

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Jakub S. Beneš, Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890–1918

J.-Guy Lalande

Volume 84, automne 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066562ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2019.0056>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lalande, J.-G. (2019). Compte rendu de [Jakub S. Beneš, Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890–1918]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 84, 371–372.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2019.0056>

the undergraduate gender studies or political science classroom, this book could serve as a potentially effective source for informed debate. As Ghodsee establishes, the improvement of gender and labour conditions requires increased engagement and participation amongst the populace, especially women; widespread change occurs not at the individual level, but rather, as Ghodsee shows, when the collective acts.

JESSICA M. DEWITT

Network in Canadian History
and Environment

Jakub S. Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017)

QUITE DIFFERENT answers have been given to the question of the relationship between nationalism and socialism. While the German Marxists Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky famously predicted the eventual melting “into thin air” of national differences under the capitalist mode of production, the Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer, for his part, viewed nations as ineradicable components of human societies and cultures. This solid monograph explores how Czech and German Austrian workers, who made up one of Europe’s biggest Social Democratic movements, came to embrace ethnic nationalism in the last decades before the outbreak of World War I and therefore justified Bauer’s approach.

The decade of the 1880s in Austria witnessed severe governmental repression that left a deep imprint on the collective psyche of the workers’ movement. In particular, this period of persecution convinced workers that the triumph of socialism would inevitably redeem a history of privation, injustice, and sacrifice.

Indeed, a scenario of suffering and redemption, which borrowed symbols and rituals from Austrian Catholicism (residual echoes of the rural traditions many of these workers had been raised in before migrating to the cities), animated the various forms of agitation – the May Day celebrations, for example – of the Austrian workers’ movement. Furthermore, through the end of the 19th century, nationalism found little support in the workers’ movement – a reality well illustrated by workers’ negative reactions to the nationalist and bourgeois-driven chauvinism that exploded in the wake of the Badeni language ordinances of 1897.

This internationalist ethos, however, was soon challenged by the emergence of tensions and divisions along ethnic lines. The first turning point happened in November 1905 when, under the influence of the revolution in Russia, the Austrian popular classes mobilized themselves on a massive scale in both Vienna and Prague – the two major cities that had experienced rapid industrialization since the 1860s – and demanded a reform of the electoral system. These extraordinary moments of political participation bore fruit: the first elections to the *Reichsrat* – the parliament of the Austrian half of the Habsburg monarchy – held in May 1907 on the basis of universal, secret, direct, and equal male suffrage. The elections gave the Social Democrats 23 per cent of the popular vote and 87 deputies – the largest single party in a 516-seat parliament. Besides ending their social marginalization, these results convinced German and Czech Social Democrats (the latter, in particular, who found inspiration in the militancy of their radical Hussite forebears) that they were justified in their bid to claim leadership of their respective nation. Indeed, Beneš concludes, charges of indifference on the part of bourgeois nationalists “prompted counterattacks that

impugned the careerist middle classes, as the truly indifferent.” (12)

The second defining moment centred around emotional debates over the national composition of the state civil service, and especially over minority school rights in nationally mixed areas. This acrimony was grounded in the understanding, hence its intensity, that education represented the first step toward class consciousness and, subsequently, involvement in the workers’ movement. German paternalistic claims to the superiority of their culture, deemed essential to socialism’s advance, were not well received by the Czechs, who felt disregarded, even humiliated by the callous references directed at them in the Austrian German socialist popular literature. The formation of nationally segregated trade unions in 1911 revealed that such antagonisms could not but seriously weaken the political efficiency and unity of Austrian Social Democracy. Even the persistence of a strong class ethos could not heal the self-inflicted wounds in the Austrian workers’ movement.

The Great War and its cortège of worsening labour and living conditions for the majority of workers proved to be the point of no return. Indeed, not only did draconian state control antagonize the Slavs in particular, but a wide rift between a cautious and pragmatic German and Czech Social Democratic leadership that genuinely wanted to help avoid the military defeat of their country and an increasingly desperate, even revolutionary rank and file by early 1918 added another fissure to a workers’ movement that was already fractured along ethnic-national lines. Furthermore, the influence of Bolshevik-inspired Communism made sure that this fissure would never be fully overcome. In a nutshell, by rejecting both the inequities of the capitalist economy and the socially exclusive restrictions on voting rights, Social Democracy played

an important role in the democratization process in Habsburg Austria. It also empowered the growing ranks of industrial workers to lay claim to their national culture.

This well-researched and richly-annotated monograph, structured like a series of somewhat self-standing tableaux rather than a traditional chronological narrative, will challenge readers who are not already familiar with the story of post-*Ausgleich* Austria. Arguably its most original feature – one that betrays Beneš’s culturalist approach and that gives a real sense of immediacy and colour to the unfolding story line – is the importance that the author attaches to fiction, song, and poetry, composed by workers themselves, diaries of low-level party leaders, local newspapers, memoirs, almanacs, and the orations heard in the streets as well as socialist meeting halls and pubs. A few paragraphs, though, on the impact of Polish and Jewish workers, whose demographic weight in Austria was not insignificant, on the development of Czech and German working-class nationalism would have further enriched this important book.

A case study that explores the links between class identities and nationalism and a convincing example of the popular appeal of nationalism in Central Europe on the eve of the Great War, yet one written in a much welcomed dispassionate tone *Workers and Nationalism* will remind perceptive readers that the question Otto Bauer posed over a century ago – is democratic multiethnic coexistence possible in a modern state? – “speak(s) to a central political dilemma of our own world.” (17)

J.-GUY LALANDE

St. Francis Xavier University