

*Beneš, Jakub S.: Dělníci a nacionalismus. Česká a německá sociální demokracie v Předlitavsku, 1890-1918 [Workers and Nationalism. Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890-1918]. Translated by Aleš Valenta.*

Academia, Praha 2024, 418 pp, ISBN 978-80-200-3538-7.

The recently published Czech translation of *Workers and Nationalism*,<sup>1</sup> by historian Jakub Beneš, about Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, has provided an opportunity to revisit the book's content, recall its significance, reflect on its reception, and outline the possible directions of any future research. As the title indicates, Beneš's book is devoted to the relationship between nationalism and the Czech and German-Austrian Social Democratic movement in the final decades of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The joint international Social Democratic organisation broke up before the First World War, when the Czech Social Democrats left due to international disputes. As the author emphasises in the book's introduction, only the centralists remained faithful to headquarters in Vienna at the time, but they crashed in the election of 1911, winning merely around 10000 votes. His interpretation frequently refers conscientiously to earlier research, in particular the now already classic work of historian Hans Mommsen;<sup>2</sup> yet Beneš is in certain respects asking different questions and offering a different perspective.

Beneš does not simply focus on the view from the upper echelons of the party hierarchy, nor does he primarily analyse conflicts among the party leadership or the Marxist approaches to the question of nationality. Rather, he asks how ordinary workers in the party “came to embrace nationalism” (p. 13). Like the sociologist Rogers Brubaker and other theoreticians, then, he does not see nationalism as a given, but as a process that slowly acquired a certain dynamic. In this sense, he investigates the specific form of nationalism that made its mark within this movement, and the relationship between this development and the gradual democratisation of the political system in the monarchy's final years. He also analyses a broad range of sources, from archival through period pamphlets or party fiction to ego-documents. Beneš's book, then, is not concerned solely with the issue of nationalism among the ranks of the Austrian Social Democratic movement; it also contributes to the analysis of internal party culture and the influences that gave it shape, and last but not least, analyses the question of mobilising adherents and ordinary party members and their involvement in the direction of the entire party.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Beneš, Jakub S.: Workers and Nationalism. Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890-1918. Oxford 2017.*

<sup>2</sup> *Mommsen, Hans: Arbeiterbewegung und Nationale Frage. Göttingen 1979.*

The English original was highly readable; in more than gratifying news, the Czech translation is also very good, which still cannot be taken for granted under Czech conditions. The book is divided into six chapters, which are ordered chronologically; however, each chapter focuses thematically on different phenomena. In Chapter One, the author considers the emergence of Social Democracy as a mass political party in the late 1880s and early 1890s. By analysing party poetry and prose, he discusses the formation of “a poetic organisation” that, along with the inspiration of Christian narratives, shaped the party in the years to come. In the second chapter, which has the chilling title of “Exclusion from the Nation”, Beneš turns the spotlight on the second half of the 1890s. At this time, Czech Social Democrats used an anti-state rights declaration to define themselves in opposition to other Czech parties, who emphasised the historical state law of the Czech Lands, and thus integrity of the Czech Lands, during the negotiations on national equality. The author argues that the identity of both Czech and German Social Democrats at that time was formed precisely because they felt excluded from the nation.

In the third chapter, Beneš turns his attention to the mass demonstrations of 1905, which resulted in the introduction of universal and equal suffrage for men, the great (and joint) success achieved by Czech and German Social Democrats. At the same time, this victory was also perceived as the seed of future happy tomorrows in connection with the already-mentioned religious influences. In the fourth chapter, which can be viewed as pivotal, he shows however that the Social Democrats, as well as pursuing class politics, began to position themselves at the head of their nation, and ultimately to elevate their own national cultures over that of others. While the Czech Social Democrats did this by appropriating the figure of the mediaeval religious reformer Jan Hus, the German-Austrian Social Democrats celebrated Friedrich Schiller, who could also demonstrate links to the greater German area. In the penultimate chapter, Beneš looks at the “logics of separation”, which resulted in the lion’s share of Czech Social Democrats seceding from the previously federalised international party. The final chapter discusses the fortunes of Social Democratic parties during the First World War. Beneš describes the gradual radicalisation of their rank-and-file members, which he uses to outline the impetus for post-war development.

As Beneš himself emphasises in the book’s conclusion, the demonstrations of 1905, when the national language gradually began to gain ground via social action, were crucial for his interpretation. Beneš directly states that “[t]he act of seizing the reins of the nation was also a retreat from proletarian internationalism.” (p. 377) However, he highlights that Social Democracy germinated nationalism of a sort different to the dominant strain in other political currents of the time. Social Democrats, then, were “proffering a different meaning of the nation and loyalty to it – rooted not in cross-class solidarity and deference to national economic and cultural elites, but rather in the political and cultural power of the ‘oppressed classes’” (p. 377). Beneš also calls attention to the role of the movement’s ordinary adherents. He argues that, while they might have overwhelmingly followed the leadership, the mere focus on the party elites is not, he feels, in itself enough to fully explain the party’s direction. It is therefore necessary to investigate the party from below, and

not just its upper echelons. Beneš believes that the party's political culture was formed by "dialectical exchange between these influences, with momentous social political events tilting or reshuffling the balance between them." (p. 379) Related to this, of course, is the question of the political mobilisation of their adherents, where it is not possible to talk of either lack of interest in political events on the part of the wider public, or of their permanent political engagement. As Beneš himself states, "[c]ontingent events crystallise political convictions and galvanise mobilisation among the popular classes" (p. 380), such as precisely those of 1905.

The book was received positively by reviewers on publication in 2017. They appreciated the author's approach to the issue, in which he connected a fruitful research question supported by theoretical concepts to a rich base of sources. The authors agreed that, as a whole, the book constitutes an important contribution to the history of the Austrian monarchy and the central European workers' movement.<sup>3</sup> Numerous complaints in otherwise laudatory reviews referred to two things in particular. The historian Lukáš Fasora of Masaryk University in Brno valued the sources cited by the work, but highlighted that Social Democracy was, prior to the First World War, a very heterogeneous movement in terms of opinion despite the proclaimed internal unity and party discipline. Beneš's thesis might also in particular be complicated by the view of the more international left-wing parties, concentrated around Vienna, Liberec (Reichenberg), Kladno and Hodonín. "Beneš's preference for central archives and periodicals results in misrepresentation, particularly of the extreme positions in the Social Democratic polyphony," Fasora argued. As he also added, the book regards as peripheral the motives of the so-called centralists who remained loyal to the party's Viennese leadership.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, some reviewers pertain to the book's chronological demarcation of the end of the First World War. Peter Bugge of Aarhus University, for example, observed that the final chapter about the First World War is sketchier than the rest and, although Beneš otherwise successfully refers to the secondary literature published so far, an important monograph by the Czech historian Zdeněk Kárník is not mentioned.<sup>5</sup> Jakub Rákosník of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University Prague, directly raised the question of post-war development, which could put several of the work's theses in a different light. "I assume that, if [the author] had had the courage to extend his interpretation to at least 1920, the situation arising from the sudden trans-

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: *Körner*, Axel: Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890-1918 by Jakub Beneš. In: *The English Historical Review* 134 (2019) 566, 248-250; *Rozenblit*, Marsha L.: Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890-1918 by Jakub S. Beneš. In: *Slavic Review* 77 (2018) 2, 465-468, and *Stegmann*, Natali: Workers and Nationalism. Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890-1918 by Jakub S. Beneš. In: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 67 (2019) 4, 654-656.

<sup>4</sup> *Fasora*, Lukáš: Jakub S. Beneš, Workers and Nationalism. German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria. In: *Střed* 9 (2017) 1, 119-122, here 121.

<sup>5</sup> See *Bugge*, Peter: Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890-1918 by Jakub S. Beneš. In: *The Hungarian Historical Review* 7 (2018) 1, 155-158, here 157, and *Kárník*, Zdeněk: *Socialisté na rozcestí. Habsburk, Masaryk, či Šmeral [Socialists at the Crossroads. Habsburg, Masaryk, or Šmeral]*. Prague 1996.

formation in position of Czech and German nationalism would provide an excellent contrast to his interpretation of the previous decades,” he stated directly.

However, it is appropriate to elaborate on these remarks, not because they diminish the contribution of Beneš’s book, but rather because they will enable us to consider the opportunities for further research. The post-war history of Czech and Czech-German Social Democracy mentioned by Rákosník certainly indicates, firstly, the type of waves in which nationalism was gaining ground. However, the foundation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1921 also points to the fact that nationalism was weakening, as well as to the desire of the lion’s share of members to unite with a significantly radical and centralised party that was also more international. Support for the newly founded Communist Party was frequently unevenly concentrated in individual, regional party organisations, which highlights not only the earlier radical left tradition within the party, but also emphasises, again, the role played by the party leaders. Most of the members in individual areas followed them directly. As it was a different era, radicalised by war and post-war experiences, the question arises of whether the Czech centralists would have failed so spectacularly in 1911 if more of the leading officials had remained within their ranks.

Beneš certainly succeeds in skilfully balancing the perspectives of the higher officials and the grassroots. Nevertheless, there is space to rethink this tension and to explore it from various angles. The party’s internal culture, built from inside the movement and from the bottom up, drew a great deal of inspiration from Christianity. However, as even Beneš indicates, the culture’s rich sources frequently conflicted with each other. The culture was accompanied by a fascination with contemporary science, which was illustrated by the popular encyclopaedia genre. This science included contemporary social Darwinism and the vogue for mysticism, the temperance movement and the popularity of alcohol. Members’ imaginations created their own literature, but now-forgotten novels, both domestic and in translation, were also very popular. In future it would be appropriate to turn special attention to the specific milieu of mid-ranking and senior party officials, as reflected in the forms and course of party congresses and polemics in the newspapers. It was possible to observe increasing levels of education among the ranks of members, as well as a generational change. This was where Marxist doctrine mingled with the aims of realpolitik, the desire for party unity and the gradual shaping of currents of opinion.

At the same time, it is worth noting that, after the First World War, Czech-German relations also continued within Social Democratic parties. Further investigation of their forms, dynamics and limits within the party’s upper and lower echelons would certainly also be productive. Although the two parties existed side by side in Czechoslovakia, the split of 1911 described by Beneš was still not definitive even here: alongside the wariness and lack of understanding, increasing collaboration was also evident, including in the joint party congress of 1928. The German-Czech partnership in what was known as Red Vienna is also yet to be the subject of more detailed research. Here the local Czech Social Democratic minority gradually united with its Austrian counterpart, while the party had a Czech representative in the city council as late as the 1950s.

In conclusion, it is fitting, from the Czech and the Czech-German perspective, to highlight that Jakub Beneš works with these two linguistic and cultural milieus as a whole. While he may follow the disintegration of the earlier Czech-German party, his interpretation successfully interlinks and gives equal weight to the stories of both components. “Although irreversibly severed from each other during and after the Second World War,” Beneš argues, already in more general terms, “the histories of both nationalities up to that point exhibit strikingly similar dynamics and warrant their inclusion in the same world-historical region” (p. 381). This approach, which researches certain phenomena and gives them equal weight across the ethnic boundaries of the Czech Lands, is however still not a guaranteed in Czech historiography. This is precisely why it is possible to hope that this translation of Beneš’s book will also contribute to similar research into many other themes beyond the scope of the history of the labour movement.