CHAPTER 2

The Great Fin-de-Siècle Crisis, 1897–1900

In order to understand modern Prague and Czechoslovakia one needs to step back and view them in their context of space and time. Until 1918 this context was that of the Habsburg Empire. Prague was merely a provincial capital, Czechoslovakia an exotic concept few people would know or take interest in. What did exist was nationalism, in a German as well as a Czech form, and from the late 1800s also in a Jewish form, Zionism. The Habsburg Empire further provided some rudimentary representative structures and held ‘elections’ for them, as well as slowly reforming the administration to better fit the changing times.

In 1867, the Habsburg Empire had been confederated into the Austro-Hungarian ‘Dual Monarchy,’ presided over by the Habsburg rulers in a personal union as Austrian emperors and Hungarian kings. The exact political and economic relationship between the Cisleithan Austrian and the Transleithan Hungarian entities of the empire, however, was to be renegotiated every ten years. This eccentric compromise hurled the country into a political crisis in regular ten-year intervals, and ultimately rendered it politically dysfunctional. That development was not without interest to Budapest—and Berlin—and precipitated Austria-Hungary’s disintegration.1

The Bohemian and Moravian Language Ordinances of 1897, which triggered the great fin-de-siècle crisis, were side effects of the negotiations of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise or Ausgleich. In 1896, the time had come to prepare for the third time for Austrian-Hungarian negotiations to begin in the next year, and Cisleithan Prime Minister Feliks Kazimierz Count Badeni set out to design a stable new government for this purpose. He preferred a coalition around the German-liberals and the Young Czech Party, the latter being the largest faction in the splintered Cisleithan (Austrian) parliament in Vienna.

The condition of the Young Czechs for entering a future government coalition was a lowering of the tax limit for voters in advance of the parliamentary elections. In late 1896, Badeni passed a bill, which extended the franchise to 3.6 million new voters (although most of them voted for a new fifth ‘voting class’ that elected only 17% of the seats). The total number of Cisleithan voters

1 Sutter, “Stellung der Deutschen in Österreich,” 231–32 [connection to Hungary]; for a detailed discussion of the functionality of the late Habsburg Empire, see Sked, Fall of the Habsburg Empire.
thus jumped by 208% to a total of 5.33 million. Although its political weight was limited, the ‘fifth voting class’ was widely viewed as a test case for the general male franchise and became the focus of a frantic election campaign in March 1897.2

The importance of the 1897 Cisleithenian Austrian elections cannot be overestimated. Never again was there another tripling of the constituency, not even when the general male franchise was finally introduced in 1907, or the general franchise for both women and men in Austria-Hungary’s successor states after World War I. It was therefore only natural that this unique enlargement of the polity would revolutionize election tactics, and in fact the relationship between nationalism and the state. Blanka Soukupová observed: “the radicalization of the Young Czech Czechness went hand in hand with its democratization.”3

The following chapter traces the various facets of (proto-) nation-cleansing, and how it impacted on all involved, but specifically on Jews, who were often scapegoated as the generic local ‘other.’ This period saw the beginning of a gradual decline of Prague’s German liberalism, Hans Kohn’s prototype Western nationalism, although this type allegedly also embraced some forms of Czech nationalism, and was later transferred to the entire Anglo-Saxon world. Further, it is at this time that Gellner’s third type of nationalism, a nationalism of security arrived in Prague: Zionism. Meanwhile the profile of Czech nationalism as a more or less conscious mimicry of German nationalism became apparent (or were they mimicking each other?). Deutsch’s nationalist “machinery of compulsion” now clearly surfaced on both the Czech and the German side, but not yet on the Jewish side, since Zionism did still not possess sufficient political tools for its own version of nation-cleansing.

Language Ordinances and the Political Parties

For Prime Minister Badeni, the results of the March 15, 1897 Austrian elections were catastrophic. The German-liberal camp disintegrated, partly due to the Great Franchise Reform, while the Young Czechs celebrated a sweeping victory, gaining sixty out of about sixty-nine Czech-elected seats. They were to become the sole anchor of the new coalition, but as their political weight increased, their demands grew. The Young Czechs wanted a generous compensation for having been passed over in 1867, when Austrian-Hungarian dualism

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3 Soukupová, Česká společnost před sto lety, 14.