

# VII

## *Defeated Politicians, Victorious Intellectuals*

(1848–1867)

In February 1848, revolution erupted in Paris and leapt like wildfire to other European cities. In Vienna, the ultraconservative Austrian chancellor, Count Metternich, who effectively ruled the country, was forced out of office. The next day, March 15, a "Declaration of the Constitutionality of the Austrian Monarchy" was issued, in which the emperor acknowledged the freedom of the press, sanctioned the establishment of national guards, and promised to summon an assembly of representatives of the Estates, the major sectors of society. This was preliminary to an actual constitution that would replace absolutist rule. In September 1848, the Law Abolishing Serfdom was issued, transforming serfs in the Danube empire into full citizens and landowners. The revolution in Vienna resolved the greatest problem of the peasants, and revolutionary enthusiasm immediately faded in the Czech villages.

In the meantime, two important congresses had taken place—pan-German in Frankfurt and pan-Slav in Prague. On May 15 a national assembly convened in Frankfurt, the first freely elected parliament in Germany, attended also by Germans from Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. František Palacký, invited to represent the Czechs, declined in an open letter declaring his conviction that the future of the Czech state lay with the Danube monarchy, which must be transformed into a federation of southern German and Slav states. The political conception formulated in this letter (Austro-Slavism) became the program of Czech conservative politicians in spite of the fact that Vienna refused any federative arrangement with the Czechs.

On June 2 the first pan-Slavic congress opened in Prague, with Palacký as chair. Czechs and representatives of other Slav nations convened to decide how to cope with increasing German nationalism. There were two options, pan-Slavism, aiming to unify all the Slavic nations, and Austro-Slavism, preferred by František Palacký as a way to protect central European Slavs against threats from both sides—Russians in the east and Germans in the west. The congress was cut short on June 12 by Austrian authorities because of violence on the streets of Prague.<sup>1</sup>

One of the leaders of the students on the barricades in Prague was the eighteen-year-old writer Josef Václav Frič. When the fighting was over (for which Frič blamed František Palacký, at that time fifty years old, and other national leaders of his generation), Frič was condemned to eighteen years in prison, then released in 1854. Four years later he was again arrested for his anti-Austrian activities and forced to leave the country; he was allowed to return only twenty-six years later. But the most famous victim of the restored absolutist monarchy was Karel Havlíček Borovský, the fearless founder of Czech journalism.

Between 1842 and 1844 Havlíček worked as a tutor in Moscow. This experience cured him completely of the Russophile and pan-Slav enthusiasm that he had originally shared with Czech nationalists. In 1846 he became the first Czech to advocate Austro-Slavism as the only possible option left to Czech patriots. He was an originator of the first Czech opposition newspaper, *Národní noviny* (National news), which he began to publish in April 1848. Havlíček was very radical in his political views. He was one of the first advocates of universal suffrage, and in his literary criticism he ridiculed the still prevailing attitude "co je české, to je hezké" (what is Czech is nice). He was one of the first Czech revivalists to value, unconditionally, originality and quality above Czechness. In his newspaper articles he continued to criticize the Austrian government even after the revolution was definitively defeated. When his *National News* was silenced in January 1850, he moved to Kutná Hora and began to issue *Slovan* (Slav), the last independent newspaper. At two o'clock in the morning in December 16, 1851, he was arrested and without trial immediately transported to Brixen on the Austrian-Italian border. In 1855 he was allowed to return, but to a totally different Bohemia, pacified and full of fear. In the next year he died, at the age of thirty-five, broken and abandoned by his former friends.

After the defeat of the revolutionary movement in Austria, the new emperor, Franz Josef, immediately took all possible measures to restore the absolutist monarchy. At Kroměříž in Moravia, a special committee had already prepared a text for the Austrian constitution on centralist-liberal fundamentals, but before it could be discussed at a plenary session, an army sent by the emperor dissolved the assembly. On the same day, on March 4, 1849, he proclaimed his own version of the constitution (named after its main author, Count Franz Stadion), which was centralist and gave considerable power to the emperor. The Czech state was proclaimed to be nonexistent; its lands are mentioned only as individual provinces of the Austrian empire—the Bohemian kingdom, the Moravian margravate, and the duchy of Lower Silesia.

Franz Josef's attitude toward the Czechs did not change until the end of his long reign. He did not even let himself be crowned as Bohemian king.

In 1848–49, the Habsburg Empire did not become a constitutional monarchy like the Western European states, but the inhabitants of Czech lands for the first time experienced democracy—political programs, agitations and public gatherings, elections, mandates, decisions made by the majority, and so on. Central Europe was changed beyond recognition and forever, in spite of the events of the next years. After the revolutionary movement was definitively put down, the constitution of 1849 was withdrawn in the Sylvester Patent Letters of December 31, 1851, in which the principle of equality before the law, the abolishment of *corvée* labor, and religious freedom were preserved. Nevertheless, civic liberties were drastically curtailed, censorship was fully reinstalled and the independent political press ceased to exist altogether.

The only way for many to cope with the “normalization” of the Austrian empire after 1848 was to emigrate. Vojtěch Náprstek was a twenty-two-year-old revolutionary who left his country immediately after the defeat. He spent ten years in the New World, in a Milwaukee immigrant colony. Although he became a U.S. citizen, studied the Dakota Indian tribe, and was politically active, he remained a Czech patriot and founded a journal and a library for the Czech community in North America. Returning to Prague in 1858, he became one of the greatest Czech philanthropists and turned the family brewery and distillery, *U Halánků*, into a center not only for Czech intellectuals, but for all patriots, women included.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in 1863 he organized an exhibition of household machines for Czech women, which he brought from the London World Fair that he had visited in the previous year. This exposition was followed by a similar event in which Náprstek introduced American sewing machines to Prague. In 1865 the American Club for Bohemian Women was founded on Náprstek's initiative, and he was nicknamed “the women's advocate” for his enthusiastic support of female emancipation.

After attempts at neo-absolutist rule failed, the Austrian emperor was forced to issue another constitution on February 26, 1861, named for its main author, Anton von Schmerling. Again, it was imposed by the emperor without consultation. In it, the imperial assembly usurped legislative power from the land assemblies. Aristocratic privileges were preserved by establishing an upper house in the parliament, and the voting order privileged the German bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, the transformation of the Habsburg state into a constitutional monarchy opened the way to liberalization. The constitution was, however, fiercely criticized by Czech politicians because it did not, like the Kroměříž constitution of 1849, recognize the unity of historical Czech

lands. In 1863 Czechs demonstratively left the Austrian parliament, not to return for sixteen years.

In 1866 the Austrian-Prussian war erupted—an unsuccessful attempt by Austria to prevent Prussia from creating a German empire. The invading Prussian army was enthusiastically received by Bohemian Germans, a prefiguration of their warm reception of Hitler's Wehrmacht in 1938. The decisive battle in which the Austrian army was massacred was fought in Bohemia (at Hradec Králové/Königgrätz), on July 3. In order to calm internal dissent in the monarchy, weakened by its disastrous foreign policy, a new constitutional law was promised by the emperor. But in the spring of 1867, the former protagonists of the liberal revolutionary movement, Germans and Magyars, usurped power to the exclusion of other ethnic minorities, leading to protests in the former Bohemian kingdom. Czech women from the American Club were also involved, and on October 8, 1867, leading members went to Bílá Hora (White Mountain) in Prague, the site of the fateful battle of 1620, and laid a wreath with the inscription "We will not allow our homeland to perish." The police briskly arrested the participants, the guilty women were sentenced to forty-eight hours' imprisonment, and the incident was used as a pretext for police prohibition of the club meetings. Incidents like this fortified the Czech conviction of the stupidity of the Austrian bureaucracy.

The hopes of Czech patriots were dashed by the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, which gave Hungarians the self-rule that the Czechs coveted. On December 21, 1867, Emperor Franz Josef issued the so-called December Constitution of the Austrian Empire. It transformed the Habsburg Empire into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The official names of its two parts were "The Kingdoms and Lands Represented in the Imperial Council (Reichsrat)," dominated by Germans, and "Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen," dominated by Magyars. The state was united only in its ruler: in the western and northern half of the country Franz Josef ruled as Austrian emperor, and in the eastern and southern half as Hungarian king. The situation of the Czechs remained the same; the historical lands of the Bohemian crown were only provinces represented in the imperial council. In the more general development of civic society, however, the constitution signified a radical advance and granted to individual citizens substantially greater rights and freedoms. This liberal constitution was in force until 1918.

Around 1850, although only 19 percent of the population of the Habsburg Empire lived in the Czech lands, they produced 28 percent of the empire's industrial production. The Czechs had better access to West European markets, a better qualified working force, modern agriculture, forestry, and industry, a relatively advanced network of roads and railways and, last but not least,

the rich resources of high-quality coal in Ostrava and northern Moravia, and abundant brown coal in Bohemia.

Already in 1830 the iron and steel works in Vítkovice (Ostrava) were set up right next to the black coal mines. The idea came from Franz Xaver Riepl, a Vienna professor of mineralogy and an economic genius, who envisaged the crucial role of the Vítkovice steelworks in the future railway boom. Riepl foresaw that any railway line going from Vienna northward must use the Oder Valley, in which Ostrava is situated. When the Northern Railway was under construction, the Vítkovice plant supplied the rails and other essential material, and after it reached Ostrava in 1848, the railway began to carry its products to Vienna, Italy, and the Balkans. From Vienna came not only the necessary expertise, but also, from 1835, the essential capital of Solomon Rothschild. Czech coal contains undesirable phosphorus, but in 1877 the Thomas process that eliminates it was patented in Britain. The Vítkovice works immediately purchased the revolutionary know-how and began mass production of high-quality steel.

The example of Vítkovice demonstrates how the Danube monarchy compensated for its lack of colonies by exploitation of its peripheral regions. The success of Vítkovice and all other Ostrava industrial plants was due not only to abundant black coal, but also to the plentiful and cheap labor force. Moreover, those peasants, only recently transformed into industrial workers, still retained their small farms, enabling them to survive during the frequent economic crises. From these crises, paradoxically, the Vítkovice works profited, because the smaller plants had to be liquidated, thus eliminating competition.

After Ostrava, the most important Czech industrial center was in Pilsen, in western Bohemia. In 1842 the biggest Czech brewery was founded there, using the new technology of bottom fermentation. *Měšťanský pivovar* (Burgheer brewery) still produces and exports the famous golden beer with characteristic hoppy taste, Pilsner Urquell ("Prazdroj" in Czech). The majority of lagers produced today, so-called Pils, are based upon the original recipe of this first "pilsner."

In 1869, the young Emil Škoda, from a prominent Pilsen family, bought the engineering plant in his hometown. In view of ever-growing competition, Škoda from the very beginning specialized in high-quality products. He bought a plant with thirty-three workers and soon made of it a huge factory employing four thousand workers and two hundred technicians. They produced not only wrought iron and steel of the highest quality, but also the most sophisticated arms. Later the Pilsen Škoda company became one of the largest producers of weapons in the world. Comparison of the Vítkovice

and Škoda companies illustrates the line of development in the economy of the Czech lands in the nineteenth century; at first the know-how and capital came from Vienna, but later enterprises were based on local intellectual and financial resources.

In the 1850s, amid all its political oppression, Vienna launched an ambitious program of economic reforms, inspired by liberal economic theories and directed by the newly established Ministry of Trade. Internal custom borders were abolished, railways were privatized and the construction of new lines was generously subsidized, a dense net of business and trade chambers was established, and telegraph systems were systematically expanded. Missing, however, was the availability of cheap loans for agricultural entrepreneurs, businesspeople, and industrialists. This demand was met by the exceptionally well-capitalized Credit Institute of Vienna (*Österreichische Credit-Anstalt für Handel und Gewerbe*), founded in 1855. Soon after, in 1868, the Czech *Živnostenská banka pro Čechy a Moravu* (Trade Bank for Bohemia and Moravia) opened in Prague. New trade (1859) and business (1862) codes opened the era of free economic competition in the Habsburg Empire.

The neo-absolutist government hoped that economic prosperity would eliminate the centrifugal tendencies in the Habsburg Empire, but the growing economic prosperity of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia contributed significantly to the worsening of relations between Czechs and Vienna. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the *Gründerzeit* (founder epoch), the Czech lands became the undisputed motor of Austrian economy, but all attempts at

Czech national self-determination failed. This situation could not last long, which should have been clear to Vienna, but it was not.

The fierce Czech-Austrian struggle and social conflicts caused by rapid industrialization were the background of the cultural boom. Jan Evangelista