

– IL CALAMO - STORIA –

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MICHAL PEHR

THE CZECHOSLOVAK PEOPLE'S PARTY
IN STRUGGLES
FOR THE INTERWAR DEMOCRACY



MARCIANUM PRESS

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Marcianum Press
Edizioni Studium S.r.l.
Dorsoduro 1 - 30123 Venezia
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Picture on the cover:

Pre-election poster the Czechoslovak People's Party

With the support of CEVRO Institute (Prague)

Impaginazione e grafica:

Linotipia Antoniana, Padova

ISBN 978-88-6512-610-3

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Introduction

The aim of this book is to describe the history of the Catholic Czechoslovak People's Party (Československá strana lidová, ČSL) in the interwar period to foreign readers. Its activity was naturally influenced by the overall social situation. After the First World War, the Habsburg monarchy was broken up and the number of new states were established. One of those was also Czechoslovakia which came into existence by the appropriate international political constellation. Exaggeratedly said, the new arising state was called a child of the Versailles' peace system in that time.

The interwar Czechoslovakia was, similarly like other states, establishing its new institutions, political system and last but not least, it was looking for its own identity as well. The result of this progressive process was the birth of liberal democratic state being based on legionnaire's traditions which, together with the ideals of Czechoslovakism¹, humanism and progress but also with a hope of the invariability of after-war organization, made a basic identity of the new state.

Everything Czech was changed into Czechoslovak, however fundamentally remaining Czech. The building of the state was a proof of the power and will of (primarily) Czech society. This was noticed by important English geo-politician Halford J. Mackinder who in his work from 1919 named *Demokratické ideály a realita* wrote: "Take for example Czechs. Didn't they decisively raise against bolshevism

¹ The term "Czechoslovakism" opens disputes in the historical society, though this term is fundamental, correct and important for the interwar society. For instance, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (TGM) never used this term. However, one of the central ideas of the state was the idea of the Czechoslovak nation when this term was widely used. Compare with, for example, the Law from 28 October about the establishment of the Czechoslovak independent state.

and didn't they prove their national greatness on the admirable conditions in Russia? Didn't they prove the exceptional political ability during repeated building and governing of their own state, even though it is almost all surrounded by Germans and Hungarians? Didn't they provide their own state with a character of erudition and modern industry? They will never miss the will for justice and for their independence."²

However, we do not have to forget also that the first republic was a remarkable state on a number of counts. Whether from the economic point of view (the achievements of Bat'a company, Zbrojovka, Škodovka and many other enterprises of international repute) or the developed cultural and scientific activities represented by many excellent artists, scientists and thinkers and at last but not least, for the reality that at the end of the 1930s Czechoslovakia was the only democratic state in the Central Europe, based on the principles of liberal democracy.

The interwar era lasting twenty years was not only amazing but also hectic. There is also tendency to see the Czechoslovak society in crisis permanently. We have to realize that the first republic was a picture of the then society.

The interwar Czechoslovakia had its own big political, national, religious, economic, social and cultural problems. The first republic's democracy was blamed for inclination to corruption,³ huge number of political parties, fustiness and ponderousness in negotiation interconnected with countless intrigues, interventions and backstage negotiations. There was nothing new under the sun. We can come across with these objections also in different states and

² HALFORD J. MACKINDER: *Democratic Ideals and Reality*. London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1919, p. 206.

³ For instance, Edvard Beneš in his work *The Democracy Today and Tomorrow* (*Demokracie dnes a zítra*) provided a convincing criticism of the interwar democracy for us. Compare with: EDVARD BENEŠ: *Demokracie dnes a zítra*. Praha: Společnost Edvarda Beneše, 1999.

democracy is blamed for these features till now. In the case of Czech society, it was even difficult because democracy did not have a long tradition⁴ at our place. Although in the contemporary society, there was a proposition that Czechoslovak society is naturally democratic, the interwar Czechoslovakia lacked the necessary time for taking roots of democratic principles and institutions and besides, it had many other problems.

There was none of the direct neighbours of the republic except Romania who would wish an existence of the independent Czechoslovakia because each of these states would rather usurp a piece of its territory. This was manifested during Munich 1938 when not only Germany but also Hungary and Poland came out with their territorial claims.

It seemed that the problems which caused the disintegration of Austria-Hungary were taken over by the new state. The state was accompanied by these problems during the whole existence and they represented its vital weakness. The main moving power of the ČSR was Czech society (similarly to Austria-Hungary where it was German and Hungarian society) which identified yourself with the new state as a whole and at the same time everything Czech was changed into Czechoslovak (remaining primarily Czech). The Czech elites were trying to create a political Czechoslovak nation like it was in Switzerland. This nation would have combined the individual nations within one state. In connection with this fact, there is a tendency to speak about the well-known and unsuccessful idea of Czechoslovakism.⁵

⁴ The interwar Czechoslovak democracy followed in this the process of building up civil society in the times of the Habsburg monarchy. However, this process was very complicated. The monarchy gradually transformed itself into a constitutional monarchy with a working parliament. A full proclamation of democracy came to terms only after the First World War.

⁵ To the question of Czechoslovakism, read more in detail e. g. ELISABETH BAKKE, *The Making of Czechoslovakism in the First Czechoslovak Republic*. In: MARTIN SCHULZE-WESEL (Hrsg.), *Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918-1938*. München, 2004, pp. 23-44.