

# THE CZECH REPUBLIC

## Geography

The Czech Republic is a small country in **Central Europe**. The area of the Czech Republic is **almost 80,000 square kilometres**. The country consists of three regions: **Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia**. The population of the Czech Republic is about **ten and a half million people**. Most of these people are Czechs and Moravians. There are also Slovaks, Ukrainians, Vietnamese, Roma, Poles, and others. The capital city of the Czech Republic is **Prague**. The Czech Republic borders **Germany, Austria, Poland, and Slovakia**.

The highest mountains in the Czech Republic are the **Giant Mountains** (in Czech *Krkonoše*). They are located on the border between the Czech Republic and Poland. The highest mountain in the Giant Mountains and the highest mountain in the Czech Republic is **Sněžka**. There are other mountain ranges in the Czech Republic, for example the **Šumava**, which is located in the South on the border between the Czech Republic and Germany. The longest rivers in the Czech Republic are **the Vltava, the Labe and the Morava**.

## History

The history of the Czech Republic is stupid and sad, like the history of most other countries around the world. Maybe even a bit more.

People have lived in the area of present day Czech Republic for a very long time. There can still be found their pre-historic artifacts, for example the famous **Venus of Dolní Věstonice**. The first people whose identity we know were the **Celts**. They were later replaced by **Germanic people** and the Germanic people were replaced by **Slavic people**.

In the 9th century, **Great Moravia** was established. **St Cyril and his brother Methodius** brought **Christianity** in Old Church Slavonic language to Great Moravia. They also invented the **Glagolitic alphabet**, from which the **Cyrillic alphabet** later developed. Cyrillic alphabet is still used today in Bulgaria, Russia, Ukraine, and other countries.

The **Kingdom of Bohemia** was a small medieval country. It included Moravia and part of Silesia as well. It was part of the **Holy Roman Empire**. It was ruled by the **Přemyslid dynasty**. The most famous Přemyslid king is probably **St Wenceslas**. He was a very religious man who was **murdered by his brother Boleslav**. One of the Přemyslid kings **invited Germans to come to his kingdom** and live in the areas near the border that were almost empty. From that time until the end of World War Two, **Czechs and Germans lived in the country together**.

One of the most famous and popular kings of Bohemia was **Charles IV**. He came from the **Luxembourg dynasty**. He was the **Holy Roman Emperor**. He loved Prague and he made it the center of his empire. He was responsible for a lot of building projects, for example **the Karlštejn Castle and the Charles Bridge**. He also founded **Charles University**, the oldest university in Central Europe.

The first half of the 15th century was a very violent period of Czech history. The **Hussite Wars** were religious wars between the Hussites and the Catholics. The wars ended by an agreement between the two parties.

Another famous Czech king and Holy Roman Emperor was **Rudolph II**. He came from the **Hapsburg dynasty**. He wasn't very interested in politics, he was more into **art, alchemy, astronomy**, and other such things. He attracted lots of famous scientists to Prague, and also a lot of charlatans. Some of the scientists that lived in Prague in Rudolph II's time were **Tycho de Brahe** and **Johannes Kepler**. Rudolph II was also quite friendly to the Jewish people. The **legend of Golem** takes place during this time.

After Rudolph's death, **religious wars started again**. This time, they were even bigger and deadlier than the Hussite Wars. They were part of a larger **conflict between the Catholics and the Protestants** known as the **Thirty Years' War**. Czech leaders were mostly Protestants. After the end of the wars, **Protestantism was banned** in Bohemia and Moravia and many thousands of people chose to **emigrate**. One of them was **Jan Amos Komenský**.

After the end of the Thirty Years' War, the Kingdom of Bohemia **became part of Austria**. The Hapsburg kings **wanted to replace the Czech language and Czech culture with the German language and German culture**. German was the official language at schools and most people who continued speaking Czech were poorer than the German-speaking people.

The situation started changing at the end of the 18th century when the **Czech National Revival** started. Intellectuals tried to bring the Czech language and culture back to life and they were successful. Unfortunately, both German and Czech nationalism grew in the process.

During World War One, **Czech soldiers had to fight for Austria-Hungary**. Many of them didn't feel at home in this country so they **deserted the army and fought for the Allies instead**. When World War One ended, Czechs and their cousins Slovaks created a new country, **Czechoslovakia**. It was a **democratic country**. The first president of Czechoslovakia was **Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk**. The country was a developed country and Czech culture prospered. However, the state had a lot of problems. The Germans (about three million people) were not happy in the new country.

When Hitler became the leader of Germany, most Czech Germans (but definitely not all of them) supported him and wanted to join his country. In September 1938, **Great Britain, France, Italy and Germany met in Munich** and agreed that **the German-speaking parts of Czechoslovakia can join Nazi Germany**. This event is called the **Munich Agreement**. Soon after, Slovakia declared independence and became a fascist state. Next year, **Germany invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia** and occupied it until the end of World War Two.

The Nazis **introduced their brutal and stupid racial laws and massacred Czech Jews**. All three sisters of Franz Kafka, the greatest German-language writer of all time, died in concentration camps. The Germans also **completely destroyed the Czech villages of Lidice and Ležáky** and did many other horrible, inhuman things. Some of the most famous Czech writers, such as **Vladislav Vančura**, were **shot**, and others, like **Josef Čapek** and **Karel Poláček**, were **sent to concentration camps** where they died.

After the end of the war, Czechs were really angry. Especially those who were too afraid to do anything against the Nazis while they were in power. Sometimes they **attacked German people, even women and children, and killed them**. A special law said that **all Germans had to leave the borderlands** where they had lived for hundreds of years.

Three years after the end of World War Two, **the Communist Party became the ruler of Czechoslovakia**. Democracy was abolished and **concentration camps were opened again** – this time for people who disagreed with communist ideas. Some prominent **opponents of the regime were unfairly sentenced to death**, for example the politician **Milada Horáková**. If people tried to escape abroad, they could be shot by the border patrol. **Freedom of speech ended** and **many writers could not publish their books**. A demented alcoholic named **Klement Gottwald** became the president of the country.

In the 1960s, the situation started changing for the better. The year **1968** was the culmination of these changes which are known as the **Prague Spring**. The Soviets and other communist countries didn't like it and **in August 1968, they sent their armies into Czechoslovakia**. The situation became similar to the 1950s, although a bit less brutal. Censorship started again. Children could be punished for what their parents said or did. Many thousands of people **emigrated**. People who criticized the regime could be put in prison. The economy was bad.

In **1989**, the nightmare suddenly ended. The Soviet Union started falling apart and **Czechoslovakia became a democratic country** again. **Václav Havel**, a well-known opponent of the communist regime, became president. In **1993**, Czechoslovakia split **into two countries**: the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

There are still a lot of problems and a lot of new problems appeared. However, people at least have more freedom to try to do something about them. But how long will it last?

## **Economy**

The Czech Republic is a **developed country** although it is not as prosperous as most countries in Western Europe. The largest industry in the Czech Republic is **car manufacturing**. The largest and most famous Czech car maker is **Škoda auto**. Most people in the Czech Republic work in **services**. The main business partner of the Czech Republic is **Germany**. The Czech Republic is part of the **European Union** and gets lots of money from it. The currency used in the Czech Republic is called the **Czech crown**.

## Symbols

The flag of the Czech Republic is **red, white, and blue**. It is the same as the flag of former Czechoslovakia. There is a red stripe at the bottom, a white stripe at the top and a blue triangle on the left side of the flag. The official animal of the Czech Republic is the **lion**. The national anthem of the Czech Republic is a song called "**Where is my home?**"

## Political institutions

The Czech Republic is a **parliamentary democracy**. The head of the Czech Republic is the **president** but he has little actual power. Czech laws are made by the **Czech Parliament**. The Parliament has two parts: **the House of Representatives** and **the Senate**. The head of the Czech government is the **Prime Minister**.

## Food

Czech food is **very tasty** but it is usually not **very healthy**. Many Czech dishes consist of **meat, dumplings, and some kind of sauce** – cream sauce, tomato sauce, dill sauce, and so on. The most famous of these sauces is called **svíčková**. It is a vegetable sauce with cream that contains carrots, celery and parsley. It is usually eaten with bread dumplings and beef.

Another typical Czech dish are **fruit dumplings**. It is a sweet dish. The dumplings are large and are filled with fruit – typically **plums, strawberries, or apricots**. They are served with sugar and melted butter. Sometimes, poppy seeds or cottage cheese are put on top of the dumplings.

Czech people also cook lots of kinds of soups. **Potato soup** is one of the most popular ones. There are potatoes, carrots, mushrooms and other things in it. Other Czech soups are for example **noodle soup, vegetable soup, bean soup, lentil soup, goulash soup, garlic soup** and others.

At Christmas, most Czech people eat **fish and potato salad**. If somebody doesn't like fish, they can have another typical Czech dish – **schnitzel and potato salad**. It is a piece of meat, typically pork, that is breaded and fried. The potato salad contains not only potatoes but also carrots, onions, mayonnaise, and boiled eggs.

Czech restaurants often have only one dish for vegetarians: **fried cheese**. It is a piece of hard cheese that is breaded and fried. It is eaten with chips or boiled potatoes and ketchup or mayonnaise.

There are also some typical Czech desserts. **Koláče** is a very popular one. It is a special kind of flat cake with sweet topping – strawberry jam, apple purée, cottage cheese, and other things. There are lots of other Czech sweet desserts such as **buchty** or **kremrole**.

If you are not very hungry and just want to have a snack, the **Czech open sandwiches called chlebíčky** are great for you. There are a lot of kinds of these open sandwiches. Very popular is for example an open sandwich with potato salad and ham.

The most popular alcoholic drink in the Czech Republic is **beer**. There are a lot of snacks that are usually served in pubs and that are eaten with beer. Typical Czech pub foods are for example **pickled sausages, ham with horseradish, pickled cheese**, and other things.

There are also many restaurants with food from other countries in the Czech Republic. **Italian and Chinese meals** are probably the most popular kinds of foreign food. In bigger cities, you can often find **Indian restaurants** and places which sell **sushi**. There is also at least one **kebab shop** in every Czech city.

## Sports

The most popular sport in the Czech Republic is **football**. There are many football competitions in the Czech Republic and a lot of people are fans of some team from the highest football league. The two most famous football teams in Prague are called **Sparta** and **Slavia**. Other Czech football clubs are for example **Victoria Plzeň** or **Baník Ostrava**. There are also quite a lot of **hooligans** in the Czech Republic.

**Ice hockey** is also a popular sport. Some of the best ice hockey players in the world come from the Czech Republic. The most famous one is definitely **Jaromír Jágr** who started his career **in Kladno**. The Czech national hockey team **won the Olympic gold medal in Nagano in 1998**.

## Famous places

The Czech Republic is a country with many spots that are interesting for tourists. The most famous sights are located in Prague and other cities and are described elsewhere but there are many other places that are also beautiful and interesting. Here are just a few of them:

### Karlštejn and other castles

The Czech Republic is **full of castles**. It is probably because Czech people hated each other and it was good to have some place where you could be safe from your neighbours. The most famous Czech castle is probably **Karlštejn**. It is not very far from Prague. It was built for **Charles IV** in the 14th century. The most famous part of Karlštejn is probably the **Chapel of the Holy Cross** with paintings by Master Theodoric. Other famous castles located in the Czech Republic are for example **Křivoklát, Krakovec, Okoř**, and others. There are also quite a lot of **chateaux** in the Czech Republic, for example **Hluboká** or **Konopiště**.

### Moravian Karst

The Moravian Karst is located not very far from **Brno**. The place is famous for its strange geological formations, especially **caves**. The most famous part of the Moravian Karst is probably **Macoča**. It is a deep hole in the ground. It plays an important role in a classic Czech book for children called **The Mammoth Hunters**.

### Bohemian Switzerland

Bohemian Switzerland is a national park located in the north of the Czech Republic, on the border with Germany. The landscape of the park looks like Swiss landscapes. There are **beautiful valleys, nice views and amazing rocks**. One of its main attractions is *Pravčická brána* – **the largest natural sandstone arch in Europe**.

### Bohemian Paradise

Bohemian Paradise (*Český ráj* in Czech) is located in **eastern Bohemia**. It is a protected landscape area famous for its beautiful and massive **rocks**. It is a great place for **walking and hiking**. Like almost everywhere in the Czech Republic, there are a lot of castles in the area.

### Šumava National Park

The Šumava is a mountain range in southern Bohemia, on the border between Czech Republic and Germany. It is a national park famous for its **wildlife and beautiful nature**.

## Famous people

### Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was **the first president of Czechoslovakia**. He was also one of the people who worked hard to establish this new country in the first place. He was the president of Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1935. He was not only a **politician** but also a **philosopher**. Before he became president, he had been a **university professor**. He showed great courage when he defended **Leopold Hilsner**, a young Jewish man who was unjustly accused of murdering a woman.

### Václav Havel

Václav Havel was a famous Czech **playwright**. During the communist era, he was an opponent of the totalitarian regime and he spent some time in prison for his convictions. He became president of Czechoslovakia after the **Velvet Revolution** and he was also the first president of the Czech Republic. Like Masaryk, he wasn't just a **politician** but also a **thinker**. Today, the Prague Airport is named after him.

### Jan Amos Komenský

Jan Amos Komenský was a Czech **thinker, educator, and priest**. He was born in Moravia but he had to leave it because of his religion. He lived in many European countries – for example in Poland, Germany, and Sweden. He died in the Netherlands. He is famous for his **books on education**.

### Karel Čapek and Josef Čapek

Karel Čapek is probably **the best-known Czech writer in the English speaking countries**. He is famous for his **science fiction plays and novels**, particularly for his play **R. U. R.** The word "**robot**" comes from this

play. It was invented by his brother Josef. Josef Čapek was also a writer, although he is more famous as a **painter**. Both brothers were strong **opponents of Nazism** and warned people against it long before the beginning of World War Two. Karel died a short time after the Munich Agreement was signed. Josef died in the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen shortly before the end of World War Two.

### Jaroslav Seifert

Jaroslav Seifert was a Czech **poet**. He wrote a lot about **Prague**. During the communist regime, his new books couldn't be published and some of his books were censored. He got the **Nobel Prize in Literature** in 1984.

### Antonín Dvořák

Antonín Dvořák was a famous Czech **composer**. One of his most famous works is the ***New World Symphony***, which he composed when he was in America.

### Bedřich Smetana

Bedřich Smetana was a famous Czech **composer**. One of his most works is a cycle of symphonic poems called ***My Country***. The most famous symphonic poem in this cycle is called ***Vltava***.

### Alfons Mucha

Alfons Mucha was a famous Czech **painter**. He painted many pictures and posters in the **Art Nouveau** style. His most famous work is probably a cycle of large paintings called ***The Slav Epic***.

### Ema Destinová

Ema Destinová was a famous Czech **opera singer**. She sang all over Europe as well as in the United States. Today, you can see her face on the 2000 Czech crown banknote.

### Otto Wichterle

Otto Wichterle was a Czech **scientist**. He was a chemist and he developed **the first soft contact lenses**.

The overview is largely based on the following sources:

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