

The evolution of racial classification and its
implications for minorities in Czechoslovakia,
1939-1989

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Introduction

In this paper, we will attempt to analyse the evolution of how minority ethnic groups in Czechoslovakia were classified by the different governments of the aforementioned period, and how this contributed to forced assimilation, a sense of cultural loss, the stifling of different languages and in more exceptional circumstances, racially-motivated crime and genocide. Furthermore, we will discuss how government policies towards the classification of people into different ethnic groups affected the wider population's perception of minority ethnic groups, and how different groups came to be targeted more than others, such as with the rise and evolution of antisemitism throughout the Nazi occupation, the short-lived Third Czechoslovak Republic and then the following Communist regime which ultimately collapsed in 1989 as a result of the Velvet Revolution.

Definitions

For our purposes, the ethnic minorities in Czechoslovakia we seek to analyse are those ethnic groups that in any of the nationwide censuses conducted between 1921 and 1990 had a total population count above 10,000 people. Moravians and Silesians, while today considered distinct from their Czech and Slovak counterparts, were only formally separated in government data from Czechs after the fall of Communism, and so for the purposes of our research are considered to be members of the Czech population. Consequently, the groups that fit our working definition of distinct minority ethnic groups in Czechoslovakia during this period are Jews, Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Russians, Ruthenians, Ukrainians, and Romani.

Evolution of the definition of nationality and the First Czechoslovak Republic

While Czechoslovak nationality was the technical umbrella label by which citizens of this relatively new Czechoslovak nation were referred to, the idea of nationality and the division of citizens into different ethnic groups was critical for Czechoslovak determinism and the justification of a new Czechoslovak state. In becoming independent after the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, the proponents of the joint Czechoslovak national solution, as opposed to those who advocated for separate Czech and Slovak countries gained the initiative. Among other approaches to newfound statehood, they successfully used the timely population census which, under Imperial purview, would have taken place in 1920, to redefine who was who in this new country.

While Austro-Hungarian authorities had historically defined one's nationality based on one's spoken tongue, which, due to the large ethnic German minority in the west of the country, and primarily Yiddish and German-speaking Jews bolstering their number and placing a limit on the number of citizens, identified as Czechs or Slovaks. The new Czechoslovak Republic changed the definition of nationality from one's spoken tongue to one's 'tribal affiliation' (Czech Statistics Office 2020), thus bolstering the number of self-identified Jews and Roma. In turn, with a higher number of self-identified Czechs, Slovaks and other minorities, reinforced the idea that this new country was indeed a country of Czechs and Slovaks before all others.

Indeed, while the German minority did hold fast around the 3 million total mark, the Czech population surveyed started growing at a high rate, increasing 8% between the 1921 and 1930 census (Czech Statistical Office 2012) as more and more people sought to identify as Czech in light of recent Czechoslovak independence, as did the Slovaks, who grew an alarming 182% in the same time period after having been relatively stifled, such as being grouped in with Czechs. Comparatively, the formerly expanding German population which had been emboldened under Austro-Hungarian rule was now bleeding formerly associated Jews and other multilingual German Czechoslovaks who had been grouped into their numbers by the old definition of nationality, who now sought a new national or ethnic affiliation closer to their own identity. As a result grew a mere 2% in the same time period. (Czech Statistical Office 2012)

The Law for the Protection of Czech Blood

Czechoslovakia, not being a fully defeated country but a new 'Protectorate' under Nazi protection, did enjoy the opportunity to be governed by ethnic Czechs (who had Hitler's stamp of approval), resulting in the leadership of Emil Hacha. Despite having been active in pre-war democratic Governments, Hacha took on the role of President of the Protectorate and actively participated in the suppression of minorities, most notably using his legal background to put into force a set of anti-semitic laws which broadened and legally codified the definition of who was a Czech Jew, and then placed many limitations on the people meeting that definition as part of the 'protection of Czech blood' ("Nuremberg Laws Proclaimed in Czech Protectorate by President Hacha" 1942).

With uncanny resemblance to the Nuremberg laws brought into effect in 1935 in Nazi Germany, the new laws in the Protectorate prevented intermarriage or sexual relations between someone who fit the definition of a Jew and a non-Jewish individual, as well as preventing Jews under this definition from hiring maids and household help considered to be Aryan under the age of 45, and lastly, prevented Jews from flying or displaying Czech colours and national symbols.

In this set of laws alone we can see what is, perhaps, the biggest deviation in the definition of a minority's identity in the history of Czechoslovakia since the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A Jew was no longer a Jew based on self-proclamation, religion, mother tongue or 'tribal affiliation', but now was a Jew by virtue of having had an ethnic-Jewish grandparent, regardless of that grandparent's Jewish identity or the identity of the grandchild in question ("Nuremberg Laws Proclaimed in Czech Protectorate by President Hacha" 1942). Racial classification, in this sense, suddenly took a much more literal meaning than it ever had before in Czechoslovakia.

Post-war ethnic tensions and the new Communist power-struggle

Despite the horrors of the second world war, ethnic tension and racial divide was hardly sidelined. With the 1948 coup and the resignation of Edvard Beneš, the Communist party had successfully utilised post-war paranoia to their benefit in taking power, but then had no means with which to justify their commitment to the one-party state. As a result, Czechoslovakia succumbed to the same tactics that their newly-minted eastern bloc communist fellow states had utilised to cement their positions: show trials.

The socio-political divide along racial lines in early communist Czechoslovakia can most notably be demonstrated with the Slansky trial, which was used as the platform on which the openly anti-semitic policies of the Czechoslovak Communist Party would be built. On the orders of Soviet advisors in the country who reported to Stalin, 14 high ranking members of the Communist Party, 11 of which were Jews, were arrested in November 1952 and tried for allegedly being Titoists and Zionists. In basing the alleged treason on anti-zionist grounds, the prosecutors used a number of anti-semitic tropes in describing Czechoslovak Jews, such as adherence to the fabled Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and that the accused were acting in accordance with the 'Morgenthau plan', a supposed plan for the alleged traitors to spy on Czechoslovakia in exchange for the US supplying arms to Israel.

The trial, having culminated in eleven executions, did have the intended effect on Czechoslovakia's Jewry. Czechoslovakia, having been relatively free and stable until the Nazi invasion in 1938, had gained a reputation among Jews across Europe as one of the few places to live which was home to a culture of good and open people who were willing to have them, and a place where their rights, however limited, would be protected. (Blumenthal 2009) Consequently, the Slansky trial's anti-semitic undertones signalled an abrupt and worrying end to the tolerance of Jews by the Czech and Slovak majority, who saw Jews as just as much of, if not more of a threat than the German minority which in recent years had played a part in encouraging and facilitating the Nazi occupation and genocide of Jews, Roma, Czechs and Slovaks.

KSČ¹ racial policy development and the 'Gypsy question'

The story of the Roma in Europe began centuries ago and its development, vicissitudes and current form is a special testimony to this particular minority. The position of the Roma in Czechoslovakia has seen dramatic reversals from tolerance to attempts to extermination attempts, to striving for their assimilation. However, these efforts never quite succeeded as their executors envisioned, and the Roma today often remain socially marginalised, as in past centuries.

It has been estimated that a little over 100,000 Roma lived in what was then Czechoslovakia before 1938. The vast majority of them lived on Slovak territory. At that time, about 7 thousand Roma were living in the Czech lands. (Holy, Necas, 1993) The Nazi genocide of the Roma is an important historical event that reminds us of the consequences that the hateful framing of certain social groups can lead to. Unfortunately, very few Czechoslovak Roma survived the cruelty of Nazism. Shortly after the war about 600 - 1000 Czech Roma remained in Czech territory (We do not know the exact numbers, as researchers continue to disagree on this issue). The sad fact is that they often encountered the same prejudices for which they suffered in concentration camps after the war's end. They responded to the suffering they experienced by adapting as much as possible to the demands of the majority's social standards, even at the cost of losing their own culture and national identity.

In the period before the communists came to power, there were measures to support the Roma as a workforce, with proposals for their placement in labor camps, taking children for re-education, etc. Fortunately for the Roma, these proposals were rejected by the government as harmful and

¹ Komunistická strana Československa (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia)

illegal. By 1950, the question of Roma peoples and their role in Czechoslovak society began to become more of a pronounced societal issue. The Roma were recognized as victims of the Nazi genocide and should be compensated by fostering equality with the Czech and Slovak majority. Equality, in this case, was supposed to mean social and cultural raising to the level of the rest of the population, i.e. social and material equality.

The year 1989 was not just a turning point for Czech and Slovak society *en masse*, but had major ramifications for Roma people as well. For many Czechs and Slovaks of all backgrounds, 1989 has also become a lasting beacon of democracy, with ideals the country should attempt to adhere to. In 1989, the Roma nationality was also officially recognized. After the Velvet Revolution, the Roma, as well as other Czechs and Slovaks of other backgrounds, found new doors open to them - free Roma politicians created what would have previously been stifled - independent social initiatives and political parties. Furthermore, it was now possible to travel abroad and to do business internationally. For many Roma who had suffered under the Communist regime, asylum in western countries, particularly Canada, was suddenly possible. This resulted in a large migration of Czechoslovak and later Hungarian Roma to Canada, eventually establishing cities such as Vancouver and Toronto as epicentres of Czech, Slovak and Hungarian Roma abroad by 1997. At the same time, however, there was a sudden jump from relaxed authoritarianism to complete independence back at home.

As a result of the history and development of Roma issues, the cultural difference between this minority and the overall majority, stereotyping, and a considerable amount of prejudice, has influenced how the majority of Czech and Slovak society treats the Roma. As was common

during the Nazi and Communist eras, there are many who still treat Roma with a specific and notable intolerance, which is often xenophobic in nature, and sometimes outright racist. Most people refuse to be racists and they distance themselves from such sections of society, but often, probably unknowingly, participate in another form of harmful behavior - applying the principle of collective guilt. This phenomenon is a classic example of cultural generalisation, in which all Roma people, despite their individual qualities are 'thrown into one bag' and judged based on general stereotypes pertaining to their ethnic group, and not their personality. It is difficult to see the educated, successful, or 'unproblematic' Roma who do not often openly identify with and promote their ethnic heritage precisely because of this social stigma.

One of the biggest dilemmas of modern Czech and Slovak society is finding a lasting peace between respecting the traditions and way of life of the minority, finding routes through which minorities, with their particular traditions, could become more compatible with the social precedents and expectations of wider Czech and Slovak society. The problem comes at a time when large and visible sections of the minority begin, for example, to abuse the social system of the state, or to destroy it with their habits and, by proxy, the lives of other people. But the reactions of people who despise these unacceptable habits they are unfamiliar with are often based on underlying prejudices, regardless of whether the accuser is aware of this or not.. Roma are not inherently more prone to crime or harassment, just as they are not more dangerous than others. These assumptions, which use similar characteristics and justifications, can lead to the same tensions that create widely criticized, populist practices both in the former Czechoslovakia and in other Central European countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can see how the understanding of race and ethnicity in what is today the Czech Republic and Slovakia has heavily influenced the idea of racial separation, questionable attitudes, and ultimately discrimination and wariness about interracial interactions. Nowadays, when faced with the growing number of immigrants from places which traditionally did not have notable populations in these countries, the former Czechoslovakia is gradually changing into an ever-increasing multicultural country, which many people are not prepared for, but with time may learn to accept and embrace. In the age of such complex multiculturalism, these two countries are in a unique position wherein they can relatively easily abandon a limited and questionable societal view of race that did not adequately serve societal relations to this point, and adapt the cultural understanding of race and ethnicity to fit today's world.

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