



# The Mystifications of a Nation: "The Potato Bug" and Other Essays on Czech Culture

*Vladimír Macura*

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A keen observer of culture, Czech writer Vladimír Macura (1945–99) devoted a lifetime to illuminating the myths that defined his nation. *The Mystifications of a Nation*, the first book-length translation of Macura's work in English, offers essays deftly analyzing a variety of cultural phenomena that originate, Macura argues, in the "big bang" of the nineteenth-century Czech National Revival, with its celebration of a uniquely Czech identity.

In reflections on two centuries of Czech history, he ponders the symbolism in daily life. Bridges, for example—once a force of civilization connecting diverse peoples—became a sign of destruction in World War I. Turning to the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, Macura probes a range of richly symbolic practices, from the naming of the Prague metro system, to the mass gymnastic displays of the Communist period, to post-Velvet Revolution preoccupations with the national anthem. In "The Potato Bug," he muses on one of the stranger moments in the Cold War—the claim that the United States was deliberately dropping insects from airplanes to wreak havoc on the crops of Czechoslovakia.

While attending to the distinctively Czech elements of such phenomena, Macura reveals the larger patterns of Soviet-brand socialism. "We were its cocreators," he declares, "and its analysis touches us as a scalpel turned on its own body." Writing with erudition, irony, and wit, Macura turns the scalpel on the authoritarian state around him, demythologizing its mythology.

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