Introduction: Czech Exceptionalism

Why should outsiders care about the Czech people and their politics? Though the country styles itself the heart of Europe, its objective importance is hard to see. It is the 85th largest country in the world by population (between Benin and Portugal), the 116th by area (between UAE and Serbia), the 40th by GDP per capita (just behind Greece and Estonia), and the 50th by total GDP (between Qatar and Peru).[1] By almost any standard measure, the Czech Republic is an ordinary country – not too big or too small, not too rich or too poor.

But the Czech Republic does have reason to claim our attention. Czech politics presents in refined form some of the major forces shaping the modern world – whether nationalism, democracy, multiculturalism, the dilemmas of being a small state, communism, state division, economic reform, and coming to terms with the past. By virtue of being in the heart of Europe, the Czech lands have experienced in the most direct way possible the vicissitudes of the past two centuries. Czech politics can thus serve as a microcosm for understanding these world-historical forces.

This chapter, however, will argue that Czech politics has an even stronger claim on our attention. In many ways, the Czechs are not just a microcosm or an exemplar, but a trailblazer and a model. Czech politics has pioneered new and unprecedented ways of dealing with just about all of the phenomena described in the previous paragraph. At the least the Czechs show us new possibilities, and at the most they reveal better ways forward. For those who wish to understand politics, it is not just interesting but essential to know something about the Czech experience. This introduction will attempt to make the case for the study of Czech politics by describing this Czech exceptionalism and what it teaches us about politics.

The birth of the Czech nation in the 19th century is in many ways typical of Europe of the time. Czech nation builders closely followed the example of their German neighbours in building an imagined community based on language and culture and relying on print media and schools to spread their message. But the result of these struggles was very different than elsewhere.

Most importantly, Czech nationalism was far less militant and far more flexible than the nationalism of its peers. Indeed, most of the early nationalists were content to remain a part of the Habsburg Empire, and Czech resistance to imperial rule was almost entirely passive up to the very end. Czech nationalism is even one that does not take itself too seriously – witness national icons like the Good Soldier Švejk or the fictional inventor Jára Cimrman. What explains this? One factor may be that Czechness was created in a fairly well-off people living in a relatively liberal empire. Life was good enough, so why rock the

[1] These rankings are approximate and vary across sources.

boat too much. Regardless of the cause, Czech nation building challenges the stereotypical view of militancy and violence that came to be associated with nationalism, particularly in peripheral countries. It shows the possibility of an ethnic nationalism without virulent xenophobia or armed struggle.

The creation of the independent state of Czechoslovakia in 1918 had its own peculiarities. Czech nationalism did not lead directly to a Czech state. Instead, Czechs found themselves a part of a multi-ethnic state that included Germans, Slovaks, and Hungarians. While this did, of course, lead to conflict, the newly-formed Czechoslovak Republic was far more functional than one might expect. It is going too far to see interwar Czechoslovakia as an ideal of interethnic harmony, but the state was unique for its time and place in protecting the civil rights of minorities and giving them political representation. And it did this under less than ideal circumstances. Interwar governments frequently had to deal with ethnic provocations from both inside and outside the country. All, of course, did not end well, but for two decades one of the most diverse countries in Europe worked. It was peaceful and prosperous and democratic.

Even more interesting is the way the leaders of the state created a new "ethnicity", the Czechoslovak. There was nothing natural or obvious about this designation. Czechs and Slovaks had last been united in the 10th century and for most of modern history Czechs had been ruled from Vienna while Slovaks were under the thumb of Hungarians. Their ethnic identities and national mythologies had also emerged separately. Yet, most Czechs ultimately embraced the Czechoslovak state and even the Czechoslovak identity. This was not a case of either/or, they were both Czechs and Czechoslovaks. In short, Czech politics can teach us lessons about the possibility of multi-ethnic democracy and even the mutability of ethnic identity.

Another exceptionalism from this era was Czechoslovak democracy. While all of its neighbours were succumbing to communism, military rule, or fascism, Czechoslovakia remained a home for free elections. While revisionist accounts point to the blemishes on interwar democracy, there is little question that it met the basic standards of democracy for the time. To get a sense of the achievement, consider how many democracies today are completely surrounded by authoritarian regimes. Mongolia might be the only current example. And the international environment of the time was far less supportive to say the least. The reasons for the survival of democracy are still debated. One explanation might be the absence of forces who had the ability and desire to seize power – the army had new leadership, the nobility had been stripped of its titles and much of its property, and neither communism nor fascism fit a country that was predominantly a middle-class mostly-Slavic state. Again, interwar Czechoslovak politics can teach us lessons about the possibilities of democracy under very inauspicious circumstances.

The fall of this republic at Munich has become a historical touchstone because it raises debates about how to deal with expansionist dictators. The dilemma of appeasement versus pre-emptive strikes is well-known. Besides this issue in international relations, Munich also lays bare the dilemma of small states. Chamberlain has been derided, probably too severely, for his appeasement of Hitler, but what about Czech leaders who decided to surrender without a fight? Should they have fought even after their allies had abandoned them or after they had ceded the Sudetenland? They would have lost, but they could have put up a fight (they had a large armaments industry and before Munich good fortifications on the borders) and this might have had positive consequences for their national character. Or were their leaders correct in seeing the writing on the wall and avoiding bloodshed and even greater repression? Regardless of the correctness of this choice, it is hard to name many small countries who have taken the decision to lay down their arms without a fight that the Czechs did.

The communist takeover presents another unique aspect of Czech politics. Communists won a plurality in mostly free elections after the war. This put them in a position to lead the government and by 1948 they were able to seize power in a mostly legal way and with the support of much of the population. Czechoslovakia may thus be the first and only case of communism coming to power through democratic means and with considerable popular support. This has its reasons – the disappointment of Munich, liberation by the Red Army, and skilful manipulation by the Communist Party – but it does present a very different perspective on communism in the satellite states than the standard vision of Soviet imposition.

While communist rule mostly followed the Soviet model in terms of ideology and institutions, the Czechoslovak experience shows a reversal unknown elsewhere. While the typical Soviet satellite saw a hard-line period followed by a gradual thaw, Czechoslovakia experienced a revival of hard-line rule after Stalinism had receded. The thaw here of course culminated in the Prague Spring and the second hard-line period occurred after the Soviet invasion and was called normalisation. This latter period from 1969 to 1989 took the country back to the ideological rigour and cadre politics of the fifties but in a less violent way.

It also created a type of communism that was more or less unique (East Germany may be the only other example). Linz and Stepan (1996) call it “frozen post-totalitarianism” and Kitschelt et al. (1999) label it “bureaucratic authoritarian communism”. Its uniqueness lay in the combination of Stalinist politics with an advanced economy and a near complete loss of faith in communist ideology. That hard-line communism could be reimposed under these conditions and that cynicism and opportunism were enough for communism to work after a fashion again tell us something new about the nature of political regimes.

The postcommunist period has provided the Czech Republic with new ways to show its exceptionality. One can begin with the revolution itself. It has been given the moniker "velvet" in part because of how easy it was. After a clash between police and a regime-sponsored parade, the seemingly most stable regime in the region simply melted away. Though a rapid transition was not uncommon in the region, the contrast between before and after was easily the most extreme in Czechoslovakia. The country went from the depths of totalitarianism to a democratic poster child led by a former dissident almost overnight. Indeed, Czechoslovakia had the greatest one-year improvement in Freedom House scores in the more than forty-year history of the index.[2]

It was not just the speed and thoroughness that distinguished the Czech transition. Many scholars have argued that the fall of communism brought little that was new. No new isms emerged. These countries simply overthrew communism and replaced it with standard-issue liberal democracy. Krapfl (2013), however, argues that Czechoslovakia did bring new ideas into the revolutionary tradition. These were the ideals of humaneness and dignity which had never before been at the centre of a revolution. The Czech lands and dissidents like Havel were ground zero for these ideas which have since gone on to enrich the democratic lexicon in other democratic transitions.

Like the democratic transition, the breakup of Czechoslovakia created a new model for state division. It is hard to think of another state division that was so smooth and amicable as to deserve the title Velvet Divorce. This was not because both sides wanted divorce. A majority in both nations wanted to stay together and certainly passions had been inflamed by the time the decision was made. Yet just as Yugoslavia was descending into chaos, the ability of Czech and Slovak politicians to negotiate an end to a state that existed for 70 years was exceptional and suggests that secession and state division may not be quite so difficult and painful as existing theories predict. Indeed, it was not just the division that was painless. Ever since, relations between the two countries have been more or less problem-free. Each considers the other its strongest ally.

Economic reforms are another area where the Czech way was unique. This is not the basic point about the unprecedented nature of the transformation from communism to a market economy which is worth mentioning in its own right. Other states in the region had to overcome similar obstacles. What distinguishes the Czech Republic is the role of the public in these reforms and its methods of privatization.

At the start of the transition most would-be reformers worried that the public would come to oppose reform as soon as it began to take away the

[2] This results from summing together the political rights and civil liberties scores. Its improvement in the Polity index was the third largest in the entire dataset.

guaranteed employment and low prices that they had become accustomed to. What makes the Czech Republic exceptional was not just that the public endorsed the initial reforms – this occurred, albeit to a lesser extent, in other postcommunist countries as well – but that it kept electing supporters of the free market – a market without adjectives in Václav Klaus's terms – long after other countries had turned to social democrats and former communists to express their disapproval. It took the Czechs eight long years to make such a move and even then it was far from decisive.

The other aspect of reform that set the Czechs apart was their way of divesting themselves of the enormous amount of property owned by the state. The standard prescription was to sell these properties to the highest bidder. The Czechs, however, pioneered two methods that had never been tried before and have never been replicated to the same extent. The first was restitution of property to its former owners from whom it had been seized. Despite the manifest justice of this approach, it had generally been considered infeasible and uneconomical until the Czechs tried it. The second was voucher privatization. Every Czech citizen could purchase inexpensive vouchers which they could use to become owners of state-owned enterprises, thus creating a citizens' capitalism. Though the success of both methods has been questioned, the Czechs did show the world that there was more than one way to skin a cat.

Finally, the Czechs have broken ground in coming to terms with an authoritarian past. Most postcommunist countries have found some way of dealing with those who collaborated with the communist regime. Few, however, have gone as far as the Czechs. Not only did the Czechs give us the term now used for the practice of purging collaborators – lustration – but they were the first to pursue it and have taken it farther than any other country. The Czech policy of requiring occupants of high public office to submit evidence that they had not collaborated with the secret police has vetted far more people, introduced far tougher sanctions – exclusion from office – and extended far longer in time than any other country. Naturally, it has its defects such as banning the innocent along with the guilty, but it did open new horizons for coming to terms with the past.

Every nation is exceptional in its own way. One could likely produce a similar, though perhaps not quite so long, list of exceptional experiences or policies for many other countries. And one could equally write of the ways that the Czech Republic is a typical country both in general and for its particular time and place. As suggested earlier, one could portray the Czechs as exemplars of such processes as nation and state building, multi-ethnic discord, totalitarian rule, democratic transition, economic reform, and coming to terms with the past. Yet, the descriptions above suggest that unique events did happen in the Czech lands and that they are worth studying.

One of Vaclav Havel's (1993) books was entitled *The Art of the Impossible*. Czech politics gives a sense of this art by uncovering possibilities

that have been absent elsewhere in the world, possibilities that are thought to be impossible. They include the possibility of a relatively benign and peaceful nationalism, the possibility of creating a multi-ethnic identity, the possibility of a democratic and multi-ethnic state in the interwar period, the possibility of laying down one's arms when faced with a more powerful foe, the possibility of democratically chosen communism, the possibility of a hard-line communist regime even after people and elites had lost faith in communism, the possibility of a rapid and peaceful democratization and state breakup, the possibility of a popular (in both senses of the word) transition to the market, and the possibility of coming to terms with a brutal past through a comprehensive policy of lustration. These possibilities were not always good ones – though they were often better than the more conventional alternatives – but they should be of interest to any student of politics who wishes to understand how societies are and can be governed. That, in short, is the case for caring about Czech politics.

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The aim of the chapters that follow is to explore many of the issues outlined above. They are not intended to make the case for Czech exceptionalism as I have above, but simply to provide a better understanding of Czech politics. They represent the work of political scientists and so the emphasis is on conceptual and causal analysis. While the book does attempt to describe the basic who, what, where, and when of Czech politics over the last two centuries, it is not a history per se. Rather its focus is on conceptual understanding – for example, of regime types, party systems, and institutions – and causality – the main forces behind the course of political events in the Czech lands and the consequences of these events.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I focuses on Czech politics up to 1989. Chapter 1 analyses the formation of the Czech nation, Czech politics under the Habsburg Empire, and the creation of an independent state. Chapter 2 focuses on politics during the democratic First Republic (1918-1938) which has been mythologized as a paradise lost and has served as an inspiration for much of current politics. Chapter 3 covers the half century of non-democratic or partially democratic regimes from 1938 to 1989 with most attention on Nazi and Communist rule. All of these chapters describe the political traditions that influence politics to this day. Chapter 4 explains the fall of communism and the creation of a new democracy. Chapter 5 considers the roots and process of the breakup of Czechoslovakia.

Part II analyses the quarter century of democratic rule since the fall of communism in 1989. Chapter 6 analyses the new Czech constitutional order – its main institutions, their powers, and their effect on Czech politics. Chapter 7 focuses on elections and electoral systems as the country has now become

the site of near constant elections. Chapter 8 deals with political parties and the party system, especially the recent breakdown in both. Chapter 9 tackles the thorny issue of economic reforms and economic policy. Chapter 10 describes the foreign affairs of the Czech Republic with a particular focus on NATO and the EU. Chapter 11 concludes with a larger view of the last two centuries of Czech politics.

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1. The birth of modern Czech politics: 1848-1918

The task of understanding the Czech political tradition prior to the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 is not easy for a historian, let alone a political scientist. The issue is not only finding a suitable starting point in time; more important is the fact that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Czech history has frequently been politicised and subject to various, often antithetical, interpretations. Understandably, this chapter cannot promise to be completely objective and neutral, but it will seek to describe Czech political developments until the end of World War I by employing a perspective that sheds light on the capabilities and deficiencies of Czech society and its political elites. The patterns that emerged before 1918 served as a basis for the many types of regime and society that followed.

1.1. Czech society and the Czech national revival: a difficult transition from serfs to citizens

A useful place to begin is Rokkan's conceptual map of Europe. He attempted to categorize the distribution of European nations and ethnic groups which sought to construct a modern nation at the threshold of the nineteenth century (Rokkan 1999b: 135-147). Although Rokkan's model is primarily focussed on a 'Europe of Celtic, Latin and Germanic peoples', its usefulness goes beyond that. The conceptual map places European states and regions along two axes. The 'West-East' axis combines economic and territorial (geopolitical) criteria (centre vs. periphery, strength of city network), whereas the 'North-South' axis is determined by Catholic (South), mixed (centre) and Protestant (North) areas. This second axis differentiates the conditions of nation-building, whereas the 'West-East' axis emphasises those of state-building.

Rokkan's map shows that the most successful and earliest nation-states were to be found in the European geopolitical centres: Catholic France, Spain and Portugal; the religiously mixed Netherlands; and the Protestant Britain, Denmark and Sweden. Unsuccessful nations, by contrast, were located on the peripheries of European politics. As a religiously and linguistically mixed territory and part of the Habsburg Empire, the Czech lands faced an uneasy path towards the establishment of a full political nation. This was to various degrees a result of disputes between its Czech- and German-speaking populations, opposition to Czech national aspirations from the Catholic Church, and the fact that Protestants, drawing from German culture, were not necessarily supporters of Czech nationhood (as they sometimes were in Western European countries).

Of key importance for both the Czech and the wider Central European experience was the process of modern nation building, often described in Czech historiography using the somewhat imprecise, but poetic and nationalistically tinged expression *národní obrození* – national revival or renascence. The term suggests the pre-existence of a Czech nation in a distant past. Czech national mythology interprets the Battle of White Mountain as the symbolic beginning of Habsburg rule and the suppression of Czech nationhood. The nation gradually revived itself, beginning in the late eighteenth century.

This story is not, however, the historical truth. Modern nations are the product of historical developments, which could have taken – at some stages at least – alternative paths. As Jiří Kořalka (1996: 19-66) reminds us, in the early-nineteenth-century Czech lands there were no fewer than five alternative (and not necessarily exclusive) national-political collective identities: Austrian (a patriotism linked with the Habsburg dynasty); Greater German (a nationalist idea that brought together the German-speaking citizens of the Habsburg monarchy with those of what would later become Germany); Slavic (which sought the future of Czech existence in a close alliance with other Slavic ethnicities, counting largely on a political leadership role for Russia); Bohemian (based on territorial rather than linguistic differences – by analogy we might also speak of Moravian patriotism, involving both the Czech- and German-speaking inhabitants of Moravia); and, finally, Czech (which emphasised the ethnic and linguistic construct of the Czech nation). Not all of these notions were of equal relevance. The dynastic Austrian and Bohemian identities, disregarding as they did linguistic differences, enjoyed the support of very narrow social bases of civil servants and certain intellectuals. Slavic patriotism was more of a political tactic than a truly shared identity. And so the Czech and German linguistic nationalisms emerged during the nineteenth century as clear winners. Czech nationalism spanned the territorial boundaries of the historical lands of Bohemia and Moravia, whereas German nationalism extended beyond the borders of the Habsburg monarchy.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Czechs were becoming a fully-fledged modern nation.[3] They underwent a process typical of most of Europe at the time, with Herder's linguistic and ethnic notion of nation and German nationalism serving as paradigms.

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[3] For non-ruling ethnic groups like the Czechs, building a modern nation involved three processes: (1) overcoming cultural and linguistic inferiority by cultivating and developing a literary language and a national culture; (2) overcoming political subjugation by obtaining the right to participate in political decision-making; and (3) abolishing the inferior social standing of their members vis-à-vis the ruling nation (Hroch 1996:10-11).

As Miroslav Hroch (1999) has argued, the Czech national movement enjoyed a good starting position in that it could refer to the long tradition of independent statehood in the medieval and early modern period. Indeed, early advocates of Czech nationhood frequently based their arguments on historical rights. Scholarly interest among the Czechs in their language, history and ethnography emerged at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the context of the Habsburg monarchy, this was relatively early. The interest of scholars during the Enlightenment was soon complemented by, and later replaced with, political demands. The period until the mid-1840s was a time of cautious national campaigning by patriotic activists on behalf of Czech cultural and political ideas.[4] The campaign won the support of more and more Czech speakers. With the revolution of 1848, Czech nationalism became a truly mass movement, which gradually built up a Czech social structure and formulated more radical demands – not just nationalist but also democratic.

As suggested above, geopolitics was a factor influencing to what degree Central European political systems were able to democratise themselves. Of equal weight were events that were connected with attempts to establish democratic and liberal ideas not only in Central Europe, but on the whole continent. The Revolutions of 1848 were, naturally, a symbolic moment. Unlike their predecessors in the 1820s and 1830s, they immediately influenced the nations in Habsburg-ruled Central Europe. And, unlike the exports of the French Revolution, in this case the reception in Central Europe of the new political currents was favourable.

The year 1848 was a milestone on the road to modern democratic politics in Central Europe. In terms of the preconditions for the liberalisation and democratisation of political and social life, the Revolutions of 1848 separated Central (Habsburg) Europe from Eastern (Romanov) Europe and South-Eastern (Ottoman) Europe, which never received the ideas of the revolution. The year 1848 was also important in that it was still the era of *risorgimento* nationalism, when demands for the liberalisation and democratisation of political life went hand in hand with calls for national, cultural and political emancipation. The tendencies to Germanise, to replace Slavic languages with German both in intellectual endeavours and daily life, failed to prevent the progress of the nation-building project among the Czechs, but as a result these projects were clearly pitted against the Germans or, symbolically, against Vienna (Claval 2000).

An even more important legacy of the revolution was that it started the process by which serfs were transformed into citizens. The revolution in fact abolished for some time the prerogatives of the aristocracy, many of which were not restored during the neo-absolutist period of 1849-1860. An

[4] The important Czech historian Jiří Štaif (2005) describes Czech national leaders of the pre-March 1848 period as ‘a cautious elite’.