

Abstract

The Czech Constitutional Progressive Party (1908–1918)

The Czech Constitutional Progressive Party represents in many aspects a unique phenomenon of the Czech politics in the last years before the outbreak of WWI and during the dramatic war period afterwards. Although it did not belong to massive and influential parties, it played a significant role on the political scene at that time with a part of a solitary, represented by many distinctive individualities. It existed for only ten years, six years out of it in standard peace conditions, but in a time of breaking historical events and decisions it made itself be heard in such an important way that it left a remarkable trace in the Czech history of the 20th century.

It was created in April 1908 by merging two parties, a Radical Progressive Party and a Constitutional Party (or rather a Radical Constitutional Party) that had been established at the very end of the 19th century following a disintegration and a political differentiation of the progressive movement of the 90's. The party took up a progressive legacy by consistently demanding a renewal of the independent Czech state on the basis of the Czech historical constitutional law, political democratisation and welfare reforms. Besides that, the party stood in a firm opposition to the government and the ruling dynasty while claiming an independent Czech foreign policy that would go beyond the scope of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy. In this way, it united a part of middle class with a national and yet democratic orientation, mostly educated classes (teachers, lawyers and physicians, but also important representatives of Czech science and culture). It did not have many representatives in the legislative bodies both in the House of Deputies in Vienna and in the Bohemian State Diet in Prague; it exercised its influence on the public through its press.

It paid a thorough attention to the international situation and its changes and emphasised the necessity of introducing the Czech issue to the European and world level. It predicted a soon outbreak of the global war and recommended to use such an opportunity for dealing with a Czech problem on an international level with the help of the opponents of Austria-Hungary. As one of the first Czech political parties, it broke away in its program from the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy already before the WWI, it declared for an independent Czech state beyond the frame of the monarchy that would be established with the support of the Entente world powers as a consequence of the expected military clash. Thus it anticipated

the route of the Czech (Czechoslovak) anti-Austrian resistance during the WWI, in which it actively took part, both in homeland and abroad.

In the course of the war years, the party was confronted with a state persecution (all its press was suspended), but it did not prevent it from rising against an Austrian activism of most of the Czech political scene and from being represented in the centre of the homeland resistance (Maffia). In 1917, when the Parliament was reopened, it made an independent radical proclamation of the State idea through its MPs, which was practically a resistance point of view. From summer 1917, the party took an active role in the negotiations with the aim to concentrate the Czech political scene and in February 1918 merged with some other civic parties into the newly created Czech Constitutional Democratic Party that went through a reorganisation after the creation of Czechoslovakia and adopted a name (in March 1919): a Czechoslovak National Democratic Party

Only few papers, on the thematic or chronological basis, have been dedicated to the history of the Czech Constitutional Progressive Party, but it has never been approached in its entirety. This thesis attempts to give a full picture of its activity on the eve of the WWI and during the war, it tries to analyse its program, membership and electorate as well as its organisational structure, finally to evaluate its role in the larger scope of Czech politics of that time. Since the archives of the party have not been preserved as such, the thesis rests, first of all, on personal archives of its important representatives, it is, in the first place, Antonín Hajn, its long-time chairman, then it uses the press, published political documents of the party (programs, organisational statutes, brochures etc.) and naturally the memoirs whether they have been published or are still in manuscript.

The thesis needs to deal with some essential issues and problems that this topic brings along. First of all, it shows a historically conditioned type of political party spirit represented in this organisation, then possibilities and limits of its political activity and influence in the pre-war years and in the midst of the war. A special attention is being paid to the role of significant, yet often very different personalities in the party leadership board and in the presentation of the party politics. It analyses a constitutional progressive variety of the Czech nationalism, with a deep philosophical and moral foundation, inseparably linked to democracy, though still demanding almost a militant national self-confidence. A profound analysis dwells on the pre-war "catastrophic" orientation of the party to war scenario, that was being rejected in the peace times by the Czech public with irony as a chimera even though it

realistically reflected the facts and anticipated a program that was to be accepted by a decisive part of the Czech political scene when the war had begun. Last but not least, it follows the destiny of the ideological legacy of the party and its representatives in the political life of Czechoslovakia between wars and even afterwards.