

Vasilij Melik's research on elections and electoral reform in Habsburg Austria

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In 1991, Vasilij Melik received the Anton Gindely-Award for the History of the Danube Monarchy (Anton Gindely-Preis für Geschichte der Donaumonarchie)¹ in Vienna for his book *Volitve na Slovenskem 1861–1918* [Elections in Slovenia 1861–1918]. He had published the volume already in 1965, as no. 10 of Slovenska matica series *Razprave in eseji* [Discussions and essays]. Following the award, the book was translated into German and issued, with a few revisions, in the Anton Gindely series on the history of the Danube Monarchy and Central Europe, with the aim of making this exceptional publication available to a broader international public that lacked a sufficient command of Slovenian. This project was realized in 1997, more than thirty years after its original publication, under the title *Wahlen im alten Österreich. Am Beispiel der Kronländer mit slowenischsprachiger Bevölkerung* [Elections in old Austria. The example of the crownlands with a Slovene-speaking population].² Clearly, the title opted for a designation of the topic that emphasized the historical, Cisleithanian context – “old Austria” and “the crown lands with a Slovene-speaking population,” rather than the – for the particular period – politicized term “Slovenia”. As a young assistant to Professor Gerald Stourzh at the University of Vienna, I vividly remember meeting the translator, Irena Vilfan-Bruckmüller, in Stourzh’s office, when she came to discuss particular problems of translation, especially the correct versions of the complicated vocabulary of Cisleithanian elections, with him. Later, I was even allowed to use the yet unpublished manuscript for preparing a paper for a conference on the regulations and practices of representation in nineteenth-century Europe and the Americas.³

¹ Since 1997, the award has been renamed as Anton Gindely-Award for Culture and History of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

² Vasilij Melik, *Wahlen im alten Österreich. Am Beispiel der Kronländer mit slowenischsprachiger Bevölkerung* (Anton-Gindely-Reihe zur Geschichte der Donaumonarchie und Mitteleuropas, vol. 3, Vienna: Böhlau, 1997).

³ Published as: Birgitta Bader-Zaar, “From Corporate to Individual Representation: The Electoral Systems in Austria 1861–1918,” in *How Did They Become Voters? The History of Franchise in Modern European Representation*, ed. Raffaele Romanelli (Den Haag: Kluwer International, 1998), 295–339.

Vasilij Melik's book was a revelation for me, and has been described by Gerald Stourzh in his preface both as a "classic work of historiography on enfranchisement" and an "indispensable and unsurpassed contribution to the history of the Habsburg Monarchy in the period of Francis Joseph".⁴ Far from being a "discussion" or "essay" as the series the original had been published in might have conveyed, the volume provides a clear understanding of the complexities and intricacies of elections and electoral reform in the Slovenian-speaking crownlands of the Habsburg Monarchy. The first chapters introduce readers to the curial system of representation in the crownland diets and the Imperial Council (*Reichsrat*) for all the crownlands of the Austrian half of the Habsburg Monarchy, including valuable statistical data on actual representation, i.e. absolute numbers of representatives per curia and the percentage of the population each curia represented. For the Imperial Council, additional statistics disclose the representation of the population regarding territory, i.e. each crownland, and, according to the census, language group, respectively "nationality" (*Nationalität*). These parts are followed by detailed information on privileged groups, the so-called "virilists" and the curiae of great landowners, usually defined as owners of real estate listed in registers for noble or feudal property with a minimum tax, and the chambers of commerce and industry. Additional chapters discuss how urban and rural areas were differentiated, especially considering the problem of defining localities as members of the more privileged curia of cities and towns, and they follow change in how electoral districts were drawn. A major section of the book introduces readers to suffrage qualifications and traces changes up to so-called "universal" suffrage for men,⁵ including instances of a compulsory vote in some regions. Melik's study not only considers the terms potential voters had to fulfil to be included in a franchise, i.e. property, tax qualifications, or higher education, that, at least on the levels of local government and crownland diets, incorporated women to some extent and, at first, minors. He also emphasizes the significance of regulations on how the enfranchised were supposed to vote, including indirect voting, the location of polling places, time assigned to the elections, the open and the secret ballot, electoral rolls and commissions, valid and invalid ballots, the system of absolute majority, and certification procedures. Candidacies and voter turnouts form the last section of the general overview. The final part of the book analyses elections in the crownlands with a Slovene-speaking population, i.e. Carniola,

⁴ Gerald Stourzh, "Vorwort des Herausgebers," in Melik, *Wahlen im alten Österreich*, vi (my translation).

⁵ Melik rightly points out that the requirement of a one-year residency in a community excluded several members of the working class. Therefore, suffrage was not really "universal". Melik, *Wahlen im alten Österreich*, 145.

Styria, Carinthia, Gorizia, Trieste, and Istria. It includes a list of the multitude of relevant election laws, explanations of the difficulties relating to the sources for election results and the parameters used in the book, as well as information on the actual election results in the specific crownlands and the elected representatives for all elections, both on the levels of the diets and the Imperial Council. An extensive bibliography, compiled by Hans-Peter Hye, that also includes important publications printed after 1965 until 1997, completes the volume. Particularly, the wealth of statistical data Melik makes available and, above all, the insights he relates concerning unequal representation, especially concerning non-German language groups, as well as election fraud, are impressive.

In 2000, a further key publication by Vasilij Melik, available for a larger international audience, appeared: his extensive chapter on the composition of and suffrage for the representative bodies of the crownlands, i.e. the diets, of Habsburg Austria, in volume VII of the classic series on the history of the Habsburg Monarchy, *Die Habsburgermonarchie, 1848–1918*, published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences.⁶ In this contribution he contrasts the imposed constitutions and election rules for the crownlands of 1849/50, that, with the exception of Trieste, never entered into force, with the new *Landesordnungen* of 1861, now officially not labelled as outright constitutions. The representation of “interests” that favoured property, taxation and higher education continued to be a guiding principle and was to become the base of all ensuing electoral reforms. Even though “universal” and equal suffrage for men was introduced for the Imperial Council, the crownland diets retained the curial system until the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy, only allowing for inclusion of an additional electoral body with “universal” suffrage. However, the apportionment of delegates to the diet representing this “universal” curia was particularly weak in comparison to the other curiae. Again, Melik displays a special interest in unequal representation of language groups here. A special section is dedicated to the compromises the government sought to allow for more fairness concerning minorities. The *Mährische Ausgleich* and those following in the Bukovina and – albeit not put into practice before the outbreak of World War I – in Galicia allowed for separate electoral bodies according to language group/nationality. Melik also mentions the first crownlands that introduced proportional representation – Moravia, Upper Austria, and the Tyrol – and indicates the social background of members of the diets for the examples of Bohemia, Styria, and Carniola. The final section outlines the election of the *Landesauschuss* (crownland committee), an executive body with responsibilities concerning, for example, the

⁶ Vasilij Melik, “Zusammensetzung und Wahlrecht der cisleithanischen Landtage,” in *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, vol. 7, pt. 2, ed. Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2000), 1311–1352.

crownland's assets. It was elected by the diets and, again, unequal representation was an issue here. All the details on various reforms Melik points out convey the scale of heterogeneity and complexity historians need to acknowledge when studying enfranchisement and representation in the Austrian half of the Habsburg Monarchy.

The internationally acclaimed publications presented above had been preceded by intensive research on the topic of the history of elections that was not only reflected in Melik's dissertation, mentored by historian Fran Zwitter and published as *Volitve na Slovenskem* in 1965,⁷ but also in numerous articles in Slovenian journals. Among his earliest are an extensive quantitative study of the social structure of voters at the elections of 1907 and 1913 in Trieste⁸ and an analysis of the election of the national assembly in Frankfurt in 1848 in the regions with a Slovenian-speaking population.⁹ He continued to publish specific studies on individual Slovenian regions and towns until the early 1980s,¹⁰ as well as analyses of the Slovenian representatives in the Imperial Council and of the effects of electoral reform of 1905/06 on Slovenian parliamentary representation.¹¹ In the early 1990s, Vasilij Melik's immense expertise on suffrage and elections in Habsburg Austria not only gained him the Austrian award mentioned at the beginning but also channelled into wider international recognition within a project sponsored by the European Science Foundation on *Comparative Studies on Governments and*

⁷ Rok Stergar, "Vasilij Melik: a Slovene Historian of the Habsburg Long Nineteenth Century," *Storia della Storiografia*, 81, no. 1 (2022): 113–120, here 115.

⁸ Vasilij Melik, "Volitve v Trstu 1907–1913 [Elections in Trieste 1907–1913]," *Zgodovinski časopis*, 1, no. 4 (1947): 70–113.

⁹ "Frankfurtske volitve 1848 na Slovenskem [The Frankfurt Elections of 1848 in Slovenia]," *Zgodovinski časopis* 2–3 (1948/1949): 69–134 (abridged version published in Vasilij Melik, *Slovinci 1848–1918. Razprave in članki* (Maribor: Litera, 2002), 86–126, with a summary in German).

¹⁰ "Jesenice in parlamentarne volitve 1861–1929 [Jesenice and the parliamentary elections of 1861–1929]," *Jeklo in ljudje: Jeseniški zbornik* 1 (1964): 121–132; "Parlamentarne volitve 1848–1929 na domžalskem in kamniškem območju [Parliamentary elections 1848–1929 in the regions of Domžale and Kamnik]," *Mengeški zbornik* 2, 1 (1969): 5–18; "Volitve v Kranju 1861–1929 [Elections in Kranj 1861–1929]," *Kranjski zbornik* (1970): 335–342 (also published in Melik, *Slovinci 1848–1918*, 246–256); "Deželnozbornske volitve 1861–1895 na današnjem grosupeljskem ozemlju [Regional elections 1861–1895 in the present-day territory of Grosuplje]," *Zbornik občine Grosuplje* 5 (1973): 225–243; "Volitve v Ljubljani 1848–1918 [Elections in Ljubljana 1848–1918]," *Kronika* 29 (1981): 115–124; "Ribnica in deželnozbornske volitve [Ribnica and elections of the diet]," *Kronika* 30 (1982): 109–117 (also published in Melik, *Slovinci 1848–1918*, 257–268).

¹¹ "Slovinci v državnem zboru 1893–1904 [Slovenians in the Imperial Council 1893–1904]," *Zgodovinski časopis* 33, No. 1 (1979): 49–66 (also published in Melik, *Slovinci 1848–1918*, 579–599, with a summary in German); "Demokratizacija volilnega sistema (1907) in njeni učinki [The democratization of the electoral system (1907) and its effects]," *Zgodovinski časopis* 33, No. 2 (1979): 221–227 (also published in Melik, *Slovinci 1848–1918*, 655–663, with a summary in German).

Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe, 1850–1940 for which he wrote a study on the representation of “Germans, Italians and Slovenes in Ljubljana, Trieste, Maribor and other neighbouring towns from 1848 until the Second World War”.¹²

A major part of Vasilij Melik's work relates to the issue of representation of the multiple language groups, nationalities or “Volksstämme,” as they were also referred to in the official administrative discourse of the time. This interest was not only based on the objective significance of the cultural rights of these groups that were protected in the Fundamental Law “on the general rights of citizens of the kingdoms and states represented in the Imperial Council” of 1867 or of nationalism in Habsburg Austria's history, but also on contemporary interests the new Yugoslav state defended when Melik began his career as a historian. As Rok Stergar tells us, Melik's mentor Fran Zwitter forwarded information on ethno-linguistic statistics of the region to the Yugoslav foreign ministry he worked for, information that was needed at the post-war peace conferences around 1947 for planning borders.¹³ Besides, nationalist teleologism prevailed in historiography at the time.¹⁴ Melik's view of the establishment of a Slovene political “nation” evolving from a preexisting Slovene linguistic community by the late nineteenth century¹⁵ and his focus on the issue of national representation in general must also be read against this background.

Overall, Vasilij Melik's work remains the standard reference to turn to as a base for research on elections and representation in Habsburg Austria. It enables us to move forward with a multitude of specific questions that his studies help us to discover. One example is women's suffrage. Melik points out the inclusion of women for elections on the municipal and diet levels in his studies – at the Imperial Council level, women were only included in the curia of great landowners. Especially the case of Ljubljana is of interest, where women who met the property and tax requirements were enfranchised in 1887. As was common at the time, they were only permitted to vote by proxy and could not personally appear at the polls. This changed, however, in 1910, and Melik briefly relates the turbulent municipal elections of 1911 in which Liberals spat at Ursuline nuns attempting to

¹² “The Representation of Germans, Italians and Slovenes in Ljubljana, Trieste, Maribor and Other Neighbouring Towns from 1848 until the Second World War,” in *Comparative Studies on Governments and Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe, 1850–1940*, vol. 4: *Governments, Ethnic Groups and Political Representation*, ed. Geoffrey Alderman, John Leslie and Klaus Erich Pollmann (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company, 1993), 123–165.

¹³ Stergar “Vasilij Melik,” 115.

¹⁴ Stergar “Vasilij Melik,” 117–119.

¹⁵ See Ferdo Gestrin and Vasilij Melik, *Slovenska zgodovina: od konca osemnajstega stoletja do 1918* [Slovenian History: from the late eighteenth century to 1918] (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1966); Stergar “Vasilij Melik,” 116f.

vote in the polling place that, as required by the law, had been reserved for women voters.¹⁶ Women voters in Ljubljana totalled about 15 percent of all enfranchised persons, not an insignificant number. Assessing the total of enfranchised women, their social background and their experiences as participants in elections more systematically across Habsburg Austria forms a desideratum of historical research, despite the fact that sources, such as election registers, are often not archived.¹⁷

In addition, not only strata of society included in the franchise should interest us. The range of those specifically excluded from the vote deserves equal attention. Just to mention the level of the Imperial Council, we can note that, apart from women (of course with the exception of members of the curia of great landowners up to 1907), children and foreigners, convicted criminals and persons under criminal investigation for certain cases, among them involving immorality, greed for profit, and bankruptcy, persons under guardianship, active members of the military and the police, and, notably, recipients of public poor relief were excluded from the vote. From 1907, men who had been placed under police supervision or submitted to forced labour, had been convicted for drunkenness, or whose authority over children had been withdrawn, were added to the list. These exclusions tell us a lot about inequality and social norms that were held on the Imperial level, apart from representing political interests. Especially unearthing exclusions of recipients of poor relief might also benefit a general history of poverty in Habsburg Austria.¹⁸

A further range of questions concerns the practices of voting in general. As I have outlined elsewhere,¹⁹ Vasilij Melik's remarkable work has been followed by

¹⁶ Melik, "Volitve v Ljubljani," 117 and 123.

¹⁷ For an initial survey see Birgitta Bader Zaar and Carola Riedmann, "Stimmberechtigte Frauen vor 1918: Zum kommunalen, Landtags- und Reichsratswahlrecht für Frauen in der österreichischen Reichshälfte der Habsburgermonarchie," in „*Sie meinen es politisch!*“ 100 Jahre Frauenwahlrecht in Österreich. *Geschlechterdemokratie als gesellschaftspolitische Herausforderung*, ed. Blaustrumpf ahoi! (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2019), 65–79; for an example similar to Ljubljana – Wiener Neustadt in Lower Austria, where personal voting was introduced for women in 1912 – see Birgitta Bader-Zaar, "Expanding the Electorate in Habsburg Austria, 1860s–1918: (Dis)Integrations of Economic and Educational Qualifications, Gender, and 'Universal' Suffrage," in: *Suffrage, Capital, and Welfare. Conditional Citizenship in Historical Perspective*, ed. Fia Cottrel-Sundevall and Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2024).

¹⁸ Due to Scandinavian countries that excluded recipients of poor relief when they introduced "universal" suffrage in the early twentieth century, international interest in this topic has risen and a publication – Fia Cottrel-Sundevall and Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, eds., *Suffrage, Capital, and Welfare. Conditional Citizenship in Historical Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan) – is forthcoming.

¹⁹ Birgitta Bader-Zaar, "Democratization and the Practices of Voting in Habsburg Austria, 1896–1914: New Directions in Research," *Austrian History Yearbook* 53 (2022): 107–120, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237822000042> (open access).

further studies in the early 2000s that show us how crucial election procedures and manipulations, but also conflicts and violence,²⁰ were for actual representation.²¹ Understanding these, especially through local case studies of the various crownlands not only for elections of the Imperial Council but also on the levels of local government and crownland diets, are essential for a social and cultural history of Habsburg elections that should, also relate to the international developments of elections during the second half of the long nineteenth century.

²⁰ Melik touches upon violence especially in his article on the Frankfurt elections, “Frankfurtske volitve 1848 na Slovenskem,” where peasants emphatically demanded the end of the manorial system without the obligation to pay fees.

²¹ For example, among studies published in German: Eduard Winkler, *Wahlrechtsreformen und Wahlen in Triest 1905–1909: Eine Analyse der politischen Partizipation in einer multinationalen Stadtregion der Habsburgermonarchie* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2000); Harald Binder, *Galizien in Wien. Parteien, Wahlen, Fraktionen und Abgeordnete im Übergang zur Massenpolitik* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2005); Thomas Stockinger, *Dörfer und Deputierte: Die Wahlen zu den konstituierenden Parlamenten von 1848 in Niederösterreich und im Pariser Umland (Seine-et-Oise)* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2012). For an excellent general assessment of the importance of procedures for actual representation see Raffaele Romanelli, “Electoral Systems and Social Structures. A Comparative Perspective,” in *How Did They Become Voters? The History of Franchise in Modern European Representation*, ed. Raffaele Romanelli (Den Haag: Kluwer International, 1998), 1–36.