

GERMAN LIBERALISM, NATIONALISM AND THE JEWS:  
THE *NEUE FREIE PRESSE* AND THE GERMAN-CZECH  
CONFLICT IN THE HABSBUERG MONARCHY 1900-1918\*

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The *Neue Freie Presse* occupies a special place in the history of the Habsburg Monarchy during the constitutional era. It had the reputation of being the "Times of Central Europe" and the "Weltblatt" of Austria. It was by far the most powerful and prestigious of the various Viennese newspapers. As such it was a newspaper with a definite political mission, founded to protect German liberal interests within the Habsburg Monarchy (as well as make a great deal of money for its editors). It was the "German-liberal" newspaper *par excellence*, and, as we shall see, stoutly defended that political position whenever required, and it was as a stereotypical example of an Austrian liberal that Moritz Benedikt, the newspaper's legendary chief editor in its heyday, was vilified by Albert Fuchs in his influential *Geistige Strömungen in Österreich*, following in the wake of Karl Kraus's obsessive attacks<sup>1</sup>. Yet the *Neue Freie Presse* also had another identity, which it often denied, but was arguably just as important as its German-liberal persona.

The *Neue Freie Presse* was generally regarded by the public, by journalists, and even by itself in unguarded moments, as a "Jewish paper", that is to say a newspaper owned and staffed mainly by Jews and representing primarily the opinions of the German Jewish bourgeoisie of "Cisleithania", the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy. Henry Wickham Steed, admittedly no friend of the *Neue Freie Presse*, called it the "chief German-Jewish organ" and saw it as voicing Jewish support for "economic pan-Germanism"<sup>2</sup>. One of Karl Kraus's main problems with the *Neue Freie Presse* was precisely its Jewishness<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, Theodor Herzl, the *Neue Freie Presse*'s star journalist until his death in 1904, criticized his employers for not owning up to their Jewishness by supporting his Zionism. He had no doubt that the paper was "Jewish" and he was confirmed in this by an interesting admission by Moritz Benedikt, the joint chief editor, later sole chief editor and guiding spirit of the paper until his death in 1920. In trying to justify his refusal to go along with Herzl's idea of a Jewish state in October 1895, Benedikt remarked: "We were regarded as a Jewish paper up until now, but we have never conceded this. Now all of a sudden we are supposed to give up all the screens

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<sup>1</sup> Fuchs, Albert: *Geistige Strömungen in Österreich 1867-1918*. Vienna 1949, 20-24.

<sup>2</sup> Steed, Henry Wickham: *Through Thirty Years*. London 1924, 305.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kraus, Karl: *Die Fackel*, No. 59 (1900) 1-3.

behind which we have been standing."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps they never conceded the point, but Benedikt, and his joint chief editor Eduard Bacher, knew only too well what the actual situation was.

A study of the German-Czech conflict from the viewpoint of the *Neue Freie Presse* thus allows us to view both the rationale behind German liberal policy in that question, but also offers an opportunity to examine the links between Austrian liberalism's attitude towards the nationality question and the ideological consequences of the history of Jewish emancipation in the Monarchy. This should be of significant help in our understanding of the nature of "Austrian liberalism", for the full implications of the ideology of Jewish emancipation remain only partially understood, even though the large Jewish role in Habsburg liberal thought and culture has often been acknowledged.

That the *Neue Freie Presse* was not only "Jewish" but also had a particular interest in the situation of Bohemian and Moravian Germans, and of German Jews, is not too hard to understand. Both Bacher and Benedikt came from the region, Bacher having been born in Postelberg, Bohemia and Benedikt in Kwanitz, Moravia. Moreover, Bohemian and Moravian affairs were not a regional, peripheral concern for the Viennese press. Rather, as the industrial heartland of the Monarchy was to be found in these provinces, they were much more the hinterland of the Viennese liberal (Jewish) press than Lower Austria was. Many of the *Neue Freie Presse's* Viennese readership, especially if it was Jewish, would have come from these provinces, and would have had family ties, or economic interests still there. The predominant part of the Viennese Jewish bourgeois establishment had their roots in the Bohemian crown lands of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. Then again, because of the political constellation in Cisleithania, the German-Czech conflict was not simply one among many problems in a crisis-ridden Austria, it was *the* problem in Austrian domestic and constitutional affairs, and often rivalled in importance the half domestic, half external problem of Austrian-Hungarian relations. As such, the German-Czech conflict was a central and oft repeated concern for the *Neue Freie Presse* between 1900 and 1918.

It does not follow, however, that the *Neue Freie Presse* concentrated unduly on the specifically Jewish situation in Bohemia and Moravia. Indeed, given its wish not to concede its "Jewish" character, one can almost expect there to have been a certain reluctance to face the Jewish question head on. Only when it felt it was absolutely necessary to say something, or when there was a chance to show up the brutality of the Czechs, did the *Neue Freie Presse* recognise a Jewish aspect to the German-Czech conflict, and it was always careful to approach the subject either in a "German" spirit, or one of a very "universalist" liberalism. Perhaps one should say rather in a spirit which was "German" and "universalist liberal", for to the *Neue Freie Presse* these qualities were indistinguishable.

In the crisis years of the late 1890s the *Neue Freie Presse* had several times used its leading article to decry the anti-Semitism of the Czechs, and remarked on the way

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<sup>4</sup> Herzl, Theodor: Briefe und Tagebücher. Vol. 2. Berlin 1983, 255, diary entry 20. 10. 1895.

that purportedly “anti-German” demonstrations had ended up in anti-Semitic riots, often against Czech Jews<sup>5</sup>. At the turn of the century, moreover, the Hilsner Affair, in which a Jewish man, Leopold Hilsner, was accused of the ritual murder, with others, of a Christian Czech maiden, often made it to the front page of the newspaper. The trial, conviction and subsequent legal process, Austria’s version of the Dreyfus-*iade*, were closely followed in the paper from September 1899 to November 1900, with great emphasis being put on the superstitious and backward nature of the Czech peasantry, and on their exploitation, despite the noble efforts of Thomas Masaryk, by unscrupulous Czech nationalist politicians<sup>6</sup>.

After this extraordinary affair, however, the anti-Semitic aspect was not put into play so much. On occasion the Czechs would be chastised for their attempts, including boycotts, to force Jews to vote Czech. Such attempts in Olmütz in 1900 and 1902 made the front page of the evening edition, while in 1903 the antics of the Czech politician, Březnovský, in using a parliamentary question to give immunity to a list of 600 German Jewish businessmen “who really wanted to be Czech” (i. e. were to be boycotted), made the front page of the morning edition<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps the most impassioned attack on the Czechs over the Jewish question came about in an indirect manner, as a reply to Karel Kramář’s unfortunate response to the Bialystok massacre of Jews, which happened in the summer of 1906 in the reaction that followed the Russian Revolution of 1905. Kramář, always a proponent of a Russian alliance, had expressed his sorrow at the casualties, involving hundreds killed, with the most awful atrocities reported, but had then commented that one only reaps the whirlwind of one’s own making. Because the Jews had been so heavily involved in the revolution, they now had to pay the price. The *Neue Freie Presse*’s response was typical: Kramář should know better than to look at the massacre in terms of Jew and non-Jew; rather the outrage of the world community was not because the victims were Jews, but because they were human beings. That is to say the tragedy was not a Jewish, but a universal, human one; in any case, Kramář was wrong in thinking that Jews all were revolutionaries, or the only ones. Moreover, those that had been revolutionaries were so for good reason, as Jews were persecuted by the Russian regime. To blame the Jews for their own massacre was unacceptable behaviour for a “civilized” man such as Kramář, who, the article concluded, should now be made into an honorary member of the Russian reactionary Black Hundreds<sup>8</sup>.

This was about as vituperative as the *Neue Freie Presse* got in accusing the Czechs of anti-Semitism, at least in the leading articles. Why this was so may have had something to do with a lessening, after Hilsner, of the stridency of Czech anti-Semitism, or – more likely – there is the fact that, as German Liberal support eroded in the years after 1900 in favour of the more radical, and anti-Semitic, German Nationalists led by Karl

<sup>5</sup> E. g. *Neue Freie Presse*, 6 April 1899 (m); 24 October 1899 (m).

<sup>6</sup> See Beller, Steven: *The Hilsner Affair: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism and the Individual in the Habsburg Monarchy at the Turn of the Century*. In: R. J. Pynsent (ed.): *T. G. Masaryk (1850–1937)*. Vol. 2: *Thinker and Critic*. London 1990.

<sup>7</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 26 November 1900 (e); 21 June 1902 (e); 24 April 1903 (m).

<sup>8</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 25 June 1906 (e).

Hermann Wolf, it became more difficult to play the anti-Semitic card against the Czechs. After all, it was the German "liberal" politicians who excluded two Viennese deputies because they were Jews in late May 1907, despite the *Neue Freie Presse's* assertion that anti-Semitism was a dead issue. The paper could assert all it liked that a coalition which allowed such an exclusion did not deserve the name "liberal" (*freisinnig*), but in the end it had to accept the excuses given, and the fact that the "German liberal" coalition of the German National Union included the Free Pan-German Party of Wolf, who had been one of the *Neue Freie Presse's* principal *bêtes noires*, and excluded at least three Viennese MPs who were too "liberal", or Jewish, to be acceptable<sup>9</sup>. Given the awkward situation that the party it supported accommodated anti-Semites, it might have appeared counter-productive to rail against Czech anti-Semitism.

There was, therefore, very little in the way of direct discussion of the plainly Jewish situation in the Bohemian crown lands in the *Neue Freie Presse* between 1900 and 1918. What there was, however, day after day, page after page, was report and analysis of the ins and outs of the conflict between Czechs and Germans, in which the *Neue Freie Presse* doggedly defended the German position, albeit trying to make that position appear as moderate and liberal as it could. In doing so it was relying on a view of the world which had become largely anachronistic by 1900, but in which its readership, especially its Jewish readership, continued to believe. To read the *Neue Freie Presse's* arguments for the German position between 1900 and 1918 is to see the *rationale* for the continuing attachment of the Jewish bourgeoisie to the German cause in Austria before 1918, and in the successor states thereafter.

I have argued elsewhere that the Austrian Jewish attachment to things German had a special character, and its own rationale<sup>10</sup>. It was due to the fact that Central European Jewry first entered non-Jewish modern society through the German version of the Enlightenment, through the *Aufklärung*, and, most importantly, through the German language, which shaped the loyalties of Jewish emancipationists so that they came to identify German culture with liberalism, and, in turn, liberalism with Judaism – and themselves. This identity of "German", "liberal" and "Jewish" never really dissipated, despite what Germans, liberals or Jews did subsequently, and the *Neue Freie Presse* was the epitome of this identification. One can argue that the newspaper's editorials were prone to rhetorical flourish and exaggeration, but when they asserted that, in their opinion, the principles of liberalism were *echt deutsch*, and that Jews (as non-Christians) provided the litmus test of liberalism's success, they meant it<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 30 May 1907 (m); 5 June 1907 (m); 21 June 1911 (m) p. 4. On hostility to Wolf, and the Pan-Germans, see *Neue Freie Presse*, 28 January 1900 (m); 11 January 1901 (m); 18 August 1901 (m); 1 November 1901 (m); 16 January 1902. Cf. Pulzer, Peter: *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria*. Revised edition. London 1988, 207–211.

<sup>10</sup> See Beller, Steven: *Vienna and the Jews 1867–1938: A Cultural History*. Cambridge 1989, 144ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 27 August 1899 (m) p. 1; 8 March 1895 (m) p. 1.

This complex identification of German, Jewish and liberal loyalties can also be seen in the newspaper's approach to the German-Czech question. The views expressed in the *Neue Freie Presse* from 1900 to 1918 are remarkably similar to those expressed in the Jewish liberal journal *Die Neuzeit* in the 1860s. There an article offers advice to the Slavic but aristocratic Poles in Galicia as to how to treat their Jewish compatriots, and it is plainly the aristocratic part of their character which they should emphasize. The example not to follow is the Slav, Czech one. The Czechs are seen in their policy towards Jews as a perfect example of Slav stupidity in thinking that they can force Jews to be Czechs by the "stamping method", and the "balled fist". If only the Czechs were more subtle, and able to compromise, like the aristocratic charming Magyars, they would do so much better, and Jews would be much more likely to become Czech. Jews are in any case seen to be attracted to German culture because of its high moral and intellectual standards, which are held to be superior to those of the other nations, including the Czechs. As the *Neuzeit* put it: "What made the Jews German? The heh-heh calls of the German street youths and the servant status in the old empire? Oh no! Rather it was the perception that being German was identical with *Bildung*, Enlightenment, and liberating culture..."<sup>12</sup>.

Similarly, the *Neue Freie Presse's* position was that the Czechs were being stupid if they thought they could get what they wanted by forcing the issue without German agreement, and especially so as, if Czechs were more reasonable, they would find the Germans ready to meet most of their demands. On the other hand, there was no doubt in the *Neue Freie Presse's* mind, despite the great advances which it readily acknowledged the Czechs had made, that German as a language was inevitably superior to Czech, because so many more people spoke it (50 million to 5 million), and because it had such a rich, liberating culture behind it. If German was thus a "world language", then the Germans were also a nation which held to universal, liberal and progressive principles, and Czech attempts to do down Germans in the Bohemian lands showed how, by contrast, and despite their impressive cultural achievement, Czechs remained a "small" and "small-minded" nation.

The political stupidity of the Czechs for not seriously seeking to advance their cause by agreement with the Germans in the Bohemian crown lands (almost 40% of the population of Bohemia, and about a third in Moravia), instead trying to get their way by forcing the government to make concessions, was something on which the *Neue Freie Presse* insisted year upon year. I shall leave it to those better qualified to judge whether it was in any sense right to blame the Czech politicians for the debacle of German-Czech negotiations on a Bohemian settlement. It suffices here to point out that the view of the Czechs as stupidly and unnecessarily aggressive and "expansionist", not really interested in equal rights for all, but only in victory for themselves (and the subjugation of the Germans), was one which can be traced back to the 1860s in Jewish liberal circles, when referring to Czech attitudes towards the Jews, and it dominated the attitude of the *Neue Freie Presse* towards the "machinations" of Czech politicians.

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<sup>12</sup> *Die Neuzeit*, 27. April 1866, p. 187; 8. November 1861, p. 110-111.

That the Germans, on the other hand, were seen as the responsible upholders of the Austrian state's interests, even when that state's government was against them, which was most of the time according to the *Neue Freie Presse*, was something which the paper constantly asserted. Whether there was anything to this is moot, although on one issue the *Neue Freie Presse* did seem to have a point: in any state there has to be one language of mediation, and in Austria that happened to be German. If Czech had been completely and utterly of "equal value", then so would the other six or seven languages of Cisleithania. The idea of having a *Reichsrat* and administration operating in eight languages of equal importance would indeed, as one commentator put it, have created a "Babylon of languages". In contrast, in today's age of simultaneous translation and sophisticated electronics, even the European Community operates in practice in only two languages, English and French, and even then linguistic politics has often hamstrung that institution as well<sup>13</sup>.

Instead of getting embroiled in the immense complexities of the internal and external official languages, of the rights and wrongs of ordinances and obstruction, federalism or centralism, national autonomy or "state rights", "nationality" or "language of daily use" in the census, and all the other aspects of the politico-national problem of Bohemia (the Moravian dispute was partially settled in 1905), I have chosen a few events which the *Neue Freie Presse* covered, to illustrate through their coverage in the newspaper something of the paper's mind-set, and, by implication, that of the version of Austrian liberalism which the newspaper represented.

In June 1901 Franz Joseph visited Bohemia, as part of the Koerber government's effort to improve Czech-German relations. There were thus visits both to Prague and to the German area of Bohemia. The *Neue Freie Presse* put its own gloss on this itinerary. Looking ahead to the emperor's tour, it remarked that the visit to the Elbe lands would show what German industriousness had built at Aussig, and the sojourn at Prague would remind everyone, by the evidence of the German theatre and the Thun palace, "that the historic roots of the German people are deeply planted in the soil of the capital [Prague]." It praised the Koerber government's efforts at reconciliation, and hoped that the Czechs would finally see sense, admit that the Battle of the White Mountain had been lost, and realize that the way to prosperity lay in cooperation with the Bohemian Germans "who embody the progress of the land". As it had said in an earlier editorial, what the *Neue Freie Presse* most wanted to see in Bohemia was not German-Czech conflict, but rather German-Czech cooperation, so that the two peoples in the Monarchy who had real middle classes could unite against the reactionary feudal nobility<sup>14</sup>.

A week later, with Franz Joseph now in Prague, the *Neue Freie Presse* was bitterly disappointed at Czech behaviour. The cause was a trivial one, but nonetheless revealing. The mayor of Prague had refused to wear *Frack* – white tie – at the Court dinner to which he had been invited. Instead he had insisted on wearing the *czamara*, a specifically Czech form of formal attire. The *Neue Freie Presse* was appalled at the provincialism and ignorance which this symbolized in Czech attitudes. The leader writer

<sup>13</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 20 February 1901 (m); 2 March 1901 (m); 28 June 1907 (m); 6 July 1907 (m).

<sup>14</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 2 June 1901 (m) p. 1; 9 June 1901 (m) p. 1.

(who might have been, by the tone and content, Theodor Herzl) pointed out that it was pure ignorance to refuse to wear *Frack* as a German imposition, because *Frack* was not German, but had in fact originally been French, and was simply the accepted formal wear of modern international society. Indeed it had been called "a tool of democratic equality" and had survived because it satisfied the (English) gentleman's wish not to stand out. If the mayor of Prague had known any history, he would have known that a red form of *Frack* had been the dress of the Bohemian nobility in times past, and was thus a reminder of the state rights for which the Czechs yearned. As the editorial summed up: "*Frack* is Western, European, the symbol of the social culture which is common to all higher peoples."

The *czamara*, in contrast, was the invention of an innkeeper, Peter FASTER, forty years before, just as the Czechs had invented their ancient literature. (This was a low blow, alluding to the Manuscripts Affair.) The *czamara* was thus *geschichtslos* (without history – just as the Czechs were, by implication, one of the "peoples without history") and, as an artificial surrogate, an attempt to spite progress, not encourage it. It was a sign of the "exaggeration of national Romanticism", which tried to separate the Czechs from the Germans in all things, but only succeeded in halting the advance of civilization, and was, in a word, "childish". If Czech footballers wore shorts, remarked the editorial, why could not Czech politicians wear *Frack*, like all civilized people? It was a great pity: the Czechs were a "talented and hard-working people"; they did not need these stupidities to make their point "linguistically and intellectually". Eventually their geographical position would mean that Westernization was inescapable – they would come to wear *Frack*, and give up this "politics of clothes" – but it was all an unnecessary trying of the patience of civilised, Western, Germans<sup>15</sup>.

If the *czamara* affair showed the Czechs as being irrationally anti-German and therefore against true progress, another episode in November 1901 showed the illogicalities in the Czech claim to complete equality with the Germans within Austria, at least in the eyes of the *Neue Freie Presse*. The occasion this time was the appointment of five Czech professors at the recently established Czech *Technische Hochschule* (polytechnic) in Brünn. The calibre of those appointed was, the *Neue Freie Presse* asserted, "a lesson in national equal rights", because the professors were clearly unqualified for their jobs as academic professors. True, they had been at the top in their fields in industry, but they had not gone through the years of study and teaching required by a real (German) academic to qualify as a professor. This led the editorial to question the very need of a Czech polytechnic, in Brünn, beside the already existing German polytechnic. Why create a separate school where lectures were given in a language which was unusable after a mere three-hour train ride – in any direction – when you had a school using a "world language" with a culture centuries old, a great literature, and rich in "human material"?

Why ignore the stark differences between Czech and German as languages? If you did, the results were absurd. Universities, for instance, needed the free movement of people and ideas, which was provided by one of the "world languages" – English, French, Italian or German. Czech speakers would be denied this free interchange,

<sup>15</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 16 June 1901 (m) p. 1.

because no one (apart from the Czechs themselves) spoke their language. Already the "educational level" at Czech secondary schools had dropped so much, claimed the editorial, that the requirements for teachers and pupils at the Czech higher educational institutions had had to be lowered – hence the appointment of the five "professors". Now these under-qualified people would train the next generation, with an inevitable further lowering of the "niveau".

This was not to say that the Czechs had not produced great thinkers. There had been Palacký, Albert, Kaizl, and now Masaryk (a particular favourite of Austrian Jewry at the time because of his intervention in the Hilsner Affair) but they had been taught at German universities. (That is to say, universities where German was the language of instruction.) It was not that one was denying that Czechs could be great scholars; it was just that the ability of the Czechs to achieve academic greatness should not be confused with the means employed to that end. The Czechs always insisted that the "equal worth" of the Czech people was identical to the equal worth of the Czech language, but this identity was unwarranted, because for purely practical reasons Czech could never be equal to German as an academic language, and a language of culture. Somehow the national feeling of the Czechs would have to be separated from the language question, because it was a fact, in itself no disgrace to the Czechs, that they were a small people, whose language had, and would ever have, a very small area of usage.

Whenever this was pointed out to the Czechs they were outraged, but it simply had to be the case that a language of five million could not be equal to that of fifty million. The "mechanical" understanding of national equality (nation equals a language) was the whole cause of the German-Czech problem, and any attempt to justify apportioning educational resources (the polytechnic) merely in terms of numbers (there were three million Germans to five million Czechs in the Bohemian crown lands, therefore the Czechs, by this argument, should have at least the same number of polytechnics) would have bad consequences, because the languages were simply not "equal", even if the peoples were.

What made matters even worse was that now the Croats and Slovenes would demand the same, but all these new schools, teaching in languages which were not as rich as German and had an even more limited use, would result in a lowering of standards all round and a huge reservoir of graduates with no practical qualifications, an immense – Slav – *Bildungsproletariat*<sup>16</sup>. All this because the government would not recognise the innate superiority of German culture and language. How the Czechs were to define themselves apart from their language was not a question, however, which the *Neue Freie Presse* addressed (perhaps because there was no reasonable answer to it).

In June 1906 the newspaper covered another of Franz Joseph's visits to Bohemia, this time to the Industrial Exhibition at Reichenberg, in the heart of German Bohemia. The editorial viewed this exhibition as a form of German national self-defense, and took the opportunity to give its version of German national identity in Austria:

Until the German war (1866) in most intimate connection with the compact mass of the German people, the Germans [in Bohemia] had never learnt to think of themselves as a nationality,

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<sup>16</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 7 November 1901 (m) p. 1.



in the current sense, among other nationalities in Austria. The German is in his innermost nature "national", it is true; but he is not "nationalist", at least not in the way in which small peoples are. He is, when he is not forced to fight, much too much a citizen of the world, much too admiring of great achievements, wherever they may be; he lacks the petty arrogance, the childish self-insistence, which characterizes the national firebrand.

To this the *Neue Freie Presse* added a revealing comment: "In every educated man [*Gebildeten*] there is hidden, more in some than in others, a spark of that Herderian humanity, which values human beings regardless of any national consideration, wherever the great and good are to be found." Here the idea of the Germans as Enlightened, humanistic world citizens, the Germans of Goethe, Lessing, Schiller as well as Herder, is seen as the true Germany, as it had all along in the German Jewish ideology of emancipation, even if many Germans by 1906 no longer saw themselves this way. How could the *Neue Freie Presse*, for instance, explain the great stridency and increasing popularity of the Pan-German Radicals in the Bohemian lands? Surely their all-conquering rhetoric did not fit nicely with the Herderian paradise the *Neue Freie Presse* was convinced was the real Germany?

The answer was relatively simple, in this editorial: the Czechs and the Austrian government were to blame for the change in the Bohemian Germans, indeed in all Germans in Austria. Austria's Germans had been ripped from their world-citizen peace by being spurned by the Austrian state from which they had once been inseparable. Now they were the victims of a politics of national divide and rule, and were having to defend themselves on three fronts: from other nationalities, from the government and from reactionaries in their own ranks. Despite all this they remained a great economic and industrial power, as the Reichenberg exhibition showed. Franz Joseph would once again see that the Germans were still the "main supportive power of Bohemia", the creators of an economy which rivalled that of Germany. Having thus touched on an oft-repeated theme, that Bohemian Germans, 40% of the population, provided over half of Bohemia's revenue, the paper commented that the exhibition was "a clear indication of the innermost health" of the Bohemian Germans.

If this medical metaphor sounds too reminiscent of later identifications between national power and athletic prowess, it should be mentioned that the editorial concluded by saying that "there is no hostile tendency in this demonstration whatsoever," for all could come, look and compete. Echoing its "Manchester" ideology rather than that of its alleged "economic pan-Germanism", its vision of a hoped-for future was one in which economic development would eventually bring Germans and Czechs to exchange both material and spiritual goods, and thus lead to a national understanding. Richard Cobden could not have put it better<sup>17</sup>.

The problem, as far as the *Neue Freie Presse* was concerned, was that the Czechs were not interested in this peaceful competition, in which they exchanged ideas with the Germans (that is, were taught by them); rather they were out to defeat the superior Germans to satisfy their irrational national pride, the arrogance of a small nation with an inferiority complex. The Czechs could not even abate their "racial hatred" of the Germans to act civilly to Count Zeppelin, on his way to Vienna with his airship in

<sup>17</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 20 June 1906 (m) p. 1.

1910<sup>18</sup>. The inability of the Czechs ever to accept any real compromises, their always wanting more, led the *Neue Freie Presse* to the ultimate condemnation: "Until now Mankind has been denied the happiness of ever seeing a satisfied Czech"<sup>19</sup>. In the *Neue Freie Presse's* eyes the readiness of the government to make concessions to the Czechs, and even the German readiness to compromise, were always foiled by the unreasoned Czech hostility to the Germans, and their determination not only to be even with the Germans, but also to *get even*, and subjugate them, as they themselves had been. As remarked before, the problem was in this view that the Czechs had never forgotten the Battle of the White Mountain. If ever the Czechs somehow got into the driving seat in Austrian politics the result would be a rout of German interests in Bohemia, perhaps in Austria as a whole, and, by definition, the defeat of progress and liberty.

If anyone doubted this, the *Neue Freie Presse* had but to point to Prague, the capital of Bohemia, once a largely German-speaking city, which the Czechs were now insisting on regarding as a completely Czech city, despite the fact of its considerable, and relatively wealthy and influential "German" community, roughly half or more of which was Jewish, a fact which no doubt added a certain edge to the *Neue Freie Presse's* frequent defences of the Germans in Prague.

The problem for the Germans in Prague was, as it was indeed for the Germans in Bohemia and even Austria as a whole, primarily one of numbers, in contrast to their "historical" importance. As the newspaper complained in 1912, the Czechs always tried to "majoritize" the national question, with no consideration being given to "the historically developed" aspect. Thus, even though the Germans in Prague were only a small minority, of between five and ten percent of the population, Prague remained a city full of German culture, with a German university, the capital of a province with *two* nations, not one. The *Neue Freie Presse* was also never tired of pointing out that the tiny German minority nevertheless paid almost half of the city's taxes. By any measure, apart from mere numbers, Prague was therefore definitely a bilingual city<sup>20</sup>.

The Czechs, as reported in the *Neue Freie Presse*, would have none of this. Indeed they resented even the appearance that Prague might be anything other than a completely Czech city. An article by an anonymous German politician in July 1900 complained that the Czechs were out to "eradicate" the German presence in the city, their slogan "the purification of Prague from Germandom". The city council had decreed that all street signs had to be only in Czech, not bilingual as before, and had furthermore insisted that Czech street names appear in German documents; thus "Wenzelsplatz" was not to be allowed in German books. Even the tram tickets, which had once been bilingual when the tram company had been privately run by a Belgian concern, were now, under municipal control, only in Czech<sup>21</sup>.

In May 1905 the newspaper complained that the Czechs were being even more tyrannical, with the Prague council forbidding German merchants to put up shop

<sup>18</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 4 May 1910 (e) p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 26 May 1906 (m) p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 25 July 1912 (e) p. 1; 17 July 1912 (e) p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 11 July 1900 (m) p. 1.

signs in German, or even in Czech and German<sup>22</sup>. The complaint of Czech unfairness which this solicited was an echo of a similar exposé of Czech anti-German persecution, written to protest a denial of anything but a derisory raise in the subsidy of the German theatre in Prague from the Bohemian *Landtag*. Instead of trying to compete with German culture in Prague, the Czechs simply wanted to get rid of it, do it down. Instead of taking a pride in this part of Prague's heritage, the "nativism" of the Czechs wanted to destroy it. This only showed "how thin the layer of culture still is, which covers their raw tribal consciousness." It also went to show that, for all their talk of equal rights, once the Czechs were actually in charge, they completely disregarded such principles<sup>23</sup>. Anyone who has followed events in Canada in recent years will recognise this sort of debate as only too contemporary.

The fate of Prague's persecuted Germans was one with which all Bohemian Germans were threatened because of their being outnumbered by Czechs, and the hostile intentions of the "invaders" of the German areas. All along the "language border" the Czechs were seen as conducting a policy of expansion, turning once "German" towns into Czech ones by various tricks, not least of which was outnumbering Germans in "German" cities such as Budweis<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, their fate was intimately linked to that of all Austrian Germans.

This was made clear in the *Neue Freie Presse's* response to a speech by István Tisza on the reasons for the Germans' fall in Austria. It completely rejected Tisza's view, which no doubt put some of the blame on the Germans themselves. Instead, the Germans in Austria were the victims of historical accident. Their fall had begun with "the tearing away of a people from the fertile empire from which it had gained its succor for a thousand years" (the Holy Roman Empire of the Germans). Once outside of Germany, they had been exposed to the fact of a clerical and Slav majority, and a hostile Court. Furthermore, faced with the impossible task of resisting such powerful opponents, they had still had the duty of supporting the state, fighting for civil rights and intellectual freedom, and against the Church's reactionary policies, something which had further angered the Court<sup>25</sup>.

There was thus a siege mentality in the *Neue Freie Presse's* attitude to the German position in Austria. Any concession to national equality was dangerous because it could be the breach in the walls which were keeping intact the German position, justified by the historic role of the Germans in the Habsburg state and by the superiority of German culture. Moreover, as the previous quote indicates, holding the German fort was also defending progress and liberty, because, as was often made clear in the newspaper, the Czechs and the other Slavs, even if they could on occasion be "progressive", had made an unholy alliance with the forces of Reaction in the Habsburg state; the fact that it was Czech obstruction in early 1914 which finally gave Count Stürgkh the excuse to prorogue the *Reichsrat* and adopt a form of absolutism only confirmed the point<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 6 May 1905 (m) p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 7 December 1900 (m) p. 1; 8 March 1904 (m) p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 11 May 1900 (m) p. 1; 7 January 1901 (e)p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 7 March 1910 (afternoon) p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 17 March 1914 (m) p. 1.

Even if a great proportion of German Austrian voters were now voting for parties which were not "liberal", but often extremist and endemically anti-Semitic, "German-dom" was, in the mind-set of the *Neue Freie Presse*, innately the essence of freedom and progress, and had to be defended against the mass of non-Germans, and even the Court. It was another oft repeated point that the Germans were inherently supporters of the state, even if this meant opposing the government.

There are two final episodes which serve to illustrate this point. The first was a riot in March 1904 by Czechs against German students in Prague. According to the *Neue Freie Presse*, this riot had been provoked by a campaign in the Czech press in which it had been said that the Czech populace of Prague should feel "provoked" by the way German students at the Charles University promenaded in their "colours" along the Graben every Sunday. This, the Czech press was reported as saying, was giving strangers to the city the wrong impression about Prague, for it "falsified" Prague's true national character, as if nothing German should be allowed on Prague's streets. The result had been a mob attack on the students. What is interesting here is that the *Neue Freie Presse* then compared this attack to a recent attack by natives on the students' "hereditary comrades in South West Africa", in other words the German colonists in one of the new German colonies. The Czech attack was likened to that of African tribesmen against Western, advanced Germans. The Czechs were likened to the threat of the savage, uncivilized world to Western, German civilization<sup>27</sup>.

The second comparison is even more poignant. In October 1913 Sir Edward Carson, Privy Councillor, former General Advocate of Ireland, was reported as setting up what amounted to a private army in the northern provinces of Ireland, Ulster, in order to oppose the plans of the English parliament to set up an Irish parliament ("Landtag" in the German). The Ulster "English", explained the *Neue Freie Presse*, did not want to be a permanent minority in the Irish parliament, and did not want their taxes, in industrially well-developed Ulster, to be "handed over" to the Irish; they did not want their money to be used to oppress them. "They do not want to be the prisoners of 'state rights', and do not want to be cast off from the United Kingdom." In other words, in a reversal of British perceptions of the Czechs, the Ulster Protestants were in effect Bohemian Germans, and in the same siege situation. The only difference was that the Ulstermen's leader, Carson, a member of the governing élite, was prepared to join the protest against the government's decision, or, as the newspaper put it, to contemplate "a high treason . . . which would be the highest love of the fatherland", whereas the wishy-washy German leadership, symbolized by the Minister of Justice, Hochenburger, was only prepared to procrastinate while the Bohemian Germans were sold down the river.

What Ulster showed was that the only logical conclusion, there and in German Bohemia, was "separation", or perhaps better in an imperial context, "partition". Only if the Germans were given full control of their own affairs, autonomous of the Czechs, could any workable peace be reached in the national struggle. Hence the plans of the Reichenberg politician, Otto Ringelhaan, for a separate, parallel *Landtag* of German

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<sup>27</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 5 March 1904 (m) p. 1.

Bohemia, an Austrian German Stormont, were not to be dismissed lightly. The *Neue Freie Presse* did not support this idea of total partition, but it did not, by 1913, fully reject it either. The frustrations of over fifteen years of bickering with the Czechs had left the newspaper despairing of any truly workable relationship within the existent Bohemian institutions. By now the Ulster solution of taking things into one's own hands – out of loyalty to the unity of the Monarchy – did not appear all that unreasonable<sup>28</sup>. It was a matter of self-defence.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1918, with Austria falling around its ears, the *Neue Freie Presse* saw the only sensible solution to the German Bohemian problem as union with the bordering “large” Germany. This was, after all, a peace of national self-determination, was it not? It is also quite understandable that the *Neue Freie Presse*, perhaps with the Ulster example in mind, regarded Masaryk's claim that the Germans were “colonists” and “emigrants”, and thus not really owners of the territory which they inhabited, which, in Masaryk's words, “is our area, and remains ours”, as the reverse of the democracy the Czech philosopher-leader supposedly represented. It was, in a word, imperialism<sup>29</sup>.

With this view of events, the *Neue Freie Presse* was quite willing to provide a platform for dire predictions that the Czech occupation of German Bohemia “would have as a consequence an ineradicable irredentism”<sup>30</sup>. Even Masaryk's famous visit to the German theatre, to listen to a performance of *Fidelio*, where he promised the Germans “full equal rights”, was looked on skeptically. The Czech idea of equal rights, the *Neue Freie Presse* complained, was to introduce Czech as the internal language of the civil service throughout Bohemia, including the purely German areas, thus severely compromising German language rights. The symbol of the new Czechoslovak republic was not Masaryk in the German theatre, but rather the smashing of German street signs in Brünn<sup>31</sup>. The world catastrophe which the extremists on both sides had wanted, and which the German politician Karl Eppinger had predicted in the pages of the *Neue Freie Presse* in January 1905, had occurred and the Czechs had won.<sup>32</sup>

Although the *Neue Freie Presse* still had a grudging respect, if a puzzled one, for Masaryk, it was clearly pessimistic about the future. Whether it was justified or not is a moot point. Yet its analysis of the Czech future in November 1918 has an uncanny ring to it:

The Czechs calculate that they will have a territory of 13 million in population, including the Germans. The Czech republic, which does not allow for German self-determination, and rouses the Magyars to deadly hatred, will be a *free-state*, but not a *state which is free*. For it needs a mighty protector in order to carry out such a violent policy. Surrounded by tensions, the Czechs will always be dependent on foreign help<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 6 October 1913 (afternoon) p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 23 December 1918 (afternoon) p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 6 December 1918 (m) p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 24 December 1918 (m) pp. 4–5.

<sup>32</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 29 January 1905 (m) p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 15 November 1918 (m) p. 1.

In another editorial it elaborated on this prediction. The forceful takeover of German Bohemia would eternally poison German-Czech relations, for the Czechs were simply repressing a minority. "Times change, and a great people such as the Germans can always reckon on the future. It would thus have been to the Czechs' great advantage, so distant are they from the French and English, if they had, in their success, shown the ability to be tolerant and just."<sup>34</sup> That they had not was a fact with terrible consequences for the future.

It was thus with the feeling that the worst nightmare had finally been realized, and the Bohemian Germans handed over to the Czechs, that the *Neue Freie Presse* entered the post-Habsburg era. The initial gloom no doubt lifted somewhat as Masaryk's relatively liberal and tolerant Czechoslovakia took shape, and became almost unique in Central Europe for those attributes. That, nevertheless, such dire predictions were made right at the start, in 1918, by a relatively moderate Viennese newspaper, says, I think, something about the subsequent history of Czechoslovakia, and of Europe. It certainly lends weight to the view that one of the most important things Václav Havel has done as Czech president is to acknowledge the wrongs done to the Germans expelled in 1945.

Whatever one might think of the validity of the views expressed by the *Neue Freie Presse* on the German-Czech conflict, I think it should be clear that the newspaper does provide a most intriguing record of the views of the German Liberal, and largely German-Jewish, bourgeoisie which did so much to hold the Monarchy, and by implication Central Europe, together. That it thought "Germandom" superior to the other cultures of Central Europe is undeniable, but it did so not from some unthinking chauvinism alone, but, as I hope to have shown, from an at least partially cogent recognition of the problem of "large nation/small nation" relations, especially when the "large nation" is in a minority situation. It is sometimes uncanny to see the same arguments now used in discussions of the Quebec problem, or the Northern Ireland problem, or affirmative action, or, closer to Vienna, the Yugoslav fiasco and the crisis in the former Soviet Union, resurface almost word for word in the *Neue Freie Presse's* pages. The same goes for the newspaper's discussions of the inevitability of German hegemony in Central Europe, despite the petty nationalisms of the area. One may dislike and dispute the newspaper's point of view, but its arguments remain intelligent, and strangely prescient.

The *Neue Freie Presse's* character as the epitome of the "Jewish press" plainly lent an edge to its views on the nationality disputes missing in a straightforwardly "German" account of events. Partly this was due to circumstances: in many instances the "German" minority under attack was actually largely Jewish (as in Prague). Above all, however, and perhaps this is the deepest irony, the legacy of the Jewish emancipatory tradition could still be seen in its staying true to the ideal vision of a liberal, progressive "Germandom", when actual Austrian Germans were already thinking and acting in ways which were to destroy the *Neue Freie Presse's* world-view, and even the world that went with it.

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<sup>34</sup> *Neue Freie Presse*, 12 December 1918 (e) p. 1.