

## INTRODUCTION

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The articles in the present special topic issue of *Nationality Papers* address the long-standing conflict, crucial to understanding both the last decades of the Habsburg monarchy and the interwar period, between Czechs and Bohemian Germans. This conflict, apparently “resolved” by the expulsion of Bohemian Germans after 1945, continues to undermine mutual understanding between the two peoples. Recent events and historical studies demonstrate that the question of Czech–German relations can benefit from fresh analysis.

Our understanding of Czech–German relations is still colored by events of the 1930s and 1940s. The Bohemian origins of the German Workers’ Party are well known, and the racist virulence of the Henlein movement in Czechoslovakia and its National Socialist sponsors in Germany has led historians to examine closely the most radical strands of German nationalism in the Habsburg monarchy in general and Bohemia in particular. On the other hand, the high moral stature of Tomáš G. Masaryk and the legacy of his views on the importance of small states, combined with the betrayal of Czechoslovakia by its western Allies at Munich, have led historians to emphasize the liberal and democratic traditions of the Czechs. Although these perspectives are not incorrect, neither do they present a complete picture of Bohemian or Sudetan German–Czech relations.

The “conflictual society” that emerged in the late nineteenth century resulted in part from the dynamic of mass politics. The politicians who ran the new parties that rose to prominence after the electoral reform of 1882 learned to exploit economic and social grievances for nationalistic ends. With the increasing differentiation of society that accompanied industrialization, politicians needed a way to solidify popular support for their programs. They found it in appeals to the national community. As the example of Austrian Social Democrats shows, even socialism had to contend with national differences.

In addition, the rhetoric used in political life became increasingly impassioned, as Germans disparaged the “*Unkultur*” of the Czechs and Czechs referred to the Germans as “our national enemies”. This led to a tolerance of racial and ethnic epithets that became integral to the political culture of Central Europe. The politics of language use also contributed to the separation of the two nationalities. Bruce Garver notes that Czechs sought the use of their own language in order to gain access to universal knowledge and culture. But use of the Czech language also underlined

what was particular to Czech culture. Elsewhere, Jan Křen suggests that by the end of the monarchy, fewer educated Czechs were completely fluent in German; they did not need the language for access to learning and were less likely than earlier generations to interact socially or professionally with their German peers.<sup>1</sup>

The system of voluntary associations that had provided the underpinning of liberal society in the middle of the nineteenth century also contributed to the alienation of the two nationalities from each other. The growth of associations with specifically nationalistic purposes drove a wedge between the two groups. Parallel German and Czech organizations might cooperate when their interests converged, but they remained organizationally separate.

The rapid demographic change that resulted from the migration of Czech laborers and *petite bourgeoisie* to predominantly German regions of the province also heightened the sense of crisis and conflict between the nationalities. As both economic and political life became more competitive, older liberal attitudes that assumed that cooperation would benefit both Germans and Czechs gave way to a desire to protect national property and rights.

The articles in this volume allow for an interpretation in nuance of national conflict and cooperation in the Bohemian lands. Bruce Garver and Herman Kopecek emphasize periods of cooperation. Garver makes clear the importance of science and technology—both of which transcend nationality—for the political and economic progress of the Czechs. Czech scientists and engineers like Jan Evangelista Purkyně, František Tilšer, and Josef Hlávka embraced a rational, liberal approach to Czech nationalism. All three valued cooperation with their German professional colleagues and were indebted to German intellectual traditions. They also sought to popularize scientific knowledge to raise the technical skills of the Czech population.

Herman Kopecek shows how the German parties moved from hostility to cooperation with the Czechoslovak government during the interwar years. Although the Czech and Slovak parties were reluctant at first to work with their German counterparts, common ideological orientations and economic interests brought them together by the mid-1920s. By joining forces with representatives of the other nationality, businessmen, farmers, and workers could hope to influence government policy. This cooperation, however, fell apart rapidly under the pressure of the depression and the example and interference of Nazi Germany.

Claire Nolte uses the case of Jindřich Fügner to examine the transitional era of the 1850s and early 1860s, where modern national identity was not yet firmly defined. Fügner's personal decision to move from being a "German-speaking Prager" to an ardent supporter of Czech causes illustrates many of the considerations that helped determine national affiliation. From Fügner's perspective the Czechs had a more liberal, less avaricious culture that was open to participation by all social classes. Nolte demonstrates the fragility of a Bohemian patriotism that, while never completely eclipsed, did not long outlast Fügner and was soon overcome by mass national movements in political, cultural, and business life.

The articles by Catherine Albrecht, Ronald Smelser, and Nancy Wingfield emphasize areas of national conflict. My contribution discusses the ways in which economic competition and uncertainty were used by German Bohemian politicians to bolster exclusive nationalism in the decades before the First World War. Despite the expectation that common economic interests would overcome nationalist suspicion, Czech advances in economic and political life were interpreted as losses threatening the German Bohemian community. The success of this approach was due in part to the decision by German politicians to exploit economic uncertainty in smaller towns in the borderlands of the province.

Ronald Smelser analyzes the decision to expel the Germans from Czechoslovakia in 1945, a decision that was based both on the long history of hostility between the two nationalities and on the hardships of the Second World War. Many Czechs were compromised by collaboration during the war years; the expulsion pushed the blame for their behavior back on the Germans. The violence of the wild expulsions in the spring of 1945 shows the extent to which unrestrained nationalism and the desire for revenge had infected the Czech population as well.

Both Smelser and Nancy Wingfield make clear that the expulsion has not fulfilled its promise of settling the question of Czech–German relations. The justification for and political, moral, and economic consequences of the expulsion were debated thoughtfully by independent Czech historians during the 1980s. The treatment of the Sudeten Germans has also become an important issue in the Czech Republic’s relationship with Germany. With independence, the Czech Republic is seeking to define its new national identity; Prime Minister Václav Klaus has embraced Czech nationalism based in part on the perceived economic strength of the country. As Wingfield points out, however, this complicates relations with the Sudeten Germans and their descendants, who have been demanding restitution for property confiscated after the war. If the Czech parliament approves a law returning property confiscated from Jews during the war, it will certainly be subject to greater pressure to deal with the problem of Sudeten German property as well.

The apparent dichotomy in this picture of Czech–German relations may be explained as demonstrating two “paradigms” in political life, a concept explored most thoroughly by Lothar Höbelt in his book on German–Austrian political parties prior to 1918.<sup>2</sup> Whenever the economic and social goals of Germans and Czechs coincided, they pursued a policy of cooperation. In times of political or economic crisis, however, strong political and even racial nationalism fostered distrust, misunderstanding, and conflict. Despite the expectation that a more modern political culture would encourage cooperation among parties and groups with similar interests, conflict often prevailed. The important question is why the cooperative paradigm failed, leaving expulsion of German Bohemians as the only apparent solution by 1945.

Behind German nationalism was the fear and disorientation that accompanied their loss of dominance of Habsburg political, cultural, and economic life. Until the

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Second World War, the Czechs could take pride in their clear progress in all three spheres; their history since 1938 is more ambiguous. Germans living in the Bohemian lands, on the other hand, were faced with a more difficult adjustment, regardless of whether they chose to cooperate with their Czech compatriots or remained firmly opposed to them. The complex relationship of these two peoples will continue to be influenced by the perceived imbalance between the large, prosperous state of Germany and the smaller Czech Republic. In the future, however, Czech apprehension about being overwhelmed by German investment may well be outweighed by the benefits of economic and political cooperation.

## NOTES

1. Jan Křen, *Konfliktní společenství: Češi a Němci, 1780–1918* [Conflictual Society: Czechs and Germans, 1780–1918] (Prague: Academia, 1990).
2. Lothar Höbelt, *Kornblume und Kaiseradler: Die deutschfreiheitlichen Parteien Altösterreichs, 1882–1918* (Vienna: Verlag für Geschichte und Politik and R. Oldenbourg, Munich, 1993).