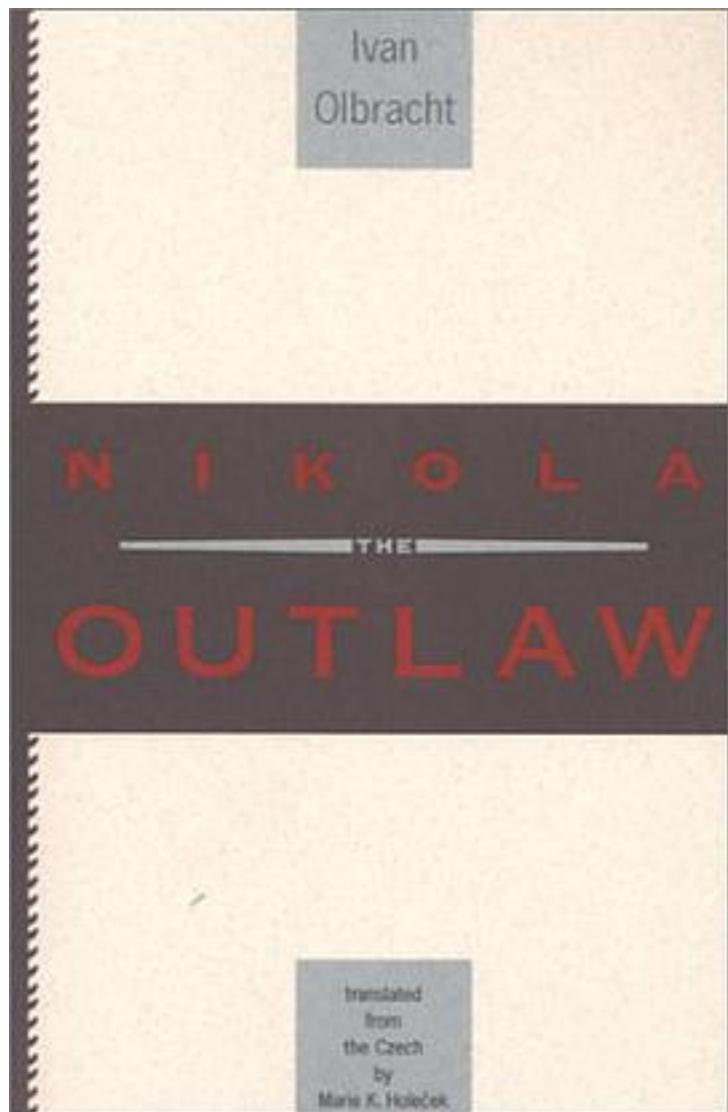


Nikola the Outlaw



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Ivan Olbracht's reputation as one of Czechoslovakia's most important interwar authors stems largely from his works dealing with Ruthenia, a region south of the Carpathian Mountains that after World War I became part of the newly formed nation of Czechoslovakia. His novels and stories deal with the interaction between the two major ethnic groups occupying the region at that time: the Ruthenians, who were largely peasants; and the Jews, who were largely merchants. *Nikola: The Outlaw* focuses on the Ruthenians and is considered Olbracht's masterpiece. *Nikola Suhaj* lives a Robin Hood-like existence as he and his accomplices rob -- and often kill -- travelers and rich Jewish merchants. They return some of the spoils to the poor, to fellow Ruthenians or even poor Jews, but keep most for themselves. The authorities, failing in their attempts to capture the outlaw, dispatch a new gendarmerie captain from Prague, who puts a reward on the outlaw's head -- and does not care if *Nikola* is brought in dead or alive. The Jewish community responds with a reward ten times as large. The results are immediate: three of *Nikola*'s former cohorts band together and attempt to outsmart him. Set against the backdrop of the relations between Ruthenians and Jews, Olbracht's novel weaves myth with realism and ties the never-ending struggle against injustice to the universal yearning for freedom.

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