H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jan Kren. *Die Konfliktgemeinschaft: Tschechen und Deutsche, 1780-1918.* Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1996. 404 pp. DM 68,00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-56017-6.

Reviewed by Nancy M. Wingfield (Northern Illinois University)

Published on HABSBURG (June, 1997)

Czechs. Germans. Conflict.

This book has an impressive pedigree: it first appeared in samizdat in Czechoslovakia in 1988, the next year it was published in Czech in Canada. Academia published it in Prague in spring 1990 (*Konfliktni spolecenstvi: Cesi a Nemci 1780-1918*); and now the venerable German publishing house, Oldenbourg Verlag, has produced a fluid German-language translation by Peter Heumos.

In his introduction to the German edition, Ferdinand Seibt of the Collegium Carolinum in Munich notes that Kren has entered into a discourse on historic Czech-German relations that has been ongoing since the 1950s, particularly in Germany, Austria, England, and the United States. With this comprehensive, albeit traditional, diplomatic-political history of Czech-German relations, Kren has added his voice to those of Czech authors who have contributed much to this discussion, despite the hindrances of the pre-1989 regime.

In writing the history of the *whole* of the Bohemian lands, Kren examines Czech-German relations in the broader realm of the Austrian and the all-German (*Gesamtdeutsche*) perspective. The author comments on the difficulty of deciding who was actually the German *partner* for the Czechs: the Bohemian Germans or the Moravian and Silesian Germans and after 1918, the Sudeten Germans, the Austrian Germans or the German Austrians, the Reich Germans, or the entire German people? In every historical phase, the Germans both represented something different and behaved differently in their relations with the Czechs and their other neighbors (p. 16).

Kren lays out the history of Czech-German relations in the context of the larger Central Europe (*Mitteleuropa*) from the late eighteenth century to the foundation of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. He examines both the nation-building process in the Habsburg Monarchy and Vienna's nationalities policies in the context of the Revolutions of 1848, where he argues that the revolution was different in Central Europe, where the national question was in the foreground from the first, than in Western Europe, where revolution had first a political-democratic, then a social character (p. 71). Formative moments for the development of Czech-German national opposition include the foundation of the German Empire in 1871, when Bismarck's *kleindeutsch* solution shocked the Germans of Austria, but came as a relief to the Czechs (p. 138), and the politics of Wilhelmine Germany and other European powers as well as the New Europe that followed the First World War.

Kren's narrative starts in the late eighteenth century, with the genesis of Central Europe, as this part of the continent began to disassociate itself from Eastern neighbors, primarily Tsarist Russia, but also from Ottoman Turkey. The economic-technical demands of a series of wars were one of the most important stimuli for the reforming activities of the enlightened absolutist states in the region. And the close connection between the history of this region and military conflict basically began with the Napoleonic era. Despite a strong impulse toward *Verwestlichung* since 1989, Central Europe remains a zone of transition between east and west, a region of both division and mixture. Germany, in contrast to Russia which came into contact with Central Europe as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, has been historically connected with Central Europe at least since the eighteenth century, even if the connection has been filled with contradictions and antagonism which culminated in the two world wars and even if today it is in part solidly in West-

ern Europe. Then as now, Central Europe was the center of European conflict.

The author asserts that the Czech process of nation formation was more closely connected to the German era of Central Europe than later Czech national interpretations have assumed and than many Czechs are ready to admit. Moreover, in its early, scholarly phase, the Czech Renaissance did not have a Czech national character. The author, however, cautions that Czechdom should not be understood simply as a German product or an imitation of Germandom, differing only in language (p. 48). He argues that the most important element of Czech-German relations is that despite the closeness and relatedness of the two nations–and the nationalists on both sides certainly don't want to hear this–the history of each has been different enough to burden relations between the two with misunderstandings (p. 49).

According to Kren, the national idea was not the primary element in societal formulation until well into the first half of the nineteenth century. Religious, class, and regional divisions were also important. There were also various *Habsburgtreu* groups whose attitude toward the national movements was complex and contradictory.

The relations between the national elements and the anticentrist opposition were no less complicated. Kren also explains that the German character of reforming, centralizing Theresian and Josephinian enlightened absolutism had little or no connection with the conscious policy of Germanizing that would occur in later periods. Finally, Kren cautions that the task of historians of this era is particularly difficult since they do not have adequate terminology. The use of terms from the national era can lead to error since nation, Germany, and Austria, for instance, had different significance than they would in later eras. Germandom in the early period represented a linguistic, cultural, and intellectual rather than a socially, economically, and politically integrated community.

In Chapters Two and Three, Kren argues that the Revolution of 1848 did not, as some have asserted, represent a nearly total break between the Czechs and Germans of the Bohemian lands, but that reality was rather more complicated. The sharpest divisions between the Czechs and Germans were not based solely on national conflict (p. 96). He notes that national political activities were completely suffocated in the period of Neoabsolutism following the failed revolution. In addition, the politics of the early 1860s were different than those of 1848, as they were almost entirely between the dynasty and the privileged German and Hungarian classes. The *Ausgleich* of 1867 was a humiliating defeat for Bohemian state rights.

In Chapter Four, "The Golden Age of the Monarchy" which covers the last decades of the nineteenth century, Kren looks at liberal regimes and the national questions as well as the rise and fall of passive resistance. In the section on the Taaffe era (1879-1891) which follows, the author considers among other issues the relationship between the Taaffe government and the Old Czech Party and what he calls the national guerilla war ("the Czechs and the Germans are separated by an absolute wall" [p. 179]). The Badeni era of the late 1890s was a time of heightened coarsening of conflict in public life. The cleft between the Czechs and Germans deepened as national antagonism expanded into the unpolitical sphere of everyday life and each group's view of the other worsened. But Kren cautions that the broader effects of the Badeni Crisis were due to external factors. The extreme radicals–both Czechs and Germans–long on the periphery of Austrian politics, were able to use the Badeni Crisis to move away from political marginality.

Although the crisis of the late 1890s contained the genesis of most of the problems which would lead to the downfall of the monarchy (p. 225), Kren argues that their dimensions had not yet reached the critical point. He dates the end of the Austrian era from 1900 to 1918, when national issues in the Bohemian lands were the key problem of the Monarchy. The so-called Moravian Compromise of 1905 represented a failed chance at democratization and national reconciliation between the Czechs and the Germans.[1] Despite domestic travails, however, Austria-Hungary's external situation remained relatively stable, not least because none of the other Great Powers had any real interest in its destruction. Wilhelmine Germany, on which Austria-Hungary was increasingly dependent, represented the greatest threat.

On the eve of the First World War, the Czechs and their political leaders reflected the same inadequacies as were displayed elsewhere in Europe. The Czech nation stood at a decisive point in its modern history, and the Czechs themselves were passionately devoted to domestic affairs. Not only was Austria in a crisis, so, too, was the Czech nation (p. 305).

The Czech war experience was different from the that of the Germans: the former were repelled by the initial national euphoria and glorification of war. Nor did the Czechs support the war aims of the Central Powers. The Czech attitude toward the war was a mixture of opposition, sabotage, and fatalistic patience. By late 1915, the

worst fears of the Czechs seemed to have been realized: Austria had sunk to a vassal of Germany and had changed into a German and authoritarian state. Most Czech political leaders initially reacted to the war with passivity and helplessness.[2] However, the war led to a final break with the Monarchy for Czech politicians Karel Kramar and Tomas Masaryk, each of whom began to think in terms of varieties of a Great Czech State. signal for the Monarchy and as an impetus toward opposition and dissatisfaction among its peoples. Finally, in the summer and autumn of 1918 came the Czech Revolution and the proclamation of the Czechoslovak Republic on October 28, whose decisive impetus came from below, when in the course of spontaneous mass demonstrations, the people began to remove Austrian state symbols.[3]

Kren writes that after the creation of Germany and Italy in 1871, 1918 represented the greatest national change in Central Europe (p. 383). Defeated Germany early recognized both that it could not take over the defense of the Germans of Czechoslovakia and that it was in German state interest for the two young democracies to develop correct relations. One of the issues confronting the New Europe was, however, a German problem: a not insignificant number of Germans now lived outside the German nation-state as minorities, and they played a larger role than before in the German national balance.

The Austrian question was far more problematic in 1918 since the dissolution of the Monarchy was a catastrophe for its Germans, whose national identity was traditionally tied up with the Habsburg Monarchy. Austro-Czech relations were tense and from Prague's view, Vienna, not Germany, was the main enemy. Moreover, both during and at the end of the First World War, but to a much greater degree, the Czech-German relationship developed into an all encompassing conflict between the two nationalities for the first time since 1848. Thus the defeat of the Central Powers and the downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy stunned the Germans of the Bohemian lands even more than those of Austria and Germany, since they considered these events threats to their national existence. The indisputable tension between the Czechs and Germans in the immediate postwar period was clearly the result of wartime conditions, and unrest showed itself especially in the social sphere. Kren writes that it is difficult to conclude if Czech-German relations were better or worse between the wars than before the war. He argues that postwar Czech-German relations were not the simple exchange of roles (dominant and dominated) from the time of the Monarchy. While the Germans of Czechoslovakia were a minority, they were still members of a large people (*Volk*). And Germany as neighbor together with the high level of development of the Germans in Czechoslovakia represented an advantage over a small people.

Finally, the author discusses the requirements for the prosperous state development of Czechoslovakia and the other successor states during the interwar era. He argues that these domestic and external prerequisites remain the fundamental problems of the region today. The people of the region need a milieu of social stability and democratic order for their further development and coexistence. Interwar history, he concludes, has demonstrated that Central Europe must be considered an all-European problem.

One of the flaws in this excellent book is that Kren posits overarching Czech and German national identities from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries that are too static. While he recognizes a variety of German national identities, both Czech and German identities were perhaps more fluid and variable than he assumes.

When this book, which is a valuable resource, first appeared, it was as important for its political pedigree as its content: an excellent synthesis of interpretations on the Czech-German symbiosis in contrast to the more standard communist-national narratives. However, enough new work on Czech-German issues has been published in the nine years since the original samizdat that readers would be well-served by some careful revisions reflecting these ideas and interpretations.

Rather than expanding the text by including recent Western interpretations as claimed in the introduction, the German edition seems rather to have inserted, for the most part, recent German-language works. This perhaps reflects the author's contention that while in recent years, Americans, British, French and Russians have done valuable work, "… haben tschechische und deutsche Autoren allerdings den Vorteil einer intimen Kenntnis des Milieus: Sie sehen besser, was sich hinter den Ereignissen und Dokumenten verbirgt" (pp. 20-21). The author has, in fact, cited some of the classics of Anglo-American literature on the subject: the books of Gary Cohen, Bruce Garver, and Hillel Kieval are all there. But much is missing. Where is the recent groundbreaking work on nationalism by scholars including Hugh Agnew, Catherine Albrecht, Mark Cornwall, and Pieter Judson, to name a few? The author is aware of the *Austrian History Yearbook*, having cited an article from the classic three-volume 1967 edition, but he does not appear to have consulted it otherwise. Nor is it merely the less easily acces-

sible English-language articles and books that are lacking. Missing also are references to the excellent work of some of the younger generation of Czech scholars, for example, Zdenek Hojda, Vladimir Macura, Jiri Pokorny, and Jiri Rak.[4]

This volume is well put together; the dust jacket with the Josef Lada cartoon reflecting conflictual society alone is worth the price. The book suffers, however, from some of the shortcomings typical of German-language publications, including a register of names rather than an index. Moreover, a bibliography would have been helpful in this synthetic work which draws on a wide variety of secondary sources.

I do, however, lament what might have been: a new interpretation of the shared history of the Czechs and Germans of the Bohemian lands by an important Czech historian, rather than a translation making (important) older ideas available to a wider audience. And I am looking forward to seeing which directions Kren is taking his post-1989 work.

Notes:

[1]. See most recently Solomon Wank, "Some Reflections on the Habsburg Empire and Its Legacy in the Nationalities Question," *Austrian History Yearbook* 28 (1997), 145.

[2]. See Claire Nolte, "Ambivalent Patriots: Czech Culture in the Great War," in *European Culture in the Great War*, ed. by Richard Stites and Aviel Roshwald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[3]. See Vaclav Cada, *28. Rijen 1918: Skutecnost, sny a iluze* (Prague: Mlada fronta / Nase vojsko, 1988).

[4]. These historians' work on Czech national memory and myths is especially important: Jiri Rak, *Byvali cechove: Ceske historicke myty a sterotypy (Prague: H&H, 1994); Zdenek Hojda and Jiri Pokorny,* Pomniky a zapomniky *(Praha, Litomysl: Paseka, 1996); and Vladimir Macura,* Masarykove boty_ (Praha: [n.n.], 1993).

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the reviewer and to HABSBURG. For other permission, please contact <h-net@h-net.msu.edu> and <habsburg@ttacs6.ttu.edu>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/habsburg

Citation: Nancy M. Wingfield. Review of Kren, Jan, *Die Konfliktgemeinschaft: Tschechen und Deutsche, 1780-1918.* HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1041

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.