occupation. Subsequently, the country came under the political and military control of the Soviet Union.

Czech autonomy was stifled under the repressive totalitarian Soviet regime. Over time, however, political and artistic freedoms were granted, leading to the reforms which came to be known as the "Prague Spring" of 1968, a short-lived season with the goals of full democracy, an end to censorship, and "socialism with a human face."

The Soviet Union and its allies reacted with an invasion of Czechoslovakia by 200,000 troops and 2,000 tanks on August 21, 1968. The military response suppressed any further attempts at democratic reforms.

The newly stringent Soviet leadership maintained control of the country until the "Velvet Revolution," a non-violent insurrection that began in the streets of Prague on November 17, 1989, and surprisingly soon overthrew the Soviet government.

Czech and Slovakian separatist movements subsequently inspired the peaceful split of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia on January 1, 1993, in what has become known as the "Velvet Divorce." Václav Havel, the Czech writer and former dissident, was elected as the first president and Prague was named the capital city of the new Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 and became a member of the European Union in 2004.

### **GLBTQ Rights**

In contrast to the repressions that characterized life under the Communist government of Czechoslovakia, life in the Czech Republic today is characterized by a great deal of personal freedom. Indeed, the Czech Republic is considered one of the most liberal countries in Central Europe and has become more glbtq-friendly in recent years.

Although homosexuality was decriminalized in Czechoslovakia in 1961, gay and lesbian life was closely monitored and sometimes harshly regulated by the soviet government. After the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia, citizens experienced a marked increase in all kinds of personal autonomy, including sexual choices.

The age of consent for sexual activity was equalized in 1990, from 18 for homosexuals to 15 for both homosexual and heterosexual partners. Homosexual prostitution, for persons 18 years or older, was decriminalized the same year.

The Czech National Labor Code was revised in 2001, providing anti-discrimination protection on the basis of sexual orientation. Consequently, the Czech Army does not question the sexual orientation of its soldiers.

Limited legal recognition of domestic partnerships has been available to same-sex couples in the Czech Republic since 2001, when "persons living in a common household" were granted inheritance and succession rights in housing.

### **Registered Partnerships**

Registered partnership legislation for same-sex couples, granting many of the same financial benefits and civil rights as legally married heterosexuals, had been proposed, and subsequently rejected, by the Czech government multiple times, beginning in 1995, before finally going into effect in 2006.

In 1995, the Czech government announced plans to update its civil code on family law and a registered-partnership proposal was put forward, based on the groundbreaking Danish Registered Partnership Act of 1989. But by the end of the year, the registered-partnership bill had been sidelined.

During the next decade the bill resurfaced several times. It came within two votes of approval in 1997. In 1999, the bill failed again. In February 2005, the bill failed yet again, this time by only one vote.

While most of the deputies for the Czech Social Democratic, Communist, and Freedom Union political parties consistently voted in favor of the bill, opposition was strong within the Civic Democratic Party, the largest right-wing party in the Czech Republic. Christian Democrats also opposed the bill, arguing that state recognition of same-sex partnerships threatened traditional family values and child rearing.

Representatives of ten Christian churches in the Czech Republic also called on legislators to reject the bill, warning that it would "weaken family life and cause chaos in values, mainly in the young generation."

Nonetheless, on January 26, 2006, a new bill to create a domestic partner registry for same-sex couples was finally passed by the Czech parliament.

However, on February 16, 2006, President Vaclav Klaus, a co-founder of the Civic Democratic Party, vetoed the bill, arguing that the legislation amounted to "excessive regulation by the state of people's private lives."

Following the announcement of the veto, gay men and lesbians marched through the streets of Prague to the presidential palace in protest. The Czech glbtq-rights organization Gay Initiative called the veto "an act against democracy."

In response, on March 15, 2006, Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek, a member of the Czech Social Democratic Party, successfully sought a parliamentary majority to override the veto. The law finally went into effect on July 1, 2006.

Same-sex couples who register as partners now have many of the same rights as legally married couples in the Czech Republic, including the right to an inheritance, the right to receive information about each other's health, and the option not to testify against each other in court.

The law, however, does not allow the adoption of children by same-sex partners.

By January 2008, nearly five hundred same-sex Czech couples had registered their partnerships.

### **GLBTQ Organizations**

Ratification of the Czech Registered Partnership Act was the culmination of years of activism and lobbying. The first Czech glbtq-rights organization was the Gay and Lesbian Citizens of the Czech Republic. Founded in 1990 and headquartered in Prague, the group's main objective was to promote the passage of a same-sex partnership law. The organization was renamed the Gay Initiative in 2000.

When the registered partnership law went into effect in July, 2006, Jiří Hromada, chairman of the Gay Initiative, stated that the group had achieved its goals and that it was "time for a younger generation of

activists to take over and draft their own goals for the future." Consequently, the Gay Initiative formally ceased to exist on December 31, 2006.

Another glbtq-rights organization, the Gay and Lesbian League (GLL), with headquarters in Prague, continues to push for stronger glbtq rights in the Czech Republic. The GLL aims to make same-sex partnerships fully equal with heterosexual marriages. The group's major concerns for same-sex couples include adoption rights, the right to hold joint ownership of property, and the right to file taxes jointly.

Although anti-discrimination laws were passed in the Czech Republic in 2001, workplace discrimination against glbtq persons also continues to be a top concern for the GLL.

While there are as yet no formal pride events in the Czech Republic, the city of Prague hosts Mezipatra, the largest annual gay and lesbian film festival in Central and Eastern Europe. Founded in 2000, the festival, which takes place each year in November, showcases approximately 80 glbtq-themed features, shorts, and documentaries. The festival also includes a number of supporting events and guest speakers.

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**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.