



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Czech Feminists and Nationalism in the Late Habsburg  
Monarchy: "The First in Austria"

Katherine David

Journal of Women's History, Volume 3, Number 2, Fall 1991, pp. 26-45 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2010.0081>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/362995/summary>

---

# CZECH FEMINISTS AND NATIONALISM IN THE LATE HABSBURG MONARCHY: "The First in Austria"<sup>1</sup>

Katherine David

The concurrence of the Czech women's emancipation movement with the rockiest stretch of the nationality conflict in the Austrian half of the Habsburg Monarchy presented no quandary to Czech middle-class feminists. As a non-dominant nationality seeking greater rights and autonomy in Austria-Hungary, the Czechs were, by the last four decades of the nineteenth century, intermittently locked in parliamentary altercations with their German political adversaries and the Austrian authorities. In the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, where Czechs constituted approximately two thirds of the population, Czech life revolved around a struggle for cultural and economic ascendancy, or at least equality with the ethnic German minority.<sup>2</sup> While it might be expected that the demand for national unity in the period between 1890 and World War I would have collided with the aspirations of Czech feminists, in fact, it did not. As this study of the women's movement demonstrates, women's rights activists drew strength from their identification with the Czech national movement and viewed their Czechness as, in many respects, advantageous to their struggle as women. The national cause and the feminist cause seemed to them to be complementary and indeed interrelated aspects of a common challenge to Vienna.

In his book, *The Feminists*, Richard J. Evans describes Czech feminism as "fanatically nationalist." He argues that progressive Czech women had to "strike a bargain with nationalists" which introduced considerable restrictions as well as benefits to the feminist movement.<sup>3</sup> The first part of the proposition—on the nationalist proclivities of Czech feminists—is undoubtedly true, by Anglo-American standards. I would, however, offer the caveat that integral nationalism was hardly an extremist ideology among the Czechs or other minorities in the Habsburg Monarchy at the turn of the twentieth century. In a nation struggling with statelessness, nationalism informed almost any political activity. Faced with a pronounced diversification of society in the late nineteenth century, Czech nationalist sentiment proved to be a protean force, not the property of a single class or political current. Czech feminists inevitably laid claim to the national tradition and adopted its rhetoric and arguments to justify their own goals.

Evans's second point—the contention that Czech feminists lost as well as gained through their alliance with nationalists—certainly merits examination. I have found no evidence that feminists traded away any radical demands in exchange for support from liberal nationalists, a category which encompassed almost the entire Czech middle class. While women's rights activists did include demands for national equality in their programs and sometimes expressed their feminist objectives in nationalist terms, they were motivated by sincere patriotism and by the assumption that promotion of the national cause would further the women's movement. Contemporary descriptions suggest that Czech male politicians and cultural figures rallied behind women's issues, whether in parliament or publications, more forcefully than other central European men. Astonishingly, the Czechs elected a female candidate to the Bohemian Diet (legislature) on a multi-party ticket in 1912, a feat unprecedented in Europe. Though the delegate-elect was never permitted to take office, the episode illustrates how Czech men wielded women's rights issues as a convenient weapon, albeit not a lethal one, against the Austrian regime. Czech feminists had little to lose by availing themselves of their support—except perhaps a potential solidarity with German Austrian women.

If the tactical and programmatic freedom of Czech feminists remained circumscribed, this was not due to their bid for nationalist support, but to repressive conditions in the monarchy. The strict Austrian laws on assembly constituted one of the distinctive factors, besides the nationality situation, which shaped the Czech women's rights movement. Until 1912, women in Austria—Czech, German, or otherwise—were forbidden to join political organizations. A second factor was the impotence of the *Reichsrat* and the provincial diets, which limited the effectiveness of feminist alliances with political parties.<sup>4</sup> Another notable circumstance was the crucial infusion of ideas and support which the Czech women's movement received from a contemporary male intellectual, the future president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937). Finally, uneven socio-economic development affected the Czech women's movement. While the Bohemian Lands overall comprised the most important industrial region in the monarchy, the less industrialized and more Catholic Moravia lagged behind Bohemia proper in the ferment of both political radicalism and feminism.<sup>5</sup>

Although Czech women did not begin to agitate for legal changes in their status until 1890, they had, by that time, developed a firm basis for middle-class feminist action. During the "national awakening" of the early nineteenth century, it was often mothers who ensured that their children learned to read Czech (which had, over the centuries, declined as a literary language), rather than just German. Already in the 1820s, Czech women

made small-scale efforts to broaden girls's education. In the revolutionary flush of 1848, upper-class women organized politically in Prague, the Bohemian capital, and with considerable fanfare dispatched a delegation to the empress. After 1869, a variety of women's organizations sprang up, in Prague and elsewhere, including a female teachers's association. Between 1863 and 1871, prominent Czech women founded three secondary schools for girls in Prague: an academic higher school, a pedagogical institute (the first of its kind in Austria), and an industrial arts school. Ladies from the growing middle classes devoted themselves to philanthropic activities, among them aiding orphans and ameliorating conditions for workers.<sup>6</sup> These actions were invariably undertaken in a patriotic spirit and heralded as a step toward Czech self-sufficiency and strength. At the same time, several popular female writers, the posthumously acclaimed Božena Němcová (1820-1862), Karolína Světlá (1830-1899), and others raised their influential voices in support of women's emancipation. Despite the patriotic aura enveloping it, the Czech women's movement in these stages roughly paralleled the efforts of German Austrian women.<sup>7</sup>

Prague society first discovered foreign feminism with the establishment of the American Ladies' Club in 1865. It was founded by Vojta Náprstek, a well-traveled Czech who admired the dynamic role played by American women in cultural and public affairs. The club featured a Czech and English library and a technical museum and sponsored lectures on American and English feminism, among other topics, some of which were attended by as many as 1,500 people.<sup>8</sup> Czech women could also keep abreast of developments in foreign women's movements by reading the monthly *Women's Journal*, established in the early 1870s and taken over by the bourgeois Women's Industrial and Commercial Training Association (*Ženský Výrobní Spolek Český*). The paper, which reported on cultural and social issues, was edited after 1874 by the women's rights activist and nationalist author Eliška Krásnohorská (1847-1926).

It was Krásnohorská who initiated the first major political action for the advancement of Czech women—and, by extension, all the women of Austria—the campaign for higher education. In 1890, the *Women's Journal* sponsored a petition to the *Reichsrat*, bearing nearly 5,000 signatures and calling for the admission of females to the medical and philosophical faculties of Austrian universities. Women at that time were barred from study at any university in the monarchy, and only a few could afford the option of going abroad for a higher education.<sup>9</sup> Viennese women's clubs, Ruthenians from Galicia, and provincial Czech groups joined in with their own petitions, while Karel Adámek, and after 1891, Gabriel Blažek and Masaryk, all deputies in the "Young Czech" (National Liberal) Party, took up the educational cause in the *Reichsrat*.<sup>10</sup>

Women's admission to the Austrian philosophical faculties would not be approved by the Ministry of Education until 1897, and to the medical faculties, not until 1900, but Czech activists lost no time in preparing girls for university study. Although universal primary education was mandated in 1869 and literacy levels were high in parts of Cisleithania, in 1890 there was not a single *gymnasium* (secondary school with a university-preparatory curriculum) for girls in the monarchy.<sup>11</sup> With breathtaking speed, Krásnohorská organized Minerva, an association for women's higher education; it gained the backing of the Prague city council and opened the *gymnasium* Minerva in the fall of the same year without any support, financial or otherwise, from the Austrian Ministry of Education.<sup>12</sup> Czech bourgeois society, for the most part, stood behind Minerva. Thus, 1890 represents a watershed in the Czech women's movement—for the first time, a claim to female equality was publicized, politicized and nationalized.

What a pleasant surprise it was, wrote student activist Karel Stanislav Sokol upon the opening of Minerva, that in this instance no one could say the Czechs were still "ten steps behind the Germans."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Czech proponents of women's education touted their cause as a matter of national pride. A petition by Minerva to Czech intellectuals in 1890 boasted:

Czech women were the first in Austria to demand the right to a higher education by legislative means when they presented their petition to the Reichsrat this year; Czech deputies were the first in the Reichsrat to support decisively this demand for modern enlightenment and justice; the Czech press was the first, all of Czech educated society was the first (to join) in non-partisan recognition of the legitimacy of this movement . . .<sup>14</sup>

The authors represent the movement as a sign of the Czechs's inherent progressiveness. Vienna, in turn, continued to show its intransigent colors over the question of girls's *gymnasium* training. Not only was Minerva denied state funding, but the Minister of Education decided, in 1897, to establish a system of girls's "lycées" which would *not* prepare their graduates for the university. Czech feminists opposed these institutions, regarding them as a deliberate obstacle to their efforts to normalize higher education for women.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, they advocated coeducation.

During the same decade, the cumbersome questions of Bohemian autonomy and Czech linguistic rights were bringing the Austrian Reichsrat to a standstill. The Young Czech party reveled in popular politics and, initially, parliamentary obstructionism, its jingoism almost keeping pace with that of the radical pan-Germanists in Vienna and Bohemia (though it rarely stooped to anti-Semitism). In 1897, the Young Czechs finally struck

---

a deal with the Austrian cabinet for the near-equality of Czech with German in the civil service of Bohemia and Moravia. The resounding rejection of this agreement by ethnic Germans, however, toppled the Austrian government of Count Kazimierz Badeni and triggered, among both Czechs and Germans, the worst rioting in Cisleithania since the revolution of 1848.<sup>16</sup>

Prague's politically-charged atmosphere jarred open unfamiliar doors for Czech middle-class women and arguably provided a major impetus for feminist activism. In that city, always the intellectual hub of the Bohemian Lands, the "woman question" was suddenly in the air. Students in the Progressive movement earnestly debated and publicized it; it soon became one of their major preoccupations.<sup>17</sup> Avant-garde literati took up the feminist cause in the iconoclastic "Modernist Manifesto" of 1895. And a small, but dedicated, group of middle-class women increasingly regarded the liberation of the female sex as the natural continuation of their role in the national movement. From the time that women's education pitted Czechs against the Austrian government, one can speak of a true "feminist" movement in Bohemia, initially centered around Prague women's organizations. By the early twentieth century, it had spread through Bohemia and to Brno, the Moravian capital; in 1910, seven regional branches of the Moravian Progressive Women's Organization (*Zemská pokroková organizace žen na Moravě*) were established.<sup>18</sup> During the 1890s, *Krásnohorská* geared the *Women's Journal* less toward information and more toward agitation and petitions for women's suffrage and civil rights as well as expanded educational opportunities. In the next decade her publication was superseded in importance by a more militant women's press. As the nationality struggle radicalized, so did its self-professed progeny, Czech feminism.

Františka F. Plamínková (1875-1942), the nation's foremost women's rights activist and later a senator in the Czechoslovak Republic, suggested internal and external causes for the transformation of the Czech women's movement in the 1890s. She emphasized both the influx of world literature into Czech life and the widespread influence of Masaryk, a professor at Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague since 1882.<sup>19</sup> Among other eye-opening works, Plamínková cited John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjugation of Women*, translated into Czech in 1890 by Charlotte Garrigue Masaryková, the American wife of the future president. Masaryk himself acknowledged that his ideas on women and family life were decisively shaped by the opinionated Charlotte, who was descended from Priscilla and John Alden on her mother's side and French Huguenots on her father's. Masaryk's slogan "Let woman be placed on an equal level with man culturally, legally and politically," embedded in the 1906 program of the Progressive Party,

---

---

exemplifies the feminist attitude he propagated among his political followers, his students, and the readers of his works.<sup>20</sup>

Masaryk placed the cause of women's emancipation in the framework of his theories on the moral and social transformation of the Czech nation. Arguing that the woman question was part of a broad "social question," he maintained it would require a recasting of the attitudes and behavior of all society. Both as a philosopher and a politician, he advocated legal equality for females, but most of his views on women were subsumed under a moral rubric. Masaryk was uncompromisingly critical of traditional male privileges and the double standard of morality which, he believed, resulted in the oppression of women and the erosion of family life.<sup>21</sup> He launched a campaign against alcoholism and lack of sexual restraint among men, and the journals associated with him, *Time* and *Our Era*, took on previously taboo topics with a crusading passion. The Austrian system of state-regulated prostitution drew Masaryk's particular ire.

Masaryk, though born a Catholic, tied his analysis of the woman question to his quasi-Protestant philosophy of Czech history. Selectively probing the Czech past in search of its unifying theme, he pointed to a series of leaders, from the fifteenth-century religious reformer Jan Hus to the nineteenth-century politician František Palacký (1798-1876). These he identified with a struggle for freedom, equality and a certain "humanity." The striving for gender equality was, to Professor Masaryk, a logical and important element of the Czech quintessence.

Thus, Masaryk spoke in terms of restoring an underlying Czech spirit, but in fact the moral transformation he advocated was no nationalist aberration. Rather, it was quite similar to the cause championed by equally straitlaced activists in other countries. His program resembled, for example, that of the "social purity" movement in the United States—"liberal in its commitment to legal equality for all persons and to a single standard of morality, but conservative in its desire to enforce traditional, rural, Yankee, Calvinist moral values on the whole society."<sup>22</sup> In view of Charlotte Masaryková's strict, Protestant upbringing and Masaryk's proverbial admiration for the United States, a comparison between "social purity" and his turn-of-the-century movement appears rather apt.

Masaryk maintained ties to the organized women's movement, lecturing to such associations as the broadly-based Central Union of Czech Women (*Ústřední spolek českých žen*, founded in 1897) and the more militant Czech Women's Club (*Ženský klub český*, founded 1904). He regularly contributed articles to the Moravian *Women's Review*, and his Progressive Party cooperated with women's suffrage activists. During the heyday of Czech feminism, from 1905 to 1915 (with a three-year break), Masaryk's journal *Our Era* ran a monthly review column devoted to women's issues,

---

penned by the feminist journalist Olga Stránská-Absolonová from 1909 onward.

Significantly, *Our Era*, like the *Women's Review* and *Women's Journal*, gave prominent coverage to developments in foreign women's movements, from the German Anita Augspurg's theories on the disadvantages of legal marriage to the latest exploits of the English suffragettes. Given the eagerness of Czech intellectuals at the turn of the century to forge reciprocal contacts with the other nations of Europe, one would not expect Czech feminists to be insular in their thinking. In 1913, Prague women's organizations hosted a contingent of delegates from ten countries en route to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance conference in Budapest.<sup>23</sup> Czech delegates themselves enthusiastically attended women's conferences abroad, including those of the IWSA. They came as representatives of their provinces, Bohemia and Moravia—and in reality only the Czech component of each—rather than their state; they could hardly have conceived of being absorbed into a central, Vienna-based *Bund*. "Austrian" delegations to the IWSA were strictly a German-speaking affair. The nationality question could be submerged, but never forgotten.

In fact, Czech women activists often formulated standard feminist concerns in terms which emphasized their national consciousness. In 1901, for example, the Women's Circle of the Slavia Literary and Oratorical Society was established to educate women on women's issues of a historical, sociological, and literary kind. A statement from the group targeted the patriotic biases of its audience:

It is our heart-felt desire that Czech women grow to a higher level, reach the women of other nations and, if possible, surpass them. We ardently wish that Bohemia, which held such an honorable place in the . . . transition to the modern age, will hold an honorable place in modern questions, and among these questions is the woman question.<sup>24</sup>

In this typical instance, the feminists posited a connection between a pre-existing Czech tradition and their efforts to ameliorate women's position in society. They argued, like Masaryk, that the nation's inherently democratic tendencies would triumph, much to the advantage of women.

The progressive Czech spirit was usually evoked by a brief allusion to the Hussite Reformation, not least because it anticipated the German Reformation. Other historical arguments surfaced as well. The Committee for Women's Voting Right (*Výbor pro volební právo žen*, founded 1905) peppered its first report to the IWSA with references to various historical figures, mentioning Jan Hus and even Princess Libuše, the semi-legendary founder of Prague.<sup>25</sup> Feminists often recalled the role of Hussite women



who defended their faith in battle alongside men, and they cited the respected position of women among the Bohemian Brethren, radical pacifist descendants of the Hussites. Scrutinizing the neighboring *Reich*, a column in *Our Era* assailed German theories on the primacy of motherhood as a woman's contribution to her race. It contrasted German "aristocratism" and racialism with Slavic democracy and humanism—characteristics which were allegedly expressed in the history of the Slavs and in Tolstoy's philosophy.<sup>26</sup> The journal may have been dallying with Herder here, but in the Czech case the disavowal of aristocratism was well-founded; the Czechs had had almost no native nobility since 1620, when it was expelled by the Habsburgs for its religious heterodoxy.

It may have seemed extraordinary to speak of Jan Hus (who was, after all, burned at the stake in 1415) in a report to the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, but in the context of early twentieth-century Czech affairs it was business as usual. Beginning about 1890, nearly every Czech political movement made some claim to the legacy of the reformation, from the Young Czechs to the Social Democrats. The Hus Monument arose in Prague as a symbol of Czech strength and freedom and, implicitly, as an insult to the Counter-Reforming Habsburgs. Despite the formal adherence to Catholicism of over 90% of Czechs, their resentment against that celebrated ally of Rome and defender of the faith, the Habsburg Monarchy, combined with anti-clerical liberalism to form a potent brew. The precocious Protestantism of the Czech past seemed to the feminists a reinforcement of their claims.

An associate of Plamínková recalled that the beautiful schoolteacher-turned-activist looked to history in the face of oppression just as other Czechs did at the turn of the century.

In the period about which I am writing, historicism flourished. We were too fettered by Austria; one could not do much, and therefore we sought refuge in the past. Even so, it was good that we looked for the broken national tradition which we could resume. Plamínková intuitively sensed [the tradition] quite correctly, and she made a point of supporting her intuition with historical evidence.<sup>27</sup>

Czech feminists, like those of any country, ran the risk of being branded as disloyal or too "internationalist." Plamínková, as a Jew and the leading force behind the most radical branch of the movement, centered in the Czech Women's Club and Committee for Women's Voting Right, may have felt particular pressure to express her national loyalty.<sup>28</sup> In the early years of the century, she fought for the right of married women to teach school, but simultaneously conducted a vigorous "buy Czech" campaign through the Czech Women's Club. Plamínková always emphasized the

practical nature of her work and its importance for the whole nation, for example, in the field of girls's education.<sup>29</sup> The women's movement constructed patriotic arguments in support of any number of issues, from pacifism to the elimination of clerical control of secondary schools. As feminists explained it, Czech women were once again leading their people to greater spiritual freedom and personal independence, as they had in the national awakening.<sup>30</sup> Female demands for equality therefore could not be dismissed as the complaining of selfish, bourgeois ladies, or vilified as an international plot.

In part, the feminists were adapting their claims to the public discourse of their time and place. Nearly everything was discussed in terms of its value to the Czech nation, so feminists evaluated their service in that light as well. This was not merely a tactical gesture to sweeten an unpalatable cause. Rather, it represented a comprehensive approach to the women's movement which can be partly attributed to Masaryk's influence. A female deputy to the Czechoslovak National Assembly summed up the feminists's feeling in retrospect: "Soon the great Czech women's movement flowed in a powerful current with the general movement of the nation for political, social and national rights."<sup>31</sup> As part of a larger ground swell toward a just order, the drive for women's rights was ascribed additional moral weight.

It is possible that because of the Czechs' preoccupation with the national cause, many progressive women were distracted from feminist concerns. What the feminist movement would have looked like in the absence of a national movement is obviously an unanswerable question. Karen Freeze argues that the campaign for higher education was deferred until 1890 precisely because of Czech women's devotion to the national cause.<sup>32</sup> Yet the other feminists of Austria—Germans, Slovenes and Poles—proved just as tardy and evidently less effective in gaining male support than the Czechs. The relative strengths of the Cisleithanian feminist movements would be difficult to gauge without extensive quantitative data, which is not readily available. As just one point of comparison, the Czechs published seven women's periodicals in 1908, the Germans, four, and Slovenes, one, while Polish women could not afford any separate journal as late as 1913.<sup>33</sup>

Czech women, furthermore, found that dedication to the nation served them well, often giving them a degree of visibility and influence which might have eluded females in more settled nations. For example, the Czech women of Vienna staged a sit-in and marched on the *Reichsrat* to protest the closing of Czech schools in the imperial capital. Czech female Social Democrats joined their male comrades in promoting the reorganization of Austrian Social Democracy along national lines. As a result,

socialist leader Viktor Adler personally interfered with the distribution of their journal, *Women's Page*, and promoted a rival publication.<sup>34</sup> Day-to-day work in patriotic associations, including the ubiquitous Sokol, offered Czech women in every town practical experience and a sense of responsibility.

If the women's movement advertised its pro-Czech aspects, it also never concealed its flip side—anti-Austrianism and sometimes anti-Germanism, in the cultural sense. From the efforts to open universities to women to the campaign for suffrage, the adversary confronting feminists was not the Czech male population but the intractable Austrian government. The fact that a foreign regime was perceived as the major source of discrimination had no small influence on the mentality of Czech feminists. They felt themselves doubly oppressed, both as women and as Czechs.

Feminists identified Austria as the antithesis of all the women's movement represented. Masaryk exhorted a congress of Progressive youth in 1909 to counteract the baleful effects of Austrian rule through the joint work of men and women. "This effort confronts Austrianism, military and clerical celibacy. Cooperation with woman signifies the extrication from those heavy shackles with which woman in Austria is held in serfdom."<sup>35</sup> The Committee for Women's Voting Right expressed bourgeois outrage at the Austrian government before the IWSA:

No woman in the whole Empire of Austria can vote for members of the central Parliament at Vienna. All men can vote, even the illiterate ones, and idiots, sluggards, paupers and criminals only are excepted. So the women of Bohemia, who have some rights in their own Kingdom [ie, the Kingdom of Bohemia], are classed by the Austrian government with criminals and other undesirable citizens.<sup>36</sup>

*Our Era* and the Brno weekly *Right of Woman* also fulminated against the Viennese press for its slander of English suffragettes.<sup>37</sup>

Czech men, according to the feminists's ideas, were expected to sympathize with women's aspirations, not only because of the democratic Czech tradition, but also because of their own experience of oppression. It was true that the Czech women's movement never inspired the sort of hostile countermovement which plagued feminists in other nations. *Right of Woman* proffered the opinion that Czech men would more or less automatically support women's suffrage because, in the words of *Our Era*, "The Czech man, feeling how the denial of national and political equality hurts, angers and inflames a thinking person, certainly will not prepare the same fate for the women of his nation: his mother, wife, daughters, sisters."<sup>38</sup>

As much as it exudes wishful thinking, the journal's argument was not without foundation. Women were able to enlist concrete support from Czech political parties in their struggle for equal rights. The Social Democratic, Progressive, National Socialist and various minor parties welcomed female members and advocated full legal equality for women. The large Agrarian Party insisted that women not be deprived of their existing voting rights. In 1906, a Moravian, Václav Choc, became the first deputy in the *Reichsrat* to introduce a resolution for full, equal suffrage for both sexes.<sup>39</sup> Even the Young Czechs, who allegedly sported feminist slogans as "modern decor," sponsored a bill in the Bohemian Diet calling for equal, universal voting rights.<sup>40</sup> The Young Czech, Agrarian, National Socialist, Progressive, and State's Right Progressive parties all joined with the Committee for Women's Voting Right in 1911 to hold a major demonstration in Prague for equal suffrage and civil rights. The fact that a party as conservative as the post-1900 Young Czechs would go that far in support of women's rights gives some indication of the progressive atmosphere which prevailed on feminist issues. In contrast, no German-Austrian or Imperial German party except the Social Democrats included women's political equality in its program.

Some Czech politicians were certainly motivated by personal conviction in their support of women's rights; others may well have viewed women's issues as convenient ammunition against the regime. In a wry account of the *Reichsrat* budget committee proceedings in 1895 regarding women's education, Progressive journalist Antonín Hajn observed that Austrian politics made strange bedfellows. It was, according to Hajn, the "peculiar position of our nation in this state" which drove so many Young Czech representatives to defend women's demands against the government even when, by inclination, they would have lined up in the conservative camp.<sup>41</sup>

One of the more spectacular symbolic exploits by the Czechs combined feminist aspirations with anti-Austrian sentiment. It came about as part of Czech women's multi-faceted campaign for increased voting rights which took shape around 1905, during the general agitation for universal manhood suffrage in Cisleithania. In Bohemia, female suffragists faced a semi-feudal morass of voting regulations. Until December, 1906, when equal manhood suffrage replaced the curial system in *Reichsrat* elections, female owners of large estates in Bohemia were allowed to vote for the *Reichsrat* by proxy. That year, Vienna rescinded their right. However, since 1861, women and men alike who were taxpayers or members of learned professions were able to vote in elections to the Bohemian Diet and in municipal elections, except in Prague and Liberec. Enfranchised women demonstrated their zeal by exercising this privilege in proportionately

greater numbers than qualified men.<sup>42</sup> In addition, these women were eligible to stand for election to the Diet, a right which had gone unnoticed for years until feminists happily rediscovered it in 1905.<sup>43</sup>

After 1906, however, the Habsburg government intended to end women's suffrage in Austria altogether. Czech feminists were prepared to fight to preserve the existing rights of Bohemian women, although they thereby put themselves in the awkward position of upholding the undemocratic, property-qualified franchise. The stated goal of the Committee for Women's Voting Right was to achieve universal, equal suffrage to replace the antiquated, estate-based system in the province. But it seemed more practical in the short run to maintain the rights of privileged Bohemian women than to risk losing them in a "democratic" reform like the one implemented for the *Reichsrat*. This stance caused some friction with the feminists's Progressive allies.<sup>44</sup>

The Committee began enlisting the help of the Czech parties to realize the ultimate act of defiance of Vienna—the election of a woman to the Diet. An effort by the Committee to convince several parties to sponsor a single female candidate initially failed, and the group unsuccessfully ran one of its own members, Marie Tůmová, in the district of Vysoké Mýto in 1908 and 1909. Plamínková used the occasion of a visit by Carrie Chapman-Catt to Prague to announce Tůmová's second candidacy. Included in her platform were demands for universal, equal suffrage and the assurance of equal rights and freedom for all nationalities. With each by-election, the Committee tried to convince the more progressive parties to nominate women candidates, and over the years several parties did, but still none was elected. Yet the Committee continued to hope that a woman, "sent to the Diet by the will of the people, may be a living protest against the reactionary Austrian government."<sup>45</sup>

In 1912, the controversy in Bohemia took on decidedly nationalist overtones. The government notified the Diet that women were absolutely not eligible for election and that furthermore they would lose all voting privileges when the curial system gave way to equal manhood suffrage. When a subcommittee of the Diet studied the issue, the result confirmed Czech feminists's suspicions: the three Czech members of the nine-man subcommittee were the only ones to uphold the women's right. The German members rejected women's suffrage altogether, while the owners of large estates (generally German-speaking and *kaisertreu*) deferred to the government.<sup>46</sup>

During the deliberations, the Committee for Women's Voting Right published an appeal to the nation, and amid a tremendous outpouring of interest and support, convinced several parties to nominate a female candidate to the Diet jointly. Backed by the National Socialist, Progressive,

and Young Czech parties and aided by a strong local feminist movement, the nationalist author Božena Viková-Kunětická struggled to victory in the district of Mladá Boleslav and Nymburk. Never before in Europe had a woman been elected to a legislature on a multi-party ticket.<sup>47</sup> Despite the governor's stuffy refusal to recognize the election and the dissolution of the Diet in 1913, the matter drew European-wide attention. Even German women from Vienna and the Czech lands petitioned for the recognition of Viková-Kunětická as a delegate.<sup>48</sup>

Czech feminists viewed the election as a symbolic victory for all women and for their own nation. An elated Stránská-Absolonová declared in *Our Era* that with this event the Czechs had recognized the equality of women, adding, "This whole election was a political protest against the injustice of the ruling circles; it was a demonstration of Czech democracy and the Czech spirit."<sup>49</sup> Success, however, had been hard won by feminists; it had required years of negotiations, petitions and lectures to sway the Bohemian parties and the public. Ultimately the parties, chafing at the bit of political powerlessness, must have relished the chance to embarrass Vienna. No doubt they also acted with an eye to their future constituencies, faced with the certainty that an ever-increasing number of women would qualify as voters, unless Austria had its way.

As it turned out, six years later, Austria did not have its way. Vienna lost a war and an empire. Czech feminists found themselves, with liberal nationalists, on the winning side of the political contest. Returning, then, to the question raised at the beginning of this paper, one might ask whether the women's movement paid a high price for victory. Had adherence to nationalism restricted the potential of Czech feminism in the pre-war years? In terms of practical achievements, it probably had not.

On the other hand, one can clearly identify a chink in international feminist solidarity in the relationship between Czechs and Germans in Austria. Already in 1892, Czech women refused to attend the first Austrian women's congress because the Viennese opposed Czech demands for their own schools in the capital. In calling for a boycott, Krásnohorská argued that the Czech women's movement was, in any case, more advanced than that of the Austrian Germans, adding "we don't need to go to Vienna to convince ourselves that we have a just claim to the same voting rights as men."<sup>50</sup> The Committee for Women's Voting Right and the Moravian Progressive Women's Organization clashed with Vienna suffragists in 1912 when the Viennese refused to allow speeches at a proposed all-Austrian suffrage conference in languages other than German. In response, the Czechs spurned the meeting and called on the other Austrian Slavs to establish a separate "Slavic Women's Federation."<sup>51</sup> Plamínková took issue with the German language requirement in girls' lycées, not because she

believed the students need not learn German, but because, as a mandatory subject, it was "an expression of national servitude to a foreign culture."<sup>52</sup> Grappling with discrimination from day to day, feminists joined in building defensive barriers around Czech culture.

Their intolerance quickly dissipated where westerners or Slavs were concerned. America and England understandably stood as beacons of freedom and toleration. Interest in other Slavic peoples, despite their relatively weak or non-existent feminist movements, persisted as a minor theme among female emancipators. Hardly an issue of *Women's Journal*, *Women's Review*, or the more conservative *Women's World* failed to take note of some petition by Polish women, a lecture series for ladies in St. Petersburg, or an exhibit of Bulgarian handcrafts. Stránská-Absolonová bandied around ideas on Slavic mutuality in *Our Era*. The same writer was always a staunch critic of German militarism, which went hand-in-hand with the oppression of women, but like most Czechs she expressed nothing but hawkish enthusiasm for the South Slav cause in the first Balkan War in 1912. Praising Czech women for sending money and volunteering as nurses, she declared that this particular war was deserving of sacrifices.<sup>53</sup> Of course, this was similar to the about-face executed by most feminists in belligerent countries at the beginning of World War I.

Even if one assumes that Czech feminists could have swallowed their national pride and launched a concerted effort with German and perhaps Polish activists, it most likely would have been to their disadvantage. Austria-Hungary survived through its divide-and-rule policy; the government needed only to invoke the ban on female participation in political assemblies to quash any unruly, multi-national feminist front. Until 1912, when the discriminatory law was repealed, feminist leaders led a precarious existence, constantly running the risk of prosecution.<sup>54</sup> Czech feminists, in any case, correctly discerned that it was more important to win over their own people than the whole monarchy. The Czechs were looking forward optimistically to a period of greater autonomy for Bohemia and Moravia—or perhaps for their Czech populations as such. (Before the war, few would have predicted total independence.) And feminists were eminently reasonable in thinking that autonomy would further their cause, since Czech men would be more receptive to their demands than any Habsburg government.

There is no single answer to the question of what made the Czech piece of the Central and East European mosaic more amenable to women's emancipation than its neighbors—as it indeed appears to have been. The Bohemian Lands' relatively high levels of economic development and education and the Czechs's ambivalence about the Catholic Church register as significant factors. The fluid class structure and predominance of the

bourgeoisie (and petty bourgeoisie), not an aristocracy, in Czech society engendered practicality rather than deference to ancient social mores. Fear of depopulation or "race suicide," which caused a backlash in other industrialized countries, did not trouble the Czechs, whose population remained proportionately stable vis-à-vis the Germans. Strong patriarchal traditions, upon which so many Slavic women's movements faltered, were absent.

From all indications, the ongoing national movement was a tremendous boon to feminism. The conventional wisdom—that women's extensive participation in the national awakening and the struggle for national rights made them deserving of a "reward" for their loyalty—cannot adequately explain the success of Czech feminism. Serb or Slovene women, no less loyal than the Czechs, failed to win voting rights until 1945. The effects of the Czechs' democratic heritage and appreciation of progressive values, which feminists themselves stressed, are difficult to measure. Women drew on this perceived tradition and portrayed feminism as not only consistent with the Czech national movement, but emanating from it. Certainly, their claims were partly based on an idealistic myth. Yet the fact that the myth was cultivated by liberals, especially Masaryk, paved the way for a greater societal acceptance of women's emancipation.

National tensions in Austria also allowed feminists to emphasize the identity of interests between Czech men and women in opposition to a common, foreign enemy. Since Czech men held little real political power, women could turn to them as allies rather than oppressors. Feminists did not whitewash their difficulties with politicians, and acknowledged that women's interests were often given lip service but not treated as high-priority issues. Still, most feminist goals won at the very least a grudging acceptance from male intellectuals and liberal leaders. To what extent the national movement promoted gender equality among the majority of the population—farmers and workers—is a worthwhile question which, unfortunately, lies beyond the scope of this article.

The experience of the Czech women's movement between 1890 and the beginning of World War I illustrates two interrelated points. First, it underscores the importance of liberal nationalist movements as a vehicle for feminism in small, foreign-dominated nations which Richard Evans has convincingly described in *The Feminists*.<sup>55</sup> But not all nationalist movements are alike. The second point which this case study highlights is the need to examine the specifics of a given nationalist ideology in relation to gender. If the Czech bourgeois women's movement exhibited a peculiarly nationalistic braggadocio, with its simultaneous exhortation and claim to be "first in Austria," it also found considerable sustenance for its feminism in the national history and mythology. The Hussite tradition and the



participation of women in the national awakening not only affirmed the feminists's liberal, individualist convictions, but seemed explicitly to include women in the national inheritance. Far from isolating Czech feminists, the national cultural values seemed to link them to the west, to a more civilized world where women were free to attend universities and political meetings as they wished.

The legacy of pre-war Bohemian feminists continued to reverberate throughout the first Czechoslovak Republic, where the most famous women's rights activist, Masaryk, served as president until 1935. Not only did women immediately gain full legal equality and voting rights, but a greater proportion took up partisan politics than in any other East European country.<sup>56</sup> With the obstacles to university study lifted, Czech women in particular sought a higher education; by the 1920s, women comprised 25% and 18%, respectively, at the Czech universities in Prague and Brno, but only about 13% at the corresponding Bohemian German and Slovak universities.<sup>57</sup> Overall, women's rights were better served in Czechoslovakia than in most European countries during the interwar period.<sup>58</sup> Whatever the rhetoric of the Czech feminist movement, the changes to which it contributed ultimately benefited the women of all nationalities in Czechoslovakia.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Peter Bugge, Zdeněk David, Michael S. Fox, Vivian Fox, Robert McQuie and Piotr Wandycz for their comments on this paper at various stages. Research was supported in part by a grant from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

<sup>2</sup> The Bohemian Crownlands, independent until 1526, consisted of three provinces: Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. In 1900, 3.9 million Czechs comprised 62% of the population of Bohemia, 1.7 million made up 71% of the Moravian population, and 146,000 constituted 22% of the people of Austrian Silesia. In Bohemia and Moravia, nearly all the remainder of the population was German-speaking, while the smaller Silesia—where no significant women's movement emerged—was also populated by Germans and Poles. Bruce Garver, *The Young Czech Party 1874-1901 and the Emergence of a Multi-Party System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), Appendix, Table 1, 323-324.

The Bohemian lands lay in Cisleithania, or the Austrian half of the Monarchy after its division in 1867. The term "Austria" in this paper refers to Cisleithania as a whole, not just the lands which later made up the Austrian Republic. The Slovaks, with whom the Czechs joined to create the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, lived in Transleithania, the Hungarian part of the Monarchy, where the regime was much more repressive to national minorities.

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia 1840-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 102. The sources in English on pre-World War II Czech feminism are few but solid. Besides

the three or so pages in Evans's book, there are articles by Karen Johnson Freeze, "Medical Education for Women in Austria: A Study in the Politics of the Czech Women's Movement in the 1890s," and by Bruce Garver, "Women in the First Czechoslovak Republic," both in *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe*, ed. Sharon L. Wolchik and Alfred G. Meyer, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985). In addition, Marie Neudorff's study, "Masaryk and the Women's Question," appears in *T. G. Masaryk (1850-1937): Thinker and Politician*, ed. Stanley B. Winters, (New York: St. Martin's, 1990). I am particularly indebted to Freeze's work. Recent Czech sources are almost non-existent.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, *The Feminists*, 94. These two conditions obviously affected all Austrian feminist movements.

<sup>5</sup> To give a general idea of the difference in the extent of industrialization in the Bohemian Lands, in 1900, 36% of the work force in Bohemia was employed in industry and 41% in agriculture, while in Moravia, the corresponding figures were 28% and 52%. *Österreichisches statistisches Handbuch für im Reichsrat vertretene Königreiche und Länder* vol. 22 (1903) (Vienna: 1904), 27. Already in 1880, the Bohemian Lands yielded 64% of the industrial production in Cisleithania while making up only 37% of its population. Robert A. Kann and Zdeněk V. David, *The Peoples of the Eastern Habsburg Lands, 1526-1918* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1984), 315-316.

<sup>6</sup> "Ženská emancipace," in *Ottův slovník naučný* (Prague: J. Otto, 1908), vol. 27, 809. On 1848, see Stanley Z. Pech, *The Czech Revolution of 1848* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), Chapter 14.

<sup>7</sup> See *Frauenbewegung, Frauenbildung und Frauenarbeit in Osterreich* (Vienna: Bund Osterreichischer Frauenvereine, 1930), Part I.

<sup>8</sup> *Ottův slovník naučný*, 809.

<sup>9</sup> Freeze, "Medical Education," in Wolchik and Meyer, provides a comprehensive account of these events.

<sup>10</sup> Kamil Harmach, "Otázka vyššího vzdělání žen a rakouský parlament," in Albína Honzáková, ed. *Československé studentky let 1890-1930* (Prague: Ženská národní rada a spolek Minerva, 1930), 145. In the early 1890s, Masaryk's Realist group was a faction of the Young Czech Party.

<sup>11</sup> According to official statistics for 1900, literacy was 96% among Czechs and 93% among Germans in Cisleithania. Among other nationalities in Austria, the figure was considerably lower, for example, 59% among Poles and only 24% among Ruthenians (Ukrainians). *Österreichisches statistisches Handbuch*, 10.

Even in Imperial Germany there was no state-sponsored *gymnasium* until 1894, when one opened in Baden. See Richard J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany, 1894-1933* (London: Sage Publications, 1976), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Freeze, "Medical Education" in Wolchik and Meyer, *Women, State and Party*, 57. Klára Červenková, "Dějiny spolku 'Minerva,'" in Honzáková, *Studentky*, 145. Emperor Franz-Josef, however, donated 100 guilders.

<sup>13</sup> *Časopis českého studentstva*, 2, no. 15 (1890): 267.

<sup>14</sup> Červenková, "Minerva" in Honzáková, *Studentky*, 147.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 153-154.

<sup>16</sup> Garver, *The Young Czech Party*, chapters 8 and 9.

<sup>17</sup> See Karen Johnson Freeze, "The Young Progressives: The Czech Student Movement, 1887-1897" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1974), 32-38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ženská revue*, 6 (November/December 1911): 250-251. I have not been able to determine the precise extent of the feminist movement in the Bohemian Lands after 1900; an 1891 survey by the *Women's Journal*, however, identified 30 Czech women's organizations in the Prague area, 101 in Bohemia outside of Prague, 22 in Moravia, three in Vienna, and one in Slovakia. *Ženské listy*, 19, no. 12 (1891): 251-255. These were generally patriotically oriented charitable and educational associations rather than women's rights organizations. They did, however, provide an institutional foundation for the nascent feminist movement, and, as early as the Minerva campaign, some provincial women's groups were sending petitions to the *Reichsrat*. Czech female teachers's associations were also quite active, and they petitioned for women teachers's right to vote in 1891. *Ženské listy*, 19, no. 10 (1891): 208. But Minerva, and later the Committee for Women's Voting Right and the Moravian Progressive Women's Organization can be considered "feminist" organizations.

On the question of what constitutes "feminism," I would accept Richard Evans's definition of the term as the belief that women suffer greater injustice because of their gender than because of their membership in any other group and the determination to remove this injustice. See Richard J. Evans, "The Concept of Feminism. Notes for Practicing Historians," in *German Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* ed. Ellen B. Joeres and Mary Jo Maynes, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 247-258. As Evans also notes, Czech feminists believed that the Austrian system discriminated against non-Germans in general.

<sup>19</sup> Františka F. Plamínková, "Žena budiž rovnoprávna muži," in *Masaryk a ženy, sborník* (Prague: Ženská národní rada, 1930), 32.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed interpretation of Masaryk's views, see Neudorfl, "Masaryk and the Women's Question," in Winters, *T. G. Masaryk*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-268.

<sup>22</sup> Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right* (New York: Grossman, 1976), 117.

<sup>23</sup> The delegates were also greeted by a representative of the city council. *Ženská revue*, 8 (May-June 1913): 110-112.

<sup>24</sup> *Naše doba*, 9 (November 20, 1901): 159.

<sup>25</sup> International Woman's Suffrage Alliance Report of the Conference (1908), 84-87.

<sup>26</sup> *Naše doba* 18 (November 20, 1910): 156.

<sup>27</sup> Juliána Lancová, "Několik pohledů zpět na Plamínkovou před válkou," in Honzáková, *Kniha Života. Práce a Osobnost F. F. Plamínkové* Albína Honzáková, ed. (Prague: Ženská národní rada, 1935), 221.

<sup>28</sup> However, her Jewishness was not mentioned in any of the Czech sources I read. Plamínková was executed by the Nazis in 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Pražák, "Vzpomínky," in Honzáková, *Plamínková*, 291.

<sup>30</sup> See review of Vlasta Kučerová, *K historii ženského hnutí v Čechách*, in *Naše doba* 22 (January 20, 1915): 79-81.

<sup>31</sup> Frana Zeminová, "Vůdčí hlava čs. feminismu," in Honzáková, *Plamínková*, 459.

<sup>32</sup> Freeze, "Medical Education," in Wolchik and Meyer, *Women, State and Party*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Six were in Bohemia and one in Moravia; according to my count, all these were in Czech. Three were published in Lower Austria, including Vienna, and one in Carinthia, presumably in German. *Österreichisches statistisches Handbuch* (1909) (Vienna: 1910), 109. The statisticians seem to have overlooked the Slovene journal, *Slovenska gospodyna*, published in Ljubljana. The Polish feminist organization in Austrian Galicia was handicapped by the very small size of the Polish middle class and the ban on cooperating with women in Russian and Prussian Poland. It had only two major associations, in Cracow and Lemberg, and the latter had four affiliates. IWSA Report (1913), 126.

<sup>34</sup> *Naše Doba* 19 (December 20, 1911): 235.

<sup>35</sup> *Naše doba* 17 (October 20, 1909): 78.

<sup>36</sup> IWSA Report (1909): 87.

<sup>37</sup> *Naše doba* 19 (April 20, 1912): 556-557, and 18 (January 20, 1911): 311.

<sup>38</sup> *Naše doba* 19 (April 20, 1912): 554. *Naše doba* still argued that there was a need for a Czech men's league to support women's rights.

<sup>39</sup> *Frauenbewegung*, 71. *Ženská revue* 2 (September 1906): 57.

<sup>40</sup> The "modern decor" comment on the Young Czechs is in *Naše doba* 17 (August 20, 1910): 867.

<sup>41</sup> Typescript of Hajn's article in Archiv narodního muzea, Antonín Hajn papers, 7639/3. It was probably published in *Radikální listy* in December, 1895, but I was unable to locate the relevant volume of that journal in Prague.

<sup>42</sup> International Woman Suffrage Alliance, *Woman Suffrage in Practice* (London and New York: 1913), 116.

<sup>43</sup> IWSA Report (1908): 86.

<sup>44</sup> Kamil Harmach, "Průkopnice," in Honzáková, *Plamínková*, 211.

<sup>45</sup> IWSA Reports (1911): 82.

<sup>46</sup> IWSA Report (1913): 109. *Ženská revue* 7 (February/March 1912): 64, describes the subcommittee's decisions.

<sup>47</sup> Only in Finland had women been elected as candidates of one party. Evans, *The Feminists*, 102.

<sup>48</sup> *Ženská revue* 7 (October 1912): 210.

<sup>49</sup> *Naše doba* 19 (July 20, 1912): 795. The 1913 IWSA Report is the most detailed source in English on the efforts to elect a woman to the Bohemian Diet. For another account partly based on the IWSA Reports, see Evans, *The Feminists*, 97-98. Evans, however, concludes that the election of Viková-Kunětická had no practical political significance.

<sup>50</sup> *Ženské listy* 19, no. 60 (1891): 208. Also noted in Freeze, "Medical Education," in Wolchik and Meyer, *Women, State and Party*, fn. 74, 372.

<sup>51</sup> Polish and Slovene women did participate and were eventually permitted to speak in their native languages. *Ženská revue* 7 (October 1912): 63-64. For the German-Austrian perspective, see *Frauenbewegung*, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Pražák, "Vzpomínky," in Honzáková, *Plamínková*, 291.

<sup>53</sup> *Naše doba* 20 (December 20, 1912): 235.

<sup>54</sup> The Committee for Women's Voting Right was technically constituted as a "free association." It and its Austrian German counterpart had to remain affiliates rather than actual members of the IWSA until 1913. "30 let práce Plamínkové," in Honzáková, *Plamínková*, 61. The predecessor to the Moravian Progressive Women's Organization was banned a week after its founding because of the political content of its bylaws. See *Ženská revue* 6 (November/December 1911): 250.

<sup>55</sup> See Evans, *The Feminists*, 85-86.

<sup>56</sup> Garver, "Women," in Wolchik and Meyer, *Women, State and Party*, 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>58</sup> Freeze, "Medical Education," in Wolchik and Meyer, *Women, State and Party*, 51.