

## Municipal Elites and the Prague Suburbs



**Jan Vobořil: Vlivní muži pražských předměstí: komunální elity v Karlíně a Libni v letech 1861–1914** [The Influential Men in the Prague Suburbs: Municipal Elites in Karlín and Libeň in 1861–1914], Prague: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy 2017, 376 pp.

The enduring and indisputably superior status of “caput regni” makes Prague an almost inexhaustible reservoir of material not only for political, but also for economic, social, administrative, and art history, and other related fields. Evidence of this the perennial stream of specialist literature of various kinds in which Prague’s agglomeration is often not only the backdrop of the phenomena under investigation but also the subject of research. Not even the changing prevailing trends and methodological approaches of historical science have ever led to the loss of interest of the scholars, although, of course, in view of the issues of current concern, the broad themes constantly changed. The 1980s were concerned with the workers<sup>1</sup> and the prime focus of the 1990s was on coming to terms with a neglected multinational past.<sup>2</sup> In the last two decades we have had to face a fundamental change in the character of entire Prague districts. The focus of economic activities has shifted to the service sector and former factory complexes are giving way to residential and commercial construction. The wider Prague centre is losing its industrial character and gaining a residential and tourist quality. The increase in individual transport revives the old problems of transport interconnection of individual urban areas and, above all, the issue of communal politics is becoming crucial again. Part of the publications about Prague of recent years, Jan Vobořil’s book appears in the context of the edition “Zmizelá Praha” [Zmizelá Praha] published by Paseka publishing house, exploring the history of the former autonomous municipalities within the conurbation.<sup>3</sup> Vobořil’s “Vlivní muži” is principally a scientific work wanting to cross the frontiers of the capital city in terms of functioning of the communal elites, their circulation, jostling for positions, mutual relations and life horizons in the second half of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century to offer some general conclusions and norms.

It seeks inspiration and comparative material not only in authors from Prague institutions (J. Hlavačka, J. Pešek and J. Štaif), with a strong inspiration source in works from the Brno circuit (L. Fasora, J. Hanuš and J. Malíř) and Ostrava (P. Kladiwa and A. Pokludová) historians.

Of the foreign research centres we note the strongest influence of the Viennese milieu, notably the team of authors around Peter Urbanitsch, and the extensive publication enterprise “Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918”.<sup>4</sup> Since the list of sources

---

1 Jarmila Šťastná — Antonín Robek — Mirjam Moravcová (eds.), *Stará dělnická Praha: život a kultura pražských dělníků 1848–1939*, Prague 1981.

2 Gary B. Cohen, *Němci v Praze 1861–1914*, Prague 2000.

3 Zdeněk Šesták, *Jak se ze Žižkova stalo velké město: 1865–1914*, Prague 2008; Zdeněk Míka, *Karlín: nejstarší předměstí Prahy*, Prague 2011.

4 For individual works see list of literature in the book.



includes seminal works by J. Klabouch and O. Urban,<sup>5</sup> the summary of secondary literature is almost as good as complete, being in itself a valuable aid to other researchers in the field of Cisleithanian self-governing territorial units and local elites. The book is published in the *Fontes* edition of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University and is divided into eight chapters. The first three chapters entitled *Determining the Factors of Karlín and Libeň's Development*, *Building the Identity in the Shadow of the Metropolis*, and *Karlín as a Breeding Ground of Czech Entrepreneurship*, can be to some extent considered as initiatory. On 77 pages, the reader is introduced in fine detail to the environment of two selected suburban communities, not only in geographical, demographical, economical or personal terms, but also from the historical point of view.

We are acquainted with key players, personalities, enterprises, financial institutions and societies, and crucial moments in the development of the two municipalities in the period under review that replicate the story of many other municipalities in the Czech Republic: the establishment of a credit union, disputes over communal infrastructure, problems of rapid urbanization and industrialization. Although by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century both municipalities had the same population, both had retained a different character, had different dynamics of growth, and a different character of communal elites (p. 322). Libeň had sprouted from the original village of serfs with numerous Jewish settlements, and the old landowners families (such as the Svět family) played an important role here. Karlín, on the other hand, was established expressly as a suburb at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was bound from the very beginning by strict regulations. While Libeň had a formally confirmed status of a town since 1898 (p. 82), Karlín persisted with a legally unclear concept of a suburb (p. 80).

We will find many more occasions for comparison but the example of Karlín and Libeň is salient for another reason. In both places there were entrepreneurs whose significance very much exceeded the limits of the Prague basin. Let us mention the name of Libeň Bohemian-Moravian Machine Works, the Karlín-based Nekvasil Construction Company, or the not so familiar name of Ferdinand Friedland, who was cousin and brother-in-law of Ferdinand Lassal (p. 90). Karlín entrepreneurs also contributed to the founding of Živnobanka (p. 92). With these names we get to the centre of gravity of the work, chapters 5 and 6, "Socio-professional composition of the municipal self-government" and "Lifestyle". It is a detailed analysis of the positions of the "influential men" in public and family life, supplemented with lists of the members of the Karlín and Libeň municipal councils in the appendix. Here the author did some extraordinarily meticulous work in what is a seldom treated area of research, expanding the base for further comparative treatment of the Czech elites of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Special kudos goes to the fourth chapter, "Who Rules the Village", describing aptly the system of elections to the municipal self-government. The author made good use of his legal groundwork here and explored an issue that has received scant attention until now from the wider academic community.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jiří Klabouch, *Die Gemeindefelbstverwaltung in Österreich 1848–1918*, Wien 1968; Otto Urban, *Česká společnost 1848–1918*, Prague 1982.

This is a crucial topic, of course, because if we study in more detail the subtleties of the elections to the three bodies, we will find that the thesis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century self-government as a school for democracy for a future independent Czech state certainly will not stand up.

The percentage of people in the city who had a real influence on the functioning of the local authorities did not reach even 20% and the personnel composition of these organs showed great rigidity. The reality of the decision-making in the elected self-governing organs did not remain in the margins of the author's interest, and the book thus provides a vivid and plausible picture of the political life of the Czech cities in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Before proceeding to the critical remarks, let us mention the last two chapters of "Municipal Economy" and the "Negotiations on the Unification with Prague", which are related to each other. The emergence of Greater Prague is an issue that was determining for decades the relationships in the conurbation, had a significant impact on urban politics and investment and, last but not least, on the elite status of some individuals. The exceptional status of Prague within the land gives this question a wider dimension. While Central Prague sought to gain territorial reserves for further development, the suburban municipalities, and especially their elites, were mostly opposed to unification. This is true of the self-confident Karlín, which was the seat of district institutions, and lawyers played a major role in local politics.

The position of Libeň was different. The local political representation staked on the construction of a port (p. 293), but as a result of delayed canalization of the Vltava it expended more on maintenance than it earned and the municipality's economy was burdened with mounting debts. Unification became an urgent necessity then although Prague harboured doubts over unification with an indebted municipality, which moreover insisted on the construction of a seldom used bridge to Holešovice, the only district where Libeň was directly adjacent to central Prague. The author clarifies the situation with a quote from Hlas národa, in which "one seeks in vain the utilitarian reasons that drive Prague to unification with this Karlín suburb." (p. 62). The issue of the merger between the municipalities and the great many memorable quotes from the periodic press are other strong points of the book.

If we are to mention some weaker points, the absence of further comparative material is most striking. This is not necessarily the author's fault and insufficient treatment of the topic is also to blame, and acquainting the readers with the situation in other municipalities would do the book a world of good work. Even with awareness of the exclusivity of the Prague area, it would certainly be possible to find parallels in other towns of the district format. Some peripeteia of the municipal politics of Karlín and Libeň are not as unique as the author would have us believe; on the contrary, they are mirrored in other places and they perhaps deserve more detailed elaboration. A case in point is the nationalist struggle for the Burghers' Debating Society (p. 87) in the 1860s. Formulation of general principles might result in more conciseness in some sections. Too many details in places and long-windedness are another negative point. The book is too descriptive in some passages and lacks expository narratives which should be one of the footings of a scholarly work as they would make the text easier to digest.





Despite the two minor complaints mentioned above, the book is valuable and beneficial. From the abundantly cited literature and sources it is evident that the author has been treating the topic for many years. As the knowledge he has gained so far has only been evaluated in qualifying works, his first monograph is a promising publication. The environment of smaller Czech towns and their communal politics still calls for a modern, truly scientific treatment deprived of the ballast of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the negation of Marxist authors, and the sentiment of the last decades. Jan Vobořil's "Vlivní muži" is more than a good repayment of this debt and can be a good aid to other researchers. A large number of biograms will help create links to the history of other places, and might even attract demanding lay readers.

**Bohumír Bernášek**