

## POPULAR SOCIALISM IN BOHEMIA: NATIONAL SOCIALISM AGAINST HITLER

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The term *Volkssozialismus* might most adequately be translated to mean *popular socialism*. It contained elements of nationalist ideology, of American Populism, and of course, of non-Marxist socialist traditions exemplified among others by Ferdinand Lassalle, Engelbert Pernersdorfer, and other national socialists. *Volkssozialismus* came into being in the nineteen-thirties as a socialist reform movement in the German Social Democratic Workers Party of Czechoslovakia (DSAP), when a number of younger members and functionaries in that party, foremost among them Wenzel Jaksch and Dr. Emil Franzel, opposed the internationalist and inflexible course advocated by then party chairman Dr. Ludwig Czech. Influenced also by former national socialist leader Dr. Otto Strasser, an early associate of Hitler, and other right-wing elements, and motivated by the desire to form an alternative to the all-embracing Sudeten German nationalist movement of Konrad Henlein, the *Volkssozialisten* perhaps all too readily parted from their own traditional socialist heritage.

The personal and ideological friendship between Wenzel Jaksch — after the war one of the foremost refugee politicians in West Germany — and Otto Strasser turned out to be of political disadvantage. Jaksch nevertheless attempted to put his brand of socialism into practice and bring the DSAP on a more national course. The reasons for his failure, however, were not only due to his misconception of socialist political opportunities but also due to the distrust of Czechs and Slovaks, to the growing threat of Hitlerism in Central Europe in the 1930s, and last but not least, to the defensive reaction of leading Sudeten German social democrats, which for reasons of internal party rivalry denied the *Volkssozialisten* support and understanding.

But the failure of popular socialism to assert itself was also due to its preoccupation with history and lofty theory, and with primarily German problems, which tended to cloud the more important tasks of a German minority party operating in Czechoslovakia: namely finding a solution for the deteriorating relationship between Czechs and Germans. The heated discussion of popular socialism by both orthodox and right-wing socialists, their failure to agree on its merits and demerits, and the eventual demise of popular socialism parallel to the end of the DSAP in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia only proved that the crisis of socialist ideas and politics in the inter-war-period was of a general nature, and too far-reaching to be cured simply by either a rightist or by a leftist socialist ideology.