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THE YOUNG CZECH PARTY
AND MODERNIZATION OF
CZECH SCHOOLS IN THE 1890S

This essay attempts to illuminate some of the issues involved in the initiative by the Czechs to establish their own modern educational system at the end of the nineteenth century. Although many aspects of this topic are well covered in Czech historical writings, literature in English is virtually nonexistent. National schools played a very important role in the nation-build-
ing process of all constituent groups in the Habsburg empire, including the Czechs. Traditionally, they considered good and easily accessible education as the most important means of preserving their national identity and their ability to survive with dignity in the general competition among European nations.

Although establishment of the centralistic principle and the division of power between the Germans and Magyars in 1867 frustrated the hopes of the numerically smaller groups in the empire to achieve political equality with them, these groups continued their struggle for greater political and national rights and for cultural advancement. Czech politicians had always viewed establishment of various cultural institutions—a national press, libraries, and national schools—as political tasks closely related to the overall progress of the Czech nation as well as that of individuals.

The Czechs of the Habsburg empire were especially successful in building up the cultural level of their nation in a relatively short period. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they had attained a cultural level equal to that of the Austrian Germans. Moreover, a decade before the end of the nineteenth century, they had caught up with the Germans economically, and

4. While centralization of the educational system had some positive aspects, it was humiliating for the non-German nationalities because autonomy in education was introduced just in 1861. Equality of Czech and German in Bohemian schools was introduced in January, 1866, and abolished in 1869. Texts of laws related to autonomy of lands in education are in Šafránek, Školy české, II, 175-202; laws related to the process of centralization, ibid., 231-41; laws related to minority and private schools, ibid., 382-89. Financial responsibility for the maintenance of elementary schools was, however, placed completely on the land diets by a law issued in 1873. Ibid., 306. All subsequent references to Šafránek are to volume II.

5. Prominent Czech politicians of the nineteenth century perceived the development of individual nations as something positive. The fact that they seemed to accept a philosophical justification for their stand, mainly from German philosophy, particularly Herder, only indicates that it coincided with their own feelings and way of thinking. Before World War I, T. G. Masaryk was the last Czech philosopher who took pains to justify theoretically the existence of national entities. Basically he viewed nations as having greater potentials than other groups for the development of their members as individuals as well as cultural, historical, social, and political beings, providing that a relatively high level of spiritual and economic development was achieved. These ideas permeate all Masaryk's works, but Česká otázka (Praga: Čas, 1895) is especially devoted to this topic in relation to the Czech nation. It should be mentioned that in the nineteenth century a "nation" was understood in Central Europe more in historical, territorial, cultural, linguistic, and psychological terms than in political, economic, and other respects. See more on the relevant aspects to this issue in Robert A. Kann, A History of the Habsburg Empire 1562-1918 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), pp. 290-91.

6. For example, W. A. Jenks, in Austria Under the Iron Ring, 1879-1893 (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1965), p. 274, states that Czech cultural development was by the 1880s very close to the German.