

## THE CZECH PEASANT MOVEMENT, ITS LEADER AND HIS PARTY

*By Antonín Paleček*

„As for myself, even though I were of gypsy stock, and its last descendant, still I would do all I can that an honorable remembrance should remain after me in the annals of humanity.“ (Palacký in discussion with Count Sternberg and Josef Dobrowský, December 1, 1825.)

„What knows he of England, who only England knows.“ This Kipling's saying may be, of course, applied to all countries. It also applies, at least in eastern Europe, to such important components of each of those countries as was their peasantry. While, however, educated people in the West spend much of their time in an effort to understand themselves by comparing their country to others, it never became a habit in eastern Europe to try to understand their own peasantry, that is, in fact, their own people, by comparing it to their neighbors' peasant class. It was always believed that preoccupation with the peasantry was below the dignity of educated people, and that basic facts to be known about that class were anyway so well known as to need no special investigation. Rural eastern Europe knew no rural sociology worthy of the name.

Still, under the surface, there were some differences. In certain east European countries the prevailing view was that peasantry was a class for itself, living apart from the main stream of national life, a more or less foreign substance in the national body, uninterested in politics, and therefore devoid of interest for educated people. Other countries again regarded their peasantry as the background of all their people, a medium from which all urban people somehow escaped and emancipated themselves, and to which they hoped never to return, and for that reason among others found uninteresting.

We see an example of the first type in countries whose intelligentsia recruited itself from, or was closely related to, native nobility, Hungary or Poland in our case, while the other type is represented by Czech, Slovene as well as Baltic countries' peasantry, lacking native nobility. The first attitude reminds of that of plantation owners to their slaves, the other of the house-negroes to the field-negroes.

The old Hungarian view of the peasantry is reflected in the following statement made by count Julius Andrássy, the last Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, to dr. Sigismund Kúnyi, the right hand man of Béla Kun, on November 11, 1918:

„You do not know what a malevolent creature such a peasant is, filled with the hatred for the towns, the culture, the industrial proletariat. I know their life, their character from direct experience; I live as landlord in the country; I know

the physical and moral dirtiness in which they are living. You as socialists, you wish laws for the protection of the workers. Do you believe that the peasant would favor such measures? You wish a city culture, good elementary schools. You are anti-clerical. The peasant is illiterate, would not give a farthing for social and cultural aims, he is clerical and anti-semitic. Universal equal suffrage would unleash this flood of barbarism upon the whole country, and the very interests of the social democratic workers, whom we consider as an element of the national culture, would be submerged in this ocean of illiterate, clerical, anti-semitic and anti-social peasants . . .<sup>1</sup>."

A similar view of the role of Polish peasantry, expressed in a less insulting way, may be gathered from a study of the Polish peasantry undertaken by an American scholar:

"The peasantry until at least the eighteen nineties felt for the most part no common bond with the rest of the nation, was hostile to any thought of the restoration of the Polish independence, and looked to the Emperors to defend their interests against the Polish *schlachta*. The landowning and the middle classes, on the other hand, regarded the peasantry as outside the pale of the Polish community and objected to their acquisition of political and citizen rights."<sup>2</sup>

Czech view of their own peasantry, of its character, and of its role in modern Czech history was very different, and the above expressed views, had they been brought to their attention in the twenties, would make them wonder. Modern Czech national life began in the atmosphere which preceeded the revolution of 1848. In January 1846 appeared the first issue of *Pražské noviny*, edited by Karel Havlíček, the spokesman of the new age. We are told that "although the Czechs had begun to fight for an industrial school in the first issue of that paper, nothing had been done for farmers. Not only was the peasant neglected in education, but greater damage had been done by the spiritual down-grading of the simple peasantry that had gone on for many years". Havlíček felt that this reflected on the entire nation. He stated: "As long as the peasant is ashamed of his own name, the nation cannot raise itself." He looked forward to the development of a self-sufficient farming class, which he considered the happiest and most important component of a free society. To ensure the growth of such a class Havlíček warned against the fragmentation of land and urged that family lots be passed on to the eldest son intact. As free men, he anticipated that the farmers would not only take care of their own land, but also of any communal properties such as pastures and roads. It was within such free farming communities he sought the roots of self-government should be placed<sup>3</sup>.

Two years later, in an article published in the *Národní noviny*, Havlíček came out with a project how to organize peasantry. Apart from raising the cultural

<sup>1</sup> Jászai, Oscar: The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy. Chicago 1929, p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> Brock, Peter: Boleslaw Wyslouch, Founder of the Polish Peasant Party. The Slavonic Review (December 1951).

<sup>3</sup> Kohák-Kimmel, Barbara: Karel Havlíček and the Czech Press. In: The Czech Renaissance of the Nineteenth Century. Ed. by Peter Brock and H. Gordon-Skilling. Toronto 1970.

level of the class, such an organization should develop peasant credit institutions, liberating thus their people from the hands of usurers and speculators.

Full constitutional life in Austria came to life in 1867, but self-government on the local, district and provincial level existed already since the early sixties. Czech cities, dominated as they were by Austrian notables and often by German speaking minorities, did not profit from this arrangement as much as the Czech countryside which particularly through district self-government gave an opportunity to Czech peasantry to break out of the bonds of the local community and, unencumbered by any German pressure extend its horizon, set up new goals and test its own strength.

There were two mass movements in Bohemia, and to a smaller extent also in Moravia, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Both were spearheaded by Czech peasantry. The first one took place in 1868—1870 as a protest against dualism, the German-Magyar rule, introduced by the constitution of 1867. It took the form of open air meetings organized in the countryside rather than in cities, most of them in the region of the Elbe plain, the same region which thirty years later became the cradle of the Agrarian Party. At the first of these meetings, which was held on May 10, 1868 at the foot of the hill of Říp, lying north of Prague and associated in Czech mythology with the birth of the Czech Bohemia, some 20 000 persons, mostly farmers, participated. Other meetings of the same kind followed in the next months, and then the movement gained popularity and became nation-wide. It was estimated that 338 000 people participated in 1868 at these meetings<sup>4</sup>. It took four months before an attempt was made to introduce a similar open air meeting in Prague, and when it took place early in October, it at once degenerated into a riot which led to the proclamation of martial law on October 11, 1868.

The open air meetings held in the country were organized in Prague in May at a meeting of secretaries of some sixty self-government districts, and were therefore well in hand<sup>5</sup>. There was no corresponding organization behind the Prague mass meeting, held in a city whose middle and upper middle class were still largely German.

The second Czech mass movement took place at the end of the eighties. By that time Czech people became thoroughly dissatisfied with the policy of their Old Czech leaders, the chief complaint being their subservience to the policies of the Taaffe regime, dominated by its aristocratic and clerical overlords. The opposition again was in the rural districts, four deputies having left in 1867 the Czech Club in the Reichsrat to form a Young Czech opposition. The elections to the Bohemian Diet, held in June 1889, ended with a surprising success of the Young Czechs in the rural district group which elected 29 deputies as against two in the preceding election. The debacle of the Old Czechs became complete two years later in the Reichsrat elections, this time largely due to their ill-advised move to sign a pact with the Germans which the country rejected. The peasantry became the backbone of the victorious party of Young Czechs.

<sup>4</sup> *Přehled československých dějin II 1848—1918* (A Survey of Czechoslovak History). Prague 1960, p. 389.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem* 384.



There is plenty of other evidence to show the weakness of the Czech cities in their struggle against the German domination of Bohemia in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. The first elections to the Bohemian Diet were held in March 1861. Czechs in Bohemia and Moravia obtained only one third of the mandates. Those mandates were elected by the countryside, while the cities elected only German deputies. From the five chambers of commerce in Bohemia three (Prague, Pilsen and Budweis) were lying in Czech regions. Yet until the early eighties all the five chambers of commerce sent to Vienna only German deputies<sup>6</sup>. In 1859 there were in Prague four German papers with a circulation of 11 014 copies. There was only one Czech paper with a circulation of 2 260 copies<sup>7</sup>. The liberalization of the regime in 1860 brought to life the *Národní listy*, the first issue of which appeared on January 1, 1861. At the end of that year the paper had 1 200 subscriptions in Prague and 2 900 in the countryside<sup>8</sup>.

The chief reason for this weakness of the Czech element in the cities should be sought in the general poverty of Czech urban population. There was not much industry or banking in Bohemian cities of that period, and what there was was in German hands. This led many people especially in Prague to deny their own nationality or at least to be undecided. In 1848 there were in Prague 33 000 Czechs and 66 000 Germans. After March 11, 1848 the ratio was the reverse<sup>9</sup>. In 1856 the population of Prague had 133 000, of whom 60 000 had been Czechs and the rest German. By 1886 the population had grown to 180 000, of whom 150 000 were Czechs<sup>10</sup>. This trend then never stopped. The reason was a sudden growth of Czech industry, sugar factories and industries producing agricultural machinery as well as equipment for the sugar factories first of all.

Prague has always set the tone to other Czech cities and it did so also in this respect. We shall quote the *Národní listy* of January 9, 1862:

„In the time before the battle on the White Mountain (1620) Czech cities stood at the head of commercial and national progress of our society ... Nowadays, however, when after the woeful and gruesome days of unfreedom the light of freedom has brought its blessings to Austria, many cities have lost the trust of their environment on account of their ill-chosen, domineering attitude towards the village population. The former relationship, when the cities set an example to the countryside, has been consequently reversed so that today in many parts of the country by its active and energetic behavior the countryside is setting an example to the sleepy cities.“ It is then reported that the people of Kukleny (a suburb of the city of Königrätz) have put through an organization of markets for their products in spite of the opposition of the Königrätz notables, who assumed haughty airs and had recently created an utraquistic school instead of a Czech school people were looking for<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem 610.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem 223.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem 223.

<sup>9</sup> Denis, Ernest: Čechy po Bílé Hoře [Bohemia after the White Mountain], p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Crankshaw, Edward: The Fall of the Habsburg Monarchy. N. Y. 1966, p. 296.

<sup>11</sup> Horská-Vrbová, Pavla: K otázce vzniku české průmyslové buržoazie [The Birth of the Czech Industrial Bourgeoisie]. ČSCH 10 (1962) 261.

In a similar way Czech element was at that time making inroads by means of an agricultural association into the Prague suburbs of Karlín and Smíchov. While in December 1860 farmers were invited to the plenary meeting by notices written in Czech and German, in June 1863 the Karlín plenary meeting sent only Czech notices. In September 1864 this association organized an agricultural and industrial exposition in Karlín<sup>12</sup>. (The first Czech industrial exposition was held in Prague in 1891.)

It appears that the czechization of „Czech“ cities did not result from the faster growth of Czech population in those cities, but from gradual penetration of the musty German-Czech society by fresh blood coming from the Czech countryside. In this way in the second half of the century there took place a biological regeneration of Czech cities, which changed the character of the whole nation. It became pushing and uncomfortable, this time no more to Czech cities, but to the political and economic dominance of Germans in Bohemia and Moravia. In this struggle it was steadily gaining ground before the war. During the war, when in 1917 constitutional life in Austria was revived, Czech countryside, true to its nature, from the outset voiced more resolutely Czech national aspirations than the Young Czechs or the Socialists. The role of the Agrarian Party during the war was described by a man who served as a link between Šámal, head of the Czech Mafia, and Švehla, heading Czech political parties:

„The Agrarian Party kept silent. Our contacts with the people of this party grew and became more intimate. The party as a whole appeared like a bolder serving ourselves as well as the activists, and its support was claimed by both. One of them will be certainly crushed when that bolder will start rolling. That was how I felt, and I was sure that it would not be ourselves. The date of the abandonment of the reserve can be exactly determined from the Agrarian press and politics: it was in the first half of 1917. That was when America entered the war in defense of democracy and the right of nations, and when the first important successes abroad became known. When America entered the war, the leadership of the Agrarian Party was decidedly anti-Austrian and Šmeral and Tusar's press used to call us Švehla's radicals<sup>13</sup>.“

It was, for example, the agrarian paper *Večer* which in May 1917 took the risk to publish the bold Declaration of Czech Writers, addressed to the Czech Deputies in Vienna, and signed by many writers with the understanding that it would be laid before Czech deputies, but not published. The Agrarian Party again was the only one of the significant Czech parties, which at the end of 1917, unlike the Young Czechs and the Social Democrats, did not have to carry out purges among its deputies to get rid of the Austrian activists.

This shows that there was a great difference between the role of Czech peasantry in Czech national life of the nineteenth century and the role that same class played among its neighbors. There are three main reasons to explain this.

First of all, Czechs in modern times did not have any Czech educated and Czech

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem* 262.

<sup>13</sup> Ha j š m a n, Jan: *Maffie v rozmachu* [Mafia at its Height]. Prague 1933, p. 52.

speaking nobility. Their native nobility having been largely liquidated after the Thirty Years War by the Habsburgs, its place was taken over by the victor's cohorts. As the years and generations went by, some of these could not help identifying themselves with the interests of their country and were taking some pride in its great past. It was due to the largess of some of these families that in the twenties of the last century Palacký was able to start his career as a historian, and in 1848 some of these people took part in the revolutionary rising. It was largely through their initiative that in the 1860's the Old Czechs Party, the first spokesman of Czech people, came to life. With that party, however, the story ended. One of the chief charges of the Young Czechs, who in 1891 routed their rival, was the subservience of the Old Czechs to Bohemian land owning aristocracy. It was in this intellectual ferment that at the turn of the century the Agrarian Party was born, and incompatibility of the interests of the peasantry and nobility became a part of its platform. Unlike the Hungarian or the Sudeten German peasantry it was never in the tow and hardly on speaking terms with the noble class and never identified itself with its „patriotic“ pathos. It justly suspected even the patriotism of many Young Czechs when they used it in support of their own industrial interests. At the same time the Czech intelligentsia decided to cast its lot either with the nationalist or the socialist movement. The peasants had then to solve through their party the problems in their own way. They had soon to learn to stand on their own feet, develop their own philosophy and find a way how to reach their own objectives in an unorthodox manner. In the end they succeeded largely due to favorable circumstances.

Shortly after their political emancipation they were favored by becoming the chief sugar-beet growers in Austria, and sugar soon became the most important export article of that country. The growing of sugar-beet became the main source of income of thousands of Czech villages, and all categories of farmers in the Elbe plain took part in it<sup>14</sup>. By and by the sugar-beet growers taught the Czech farmer to build organizations which could stand up against the industrial sugar-factories, whose cartel was for years dictating the price of the sugar-beet until a successful farmers' strike in 1909 forced them to come to terms. In 1912 the Czech sugar-beet farmers organization had 40 000 members organized in 1 647 communities<sup>15</sup>. The sugar-beet farmers had taught the Czech peasant to see his enemy first of all in the circles which used nationalism as a pious fraud covering the very material interests of urban industrial circles. Sugar-beet growing and the processing industry became in the seventies the chief national industry<sup>16</sup> and in the

<sup>14</sup> The area in Bohemia planted by sugar-beet in 1858—59 was 11.500 ha; in 1869—70 it rose to 64.400 ha and in 1872—73 to 123.800 ha. In 1861 there came to life in Bohemia 17 German corporations and 9 Czech; in 1868—74 98 German and 126 Czech corporations, first of all peasant sugar factories (most of them liquidated during the depression of the seventies). *Přehled československých dějin* 307 and 330.

<sup>15</sup> Kučera, Edward / Kučerová, Zdenka: *O agrárnícký stát* [An Agrarian State]. Prague 1955, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> „Sugar-beet cultivation and sugar-beet industry, and to a degree breweries and distilleries have played a principal role in the development of Czech national capital.“ *Přehled československých dějin* 531.



first years of the new state became its by far most important source of income. What was sugar-beet for the low lying regions, industrial potatoes, the raw material for alcohol for industrial use, became for the higher lying regions. Alcohol distilleries, most of them in the new republic in the hands of farmer cooperatives, became the bond that held the poor farmer in the Agrarian Party.

There was yet a third fact that in the end determined the character of Czech peasantry. In the eighties the Taaffe's conservative regime sought to build a countervailing power against the liberal capitalism which preceded it. It did so by turning attention to the needs and demands of the lower middle class, represented by peasantry in the country and artisans in the cities, which like the Catholic church were either neglected or frowned upon in the preceding era of unrestrained liberalism. It had success in Vienna and in Austria as well as among the Slovenes and Poles and in Moravia, but ignominiously failed in Bohemia, where there were strong hussite traditions which were naturally strongest in the protestant villages lying in the sugar-beet growing Elbe region. Rather than joining the Taaffe's conservative „iron ring“, largely due to these forces, Czech farmers became the backbone of the radical „anti-clerical Young Czechs helping them to their signal success in the election to the Czech Diet in 1889. It is interesting that in the electoral group of the countryside, which, unlike the cities and chambers of commerce went with the Young Czechs, 62 per cent of Young Czech districts were located in the sugar-beet growing regions, 27 per cent in the cereal growing and 2 per cent in the potato growing areas<sup>17</sup>. In Moravia, on the other hand, where economic and political conditions were identical, the absence or a weaker hold of hussite traditions made Moravian peasant for a long time the stronghold of the clerical party.

The character of the modern Czech peasantry has in this way been roughly formed by the end of the nineteenth century. In its beginnings, at the turn of the century, the Agrarian Party, the culmination of the aspirations of Czech peasantry, was able to hold its ground in its struggle with the maternal party of the Young Czechs as well as with Clericals, the least popular of Czech parties, and surprisingly enough with the revolutionary Social Democrats. There were two elections under universal suffrage in prewar Austria. In the first one, in 1907, the Agrarians won 28 mandates as against 26 Young Czechs, 24 Social Democrats and 17 Clericals. In the election of 1911 there were 37 Agrarians, 26 Social Democrats, 14 Young Czechs and 7 Clericals. The Agrarians thus soon became the leading Czech party and, with the exception of a short interval of the postwar social democratic primacy, retained that title until the end of the first republic.

Considering that their rivals, the Young Czechs first and the Social Democrats later, enjoyed the sympathies of Czech intellectuals, due to their popular philosophies reflecting the spirit of the time, and disposed of well organized cadres, one may wonder what made the Agrarians overcome all those obstacles and retain the stewardship of the country for a whole generation.

<sup>17</sup> Křížek, Jurij: *Krise cukrovarnictví v českých zemích v osmdesátých letech minulého století* [The Crisis in Sugar-Beet Industry in the Eighties of the Last Century]. ČSCH 5 (1957) No. 3.

They owed their success partly to luck, and partly to the courage and wisdom of its leader. They were lucky in practically not having a competitor for rural votes. All the other parties, except the unpopular Clericals, focussed their attention on urban votes. They were not afraid of the Agrarian supremacy, for they underestimated the agrarian leadership. The „house-negro“ was apparently very sure that the „field-negro“ cannot compete with him in politics.

This may have been true in the first elections in which the Agrarian Party took part, which were held in 1901. It won then 5 mandates, as against 53 Young Czechs<sup>18</sup>. Under a new leadership, however, it took due note of its defects and at once took steps to remedy them. In 1906 it gave itself for the first time a daily, called *Venkov* (the countryside). Unlike its predecessor, which was a weekly, this paper was printed in Prague. At the same time it succeeded in reforming the election law and made an end to gerrymandering by separating the strictly rural districts from the urban and industrial ones. It did more than that. It created a variety of front organizations representing not only agricultural but rural interest in general. The party claimed to be the spokesman not only of the big farmers, who were its founders, but of all classes of the rural population. The first issue of *Venkov*, of January 29, 1906, introduced the party as the spokesman of all people living in the countryside, including the small-holders, crofters, village trades men and agricultural workers. Its chief concern throughout its history was the small-holder, representing some 80 percent of the agricultural population. They had an organization of their own, which was formally only affiliated to the Agrarian Party. They also had their own daily, their own representatives in the parliament and already during the communal elections of 1919 directives were issued to select by preference small-holders in the agricultural villages as party candidates for the post of mayor<sup>19</sup>. Their very name appeared in the official title of the party which was: Republican Party of Farmers and Small-Holders.

Most of the front organizations embraced farmers producing the same product. There were sugar-beet growers in the low lands and potato-growers on higher grounds, there were flax growers, hops growers, milk farmers and a lot of others. Organizations like these exist, of course, in all western countries. It was a specialty of Czechoslovakia that all of them were affiliated with one party which they never dreamt of leaving.

The third type of front organizations pursued what one might call the educational or cultural objectives of the party. There was an organization of farmers' wives and daughters, set up to protect the women folk against the clerical influence; there soon grew up an organization of young farmers, of graduates of agricultural schools and of college educated people. Likewise village tradesmen, teachers and priests had similar organizations of their own. After the war these pursuits culminated in a representative building of an Agricultural Academy, conceived as an intellectual center of agrarism.

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<sup>18</sup> Československá vlastivěda [A Study of Czechoslovakia]. Dějiny, Vol. 2. Prague 1969, p. 330.

<sup>19</sup> Peroutka, F.: Budování státu [Building the State]. Prague 1934—36, p. 903.



Though agricultural credit cooperatives preceded by a few decades the birth of the party, the great days of agricultural cooperatives came in the nineties and later under the auspices of the party. The cooperation was so close that a representative of cooperatives, which became an important economic and financial power in the country, had a seat in the executive committee of the party.

As long as they were voting for the Young Czechs the agrarians could be identified with well-to-do farmers. Under the new leadership they strove to become a rural party. That change was not unnoticed by their Sudeten German neighbors who set up their own *Bund der Landwirte* three years later. All these developments signaling self-determination of the rural population were due to the vision of one man, a young farmer from a village lying a few miles south of Prague. His name was Antonín Švehla, and the fate of no other party had been so radically affected by its new leadership as in this case. He was a son of a well-to-do farmer, one of the founders of the party. One of his brothers became a university professor and the other a lawyer. He himself was destined to be a farmer, attended an agricultural school and then spent a year in Böhmisoh-Leipa to learn German. From his early years he showed interest in public life. As he grew older he supplemented his mediocre education by voracious reading and later travel during his reconvalence from a kidney disease which eventually caused his death at the age of 60. Karel Engliš, the minister of finance, in his obituary of Švehla wrote that he went to Švehla's school, though he was himself a university professor<sup>20</sup>.

He took over his farm after his father's death in 1900, but within a few years was up to his neck in politics. Unlike the conservative rank and file of Czech farmers he was from the outset a kind of a radical tory. He sought to broaden the appeal of the party. He believed that in modern times in order to survive political parties must become mass parties. He saw in social democracy one such urban party, and was determined to make his own party a similar mass party serving the interests of the countryside. He was also aware of the weakness of his own movement which was lacking wide appeal to the urban intelligentsia, and was facing a very different type of issues. He wanted to galvanize the countryside in an age of rising industrialism. To reach his objective he chose much less radical slogans than were those of urban parties, led by intellectuals. All that he wanted for his people was that they should not be discriminated against in an industrial society and to that end he chose slogans like „The countryfolks are one big family“ and „equal among equals“. Czech intellectuals no doubt were little attracted to appeals of this kind, and he never won any sizable part of them for his cause. Yet in the end, as long as he lived, these slogans became in his own country a greater power than the dictatorship of the proletariat of the Communists and Social Democrats or „nothing but the nation“ of National Democrats.

He first distinguished himself politically or ideologically during the agitation in 1905 on behalf of universal suffrage in Austria. His own party, more conservative in this respect than the Young Czechs, originally rejected it. Švehla was then not yet on the party's governing board, but it was due to his vigorous support of

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<sup>20</sup> Venkov, organ of the Agrarian Party, December 24, 1933.

the proposed legislation that in December 1905 the party changed its mind and joined the ranks of those who favored its adoption.

In 1908 he was elected chairman of the party after being first elected deputy to the Bohemian Diet. He could have been elected to the Austrian Parliament either in 1907 or in 1911 but showed no interest in that kind of distinction. „Why Vienna“, he said at the party congress in 1912, „I always wonder why our people are so anxious to get there, why that city attracts them. I believe that Prague is the best place where we can show what we can do, rather than Vienna. There I am nobody, here we can be everything”<sup>21</sup>.

His second major feat was the assumption of the leading role in the Czech camp during the war. Superficial observers, the rank and file of the Czech intelligentsia, perhaps because he spoke so little in public, for a long time regarded him only as a dexterous politician. If we take time to study him, however, we will come to the conclusion that he saw further than any non-socialist prewar or wartime politician, and that he then relentlessly pursued his original objective throughout all the years of his public life. He is the only responsible democratic European statesman who rose to power during the war, remained in power for ten years, and his power was all the time growing to reach its zenith in the year when his fatal illness forced him to retire from politics.

Soon after the beginning of the war he came to the conclusion that, regardless of who would win the war, after the war in the whole of Europe lying east of the Rhine, Social Democrats would play an increasingly important role. He regretted that for the Czech Social Democrats, good Marxists as they were, national aspirations had little attraction, and that some of their leaders sincerely believed and worked for German victory. He also knew that Czech socialistic electorate felt differently, and he bent all his efforts to change this state of things and bring the Social Democrats, rank and file into the Czech anti-Austrian, national camp. His first formulation of this policy dates from 1916, that is from the year preceding the Russian revolution and the revival of constitutional life in Austria. He held then a meeting with the leaders of two other main Czech parties, the Social Democrats and the Young Czechs, at which an agreement was reached to the effect that:

1. It is necessary to resist dictatorship by argument, protest or evasion.
2. A possibility that war will not end with the break-up of Austria should be considered.
3. This agreement will remain secret.
4. The Social Democrats will assume the leading role in the creation of a national program and will convene the representatives of all Czech parties.
5. The Young Czechs will make an effort to consolidate the existing urban parties so that there are three pillars: the Social Democrats, the Agrarians and the Young Czechs.

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<sup>21</sup> Kučera / Kučerová 41.

6. The Clerical Party will be the last one to receive an invitation, and the same applies to the aristocratic land-owners<sup>22</sup>.

This was the first step in Švehla's wartime policy and he did not deviate later from these principles. He took into account even the least desired Austrian alternative; the building-up of a common front for the whole country was his chief objective; the new age required that Social Democrats should preside; the urban parties must be consolidated; old things should be forgotten and nobody should be ostracized.

Once political life was restored in Austria in 1917 Švehla emerged as the moderator in the Czech camp. There was at that time, of course, no freedom of the press and, moreover, Švehla hated wide publicity of his achievements. Consequently even after the war most Czechs, fascinated as they were by the achievements of Masaryk and Beneš abroad<sup>23</sup>, little knew or cared about the developments which had taken place in the last eighteen months of the war in Prague. They never pondered about the fact that from the moment the country had won its freedom, thanks to the work that was done in the last months of the war it had enjoyed in western capitals the reputation of having an orderly, stable government which, incidentally, enabled dr. Beneš in Paris to attain the maximum of his objectives. The achievements, real or presumed of Masaryk and Beneš abroad for years captivated the whole nation and to cherish them a special historical review called *Naše revoluce* (Our revolution) was created. It never occurred to its editors that wartime achievements on the home front were as remarkable as those abroad and should be popularized in the same periodical. To know the roots of their own government should have been as important as knowing the incidents which aroused the interest and sympathy for the Czechoslovak cause abroad and eventually admitted it into the family of independent nations.

Some light on the activities of Švehla during the war was thrown only in the thirties by a man who served as liaison between Masaryk's closest friends at home, known as Maffia, and Švehla's office. This is in fact the only report which gives a glimpse into Švehla's workshop during the war. No similar work about his doings while he was in office or out of office after the war is extant. According to this reporter:

„First there was always a meeting in Švehla's office — general principles, the crying national need — then came meetings of executive committees of several par-

<sup>22</sup> Tobolka, Zdeněk: *Politické dějiny československého národa od roku 1848 do dnešní doby* [Political History of the Czechoslovak People from 1848 until the present time]. Prague 1932—1937, p. 192.

<sup>23</sup> In 1920 there appeared a book entitled: *Masaryk Osvoboditel* [Masaryk the Liberator]. This was the first of a number of hagiographies dealing with Masaryk. On its first page, printed in capital letters it says: „Masaryk is one more Czech who has stirred Europe. More than that, Masaryk spread the glory of the Czech name in three parts of the world. Thomas G. Masaryk is one of those great men, who lift their hands across the ages and heads of nations. Hus, Chelčický, Blahoslav, Komenský were lights showing the road to their nation . . .“ (Note the absence of the names of Havlíček, Palacký or Rieger from this series. They were apparently regarded as small fry, ed. note).



ties ending with an agreement which was reached again in Švehla's office. He had the first and the last word, not only as the leader of a great party, certainly not because he was an agrarian, but because of his firm belief that the National Committee was indispensable, because he was patient and able, and had personal authority which enabled him to bridge countless differences. He was a man of compromise. When national interests were involved, dr. Rašín and to an extent dr. Kramář were hot-tempered, stubborn and intransigent. Švehla kept his own feelings for himself, was winning general confidence, negotiations came into his hands and the center of gravity fell on his shoulders <sup>24</sup>.

After his tireless wooing of the Social Democrats he finally succeeded in bringing them into the national camp. In November 1916 they agreed to join the Czech Union, founded by him. That union was created as a spokesman of Czech people in the Vienna parliament. In its activity, however, it was to be directed and supervised by the National Committee, whose seat was in Prague. Švehla became the secretary of that committee.

His next wartime achievement took place under very changed circumstances in July 1918. By that time Czech people had recovered from their wartime depression and, sure of the victory of their cause, proceeded to organize in Prague in May 1918 a public manifestation on the occasion of an anniversary of the Czech National Theater. That manifestation turned out to be a replica of the Congress of Oppressed Austrian Nationalities which was held a month before in Rome. The presence of Yugoslav guests led to such jubilation that the government had to intervene and send the Yugoslavs home <sup>25</sup>. The fear of a premature Prague rising which would have been crushed by the Austrian or German military led then Švehla and his friends to reorganize the old National Committee and assign it a new purpose. It was called to life to calm the masses, restore order in Prague and give the Czechs the feeling that their future was in good hands. That National Committee in fact became a sort of Czech provisional government which after the day of liberation merely expanded to become the Revolutionary National Assembly of the new country. This transformation was the last of Švehla's acts during the war. To effect it he had to succeed in convincing the leaders of all the other parties, the Social Democrats being the most important, to accept the relative strength of Czech parties in the last prewar elections of 1911 as the pattern to be adopted in the composition of the Revolutionary National Assembly, which then remained in power until the first regular elections took place in April 1920 <sup>26</sup>.

It soon appeared that might have been the last of Švehla's feats. It is true that thanks to it his party had in the assembly more mandates than any other. It obtained in this way 55 deputies as against 53 Social Democrats, 46 National Demo-

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<sup>24</sup> Hajšman 344.

<sup>25</sup> Hajšman 330.

<sup>26</sup> According to Peroutka 892: „The formation of the National Committee was arranged in his (Švehla's) office. In the same office were edited the proclamations of the Czech Union . . . There, too, the decision was reached concerning the composition of the Revolutionary National Assembly, and he solved the difficult problem of representation of various political parties in that body.“

crats, 29 National Socialists (known then as Czechoslovak Socialists), 24 Clericals, 6 Progressives (Masaryk's own party) and 41 Slovak deputies. But from the first months of the republic (rather than from the first days of peace, as was the case in Germany and Austria), it became obvious that the revolutionary Social Democrats had the main word in the country.

In the first cabinet Švehla assumed the role of the minister of interior, but soon greater responsibility was in store for him. Dr. Kramář, the premier, having become the leader of the Czech delegation to the Peace Conference in Versailles in January 1919, Švehla was unanimously elected as acting prime minister. He then led the government until the communal elections in June 1919 ending with a decisive socialist victory which forced him and Kramář to resign. Masaryk then wanted to appoint Beneš, but he refused and suggested Švehla instead. Švehla having refused, too, suggested a socialist minister, to whom he pledged his party's support to head the government. That was the Red-Green coalition. The president then appointed Tusar. To exalt their victory the Social Democrats ostracized the National Democrats and the Clericals as reactionaries and excluded them from participation in the Tusar cabinet. This punitive measure turned out to be of short duration. What mattered more in the end was the defeat of the first socialistic project which took place a few months before. That project was their idea of the land reform.

Briefly stated, the more or less compulsory transfer of large tracts of arable land from the hands of the latifundia owners, absentee landlords of non-Czech stock, into the hands of the poor peasantry, appeared after the war to most people as an act long overdue social justice. How to divide the requisitioned land became, however, a delicate issue. The land reform was to give the socialists the first opportunity to bring down by one stroke the last remains of feudalism and lay foundations for socialism in agriculture into the bargain. It was their plan to nationalize the latifundia and then rent the requisitioned land to socialist collectives. The prospective beneficiaries, the poor peasantry, were unorganized, but their dreams and hopes resembled more those of their organized neighbors, the slightly better of agrarian farmers. Ownership of the land which he tills is an unwritten article of faith of every peasant. It was not very difficult for Švehla and his friends to organize almost overnight in thousands of Czech villages a powerful movement of small-holders under the slogan: A free peasant on a free soil. In the end the agrarian plan was accepted, and what was meant to be the first socialist triumph became their first major set-back. In this way the revolutionary socialist movement was permanently deprived of the support of the rural rear guard, so important in the Russian revolution. Small-holders together with the medium-sized farmers became the backbone of the Agrarian Party in all the Czechoslovak elections.

The main reason why the Revolutionary National Assembly remained for 18 months in power was that it was assigned the important task of drafting and ratification of the constitution. It was feared that the presence of disaffected German deputies in parliament would greatly complicate that task. That constitution has been described as a „compromise between parties, between the government and the opposition, between different political philosophies, between scholars and politi-

cians, between the socialists and the bourgeoisie, Catholics and atheists, conservatives and progressives, as well as between the Czechoslovaks and the German minority which was not yet represented in the parliament"<sup>27</sup>. The cabinet in power had votes enough to ratify the constitution, but this was not enough for the man who took it upon himself to steer the constitution through the parliament. This was not Tusar, the premier, but Švehla, the minister of the interior. He became the soul of the constitutional committee. His ambition was to secure an unanimous passage of that document, and thanks to a multitude of compromises described in F. Peroutka's *Budování státu* he fully succeeded. A year or so later in a calmer atmosphere, he created the *Pětka* (the Committee of Five) to help him in similar situations. Considering that since December 1919 there existed in parliament an embryo of the future Communist Party under the name of the Marxist Left, and the government in all its activities was severely taken to task by the ostracized National Democrats and Clericals, this last manifestation of unanimity of Czech and Slovak deputies, brought about chiefly through the effort of one man, is most remarkable. It stands on record that during those night hours of February 28 and 29, 1920, the deputies rose 155 times to signify their approval of various constitutional provisions, and that 105 of those votes, thanks to Švehla's compromises, were passed without debate<sup>28</sup>.

The parliamentary elections which followed in April 1920 confirmed the socialist victory of the preceding year and re-installed Tusar. The Agrarians — Czech and Slovak together — were second, but the greatest surprise was the decline of National Democrats who have garnered only 9 percent of the electorate. It thus became clear that the Social Democrats and the Agrarians alone could claim to speak for the bulk of the Czechoslovak population, and that the Red-Green coalition under the circumstances was the best foundation of a democratic regime.

Before coming to Prague at the end of 1918 Tusar spent the war years in Vienna and was consequently not well versed in Czechoslovak politics. The man who stood behind him to guide him was Švehla<sup>29</sup>. He made many friends among the Social Democrats during the last years of the war, and was willing to join the government, one of whose objectives was gradual socialization of the industry, when the country would be ripe for it. The Red-Green coalition, a partnership of workers and peasants, unlike in Russia, was steered by a peasant leader and a good democrat. The Social Democrats, even after the communist secession at the end of 1920, remained Marxists, while to the Czech and Slovak peasantry Marxism was an anathema. The partnership in fact existed only between the agrarian and socialist leaders, and was originally meant only as a stop-gap to prevent or attenuate the ideological warfare. It lasted longer than was expected. Švehla knew that his Social Democrats were red on the outside, but white inside. In 1919 and 1920 he too was horrified by the behavior of the socialist masses. He rejected their doctrine,

<sup>27</sup> Peroutka 1443.

<sup>28</sup> Peroutka 1448 f.

<sup>29</sup> „Those who care more for the facts than for words were well aware that the leader of the so-called Red-Green coalition was Švehla . . .“ Masaryk to Karel Čapek in an interview published in *Lidové noviny*, April 8, 1928.



yet during their long, lean years which had followed the communist secession, refused to let them down. He behaved like an elder brother of the reborn or half-reformed Social Democracy. The absence of such a man, party and policy in Austria and Germany explains why until the Hitler era, when Czechoslovakia had a different kind of leadership, that country succeeded where the other two democracies had failed.

The resounding socialist victory in the 1920 election was of short duration. No one was more aware of it than the socialists themselves. By that time it became evident that the radical wing of the party, the Marxist Left, was by far superior in strength in the electorate. The leading socialist paper was in its hands. They attacked Tusar, disavowed him, and in the end he was not even able to build a definite cabinet. The end of the party squabble came in September 1919 when a group of moderates assumed power, postponed the party congress, which threatened to reveal their own weakness, excommunicated the Communists and left the government to have free hands for the forthcoming encounter with them. Thus ended the era of what one may call creeping socialism in Czechoslovakia.

These unexpected developments led Masaryk and the moderate Social Democrats as well as Švehla, the leading man in the non-socialist camp, to resort to the expediency of a cabinet of officials, that is, administrative experts. This was an emasculated cabinet. Masaryk bade it to carry on the policy of the preceding, socialistic cabinet<sup>30</sup>. Instead it opened an era in Czechoslovak politics when it became an executive organ of a new, discreet political organism which sprang up to its support behind the scene. It became soon known as Pětka, the Committee of Five. Led by Švehla, who probably regarded it as a new edition of the equally discreet National Committee which he created and led in the last months of the war, this committee, consisting of the spokesmen of the leading parties: the Agrarians, the Social Democrats, the Czechoslovak Socialists, the National Democrats and the Clericals, soon became the real boss of the country. It was doing its work to general satisfaction and governed the country in domestic affairs also under the two following cabinets, the first one headed by Beneš and the other by Švehla. Without any protest by the cabinet of officials it actually assumed the role of dictator in the field of economic and social legislation.

The rejection of their plan of the land reform, the subsequent gradual disintegration of the Social Democratic Party into its democratic and communist factions, followed by Švehla's steady support of the disillusioned Social Democrats was a most significant political development in the first decade of the country. It mitigated the class struggle, gave stability to the regime, and incidentally turned Švehla's party into the vital center of the country. Its effects became apparent in many ways. It led to the merger of the Slovak National and Peasant Party with the Czech Agrarians, although the leadership of the Slovak party was in urban hands, that is in a sense closer to Czech National Democrats. It aroused the interest of the German farmers and their party and made German peasantry the first group to abandon irredentism and seek contacts with their Czech counterpart. It

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<sup>30</sup> Peroutka 1936.

also made it possible to bring in 1921 under the same roof the Social Democrats and their former arch-enemies, National Democrats and Clericals and in this way somehow revive the spirit of 1918.

The Pětka was born almost on the same day as the Černý's first cabinet of officials. The cabinet prepared a budget which had to be ratified. The leaders of the five parties met and agreed, and for a time were then called the budget majority. Then they regularly met to discuss and agree on important legislation, something which a parliament consisting of 300 individuals was totally unable to do. The partnership had to remain secret to prevent the Social Democrats from being attacked by unscrupulous leftist intellectuals. In December 1920 this committee stood behind the government when it resolutely liquidated the general strike organized by the dissident communists illegally occupying the buildings belonging to the Social Democrats. Step by step they carried out a non-violent counter-revolution directed at the same time against communism and Czech, Slovak and German ultra-nationalism<sup>31</sup>. The underlying conviction, which was only then accepted also by the Social Democrats, was that a modern, progressive society should be pluralistic, and that none of its components should be allowed to carry out ruthlessly its objectives, that is, in this case, that each of the parties has the right of veto<sup>32</sup>. That committee until 1926 was the directive force of all the cabinets. It also became the school of democracy for the other parties, and it was only under its patronage that democracy definitely took root in Czechoslovakia.

The Černý's cabinet of officials having after a years of service outlived its usefulness was supplanted by a cabinet led by dr. Beneš. It was widely believed by the Czech people that once the spectre of communism was dispelled the country would rally and consolidate and it was expected that Beneš's cabinet would carry out this task. That turned out to be a mistake. For various reasons, the most important one being dr. Beneš's intense dislike of the Pětka, there was no consolidation<sup>33</sup>. The trouble with dr. Beneš was that, though he was the youngest of all ministers and had no experience in politics of his own country, still regarded himself as an authority even in this field and was outspoken in this respect. This produced ill-feeling between him and the leading parties so that three months after having assumed power he was ready to resign<sup>34</sup>. His successor apparently being not yet ready, he had to hold the post for a whole year.

That successor was Švehla. He became premier in October 1922 and remained

<sup>31</sup> The resolute condemnation of the behavior of the Prague Czech mobs in November 1920 when they seized one of the two German operas and occupied the offices of two German papers, was one of the first acts of the Pětka. They could hardly tolerate enormities committed by their own people which they put down when the perpetrators were Communists. Peroutka 2028.

<sup>32</sup> Peroutka 2154.

<sup>33</sup> In his discussion with Kundt and Sebekovsky on August 24, 1938, he told them that „he had always disavowed the Pětka system and as minister had never reported to the Committee. In 1922 he had written a pamphlet ‚What is Democracy‘ which indirectly attacked the Pětka and brought on him great enmity. Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918—1948.“ Series D Vol. II.

<sup>34</sup> Klepetář, Harry: Seit 1918. Mährisch-Ostrau 1937, p. 181.

in power for nearly three years. He inherited from the Beneš cabinet the title of the second cabinet of consolidation, made some progress in that sense by giving posts to the other members of the Pětka in his cabinet, but even his talent for compromises could not bring about the desirable consolidation. In the end his government ended with a universal desire for national elections to end in that way a prolonged, unpleasant feud between the Agrarians and the Social Democrats. The reason was that some people had a ground to believe that since the war their own interests were continuously pushed aside and that the time had arrived that they should receive due attention. The chief national segment which felt that way were the farmers. In the first postwar years that class indeed was the only economically sound and productive element of the national community. Sugar produced from beet was for a few years by far the most important article of export and so to say the only source of national income. It was then talked about as the country's white gold. In the mid-twenties, however, bad times had arrived for the farmer, due to the cheap American and east European wheat. The farmers demanded protection and since 1924 made protection a national issue. In the end a deal was made with the socialists. The price the Agrarians were willing to pay was advanced social legislation for the industrial working class. In October 1924 that legislation was enacted, but the socialists then suddenly reneged on their promise. They pleaded that agrarian tariffs would raise the price of foodstuffs which on the forthcoming election would redound to the benefit of the Communists at their own expense. An angry farmers' reaction to their decision led then to a premature dissolution of the parliament and to election in November 1925.

As the election of 1920 revealed the weakness of the National Democrats, so that of 1925 brought to light a noteworthy decline of the second rival, the Social Democrats. In 1920 they garnered 37 percent of the total Czechoslovak vote. Five years later they sank to a little less than 9 percent<sup>35</sup>. They became the fourth largest party, the chief beneficiaries being the Communists. The Agrarians in their turn slightly grew in strength and their dominant position in Czechoslovak politics was generally recognized. Subsequently the second of Švehla's cabinets was patched up. It lasted only a few months and was then replaced by the second Černý's cabinet of officials when it was unable to meet the agrarian demands.

A significant development in Czech politics took place in the middle of 1926. Under the pressure of circumstances a new, hitherto passive if not rebellious element was introduced into the government. It did not change its nature, but in an unexpected way helped the non-socialistic, that is, bourgeois segment of Czech population to reach its objective. The first postwar years had demonstrated that the aims of the socialists could be at least partially realized without the support of the German minority. The developments of 1926 showed that the Czech and German non-socialist middle class, led by their peasantry, could be respected only by joining hands. A parliamentary majority necessary for passing agricultural tariffs as well as for giving assistance to the clergy, the only kind of „civil servants“

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<sup>35</sup> Olivoá, Věra / Kvaček, Robert: *Dějiny Československa od roku 1918 do roku 1948* [History of Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1948]. Prague 1967, p. 134.



whose claims to a decent living the socialist parties never recognized, was then built in the face of violent protests and manifestations that took place in Prague. The opposition was headed partly by Communists and partly by the radical wing of the Castle group.

The necessary legislation was enacted under the Černý cabinet. The Sudeten German *Bund der Landwirte* and the Christian Socials, having demonstrated their common interests with their Czech counterparts, have in October 1926 entered the Švehla's third cabinet, which was later also joined by the hitherto dissident Slovak Populists and Czech National Democrats. The whole transaction took place rather suddenly. It was not preceded by any lengthy investigations, studies and deliberations, and it could then be expected that it would not have a long life. But it turned out to be a well considered move, and incidentally a demonstration of the vitality of Czechoslovak democracy. The example set by the two German parties was three years later followed by the German Social Democrats, and a year later by the spokesmen of the German industry (DAWG). After the 1929 elections the German National Party as well as National Socialists issued statements announcing their willingness to cooperate effectively in the building of a new government<sup>36</sup>. So long as the country's chief concern was domestic peace, stability and welfare rather than desire to play a spectacular, adventurous, role in world politics, the problem of the German minority was far less serious than coming to terms with a variety of more or less radical Czech social revolutionaries.

Švehla's last significant achievement was the role he played in 1927 in the presidential elections. Masaryk was elected already twice: in November 1918 by acclamation, and in May 1920 by the first duly elected National Assembly. The constitution specifically stated that the provision that no president should hold office for more than two successive terms did not apply to the first president.

Masaryk's prestige stood at its peak in the first two postwar years. He was a man of strong views and hence was bound to have critics, if not enemies. By and by two things were held against him by many people. It was said that his own and particularly dr. Beneš's version of events which induced the Allied and Associated Powers during the last months of the War to recognize the Czechoslovak National Council in Paris as the provisional government of the future Czechoslovakia, for one reason or another downgraded the role of the Czechoslovak Legion in Siberia in the summer months of 1918. The view that the country owed its independence primarily if not solely to Masaryk's and Beneš's wisdom and diplomacy rather than to the spectacular, unexpected rising of the Czech Legion in Russia and its victorious march across Siberia, which for a while astonished the world and made the word Czechoslovak known abroad, seemed to the critics of both these men, the so-called anti-Castle group, outrageous and unsupported by any evidence<sup>37</sup>. The second thing held against the president by many was his re-

<sup>36</sup> Campbell, F. Gregory: *Confrontation in Central Europe*. Chicago 1975, p. 330.

<sup>37</sup> Dr. Beneš believed that the rising of the Legion against the Soviets in the summer of 1918 in view of the negotiations he was carrying then with the Allies was „completely unnecessary.“ Beneš, E.: *Světová válka a naše revoluce* [The World War and Our Revolution], Vol. II, p. 185.

peated identification with socialism. What was aggravating to them was that he did not do so only in the first postwar years, when such a profession might have been comprehensible for the head of a semi-socialist state. He kept on doing so from time to time even when the spell of socialism in our time was broken and socialists east or west were on the retreat. Was it not his duty in view of the eminent position he held to stand above the parties in word and deed?

The presidential election was an occasion for Masaryk's critics to get together, think hard and then make an effort to complement the bourgeois cabinet with a bourgeois president. The president was elected by the National Assembly, that is, by both houses. Since there was a bourgeois majority in both houses, the problem of electing a non-socialist president appeared not too difficult.

Ideas like these were entertained in national democratic, clerical and some agrarian circles for more than a year before the date of election. Švehla appeared to these people as the safest candidate. His popularity in parliament indeed not only never declined, but as the years went by was steadily mounting. He probably would have been elected, had he so desired, but there was nothing in the presidential office that would attract him<sup>38</sup>. Moreover, he believed that the rejection of Masaryk would strike many as rejection of the spirit of 1918, of the ideals of social justice and international good-will, of which he appeared to be an embodiment. Nor could he forget that Masaryk with his immense prestige stood by when he was forging the Red-Green coalition, the Committee of Five and the subsequent cabinets, little as these Švehla's instruments, predicated on the community of principles i. e. rules of conduct, and interests, tallied with Masaryk's notion that cabinets should be based on common ideologies. In the end the election of Masaryk was ensured when, months before it took place, Švehla came out openly in favor of Masaryk. He had not only brought all the agrarian electors, but also those of the German Agrarians, German Christian Socials and Czech Small Traders to give him their vote<sup>39</sup>.

In October 1927 and then again in March 1928 Švehla fell seriously ill. Although it was doubtful that he would ever recover his health and work again, the party leaders agreed that he should remain in power during the whole year in which the country was celebrating its tenth anniversary. That was their way of saying that he had deserved well of his country.

Švehla's conception of democracy, the way he introduced it and the method he used in reaching his objectives were not universally accepted. They were indeed hardly understood and with few exceptions never seriously studied. Czech intelligentsia from the first days of the republic had its eyes fixed on the contest between articulate heralds of two contemporary philosophies, Kramář, the spokesman of Czech nationalism, and Masaryk, the herald of Czech progressive liberalism. In Czech thinking there was no room for a third person, and Švehla was too busy building up the state to be interested in ideological squabbles. His only serious enemy was the radical wing of the so-called Castle Group, influential chiefly behind the scene, not to speak of the noisy, but harmless communists. These anti-establishment

<sup>38</sup> Peroutka 1505.

<sup>39</sup> Klepetář 217.

people, who since the mid-twenties gathered around dr. Beneš, deplored Masaryk's and Social democrats' trust in Švehla, whom they regarded as the main pillar of the bourgeois establishment. In their eyes he was only a crafty peasant, who never wrote a book and who, moreover, to reach his objectives by preference resorted to such „undemocratic“ and „immoral“ tools as compromises and the use of two irons in the fire. As it was their own favorite tool in politics all too often was character assassination <sup>40</sup>.

Against Švehla's idea to broaden the interdependence from the Committee of Five to all the other parties and sectors of the country, irrespective of their language or ideology, there stood Beneš's conception of democracy which sought to give Czech policy a distinct ideological coloring, to equate the adjective Czechoslovak with the adjective progressive and to do so by eliminating from Czech politics everything that was reactionary or conservative, the Agrarian Party first of all. Beneš's conception of democracy, which had no analogy in any western European country, sought to transform the bourgeois democracy into a higher stage of democracy, which he called the „rule of the fourth estate“ <sup>41</sup>. He could not do very much to bring this about even when he became president, but the London Exile Government, in which he was more or less a dictator finally gave him a chance. There, after having signed his pact with Russia in 1943, he had found a partner among the Czech communists, who believed, too, that the days of bourgeois democracy were numbered. On his return to his country after the war, the „rule of the fourth estate“ became people's democracy. This was understood by dr. Beneš to be a bridge between Moscow and the West. It became instead everywhere only a communist anti-chambre.

One of the first acts of the new regime was the liquidation of the Agrarian Party as well as of the National Democrats and the Small Traders Party. They were all blamed for displaying a signal lack of patriotism bordering on treason during the Munich days, weeks and months. The story, however, is not that simple.

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<sup>40</sup> Two months after Munich and after dr. Beneš's resignation, there appeared in Prague a book entitled: Kramář in Judgment over Beneš. This was a posthumous work of dr. Kramář, who died a year before. It tells the story of about a dozen officials whose career had been cut short and who were victimized for no other reason than that they did not share dr. Beneš's philosophy. Character assassination was the method employed in each case. In his discussions with the Czech leaders of the Communist Party, held in Moscow in December 1943, dr. Beneš went on record that he „as minister of foreign affairs and as president had executed quite a few ambassadors, but unfortunately not enough of them“. *Cesta ke květnu [Road to May]*. Prague 1966, p. 49.

<sup>41</sup> The replacement of the bourgeois democracy by the rule of the „fourth estate“ was for Beneš a crucial issue and subject of many of his talks. He cautiously formulated his ideas on this subject in his book, *Democracy Today and Tomorrow*, based on the lectures he held in 1939 at the Chicago University. He spoke on the same theme in Paris on October 18, 1932, when he was addressing the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences. His statement was: „La bourgeoisie a triomphé sous l'ancien régime. De 1830 à 1890 elle a réussi à prendre la haute main en Europe. A partir de 1848 se dresse à côté d'elle un Quatrième Etat, dont l'influence s'étend sur toute la société européenne . . . Le Quatrième Etat, l'homme moderne, nous plante, la France et nous tous, devant la question fatale: ce que nous apporte aujourd' hui et ce que cela demain . . .“



The Agrarian Party in 1935 originally opposed the election of dr. Beneš as president. It did so because it was keenly aware of his overweening ambition to play a role in international affairs and have a hand in determining the fate and shape of Europe. Švehla, on the other hand, believed that the country should strive to avoid involvement in the quarrels of others<sup>42</sup>. The party subconsciously followed in that way the admonition given in 1848 by Havlíček when he warned his people against accepting the invitation, which had come from the *Frankfurter Vorparlament*, to take part in its deliberations. This admonition was expressed in the form of a doggerel, known to every Czech child, but little respected by dr. Beneš<sup>43</sup>: „Jack, don't go skating with gentlemen. It often happens that a gentleman has a slip and the poor man breaks his leg.“ As the tension between Czechoslovakia and Germany was from year to year growing, the agrarian press from time to time became the voice of Czech Cassandra. Events had unfortunately shown that their fears were justified. It was never forgotten its temerity. As the war was ending, dr. Beneš came to the conclusion that it should be severely punished for having distrusted his foolhardy policy, rather than praised for its foresight. This was one more reason why it was liquidated. The third reason was that it was obvious that the three bourgeois parties doomed to death would dislike dr. Beneš's close ties and his hob-nobbing with Stalin, and for all we know would be able to frustrate the new regime's people's democratic legislation and policies.

The disappearance of the Agrarian Party after the war was noted by all students of eastern Europe, but so far no western student has taken pains to investigate the charges raised against it, though it has been invariably described as the main pillar of Czechoslovak democracy. It is worth noting, however, that the Mamatey-Luža's symposium, *A History of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918—1948*, regarded as a standard work on this subject in English, published in 1973, avoids in its story of Munich to mention this presumably very important fact. It appears that

<sup>42</sup> In the words of Švehla, who died in 1933, „no enemy has ever failed me, but friends almost always did. In our foreign policy we should always strive to stay out of wars in which others are involved. We should take a lesson from the peasant. He has to maintain good relations with all his neighbors, particularly with the nearest ones. Should his house be on fire, it is the nearest rather than the distant one that will come to help. A small nation cannot be a match for a big country. It can always and should strive to come to terms with it, but it must see the danger and take the necessary steps in time.“ H a l í k, Rudolf: Švehla ve fotografii [Švehla in photography]. Prague 1935. — Had Beneš accepted the proposition of a pact à la polonaise, as he himself described it, made to him by Hitler in October and December 1936 through his two emissaries, war would not have been averted. Hitler being what he was, would have eventually struck somewhere else. The Czechs being what they were, would then soon be involved. Their country would have been overrun and devastated, but they would not have the feeling of being betrayed by the West, there would not have been any fatal estrangement of the German minority nor any Munich conference, no embitterment against France and England and they would have no reason to rush into the Russian bear's arms. The country and its neighbors might have then emerged from the war merely „finlandized“.

<sup>43</sup> In the last days of his life dr. Beneš in a message addressed to his former secretary, dr. E. Táborský, wrote: „My greatest mistake was that I refused to believe to the very last that even Stalin lied to me cynically both in 1935 and later, and that his assurances to me and Masaryk were an intentional deceit.“ E. T á b o r s k ý : Beneš and Stalin — Moscow 1943 and 1945. JCEA (July 1953).

this may be an outstanding modern case of character assassination, a forgotten dossier for a modern Dreyfuss affair — perhaps because, in the words of Chamberlain, it happened, in a far away country of which we know nothing — the victim in this case being a whole peasant class.

In December 1918 Masaryk returned to his country as a messenger of Wilsonian democracy, which the country presumably then adopted. Švehla's slogan, when he was building his party before the war in rebellion against the maternal urban party of Young Czechs, was „equal among equals“. By this he meant and demanded square deal for the Czech peasantry, which reminds more of the way of thinking of Theodore Roosevelt than of Wilson. Masaryk indeed stood in his thinking close to Wilson, but all the great political and social achievements of the Czechoslovak regime had found their main source of strength in the principle „equal among equals“, the Czech agrarian conception of democracy. Under that slogan in 1919 Švehla with the Social Democrats formed the Red-Green coalition, and later, when the Social Democrats broke down, kept it alive; a year later it became the ruling principle of the Committee of Five; in 1922 Slovak autonomists came to life with that principle on their banner, and so did the German parties in 1926 when they had entered the government. In the mid-thirties it became the slogan of the moderate wing of the Sudeten-German Party. During the Second World War it was in vain advocated by the German Social Democrats in London. Finally after the war, when the Agrarian Party on trumped up charges was liquidated by the communists without any protest and with full support of the radical wing of the Castle Group, their fellow-conspirators, it soon appeared on the banner of the non-communist members of the National Front as the last living symbol of the First Republic.

Czech peasantry, which in the First Republic had contributed so significantly to the good name of the country both in the West and in the East<sup>44</sup>, ceased to play an active role in the country after 1945. Their substantial part of the Czech population, living in some 10 000 Czech villages, was deprived of the right to vote for the representatives from their own ranks, and was left free in the elections of 1946, commonly described in western text-books as free, either to vote for the representatives of the four urban parties of the National Front, led by urban people, who in the past had never shown any interest in agricultural problems and looked at the farmers askance, or not to vote at all. Such was the end of the era „equal among equals“, which the farmers' party had presented to the country and which subsequently became the quintessence of Czechoslovak democracy. The events of February 1948, which had caused much alarm in the West, in fact only completed the infamous and foolish work initiated in May 1945 by fratricide and other atrocities, implying for the sake of a chimera wanton rejection of most political and moral values arduously accumulated during the glorious first seventeen years of the First Republic.

<sup>44</sup> „In reality among the European countries after the War Czechoslovakia was one of the few states enjoying internal peace and a peaceful foreign policy.“ A note of the Soviet government of March 16, 1939, sent by Litvinov to the German ambassador von Schulenburg.

## DIE TSCHECHISCHE BAUERNBEWEGUNG, IHR FÜHRER UND DESSEN PARTEI

Die tschechische Agrarpartei entstand um die Jahrhundertwende. Die tschechische Bauernbewegung verdankt ihr Entstehen dem Nichtvorhandensein einer tschechisch sprechenden Aristokratie.

In den Anfängen war sie eine Bewegung der Großbauern, doch schon bald hatte die Partei einen neuen Führer, einen jungen, intelligenten Bauern, der diese Gruppenpartei in eine Massenpartei umwandeln wollte, die alle Gruppen der ländlichen Bevölkerung erfassen sollte. Sein Name war Antonín Švehla. Seine Bemühungen hatten vollen Erfolg, besonders durch die Landreform, die der Partei die Stimmen der Kleinbauern brachte.

Švehla verstand nicht nur die Bedürfnisse der kleinen Landbesitzer, sondern auch die der Industriearbeiter. Während des Ersten Weltkrieges brachte er die sozialdemokratischen Führer in sein Lager und in der neuen Republik, als er allmählich Regierungschef wurde, waren diese immer unter seinen treuen Anhängern. Auf diese Weise gewann er auch das Vertrauen von Masaryk, einem Sozialisten eigener Prägung. Zuerst bildete er die rot-grüne Koalitionsregierung und dann, nach der Lösung der Kommunisten im Jahre 1920, rief er das Fünferkomitee ins Leben, bestehend aus den Leitern der fünf führenden Parteien, die letztlich die drei aufeinanderfolgenden Kabinette stützten und führten. Diesem Komitee verdankt das Land seine stabile Regierung und seine Demokratie.

Diese Demokratie stand unter dem Wahlspruch der Agrarier: „Gleiche unter Gleichen“. Ihr Geist beherrschte die rot-grüne Koalition, die Arbeit der Fünf und bewirkte später die Teilnahme der deutschen Parteien und der slowakischen Volkspartei an der bürgerlichen Koalition von 1926.

Die Wahl von Dr. Beneš zum Präsidenten im Jahre 1935 kam durch eine neue Koalition zustande, die tschechische Volksfront, die aus denselben Parteien bestand, die nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg als Volksdemokratie an die Macht kamen. Die Agrarpartei mißtraute der Selbstüberschätzung von Dr. Beneš und teilte weder seinen Glauben an Stalin noch sein Vertrauen in den guten Willen und den Patriotismus der Kommunisten. Dies ist als der Hauptgrund für das Verbot dieser Partei nach dem Kriege zu betrachten.

Die Agrarpartei ist ein Symbol der Ersten Republik, deren westliche Form einer Demokratie Dr. Beneš in eine „höhere Demokratie“ zu verwandeln hoffte, und zwar in der Form einer Herrschaft des vierten Standes.