

Between Politics and Culture: New Perspectives on the History of the Bohemian Lands and the First Czechoslovak Republic

Veranstalter: Masaryk Institute and Archives, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic; Department of German and Austrian Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University Prague

Datum, Ort: 30.05.2014–31.05.2014, Prague

Bericht von: Václav Šmidrkal, Masaryk Institute and Archives, Czech Academy of Sciences

The two-day conference 'Between Politics and Culture: New Perspectives on the History of the Bohemian Lands and the First Czechoslovak Republic' aimed to gather scholars both from the Czech Republic and abroad who shared a common interest in the modern history of Bohemian Lands and interwar Czechoslovakia and were actually conducting new research projects in this field. The tumultuous decades from late 19th century until the outbreak of World War II have been studied extensively from the perspective of traditionally conceived political history, the history of events or economic and social history. But the scholarship lacked culturally oriented perspectives on this period, and transnational perspectives on this territory currently belong to desiderata of research as well. On top of that, after 1989 Czech historical scholarship focused on contemporary history and the period of Communism. The first Czechoslovak Republic often was romanticized as a Czech 'belle époque'. The observed growing tendency for methodologically innovative research on the modern history of Bohemian Lands was among the reasons to organise this conference. The two-day event provided a broad overview of ongoing research projects. Despite the wide range of topics presented, all papers addressed problems that included both a cultural and a political innovative dimension of history of Bohemian Lands. Although some of the papers presented reached as far back as to the mid-19th century while others focused on the 1940s, most of the contributions were centred on the Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) This period was char-

acterized as the time in which Czech state-building was fulfilled. The majority of papers were based on a broader doctoral or post-doctoral research.

The first panel focused on new political history. The papers dealt with preconditions and development of democracy in interwar Czechoslovakia in the light of Arend Lijphart's model of consociationalism, with Tomáš G. Masaryk's religion-free republican ideology and its reception by other Czech politicians in the light of the 1907 election, and with the language policy of the Czechoslovak Parliament after the general elections in 1920. DANIEL E. MILLER (West Florida) presented results of comparative inquires into democratic qualities in several states. He argued that late Austria-Hungary had a clear growing potential in democratization. The political system of the first Czechoslovak Republic was equally characterized by a number of positive factors enabling democratic forms of government and future democratic development. BENJAMIN CONRAD (Munich) gave a concrete empirical example of an ambiguity inherent to the Czechoslovak political system. The National Assembly was, together with parliaments of Latvia and Finland, the only legislative body in East-Central Europe that allowed its members to use their mother tongues. Thus, with seven official languages it became a truly multilingual institution. Conrad asked to what extent the multilingual policy endorsed a wider integration of the minorities into the parliamentary system. Drawing a comparison between the German members of parliament in Latvia, who soon learned Latvian, and in Czechoslovakia, who did not learn the dominant language, Conrad suggested that this difference resulted from the level of attractiveness of both states for their minorities. Whereas Latvia seemed to be a better option than Russia, Czechoslovakia did not offer an attractive enough possibility for integration. JOHANNES GLEIXNER (Mainz), in his paper, discussed the reception of anticlerical and national political ideology by T. G. Masaryk and his adherents that complicated the way to a compromise with political Catholicism after 1918.

For the newly created states after World War I, commemorative practices played a sig-

nificant role in public politics. In her comparison with Hungary, ANDREA TALABÉR (Budapest/Florence) concluded that Czechoslovak state holidays represented a victorious euphoria orientated towards future progress, whereas defeated and dismembered Hungary showed in public celebrations its nostalgia for the lost empire and frustration from the World War I outcomes. EVA KALIVODOVÁ and VOJTĚCH KESSLER (both Prague) presented an overview of a project on commemorations in interwar Czechoslovakia. Linking official state commemorations to different memory practices of national minorities or social groups, the research will analyse the constitution of different collectives and their relation to the Czechoslovak state.

Even though transnational history has become a chic and fashionable methodological approach in present-day historiography, in the case of the Bohemian Lands it has been used surprisingly little. TORSTEN LORENZ (Prague) embedded the history of co-operatives that were established as a collectivist response to challenges of 19th century capitalism into a broader East-Central European perspective. ONDŘEJ MATĚJKA (Prague) presented a collocation of 'international-mindedness' that he used to describe the goals of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in interwar Czechoslovakia. The YMCA created a network of branches in order to spread values of human development and international cooperation, while disguising their religious background due to the complicated relation of the Czechs to spiritual questions. MAREK SKOVAJSA (Prague) presented a paper on the effects Rockefeller Foundation funding of Czechoslovak social scientists' stays in the US had on their research. The generous programme helped social scientists from Czechoslovakia to learn about the newest trends in social sciences overseas and to implant them back in their homeland. The impact of these exchanges remained rather limited, though: Because of World War II and the communist takeover in 1948, many recipients ended up in emigration.

The first day of the conference was concluded by two contributions to the history of cultural institutions. The paper on the elec-

trification of the Municipal Theatre in Brno presented by KATHARINA WESSELY (Bern) showed that technical modernisation was not linear or proportional, but rather unbalanced, and that theatre represented one of the local foci of urban modernisation. MARTHA STELLMACHER (Hannover) talked about musical practices in Prague synagogues and their attempts to keep their specific style of religious music. For her case study she used the auditions for new cantors in the Klausen Synagogue and Vinohrady Synagogue in Prague.

Images of the other and of oneself were another popular topic pursued by different speakers. Imaginations of the nation and its territorial perception were demonstrated by FELIX JESCHKE's (London) paper. He studied the development of the Czechoslovak railway network from the point of view of spreading national representations. The West-East oblong shape of the Czechoslovak territory required a new railway network that would interconnect its regions and foster its territorial integrity. Newly built railway routes lent themselves to imagining the state and its power to control its territory. Moreover, the opening of new track sections in Slovakia (and Carpathian Ruthenia) can be interpreted in the colonial discourse as conquering of new land and its 'civilisation' by 'Westerners'.

SARAH LEMMEN (Vienna/Bremen) presented a paper on Czech imagination of the Orient and its impact on national identity. The Czechs did not have their own state and did not take part in colonial conquest and from this, paradoxically, deduced their predestination for an economical expansion in non-European parts of the world after the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918. FILIP HERZA (Prague) analysed the representational forms of other 'races' in the 1890s exhibitions in Prague and their reflections by the Czechs on the example of the Dahomey Kingdom and the Dahomeans. Representations played also a role in CYNTHIA PACE's (New Jersey) paper on modern views of womanhood on the brink of 20th century. The 'modern woman' was expected to handle her role as a mother and an educator of a new generation, but she was also acknowledged as a participant in public life.

Urban history was represented by two papers. CLAIRE MORELON (Paris/Birmingham) dealt with the impact of the Great War on the modifications of urban spaces in Prague, its architecture as well as its uses for war purposes. She paid attention to the interethnic relations and the representations of Slavic and German loyalty and patriotisms. JOHANNES F. KONTNY (Vienna) took a comparative look at the integration of South Moravian Znojmo/Znaim and East Belgian Eupen into their new states to which they belonged despite their different ethnical compositions. Znojmo/Znaim was chosen as an example of a town where Czech and German politicians could make a deal even under the conditions of harsh nationalistic confrontation in most Czech-German mixed territories.

The last panel was devoted to social history. VOLKER ZIMMERMANN (Munich) presented an overview of the administrative categorisations of the 'Gypsies' and other 'suspicious elements' in the discourses over criminality from the mid-19th century until World War II. Radical views on links between ethnicity and criminality and a wide political consensus to discipline marginal groups resulted in the adoption of the Czechoslovak Law No. 127/1927 Coll. that introduced strict measures against 'vagrant gypsies'. Using the example of the children book 'Frantik, kladivo a spol.' from 1943 RADKA ŠUTROVÁ (Prague) spoke about ideas on the rationalisation of labour productivity during the Nazi occupation of the Bohemian Lands. Whereas the initial goal was to give support to the German war effort, some of the ideas propagated during the war had a longer impact on the conceptualisation of work in later Czechoslovakia.

The conference proved that the history of Bohemian Lands in the turbulent, but slightly overshadowed era from the fin de siècle through the shock of the Great War and the re-configuration of Central Europe until the decomposition of the interwar order offered a wide arena for further research that needed to transcend traditional political and national narratives. It also showed that there are untouched topics or untried ways of research that could extend or sharpen answers to sub-

stantial questions about the history of this region. Last but not least, the conference also indicated perils of cultural history that could slip into superficiality or into a patchwork of impressions hidden in eloquence or picturesque argumentation. In spite of this liability, the variety of topics, methodological approaches and preliminary results that were presented in the course of this conference were an inspiring manifestation of possible ways to re-think the history of Bohemian Lands and to extend the existing scholarly literature in this field.

Conference overview:

Ota Konrád – Ines Koeltzsch (Prague): Introduction

New Political History

Daniel E. Miller (West Florida)/Philip J. Howe (Adrian)/Thomas A. Lorman (London): The Creation of the Conditions for Consociational Democracy and Its Development in Interwar Czechoslovakia

Johannes Gleixner (Munich): Secular-Religious Republicanism or the Rise of a New Republican Ideology: T. G. Masaryk in the Perception of his Various Followers, 1900–1920

Benjamin Conrad (Mainz): Languages in the Czechoslovakian Chamber of Deputies: A Path towards Integration?

The Politics of Memory

Andrea Talabér (Budapest/Florence): Mapping the Post-Imperial Nation: National Days in Interwar Czechoslovakia and Hungary

Eva Kalivodová/Vojtěch Kessler (Prague): Commemoration as Social Practice. State Holidays in the First Czechoslovak Republic

Transnational Actors and the Transfer of Knowledge

Torsten Lorenz (Prague): The Cooperative Movement in Central and Eastern Europe: National and Transnational Dimensions of a Social Movement

Ondřej Matějka (Prague): Producing Social Modernity and 'International-Mindedness': The Action of the YMCA in Czechoslovakia and its Transnationalizing Effects (1919–1938)

Marek Skovajsa (Prague): The Rockefeller

ler Foundation and the Social Sciences in
Czechoslovakia 1924–1948: The Failure of an
Institutionalization Effort

30.05.2014–31.05.2014, Prague, in: H-Soz-Kult
17.01.2015.

Transnational Cultural Networks

Katharina Wessely (Bern): Mobile Actors,
Transnational Networks and Urban Space:
The Electrification of the Brno Theatre at the
End of the 19th Century

Martha Stellmacher (Hannover): Synagogue
Music in Prague in the Habsburg Empire and
the First Czechoslovak Republic: Musicians
and their Transnational Networks

Re-Imagining the Nation through Mobility

Sarah Lemmen (Vienna/Bremen): Czechoslo-
vak Emigration: Migration Infrastructure,
Municipal Policy, and Public Discourse in
Prague during the Interwar Years

Felix Jeschke (London): „Poznejte svou vlast!“
The Nation in Representations of New Rail-
way Lines in Interwar Czechoslovakia

Urban Spaces

Claire Morelon (Paris/Birmingham): The In-
vasion of Urban Space through War: Prague,
1914–1920

Johannes F. Kontny (Vienna): Unfinished
Transformation? The Integration of Eupen
and Znojmo/Znaim into the New State dur-
ing the Interwar Period

Gender, Race and Nation

Filip Herza (Prague): ‘Dahomey Amazons’:
Exhibitions and the Imagination of Race in
1890’s Prague

Cynthia Paces (New Jersey): The National
Mother and the New Woman in Early Twenti-
eth Century Bohemia

Social Engineering

Volker Zimmermann (Munich): ‘Gypsies’ and
Other Suspects: Discourses on Crime in the
Bohemian Lands and the First Czechoslovak
Republic, 1867–1938

Radka Šustrová (Prague): Rationalized Soci-
ety: Science, Labor and Productivity in the Bo-
hemian Lands during the 1930s and 1940s

Tagungsbericht *Between Politics and Culture:
New Perspectives on the History of the Bohemi-
an Lands and the First Czechoslovak Republic.*