

History of Minority Rights and Language in the Czech Republic

Mary Betz

Kent State University

Both the position and composition of minorities in Czech society have fluctuated greatly in the past hundred years. The Czech region formerly included a wide range of ethnic groups, but today is much less diverse. The changes in the past century can be divided into major time periods including the Habsburg Era, World War I and II, the communist takeover, and the transformation to democracy. During each of these time periods, the composition and rights of these minority groups and their languages have varied immensely ("Protection," 2003).

Czech Minority History

I. Habsburg Era

Minorities were of great concern for the Habsburg Empire because the region included people from a range of ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and languages (B. Eddleston, personal communication, August 9, 2013). However, the empire was controlled from Vienna using only the German language. German was used in business and official dealings, while the Czech language was largely unaccepted (Bibo, 1998). Soon, the Habsburgs struggled to hold their power over their diverse states when nationalist ideals swept the region (B. Eddleston, personal communication, August 9, 2013).

Thus, previously peaceful times for minorities came to an end when nationalism took hold in the 18th century. The conflicts began when ethnic groups, such as the Czechs, attempted to revert back to their medieval state boundaries to retain their own culture and language. The Czech language and cultural identity was often at odds with those who held power. It was during this time period that the Czech language nearly died out. However, the clash between ethnic and political boundaries could not be easily

resolved. It was not until the eighteenth century for the Czech language to be revived through the popularity of composers, politicians and writers of the time (Bibo, 1998).

The era of nationalism was just the beginning of minority issues in the region.

II. Interwar Period

The time after World War I is often referred to as the Interwar Period in Czech history. The Habsburg era ended in 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles provided separate states for minorities. The Czech and Slovak territories were combined as one due to the similarity of their language and culture. In fact, the two languages were nearly mutually intelligible between Czechs and Slovaks. This combined territory now included Bohemia and Moravia (formerly under Austrian rule), and Slovakia (formerly under Hungarian rule) (Rhodes, 1995). However, from 1919 to 1923, wars broke out in dispute of these boundaries including the borders between Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary (B. Eddleston, personal communication, August 9, 2013).

Despite the attempt to divide the states between different ethnicities, it was said that out of most European countries, Czechoslovakia's population was the least homogenous (Rhodes, 1995). Sudeten Germans made up 33% of the population (3,000,000) in Czechoslovakia, which was equal to the populations of Slovaks and Ruthenes combined (B. Eddleston, personal communication, August 9, 2013). In addition, Czechoslovakia included 750,000 Hungarians, 200,000 Jews, and 100,000 Poles. Roma, though numerous, were excluded from being considered a minority group. Thus, Czechoslovakia was a mix of many diverse ethnic groups in one territory with many different beliefs and traditions ("Protection," 2003, page 65). Though the region was very diverse, during the censuses in the 1920s, only one ethnicity of Czechoslovak

was given. By doing this, the young nation tried to “magnify the size of the national majority” and “justify the claim to statehood and territory” (Rhodes, 1995, p. 348).

After the end of World War I, many new minority laws were created through the new democracy. Much of the protection for minorities came about from international peace treaties at the end of the World War I, such as the Treaty of Saint-Germain in 1919 which defined minority groups' legal status. The Czechoslovak constitution protected minorities of religious or racial minority groups. Though the Act on Language Rights in 1920 set Czech as the official language, minorities were free to use their language in daily life and be educated in their native language. In contrast to many other European countries' legislation at this time, Czechoslovakia protected minorities and granted them many freedoms for their own culture and language (“Protection,” 2003).

III. World War II

World War II brought many changes to the Czech lands. Hitler gained control of Czechoslovakia, which was divided once again. The national language became German again, due to Nazi rule. The language of the majority, Czech, was again threatened.

World War II not only brought a change in politics, but also great change in the demographics of minorities. With Hitler in control of the Sudeten territory, the Czechs lost Sudeten Germans, which were previously their largest minority. By the end of World War II, the minority population had largely disappeared including many of the Jews exterminated by Hitler (“Protection,” 2003). In addition, more than 2.5 million Germans and also many Hungarians were also forced to leave the region in 1945 for being accused of involvement with Nazis (Cordell & Wolff, 2005). Many Czech Roma were

also killed by the Nazis. In fact, most Roma in the Czech Republic today originally immigrated from Slovakia after World War II (“Protection,” 2003).

IV. Communist Period

Communists took power in 1948 and the region became part of the Communist Block (Rhodes, 1995). Czechoslovakia was reunited once again after the end of WWII and was now very much influenced by the Soviets. During the time of Communism, Russians made elementary school children all learn Russian. Some Czechs today still despise the Russian language and refuse to speak it (Bibo, 1998).

By 1984, population estimates indicated that the country had 590,000 Hungarians, 71,000 Poles, 48,000 Ukrainians, and 5,000 Jews. Roma were estimated to be 250,000 to 400,000 in number. Very few Germans remained in Czechoslovakia except those near the Sudetenland border who had escaped deportation. It was not until 1953 that they could become citizens, and not until 1968 that their ethnicity was recognized. Soon, the remaining Germans either emigrated elsewhere or assimilated into the majority population (“Protection,” 2003).

As for minority legislation, Amendments to the Czechoslovak constitution in 1968 “defined the status of ethnic groups and acknowledged the full political and cultural rights of legally recognised minorities” (“Protection,” 2003, p.67). These “legally recognized minorities” included Poles, Hungarians, Ukrainians and also Germans who were previously not recognized. Roma were still not recognized as a minority group but rather as “groups of inhabitants” and because this amendment excluded them, it was difficult for them to integrate into Czech society (“Protection,” 2003, p.67). Though these amendments were added, minorities complained that they were still not being

represented politically. Most of the Hungarians resided in the Slovakia regions of the state and suffered from anti-Hungarian policies that restricted the use of the Hungarian language in business settings. The rest of the minority groups, including the remaining Poles and Ukrainians, had difficult lives under anti-minority government legislation ("Protection," 2003).

V. The Rise of Democracy

After the fall of communism, Czechoslovakia was able to separate once again. The transition was made easier by many of the natural divides that were already present between the two new countries. In fact, schools in both regions had already been using their respective language for education for some time before the split. Once again, the composition of minorities changed once again with this divide ("Protection," 2003).

Population statistics after the fall of communism vary in estimates of the composition of ethnic groups in the Czech Republic. However, it is clear that the Czech Republic had much fewer minorities than it did previously ("Protection," 2003). Some estimated Czechs to have made up 94% of the population (Rhodes, 1995). However, other estimates disagree and argue that this statistic is exaggerated.

One of the largest minority groups was the Slovaks. The Czech Republic was estimated to have over 500,000 Slovaks despite the reported 315,000 statistic. Many had moved west out of Slovakia after World War II ("Protection," 2003). Slovaks may have reported themselves as "Czech" due to their feeling of belonging to this identity. They were given greater opportunities in the Czech Republic and the languages are similar. Thus, this may account for some discrepancies in the statistics. Though Slovaks

make up the largest minority, they had few complaints of discrimination and have equal language rights through legislation ("Minority," 2005).

The German minority was reported as 60,000, but many of these individuals are "largely the fairly assimilated, aging remnant of the much larger pre-World War II population" (Rhodes, 1995, p. 347). However, the remaining German population had some complaints regarding compensation for land taken in the 1945 Benes decrees. The Czech government had only compensated land claims if it had been taken after 1948. Thus, the Germans felt discriminated against as a whole due to the lack of land compensation (Rhodes, 1995).

In addition, the Roma population was estimated to be double of the reported statistics. It was estimated the population was near 200,000 in 1989 ("Protection," 2003). Many Roma avoid stating their true ethnicity and this may account for the differences in statistics. The Roma minority is often the target of discrimination and violence. Much of the sense of hostility towards Roma stems from the involvement of Roma in crime. Roma have voiced discontent with the Czech government for little protection for their rights. At the time, Prime Minister Klaus "characterized some of their demands as unrealistic and downplayed their situation as primarily a local issue" (Rhodes, 1995, p. 347). A law passed in 1994 required a clean five-year criminal record with two years residence to be considered for Czech citizenship. Many Roma believed this to be discrimination against them ("Protection," 2003).

In some statistics, the Czech ethnicity group includes Bohemian Czech, Moravian, and Silesian ("Protection," 2003). However, many people in Moravia and Silesia, have voiced their wish for more autonomy. The subject of Moravians being a

separate ethnic group is controversial. In the past, Moravia, though divided into a separate province, was a part of the Habsburg Empire with the rest of the Czech people. Much of Silesia is located in Poland, but the portion in the Czech Republic has more than 60,000 Poles. Though these areas may seem to be important differences for autonomy, the areas still speak Czech as their native language (though with a regional dialect) and historically have been considered “Czech” (Rhodes, 1995). In addition, the first President of Czechoslovakia was Moravian himself.

Today, according to the CIA World Factbook, estimates place those with Czech ethnicity at 63.7%. It estimates 1.6% to be Slovak and gives an other category at 30% of the population (“Czech Republic,” 2013). Overall, Poles, Germans, Hungarians and Ukrainians are gradually decreasing and becoming more and more assimilated into the Czech majority (“Protection,” 2003). Although after the fall of communism, the Czech Republic had much fewer minorities, the new constitution had been “criticized by ethnic or regional groups who feel their rights and status have been inadequately recognized” (Rhodes, 1995, p.347).

According to Bill Eddleston a professor of history at Anglo-American University, many “foolish American political scientists and economists arrived in Eastern Europe and told people that capitalism and democracy would solve all their problems. As far as ethnic questions go, democracy actually made things worse” (personal communication, August 9, 2013). However, Professor Eddleston said he believes entry into the European Union (EU) was what urged change for minorities. He said the benefits of being an EU member, including financial support, gives the EU great control over the policy in these nations (B. Eddleston, personal communication, August 9, 2013).

The EU put pressure on many central and east European countries, including the Czech Republic, for minority protection (Ram, 2003). The Czech Republic signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages in 2000 in which Czechs agreed to heed human rights legislation on an international level. Signing this charter demonstrated the validity of international law as just as valid as domestic legislation. In addition, Act 273/2001 concerning the Rights of Members of National Minorities was enacted in 2001. This act further recognized national minorities and also allows the use of a name or surname in an individual's native language and also multilingual names. It included the acceptance of their native language in court, in official documents, and in education.

Though rights of minorities are written in legislation, it is unclear whether all groups truly have opportunities to be educated in their native language. Because there are so few Germans remaining in Czech Republic, few schools are offered for their educational needs, so most go to standard Czech schools. The Poles have a "fully developed school system and network," which is unique from all of the other minorities ("Minority," 2005, para. 11). The Poles have opportunities to learn from preschool until higher education.

The state of Roma education is poor, and as of 2005 there were no schools using Roma as the language of primary education in the Czech Republic. Often, Romani children do poorly at all Czech schools, and parents send them to remedial schools instead. As for the Slovak minority, though it is the largest minority, there are no primary or secondary schools in Slovak. It is still possible to learn Slovak at a college

level. Despite these limitations in Slovak education, few Slovaks have voiced desire for more schools ("Minority," 2005).

Thus, the Czech region was once a land made up of many cultures and diverse ethnicities. Each time period brought changes to the region. Today, the Czech Republic has few minorities except for the Roma. As a result, concerns with the protection of other ethnic groups have largely disappeared. Only minority and social issues of the Roma still remain today ("Minority," 2005). Though much legislation has been written for the protection of education for minorities, the Roma still struggle to succeed in education today. While incorporating the Roma language into school curriculum may not be possible, at least the integration of the Roma minority into the education system is needed to avoid marginalizing this group in society ("Minority," 2005). With pressures from the EU and Czech minority rights activists, perhaps progress can be made towards solving the complicated issue of the Roma in the future.

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