

State of Stone: Resilience and Fragility in Josef Sudek's Prague

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Stone offers a potent symbol for the strength and sovereignty of city and state. In aesthetic representations of the state, images of stone provide assurances of resilience when dominated or occupied by hostile foreign forces or occupation: identification with a country perceived as innately strong can mitigate personal feelings of terror and powerlessness.

The celebrated Czech photographer Josef Sudek used stone as a bridging metaphor between representations of the self, and of the state with which the self is identified.¹ Here, I focus on Sudek's elaboration of the dialectical tension inherent in stone: its innate durability, toughness, and strength, as opposed to its essential fragility.

Sudek photographed stone symbols of his violated Czech homeland during the Nazi occupation of the young nation of Czechoslovakia, and later, after the Soviet-sponsored Communist coup of 1948 once again deprived the country of its autonomy, including the stone cathedral of Svaty Vit and its surrounds—the "Third Courtyard," which overlies its oldest foundations the Czech Castle. After the establishment of the Czechoslovak state in 1918, the Third Courtyard was paved with slabs of granite quarried from every region of the young nation, a veritable geological atlas: a strong stone skin that protects its ancient origins.

And yet the integrity of the new country was continually violated. Sudek conveys the transience of stone in photographs of mutilated stone statuary and shattered ground rock. Thus does Sudek express the both the resilience and the ultimate fragility of the corporeal and psychic self, and of the oppressed nation-state with which its citizens identify.

¹ Tutter, A. (2013) Angel with a missing wing: Loss, restitution, and the embodied self in the photography of Josef Sudek. *American Imago*, Vol. 70, pp. 127-190.



Sudek, Third Courtyard of the Czech Castle.



Sudek, *Shattered Ground Rock.*