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**Modernism: The Creation of Nation-States** | Ahmet Ersoy,  
Maciej Górny, Vangelis Kechriotis

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## The idea of the Austrian state

**František Palacký**

Translated by Derek Paton

p. 25-33

### Full text

- 1 Title: *Idea státu rakouského* (The idea of the Austrian state)
- 2 **Originally Published:** *Národ*, a set of eight articles published between 9 April and 16 May, 1865 Language: Czech
- 3 The excerpts used are from František Palacký, *Spisy drobné 1: Spisy a řeči z oboru politiky*, ed. by Bohuš Rieger (Prague: Bursík a

## About the author

- 4 **František Palacký** [1798, Hodslavice (*Ger.* Hotzendorf, north Moravia) – 1876, Prague]: politician and historian. He came from a traditional Protestant (Bohemian Brethren) family in Moravia. He studied at the Lutheran Latin School in Trenčsén (*Slo.* Trenčín, present-day Slovakia) and the Lutheran Lyceum in Pressburg (*Hun.* Pozsony; *Slo.* Prešporok; present-day Bratislava, Slovakia), where he became acquainted with the ideas of Czech patriotism and Slavic reciprocity. Among his friends were Jan Benedikti, Pavel Josef Safařík and **Jan Kollár**. After 1818, he was tutor to several Hungarian noble families, and was concerned principally with philosophy and aesthetics. The liberal-minded environment of Upper Hungary at that time and his experience gained in noble circles opened up the world of European culture and academic life for the young Palacký. In 1823, he went to Prague with the intention of studying Czech history, in particular the Hussite period. He was employed as a genealogist for the aristocratic Sternberg family, and studied historical methods under the tutelage of **Josef Dobrovský**. In 1829, the Estates appointed Palacký ‘Historian of the Bohemian Kingdom.’ At the same time he was instrumental in providing the Czech patriots with a firm institutional background for their cultural endeavors. In 1827, he started the *Casopis Společnosti Vlasteneckého museum v Čechách* (Journal of the Patriotic Museum Society in Bohemia) the most important Czech scholarly journal of the period. He also made important contributions in 1831 to the *Matice česká*, a foundation that supported the publication of books written in Czech. As a secretary of the ‘Patriotic Museum Society,’ he proposed in 1841 that the main task of the museum should be to present Bohemian scholarship, and he turned it into an important centre of ‘national academic life.’ Palacký entered politics in 1848 as a member of the Czech National Committee and became a deputy to the *Reichsrat* (Imperial Diet) and the president of the 1848 Slavic Congress in Prague. Moreover, he was a delegate to the Constituent Assembly of 1848–1849. He also formulated the liberal political program of the bourgeoisie, and later became the unchallenged intellectual leader of the liberal National Party and remained so until the end of his life. He retired from active politics in the neo-absolutist period of the 1850s, but resumed his involvement in the 1860s, after the reinstatement of constitutional rule. He was a deputy to the Bohemian Diet and, in 1861, became the only Czech ever elected to the upper chamber of the *Reichsrat*. In subsequent years Palacký

was one of the chief opponents of dualism and a supporter of the historical 'state rights' (*Staatsrecht*) arrangement of the Empire as opposed to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. After 1871, he concentrated on publishing collections of his articles on politics, aesthetics, history, and literature, as well as working to complete his magnum opus, *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě* (History of the Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia). Palacký remained a leading personality of the Czech national movement for more than fifty years. In the national historical canon he used to be referred to as the 'father of the nation'; for his monumental academic work he has been dubbed the 'founder' of modern Czech historiography.

- 5 Main works: *Počátkové českého básnictví, obzvláště prozodie* [The beginnings of Czech poetry, especially prosody] with P. J. Šafařík (1818); *Starf letopisové čeští* [Old Bohemian annals] (1829); *Archiv český*, 6 vols. [Czech archive: Documents] (1840–72); *Wurdigung der alten böhmischen Geschichtsschreiber* [An appreciation of the old Bohemian historians] (1830); *Geschichte von Böhmen*, 5 vols. [History of Bohemia] (1836–67); *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě*, 5 vols. [A History of the Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia] (1848–67); *Idea státu rakouského* [The idea of the Austrian state] (1865); *Radhost Sbíрка z oboru řeči a literatury české, krásovědy, historie a politiky*, 3 vols. [Radhost: A collection from the disciplines of Czech language and literature, aesthetics, history and politics] (1871–73).

## Context

- 6 Having left active politics in the 1850s, Palacký resumed his activity after the imposed constitution, the 'October Diploma,' was promulgated in 1860. Referring to the October Diploma, he suggested that the federalization of Austria should be implemented. Such hopes, however, faded after the constitution of 1861, the 'February Patent' The government set out to work with the German liberals and the Austrian pro-constitution nobility, while Czech liberals began to coordinate their policy with the conservative nobility of Bohemia. In response to the ascendant dualist Austro-Hungarian solution to the constitutional conflict, the recognition of historical Bohemian state rights as being equal to Hungarian state rights became the main demand of Czech liberal politics in the 1860s. In the course of the decade, Palacký strove to justify the idea of equality between nations as a true historical mission and a principle to revitalize the Austrian multinational state. He tried to defend his conception of federalism against the proponents of centralist and dualist concepts.

7 In the spring of 1865, Palacký published a series of articles called ‘The Idea of the Austrian State,’ which turned out to be the most extensive and elaborate of his political treatises. At first he followed the historical development of the coexistence of Central European nations and pointed out the basic reason for their unification, namely to create a common state that could counter the threat of the expanding Ottoman Empire at the first half of the sixteenth century. In addition, Palacký argued that the Austrian state had become the hallmark of the Counter-Reformation and reaction against progress and modern enlightenment. But the situation changed in the mid-nineteenth century, when the *Weltgeist* manifested itself in the idea of the equality of nations. To implement this equality did not mean, he argued, the destruction of great multinational states because in the process of ‘world centralization,’ the small nations—self-standing moral and legal entities according to Palacký—must help each other against the large ones and thus balance out the historical powers of centralization that tend to make everything uniform. The true reason Austria should exist was to guarantee the freedom, justice and security of the small Central European nations on the basis of their equality. Palacký refused both the concept of centralization developed by the Viennese government and the concept of the dual monarchy favored by leading Hungarian politicians, while criticizing German and Magyar hegemonic tendencies. Instead, he basically proposed his original federalization concept of 1848/49, though with some important corrections. He did not change the emphasis on national self-determination and basic liberal tenets. He did, however, combine this with other elements, especially with the concept of historical rights, referring to **József Eötvös’s** theory on the historical and political individuality of the Crown lands in Austria.

8 This also was why ‘The idea of the Austrian state’ has sometimes been understood as being in opposition to Palacký’s 1848/49 concept of ethnic federalization. In this respect the apparent contradiction between two of his famous dicta was usually pointed out: “We [the Slavs] existed before Austria, and we shall exist after her!” (1865), and “If the Austrian State had not existed for ages, it would have been in the interests of Europe and indeed of humanity to endeavor to create it as soon as possible” (1848) (See **František Palacký**, *Letter to Frankfurt*). Despite Palacký’s strong pessimism regarding the ability of Austria to reform itself, however, the 1865 article is by no means a program for independence. Some interpretations stress the shift of the argumentation from the doctrine of natural rights towards the politics of historical state

rights. More sympathetic accounts regard these two aspects not as contradictory, but as complimentary, a necessary combination under the political circumstances.

9 Since its publication, *Idea statu rakouského* has been perceived as the most important statement of Czech liberal politics in terms of its relation to the Austrian state in the nineteenth century. As such, it also received a lot of attention and support among Czech, Croat, Polish and other federalist groups in the Monarchy. On the other hand, it drew criticism from political opponents immediately after its German translation (*Oesterreichs Staatsidee*) was published in 1866. Every subsequent Czech political argument regarding Austria referred to this article, and, despite the fact that federalization was never realized, it was only during the First World War that the alternative concept of an independent Czech or Czechoslovak state gained substantial support. Afterwards, however, it still remained an emblematic expression of the mainstream Czech liberal federalist position, and as such has been referred to in numerous subsequent discussions on the coexistence, or even the possible reintegration, of various nations in Central Europe.

10 MK

## **The idea of the Austrian state**

11 The principle of the equality of nations is as old as the doctrine of natural law in general. The source of both is the source from which morality and law stem, that is to say, a commandment implanted deep in the human heart: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” However, it took long and cruel struggles before this divine spark was lit in the soul of man and caught fire to the extent that it could stand on its own and resist brutishness, that is to say, raw and all-consuming egoism. This is also why it happened that civil, or, better said, interpersonal, law was recognized and took precedence over international law. Indeed, physical violence between nations was for centuries decisive, and mostly remains decisive to this day. With the progress of civilization, however, principles of law were formed in this respect, too, which attained general recognition in our century. But the historical fact that originally every nation used to have its own government and was therefore its own state entity meant that the law between states and the law between nations were for centuries considered, and are for the most part still considered, identical. Although the progress of world centralization and decentralization long ago caused the terms ‘state’ and ‘nation’ to cease to be one and the same, to cease to overlap, more than one nation has divided up into several states

and more than one state has sometimes contained several nations.  
[...]

12 That the feeling, consciousness and validity of the principle of nationality, in this sense, has in our age gained in strength and grown in all corners and lands of the earth is a truth that neither friends nor foes will deny. [...] One dares to say that it has never been one of the Lord's commandments that the universe should be uniform. That is why the role of the principle of nationality is, and will forever remain, in the administration of the world, and all human railing against it and taking up arms is like blowing into the wind; one may blow insignificant crumbs here and there, but that always turns out to be useless with larger amounts. This principle is still only in the early stages of its powerful effect, and the mortal eye is unable to see where it will end.

13 Is it not irrelevant to ask whether nationality in this sense (providing there is a difference between the nation and the state) is based on reality or whether it is a mere fiction, an empty abstraction? And if, as I hope, no one denies the reality of nationality, it is appropriate to ask: Is or is not every nation in its whole some sort of moral and legal entity? I assume that at least among thinkers there will be no doubt about that. Nations, such as the Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, and Germans, are a reality, they are individual and living wholes, each has its own consciousness, its desires, its common interests and consequently its rights and obligations: they are therefore moral and legal entities. And no one will deny that Germans, for example, those who live in the states of Austria, Prussia, Russia and France, have their own common national interests, for which they may make claims in full and friendly agreement, even if their governments and therefore these states argued and clawed at each other till they drew blood. [...]

14 In the 'Bach Period,' the principle of national equality may never have been expressly denied from above, but another principle, one that was discordant with it, indeed in outright opposition to it, acquired greater and greater validity both in theory and in practice: it was the principle of the spreading of German culture to the East. If it were understood sincerely, and if the proponents of this doctrine resembled the Apostles, accepting the Holy Ghost from above in order to spread the Gospel to all nations in their natural languages (see Acts 2), there would be nothing particular in their actions to object to; it could even be gratefully accepted. But even children immediately saw that it was a mere euphemism that concealed the attempt to raise German nationality to a place where it would not only rule over the other nationalities in Austria, but would also gradually undermine them and ultimately rob them of

their lives. All culture, that is to say, all spiritual culture, and consequently all national life were clearly meant to be dependent solely on the German language, after which the death of other nationalities would naturally follow. This would not have been wrong or an injustice, providing some nations were not conscious of themselves and of a national life, providing the nations did not consider their national existence something dear and desirable and providing they did not intend to preserve and defend it. In our day, however, when nations, no matter how neglected and asleep, awaken one after the other as soon as they are touched with the magic wand of modern enlightenment, the torture and murder of nationalities becomes a sin that is no less flagrant than the torture and murder of any rational creature of God. [...]

15 Now we shall posit the following premises: (1) in the state of Austria, rights and the law (that is, the will of the state), rather than physical violence or the arbitrariness of one over the other, are supposed to reign supreme; (2) the state of Austria is comprised of diverse nations; (3) no nation has any right over any other nation, nor can any nation use any other nation as a means to its own ends. Consequently, I do not see how from those premises, without blatantly false reasoning, anything other than the equality of nations in Austria may be deduced. [...]

16 The fact that with the creation of the Austrian Empire more than three centuries ago, and by way of voluntary agreements, such diverse nations joined together in one state entity is something I consider a great boon of divine Providence for all of them. [...] This sort of union did not, however, provide enough room for the ambition and imperiousness or domineeringness of individuals amongst them; but were there, then, fewer opportunities to practice civil virtue? After all, bad honor achieved from the use of violence does not essentially differ from the honor or, better said, the shame, of thieves, except in its extent. If someone objects that this union has not always led to the benefit or welfare of the individual parts of the whole, I shall not deny that rather a lot happened that should not have happened, and that various things could have and should have been conducted better, but a just judgment about the past belongs to the Lord God and History. Political considerations should, however, include lessons learnt from the past, yet they should turn their attention to the present and the future in order that at least what in the past proved itself to be defective and detrimental be removed from the state system. [...]

17 Statesmen are trying to frame the constitution of the Austrian Empire on centralistic and dualistic foundations, a contradictory effort which is based on foundations that undermine each other

and are repugnant both to law and nature; they are therefore building something that is physically and morally impossible in the long run. By the principle of constitutionalism, nations are called upon everywhere to express their will in legislation and to see to its full effect; but centralism and dualism limits this to only civil and political rights and denies it arbitrarily with regard to the right of nations. The Slavs and Romanians are therefore supposed to subordinate themselves and subject themselves to the Germans and the Magyars; as citizens they are supposed to add their will to the laws, but as nations they are not supposed to have free will. Does this comport with the basic ideas and rights of constitutionalism? Is the person still free who is told: "You are supposed to be free, but not in the way in which you want but in the way I prescribe"? What entitles the Germans and Magyars to that sort of prescription? Who, being free, will be obliged to acknowledge foreign superiority under the law? If the Germans and Hungarians determine how many national rights the Slavs should get, how can anyone in Austria still speak of the equality of nations or of justice for all? [...]

18 But in the womb of the great and speculative German nation, one always comes across odd philosophers who, just as they are able to draw together all rationale and irrationality into methods and systems, also know how to show a priori that the principle of national equality is in itself sheer nonsense. The common origin of all humanity is said to be, just like Adam and Eve, a mere myth; as nature does not create two perfectly identical leaves, so she does not divide up her gifts to the nations in the same way, and when she granted some superior standing to one nation, that nation has the right to make use of it. And consequently the Germans, being by nature more talented, stronger and noble than the Slavs, are not meant at all to be placed on the same level as the Slavs. And such words are expressed not only in books and periodicals but also in German taverns. [...]

19 If, however, we look at the matter more closely, we cannot help suspecting that the Germans, who make noises about their natural superiority over us, only wish to drown out their own conscience, not being sufficiently, convinced themselves about their own claims. It would otherwise be impossible to explain why they would be so hesitant to enter a footrace with us on equal terms, if they were sure of their superiority and victory. But precisely for such a race to be just, we demand, rightfully, that the ancient wrongs end once and for all, and that the inequality, which is only a matter of fact and not of nature, not be exacerbated any more. We may, and we must, demand that the state, with the money that it gets from us, to the same extent as the Germans, does not support only



German offices and higher education in our country; we must demand that Czech chairs at Prague University be established whenever the need arises, and that when some dozent is to lecture not only on early German law but also on early Czech law, that is to say, not only on Eike von Repgow<sup>1</sup> but also on Ondřej z Dubé<sup>2</sup> and Viktorin ze Vsehrd,<sup>3</sup> the reply from Vienna not always be negative, and so forth. [...]

20 Even more backward is the pretence of the Magyars to rule in their country simply because they allegedly conquered it a thousand years ago. Were the rights they obtained by the sword not lost long ago also by the sword, because they were since then defeated a hundred times? Did they once get out of the Turkish yoke by their own power? Did they leave their last national battle at Világos as victors? But, as I have already said, one cannot carry on a discussion about right based on might, so I shall not waste any more words on the topic.

21 Lastly, as a reason against the introduction of national equality, one gives the allegedly inevitable need of Austria not to give up the alliance with, and support of, the German Reich, which allegedly underpins it, and without which it would not just cease to be a Great Power (*Grossmacht*), but might perhaps even cease to exist. Indeed, Austria could not receive a stranger compliment than when it is said that the conditions for its existence come from outside it, not from within! And that is how the leading organ of public opinion speaks in the very heart of Austria, Vienna! I would tend to consider such words an insult to the magnificence of the Empire; and I cannot interpret them otherwise than to say that those who think and talk like that are far more concerned that the German nation rules than that Austria survives as a great power. It is all the same to us Slavs who rules in Germany or Italy, and we think that, if only Austria could ensure the satisfaction of all its nations with wise and just institutions and make it possible for us all to be proud of the name Austria, then she would have no reason to fear any other power in the world. [...]

22 Recently the Germans and the Magyars became accustomed to calling each and every conscious Slav who did not want to deny his nationality 'Pan-Slavist' or—as they say with foppish elegance in Hungary—'Pan-Slav.' Of course, if every national feeling, every natural Slav effort is Pan-Slavism, if every Slav who does not let himself be Germanized or Magyarized is a Pan-Slavist or a Pan-Slav, then there shall be millions of Pan-Slavists, and all Austria will become the promised land of Pan-Slavism—but a Pan-Slavism that not even we ourselves wish for.

23 We unfortunately observe how in recent times the national egoism of the tribes ruling in Cisleithania and Transleithania appears increasingly open and ruthless. We read about the bargaining between German and Magyar politicians and about the dividing up of the administration of the Empire as if there were not even any Slavdom in Austria. We hear from both sides joyful words from the masses, which are prepared to rush into the supposed dualist paradise, and our hopes, no matter how justified, in the wise and continuous resistance of the Government to such developments might (God forbid) ultimately remain unfulfilled. In that case, we would have no choice but to say one last word: if the opposite of the idea of a modern Austrian state becomes the reality and if that heterogeneous and unique Empire does not grant the same justice to all, but instead chooses tyranny and the power of one over the other, if Slavs are proclaimed by law to be a subordinate race and, as we have already discussed, the subjects of a Government representing two other nations, then nature will assume its rights, and its inevitable resistance will change peace at home into unrest, will turn hope into desperation and will ultimately give rise to friction and struggles, the direction, extent and end of which cannot be foreseen. The day when dualism is proclaimed, which is an inevitable necessity of nature, will also be the day Pan-Slavism is born in its least desirable form, and its godparents will be the parents of dualism. What will follow can be imagined by every reader himself. We Slavs shall look to that day with sincere pain, but without fear. We existed before Austria, and we shall exist after her! [...]

## Notes

1. Eike von Repgow: medieval German administrator and compiler of the thirteenth-century *Sachsenspiegel* legal code.
2. Ondřej z Dubé: fourteenth-century Czech nobleman, judge and jurist of municipal law.
3. Viktorín ze Všehrd: Czech humanist lawyer, writer, and Dean of Prague University.

## Author

***František Palacký***

*By the same author*

**History of the Czech nation in  
bohemia and Moravia in *National  
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National Movements*, Central  
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