

INTRODUCTION

Gender, Rights, and the Limits of Equality in Czechoslovakia

Democracy is not only a form of government, it is not only what is written in constitutions; democracy is a view of life, which rests on faith in men, in humanity and human nature . . . real democracy is only possible where men trust one another, and honestly seek the truth. Democracy is a conversation among equals.

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, president of Czechoslovakia, 1918–1935,
quoted in Karel Čapek, *Masaryk on Thought and Life*

IN THE SUMMER and fall of 1989, the world was transfixed by the “carnival of revolution” wending its way through Central and Eastern Europe.¹ It was a season in which the impossible became real: the Hungarians rolled back the barbed wire on their western border, Poles elected Solidarity candidates to the Sejm, and Berliners celebrated under the Brandenburg Gate. Equally dramatic was the scene in Prague, where hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Wenceslas Square, shook their keys, and peacefully brought about a democratic revolution. Czechoslovakia’s Communist government melted away, leaving former dissident Václav Havel as the country’s new president. Seeing the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe collapse so suddenly and so completely, most observers predicted that Eastern Europe would have a quick and easy transition from Communism to democracy. Local leaders, as well as the Western academics,

politicians, and investors who rushed in to help them develop new political and economic systems, generally assumed that their task was straightforward. They would write new constitutions and hold regular elections, and democracy would result. What they failed to see, however, was that even with a man like Václav Havel as the symbolic head of the state, creating a political culture capable of sustaining those democratic institutions was a far more difficult task.² As most scholars of the region now realize, changing laws and electing new leaders was only the beginning of a long and difficult process.

A similar moment in Czechoslovakia's past occurred in 1918. In the aftermath of the First World War, empires collapsed across Central and Eastern Europe. Germany's emperor was forced to flee, and his realm became a republic. The Habsburg Monarchy was carved into several independent states, including Hungary, Yugoslavia, and the Czechoslovak Republic. As in 1989, Czech crowds filled Prague's squares to celebrate the change of regime. Many did so because they assumed that this revolutionary shift in government had brought them democracy. Czech nationalists had been craving democracy for decades. The Czechs, they believed, were a nation especially suited to democracy, and, in fact, required it to be truly free. With the sudden departure of the Habsburg emperor, many thought that the Czech transition to democracy was complete. But aside from being something good for the Czech nation, what exactly was this democracy? What were its values, its priorities, its morals, and ethics? What kind of laws would it mandate, what social policies would it foster? What kind of community would it inspire?

For decades, Czechs debated these questions, which became struggles over the meaning of the Czechoslovak state, the nature of the Czech nation, and the value of individual equality and freedom. Conflicts over the meaning of women's citizenship were at the heart of these struggles. Gender equality, far from being a peripheral matter that concerned only a few women's activists, was central to Czech politics. Women's citizenship was a privileged arena in which uncertainties about democracy, and especially democracy's more radical potential, could be vocalized and enacted. Between 1918 and 1950, the Czech love of democracy remained ostensibly strong. But this attachment to democracy increasingly became a tie to a

name, rather than to any specific set of political ideals. The reality, as manifested in government policies and programs, was far more ambivalent. By the end, “democracy” could be used to legitimize regimes that were in fact not particularly free, including the rightist authoritarian regime that succeeded the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1938 under the label of “authoritarian democracy,” and the repressive Communist government that ruled Czechoslovakia after 1948 under the mantle of the “people’s democracy.”

The Peculiar Threat of Women’s Equality

My analysis of the problem of democracy in Czech political culture begins with what was known in the early twentieth century as the “woman question.” The basic issue behind this term was whether women were equal to men and deserving of the same legal rights and responsibilities. Many Czech women and men believed that democracy and women’s equality were inseparably linked. As a result of this feeling, the framers of the Czechoslovak Republic of 1918 proposed granting women suffrage and new access to education and employment. The Czech public responded with applause. Yet this easy acceptance of what Czechs explicitly called “women’s equality” belied the true complexity of the woman question. Like democracy itself, women’s equality was a term that was open to debate.

Czech feminists, who were perhaps the most utopian of Czech democrats, had a very expansive idea of what women’s equality should be. In their version of democracy, all citizens were equal and had the same rights, regardless of gender. In concrete terms, this meant that the rights women had gained shortly after 1918 were not enough. There were still many instances of Czechoslovak law—particularly regulations directed at the family—that did not treat men and women as equals. Statutes spoke of husbands and wives rather than citizens or spouses, and used gender difference as the very basis of policy. Czech feminists made it their mission to see that such laws were changed, even if the results went against widely held beliefs about the distribution of power within the family. In their opinion, tradition was never a good reason for standing in the way of democratic

progress. They believed that limiting the reach of the democratic ethic of equality did more than simply curtail women's freedom. Such acts represented an attack on their vision of the Czech nation itself.

These women hoped that all good Czech democrats would share their views, but they discovered that Czechs held widely divergent beliefs about how gender should function in a democratic society. Most Czechs, to varying degrees, did not see "democracy" as a barrier to laws that distinguished between citizens on the basis of their gender. This was not an issue that mapped easily onto partisan divisions. Czech feminists (men and women) belonged to a wide range of political parties. The only party they did not belong to was the Catholic-oriented People's Party. Those who articulated any of a range of nonfeminist positions on women's equality belonged to every Czech political party. While I have generally identified the party membership of individuals, as far as it was known, this information is never a reliable predictor of a person's position on women's citizenship.

Those Czechs who wanted their government to adopt a more limited view of women's equality generally made a much greater distinction between the public and private sphere than the feminists did, relying more on the traditional tenets of bourgeois democratic liberalism. Nineteenth-century advocates of liberal democracy, as Carole Pateman has theorized, essentially worked toward establishing a male fraternity of citizens that would collectively share public power, leaving women marooned in a private sphere that was supposed to exist outside the realm of the state, with each household ruled absolutely by the male citizen at its head.³ For the most part, twentieth-century Czechs agreed this model was out-of-date and supported opening up the public sphere to women as well as men. But, while the feminists argued that the private sphere also needed to be democratized, their opponents wanted to retain the distinction between domestic and public worlds, with equality stopping at the front door. Inside the walls of the home, citizens would revert to being husbands and wives, and a man would still be the head of his household.

In this version of democracy, man's arbitrary laws could not challenge nature's dictates about gender. As citizens, women might now have an expanded public role, but this did not take away their natural functions within the domestic sphere. Many Czechs firmly believed that women's unique role in the family was not something they could choose: it was their social

duty, and their responsibility to the nation. Thus, Czech law would need to endorse that role, primarily by making distinctions between different kinds of rights in different situations, at times allowing social functions to determine which rights a citizen could claim. Far from being irrelevant, gender would be a necessary legal category, and a perfectly acceptable element in policy decisions and government practices.

The struggle to balance individual freedom with the collective needs of society is a characteristic feature of modern democracies, all of which need to make decisions about how to achieve a workable balance between these occasionally competing interests. Modern democratic governments, however, generally have a set of guidelines for achieving this balance: this is their constitution. The Constitution of 1920 gave Czechoslovakia a very progressive rulebook for its future laws. One of its most striking features was Article 106, which essentially forbade discrimination on the basis of gender or class. This section of the constitution gave a concrete content to the model of “women’s equality” that many found unsettling. It also gave a sense of mission to Czech feminists, who made implementing Article 106 the foundation of their work, arguing that they were simply pushing their government to adhere to its own rules. Their constant use of Article 106 put their opponents in an awkward position. Those who argued for a more gendered model of citizenship claimed that they were loyal citizens of the republic. Indeed, they believed that their attitude toward rights was the one best suited to the needs of the country. But, unable to deal directly with the legal obstacle of Article 106, this group of democrats began to urge lawmakers to ignore the constitution and its mandate of gender equality. Rather than attempt to revise or amend the article in question, they hoped to simply dismiss the constitution as a relevant factor. Gradually, they found themselves adopting a political methodology that helped to hollow out the Czechoslovak Constitution, turning its rules into mere guidelines that suggested rather than mandated the shape of the law.

Those who attacked the idea of women’s equality as a threat to family values and national stability certainly did not see themselves as against democracy. But, although they did not put it that way, they were trying to refashion democracy in order to neutralize the potential danger they believed it posed to established patterns of family life. They wanted to place

definite limits on the concept of equality, making it above all subordinate to the national interest. If expanding women's freedom undermined the family as a social institution, and thereby weakened the nation, then it would need to be curtailed for the sake of the greater good.

This need to stabilize the family at all costs was characteristic of Europe during the decades after the First World War. In the aftermath of an incredibly brutal war, postwar revolutions, and economic devastation, Europeans across the continent hoped to restore order by restoring the family. As historians of various Western European nations have shown, Europeans watched women's efforts to free themselves—either via party politics, through cutting their hair and shortening their skirts, or by achieving economic independence—with a mixture of excitement, fascination, and revulsion. They feared the possibility of a world where gender difference no longer existed, or, as historian Mary Louise Roberts puts it, a “civilization that no longer had sexes.” Across Europe, the desire to fix gender by grounding it ever more firmly in the traditional family was a strong factor drawing people toward fascism and other forms of authoritarianism. The European Right claimed that it could put society back on track by getting men back to work and placing women back in the home. This appealing message found adherents all over the continent, including Czechoslovakia.⁴

Czechoslovakia: The Home of Czech Democracy?

The part of Europe that this book refers to as the “Czech lands” contained a complicated mix of peoples in the first half of the twentieth century.⁵ Located right in the center of the European continent, the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia had communities that spoke both Czech and German (often interchangeably), and a smattering of other languages as well. The state of Czechoslovakia was constructed by adding the regions of Slovakia and Ruthenia to the Czech lands, creating an intensely multinational republic, in which people identified themselves as Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Jews, and Ruthenians, and other nationalities, as well. Much of the most recent scholarship on Czechoslovakia has been concerned with the conflicts between the country's many national or ethnic groups, especially between the Czechs and Germans. In just the past five

years, there has been an explosion of excellent research on the process of becoming national in the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia. This literature has examined the intense pressure people felt to pick sides in these struggles, to become either “German” or “Czech.”⁶

This book takes a different focus. While not denying the importance of research into conflicts between ethnic groups, I look at the conflicts within one group: the Czechs. In October of 1918, Czechs cheered the prospect of a democratic Czechoslovakia because they believed it would bring them equality and freedom, both as individual citizens and as a nation. For many Czechs, “democracy” always carried within it this double meaning. It was a set of political ideals that would help create a just system of governance for all, and, at the same time, it was the form of government that would best enable the Czech nation to flourish. It was both egalitarian and ethno-nationalist. Therefore, when Czechs debated democracy, they were not just arguing over political ideals—they were also arguing over the way they defined their nation. It is because of this curious tie that Czechs made between democracy and their nation that I believe it makes sense to limit my analysis of democratic discourse in Czechoslovakia to this one national group.

Before 1918, Czechs did not need to be terribly specific about what they meant when they talked about democracy. However, after 1918, it became apparent that there was no single vision of democracy within the Czech nation. In fact, instead of subscribing to one view, Czech politics harbored many different opinions of what democracy should actually look like. While some seemed to favor a liberal state with republican government, others envisioned an egalitarian community of citizens, or a state dedicated to social justice and equality of economic opportunity, or something else entirely. This ambiguity over the meaning of democracy could never be definitively resolved, for to do so might have shattered the political community that had constituted itself around the idea of a Czech democracy. So the term remained open and contested, and debate over democracy became and remained a crucial element in Czech political life.

Turning from a more exclusive focus on minority politics to gender politics gives us a new way of examining democracy in Czechoslovakia. This approach helps us to see that the difficulty of creating stable democracies in interwar Europe cannot be reduced to disputes over who would

speak which language or which group would have access to what land. There is something deeper lurking behind these issues: the problem of dealing with difference. The Czechs hoped that the democracy they created within the Czechoslovak Republic would serve them as a sort of political and spiritual home, a place described by Bonnie Honig as “free of power, conflict and struggle, a place—an identity, a form of life, a group vision—unmarked or unriven by difference.”⁷ National minorities like the Germans, Hungarians, or even the Slovaks, each of which also had its own designs on a mythical political unity, openly resisted being subsumed into a Czech state and therefore posed the most visible threat to this dream for “home.” The conflict that resulted certainly did have an impact on Czech politics, as the rise of Konrad Henlein’s openly antistate Sudeten German Party and the postwar expulsions of German and Hungarian citizens from Czechoslovakia attest. However, the Czech struggle to deal with the different nationalities in their midst only served to cover up the more fundamental problem: that the home they hoped to find did not exist. Battles over the meaning of women’s citizenship reveal that conflict and struggle actually lived at the very heart of the Czech political community. This was an uncomfortable reality to deal with. To safely navigate it, Czechs would need to realize that “democracy” could not be a place of refuge in sameness, but in fact would always be hard work.

This analysis suggests that the strength of the Czech democracy was also its Achilles heel. As has been so often noted, the Czechoslovak Republic was exceptional in Central and Eastern Europe for being the one place where democracy seemed to work. As the typical narrative goes, the Czechs “had” democracy, and when they lost it, after Munich in 1938 and again in 1948, it was not their fault. They merely succumbed to the enormous geopolitical pressures brought against them by the worst totalitarian regimes of Europe. My work, however, complicates this picture by showing that while Czechs wanted to believe that they had achieved democracy, and did in fact establish democratic institutions, their inability to come to terms with the problem of difference rendered them incapable of creating the kind of political culture that would support those institutions in times of true crisis. When dissent threatened the ability of democracy to serve as the national home, Czech politicians tried to stifle it and legislate away the

differences instead of working to build a new coalition of citizens. Their attempts to still the conflict in order to save democracy ironically led them away from it.

In essence, although the Czechs were emotionally attached to the idea of democracy, they were not able to deal with the perils of a system that counted equality as one of its primary political values. The arena of women's rights was one place in which this came through most forcefully. The potential of women's equality to destabilize a perceived model of happy domesticity triggered a whole series of parallel fears, reverberating through their hopes for the nation, and the democratic state that stood behind it. As it began to appear that women's rights might pose a threat to the "national home," politicians and the public eventually moved to curtail them, not caring that doing so might go against both the laws and ideals of their democratic government.

Thinking about the Czech case in this way gives us a new means of conceptualizing the crisis of democracy in interwar Europe. Historians frequently concentrate on how democracies were attacked from without by the forces of fascism and communism, and pay less attention to the conflicts that fractured European democracies from within. Rather than assuming that Europeans wanted democracy, we should think about how and why they feared it, and its potential to bring more change into already disrupted lives. Here, the issue of rights becomes central. In the Czech case, politicians, worried about the impact of women's equality on the family, developed a capricious attitude toward rights. From the 1920s into the late 1930s, their concept of rights gradually became less absolute, and rights themselves were seen as less important than political, familial, or national needs. Once Czech democrats accepted rights as shifting, and citizenship as something that deferred to the nation rather than the law or the constitution, they began to find themselves making ideological common cause with their fascist or authoritarian neighbors. In the mid-1940s, individual rights would again be sidelined, this time in the name of social justice.

The legal issues that motivated Czech debates over women's citizenship were issues of Czechoslovak law, just as the Czech politicians who discussed them were working for the Czechoslovak Republic, not the Czech nation (although they may have well seen these two things as essentially

identical). To help clarify this potentially confusing situation, I have used the adjective “Czech” to indicate that I am making claims that are only relevant for this particular group. I have used the term “Czechoslovak,” when referring to institutions, laws, and policies that relate to the central government or to the country as a whole and not to any particular ethnic group.

Throughout the text, “Czech feminists,” especially the women in charge of a group known as the Women’s National Council, appears frequently. While this book is not intended to be an institutional history of the Czech feminist movement, its leaders, values, and goals provide the thread that holds the narrative together. I chose to feature these women for several reasons. First, because they proved to be so emblematic of the egalitarian democrats who hoped to transform society and politics in the Czech lands after 1918. Perhaps more than any other single group, Czech feminists had a positive vision of democracy and how they planned to achieve it. For them, democracy was not simply a government that substituted elected leaders for the Habsburg imperial system, nor was it purely a synonym for a Czech national state. It was a society with a strict code of egalitarian ethics. Their very explicit vision and their zeal made them stand out from many of their compatriots, who attached themselves to a concept (“democracy”) without a firm content, which allowed them to accept a number of very different regimes that labeled themselves democratic. The Czech feminists provide us with a model of the possibility, and the limits, of progressive political action in interwar Central Europe. They were passionately committed to their ideals, but unable or unwilling to adapt those ideals to changing circumstances, which helped to lead to their ultimate end. Their story also serves to remind us that the lack of popular sympathy for feminism in Eastern Europe today is not something intrinsic to the region. In the Czech case at least, current attitudes toward feminism can only be explained as a legacy of Communism, which gutted the democratic Czech feminist movement and took its language, its organizational structure, and even its magazine for itself.⁸ The decades of Communist rule effaced the memory of this earlier Czech feminism, just as they simplified the memory of the First Czechoslovak Republic, covering over its conflicts and contradictions and turning it into a mythical Czech golden age.⁹