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Daniel E. Miller. *Forging Political Compromise: Antonin Svehla and the Czechoslovak Republican Party, 1918-1933.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999. xv + 323 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4091-3.

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More Than Just a Ploughman's Politician: Antonin Svehla

According to Daniel Miller's excellent and well-researched study, Antonin Svehla played a pivotal role in engineering the political compromises that allowed democracy to function and develop during the First Czechoslovak Republic. The astute Czech Agrarian politician served as prime minister between 1922 and 1929, and helped his Czechoslovak Republican Party hold on to the chief government office even after he left office. He remained an important figure in the party until his death in 1933. His moderation and penchant for behind the scenes deal-making helped Czechoslovakia to achieve more political stability than any other East Central European successor state.

Miller's study of Svehla is the most extensive work on the man in any language. A bibliographic essay summarizes some of the current and previous scholarship on Svehla. The pre-World War II materials written about Svehla were mainly journalistic or laudatory.[1] After the Second World War, Antonin Palecek published six insightful articles that Miller cites. Dissertations by Mary Hrabik Samal (1973), Andrew Paul Kubrichts (1974), and James Rogerson (1980) are also listed. Among recent works in Czech are those by Dusan Uhlir[2], Vladimir Dostal, and Antonin Klimek. Dostal, the chairman of the Republican Party in Exile, wrote a biography that incorporated some primary sources but did not have access to the archives Miller used.[3] Only after 1989 did scholars in the Czech Republic rekindle their interest in Svehla. The most exhaustive study is Antonin Klimek's *Boj o hrad*, and its second volume, which was subtitled *Kdo po*

Masarykovi? 1926-1928 (n.d.) just appeared as Miller's book was going to press.[4] Needless to say, nothing in English rivals Miller's book and none covers the man himself so thoroughly.

Miller effectively portrays Svehla as a practical politician who was able to pursue his party's overall goals. At the same time, he showed the kind of ideological flexibility that enabled him to work with people from other parties as well. Svehla perfected the art of the possible during the transitional and potentially turbulent inter-war period. He was always willing to make a deal, and he clearly understood that compromise was an integral part of the democratic process. Miller believes that, along with President Masaryk himself, Svehla played a greater role than any politician in making Czechoslovak democracy work.

Although he shunned public appearances, Svehla was a skilled politician adept at negotiating and effective at organizing. He remained immensely popular with his own party's followers, leaders of other parties, and the population as a whole. He was a man one could work with and thus, both before and after the First World War, he was always trying to build coalitions with moderate politicians. In fact, in his own words, Svehla admitted that he thrived on working with politicians from other parties. He was a born politician. Perhaps no one better fits Aristotle's dictum that man is a political animal.

In addition to providing a general history of Svehla, Miller's book also surveys the early formation of the

Czechoslovak Agrarian party in the Austrian part of the Habsburg Monarchy. Miller highlights the development of beet sugar production in propelling Czech farmers, with the aid of agrarian leaders like Svehla, to found organizations such as cooperatives and financial institutions to safeguard their interests. The chronological development is outlined in a useful series of charts in the Appendices. Because one page of Appendix 3 is missing, the publisher added an errata page that goes along with the book. But the index appears to be off one page because of the error.

In a short time after its founding in 1899, the Czech Agrarian party became the largest party in the Czech lands, with 28 seats in the Reichsrat in the 1907 elections. The party is often overshadowed in English language history books by the Young Czech party and Masaryk, the leading figure in the establishment of Czechoslovakia. Thus Miller's study remedies the need for a more in depth study of one of the most influential personalities in the most consistently Czech moderate party, and ultimately, after the war, the most successful statewide Czechoslovak party.

Always willing to settle differences, Svehla tried to find common ground with other agrarian interests, including the ethnic Germans and later the Slovaks. He only adopted a more nationalistic orientation during the First World War when it was apparent that the Czechs were being pushed aside by other parties in Austria. He finally opted for independence when he believed it to be the only viable option around which Czechs could unite.

After the war, Svehla became the republic's first minister of the interior and vice premier to Karel Kramar. He was instrumental in placing Czech officials in Slovakia in order to unify the country's bureaucratic system. He also averted an early governmental crisis by arranging a deal with the Social Democrats over land reform, an issue that concerned agrarians as well as socialists. The success of a more moderate form of land reform preserved private ownership and lifted the political fortunes of his renamed Republican party. Miller believes that his success in enacting a reasonable form of land distribution contributed to his party's success during the interwar period. Those who benefited from the reform acquired a vested interest in the new state, even though the reforms worked much less effectively in Slovakia and Ruthenia.

Svehla played a crucial role in constructing the first Red-Green Coalition, which allied Social Democrats, Czechoslovak Socialists, Agrarians (now in the Republican party), and Slovak agrarians. He based the coal-

ition on the premise: "you have the coal; we have the bread." (p. 59) Later, in 1926, he would show similar political skill in building a Green-Black coalition government, the so-called "Gentleman's Coalition," which somehow managed to reconcile the Republicans with the Czech, Slovak and German Populists, the Tradesmen, and the National Democrats.

Svehla is also credited with having founded the *Domovina*, a peasant rural organization dedicated to solving problems related to land reform. Through it all, he had to walk the tightrope of balancing the interests of the moderate Social Democrats and influential right wing Agrarians who were less enthusiastic about reform. The trick was to convince them that moderate reform was in their own best interests as well as that of the poor peasants. Few could have done so more efficaciously than Svehla, and his experience with balancing the right and center in his own party enabled him to use equal skill in his dealings with other parties.

In addition to his political activities, Svehla played a role in writing the republic's first constitution. True to form, his contributions largely remained behind the scenes and not so obvious in the official minutes of the Constitutional Committee. His out of the spotlight style was reflected in his participation in the famous Petka and later the Siestka and Osmieka, the informal arrangements of five, six and eight party leaders who essentially decided how party members would vote in the National Assembly.

Miller also introduces new archival evidence that indicates that, when Benes first assumed the office of premier in the fall 1921, he did so not because Svehla was ill (the publicly stated reason), but because President Masaryk had intervened to install Benes as his would-be successor. When Svehla had to play second fiddle to Benes, he did not simply lay down and roll over. He worked to strengthen his own Agrarian party and helped broaden its base by incorporating Slovak and Rusyn agrarians into the newly named Republican Party of Agriculturalists and Small Farmers. Emphasizing the importance of land rather than a narrow nationalism, the Republican party became the most successful truly statewide Czechoslovak party. In the 1928 elections the party managed to win 15 percent of the votes.

Svehla's last years in office were clouded by his illness after late 1927 and he was forced to resign in early 1929. By not naming a successor, he effectively left the Republican party without an adequate replacement. But the Agrarians continued to play an active role in forming

all the governments until the time of the Munich crisis of 1938.

Miller argues that the willingness of Svehla and other politicians to find common ground on overall policy made the difference. Thus due credit also belongs to other politicians, but they looked to Svehla to broker the deals. While they might disagree on specific issues, a belief in democracy and the need to compromise set Czechoslovak politicians apart from their counterparts in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe. Perhaps Czech agrarian politician Karel Viskovsky characterized Svehla best when he termed him “a man of compromise,” who “remained uncompromising when it came to things concerning democracy.” (p. 171)

There are but a few minor errors in Miller’s book: an errant “e” on page 7 and an “m” on page 158. Probably the most glaring error occurs on page 10, where he incorrectly dates the involvement of Hlinka’s People’s Party in the government coalition as beginning in 1929. In fact, Svehla pulled the Slovak populists into the coalition after the 1925 elections. The author does get it correct later in the text on page 148, but forgot to correct the earlier mistake. Readers should be aware of this. Most of the text flows fairly smoothly, although the reader’s endurance can be tested when short biographical descriptions of various politicians follow one another in succession.

The book is also plagued by wordy end notes. This was a result of the publisher requiring that the author have one note per paragraph. On the down side, it forces the reader to wade through a wad of information when perusing the end notes. But most studies have their tedious spots. The academic need for the information outweighs difficulties in reading such passages. Perhaps an appendix with biographies of significant individuals would have allowed the text to flow smoother in a few places.

In researching the study, Miller made use mainly of newspapers and archives located in Prague such as the Archive of the National Museum, the Prague City Archive, the State Central Archive, and the archives of Masaryk and Benes. He also looked at police reports from the regional archive in Brno as well as the Viennese documents from the Prague embassy. Although he uti-

lized Slovak secondary sources on the Republican party and the Slovak agrarian political movement, he did not look into agrarian newspapers or archival sources from Slovakia or Ruthenia. If anything, these are the weakest part of the study. Nonetheless, Miller does pay attention to Slovakia and the influential role that ambitious Slovak politicians such as Milan Hodza played in the Republican party. As intended, the book also focuses on the party leadership rather than rank-and-file party members or the electorate, particularly at the local level. These of course present opportunities for future research.

In conclusion, any scholar interested in the First Czechoslovak Republic should give Miller’s book a serious read. It presents a meticulous narrative and analysis of the way in which politics functioned in the First Republic. It also provides some worthwhile examples for today’s post-communist states, where coalition building can seem like a Sisyphean task. Svehla’s pragmatism and moderation provide us with the key to understanding ways to lay the building blocks that construct democracy out of an imperial past.

Notes

[1]. See the writer Karel Capek, “A Representative Czech: Antonin Svehla,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 7 (January 1929), 268-71, and historian R. W. Seton-Watson, “Antonin Svehla,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 12 (April 1934), 725-28.

[2]. Dusan Uhlik, *Republikanska strana venkovskeho a malorolnickeho lidu, 1918-1938: Charakteristika agrarniho hnuti v Ceskoslovensku* (Praha: Ustav ceskoslovenskych a svetovych dejin CSAV, 1988).

[3]. Vladimir Dostal, *Antonin Svehla: Profil ceskoslovenskeho statnika* (Elmhurst, N.Y.: Vykonny vybor Republikanske strany v exilu, 1989; 2nd ed. Praha: SZN, Grafia, 1990).

[4]. Antonin Klimek, *Boj o hrad* (Praha: Panevropa, 1996), 2 vols.

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