CHAPTER 5

The First Republic and the Minorities, 1920–1938

“Kde domov můj?” [“Where is My Home?”], a Czech piece of incidental music written in 1834 by Josef Kajetán Tyl, gave two rather different answers to this classical Herderian\(^1\) question. In the first stanza, which eventually became the Czech national anthem, home was the province of Bohemia, which was also clearly reflected in the official German translation used during the interwar period.\(^2\) In the second stanza, however, home was “among the Czechs” (who lived in only part of Bohemia, namely the center, as well as in much of Moravia).

Even if both of these distinct definitions had been heeded, the Bohemian-Czech state should have encompassed only the historical province of Bohemia plus the Czech-speaking areas of Moravia. Interwar Czechoslovakia, however, was neither a “Bohemian State,” as it was sometimes called, nor a state of Czech-speakers, as many foreigners, including some historians, keep imagining it. Generously carved out from Austria-Hungarian vestiges it encompassed territories roughly three times the size of Bohemia with a population twice the total number of Czech-speakers.

Todd W. Huebner described the unhappy Czech-German-Slovak constellation that emerged in interwar Czechoslovakia as follows:

In contrast to the remarkable symmetry between the Czechs and the Germans, whom everyone agreed constituted two separate, distinct, indeed hostile nations, the Czechs and Slovaks, whom many wished to regard as a single nation, appear in retrospect to have shared little besides mutually comprehensible speech.\(^3\)

Huebner also provided a partial explanation of the seemingly irrational Czech nationalist reckoning:

---

1 On this Herderian paradigm see Wein, *Slavic Jerusalem*, 7, 11, 21, 25.
2 In Czech, the first stanza refers to “the Czech land,” an ambiguous term that could mean the province of Bohemia, or else the land of the Czech-speaking populations, i.e. part of Bohemia and part of Moravia, as in the second stanza. However, from the historical and literary context it is evident that the first stanza here in fact refers to Bohemia, as confirmed by the German translation, where, unlike in Czech (but like in English), there exist two separate terms for *Czech* and *Bohemian*.
3 Huebner, “Multi-National ‘Nation-State,’” 263.
The heart of the Czech question, as the Czechs saw it, was the need for protection from German hegemony. Czech nationalism had developed during the nineteenth century very much in reaction to the formidable economic, cultural, and political strength of the German nation. Confronted by Germans on three sides, the Czechs felt dangerously exposed.4

The Czech nationalist leadership thus turned to the Slovaks, their closest ‘Slavic’ neighbors. Social scientist Jaroslav Krejčí tried to explain the resulting Czecho-Slovak alliance as a win-win deal. This, however, conceptualized Czechoslovakia primarily as a ‘Slavic’ alliance against the German-speaking belt in the Bohemian lands:

There were good reasons, both on the Czech and on the Slovak sides, to create a common state. The more advanced Czechs were supposed to help the Slovaks to catch up; they also had to give them support against the attempts of their former Magyar masters to regain lost territory. As a quid pro quo the 2 million Slovaks, endowed with a much higher birth-rate than the Czechs, were supposed to strengthen the 7 million Czechs against the 3 million Germans in the Bohemian Lands.

Istvan I. Moscy painted a yet more cynical picture of the unreasonable reasoning that guided the successor states of Austria-Hungary in general:

In 1918–1919 the Successor States were little concerned with the establishment of a system that would assure long range cooperation between the small states of the region. They realized that the Western Allies were not in a position to fill the power vacuum left by the military defeat of the Central Powers, and seized upon this unique opportunity to guarantee their security through territorial expansion.6

Accordingly, the Czech nationalist leadership started taking major risks to create an immediate political future for itself and for its constituency through maximalist demands. Czechoslovakia was thus ideologically based on four fundamentally irreconcilable principles:

4 Ibid., 5.
5 Krejčí, “Ethnopolitics,” 8 [emphasis in original]. Note that the number of Czechs in the Bohemian lands in the 1921 census was only ca. 6.4 m.
6 Mocsy, “Partition of Hungary.”