

Jakub S. Beneš, **Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890–1918**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 268 pages. ISBN 978-0-198-78929-1

The title of this book, *Workers and Nationalism*, connects two seemingly unrelated phenomena in Central European society at the turn of the nineteenth century: the internationalist working-class movement and ethnic nationalism. However, Jakub S. Beneš, an American historian with Czech and Slovak roots, proposes a new approach, through which he attempts to refute the idea that labor was indifferent to nationalism until bourgeois nationalists prevailed upon it to take an interest in the advantages offered by national ethnic communities. Beneš's monograph was awarded the 2016 George Blazyca Prize by the British Association for Slavonic & East European Studies and received the 2017 Barbara Jelavich Prize from the Association of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. Both professional associations appreciated Beneš's work as an outstanding contribution to the current debate on the history of the working class and the multi-ethnic society of the Habsburg monarchy in its last years.¹

The author's main thesis is that the Czech- and German-speaking Social Democrats² in Habsburg Austria each developed their own separate culture of left-wing populist nationalism. The rising awareness within national groups of their bonds of a common language and shared everyday cultural attributes, as well as displeasure with the privileged social elites' control of public affairs, engaged the masses in Austro-Hungarian politics but also gradually split the Social Democrats into separate Czech and German organizations. In 1897, the Social Democratic Party in Habsburg Austria formally transformed itself into a confederacy of six autonomous national parties. Nevertheless, the Party's German leadership still maintained decisive influence over the policies of the labor movement and promoted an internationalist orientation. According to Beneš, the turning point that saw the beginning of the merger of socialism with nationalism was the campaign for universal suffrage in 1905–1907, when the masses started to perceive themselves not only as an integral part of Austrian society but as the power that would determine the future of the nation.

Since Beneš aims to explain how nationalism became so attractive for most workers, he cannot focus only on the performance of prominent political leaders. He also needs to make the Social Democratic Party's ordinary members and supporters visible in his analysis. Therefore, he researches the popular culture that created the space in which working

¹ Compare the reviews of Beneš's work published by the awarding associations, the 2016 George Blazyca Prize of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies: <http://basees.org/news/2018/3/8/jakub-bene-wins-george-blazyca-prize-for-workers-and-nationalism> and the 2017 Barbara Jelavich Prize of the Association of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies: <https://www.aseees.pitt.edu/programs/aseees-prizes/barbara-jelavich-book-prize/citations-past-winner-barbara-jelavich-book-prize>.

² The author of this review adopts a practice suggested by Beneš, who uses the terms "socialists" and "social democrats" interchangeably as synonyms throughout his book.

people expressed and shared their life experiences at a time when the government was resisting the development of social democracy and the political enfranchisement of the masses. The book is based on extensive research drawing on sources such as songs, poetry, and fiction composed by socialist activists and ordinary workers. It also draws on memoirs and diaries by low-level functionaries of the party, which Beneš masterfully contextualizes into the canon of the movement's leaders' statements and the Party's programs. This cultural-historical approach distinguishes Beneš's study from older works on the history of the working class in Habsburg Austria, which mostly adopted the German historian Hans Mommsen's social-historical interpretation. Mommsen understood the economic emancipation of the Czechs from the Germans, which the Czech middle classes managed to achieve in cooperation with the workers' leaders, as the key factor in the breakdown of the internationalist labor movement into individual national social democratic parties.³

The book is divided into three parts, which describe how the popular cultural practices and poetics of Czech- and German-speaking workers developed from the beginning of the mass labor movement around 1890 to the end of World War I and the establishment of the successor states. Starting with the chapter "Narrating Socialism in Habsburg Austria," Beneš places popular socialist culture in the context of restrictions on labor political organizations imposed by the Taaffe government (1879–1893). Shared participation in May Day manifestations, singing proletarian songs and reading socialist novels were the only ways that ordinary workers could take part in a movement that was denied the form of a legal political party. The writers of labor movement-influenced fiction used the Christian motifs of suffering, sacrifice, and salvation that were well-known to all people coming from the country to the city for work. Their portrayals of workers' stories turned those themes into a class ethos. By appealing to the emotions, their poetics gained more popularity for democratic socialism among ordinary people than did all the pamphlets written by the prominent theorists of socialism, such as Marx, Engels, Lassalle, Bauer and others.

In the second chapter, "Exclusion from the Nation," the author discusses another fundamental thing that shaped the social experience of Czech- and German-speaking labor at the turn of the century. The working class mostly lived on the outskirts of the cities, separated from the bourgeois residential areas of the city centers. Workers were spatially excluded from the public life of Austria's national community. This led them to reject Austro-Hungarian nationalism as a bourgeois construct and strengthened class consciousness among the inhabitants of the suburban settlements. From the perspective of a middle-class nationalist, the working people were indifferent to nationalism. Nevertheless, the intimate proximity of Czech- and German-speaking neighbors in the suburban settlements emphasized ethnic differences in their everyday lives. Since bilingualism

³ Hans Mommsen, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Nationalitätenfrage im Habsburgischen Vielvölkerstaat. Das Ringen um die supranationale Integration der zisleithanischen Arbeiterbewegung (1867–1907)* (Vienna: Europa-Verlag, 1963).

was rather an exception in those circles, most people naturally preferred to associate with their co-nationals.

The second part of the book shows that the 1905–07 campaign for universal male suffrage was the turning point in the self-perception and self-presentation of workers in Habsburg Austria. The third chapter, titled “Storms of November,” suggests that mobilization for political rights radically changed how socialists related to their ethnic nationalities. As Beneš demonstrates, the Social Democrats managed to convince the masses to take an interest in politics and public affairs and grasp the power to determine the future of the state and the nation. The labor movement started to integrate nationalist accents into its street demonstrations in order to compete with the impressive promises of the bourgeois parties. But articulating the national question accentuated the dissimilarities between Czech- and German-speaking worker activists. Czech workers came to believe that their suffering and exclusion could be explained in both social and national terms. They embraced the memory of the Hussites and the battle of Lipany to justify socialist claims on Czech national culture. For their part, German workers were unable to find any iconic rebel personalities comparable to Jan Hus. Thus, they associated themselves with the poets and thinkers of German high culture (Friedrich Schiller, Richard Wagner) in their communications with the masses. The fourth chapter of the book, “Socialist Hussites, Marxist Wagnerians,” concludes that Czech-speaking working people were radicalized under the influence of militant models, while their German-speaking comrades were confirmed in their German cultural superiority.

The last two chapters present the breakdown of the labor movement along nationality lines that took place in the last years of the Habsburg monarchy. In his chapter titled “The Logics of Separatism,” Beneš maintains that the institutional division of the Czech- and German-speaking labor movements was unavoidable in light of practical difficulties in communication among the trade unions and in leisure activities. The Czechs, together with representatives of other non-German nationalities, insisted on the federalization of the workers’ organizations. However, the Social Democratic Party leadership in Vienna, and other representatives of German-speaking Austria, argued for centralization and a return to socialist internationalism. The chapter, “War and Revolution,” addresses the growing contradictions between the leadership and the grass roots within the party. During World War I, the political representatives of social democracy all concurred in supporting the government’s war effort because they expected that cooperating was the only way not to lose their pre-war gains. It was, moreover, the only way they saw to strengthen their future influence over the state. The lower levels of the movement, experiencing the suffering of war directly, were disappointed by such an approach. They demanded radical solutions in the form of militant revolution and Bolshevism. After 1918 it became apparent how powerful that stream was. While social democratic politicians were leading players in the establishment of the successor states of Czechoslovakia and Austria, an influential group of workers opposed the new governments. In both countries, bourgeois parties held the majority and sought to prevent the establishment of socialist

regimes. Later, the left-wing critics left the labor movement for the newly founded communist parties.

The author presents social democracy in Habsburg Austria as a very dynamic political force, which successfully involved the masses in politics by associating itself with national cultures. He redefines the concept of “embourgeoisement” (*Verbürgerlichung*) coined by Czech historian Lukáš Fasora, who argued that workers adopted the practices of middle-class culture and transformed them for their own purposes.⁴ Contrary to Fasora, Beneš does not read this process as the convergence of the classes into a homogeneous national community. He rather emphasizes the centrifugal dynamic of interclass relations. Instead of presenting workers as passive followers of the political leadership, Beneš calls attention to the active, competitive approach that the masses took to their interactions with the elites.

Beneš provides evidence that labor was not indifferent to nationality but created its own national discourse, which cannot be reconstructed through study of the documents produced by the middle-class intelligentsia that are preserved in official archives. His approach challenges the so-called constructivist theory of nationalism advanced by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner and Miroslav Hroch, which has dominated scholarship on the nationalizing of the multi-ethnic societies of Central and Eastern Europe, which continued until the end of the twentieth century. The constructivists saw the origin of the nation-building process in the well-educated and politically engaged middle class, which attempted to attract the support of the masses to their ideas of nationhood.⁵ Beneš refutes the idea that the masses were indifferent to nationality that was put forth by the American historian Tara Zahra, who argues that nationalist politics did not matter to the majority of the region's population.⁶

From the perspective of ordinary workers, ethnicity was a flexible concept in the everyday life of the multi-ethnic worker settlements, but it gradually came to influence their political thinking and led to both emancipation and exclusionary national projects. The assumptions that Beneš makes correspond with the theories of the American sociologist Rogers Brubaker, who suggests that we must take into account the fluid character of individual identities and understand that the manifestation of ethnicity is primarily the result of particular social and economic conditions in everyday life.⁷ Brubaker's approach

⁴ See Lukáš Fasora, *Dělník a měšťan: vývoj jejich vzájemných vztahů na příkladu šesti moravských měst 1870–1914* (Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2010).

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁶ Tara Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis', *Slavic Review* 69, No. 1 (2010): 93–119, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25621730>.

⁷ See Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Rogers Brubaker, Margit Feischmidt, Jon Fox, Liana Grancea, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

provides Beneš with an innovative perspective on the nationality problem, which allows him to do more than simply report the societal divisions between nationalists and nationally indifferent people that were introduced in the nineteenth century by the players in the nation-building process.

The book not only offers a good insight into the development of Czech- and German-speaking socialism in Bohemia, but also demonstrates the socialists' relationship with the workers' movement in Lower Austria. This geographical framework is relevant because Vienna, like Prague and other cities, was the target destination of labor moving from the rural areas of Bohemia, making it the home of a significant Czech minority. Moreover, Vienna was the capital of an empire in which the leadership of Austrian social democracy was a key actor. That adds a further dimension to Beneš's study and enables the author to present his conclusions in a broader context. His conclusions offer an inspiring perspective on the history of the Austrian monarchy, but at the same time, they open up many new questions that remain unanswered. A situation in which only two ethnicities lived together in a city was rather the exception in the region. Therefore, it would be desirable to take more ethnic groups into consideration. How did the working class perceive the Jews and increasing anti-Semitism at the turn of the century? How much did the motivation of Slavic solidarity matter to non-German workers?

These suggestions for deepening Beneš's analysis should be seen as a starting point for subsequent research rather than as an attempt to expose gaps in the book. One of the book's main qualities is maintaining a balance between its compact page count and its presentation of a complex problem, keeping it coherent for the reader who is not familiar with the details of the history of the labor movement in Habsburg Austria. The author assists the reader with very accessible language as well as with his clear organization of the text and its headings, which allows for easy orientation in his main arguments. Besides that, his study is illustrated with a number of images depicting manifestations of socialist culture.

To conclude, the book here reviewed deserves the attention of historians and history students for its inspirational, methodical approach. The author brings a new perspective to nationalism and interethnic coexistence in the years before the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, as well as to the early history of the labor movement in the region.

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