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Title: Nobility in the changing world: Oscar baron Parish, universal suffrage and strategies of adaptation

Abstract: The history of the nobility in the 19th century has long been dominated by the narrative of the history of decline (Niedergangsgeschichte), emphasizing the negative or even destructive impact of contemporary political, and socio-economic phenomena on the noble communities of Europe. From the 1980s onwards, a new research approach was formulated which, on the contrary, emphasised the nobility's ability to maintain its position and retain considerable influence (Obenbleiben). In recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on the adaptive strategies by which the nobility sought to overcome these phenomena. One of the challenges for the nobility in Cisleithania was the expansion of the right to vote, which undermined their position in the Imperial Council; the introduction of universal suffrage was crucial in this respect. The proposed paper will present the results of ongoing doctoral research that focuses on the approaches of the Bohemian conservative nobility towards the electoral reform of 1905-7 and their adaptation to the possible loss of their position in the Imperial Council. The paper will focus on a lesser-known Bohemian nobleman, Oscar baron Parish von Senftenberg (1864-1925), who belonged to the younger generation of the Conservative Great Landowners Party, was a member of the Imperial Council in 1896-1907, and together with E. Sylva-Tarouca (1860-1936) and F. Schwarzenberg (1862-1936) formed the so-called Vienna Centre of the party. Unlike many other noblemen, Parish took an active approach to electoral reform and tried to influence it throughout the dynamic negotiations. Based on an analysis of Parish's personal inheritance (diaries, correspondence, political papers), Parish's views on the extension of the suffrage, which were often in contrast to most officials of the party, and his gradual departure from the party's basic programmatic premises, which had been in place since the mid-19th century, will be presented. The paper will also present one of Parish's specific strategies of adaptation, namely his regional efforts to penetrate the agrarian and Catholic movements and attempt to gain influence over these political entities.

PD. Dr. Heléna Tóth (Georg August University, Göttingen)
Central European History Convention, July 17th-19th 2025, University of Vienna

Paper proposal

The Moral Economy of Retribution: Confiscations and Sequestrations as Political Punishment in the Kingdom of Hungary 1848-1867

“Money is the most powerful lever of the century,” wrote Count Emil Dessewffy, a key figure of the Hungarian conservative nobility, to the Court in Vienna in May 1849. In his unsolicited letter to minister of the interior, Dessewffy proposed that the most effective strategy for quelling the Hungarian War of Independence was to complement threats of incarceration or execution – measures he subsumed under “mere punitive justice” – with a financial system of rewards and punishments. Dessewffy suggested to combine the confiscation of property from the supporters of the Hungarian independence movement with the redistribution of these assets to incentivize and reward loyalty. Far from merely transposing concepts of early modern statehood to the middle of the 19th century, Dessewffy argued that property confiscation was a political instrument that encapsulated the spirit of the age.

The starting point of the proposed paper is that the discourse about confiscation as punishment was pivotal in shaping modern statehood in the Habsburg Empire after the 1848-1849 revolution and War of Independence. Focusing on the deliberations of the Habsburg administration on the modalities of confiscations from 1849 to 1867, the paper argues that these measures constituted a ‘moral economy.’ Central to this moral economy were cost-benefit calculations, where the repercussions of confiscations were weighed against expected political gains and the tangible financial costs of the state’s guardianship over seized assets. While contingent factors significantly shaped the implementation of economic punitive measures, the paper shows that the parliamentary or inter-ministerial discussions about confiscations were intertwined with broader discussions on responsibility, representation and the transition from subjecthood to citizenship.

CEHC 2025 Proposal

Proposed paper: The Rises and Falls of Czechoslovak Democracy in the Perspective of One of its Elite Protagonists: Hugo Vavrečka

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Abstract:

The proposed paper focuses on Hugo Vavrečka (1880–1952), a Czech engineer, journalist, diplomat, and director of the Baťa Shoe Company, who presented himself as one of the ‘disciples’ of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first Czechoslovak president. This self-presentation was later supported by his family connections, as he was a grandfather of Václav Havel, who often referred to Masaryk as one of his inspirations after he became president in 1989. The key characteristics of both presidents are usually ‘democratic’ a ‘first after the fall of’ – either the Austro-Hungarian Empire or a communist regime. Along with it, Vavrečka is also often labeled as a ‘true democrat’.

However, several moments from his life, which are intertwined with the ‘large Czechoslovak history’, problematize this narrative. For example, he was first accused of collaboration with the Nazis during WWII in 1945 by the local communist elites because he remained in the position of the company director during the Protectorate and was portrayed as a member of the ‘former bourgeoisie elite.’ However, he was cleared of all accusations two years later. After the communist coup in 1948, his case was reopened, revised, and demonstrably manipulated and he was found guilty. He was sentenced to three years in prison and had all his property seized. However, it was Klement Gottwald, the first Czechoslovak communist president, who – paradoxically? – allowed him to avoid imprisonment.

This paper deciphers the strategies used by this one historical actor, Hugo Vavrečka, and shines a potentially different light on the key historical events during which he used them. Subsequently, the paper aims to show how beneficial biographical research can be for understanding even the ‘larger’ history.