



Fire Insurance and Nationalism in the Late Habsburg Empire, 1868-1914

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Approaching the history of insurance in the Late Habsburg Empire from a perspective that at the same time goes beyond the imperial state and traces the global entanglements of insurance in this part of the world unlocks several new analytical and narrative options. As some papers in this session demonstrate, such a perspective makes it possible to trace the genealogy of state-driven insurance blueprints back to their origins in private insurance. My paper, in turn, explores the links between private insurance and nationalist activism in the Habsburg Empire. In doing so, I connect two separate debates. On the one hand, I draw on Habsburg studies and their reflections on the history of nationalism in East Central Europe. While this body of literature recognizes that the nationalist activists were stateless in the sense that they operated outside, and sometimes against, the imperial state, it contests the assumption that these activists were highly successful in creating mass nationalist movements. Analyzing the practices and results of nationalist activists from below, historians such as Peter Judson and Tara Zahra examined their attempts to aggressively extend their networks into the rural world and noted that these attempts often failed due to a widespread national indifference.¹ On the other hand, my paper is inspired by the history of insurance, and particularly by the body of literature that explores the cultural and social preconditions that make the “appeal” and spread of insurance possible.² However, since most historians of insurance working on the Habsburg Empire tended to focus on the state, they tended to underestimate these cultural and social factors, in general, and have yet to explore the links between insurance and nationalist activism, in particular. In what follows, I propose a concept of “nationalist fire insurance” that may help to connect these two debates, and to show that nationalist activism and the spread of fire insurance in the rural areas of the Habsburg Empire were two sides of the same coin.

Nationalist Fire Insurance: Defining a Type

A specific type of insurance company emerged in the course of the nineteenth century in the multiethnic setting of the landed empires of Central and Eastern Europe, and of the Habsburg Empire in particular. Proliferating hand in glove with the rising nationalist activism, the “nationalist fire insurance” had three main defining features. First, the business strategy of these insurance companies was

¹ Judson, Pieter M. *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.

² Alborn, Timothy L. *Regulated Lives: Life Insurance and British Society, 1800-1914*. Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2009; Anderson, Gregory, Geoffrey Clark, Johann-Matthias Schulenburg, and Christian Thomann. *The Appeal of Insurance*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010; Zelizer, Viviana A. *Morals and Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.

permeated with economic nationalism. As Helga Schultz argued some time ago, economic nationalism does not always manifest itself in the form of protectionist policies pursued by the state. In imperial Austria and similar multiethnic polities, nationalist groups had little influence on that state's economic policy. As a response, they developed an internal economic nationalism that circumvented the state and appealed instead directly to the nationally minded consumers. It encouraged them to choose products of those businesses that belonged to the same community, sometimes going as far as to call for boycotts of the other ethnic groups.³ Nationalist fire insurance companies cooperated closely with these nationalist groups. Economic nationalism became part and parcel of their business strategy. Consequently, these fire insurance companies tended to stay local and to do their business in the particular province or provinces claimed by their allied nationalist activists. However, on a few occasions, some of these fire insurance companies did try to expand beyond their initial context in which they claimed to be rooted. In those cases, they adopted what Alexander Maxwell recently called pan-nationalism, a type of nationalism that "extends across state frontiers" and that in Central and Eastern Europe was most prominently exemplified by Pan-Slavism, Pan-Germanism, and Turanism.⁴ Second, nationalist fire insurance companies eagerly embraced nationalism on the symbolic level. Not only did they use a national language to communicate with their customers, incorporated nationalist symbols into their logos, and infused their advertisement with nationalist tropes and emotionally charged images of the other. A symbolic cooptation of nationalism also meant a cooptation of leading nationalist activists into the management of these insurance companies, the employment of vocally nationalist clerks, and a conspicuous backing of various nationalist prestige projects.

A third, and crucial, defining feature of nationalist fire insurance companies was their energetic involvement in nationalist activism. In imperial Austria and beyond, rural spaces became sites of repeated conflicts in the second half of the nineteenth century. Various groups of nationalist activists attempted to expand their networks beyond the urban centers and to claim the largely nationally indifferent rural population for their imagined communities.⁵ Crucially, the nationalists were thus extending their

³ Schultz, Helga, and Eduard Kubů, eds. *History and Culture of Economic Nationalism in East Central Europe*. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2006; Miller, Michael L. "In Defense of the Nation: Protectionism and Boycotts in the Habsburg Lands, 1844–1914." In *Boycotts Past and Present*, by David Feldman, 41–52. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

⁴ Maxwell, Alexander. "Pan-Nationalism as a Category in Theory and Practice." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 28, no. 1 (January 2022): 1–19.

⁵ Judson, Pieter M. *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006; Zahra, Tara. *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.

networks from the urban centers into the countryside at the same time as the insurance companies were creating their networks of agents in these areas. For unlike life insurance that remained largely restricted to urban middle classes, fire insurance rapidly expanded into the rural world.⁶ What I labelled above as nationalist fire insurance companies exploited the contemporaneity of these processes and enlisted the emerging nationalist networks as their business representatives. For many nationalist activists, consequently, selling fire insurance became a part and parcel of their involvement in nationalizing activities in the rural areas. Conversely, in a context where nationalists “attempted to define precisely the national identity of workers, businessmen, enterprises, property, products, and even consumers,” sometimes during aggressive boycott campaigns, the choice of one’s fire insurance provider was no longer perceived as neutral.⁷ Instead, it was a choice that flagged an individual’s national identification. Tellingly, the fire marks issued by the nationalist insurance companies that the peasants attached to their property often featured an inscription in the national language and highlighted politically charged nationalist symbols (see Figure no. 1). In the nationalist activist discourse about the rural world that revolved around the alleged reconquest of the native land and population, and foregrounded concepts such as national property [*Nationalbesitzstand/národní država*], these “nationalist fire marks” were widely perceived as claiming and demarcating the boundaries of the imagined national territory. In the rural world, the spread of fire insurance and the attempts at nationalization were thus two sides of the same coin.



FIGURE 1: A FIRE MARK OF THE SLAVIA INSURANCE COMPANY. NOTE THE INCARNATION OF SLAVDOM, HOLDING A LINDEN TWIG, ELEVATED ABOVE THE CITYSCAPES OF PRAGUE AND MOSCOW, AND SURROUNDED BY THE COATS OF ARMS OF VARIOUS TERRITORIES INHABITED BY THE SLAVS (LIKELY NOVI SAD/ÚJVÍDEK BEFORE THE 1890s).

⁶ Rural diaries bear testimony to the embrace of fire insurance in some rural areas of Austria-Hungary. For instance, a prosperous peasant and diarist from Bohemia Josef Dlask noted in 1831 that he insured his property against fire for the first time. Kutnar, František, ed. *Paměti sedláka Josefa Dlaska* [The Diaries of Josef Dlask, a Peasant]. Prague: Melantrich, 1941, 44.

⁷ Albrecht, Catherine. “The Rhetoric of Economic Nationalism in the Bohemian Boycott Campaigns of the Late Habsburg Monarchy.” *Austrian History Yearbook* 32 (January 2001): 47–67, 14.

The earliest nationalist fire insurance companies can be traced back to the imperial Austria of the 1860s. In the province of Bohemia, German and Czech nationalists, respectively, founded two mirroring nationalist fire insurance companies. The *Slavia* insurance company, embracing both Czech nationalism and Pan-Slavism, started its operation in Prague in 1869, while the fire insurance company *Concordia* balancing between German-Austrian and pan-German identity emerged in Reichenberg/Liberec in 1867.⁸ Shortly afterwards, in 1872, Slovene nationalists in the province of Carniola emulated the Czech model by setting up a fire insurance company *Slovenija*.⁹ While the Slovene attempt proved to be short-lived, nationalist activists further afield proved to be more successful. Transylvanian Saxons and Romanians in imperial Hungary started developing their nationalist fire insurance institutions from the late 1860s onwards.¹⁰ In 1884, Croatian nationalists founded the fire insurance company *Croatia*, and the Ukrainians in Lviv followed suit with the establishment of the *Dniester* insurance company in 1892.¹¹ By the turn of the century, therefore, most major nationalist groupings in the Habsburg Empire ran a fire insurance company, even though their respective market share and profitability varied. While some of these companies adopted other insurance branches such as hailstorm, life, or accident insurance, as well, fire insurance nevertheless remained their most important business, at least until short before the First World War. Significantly, all these nationalist fire insurance companies were founded as mutuals. The motives of mutuality and of economic nationalism reinforced each other in their advertisement. Even though in most contexts the emergence of nationalist fire insurance preceded the founding of most agricultural credit cooperatives in the rural areas, and to some extent pioneered their strategies of linking finance and nationalism, their effect was rather similar. As Catherine Albrecht acutely observes, the exclusionary nature of such mutual aid created and hardened the divides between various groups, and thus became

⁸ Marvan, Miroslav, ed. *Dějiny Pojišťovnictví v Československu* [The History of Insurance in Czechoslovakia]. Vol. 1. Prague: Novinář, 1989.

⁹ Kresal, France. "Začetki in razvoj zavarovalništva na Slovenskem [Beginnings and development of insurance in Slovenia]." In *Med srednjo Evropo in Sredozemljem: Vojetov zbornik*, edited by Sašo Jerše, Darja Mihelič, and Peter Štih, 677–688. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2006.

¹⁰ Saxon and Romanian businessmen and nationalists set up a common fire insurance company, *Transilvania*, in 1868. While originally the two groups enjoyed a parity within the mutual insurance company, in the late nineteenth century the Saxon nationalists gained decisive influence. Romanian nationalists, in turn, established the *Banca generală de asigurare* in 1911. Danneberg, Stéphanie. *Wirtschaftsnationalismus lokal: Interaktion und Abgrenzung zwischen rumänischen und sächsischen Gewerbeorganisationen in den siebenbürgischen Zentren Hermannstadt und Kronstadt, 1868–1914*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018, 174.

¹¹ Rohrbach, Wolfgang, ed. *Versicherungsgeschichte Österreichs. Die Ära des klassischen Versicherungswesens*. Vol. 2. Vienna: Holzhausen, 1988.

an important tool of the attempts to nationalize the rural world.¹² Finally, while most of the examples presented above come from the Habsburg Empire, parallel developments may be discerned in other multiethnic landed empires, as well. There is literature suggesting, for instance, that more than one nationalist fire insurance company had emerged in Finland shortly before it gained independence from the Russian Empire.¹³ The expansion of fire insurance in Central and Eastern Europe, therefore, became closely entangled with nationalist activism.

Nationalist Fire Insurance within and between the Empires: The *Slavia* Insurance Company

Nationalist fire insurance companies operated on the local, national, and in some cases even on the transnational and inter-imperial levels. In order to grasp their distinct strategy and its outcomes, their historian thus needs to constantly negotiate between these scales. The exceptionally well-preserved archives of the *Slavia* insurance company make such an analysis possible. Founded in 1869 in Prague as a mutual insurance company, *Slavia* had a fire, life, and hailstorm insurance business. Its founder and first director, František Ladislav Chleborád (1839-1911) was a politician, economist, and one of the first promoters of Friedrich List's theory of economic nationalism in the Czech context.¹⁴ Concurrently with founding the insurance company in 1869, moreover, Chleborád published his most significant treatise, *A System of National Political Economy* [Soustava národního hospodářství politického] where he attempted to provide a systematic account of List's ideas and adapt them for a Czech nationalist audience. Consequently, he emphasized forms of economic nationalism that circumvented the state. For Chleborád, economic nationalism was a strategy that ultimately aimed at strengthening the position of the nationalists against the imperial state: "A private entrepreneur may become wealthy even though he fights constant legal battles with his companions, debtors, competitors. By the same token, the national economy may become prosperous in spite of permanent struggles with other nationalities, the government, and the empire."¹⁵ Moreover, Chleborád departed from List in his emphasis on the role of

¹² Albrecht, Catherine. "Nationalism in the Cooperative Movement in Bohemia before 1914." In *Cooperatives in Ethnic Conflicts: Eastern Europe in the 19th and Early 20th Century*, by Torsten Lorenz, 215–28. Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2006.

¹³ Ashby, Charlotte. "The Pohjola Building: Reconciling Contradictions in Finnish Architecture around 1900." In *Nationalism and Architecture*, by Darren Deane, Sarah Butler, and Raymond Quek, 135–46. London: Routledge, 2016.

¹⁴ Chleborád, František Ladislav. *Soustava národního hospodářství politického* [A System of National Political Economy]. Prague: F. Skrejšovský, 1869; Vencovský, František. *Dějiny českého ekonomického myšlení do roku 1948* [The History of Czech Economic Thinking till 1948]. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 1997.

¹⁵ Chleborád, František Ladislav. *O důležitosti životního pojišťování: se zvláštním zřetelem na "Slavii," první českou banku pro vzájemné pojišťování života, zdraví, kapitálů a důchodů v Praze* [On the importance of life insurance: with a special focus on "Slavia", the first Czech company for mutual insurance of life, health, capital and pensions in Prague]. Prague: Knapp, 1868, 1.

private insurance, emphasizing that “the national economy has devoted to insurance less attention than it deserves, and thus failed to recognize the immense importance it has and will have in human history.”¹⁶ Indeed, Chleborád went on to claim that a nationalist private insurance company would be “of immense importance [...] for the entire Czech nation” and represent “one of the most important triumphs of our nation, as far as our material interests are concerned, and one of the key instruments of national unification [...]”. The goal, in short, was to make sure that “the entire Czech nation uses insurance to protect its life, health, capital, and income.”¹⁷ A project to create a nationalist insurance company was thus a cornerstone of Chleborád’s adaptation of List’s theory of economic nationalism. Conversely, the rhetoric of Czech economic nationalism as outlined by Chleborád permeated from the outset the debates that surrounded the emergence of the *Slavia* insurance company.

There was a major ambivalence in List’s theory, however. As Onur Ulas Ince recently pointed out, while List indeed “pitted his national principle against the British imperialism of free trade and the relations of dependency it heralded for late developers,” his theory of economic nationalism “aimed less at dismantling imperial core–periphery relations as a whole than at reproducing these relations domestically and expanding them globally.”¹⁸ The history of nationalist fire insurance corroborates this argument. Chleborád reproduced List’s double move when he emphasized that the of embrace Czech economic nationalism must be accompanied with the espousal of pan-Slavism. According to Chleborád, a new nationalist insurance company had to bring “the tribes of the entire Slavdom under the banner of mutualism,”¹⁹ and thus to transform itself into “a vital common tie that binds the nation of Slavs together.”²⁰ In practical terms, this meant that the emerging Czech nationalist insurance company – bearing the revealing name *Slavia* – very soon expanded its business beyond the province of Bohemia.²¹

¹⁶ Chleborád, *Soustava*, 465.

¹⁷ Chleborád, František Ladislav. “Národu českoslovanskému! [To the Czech nation!].” *Jednota* 1, no. 17 (April 30, 1869): 1–2.

¹⁸ Ince, Onur Ulas. “Friedrich List and the Imperial Origins of the National Economy.” *New Political Economy* 21, no. 4 (July 2016): 380–400.

¹⁹ “Jednatelská zpráva, čtená ve valné hromadě zakladatelů „Slavie“ dne 11. února 1869 [Executive report, read at the general meeting of the founders of ‘Slavia’ on February 11, 1869].” *Jednota* 1, no. 6 (February 13, 1869): 2–3.

²⁰ “Slavia Slovanskou bankou gothajskou [Slavia will be the Slavic Bank of Gotha].” *Slovan: Politický, literární, asekurační a hospodářský týdeník* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 1870): 125–26.

²¹ The pan-Slavic rhetoric and strategy of *Slavia* provoked a certain degree of suspicion by the provincial administration and the police which very closely followed the first years of its existence and collected in its file nearly all the materials published by *Slavia* or referring to it. National Archives of the Czech Republic, Police Directorate Prague, Section I, Presidium 1900-1907, box. 1934; NACR, King’s Commissioner of Bohemia, Presidium, Secret Papers 1853-1918, boxes 15 and 26.

While it circumvented the existing imperial state, the nationalist fire insurance *Slavia* thus harbored an imperial project of its own.

In Bohemia and other provinces of the Habsburg Empire inhabited by Czech speakers, *Slavia* eagerly embraced Czech nationalist narratives and symbols. For instance, Chleborád made sure that the insurance company's founders included not only Czech businessmen, but also some of the leading nationalist political figures. The most emblematic among them was František Palacký. By the 1860s, the historian and politician was widely regarded as the leading figure of the nationalist movement and as such enjoyed an unparalleled authority in the public. The cooptation of the figures such as Palacký was a crucial part of the company's public image; one of the contemporaries recalls that "whenever an insurance agent of *Slavia* entered a village, he publicized the purpose of his visit by announcing to the members of the community that the father of the nation Palacký sends them his kind regards and encourages them to purchase insurance."²² Moreover, the insurance company was very vocal about the funding it provided to various nationalist organizations, and to representative projects such as the reconstruction of Prague's National Theatre. Conversely, *Slavia*'s ads denounced its competitors for their alleged lack of national identity and labelled them as "foreign nationals fleecing the Czech people."²³

Yet, the *Slavia* also expanded its business into other parts of the Habsburg Empire. Beyond the Bohemian Lands, however, the insurance company harped on pan-Slavic motives. For example, an article that appeared in 1870 in the leading Slovene nationalist periodical enthusiastically promoted the company, claiming that "the insurance company *Slavia* does everything to unite all Slavic nations in one big family, and thus represents a great step towards Slavic commonality."²⁴ In practice, then, *Slavia* replicated the strategy it pursued vis-à-vis Czech nationalists. It established close relationships with local nationalist activists, coopted a part of them as its branch managers and clerks, and used the national language in its internal and external communication. For instance, the leading Slovene nationalist politician and the mayor of Ljubljana Ivan Hribar worked for several decades as the insurance company's main representative in the Slovene speaking territories.²⁵ As in Bohemia, moreover, the insurance

²² [Peča], [Václav]. Banka Slavia, 1869-1919 [Slavia Insurance Company, 1869-1919]. Prague: Banka Slavia, 1919, 93.

²³ Chleborád, František Ladislav. "Národu českoslovanskému: Slavia, česká vzájemná život, kapitál a důchody pojišťovací banka v Praze [For the Czech Nation: Slavia, Czech Mutual Life, Fire and Pension Insurance Company in Prague]" *Národní listy* 8, no. 85 (March 26, 1868): 2–3, 3.

²⁴ "Slavija, vzajemno zavarovalna banka v Pragi [Slavia, Mutual Insurance Company in Prague]." *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice* 28, no. 12 (March 19, 1870): 3.

²⁵ Hribar, Ivan. *Moji spomini* [My Memoirs]. Ljubljana: Tiskarna Merkur, 1928.

company also donated large sums of money to local nationalist associations and causes. *Slavia* thus fully enlisted nationalism, both in its Slavic and Czech iterations.

From its inception the insurance company aimed to expand its business across the imperial borders to the Russian Empire and to some post-Ottoman states. However, these attempts ran into sand. While its founders regarded a business expansion to the Russian Empire as one of *Slavia*'s priorities, their attempts failed due to its protectionist policies. Even though the insurance company did expand for a short period of time to Serbia and employed several insurance agents in Bulgaria, moreover, its business in both states remained negligible, and *Slavia* soon withdrew from both markets.²⁶ While *Slavia* rhetorically embraced pan-Slavism, therefore, its actual business strategy in the end gravitated towards Austro-Slavism, and ideology and rhetoric that stressed the alleged commonality of Slavic speakers within imperial Austria.

In all the locations where it operated, *Slavia* developed a strong synergy with nationalist activists on the local level. By the turn of the 20th century, more than 7000 insurance agents worked for *Slavia*. While some of them resided in large cities such as Vienna or Prague, the decisive part of these agents was scattered along the rural areas of Austria-Hungary. Indeed, *Slavia*'s insurance agents were not based solely in the Bohemian Lands, but their numbers were also rapidly growing in the Alpine provinces, in Galicia, in Croatia and Slavonia, and in Bosnia. For example, in the year 1899 *Slavia* hired 102 new insurance agents in the Slovene-speaking provinces of imperial Austria, 136 new agents in Croatia and Slavonia, and 498 agents in Galicia. Crucially, there was a large, if not entire, overlap between *Slavia*'s insurance agents and the networks of nationalist activists. Tellingly, if *Slavia*'s insurance agents recruited mainly from larger farmers (over 27% of agents newly appointed in 1894), small shopkeepers and artisans (over 25%), village notables (over 20%), and teachers (over 8%), the same social groups were also driving the nationalist activities in the rural areas.²⁷ Apart from working as insurance agents of *Slavia*, these men (and, in some cases, women) were often leaders of local branches of nationalist gymnastic associations such as the *Sokol*, of nationalist pressure organizations such as the *Ústřední Matice Školská* [Central School Association], and often represented one of the nationalist parties in the local political bodies. Selling *Slavia*'s fire insurance was not only a welcome source of income for these individuals, but also a part and

²⁶ Nečas, Ctibor. Na prahu české kapitálové expanze [At the Threshold of Czech Capital Expansion]. Brno: Univerzita J. E. Purkyně, 1987.

²⁷ Calculated from the Minutes of the Board of Directors and of the Directorate of the *Slavia* Insurance Company, 1894 and 1899, Archives of the Generali Česká pojišťovna, Prague, fund 101. The social background of the insurance agents does not significantly change in the following years, either.

parcel of their broader agenda that sought to nationalize the local population. Conversely, an insurance contract with *Slavia* was widely perceived as one of the actions that clearly flagged one's membership of the national community.²⁸ The nationalist networks, on the one hand, and the networks of *Slavia*'s insurance agents, on the other hand, overlapped up to the point of becoming virtually indistinct.

The embrace of Czech and Slavic iterations of economic nationalism, on a symbolic and on a strategic level, made *Slavia* into one of the medium-sized companies on the Austro-Hungarian insurance market. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, *Slavia* had with 9,1% one of the largest market shares in Bohemia. Moreover, *Slavia* held smaller, yet still significant market shares in several other provinces of the empire such as Carniola and Carinthia, as well. Overall, this made *Slavia* into the ninth largest insurance company, and the second largest mutual, in imperial Austria.²⁹ Crucially, these market shares, however, are also indicative of the limits of economic nationalism in fire insurance. An overwhelming number of Czech-, Slovene-, or Croatian- speaking clients remained indifferent to *Slavia*'s nationalist calls and opted for cheaper or more trusted alternatives.

²⁸ This was, of course, a claim endlessly repeated in *Slavia*'s advertisement. However, various village diaries and chronicles make a similar point.

²⁹ Die privaten Versicherungsunternehmen in den im Kaisersrathe vertretenen Königreichen und Ländern im Jahre 1907. Vienna: k.k. Hof- und Staatsdruckerei, 1911, passim.