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The Mayor Phenomenon

Personalities Running Cities in the 19th and 20th Centuries

The 41st international conference on Urban History held by the Prague City Archives, Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Faculty of Humanities of Charles University, Faculty of Arts of J. E. Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem and Institute of History and Archival Studies of Pedagogical University of Cracow

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Individual city councillors took turns in the position of burgomaster in medieval city administration, and it was the burgher who, during the renewal of city councils, first assumed this position – the first councillor – the first burgomaster – *primus magister civium* – who enjoyed special standing. He was both a symbolic and actual representative of the city and he had a crucial say in the most important sphere of city administration, i.e., in city finances. The title "primas – primátor" (mayor) first appears in the Prague towns in connection with this function in the year 1547. However, during the Early Modern period, the significance of this post gradually faded, as its importance was always dependent on the degree of autonomy that the towns had, or, rather, were gradually losing during this period.

The mayor's function with a historical tradition has been preserved in the modern history of city administration. Representatives of the city, whether they were in office in the 19th and 20th centuries under the title of burgomaster or mayor, had different powers at different times, reflecting in particular the degree of the independent status of town administrations, after 1848 local governments. Many of the mayors went beyond the mere formal representation of the city and became active urban policy makers. They were able to promote visions or specific political programmes and initiate the expansion of towns, their housing construction, the building of modern infrastructure, implementing generous social policy and supporting the cultural development of the towns. They were able to represent the city beyond the country's borders and open urban policy to foreign contacts and experience. Some of them also entered national politics while performing their local function. For others, a leading position in the city became a springboard to national politics. Some simply returned to the councils after the end of their term.

Many of the mayors had to navigate difficult political situations, where they were forced to defend the very essence of the functioning of the city government, the interests of the city against the decisions of the state executive, to lead the city administration in wartime crisis situations and secure the life of cities at times of economic crises. Of course, they also headed the city during periods when operation was paralysed by various natural disasters (repeated floods) or threatened by health risks in the form of epidemics.

The importance of the mayor's position didn't change until the arrival of totalitarian regimes, when the principles of self-government were eliminated from city management, the head position became part of the totalitarian nomenclature and no longer provided opportunities for independent city policy. Even then, however, cities were often led by personalities who were able to take advantage of, for example, the temporary relaxation of conditions and, with all the existing limits, implement a number of measures that were beneficial to the city.

At our conference, we would like to focus especially on those personalities at the head of large cities in the 19th and 20th centuries who significantly influenced their development and left a significant (albeit often controversial) mark on their history. Persons in the background of urban policy should not be forgotten,

individuals who, either by virtue of a specific position in city administration or only in an informal position, influenced the direction of urban policy and often overshadowed the personalities of mayors. We look into the role party politics played in the performance of the mayor's office, how it was influenced by state policy, which for most of the period under review aimed mainly at exploiting the economic and political potential of cities. What effect did the network of personal, professional and political ties they formed have on the performance of the mayor's position? How (if at all) were the political agendas of the parties they represented reflected in the actions of the politicians at the head of cities? There are numerous questions to be answered.

While we are primarily interested in Prague, other large, mostly former statutory cities, in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia are addressed. We would also like to make comparisons with European metropolises, especially large cities in Central Europe.

Please send offers for papers along with an abstract by 15 April 2022 to the contact address provided below. The organisers reserve the right to make selections among the submitted papers. Presented papers shall be printed in a monothematic volume as part of the *Documenta Pragensia* series. Foreign participants will be provided accommodations at the expense of the organisers. No conference fees are collected. The conference languages are Czech and German (or English). Simultaneous interpretation from German is provided.

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