

**ETHNIC DIVERSITY, DEMOCRACY AND  
ELECTORAL EXTREMISM IN INTERWAR  
CZECHOSLOVAKIA**

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## **Executive Summary**

The political elites of the successor states of interwar Czechoslovakia confronted a central paradox. On the one hand, since they viewed their state as a vehicle of national expression and survival, they sought to build a unitary nation-state. On the other hand, this unitary ideal had to confront a deeply multicultural reality: over one third of the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia were ethnically foreign. This was a result of the imperial recognition of the limits of state power to affect cultural engineering. Historians generally acknowledge that the successor states of interwar Europe had little appreciation for these limits. The result was a mix of minorities policies, pursued with different intensity and combination at different times, that oscillated between assimilation, accommodation, and discrimination.

It is not surprising therefore that the minorities of Czechoslovakia did not always embrace the new national state. On this much historians agree. What remains unknown or at least disputed, however, is the precise nature of minority public opinion in Czechoslovakia, and the preferred mix of political strategies of various minorities for dealing with their new states. The present study is intended to fill in part of that gap in our knowledge.

## **Introduction**

The political elites of the successor states of interwar Czechoslovakia confronted a central paradox. On the one hand, since they viewed their state as a vehicle of national expression and survival, they sought to build a unitary nation-state. On the other hand, this unitary ideal had to confront a deeply multicultural reality: over one third of the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia were ethnically foreign. This multiculturalism should not be confused with the optimistic and benevolent liberal design of the present era in the developed West. It resulted, rather, from the imperial recognition of the limits of state power to affect cultural engineering. Historians generally acknowledge that the successor states of interwar Europe had little appreciation for these limits. The result was a mix of minorities policies, pursued with different intensity and combination at different times, that oscillated between assimilation, accommodation, and discrimination.

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Czech national historiography, even when not "nationalist" or right wing, has largely viewed the minorities as disloyal and destabilizing. From this not very sophisticated or convincing perspective all minorities and their attitudes are lumped together in the same group. Communist historiography, by contrast, stressed the discrimination confronted by national minorities but never really came to grips with just how varied the potential responses to discrimination were. Historians in the West have been much more willing to problematize the issue of social and political identities in both countries and in recent years have generated

fascinating local and case studies of identity politics. Yet, as plausible as these recent studies are, from the standpoint of social science they are not systematic (indeed, they do not intend to be).

The present study is intended to fill in part of that gap in our knowledge. It is a work of history using the methods of modern political science. It is of course always hazardous to assess attitudes and political strategies of large groups of people. One good (though by no means perfect) venue for doing this is elections. During elections citizens have the opportunity to boil down their preferences to their most raw form and cast their ballots if not for the party they like the most, then at least for the party they dislike the least. Interwar Czechoslovakia, by the standards of the day, was a solid democracy. Four national elections occurred: in 1920, 1925, 1929, and 1935. Most students of the era consider them to be free and fair, even if in the Eastern part of the country there was a modest amount administrative pressure applied to the minority population.

How could the various ethnic groups respond to the stringent minorities regimes in Czechoslovakia? What was the range of possible political reactions to accommodation, assimilation, and discrimination? A useful model remains Albert Hirschman's "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty." Faced with a poorly performing state (or firm), Hirschman maintained, dissatisfied citizens (or consumers) first may choose to "defect" or "exit" from the existing order altogether. In our adaptation of this notion, exit would be a move away from democratic politics into anti-system or revolutionary politics of either the left or right. A second modal response is the articulation of dissatisfaction within the existing democratic order through ethnonational "voice." In this case, voters would cast their ballot and voice their dissatisfaction through ethnic parties that attempt to remedy the situation by way of parliamentary power. A third option for

dissatisfied ethnic groups is suggested by Hirschman's concept of “loyalty.” Under certain circumstances ethnic groups (or parts of groups) may choose to *politically* assimilate by casting their ballots for non-ethnic parties that offer either protection or a path for inclusion that remains short of abandoning group identity altogether.

In what follows, we use a unique data set to analyze the ethnic minority vote in two Czechoslovak elections: 1929 and 1935. In both of these elections a large range of democratic and non-democratic, as well as ethnic, non-ethnic, and multiethnic parties, competed for office. Our purpose is to identify the political preferences and strategies of both countries minority populations, concentrating especially on the Jewish populations, and offer plausible explanations for the trends that we identify.

Neither of these tasks is easy. For one thing, even in the era of mass surveys and floods of individual level data, reported preferences are frequently falsified. This is especially true regarding issues of race, ethnicity, and religion. In the interwar period, the problem is made even more complicated by the absence of representative public opinion surveys. Exit polling had not yet been invented. This leaves the historical researcher with no choice but to rely on election results reported at the lowest possible level of aggregation and matched census results of ethnic and religious makeup reported at the same level. Although this method removes the element of self reporting (and therefore preference falsification), it is dependent upon the quality of historical statistics. If either the election or census materials fail to mirror the underlying reality, then any analysis based upon them will be flawed. Even more important, however, inferring the behavior of individual ethnic groups from aggregate level data is packed full of pitfalls. To do it accurately requires the use of methods that have only recently been developed (and which are discussed in detail below). We make no pretension to a full account of Jewish public opinion or

the public opinion and strategies of other ethnic groups. What can be accomplished, however, is a much more accurate rendering of the mass political voice than has been possible to date.

We proceed in three stages. First by way of historical background to these elections and the societies in which they occurred, we discuss the nature and limitations of the census and electoral data. We then turn to an analysis of the vote broken down by ethnic group using graphic and statistical inference techniques. In the final part of the paper we attempt to explain these patterns. To preface the results: it makes little sense to speak of a homogenous minority vote in either country. The Jewish vote in areas where significant numbers of Jews resided in Czechoslovakia was highly diverse but displays the predominant strategies of ethnonational voice and political assimilationist loyalty. An interesting question, of course, is, if not the Jews what is the relationship between ethnic minority status and extremist or anti-democratic politics. How large was the constituency for anti-democratic politics among the Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Germans of Poland and the Hungarians, Ruthenians, and Germans of Czechoslovakia? Using our data, we are able to assess these questions as well, and in doing so we will be able to better situate Jewish political behavior in the multiethnic context of interwar East-Central Europe.

### **Interwar Czechoslovakia: Censuses and Elections**

Czechoslovakia emerged from remnants of Austrian and Hungarian halves of the Habsburg empire. The bond between Czechs and Slovaks was tenuous. Divisions over administrative control, the place of religion in society, and the kinds of policies appropriate for overcoming the formidable regional economic disparities between the highly industrialized Czech lands and the backward and agrarian areas of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus plagued the

first Czechoslovak republic from the beginning of its existence until its end on the eve of World War II. In recognition of the historically very different origins of the regions in both cases, statistics were collected not only for smaller administrative units but also divided up along the larger historical boundaries. Thus Czechoslovak census and electoral data was reported and even published in volumes that were categorized as Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus.

Czechoslovakia's censuses reflected the complexities of its multicultural society. The most obvious peculiarity of its census was the amalgamation of Czechs and Slovaks into one category ("Czechoslovaks") for purposes of enumeration. Of course the real reason behind this was all too obvious to observers at the time: if counted separately it would quickly become apparent that more Germans resided in Czechoslovakia than Slovaks. The Germans lived throughout the country but were highly concentrated (constituting overwhelming majorities) in the Sudetenland, comprising approximately 23 percent of the total population of the country. The Jews of Czechoslovakia were of course a much smaller minority (approximately 350,000) than they were in Poland but in Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus they constituted much larger percentages of the local communities. In Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus also lived a large and deeply dissatisfied Hungarian minority of approximately 700,000 inhabitants. Both at the time and today, Hungarian scholars have disputed the reported census numbers. But their arguments have much more to do with procedures than reported outcomes. In any case, the dispute is more over tens than hundreds of thousands.



Since the essence of our method is to match census with electoral data, a discussion of how the data is structured is in order. The Czechoslovak census contains data on religion, nationality and total inhabitants for over 15,000 settlements. These data have been matched with electoral returns, providing us with what by any standards is a very large data set for analysis.

The Czechoslovak electoral system featured proportional representation and low thresholds for party entry in parliament. This led to competition between more than twenty parties in the interwar republic. Since many of the parties ran on similar platforms and since what we are interested in here is the nature of the ethnic vote, it makes sense (and indeed the number of parties requires us) to group the parties into “blocs.” In what follows we discuss the nature of the blocs we use and situate the blocs within the conduct of the two elections in our study.

Czechoslovakia’s party system was a product of pre-independence politics and also the dominant ethnic cleavages in the new republic itself. Czechoslovakia conducted four free and fair national elections before its collapse on the eve of World War II: 1920, 1925, 1929, and 1935. By 1929 the party spectrum was fully spread from the revolutionary left to the fascist right with a full range of parties in between. The data for these elections were published in volumes corresponding to electoral districts and the data is further broken down to the district and municipality (obec) level.

Czechoslovakia’s political left had been deeply affected by both the creation of the Czechoslovak state and the revolutionary events in Russia. By 1925 the left had split into a revolutionary communist left that hewed closely to the third international line coming out of Moscow and a social democratic party that attempted to capture the non-revolutionary left, while at the same time appealing to Czech and Slovak nationals. German Social Democrats also ran on

a separate list. Among the German parties, in addition to the Social Democrats, there were several bourgeois parties and, of course, by 1929 the pro-Nazi party led by Konrad Henlein that achieved such spectacular success in 1935. In Slovakia, the largest pro-Slovak party was the Slovak People's party led by the charismatic Hlinka.

For the purposes of our analysis of the 1929 and 1935 elections, we have grouped the parties into seven categories as either communist, non-Nazi German ethnic, Hlinka, Nazi, Czechoslovak, Republican, and Other. Although this grouping does not do justice to the great diversity of rural and urban based Czech and Slovak parties, as well as the significant split between pro and anti Hrad parties, the point of these blocs is to highlight the extent to which Czechoslovakia's ethnic groups were gravitating towards the loyalist response of political assimilation, the voice option of ethnonational parties, or the exit option of revolutionary politics of the left and right.

It should be noted that although the blocs remain the same between the two elections, the meaning of the blocs does change somewhat. The most important change that took place concerned what we call the Hlinka bloc. Although the Hlinka's Slovak People's party had been eager to participate in government during the mid-1920s, by the time of the 1935 election, it was clearly anti-system, favored the breakup of the Czechoslovak state, and had made an alliance with other "autonomist" groupings in Slovakia and Ruthenia. The communists, on the other hand, although still revolutionary in orientation, by 1935 were no longer dead set on the breakup of the Czechoslovak state. Nevertheless, the blocs remain accurate reflections of the main ethnic currents in Czechoslovak electoral politics. The parties within each party block are shown below.

**Communist 1929** List 1-Communists

**Republican 1929** List 8-Narodne-socialisticke, List 10-Socialne-democraticke strany delnicke,  
List 13-Narodni Demokracie, List 14-Lidove, List 15-Republikanske strany zemedelskeho a  
malorolnickeho lidu, List 16-Zivnostensko-obchodnicke strany stredostavovske

**German 1929** List 3-Nemeckeho volebniho spolecenstvi, List 4-Nemecke socialne-  
democraticke strany delnicke, List 6-Nemecke narodni strany a sudetsko-nemeckeho  
zemedelskeho svazu, List 17-Nemecke krest'ansko-socialni strany lidove a nemecke strany  
zivnostenske

**German Nazi 1929** List 19-Nemecke narodne-socialisticke strany delnicke

**Other 1929** List 2-Zemske krest'ansko-socialni, madarske narodni a spissko-nemecke strany,  
List 5-Volebniho sdruzeni polskych stran a zidovskych stran

**Hlinka 1929** List 18-Hlinkovy slovenske ludove strany

**Communist 1935** List 4-Communists,

**Republican 1935** List 1-Republicans, List 2-Czechoslovak social democracy, List 3-Czech  
national socialists, List 5-Czech people's party (Sramek), List 10-Cs Zivn obch

**German 1935** List 6-German social democrats, List 8-Bund der Landeswirte, List 9-German  
Christian Socialists

**Czechoslovak Fascists 1935** Narodni obec fasist

**Hlinka 1935** List 7-Aut. blok (Hlinka)

**Henlein 1935** List 12-SDP

**Hungarian 1935** Kraj krest' soc. Mad' n. a Wahlblock

## Method of Analysis

Our goal is to estimate the proportion of a social group voting for a particular party (or group of parties). Since there were no surveys during the period under consideration, it is necessary to rely upon indirect estimation using census and electoral data. This poses a statistical problem. Our ultimate quantity of interest is an *unobserved* quantity: the proportion of a group voting for a party. However, we observe only the aggregation geographic distribution of the social group and the electoral results. We will employ a variety of methods to make inferences from the aggregate data.

One is graphical data analysis. The advantage of this method is that it imposes no statistical assumptions. As will become clear below, quite a lot of information can be learned from a visual inspection of the data. By examining municipalities that are homogeneously minority, for example, it is possible to make direct inferences about which parties a particular group supported. We will use this to reconstruct the voting behavior of the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia. Considering areas where there are no minorities, by contrast, allows us to absolve the minorities from responsibility for whatever parties get elected in those areas. This logic will be used to show that the Jews could not have been major supporters of communist parties in Poland.

There is a limit, however, to the usefulness of such aggregate analysis. The ecological fallacy prevents us in most cases from “reading off” of our actual quantity of interest from the raw census and electoral data. We employ King et al ecological inference model (hereafter, EI) to estimate who voted for whom. The goal is to estimate the percentage of a given social group that supported a given party or bloc of parties using only census data on social group membership and electoral data on the number of voters for that party or bloc.

The advantage of this method is that it combines deterministic information about the possible values of the quantity of interest with a statistical model of what the most likely values of that quantity are within that range of possibilities. EI first computes deterministic bounds on the possible values of the quantity of interest using only the census and electoral data, without statistical assumptions. In other words, for each unit in the sample, it formalizes the kind of non-statistical information that I discussed above. For example, if there were a municipality that had 90 percent Jews, and the communist party only received 5 percent of the vote, then we know that at most 5.5 percent ( $5/90$ ) of the Jews there could have voted communist, and possibility none at all (if the non-Jews in the settlement all supported the communists). That is, the range of possible Jewish support for the communists is  $[0, 5.5]$  EI computes and collates all this information for each group and each settlement and each party.

EI then narrows the range of possibilities further by assigning each potential value within each range a likelihood of being the true value. That is, it takes the ranges for all the settlements together, and estimates the most likely combination of values for the percentages of each group that support particular parties. For example, if it turned out that across settlements the range of potential Jewish support for communists parties was always in the range of  $[0, 8]$  percent or less, then EI would choose a value that lies within the range of each settlement.

## Results

As was the case throughout East-Central Europe in the period under analysis here, in Czechoslovakia ethnic politics infused with the politics of ideological polarization. To what extent did Czechoslovakia's ethnic groups drift into right and left wing revolutionary politics and to what extent did they remain loyal to a state?

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that political polarization was actually moderate in Czechoslovakia in 1929. Figure 1 shows the level of support for ethnic parties across different levels of ethnic homogeneity, whereas figure 2 plots support for both ethnic and communist parties. In each case there is a separate panel for each of Czechoslovakia's major regions. There are several interesting features of these figures. First, examining the settlements with no minorities (on the far left side of each panel), we see that ethnic parties must have gotten electoral support from Czechs and Slovaks. There also appear to be differences in political behavior between ethnic Germans, who predominate in Bohemia and Moravia, and Hungarians, Ruthenians, and other minorities. We see in on the far right of the top two panels in Figure 1, and especially in Moravia, that German settlements tended to support German parties. The pattern is quite different in Slovakia, where Hungarians are the largest minority, and Sub-Carpathian Rus, where Hungarians and Ruthenians predominated. There the homogeneously minority settlements supported not just ethnic, but other parties as well.

Second, examining Figure 2, we can see that a decent chunk of the ethnic German vote in Bohemia and Moravia was going to the communists. The same cannot be said for the Hungarians and Ruthenians in Slovakia and Sub-Carpathian Rus, where the continued high vote variance in minority districts even in Figure 3 indicates that the minorities had to have been supporting republican parties. |

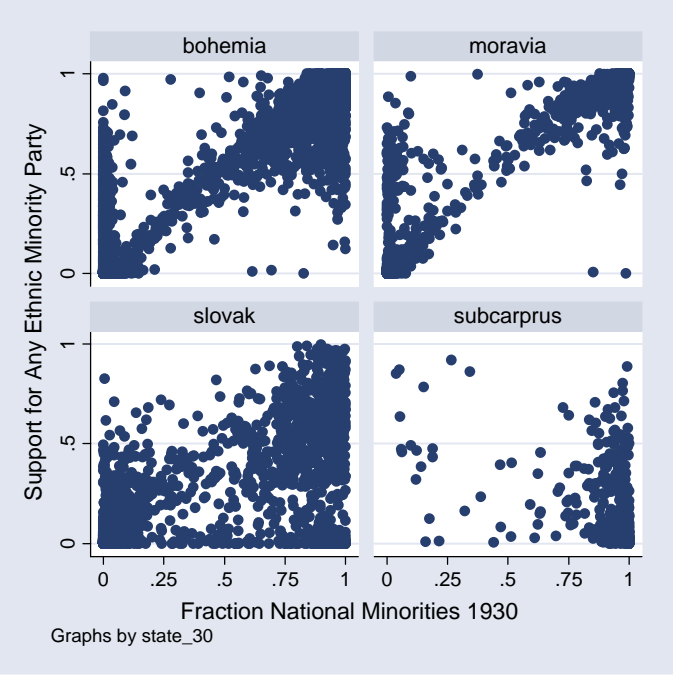


Figure 1

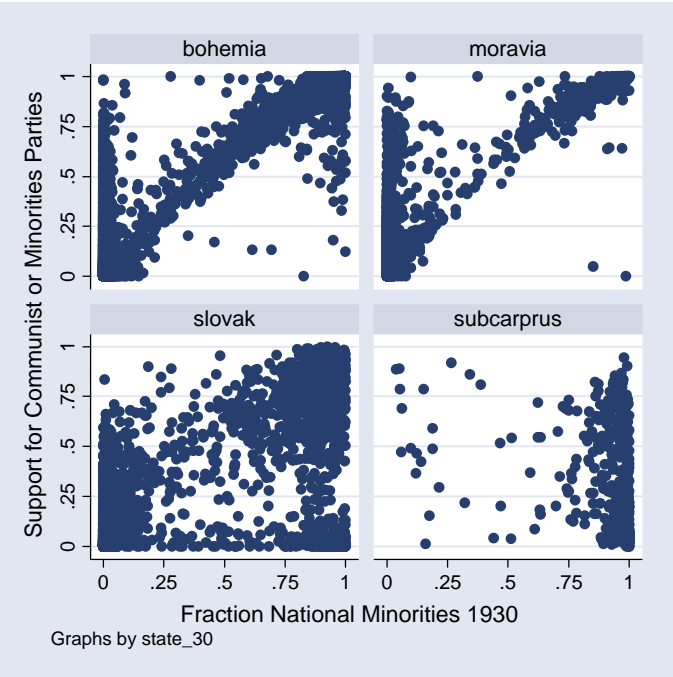
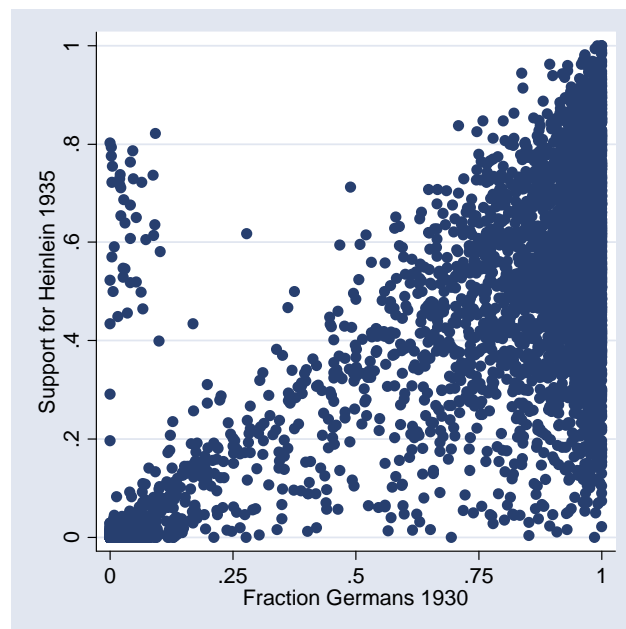


Figure 2

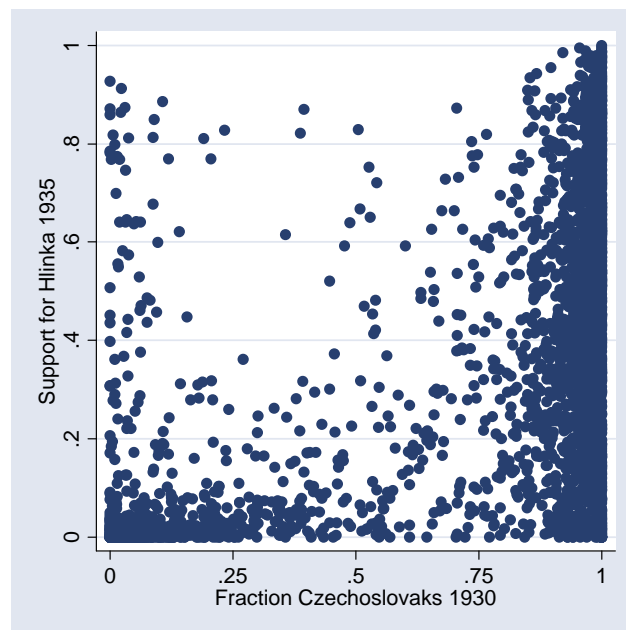
By 1935 the Nazis were well entrenched in Germany and fascist movements in East Europe gained ground. Nowhere was this more true than in Czechoslovakia, where Sudeten German irredentists under Konrad Heinlein weakened the State in the West, while the Slovak nationalists under Hlinka weakened it from the East. Figure 3 illustrates the level of support for Heinlein across settlements with different fractions of German inhabitants. There are two important points to take away. First where there are no Germans there is, by and large, no support for Heinlein's party. The clump of non-German settlements in Moravia that support Heinlein may be “Moravians” with German roots. Given Heinlein’s aims, this should come as little surprise. Second, examining again the far right side of each panel (there were few Germans in Sub-Carpathian Rus), we see that support for Heinlein was by no means uniform. Even in 1935, ethnic Germans were supporting non-fascist parties. As we shall see, much of this went to other ethnic German parties. |



**Figure 3**



Figure 4 indicates a diverse base of support for Hlinka. On the one hand, looking at the right side of the panel, it is clear that while some Slovaks supported him, others did not. Many in fact supported republican parties. On the other hand, considering the left side of the panel, it must be true that some non-Slovaks also supported Hlinka. Given that he had organized his autonomist party for the 1935 election by including parties of other ethnic groups, especially among Ruthenians who wished to break up Czechoslovakia, this result is hardly surprising.



**Figure 4**

Table 1 below shows our EI calculations for Bohemia, Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus for the 1935 election.

These results suggest that apart from the Czechs themselves, the Jews, where they lived in sizable numbers were the most pro-Republican of any minority group in the country. By 1935 the other minority groups had all drifted into the politics of the far left or the far right. In Slovakia over half of Slovaks supported the separatist and clearly anti-democratic Hlinka. The

communist vote was disproportionately strong among all ethnic minority groups but especially strong among the minority inhabitants of Subcarpathian Rus.

**TABLE 1: NATIONAL BASES OF POLITICAL BEHAVIOR IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1935**

Bohemia

	Comm	Rep	Fascist	German	Henlein	-	Other
Czecho	7	85	5				3
German	2			36	61		

Slovakia

	Comm	Republican	Hlinka	German	Henlein	HGerm	Other
Czecho	8	39	50				2
German	14	11			51	20	3
Magyar	16	24				60	
Ruthene	2	81	3		3	4	6

Subcarpathian Rus

	Comm	Republ	Hlinka	German	Henlein	HunGerm	Other
Czecho	33	61	2			2	3
Magyar	28	21				50	
Ruthene	24	38	22				15
Jews	15	72	8			2	3

**Conclusion**

The Jewish place within the multiethnic communities of Interwar Eastern Europe was unique. Unlike the other national minorities of Czechoslovakia, the Jews had no external homeland upon which they could rely. Seen in retrospect, this place of external homelands seems crucial in explaining Jewish political exceptionalism and Jewish voting behavior. For unlike the Germans, Ruthenians, and even Hungarians, who could pursue national and even

separatist goals through the politics of fascism, communism, Jews had little alternative but either the politics of ethnonationalism at home or what in retrospect appears to be the vain hope for inclusion through demonstrating political loyalty or even assimilation. Revolutionary exist was not a realistic option.