Czech Politics: From West to East and Back Again

Stanislav Balík
Vít Hloušek
Lubomír Kopeček
Jan Holzer
Pavel Pšeja
Andrew Lawrence Roberts

Barbara Budrich Publishers
Stanislav Balík/Vít Hloušek/
Lubomír Kopeček/Jan Holzer/
Pavel Pšeja/Andrew Lawrence Roberts

Czech Politics: From West to East and Back
Again
Stanislav Balík
Vít Hloušek
Lubomír Kopeček
Jan Holzer
Pavel Pšeja
Andrew Lawrence Roberts

Czech Politics: From West to East and Back Again

Barbara Budrich Publishers
Opladen • Berlin • Toronto 2017
Contents

Introduction: Czech exceptionalism – Andrew Roberts ......................... 7


2. Politics in interwar Czechoslovakia – Jan Holzer ............................... 33


4. The Velvet Revolution: the causes and process of the decline of communist power – Stanislav Balík ......................................................... 85

5. The Velvet Divorce: the end of Czechoslovakia – Lubomír Kopeček ...... 99

6. Czech political institutions and the problems of parliamentary democracy – Lubomír Kopeček ................................................................. 115

7. Electoral systems and an obsession with elections – Stanislav Balík .... 147

8. Reshuffling the party system: from non-politics to anti-politics – Pavel Pšeja .............................................................................................. 161

9. Market reforms, society and the main features of Czech capitalism – Lubomír Kopeček, Stanislav Balík ............................................................... 183

10. Europeanising and Westernising – Vít Hloušek ................................... 213

11. Five ways of looking at Czech politics – Andrew Roberts .................. 231

References ............................................................................................... 249

List of abbreviations ............................................................................... 273

Tables and figures ................................................................................. 277
This book was written and published with the support of the specific research grants from the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University (MUNI/A/1110/2015, MUNI/A/1113/2015, MUNI/A/1342/2014).
Introduction: Czech exceptionalism

Andrew Roberts

Why should outsiders care about the Czech people and their politics? Though the country styles itself the heart of Europe, its objective importance is hard to see. It is the 85th largest country in the world by population (between Benin and Portugal), the 116th by area (between UAE and Serbia), the 40th by GDP per capita (just behind Greece and Estonia), and the 50th by total GDP (between Qatar and Peru). By almost any standard measure, the Czech Republic is an ordinary country – not too big or too small, not too rich or too poor.

But the Czech Republic does have reason to claim our attention. Czech politics presents in refined form some of the major forces shaping the modern world – whether nationalism, democracy, multiculturalism, the dilemmas of being a small state, communism, state division, economic reform, and coming to terms with the past. By virtue of being in the heart of Europe, the Czech lands have experienced in the most direct way possible the vicissitudes of the past two centuries. Czech politics can thus serve as a microcosm for understanding these world-historical forces.

This chapter, however, will argue that Czech politics has an even stronger claim on our attention. In many ways, the Czechs are not just a microcosm or an exemplar, but a trailblazer and a model. Czech politics has pioneered new and unprecedented ways of dealing with just about all of the phenomena described in the previous paragraph. At the least the Czechs show us new possibilities, and at the most they reveal better ways forward. For those who wish to understand politics, it is not just interesting but essential to know something about the Czech experience. This introduction will attempt to make the case for the study of Czech politics by describing this Czech exceptionalism and what it teaches us about politics.

The birth of the Czech nation in the 19th century is in many ways typical of Europe of the time. Czech nation builders closely followed the example of their German neighbours in building an imagined community based on language and culture and relying on print media and schools to spread their message. But the result of these struggles was very different than elsewhere.

Most importantly, Czech nationalism was far less militant and far more flexible than the nationalism of its peers. Indeed, most of the early nationalists were content to remain a part of the Habsburg Empire, and Czech resistance to imperial rule was almost entirely passive up to the very end. Czech nationalism

---

1 These rankings are approximate and vary across sources.
is even one that does not take itself too seriously – witness national icons like
the Good Soldier Švejk or the fictional inventor Jára Cimrman.

What explains this? One factor may be that Czechness was created for a
fairly well-off people living in a relatively liberal empire. Life was good
enough, so why rock the boat too much. Regardless of the cause, Czech nation
building challenges the stereotypical view of militancy and violence that came
to be associated with nationalism, particularly in peripheral countries. It shows
the possibility of an ethnic nationalism without virulent xenophobia or armed
struggle.

The creation of the independent state of Czechoslovakia in 1918 had its
own peculiarities. Czech nationalism did not lead directly to a Czech state.
Instead, Czechs found themselves a part of a multi-ethnic state that included
Germans, Slovaks, and Hungarians. While this did, of course, lead to conflict,
the newly-formed Czechoslovak Republic was far more functional than one
might expect. It is going too far to see interwar Czechoslovakia as an ideal of
interethnic harmony, but the state was unique for its time and place in
protecting the civil rights of minorities and giving them political represent-
tation. And it did this under less than ideal circumstances. Interwar govern-
ments frequently had to deal with ethnic provocations from both inside and
outside the country. All, of course, did not end well, but for two decades one
of the most diverse countries in Europe worked. It was peaceful and prosperous
and democratic.

Even more interesting is the way the leaders of the state created a new
“ethnicity”, the Czechoslovak. There was nothing natural or obvious about this
designation. Czechs and Slovaks had last been united in the 10th century and
for most of modern history Czechs had been ruled from Vienna while Slovaks
were under the thumb of Hungarians. Their ethnic identities and national
mythologies had also emerged separately. Yet, most Czechs ultimately em-
braced the Czechoslovak state and even the Czechoslovak identity. This was
not a case of either/or, they were both Czechs and Czechoslovaks. In short,
Czech politics can teach us lessons about the possibility of multi-ethnic
democracy and even the mutability of ethnic identity.

Another exceptionalism from this era was Czechoslovak democracy.
While all of its neighbours were succumbing to communism, military rule, or
fascism, Czechoslovakia continued to hold free elections. Although revisionist
accounts point to the blemishes on interwar democracy, there is little question
that it met the basic standards of democracy for the time. To get a sense of
the achievement, consider how many democracies today are completely sur-
rounded by authoritarian regimes. Mongolia might be the only current exam-
ple. And the international environment of the time was far less supportive to
say the least. The reasons for the survival of democracy are still debated. One
explanation might be the absence of forces who had the ability and desire to seize power – the army had new leadership, the nobility had been stripped of its titles and much of its property, and neither communism nor fascism fit a country that was predominantly middle-class and Slavic. Again, interwar Czechoslovak politics can teach us lessons about the possibilities of democracy under very inauspicious circumstances.

The fall of this republic at Munich has become a historical touchstone because it raises debates about how to deal with expansionist dictators. The dilemma of appeasement versus pre-emptive strikes is well-known. Besides this issue in international relations, Munich also lays bare the dilemma of small states. Chamberlain has been derided, probably too severely, for his appeasement of Hitler, but what about Czech leaders who decided to surrender without a fight? Should they have fought even after their allies had abandoned them or after they had ceded the Sudetenland? They would have lost, but they could have put up a fight (they had a large armaments industry and before Munich good fortifications on the borders) and this might have had positive consequences for their national character. Or were their leaders correct in seeing the writing on the wall and avoiding bloodshed and even greater repression? Regardless of the correctness of this choice, it is hard to name many small countries who have taken the decision to lay down their arms without a fight like the Czechs did.

The communist takeover represents another unique aspect of Czech politics. Communists won a plurality in mostly free elections after the war. This put them in a position to lead the government and by 1948 they were able to seize power in a mostly legal way and with the support of much of the population. Czechoslovakia may thus be the first and only case of communism coming to power through democratic means and with considerable popular support. This has its reasons – the disappointment of Munich, liberation by the Red Army, and skilful manipulation by the Communist Party – but it does present a very different perspective on communism in the satellite states than the standard vision of Soviet imposition.

Though communist rule mostly followed the Soviet model in terms of ideology and institutions, the Czechoslovak experience shows a reversal unknown elsewhere. Whereas the typical Soviet satellite saw a hard-line period followed by a gradual thaw, Czechoslovakia experienced a revival of hard-line rule after Stalinism had receded. The thaw here of course culminated in the Prague Spring and the second hard-line period occurred after the Soviet invasion and was called normalisation. This latter period from 1969 to 1989
took the country back to the ideological rigour and cadre politics of the fifties but in a less violent way.

It also created a type of communism that was more or less unique (East Germany may be the only other example). Linz and Stepan (1996) call it “frozen post-totalitarianism” and Kitschelt et al. (1999) label it “bureaucratic authoritarian communism”. Its uniqueness lay in the combination of Stalinist politics with an advanced economy and a near complete loss of faith in communist ideology. That hard-line communism could be reimposed under these conditions and that cynicism and opportunism were enough for communism to work after a fashion again tell us something new about the nature of political regimes.

The postcommunist period has provided the Czech Republic with new ways to show its exceptionality. One can begin with the revolution itself. It has been given the moniker “velvet” in part because of how easy it was. After a clash between police and a regime-sponsored parade, the seemingly most stable regime in the region simply melted away. Though a rapid transition was not uncommon in the region, the contrast between before and after was easily the most extreme in Czechoslovakia. The country went from the depths of totalitarianism to a democratic poster child led by a former dissident almost overnight. Indeed, Czechoslovakia had the greatest one-year improvement in Freedom House scores in the more than forty-year history of the index.2

It was not just the speed and thoroughness that distinguished the Czech transition. Many scholars have argued that the fall of communism brought little that was new. No new isms emerged. These countries simply overthrew communism and replaced it with standard-issue liberal democracy. Krapfl (2013), however, argues that Czechoslovakia did bring new ideas into the revolutionary tradition. These were the ideals of humaneness and dignity which had never before been at the centre of a revolution. The Czech lands and dissidents like Havel were ground zero for these ideas which have since gone on to enrich the democratic lexicon in other democratic transitions.

Like the democratic transition, the breakup of Czechoslovakia created a new model for state division. It is hard to think of another state breakup that was so smooth and amicable as to deserve the title Velvet Divorce. This was not because both sides wanted divorce. A majority in both nations wanted to stay together even though passions had been inflamed by the time the decision was made. Yet just as Yugoslavia was descending into chaos, the ability of Czech and Slovak politicians to negotiate an end to a state that existed for 70 years was exceptional and suggests that secession and state division may

---

2 This results from summing together the political rights and civil liberties scores. Its improvement in the Polity index was the third largest in the entire dataset.
not be quite so difficult and painful as existing theories predict. Indeed, it was not just the division that was painless. Ever since, relations between the two countries have been more or less problem-free. Each considers the other its strongest ally.

Economic reforms are another area where the Czech way was unique. This is not the basic point about the unprecedented nature of the transformation from communism to a market economy which is worth mentioning in its own right. Other states in the region had to overcome similar obstacles.

What distinguishes the Czech Republic is the role of the public in these reforms and its methods of privatization. At the start of the transition most would-be reformers worried that the public would come to oppose reform as soon as they began to lose the guaranteed employment and low prices that they had become accustomed to. What makes the Czech Republic exceptional was not just that the public endorsed the initial reforms – this occurred, albeit to a lesser extent, in other postcommunist countries as well – but that it kept electing supporters of the free market – a market without adjectives in Václav Klaus’s terms – long after other countries had turned to social democrats and former communists to express their disapproval. It took the Czechs eight long years to make such a move and even then it was far from decisive.

The other aspect of reform that set the Czechs apart was their way of divesting themselves of the enormous amount of property owned by the state. The standard prescription was to sell these properties to the highest bidder. The Czechs, however, pioneered two methods that had never really been tried before and have never been replicated to the same extent. The first was restitution of property to its former owners from whom it had been seized. Despite the manifest justice of this approach, it had generally been considered infeasible and uneconomical until the Czechs tried it. The second was voucher privatization. Every Czech citizen could purchase inexpensive vouchers which they could use to become owners of state-owned enterprises, thus creating a citizens’ capitalism. Though the success of both methods has been questioned, the Czechs did show the world that there was more than one way to skin a cat.

Finally, the Czechs have broken ground in coming to terms with an authoritarian past. Most postcommunist countries have found some way of dealing with those who collaborated with the communist regime. Few, however, have gone as far as the Czechs. Not only did the Czechs give us the term now used for the practice of purging collaborators – lustration – but they were the first to pursue it and have taken it farther than any other country. The Czech policy of requiring occupants of high public office to submit evidence that they had not collaborated with the secret police has vetted far more people, introduced far tougher sanctions – exclusion from office – and extended far longer in time than any other country. Naturally, it has its defects such as
banning the innocent along with the guilty, but it did open new horizons for coming to terms with the past.

Every nation is exceptional in its own way. One could likely produce a similar, though perhaps not quite so long, list of exceptional experiences or policies for many other countries. And one could equally write of the ways that the Czech Republic is a typical country both in general and for its particular time and place. As suggested earlier, one could portray the Czechs as exemplars of such processes as nation and state building, multi-ethnic discord, totalitarian rule, democratic transition, economic reform, and coming to terms with the past. Yet, the descriptions above suggest that unique events did happen in the Czech lands and that they are worth studying.

One of Vaclav Havel’s (1993) books was entitled *The Art of the Impossible*. Czech politics gives a sense of this art by uncovering possibilities that have been absent elsewhere in the world, possibilities that are thought to be impossible. They include the possibility of a relatively benign and peaceful nationalism, the possibility of creating a multi-ethnic identity, the possibility of a democratic and multi-ethnic state under inauspicious conditions, the possibility of laying down one’s arms when faced with a more powerful foe, the possibility of democratically chosen communism, the possibility of a hard-line communist regime even after people and elites had lost faith in communism, the possibility of a rapid and peaceful democratization and state breakup, the possibility of a popular (in both senses of the word) transition to the market, and the possibility of coming to terms with a brutal past through a comprehensive policy of lustration. These possibilities were not always good ones – though they were often better than the more conventional alternatives – but they should be of interest to any student of politics who wishes to understand how societies are and can be governed. That, in short, is the case for caring about Czech politics.

***

The aim of the chapters that follow is to explore many of the issues outlined above. They are not intended to make the case for Czech exceptionalism as I have above, but simply to provide a better understanding of Czech politics. They represent the work of political scientists and so the emphasis is on conceptual and causal analysis. While the book does attempt to describe the basic who, what, where, and when of Czech politics over the last two centuries, it is not a history per se. Rather its focus is on conceptual understanding – for example, of regime types, party systems, and institutions – and causality – the
main forces behind the course of political events in the Czech lands and the consequences of these events.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I focuses on Czech politics up to 1989. Chapter 1 analyses the formation of the Czech nation, Czech politics under the Habsburg Empire, and the creation of an independent state. Chapter 2 focuses on politics during the democratic First Republic (1918–1938) which has been mythologized as a paradise lost and has served as an inspiration for much of current politics. Chapter 3 covers the half century of non-democratic or partially democratic regimes from 1938 to 1989 with most attention on Nazi and Communist rule. All of these chapters describe the political traditions that influence politics to this day. Chapter 4 explains the fall of communism and the creation of a new democracy. Chapter 5 considers the roots and process of the breakup of Czechoslovakia.

Part II analyses the quarter century of democratic rule since the fall of communism in 1989. Chapter 6 describes the new Czech constitutional order – its main institutions, their powers, and their effect on Czech politics. Chapter 7 focuses on elections and electoral systems as the country has now become the site of near constant elections. Chapter 8 deals with political parties and the party system, especially the recent breakdown in both. Chapter 9 tackles the thorny issue of economic reforms and economic policy. Chapter 10 describes the foreign affairs of the Czech Republic with a particular focus on NATO and the EU. Chapter 11 concludes with a larger view of the last two centuries of Czech politics.

The authors wish to thank Oldřich Krpec of Masaryk University for his valuable comments and Michal Kubát of Charles University for his careful review of the manuscript. Štěpán Kaňa’s excellent work as translator warrants our deepest gratitude. Finally, we wish to express our appreciation to Masaryk University (MUNI/A/1110/2015, MUNI/A/1113/2015, MUNI/A/1342/2014) for its generous financial support of this project. Our hope is that this book inspires debate and helps to bring Czech politics closer to the centre of research in political science.
1. The birth of modern Czech politics: 1848–1918

Vít Hloušek

The task of understanding the Czech political tradition prior to the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 is not easy for a historian, let alone a political scientist. The issue is not only finding a suitable starting point in time; more important is the fact that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Czech history has frequently been politicised and subject to various, often antithetical, interpretations. Understandably, this chapter cannot promise to be completely objective and neutral, but it will seek to describe Czech political developments until the end of World War I by employing a perspective that sheds light on the capabilities and deficiencies of Czech society and its political elites. The patterns that emerged before 1918 served as a basis for the many types of regime and society that followed.

1.1. Czech society and the Czech national revival: a difficult transition from serfs to citizens

A useful place to begin is Rokkan’s conceptual map of Europe. He attempted to categorize the distribution of European nations and ethnic groups which sought to construct a modern nation at the threshold of the nineteenth century (Rokkan 1999b: 135–147). Although Rokkan’s model is primarily focussed on a ‘Europe of Celtic, Latin and Germanic peoples’, its usefulness goes beyond that. The conceptual map places European states and regions along two axes. The ‘West-East’ axis combines economic and territorial (geopolitical) criteria (centre vs. periphery, strength of city network), whereas the ‘North-South’ axis is determined by Catholic (South), mixed (centre) and Protestant (North) areas. This second axis differentiates the conditions of nation-building, whereas the ‘West-East’ axis emphasises those of state-building.

Rokkan’s map shows that the most successful and earliest nation-states were to be found in the European geopolitical centres: Catholic France, Spain and Portugal; the religiously mixed Netherlands; and Protestant Britain, Denmark and Sweden. Unsuccessful nations, by contrast, were located on the peripheries of European politics. As a religiously and linguistically mixed
territory and part of the Habsburg Empire, the Czech lands faced an uneasy path towards the establishment of a full political nation. This was to various degrees a result of disputes between its Czech- and German-speaking populations, opposition to Czech national aspirations from the Catholic Church, and the fact that Protestants, drawing from German culture, were not necessarily supporters of Czech nationhood (as they sometimes were in Western European countries).

Of key importance for both the Czech and the wider Central European experience was the process of modern nation building, often described in Czech historiography using the somewhat imprecise, but poetic and nationalism-tinged expression národní obrození – national revival or renascence. The term suggests the pre-existence of a Czech nation in a distant past. Czech national mythology interprets the Battle of White Mountain as the symbolic beginning of Habsburg rule and the suppression of Czech nationhood. The nation gradually revived itself, beginning in the late eighteenth century.

This story is not, however, the historical truth. Modern nations are the product of historical developments, which could have taken – at some stages at least – alternative paths. As Jiří Kofalka (1996: 19-66) reminds us, in the early-nineteenth-century Czech lands there were no fewer than five alternative (and not necessarily exclusive) national-political collective identities: Austrian (a patriotism linked with the Habsburg dynasty); Greater German (a nationalist idea that brought together the German-speaking citizens of the Habsburg monarchy with those of what would later become Germany); Slavic (which sought the future of Czech existence in a close alliance with other Slavic ethnicities, relying largely on a political leadership role for Russia); Bohemian (based on territorial rather than linguistic differences – by analogy we might also speak of Moravian patriotism, involving both the Czech- and German-speaking inhabitants of Moravia); and, finally, Czech (which emphasised the ethnic and linguistic construct of the Czech nation). Not all of these notions were of equal relevance. The dynastic Austrian and Bohemian identities, disregarding as they did linguistic differences, enjoyed the support of very narrow social bases of civil servants and certain intellectuals. Slavic patriotism was more of a political tactic than a truly shared identity. And so the Czech and German linguistic nationalisms emerged during the nineteenth century as clear winners. Czech nationalism spanned the territorial boundaries of the historical lands of Bohemia and Moravia, whereas German nationalism extended beyond the borders of the Habsburg monarchy.
During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Czechs were becoming a fully-fledged modern nation.¹ They underwent a process typical of most of Europe at the time, with Herder’s linguistic and ethnic notion of nation and German nationalism serving as paradigms.

As Miroslav Hroch (1999) has argued, the Czech national movement enjoyed a good starting position in that it could refer to the long tradition of independent statehood in the medieval and early modern period. Indeed, early advocates of Czech nationhood frequently based their arguments on historical rights. Scholarly interest among the Czechs in their language, history and ethnography emerged at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the context of the Habsburg monarchy, this was relatively early. The interest of scholars during the Enlightenment was soon complemented by, and later replaced with, political demands. The period until the mid-1840s was a time of cautious national campaigning by patriotic activists on behalf of Czech cultural and political ideas.² The campaign won the support of more and more Czech speakers. With the revolution of 1848, Czech nationalism became a truly mass movement, which gradually built up a Czech social structure and formulated more radical demands – not just nationalist but also democratic.

As suggested above, geopolitics was a factor influencing to what degree Central European political systems were able to democratise themselves. Of equal weight were events that were connected with attempts to establish democratic and liberal ideas not only in Central Europe, but on the whole continent. The Revolutions of 1848 were, naturally, a symbolic moment. Unlike their predecessors in the 1820s and 1830s, they immediately influenced the nations in Habsburg-ruled Central Europe. And, unlike the exports of the French Revolution, in this case the reception in Central Europe of the new political currents was favourable.

The year 1848 was a milestone on the road to modern democratic politics in Central Europe. In terms of the preconditions for the liberalisation and democratisation of political and social life, the Revolutions of 1848 separated Central (Habsburg) Europe from Eastern (Romanov) Europe and South-

¹ For non-ruling ethnic groups like the Czechs, building a modern nation involved three processes: (1) overcoming cultural and linguistic inferiority by cultivating and developing a literary language and a national culture; (2) overcoming political subjugation by obtaining the right to participate in political decision-making; and (3) abolishing the inferior social standing of their members vis-à-vis the ruling nation (Hroch 1996: 10–11).

² The important Czech historian Jiří Štaif (2005) describes Czech national leaders of the pre-March 1848 period as ‘a cautious elite’.
Eastern (Ottoman) Europe, which never received the ideas of the revolution. The year 1848 was also important in that it was still the era of *risorgimento* nationalism, when demands for the liberalisation and democratisation of political life went hand in hand with calls for national, cultural and political emancipation. The tendencies to Germanise, to replace Slavic languages with German both in intellectual endeavours and daily life, failed to prevent the progress of the nation-building project among the Czechs, but as a result these projects were clearly pitted against the Germans or, symbolically, against Vienna (Claval 2000).

An even more important legacy of the revolution was that it started the process by which serfs were transformed into citizens. The revolution in fact abolished for some time the prerogatives of the aristocracy, many of which were not restored during the neo-absolutist period of 1849-1860. An August/September 1848 Act that abolished serfdom paved the way for the gradual political socialisation and mobilisation of rural populations, then still the decisive majority of the population. The revolution ushered in a modern society in the Czech lands. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental traits of this society was the plebeian character of Czech society. As a result of Habsburg rule and Germanization, the Czechs lacked an aristocracy and upper stratum. This meant that Czechs viewed excessive political and social differences with much suspicion and were only too eager to listen to the proponents of exaggerated egalitarianism. The trend that culminated in the communist takeover in February 1948 therefore had deep historical roots.

1.2. Was Czech society exclusively Czech? Nationalist disputes and their cultural and political consequences

From today’s perspective, the Czech Republic is a relatively homogeneous country, where religious identities and disputes are of low importance, nationalist and ethnic issues are politicised only to a very modest degree, and

---

3 The 1910 census showed that the proportion of people working in the primary sector of the economy (39%) was still higher than that of those working in the secondary sector (37%) – despite the fact that the Czech lands were the most industrially developed part of the monarchy (Kofalka 1996: 117).
Czecholovakia could be peacefully dismantled. It must, however, be noted that the path towards this homogeneity was only taken from the 1930s onwards, and the process was violent, including the elimination, expulsion, and assimilation of minorities. Before 1918 the society of the Czech lands was diverse in linguistic, national and religious terms. This variety produced cultural exchange along with very strong social and political tensions.

Leaving aside the phenomenon of the great migrations of peoples in antiquity, an overview of the evolving multinational society in the Czech lands needs to begin in the Middle Ages. In the twelfth century, immigrants from Germany began to colonise the peripheries of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. The Germans gradually became the largest minority and politically the most important. Their arrival was strongly supported by the Přemyslid royal dynasty, as they settled in and cultivated hitherto uninhabited regions of the Czech lands, in particular the borderlands. Thanks to this German colonisation and the geographical and cultural proximity of Germany, German models influenced many of the institutions of Czech medieval and early modern politics and society.

This did not, however, mean that relations between the Czechs and the Germans were always cooperative. From the very beginning, relations oscillated between cooperation and conflict. The Reformation was a critical juncture: the dispute between Catholics and Protestants temporarily pushed the Czech-German rivalry into the background (Brokl 1999: 49-52). This led to a relatively short period at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when humanist ideas flowed freely between Czech and German societies and across religious spheres. Enforced re-Catholicisation after the Battle of White Mountain (1620) destroyed the developing dialogue between religions and nations, increased tensions between the Czechs and the Germans and, last but not least, deprived Czech society of its historical aristocracy. The aforementioned Czech plebeianism was thus grounded in the specific structure of Czech society. From the end of the eighteenth century, the endeavours of Czechs to catch up with, and if possible get ahead of, the developmentally more ‘progressive’ Germans provided a permanent and dominant impetus to nascent modern Czech politics. Its programme was to ‘redress’ White Mountain. This not only inspired Czech politics, but also nourished and radicalised competition and animosity between Czechs and Germans. Contact and

---

4 The 2001 census showed that 94% of the Czech Republic’s population were of Czech (90%), Moravian, or Silesian nationality.
confrontation with the German element was in practice the strongest inspiration for Czech national activists (Křen 1996).  

On the German side, attitudes towards the Czech lands had long been ambivalent. The ethnically Czech population could hardly be considered a fully-fledged part of the German nation-building process, but the Czech lands were clearly understood as a geographical part of the German cultural and political space. The well-known Czech historian and politician František Palacký was invited alongside ethnic Germans to represent Bohemia and Moravia at the Frankfurt Parliament (1848). His no less famous letter, in which he refused the invitation and emphasized instead Czech participation in the Habsburg monarchy and compromise within the ethnically fragmented commonwealth, created a framework for the statehood efforts of the Czechs and their distinctiveness vis-a-vis the German element in the Czech lands in particular and the Habsburg monarchy in general, a framework that remained in place until almost the beginning of World War I.

Constitutionalisation, liberalisation and the gradual democratisation of governance transformed the struggle between Germans and Czechs on economic and political levels. Economic nationalism and the slogan ‘svůj ke svému’ (‘each to his own [folk]’) limited commercial relations in the Czech lands, The Imperial Council (Reichsrat) and the regional diets of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia long suffered from nationalist struggles. This climate was not propitious for peaceful compromises and a number of attempts to do so in Bohemia from the 1870s onwards met with failure. Indeed, the institutions of Bohemia (its diet, Landtag, and committee, Landesausschuß, which served as the governing bodies) were temporarily suspended in 1913 as nationalist rivalry between Czech and German parties effectively paralysed them. In Moravia, such developments had been avoided thanks to the Moravian Compromise of 1905 (Ausgleich), but the price paid was the de facto division of Moravian self-government into Czech and German parts.

The Jewish population, which mostly resided in urban areas, further increased the diversity of the Czech lands. Prague and Brno had their first continually-inhabited Jewish quarters in the eleventh century but, until the eighteenth century, Jews did not enjoy full civil rights. They were subjected to frequent pogroms, attacks, and economic and administrative discrimination.

---

5 The famous Czech historian Josef Pekář remarked in 1929: ‘[I]f we are further advanced than other Eastern nations in economic and industrial capability, in administration, discipline and diligence, we owe it especially to our German education’ (reprinted in Pekář 1995: 509–510).
The majority group perceived them as foreign and the gradual process of Jewish emancipation only began with the reforms of Emperor Joseph II. In terms of political rights, emancipation was complete with the adoption of a fundamental and universal catalogue of civic rights and freedoms in the constitution of December 1867. Thus, Jewish emancipation became a part of a more general process by which the neo-absolutist understanding of the populace as subjects was transformed into a constitutionally-defined citizenship. The emancipation process had overturned the religious ostracism of the Jewish population, but did not in itself signal the achievement of independent political representation for Jews. Linguistic differences overrode religious-ethnic differentiation: richer, urban, Jews participated in the politics of the German liberals, whereas those in small towns and villages who spoke Czech tended to seek political representation in Czech parties (Pešný 2001).

Thus, in terms of political salience, the national conflict in the Czech lands was largely reduced to a rivalry between Czechs and Germans. Despite attempts at reconciliation made by some aristocrats and conservative bourgeois politicians, Czech-German relations continued to worsen, and national bonds were emphasised to the detriment of civic and democratic principles. The Czech and German communities in the Czech lands carried their nationalist dispute into the era of the so-called First Republic. Their dangerous tendencies towards ethnic homogenisation were preserved too. Later these tendencies much simplified the onset of both ‘brown’ and ‘red’ totalitarianism.

1.3. The Czech lands as part of Cisleithania: the consistent constitutionalisation and the inconsistent liberalisation of political institutions

National strife carried over into political life and complicated – sometimes even paralysed – the functioning of political institutions. The Habsburg monarchy could hardly be described as a pioneer in liberalising and democratising its political life. Nonetheless, developments in the last third of the nineteenth century laid down the foundations of a modern administrative state and gradually democratised the political system. These were the foundations on which the interwar Czechoslovak state was also able to build. The following brief overview focuses on constitutional developments in the
Empire, the particularities of the Cisleithanian parliament and government, and the political institutions of the lands of Bohemia and Moravia.  

The first phase of the constitutionalisation of the Habsburg monarchy was connected with the revolutionary wave of 1848-1849. At the outset the process looked promising. The Pillersdorf Constitution was imposed in April 1848, taking as its model the Belgian liberal constitution of 1830. It guaranteed fundamental civic rights and anticipated universal male suffrage, but it also preserved the specific position of the Emperor and was inconsistent in its separation of powers. Its main problem, which frequently reappeared in Habsburg constitutionalism, was its limited territorial validity, as it did not apply to Hungary and the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom. Disputes over internal autonomy within the Habsburg monarchy, which led to the establishment of the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary in 1867, also provided the context for the aspirations of the Czech national movement to secure self-rule for the Czech lands within the monarchy. In the end, neither the Pillersdorf Constitution nor the much more liberal constitution adopted by the Kremsier (Kroměříž) parliament (Brauneder and Lachmayer 1992: 117–119) came into effect, and in March 1849 the Stadion Constitution was imposed. Compared to the earlier two, it was clearly regressive. It corresponded to the gradual exhaustion of the revolutionary wave.

These constitutional experiments were finally put to rest with the St. Sylvester’s Day Patents of 31 December 1851, which suspended the validity of the Stadion Constitution and paved the way for the neo-absolutist period of the so-called Bach regime, named for the repressive Minister of the Interior. Although the revolutionary constitutional attempts essentially failed, what was achieved was a fundamental modernisation of public administration, including its central offices, whose symbolic culmination was the establishment of the Council of Ministers as a collective form of government in March 1848 (Baltl and Kocher 1997: 195–196). Liberalism established itself as an important economic doctrine and was gradually put into practice. The political and nationalist aims of the Czech (and German) liberals, however, remained unfulfilled (Jászi 1961: 86–99).

The gradual dismantling of the neo-absolutist regime was a consequence of Austria losing the Franco-Austrian War in 1859. The October Diploma (1860) and the Schmerling (also called February) Constitution (1861) restored

---

6 Cisleithania refers to the Austrian half of the dual monarchy. The Hungarian half was termed Transleithania. The Leitha River marked part of the boundary between the two.
limited constitutionalism. Among other achievements, they opened the way for the establishment of provincial assemblies or diets in the individual crown lands, thus allowing Bohemian, Moravian and Silesian provincial politics to develop (Hye 1998: 58–72). This was far from liberal governance, however, not least due to the highly discriminatory electoral system, in which those who paid the highest taxes were allowed to dominate: there were four classes of electors, or curias, and the system was strongly biased towards the representation of the landed gentry. Furthermore, the system of constituencies that was adopted and the way these were drawn allowed large-scale gerrymandering, the main consequence of which was the over-representation of German-speaking areas (Valenta 2002: 66–67). Among other illiberal and undemocratic elements, the monarch held executive power, there was neither a constitutional court nor a catalogue of fundamental rights, ministers were not accountable to the parliament, and the separation of powers was inconsistent. The demands of the individual nations and parts of the monarchy were, again, insufficiently addressed, which led in practice to a dysfunctional political system.

The Austro-Hungarian compromise (Ausgleich, kiegyenlítés; Galántai 1985) led to the adoption of the December Constitution (1867). A positive development was that it was not imposed, but adopted jointly by the monarch and parliament. The constitution was based on a combination of the principles of monarchical legitimacy and the sovereignty of the people. It established a true separation of powers, reintroduced both the catalogue of fundamental rights and the constitutional court, and consistently subordinated the activities of the state and its bodies to the rule of law. It did include a provision for emergency legislation, the notorious Article 14, which allowed the ruler to issue emergency decrees with the power of the law. This was frequently used in practice as the fragmented House of Deputies was often paralysed by abstention or obstruction.

The constitution introduced a bicameral Imperial Council with a House of Lords and a House of Deputies. The latter would be elected indirectly by provincial diets. Many of the diets were paralysed by national strife and the obstruction that went with it (Bohemia was particularly renowned for this

---

7 To be fair, in its favouring of rich voters, the Habsburg monarchy was certainly not an exception in Europe at the time (Rokkan 1999a: 252–253).
8 Czechs, Moravians, Tyroleans, Romanians, Italians, and Slovenians practised abstention for significant periods of time.
practice), so the principle of direct election was gradually introduced beginning in 1868.\textsuperscript{9} In an attempt to overcome the negative consequences of obstruction, an emergency electoral law was adopted in 1873. It allowed the government to hold a direct election whenever a deputy was not exercising the duties of his office. These laws were a direct response to the deliberate Czech policy of abstention.

The struggle for universal suffrage flared up in the early 1890s, but electoral reform did not take place until Count Badeni’s draft was adopted in 1896. This added a fifth curia for most of the male populace. The reform increased the number of voters in Cisleithania from 1,732,000 to 5,333,000 (Balil and Kocher 1997: 225–226). However, suffrage was limited to men aged over 24 and soldiers and police officers were denied the franchise. Suffrage once more topped the agenda in 1905, when the demand for equal suffrage crystallised.\textsuperscript{10} Beck’s electoral reform, which came into effect in January 1907, responded to these events (Pernes 2005: 282–296). It introduced universal, equal, and direct male suffrage by secret ballot, but still limited to those over 24 and excluding soldiers and police officers.

Governments in Cisleithania were peculiar. They were not answerable to parliament, but only to the Emperor. For that reason, the make-up of a government did not necessarily correspond to a parliamentary majority (indeed, given the fragmented party spectrum, majorities were hard to form), and governments sought to create rather heterogeneous coalitions in parliament or simply ruled using Article 14.

With the exception of the troublesome years 1865–1867, the German Liberals (the so-called constitutional party) ruled for almost two decades from 1861 onwards. This, however, does not mean that the cabinet was closely linked with the liberal faction (or factions) in the Imperial Council. In fact, the individual cabinets preferred to keep their distance from parliamentary factions, espousing alternately a liberal, conservative, federalist or centralist profile, depending on specific points of the policies being carried out (Brauneder 1987: 30–31). Liberals were then replaced by the government led by Count Eduard Taaffe (1879–1893), who was renowned for his attempts to

\textsuperscript{9} With the exception of the fourth curia, where the elections were still indirect, these elections took place through special electoral colleges.

\textsuperscript{10} Employees of the railways waged an unusual campaign in support of universal suffrage: they worked to rule, thus causing chaos on the railways (Urban 1982: 524).
rule in a non-partisan manner, which in practical terms meant replacing politics with administration.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, governments followed each other in quick succession. Practically all of them fell due to an inability to find any reasonable compromise between Czechs and Germans, with both nationalities engaging in obstruction. The situation quieted down somewhat during the government of Ernst von Koerber (1900–1904), which ruled technocratically, sought to ignore language issues, and focussed on economic development. The year 1905 was once again turbulent due to the question of equal suffrage. It was followed by a series of largely caretaker governments which continued into the years of World War I.

In the context of Czech representation, one must mention the practice of appointing a Czech Landsmannminister to the government. Though not present in every government, this minister without portfolio represented the Czech nation, but his position was complicated, as he had to balance the pressures for Czech political representation against the demands of the cabinet.

Provincial politics, that is, provincial diets and governments, provided a more important locus in which a Czech political culture and elite (or more precisely, elites) could be created and socialised. The fundamentals of provincial self-governance were already formulated in the constitution of February 1861 and remained in force until World War I. Whatever was not explicitly a prerogative of Cisleithania fell within the jurisdiction of the provinces. Furthermore, in 1907 the provinces obtained further powers in the areas of civil and criminal legislation and a new civil service system. Although provincial self-governance could be suspended, in general the trend of the years 1867–1918 was to strengthen regional and provincial self-government.

The provincial diets were legislatures made up of the so-called ‘Virilists’, i.e., ex-officio members representing specific interests (typically, dignitaries of the Church and university rectors), and elected deputies, who were significantly more numerous than the Virilists. The electoral system was unfair, as it was based on curias (classes) of voters, where membership was determined on the basis of property ownership. The provincial committee served as the executive, but as it was formally a standing committee of the diet, it was composed of sitting deputies. The Emperor appointed the chairs of these committees. A provincial committee acted strictly as a collective body: there were no powers granted to its individual members and decisions were taken in plenum. The scope of their authority consisted of the powers given to provincial self-government. Until the 1890s, the provinces had been quite weak
financially, and this changed only when there was a boom in public works. The efficiency of provincial self-government was often hampered by nationalist and party strife. However, even in these cases it was generally true that in the provincial committees themselves the atmosphere was constructive.

In addition to the bodies of provincial self-governance, there were also those of public administration. At the provincial level they were headed by governors and their offices oversaw county offices. Furthermore, there was also a network of provincial and county revenue offices, school boards, and other institutions.

Provincial diets were often victims of passive resistance and the policy of abstention. Thus, in the 1870s, the functioning of the Bohemian diet was complicated by the absence of the Old Czech Party – one of the two Czech parties of the time – and in the second half of the 1880s by the absence of German deputies after they lost their majority in the diet. From 1908 until its closure in the summer of 1913, the Bohemian diet was practically defunct due to obstruction.

In Moravia a political solution for the complicated relationship between Czechs and Germans was found in the Moravian Compromise of 1905. Czech politicians demanded a change to the law governing elections to the diet which would secure adequate representation of the Czech-speaking majority and also expansion of the use of Czech as a language of provincial and local self-governance. The Germans, meanwhile, wanted an arrangement that would provide them with some protection from the Czech majority.11 After many years of disputes, an agreement was found that secured a relatively peaceful coexistence between the two ethnicities. The compromise consisted of four laws: a new provincial system of government, a new electoral law for elections to the Moravian diet, the *Lex Parma* which addressed language issues and local self-governance (each local authority could choose the language in which it would conduct business, and a minority representing 20 % or more of the populace had the right to have the business conducted in its own language); and the *Lex Perek*, which regulated education in Moravia according to the language criterion, splitting the provincial, county and local school boards between Czechs and Germans. The new electoral law introduced registers of voters according to ethnicity, ensuring a fixed number of Czech and German

11 At the turn of the century, Moravia consisted of 28 % German speakers and 71 % Czech speakers. Germans were not concentrated in one area, but scattered throughout the Czech population.
deputies in both the existing curias of towns and villages and the newly introduced universal curia. In the diet the deputies would be split into Czech and German curias, while the curias of the large landowners and those of the business and trade chambers remained intact. Neither Czechs nor Germans could command a clear majority in the diet and it was necessary to seek cross-curia support in order to adopt laws. The advantage of the compromise was that it allowed for stable governance and showed that agreement was possible. However, the price paid for this peace was high – the *de facto* ethnic separation of Czechs and Germans in Moravia.

To sum up the constitutional and political developments and the political system that resulted, we can use the thresholds of democratisation model developed by Stein Rokkan (1999a: 246–247). The Czech polity had to cross these thresholds on its way to modernity. The first, the threshold of legitimisation, which provides the freedom to express oppositional political views, was set high. The first attempt to cross it during the revolution of 1848–1849 failed and the Czechs then had to wait until the early 1860s. This fact, together with the insufficient differentiation and the acute nature of the nationalist conflict, led to the long-term concentration of Czech political representation in a single National Party, as we shall see below. The revolution also brought a failed attempt to cross the threshold of incorporation, the introduction of universal male suffrage. The subsequent path towards the achievement of universal suffrage was based instead on the British model of gradual, evolutionary reform. The thresholds of representation (a proportional electoral system) and of executive power (a government answerable to parliament) were crossed only after the creation of the First Republic in 1918. Still, it can be argued that the essential elements of modern competitive mass democratic politics were already established before World War I. In this sense, the heritage of Cisleithania provides a key part of the explanation for the greater longevity of democracy in interwar Czechoslovakia (and in Austria where it lasted until 1934) than in most other Central European countries. However, it must be added that the political culture that became established was somewhat parochial, focussed as it was on the national struggle, and often encouraged conflict over consensus. Over the last decades of the Habsburg monarchy, this process was further complicated by socio-political differentiation and the rise of mass parties. Very much manifest in the Czech lands, this process is the subject of the next section.
1.4. Czech society, parties, and politics before World War I

A key feature of political life in Cisleithania before World War I was the growing importance of political parties, as instruments both of political struggle and of the political socialisation of citizens. To describe the specific relationship between parties and their voters in situations where the voters typically constituted relatively distinct social groups or milieux, the metaphors of camps or pillars are frequently used. How was such a camp- or pillar-based political culture created? In Cisleithania, the dominant political force since the 1860s was the German liberal bourgeoisie, who not only had specific political demands, but also a specific political culture. Though influenced by liberalism in the economic meaning of the term, they were from the outset characterised by relatively strong German national feeling and an elitist stance towards the further expansion of political participation. Other political parties (and the citizens they represented) had to fight for their place in the sun.

The issue of expanding the franchise in Cisleithania provides a good illustration of the rivalries that accompanied the rise of new mass political parties. The only way other groups could gain more political space for themselves was to obtain political concessions from the ruling stratum – either by protest or by acts of defiance – and such efforts took time. Political parties such as the Social Democrats, the Christian Socialists, and naturally the Czech and Moravian parties defined themselves as separate from the dominant liberal political culture, which was viewed in the Czech environment not only as a brake on upward social mobility and the political emancipation of the lower social classes (this was true of the whole of Cisleithania) but also as a political force aimed against Czech national needs. In this sense, the process by which the Czech camps or pillars established themselves was a response to social and political events.12

As already indicated, the camps and their parties served as mechanisms of political and social modernisation. The large network of activities supporting each movement ranged from explicitly political endeavours (the party and its organisation, its periodicals and other printed matter, and affiliated trade unions) to economic activities linked with the party (consumers’ or producers’ cooperatives) to social and apparently non-political activities that strengthened the collective experience and mentality of its supporters (gymnastics and sports

---

12 John W. Boyer, an American historian, even argued that these camps conceived of politics as ‘social aggression and ideological conquest’ (Boyer 1986: 165–166).