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Cooperating with the Czechs, driving the state

German activist policies through biographical trajectories and administrative records (1918-1938)

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**Cooperating with the Czechs, driving the state
German activist policies through biographical trajectories and
administrative records (1918-1938)**

Abstract

Czechoslovakia, a newborn state in 1918, immediately faced interethnic conflict, threatening its survival. In other multinational places of interwar Central Europe, democracy rapidly collapsed, and most ethnic minorities became entrenched into a systemic opposition to the dominant nationality of their state. How could the Czechoslovak leaders of all nationalities overcome this state of tension and mistrust? How would leaders shape their preferences and strategies be shaped? Would cooperation prove to be a better option than systematic rejection of a common polity? To what extent did the imperial experience of interethnic cooperation survive the war and remain a useful frame for at least some part of the political leadership?

This paper studies how and why interethnic cooperation was successful. It pursues two directions. First, it considers how biographies and individual trajectories of leaders inform us about the strategies adopted vis-à-vis the minority issue. Then, it assesses how documents from the relevant ministries controlled by German-speaking ministers help decipher public policy choices and reassess the importance of the “national question” in the everyday routine of these institutions.

Keywords: Ethnic cooperation, Transnational, Czechoslovakia, Activism, Archives.

Introduction

Central Europe has been described as a place of ethnic hatred, terror and totalitarianism by many observers and historians throughout the 20th century.¹ It was also the place where nationalists attempted to adjust ethnic boundaries they co-created to the territory of the state they dreamed of or succeeded to build.² In the long run, the national framework became monolithic. Multinational entities disappeared and were not considered viable anymore. What remained of ethnic diversity was suspected of undermining peace and stability by fueling conflict and authoritarian tendencies. Hungary is probably the most visible example of ethnic-based populism where, since the 2000s, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán insisted that his kinsmen abroad should benefit from Hungarian passports, preserve their cultural autonomy, and wait for the next historical opportunity to break from their – necessarily oppressive – state (Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania and Serbia) and rejoin a Greater Hungary. Similarly, in Ukraine, ethnic difference – in this case, mostly a state-oriented preference based on a very blurred notion of national belonging – would be the cause of the most lethal armed conflict in Europe since the breakdown of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

In spite of this very dark perception of ethnic diversity, Europeans – notably Europeans from the center and the East of the continent – never ceased to live, work, fight along, marry and exchange with their ethnically/linguistically different neighbors and co-citizens. They shared much more than a taste for radical particularism and had to cooperate to a large extent, on an everyday basis, from the local factory or small village, up to the state level.

Czechoslovakia is a good example of interethnic cooperation at a state level: from the early 1920s to the late 1930s, leaders from various nationalities agreed to work together in the governance of public affairs. Joining parliamentary alliances and government coalitions, Czechs, Slovaks and Germans but also Jews and Subcarpathian Ruthenians (also known as Rusyns) participated in the building of a viable state after the collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. If radical minority politics contributed to undermining these efforts in what would become an overture to the Second World War, it does not mean that so-called “activism” – moderates cooperating with moderates – was doomed from the start.

Czechoslovakia, although one of the most tolerant places to live in between the world wars, was not immune to interethnic conflict. In 1918, the short-term survival of the newborn state was not taken for granted by Czech and Slovak leaders: the Germans refused to swear allegiance to the provisional government, and the Hungarian revolution soon broke out, threatening Slovakia, while the Poles fought against the Czechs in Silesia.³ How could the Czechoslovak leaders of all nationalities overcome this state of tension and mistrust? How would leader preferences and strategies be shaped? Would cooperation prove to be a better option than systematic rejection of a common polity? To what extent did the imperial

¹ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1998).

² Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations. Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

³ Robert Gerwirth, John Horne, (eds.), *War in Peace. Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

experience of interethnic cooperation survive the war and remain valid frame for at least some part of the political leadership?

This paper aims at understanding how and why cooperation was successful. We pursue two directions. First, we consider how biographies and individual trajectories of leaders inform us about the strategies adopted vis-à-vis the minority issue. Then, we assess how documents from the relevant ministries controlled by German-speaking ministers help decipher public policy choices and reassess the importance of the “national question” in the everyday routine of these institutions.

We focus on three German activist leaders in interwar Czechoslovakia: Ludwig Czech (DSAP, social democracy), Robert Mayr-Harting (DCSV, Christian democracy), and Franz Spina (BdL, agrarianism). We find that, first, the three leaders were socialized in a multinational imperial context, and thus cooperation was a natural *modus operandi* for them. Second, these three men were consistently activist: despite their initial doubt about the viability of Czechoslovakia, they supported it through its ups and downs. Importantly, the social catastrophe of the Great Depression did not weaken, but rather strengthened their cooperative resolve and activity. Finally, while these leaders supported German linguistic and cultural interests, the policies they implement while in office were explicitly ethno-blind.

I. Historiographical background

The often-strained relations between states, ethnic majorities and minorities have been studied extensively. Imperial and post-imperial studies focused notably on national and non-national identities in Austria-Hungary and its successor states.⁴ In interwar Czechoslovakia, it was particularly Czech-German relations that received extensive treatment, assessing the conflictual and cooperative features of this ethnic cohabitation.⁵ Scholars also dealt with the specific question of national groups, how they were defined, redefined and how they interacted within interwar states. The place of “non-national” individuals has been discussed, be it Jews pressured to “choose their side” or other groups reluctant to national categorization.⁶ A

⁴ István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Pieter Judson, “Marking National Space on the Habsburg Austrian Borderlands: 1880-1918” in Omer Bartov and Eric Weitz, eds, *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the East, Central, and Southeast European Borderlands* (University of Indiana Press, 2013), 122-135; Claire Morelon, « State and Legitimacy and Continuity Between the Habsburg Empire and Czechoslovakia: the 1918 Transition in Prague » in Paul Miller, Claire Morelon (eds.), *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), p. 43-63; Etienne Boissier, *Les Tchèques dans l'Autriche-Hongrie en guerre : "Nous ne croyons plus aucune promesse"* (Paris: Eur'ORBEM, 2017); Antony Polonsky, *The Little Dictators: the History of Eastern Europe since 1918*, (London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1975).

⁵ Jan Křen, *Konfliktní společenství. Češi a Němci 1780-1918* (Prague: Karolinum, 2013); Johann Wolfgang Brügel, *Czechoslovakia before Munich: the German minority problem and British appeasement policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Václav Houžvicka, *Czechs and Germans 1848-2004: the Sudeten question and the transformation of Central Europe* (Prague: Karolinum, 2015); Wenzel Jaksch, *Europe's road to Potsdam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963).

⁶ Chad Bryant, « Either German or Czech: Fixing Nationality in Bohemia and Moravia, 1939-1946 », *Slavic Review*, vol. 61, 4/2002, p. 683-706; Morgane Labbé, "National indifference, statistics, and the constructivist paradigm: The case of the “Tutejsi” (‘the people from here’) in interwar Polish censuses”, in Maarten Van Genderachter and Jon Fox (eds.), *Ignoring the nation's call. National indifference and the history of nationalism in modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 161-179. Kateřina Čapková, *Češi, Němci, Židé? Národní identita Židů v Čechách 1918-1938* (Prague: Paseka, 2005).

number of works have focused on the particular policies of the Czechoslovak state towards its ethnic minorities⁷, while others turned towards the study of the specific political parties.⁸ Finally, various works have been devoted to key personalities of the period, in most cases heads of state, prominent politicians or, as in the case of Henlein, radical minority leaders.⁹ Activist leaders have received less attention from scholars, though a few works have been published.¹⁰

II. The archives: what we have and what we miss

The present study rests on a dual set of archival material. On the one hand, we looked for personal papers and biographical records of three German activist leaders in interwar Czechoslovakia: Ludwig Czech, Robert Mayr-Harting, and Franz Spina. On the other hand, we prospected records from the administration under their command, most notably from the Ministry of Social Affairs (*Ministerstvo sociální péče - MSP*) and to a lesser extent from the Ministry of Health (*Ministerstvo zdravotnictví*) and the Ministry of Justice (*Ministerstvo spravedlnosti*). These documents offer a broad overview of the personality and the action of the three leaders.

There are, however, limits to the heuristic use we can make of these records. First, the quantity of information is overwhelming, and usually disconnected from our research goals. The MSP records, for instance, contain 4,297 boxes for the interwar period, and as a rule, its content is beyond the scope of our study. Consequently, we focused mostly on linguistic issues within the Ministry and identified a dozen of boxes, i.e. about one hundred files. Administrative record classification, and the absence of a thematic index make difficult the identification of documents. Therefore, we do not pretend to have seen everything or to approach exhaustivity. This is simply impossible, and it would probably not bring so many answers to our questions.

Another limit is qualitative. If these documents provide an interesting insight into the life of the activist ministers and administration, the records were not constituted along ethnic lines, and even ethnicity or nationality is not a concept explicitly used in the classification. Every

⁷ Jaroslav Kučera *Minderheiten in Nationalstaat. Die Sprachenfrage in Den Tschechisch-deutschen Beziehungen 1918-1938* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag 1999).

⁸ Eva Broklová, *Politická kultura německých aktivistických stran v Československu 1918-1938* (Prague: Karolinum, 1999); Jaroslav César, Bohumil Cerný, *Politika německých buržoazních stran v Československu v letech 1918-1938* (Prague: Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1962), 2 volumes; Silke Sobieraj, *Die nationale Politik des Bundes der Landwirte in der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen Republik: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Verständigung zwischen Tschechen und Deutschen, 1918-1929* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2002); Jaroslav Šebek, *Mezi křížem a národem: politické prostředí sudetoněmeckého katolicismu v meziválečném Československu* (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2006); Thomas Oellermann, *Mehr als nur eine Partei. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918-1938* (doctoral dissertation, 2013).

⁹ Mark Cornwall, *The Devil's Wall: the Nationalist Youth Mission of Heinz Rutha* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 2012); Ralf Gebel, "Heim ins Reich!" *Konrad Henlein und der Reichsgau Sudetenland 1938-1945* (München: Aufl, 1999).

¹⁰ Hagiographic works exist on Spina and Czech: Hugo Scholz (ed.), *Franz Spina als Politiker, Wissenschaftler und Mensch* (Braunau in Böhmen: Scholle-Verlag, 1928); Johann Wolfgang Brügel, *Ludwig Czech Arbeiterführer und Statsmann* (Vienna: Verlag der Wiener Volksbuchhandlung, 1960). See also, Steffen Höhne, Ludger Udolph (eds.); *Franz Spina (1868-1938): ein Prager Slawist zwischen Universität und politischer Öffentlichkeit* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2012); On Poland, see Timothy Snyder, *Sketches from a Secret War. A Polish Artist's Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

Czechoslovak citizen was not using his or her nationality when interacting with the administration and the ministerial bureaucracy did not always mention the nationality of the individuals in its daily work, to say nothing of the administrators themselves, whose identity is often unknown or difficult to establish. Many of them were low to medium-level civil servants, and reports were also produced by other administrations, such as local police stations or various municipalities. In most cases, we do not have personal records or reliable data on these individuals and their personal sense of ethnicity – if they had any – remains unknown.

Finally, the role played by the ministers in the daily activity of their own administration is difficult to assess. From the MSP records we looked at, we can see that Ludwig Czech rarely intervened directly in concrete affairs, and that his signature is not to be found on documents, save for some exceptions. It does not mean that he neglected his duties or ignored problems, as his mission was first and foremost to lead the bureaucracy towards a politically set goal, i.e. distributing aid to the unemployed and people in need. Nevertheless, Ludwig Czech could not oversee the thousands of civil servants under his command. As a result, these many people were a screen between him and the accomplishment of his duty.¹¹ Among them, a majority was recruited before he took the head of the ministry in 1929. Some subordinates certainly did their job along the lines he fixed, others inevitably did not and disrespected the guidelines, if not the law. In other words, ministries cannot be reduced to their leadership and must be considered as public organs with a certain autonomy, as well as a strong inertia, impacting the implementation of public policies of any nature.

II.1 Assessing cooperation through biographical trajectories

Ludwig Czech, Franz Spina and Robert Mayr-Harting were prominent leaders of three major German parties in interwar Czechoslovakia, representing the interest of roughly 1,250,000 voters in 1929 (17% of all voters but 75% of the German speakers). After an initial skepticism regarding the viability of the Czechoslovak state, they spearheaded activist strategies among the German representation, rejecting a pro-German state option (through independence or the annexation by neighboring Germany). It is important to underline that these men remained faithful to their cooperative politics even after the victory of the German radical nationalists in 1935. However, not all of their fellow activists from the DSAP, DCSV and the BdL did the same, especially in the two later parties. The lasting commitment of Czech, Spina and Mayr-Harting to cooperation with the Czechoslovak politicians was the consequence of two interrelated phenomena.

First, they came from a generation socialized in an already nationalized, but nonetheless supranational, environment. In other words, they shared an imperial conception of politics, rooted in the necessity and possibility to work with non-kinsmen. In the Habsburg Empire, the Germans were certainly the most favored nationality (at least in Cisleithanian, the Austria half of the monarchy). However, they were a minority and, in some places, a very small one. The political leadership was not strictly democratic – as the Emperor and King could not be recused, unless physically or mentally unfit, and the government was not responsible – but the

¹¹ Evidence of occasional tensions appears in a brief letter Franz Spina wrote to the head of one of his departments (the 4th *odbor*), in which he explained that any criticism of the instructions is “inacceptable,” as all instructions coming from his cabinet are sent with his knowledge and approval (we can guess that the administrative work was not always that fluid). Franz Spina to Jan Masák, 18 April 1933, PNP 45/77.

regime was considered liberal, allowing relatively free elections with a growing number of voters. Steps were taken, notably in the last decade of the monarchy, to grant more rights to minorities (Moravian Compromise). Also, 516 members were elected in the *Reichsrat*, located in Vienna, among them a substantial numbers of Bohemians and Moravians from both nationalities.

The three leaders we studied were clearly part of this imperial culture of multinational coexistence. Ludwig Czech participated in local politics in Moravia from 1899 onward and, as a social democrat of Jewish origin, he lived in a fully transnational – though largely German-speaking – world, formed by the Austrian socialists' rejection of a radical nationalist vision of politics. Both Robert Mayr-Harting and Franz Spina worked in the multilingual environment of Habsburg universities. Spina, in particular, was not only a typical intellectual of the *Belle Époque*, he also wrote extensively on Slavic philology and culture, speaking perfect Czech, and promoting binational coexistence within Bohemia and Moravia.

These three men, having accepted responsibilities of participating in the Czechoslovak cultural life, interacted intensively with their Czech counterparts, colleagues and friends. Letters exchanged between them and politicians, writers or translators, testify to the significance of personal relationships in a multicultural context. The few documents kept by the literary archives of the Czech Republic give an insight into the intimacy of the three men, notably Franz Spina.

In a 1924 letter to the Czech anthropologist and historian Čeněk Zíbrt (1864-1932), Spina concluded his birthday wishes – written in German, but he also wrote in Czech in other documents – by a Slavic and complicit “Mnogaja léta!” (Many years [to you], i.e. Happy Birthday). On another occasion, Spina sent a postcard from Türnau (Městečko Trnávka) to Zíbrt, labelling the small provincial town where he was born his “*mährische Heimat*” (Moravian homeland).¹² Clearly, what really mattered to him was his connection to the land, much more than just the nationality. Spina and other men of his generation were raised in a place where they were using different registers with different people, depending on the circumstances, was quite natural and perfectly normal.

Concerning the use of language, there is no doubt that Franz Spina and Ludwig Czech had a good proficiency of both German and Czech. It is likely that Robert Mayr-Harting possessed the same capacity, as he commented on Karel Čapek's book of interviews with the Czechoslovak President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk at a time when this work was not yet translated to German.¹³ It means that if these leaders promoted a fair use of German at the local level for their kinsmen, they were able to use the Czech language to communicate with their governmental or parliamentary partners, showcasing their own goodwill and loyalty to the “state language.”

¹² Franz Spina to Čeněk Zíbrt, 1920s. PNP, 230/50 ; Franz Spina to Antonín Stanislav Mágr, 1929, PNP, 4/60.

¹³ Also, a 1945 copy of a letter from RMH, likely sent to Christian democrat leader Šrámek, is written in Czech but it may have been a translation from the original in German. Robert Mayr-Harting to Šrámek, 22 August 1945, CZNA, Fonds Šrámek, 9-1/34/2-1; Robert Mayr-Harting to Karel Čapek, 4 November 1935, PNP 96/82.

What were the motivations behind political strategies of these men? Political career was certainly an incentive for Ludwig Czech, who was active before 1918, but less so for university figures like Spina and Mayr-Harting. Feeling of belonging to the German *Volk* did play its role, notably for the two later, but the Austro-Marxist networks remained very active and even Ludwig Czech was not alien to this cultural bonding with Germanness.

In parallel, the political ideologies -- Christian, agrarian, and socialist – shaped and fueled the political commitment of the three leaders: they knew that their parties would not survive politically without allies, and these could only be found on the Czech side. Franz Spina, in particular, increasingly relied on support from the Czech agrarian Republican Party, both in the newspaper (*Venkov*) and financially (in 1935).¹⁴ Mayr-Harting kept connections with the Czechoslovak People's Party and notably with its leader, the Catholic priest Josef Šrámek.¹⁵ The relationship between the Czech and German social democratic parties took longer to develop and deepen. However, before the 1929 parliamentary elections, the parties held a common party conference. After Ludwig Czech joined the Czechoslovak government as Minister of Social Affairs in 1929, and in the context of the outbreak of the Great Depression, he relied on parliamentary and governmental support of the Czech social democratic parties.¹⁶

These Czech government parties had an obvious interest in supporting moderate German forces, thus undermining radical efforts to push for a complete break between Germans and Czechs. In return, German activist leaders hoped for concessions and defended the interests of their community.

While we insist on the role of imperial and transnational experience of the German leaders, their political aim centered on caring for the Germans as a minority group deprived of its past domination and its own state. Their opinion about the few options they had after 1918 is very valuable when analyzing political preference formation in the multinational Czechoslovakia and the rationale behind their cooperative behavior.

First, these leaders were initially skeptical about the viability of the Czechoslovak state. Not surprisingly, in the postwar turmoil, Germans could see only two outcomes: chaos because of a conflict or order under a dictatorship enforced by the Czechoslovak military or militias.¹⁷ In both cases, German speakers would be clearly the losers of the transition, though the Peace conference gave some hope to minority leaders. This state of mind did not vanish in a couple of months or even years: after the 1920 Constitution was adopted and most threats eliminated (foreign military interventions and social instability), the German leaders feared that the Czechs would use their power to oppress minorities. In a 1923 meeting of the BdL, Franz Spina reportedly said to his fellow party members that “in theory, on paper, the republic is a democratic state, but the reality is different. The example of Switzerland is often presented to

¹⁴ Franz Spina, CZNA, MV I, 225-1161-6/63; Interview of Josef Nebeský, an agrarian leader (postwar), ABS, Zemský odbor bezpečnosti (ZOB), 300-7-3/107.

¹⁵ Robert Mayr-Harting to Šrámek, 22 August 1945, CZNA, Fonds Šrámek, 9-1/34/2-1.

¹⁶ *Lidové Noviny*, 20 February 1932.

¹⁷ Rudolf Kučera, "Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat: Uniformed Violence in the Creation of the New Order in Czechoslovakia and Austria, 1918-1922," *The Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 4 (December 2016), 827-855; Campbell, Michael Walsh. "The Making of the 'March Fallen': March 4, 1919 and the Subversive Potential of Occupation." *Central European History*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2006), 1-29; Karl Braun, "Der 4. März 1919. Zur Herausbildung sudetendeutscher Identität," *Bohemia*, Bd. 37, no. 2 (1996), <https://www.bohemia-online.de/index.php/bohemia/article/view/1509>.

the Germans. Here some similar system is however not possible, as long as will last rushes of hawks with anti-German discourse on our territory” and that “today the Germans in this republic cannot count on anybody.”¹⁸ In spite of the improvement of Czech-German relations in the subsequent years, activist leaders would remain cautious about the future. Mayr-Harting mentioned “Czechification” while his fellow Christian democrat Rudolf Hawelka expressed criticism of some parliamentary decisions and insisted the German parties should not neglect the cultural struggle, i.e. fighting for the use of German and for German schools.¹⁹

The successful experience of cooperation in government did a lot to reinforce mutual trust between German and Czech moderates.²⁰ *Aktivismus* was presented as the least bad option: “Activism isn’t the German political ideal, but in the current situation of this state it is the only reasonable method for Germans who are loyally recognizing the Czechoslovak state.”²¹ Increasingly, both out of interest and of sincere sympathy, German leaders praised the efforts of the Czechs and put forward the results of their policy - “Activists must be thanked for the fact they stopped the unjustified closing of German schools and for the fact that the school question has been solved in a fair way and according to the real needs.”²² Spina, for instance, expressed his admiration for the Czech Agrarian leader Antonín Švehla, a prominent leader he described as a nationalist of the good kind, who helped to make the Germans into coworkers instead of fighters.²³ Mayr-Harting, for his part, acknowledged that President Masaryk had contributed to “a better understanding of the Germans of this state with the Czech people.”²⁴

The activists’ endeavors during the last three years of the Czechoslovak Republic (from the lost elections of 1935 to the collapse of the regime in 1938) is less documented. Ludwig Czech and Franz Spina continued to participate in the governing coalitions, though the latter only as a Minister without a portfolio. His death in September 1938 prevented him from contemplating the complete ruin of activist politics after the Munich Agreement dismembered Czechoslovakia and paved the way towards complete occupation by the Nazi Third Reich. Mayr-Harting was suspected of joining the SdP Parliamentary club in March 1938, as did most of the DCSV parliamentarians, and resided in the Reich during the war, although he did not hold any position in the Nazi system. He claimed his rejection of Nazism in 1945, insisting that he did not resign from his function after Munich because his legal expertise was required by the parliamentary committee he belonged to, under the authority of the Czech politician Jaroslav Stránský (who was also, incidentally, an important member of the government-in-

¹⁸ Report on a BdL meeting in 1923, CZNA, MV I, 225-10-9/38. On Switzerland as a point of comparison, see Wenzel Jaksch, “Slíbené Švýcarsko” (1958) in Václav Velčovsky (ed.), *Jazyk jako fetiš: texty o Čechách a českých Němcích 1880-1948* (Prague: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy, 2019), p. 242-249.

¹⁹ Police report on a meeting of the DCSVP, 5 November 1933, Cheb. CZNA, Zemský Úřad, 207-1320-6/133; Report on a DCSVP meeting (Brno, 26 November 1928), speech of MP Rudolf Hawelka (1866-1937), CZNA, MV I – presidium Praha, 225-350-5.

²⁰ By contrast, some Slovak moderate nationalists around Jozef Tiso, himself Ministry of Health (1927-1929), were dissatisfied with the results of their participation in a coalition government. They radicalized sooner than the Germans and contributed as well to the collapse of the state. See James Mace Ward, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

²¹ Report on a DCSVP meeting (Brno, 26 November 1928), speech of MP Rudolf Hawelka (1866-1937), CZNA, MV I – presidium Praha, 225-350-5.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Transcription of Spina’s speech at Švehla’s funerals or in the press, 17 December 1933. CZNA, Malypetr Records, Box 4, reference 187.

²⁴ Robert Mayr-Harting to Karel Čapek, 4 November 1935, PNP 96/82.

exile during World War Two).²⁵ Ludwig Czech never emigrated and, being a Marxist activist of Jewish origin, he was deported and died in the Terezín concentration camp in 1942. So, as a rule, activist leaders did not renounce their preference for cooperation with the Czech majority. In other words, activism was deeply rooted in the imperial socialization of the three leaders and was also part of their specific ideologies (all transnational).

The impact German negativists (radicals from the SdP after 1935) had on the younger generation of activist leaders was much greater. Some simply left their party and became supporters of the Nazis, others waited for its dissolution before joining de facto the SdP, and some others never accepted Nazi ideology but adjusted their discourse to be more aggressive and more demanding vis-à-vis the Czechs, mixing populist/*völkisch* references with the more liberal values they professed before 1935.²⁶

Throughout the period, activist leaders played a double function in the Czechoslovak political system: they contributed to its stability, by securing additional participants in the parliamentary and governmental game, while the German negativists essentially achieved nothing at all until they had an opportunity to destroy the Czechoslovak state. Activists also prevented the most radical Czechs to implement public policies directly detrimental to the German minority or to the civil peace in the dominantly German-populated areas, by not giving them the excuse of systematic opposition (the option of the negativists) and by securing allies in the Czech parties with similar ideological affiliation. The extent to which we can observe the effect of activism within the ministries is another question we turn to in the next section.

II.2 Assessing cooperation in the workings of the Ministries

Public policies are shaped by diverse actors at different levels, producing results for citizens. It is the decisions taken by the leaders, the resources attributed to an administration, the implementation, and the interactions with the citizens which define a more or less successful or, on the contrary, conflictual policy. We mentioned the importance of Ludwig Czech, Franz Spina and Robert Mayr-Harting in promoting cooperation between the Czechs and Germans. In addition to their political and public role, they also intervened in public affairs through private or semi-public channels – though only occasionally, if not exceptionally, from what can be found in the available records. The ministers look absent from the everyday administrative correspondence, a bias we mentioned, but they had the power to impact public policies when they felt the need to.

For instance, Franz Spina – then Minister of Public Works (1926-1929) – asked his colleague Jozef Tiso (1887-1947), Minister of Public Health and Physical Education in October 1929, to support his German-speaking candidate for a medical position in the Třeboň-Kaplice district. As Tiso hesitated and refused, Spina wrote to his successor, Jan Šrámek (1870-1956), only ten days after he had been appointed as Minister of Health. The latter was also the head of the Czechoslovak People's Party, a Christian democratic organization participating in most coalitions of the Czechoslovak First Republic. Spina argued that not appointing a “doctor of

²⁵ Robert Mayr-Harting to Jan Šrámek, 22 August 1945, CZNA, Fonds Šrámek, 9-1/34/2-1.

²⁶ See Jaksch's articles published in *Sozialdemokrat* in the 1920s. Wenzel Jaksch, *Ztracené vesnice, opuštění lidé...: reportáže z českého pohraničí 1924-1928* (Prague: Academia, 2017).

German nationality would be [...] very detrimental” to the German Christian Social Party, strong in this area. He defended German interests while appealing to Šrámek’s sense of solidarity with his fellow Christian activists.²⁷

Later on, having replaced Šrámek as Minister of Health, Spina continued to discretely support Germans in Czechoslovakia. A year later, he granted a subvention to *Hochschulwissen*, a German educational revue from Warnsdorf, for a special issue to be published in early 1931.²⁸ As this publication, created in 1924, disappeared precisely in 1931, the funding attributed on Spina’s decision was probably an emergency support for what he considered to be a positive – activist – player in the German-speaking milieu.

The capacity of the ministers to achieve results, and in particular to defend German interests, remains difficult to assess. What we know of their bureaucratic personnel is too limited to draw general conclusions. Nevertheless, from the fragments collected in the records, we can observe the diversity of high civil servants working in these administrations. Looking at Ludwig Czech’s collaborators, we can find two very different profiles.

On the one hand stands Johann Wolfgang Brügel (1905-1986), Czech’s personal secretary from 1929 onward, and a life-long loyal follower. Brügel came from the German-speaking middle-class of Brno (Brünn), in Moravia, one of the major centers of German culture in the Czech lands. His ideological and national connection with Ludwig Czech allowed him to start a successful career in the administration, and there is little doubt that this young man was an efficient transmission belt between his boss and his ministerial subordinates.²⁹

In the same period, another administrator at the Ministry, Bronislav Wellek (1872-1959), was a Czech musicologist, translator and bureaucrat, considered a nationalist. His nationalism did not prevent him from working in Vienna before 1914, to marry a German-speaking aristocrat, and to serve the German leadership of the Ministry after 1929, until his retirement in 1934.³⁰ Even if Wellek might have supported a more Czechifying policy, he spoke German perfectly well, published about Smetana in German and, just like his hierarchy, had a clear habit of transnational cooperation, having been raised in the fluid imperial environment of the Habsburg urbanites and intellectuals.³¹

Franz Spina, acting as the Minister of Health (1929-1935), also had this apparently strange preference for Czech nationalists.³² He worked closely with Jan Masák (1871-1936), a ministerial adviser who had been a Prague medical doctor until 1919 and had joined the

²⁷ Franz Spina to Jan Šrámek, 19 October 1929, CZNA, Šrámek Records, 9-1-106/6.

²⁸ Franz Spina to Rudolf Löhr, editor of *Hochschulwissen. Monatsschrift für das deutsche Volk und seine Schule*, PNP, /2134.

²⁹ Johann Wolfgang Brügel, *Ludwig Czech Arbeiterführer und Statsmann* (Vienna: Verlag der Wiener Volksbuchhandlung, 1960) & J. P. Stern. “Defending the State against the Nations: The Work of J. W. Bruegel,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 28, no. 4, (1985), 1023-1027.

³⁰ Martin Bucco, *René Wellek* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), chapter one.

³¹ http://www.ceskyhudebnislovník.cz/slovník/index.php?option=com_mdictinary&task=record.record_detail&id=6544 CZNA, MSP, box 311, folder 2.

³² And for nationalists in general, as proves the durable collaboration between Spina and his personal secretary, Josef Werner Mittig (born 13 July 1896), convinced of German nationalistic views (from 1926 onward), who finally joined the SdP in 1938. CZNA, Policejní Reditelství Praha II – prezidium 1931-40, 42/M-44/156.

administration only once it was in Czechoslovak (i.e. Czech) hands. Masák, incidentally, was an ardent supporter of the Sokol movement, this gymnastics organization devoted to nation-building and hygienics.³³ Despite this rather anti-German curriculum, Spina wrote him that he regretted his absence – after Masák went on leave for health issues – and that he offered him to work together again.³⁴ So, as a rule, German activism relied on a permanent cooperation with the Czechs moderates, in a world of mutual interests: German leaders hoped for concessions while Czech ones tried to neutralize the German minority and ensure stability.

The recruitment policy of the administration reflected this preference for flexible or at least adaptable employees. Following the rules established by the 1920 law and the 1926 and 1928 ordinances, state employees had to master the “state language”, i.e. Czechoslovak (*de facto* Czech in Bohemia and Moravia), though other languages could be registered in the personal files.³⁵ As a rule, the knowledge of several languages was an asset for the administration, and candidates of the job contest (*soutěž*) had to prove their proficiency in the state language but also, as much as possible, in a minority language. In a 1937 job contest at the Ministry of Health, German was specifically mentioned as a useful language (before “other languages”).³⁶ Applicants often emphasized their linguistic skills. Arnošt Szekelý claimed to speak perfectly Czech, Slovak, French, German and Hungarian, having also some knowledge of English, Spanish and Esperanto.³⁷ Another applicant, Ernestine Borstová, stated that she spoke Czech, German and English, and that she mastered “German stenography.”³⁸ Overall, hiring policies within these ministries reflected the national structure of the Czech lands, even if a legal bias in favor of Czech-speaking bureaucrats was obviously preventing purely German speakers to be employed outside of the local administration in German-speaking areas.

Concerning the public policies implemented by the activist ministers, no strong national (that is, pro-German) preference can be observed. Obviously, quantifying national favoritism would be virtually impossible. Indeed, public policies we analyzed are following clear legal rules, allowing in many cases (hiring new civil servants, for instance) to grant advantages to a given national group. The extent to which appointments, subsidies, favorable or unfavorable responses to requests were used to push for a particular national cause is difficult to assess. However, the regularity of the “non-national” administrative decisions taken by the Ministry of Social Affairs speaks in favor of a rather neutral bureaucracy regarding the ethnic question.

Going national was in fact seen as an embarrassment for bureaucrats. One example illustrates what a headache it was for the administration to decide to accept or not exchanges in a minority language. In 1933, the Domažlice public hospital sent a request in Czech to the Česká Lípa (Böhmisch Leipa) social security office, the latter answering the hospital request in German. The 1920 law (§ 2) granted minorities the right to make requests in their language in areas where they accounted for more than 20% of the population. The “*podání*”

³³ <http://www.langhans.cz/cz/archiv/online-archiv/name/m/masak/1864/#>; on the Sokol, see Mark Dimond, « The Sokol and Czech nationalism, 1918-1948 » in Mark Cornwall, R. J. W. Evans, (eds.), *Czechoslovakia in a Nationalist and Fascist Europe, 1918-1948* (London: British Academy, 2007), p. 185-205; Claire E. Nolte, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

³⁴ Franz Spina to Jan Masák, 1931 (for his sixtieth anniversary), PNP, 45/77.

³⁵ Qualification of state employees, 1926. CZNA, MS (Ministry of Justice), box 328.

³⁶ Rules for contest, 20 July 1937, CZNA, MZd., box 148.

³⁷ Application letter, 1st September 1937, CZNA, MZd., box 148.

³⁸ Application letter, 17 September 1937, CZNA, MZd., box 148.

(administrative action) principle limited this right to “the most important” requests, excluding – in theory – answers and less important correspondence. However, the 1926 ordinance extended the minority right to correspond in their language (again, in areas with more than 20% of minority members)³⁹ – but it did not include all ministries: the Ministry of Social Affairs was not on the list. Also, the Česká Lípa office considered itself an “independent legal subject” and not a part of the state apparatus per se (the Social Security was an independent legal body under the control of the Ministry),⁴⁰ thus having the right to choose an “official language [for deliberation and administrative work]” other than the state language.⁴¹ For the administration, it meant that the Domažlice hospital did not have to correspond in German (according to both the 1920 law and the 1926 ordinance), as it was located in a district with less than 20% of German-speakers. The Česká Lípa social security office, for its part, was *de facto* a local German-speaking administration, under the aegis of the Ministry of Social Affairs. As a result, it was granted the right to correspond in German but, according to the 1920 law, only for “the most important” questions. The Central Social Security (ÚSP), trying to solve this conflict, regretted the “imprecise” nature of the legal system and considered that this problem would be solved only by deciding “who has to concede” (underlined in the original). Finally, its director, Petr Zenkl, a prominent Czech leader in Prague, suggested that the local office in Česká Lípa was right not to accept to answer in the state language, and most importantly that the language conflict should not affect negatively the interests of the insured (*pojištěnců*).⁴² He passed the decision to the Ministry, and the ultimate resolution is not known from the records, but it likely decided in favor of the right to use German, as it did before in similar conflicts.⁴³

Overall, the concomitant presence of anti-Czech or anti-German statements in the records shows that no systematic policy of persecution against one nationality or another can be traced. Most documents deal with the administrative routine and missions of the Ministry. Ethnic conflict was not frequent, maybe even rare, in a country inhabited by a majority of Czechs dominating the state and a three million minority of Germans recently dispossessed of their prior linguistic and administrative superiority over the other nationalities. Confrontations and dissatisfactions connected to economic or social issues, by contrast, were the norm. It was, of course, the job of the Ministry of Social Affairs to care of the unemployed and the poor but this question could have been phrased in ethnic terms instead of being “sanitized” through the bureaucratic and legal language of the administration.

The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Public Health did not focus on nationality when considering requests submitted by citizens. The contrary was not necessarily true, as the following example illustrates. In 1933, the Czech-speaking Josef Rudolf, living in Smržovka (Morchenstern), a predominantly German-speaking area, complained directly to the Ministry

³⁹ Fueling anger on the Czech nationalist side. See *Národní politika*, 14 April 1928. CZNA, MSP, box 311, folder 1.

⁴⁰ See law 221/1924 (*o pojištění zaměstnanců pro případ nemoci, invalidity a stáří*).

⁴¹ Vereinigung deutscher Krankenversicherungsanstalten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik (Karlsbad) to the Central Social Security, 3 October 1933 (in German). Attached is a ministerial decision on a similar conflict between the Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad) office and the Plzeň municipality, granting Marienbad the right to answer in German (P-3163-21/6, 11 July 1933). CZNA, MSP, box 311, folder 2.

⁴² Martin Nekola, *Petr Zenkl: politik a člověk* (Prague, Mladá fronta, 2014).

⁴³ Petr Zenkl (Head of the Central social security) to the Vereinigung deutscher Krankenversicherungsanstalten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik, 23 October 1933 (Czech). CZNA, MSP, box 311, folder 2.

of Social Affairs about not receiving any aid from the municipality and district. He asked for state support, utilizing virulent anti-German discourse, pretending he was oppressed as a good patriot, concluding that “here in the Germanized region [*v poněmčím kraji*] a Czech man doesn’t find any justice.”⁴⁴ What might have been considered a heartbreaking story of ethnic violence against the Czech minority in the borderlands soon failed to convince the Ministry. Indeed, the municipality reacted, uncovering what appeared to be a gross exaggeration or even a “lie” from Rudolf, who lost his right to receive food tickets because he worked part-time, while his wife worked full-time, which broke the rules regarding support for unemployed.

Also, the municipality claimed to have met with Rudolf, who was also criticized for refusing to carry out municipal work (in exchange for money) and “behaving brutally” with the social commissar sent by the mayor’s administration. The municipality wrote in Czech – and used bilingual forms for its citizens – to the district (Jablonec nad Nisou/Gablonz an der Neiße), the district writing again in Czech to the Ministry, both local administrations being somehow angry that Rudolf bypassed their authority and tried to get support from the political center he naively expected to be ethnically minded, and pro-Czech, whatever the circumstances.⁴⁵ Even if we could believe that Josef Rudolf was fully sincere and suffered from ethnic discrimination, the records show that he probably used his ethnic claims to receive economic advantages, while the local administration, in the hands of German-speakers, distributed aid to Rudolf for months, independently of his nationality, until he failed to meet the legal criteria.

What is interesting is that in the same period, mayors from the same region (Liberec) complained bitterly during their meetings that the Germans were the first victims of the economic crisis (“in the middle of the world crisis and the Czechoslovak crisis there is an even more intense Sudeten-German crisis, whose causes are turning around nationality, attempts to Czechify and the ignorance of institutions and of real conditions in the German territories”).⁴⁶ This ethnicization of the primarily economic crisis was not necessarily reflected in the bureaucratic routine, as the state tried to remain as ethnically neutral as possible when dealing with broad social issues, such as unemployment and poverty. Moreover, the numerous resolutions against the “Gentský system” of aid distribution almost never targeted nationality but insisted on not considering union or party membership as a criterion for being helped. It seems that considering nationality for this purpose was too absurd for even being mentioned.⁴⁷ As long as the Left remained strong in German-speaking industrial areas, i.e. until 1935, going ethnic was not an option, and angry workers sang the Internationale rather than *völkisch* songs.⁴⁸

It is striking, that the Minister of Social Affairs between the years 1929 and 1934 and thus during the Great Depression, was the German, Ludwig Czech. The response to this unprecedented economic crisis, which hit the industrialized Czechoslovakia, and particularly the German-speaking areas with staggering levels of unemployment, thus layed on his shoulders. Czech’s first reported act in the ministry came in the second week of his

⁴⁴ Josef Rudolf to the MSP, Smržovka, 29May, 1933. CZNA, MSP, box 1609.

⁴⁵ District office to the MSP, 20 October 1933; Note on Josef Rudolf from the municipality of Smržovka to the district office. CZNA, MSP, box 1609.

⁴⁶ Secret meeting of the German mayors and town representatives of Northern Bohemia, Liberec, Police report, signed “Žák“, 28 November 1932, CZNA, MSP, box 1740.

⁴⁷ Resolutions from individual companies or localities, CZNA, MSP, box 1739-1740.

⁴⁸ DSAP meeting, Plzeň, June 1933, CZNA, MSP, box 1741.

appointment on December 20, 1929, when he dedicated 1.5 million Czechoslovak crowns for unemployment support⁴⁹. In February 1930, Czech gave a speech in parliament proposing the creation of a mandatory unemployment insurance scheme payed for by employees, employers and the state.⁵⁰ In the subsequent months and years, he negotiated and organized the release of extensive emergency funds for the unemployed and their families.⁵¹ This process was not without its critics. Ludwig Czech on occasion needed to convince right-wing government members to support the release of these funds, and in this process, he was often aided by the Czech social democrats.⁵² At this time, the two social democratic parties held frequent joint conferences and coordinated their political strategies. It is important to note that Czech's extensive effects, aimed simply at mitigating the effects of unemployment, were a product of ideological cooperation of two left-wing parties heeding from different ethnic camps while being explicitly ethno-blind.

Ludwig Czech's discourse reported in mainstream Czech press is overwhelmingly focused on social affairs until 1934. At this time, he moved from the Ministry of Social Affairs to the Ministry of Public Works – a coalition reshuffling in the context of Czechoslovak rapprochement with Soviet Russia, which in turn reflected the rising threat from now Nazi Germany. Czech continued to focus on the difficult social situation, but his speeches increasingly turned towards topics of ethnic cohabitation. In October 1934 he spoke of the importance of staying in “the front of European peaceful forces.”⁵³ By the spring of 1935, shortly before the general election, Ludwig Czech implored the mission of Czechoslovakia to “stave off the wave of fascist reaction,” suggesting that the “democratic cooperation of workers and farmers, Czechs and Germans can keep domestic peace”.⁵⁴ As Minister of Health, he made a presentation in November 1937 on various problems, among them the falling birth rate. L. Czech insisted on the shared fate Czechs and Germans faced, with a similar decline for both communities. Similarly, when dealing with children from impoverished districts, the Minister focused on the crisis affecting Czech and German youth, providing percentages for every nationality in the territories concerned. Even so, most of his speech relied on statistics and “objective” data to tackle concrete health issues – the ethnic dimension was never dominant.⁵⁵

It is notable that, contrary to widely held belief, the social abyss of the Great Depression deepened, rather than thwarted, activism and Czech-German cooperation. The dire economic situation saw a German minister manage the social affairs of the Czechoslovak state in cooperation with Czech parties, and with particular support from the Czech social democrats.

It was not until the economic situation started improving, but the political situation in neighboring Germany imploded, bringing the Nazis to power, that we see an increased engagement of the ethnic question. The rise of Hitler in Germany, and the ensuing triumph of

⁴⁹ *Lidové Noviny*, 20 December 1929.

⁵⁰ *Lidové Noviny*, 13 February 1930.

⁵¹ *Lidové Noviny*, 11 July 1930; 21 January 1931; 7 February 1932; 24 September 1932; 14 December 1933.

⁵² *Lidové Noviny*, 20 February 1932.

⁵³ *Lidové Noviny*, 23 October 1934.

⁵⁴ *Lidové Noviny*, 25 April 1935.

⁵⁵ Ludwig Czech, *Výklad ministra veřejného zdravotnictví Ludwiga Czecha v rozpočtovém výboru poslanecké sněmovny dne 23. listopadu 1937* (Prague: Ministerstvo veřejného zdravotnictví, 1937).

pan-German nationalism, is what undermined German activism in Czechoslovakia. Czech Germans looked at Germany with envy and hoped for an external help to put an end to their minority status, which truly happened.

In the aftermath of Nazi victory in Germany, and days after the Saarland plebiscite transferred the first German territories back to the Reich, the SdP surged to the lead in the 1935 election. In this context, radical politics slowly permeated into the administrative records of the Ministry. German Nazis did hope to eliminate their activist competitors by legal means. In the social field, they notably tried to conquer the workers' boards in factories.⁵⁶ For instance, the SdP minority in the Ekstein Factory of Nýrsko (Neuern) – a German-speaking territory – complained to the Ministry about “purges” in their ranks (i.e. SdP workers fired), the initiators being DSAP unionists who pushed for joining a clearly non-Nazi Federation (the Internationaler Metallarbeiterverband). After failing to convince the factory owner to hire only SdP members, the local Nazis realized that they would not get the majority at the factory council (having less than 15% of the workers on their side) and they decided to contest the legality of the Union affiliation.⁵⁷ They did not, at any time, mention nationalist motivations in their correspondence with the Ministry, first because it was a German-German conflict, but also because this kind of discourse was probably considered inefficient when dealing with the state. What the SdP cells did in terms of propaganda at the local level is another question, and it is more than likely that the Nazis focused on ethnic issues (against Czech administrators or Jews) rather than on legal or economic aspects.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Archival documents are inherently biased and do not display the reality as people experienced it in the past. However, if the bureaucracy built its own reality, it does not mean it is an imaginary one. By not pushing for an ethnic vision of social care, administrators in the Ministry of Social Affairs successfully helped the Czechs and Germans of the Czechoslovak First Republic. The state support was critical in times of an economic crisis, though the resources were not abundant enough to contain the social consequences of the depression. From the limited evidence we had at our disposal, activist ministers -- Ludwig Czech and Franz Spina in particular -- and their subordinates supported a relatively national-blind public policy. They were well aware of the weaknesses of multinational Czechoslovakia, but rather than undermining the state, they used its resources in the form of law, and public funding to support and protect the German minority from a complete Czech monopoly over the state. They were both rational, as the most extreme Czech nationalists would have prospered in an entirely radical German environment, and culturally inclined to do so, having been socialized in an era of transnational cooperation.

⁵⁶ On the conquest of power by a few Nazis at a local level, see William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town 1930-1935* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books. 1965). On Budweis, see Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002), 170-185.

⁵⁷ The owners – and the DSAP workers they employed – had no interest in breaking with the important Czechoslovak market (including the state commands). It emphasizes the local dimension of the nationalization, more or less prevalent, depending not just on local Nazi activists, but also on commercial, industrial and personal connections.

⁵⁸ Correspondence, September 1936-January 1937, CZNA, MSP, box 1883, file E 2311.

The next generation of leaders from the German activist parties was profoundly pressured. The last years of the Czechoslovak First Republic saw large sections of the German-speaking population heed the nationalist call of the Nazi-backed SdP. In the context of rising populist group-centrism, a number of activist leaders adopted *völkisch* nationalist rhetoric, effectively aligning themselves with the SdP. Others staunchly opposed the Nazis but found it difficult to defend the German interests in an increasingly polarized society, in which German nationalism was met with anti-German Czech sentiment. Wenzel Jaksch from the DSAP, though he left occupied Czechoslovakia for Great-Britain, broke up with the government-in-exile and never returned to his homeland. Only a handful of Germans accepted to cooperate with the Czechs (mostly in London), such as Josef Zinner (DSAP), whose antifascist credentials and absolute loyalty to Beneš did not really achieve anything good for the Czechoslovak Germans, vilified for the occupation and massacres of World War Two. The minority was expelled, and the activist policy was largely forgotten or rated as inefficient *a posteriori*, without a look for the concrete work of the interwar period.

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