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Minorities and Law in Czechoslovakia (1918–1992)

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The issue of minorities has always been important in East and Central Europe. The main aim of the book written by Jan Kuklík and René Petráš is to provide an objective overview of the legal status of ethnic and language minorities in Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1992 (during the whole existence of the country), especially for foreigners, who are not familiar with the topic. It gives a great value to the book that the situation of minorities living in this country during the examined period is analysed not only from a legal perspective, but also in a historical context. Even though the scope of the analysis embraces a long period of time, the main focus of the examination lies on the interwar period.

The first chapter provides an introduction to the minority issue in the Habsburg Monarchy and at the beginning of Czechoslovakia. The situation of Germans in the Czech part of the Monarchy is described the most thoroughly. The authors give a detailed picture on the process, how the minority issue emerged by the end of the existence of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. They also introduce the different legal status of minorities in the Austrian and Hungarian part of the Monarchy at that time, outlining the Act on Nationalities adopted in Hungary in 1868 and the Austrian Fundamental Law's provisions. After that, the cease of the Monarchy and the birth of Czechoslovakia is described in a context of minority questions. They give a detailed description of the process of concluding the peace treaties after the World War I. They put an emphasis on the Paris Conference's minorities' protection system.

In the next chapter they outline how the legal regulation regarding minorities changed between the two world wars. They describe the political context, and the changes of the relation between the majority and the minorities during this era. A statistics regarding minorities in the country is provided as well in the context of legal status of minorities. Disputes concerning the Czechoslovak nation's existence and identity are mentioned as well. Assimilation of Germans, situation of Hungarians, Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, Jews, Gypsies (the Roma) are negotiated, too. The sources of law and the legal practice concerning minorities' legal status are also described, and a critical approach is introduced. Furthermore, lack of certain definition of the concepts 'nation' and 'nationality' at this time is criticised. They emphasise that the nation state was preferred at this time and a part of the legal rules included provisions discriminating minorities to some extent. Not only the rules explicitly made on minorities are analysed, but also the right to vote and the representation of minorities, legal sources on economy, economy policy, industry and business, agrarian reforms. An emphasis is put on the language law, the school and cultural nationalities law,

and the disputes surrounding them are also outlined, just as the issue of autonomy of minorities and this idea's roots tracing back to the time of the Habsburg Monarchy. All these are followed by a description and analysis of the changes of regulation on minorities between 1929 and 1938. The main topic of this part are the legal status and the situation of Germans in the Czechoslovak Republic. The rise of right-wing extremism and its relation to the minorities is also negotiated with a great emphasis, just as the legal rules deriving from it. It is also negotiated, how the state tried to fulfil an anti-German policy (e.g. with the Machník decree). Clashes with the Treaty of St. Germain are also mentioned. The Act on the Defence of the States are analysed in this context as well.

The third chapter provides a detailed overview of the Munich Agreement giving territories inhabited by Germans and Hungarians to Germany and Hungary and the World War II. The establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia through the occupation by Nazi Germany, and endeavours for control of all spheres of life by Germans, and suppression based on race are described as well. After all these, negotiations on transfer of minorities, the minority policy of Edvard Beneš and the exile Government, furthermore expulsions, and forced migration of Germans which took part before the Potsdam Conference are discussed, just as the organised transfer of Germans following the Potsdam Conference.

The next chapter deals with the legislation of Czechoslovakia on minorities between 1945 and 1948. They start with an analysis of Edvard Beneš's presidential decrees (the so-called Beneš-decrees), which contained lots of provisions depriving Hungarians and Germans from their rights. The authors analyse the situation of the Hungarians in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1948 separately as well, just as the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange. The situation of other minorities (Poles, Rusyns and Gypsies or Romanies) during this time is also outlined.

The fifth chapter is connected to the era of the communist regime (1948–1989) from the beginning to the end. The different status and positions of minorities between 1948 and 1953 and the discrimination of Germans, furthermore the moderation of this situation is analysed. They shortly overview the status of Jews, Ruthenians and Gypsies, too. It is also examined, how the minority policy of the dictatorship of the proletariat and a more liberal era varied, and how the so-called Prague-spring in 1968 influenced legislation on minorities. An analysis of setback or at least stagnation after the invasion of 1968 (between 1970–1989) is also performed.

The last chapter discusses the period between 1989 and 1992, which can be characterised by the change of regime and disintegration of Czechoslovakia. The collapse of communism is described, just as the issue of EU and NATO accession. Furthermore, the case of Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros (Bős-Nagymaros) and other disputes between Slovakia and Hungary are mentioned. Bad social situation and social exclusion of Gypsy (Romani) population, and the situation of Slovaks in the Czech Lands and Ruthenians and Ukrainians living in Slovakia, accordingly the Poles in Teschen (Těšín) Silesia, furthermore the Jewish minority is analysed as well. They also describe that the change of regime did not activate Germans remained in the Czech and Slovak territories, and issue of restitutions is also discussed. The European idea and the low significance of new minorities (e.g. Vietnamese) after 1989 is mentioned, too. The book ends with a brief analysis of the legal regulations connected to

minorities in Czechoslovakia after 1989 and a conclusion, in which the authors emphasise again that the main aim of the book was not to make a new contribution to the scientific discourse on this very complicated question, but to provide an introduction and overview of the change of legal status of minorities in Czechoslovakia over time to help foreign readers in understanding minority issues in Central European Context.

Our conclusion can be that they succeeded with this aim, hence the book provides a very detailed, thorough, but understandable, and mostly objective overview of the minorities' legal status in Czechoslovakia. This was not possible if they would not had been analysing the issue in a long-term historical context. At the same time, the book can not only be useful for foreigners (especially for Western European or non-European researchers), but also for East and Central European scholars who are aimed at explaining minority issues in a Central European context to an international audience.

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