

# Hundred Years of the Czech Statistics

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## Abstract

After a brief information about the history of statistics in the Czech lands during the Austria-Hungarian monarchy the paper aims to specify basic features of statistics outlined during the World War I by Dobroslav Krejčí, a representative of the Statistical Office in the Bohemian Kingdom.

Dobroslav Krejčí and Karel Engliš processed the above features and included them into the law regulating the organization of statistical service adopted after the birth of the republic in 1919. It summarizes basic principles of statistical act including specification of statistical bodies and informs also about the role and activities of the “Statistical State Council” and “State Statistical Office”, i.e. institutions specified by respective governmental provisions. The attention is paid also to the beginnings of activities of the statistical office and implementation of respective hundred years’ old statistical principles at present.

## Keywords

*Beginnings of Statistics, Dobroslav Krejčí, Act No. 49/1919, establishment of the SSO*

## JEL code

*B20, B30, Z00*

Birth of an independent Czech, i.e. Czechoslovak state in 1918 entailed also a gradual establishment of individual state bodies and institutions.

The same applied to the state statistics. This was naturally linked to the existing bodies within the extinct Austrian – Hungarian empire. Especially in Bohemia there existed a statistical institution since the end of 1856 called the **Central Committee on Statistics of Agriculture and Forestry** and qualified by historians of statistics as the first state organized statistics in the Czech lands. An imminent predecessor of a statistical institution in an independent republic was the **Land Statistical Office of Bohemian Kingdom**, founded by the Czech Assembly in March 1897, both in terms of institution and personalities. The office consisted of the two following bodies: the Land Statistical Commission, as consultative and decision-making unit and the Land Statistical Office as an executive unit. This principle of two bodies was subsequently implemented in the organization of statistics in various modifications up to present day.

We should mention at least briefly the preceding institutions in other parts of the country. In Moravia, which was the margraviate with autonomy and an independent land assembly, there was the Land Statistical Office of the Margraviate of Moravia located in Brno and established even four years earlier. Similarly, in Silesian Dukedom in 1898 the Land Statistical Office was established in Opava, however, in view of prevailing German community it acted in purely German environs. It should be noted, that a significant activity was recorded especially for the statistical office in Bohemia. Let us mention

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the situation in Slovakia, in order to have a complete picture. Given the direct integration of Slovakia into Hungary, statistical service at its territory was performed by the Royal Hungarian Central Statistical Office in Budapest existing in Hungary since 1871.

Let us go back to the land office of Bohemian Kingdom which formed the platform for the future Czech statistics.

As early as during the World War I a number of representatives of public and professional life in Bohemia paid attention to the future structure of public life and general government after the war end, including statistics. Statistics was perceived under these circumstances as one of the important elements characterising the level of administrative independence of a certain territorial unit, i.e., as a precondition of functioning of future independent state. As early as in 1915, Dobroslav Krejčí, a long time representative of the Land Statistical Office of Bohemian Kingdom, raised the issue of including statistics into these plans. He delivered his lecture dealing with future organization of statistical work at the end of the year 1915 in the Czech National Economic Society. For wider public the lecture was published in 1916 in the first issue of the journal called *Obzor národohospodářský* under the title "Our Statistics after the War". Let us remind here, along with numerous principles which now constitute a natural part of statistics performance, three fundamental requirements for the future development of statistics which Krejčí formulated.

The most important and until then non existing in Austrian statistics was, according to Dobroslav Krejčí, the need for statistics with a firm legal basis regulating its activities. This should be reached by proposing and approval of Statistics Act anchoring especially a **reporting duty for statistical entities**. This duty was not a regular principle at that time, not even in more developed countries than Austria and in the monarchy itself there existed only for a few most important statistical surveys, such as the population census. Otherwise, the statistical surveys were organised on voluntary basis. Needless to say that this is clear to any statistician. As a matter of interest let us mention a fitting and apt characteristics of the above duty given by Dobroslav Krejčí – *"thus, the statistics will cease to be a pack of voluntarily provided, i.e., as a rule, incomplete and hardly controlled data"*.

The other proposed requirement was the issue of systematic organization of statistical work. This referred to a firm **working plan of statistical works**, chiefly statistical surveys including all other related links to this plan. He had in mind e.g. allocation of tasks to individual statistical bodies including proper facilities for their performance. According to him, the plan should determine *"what is to be statistically surveyed, in which order, the scope of survey as well as methods used."*

To date still current requirement formulated by Dobroslav Krejčí was his third axiom for operation of statistics – to inform by all means the wide public of the **need for and usefulness of proper statistics**. Even this requirement in the light of later often used statement, mostly incorrectly assigned to an anonymous author: *"I do not believe any statistics which I failed to fix myself"* is still needy and perhaps today even more important. As for the two preceding requirements it may be stated that both have always been anchored in statistical act amendments, including the one which is in force now. Specifically, it refers to the reporting duty and also to annual unified plan of statistical surveys.

It should be noted that Dobroslav Krejčí was not the first who proposed the reporting duty on our territory. The first one was Karel Engliš, who had been working at the beginning of the 20th century for four years with Dobroslav Krejčí at the Land Statistical Office. Five years later when he acted as an extraordinary professor of national economy including statistics at the Technical University in Brno, he helped to organize statistical service in Moravia (Moravia was then Margraviate of Moravia, like the Bohemian Kingdom, one of Austro-Hungarian lands). Based on his initiative the Land Moravian Chair adopted by the end of 1914 the act setting out the reporting duty for all surveys conducted by self-administrative units, i.e. only for a certain part of administrative bodies and not for physical persons. However, the fact is that in view of war events the act did not record any significant response neither was widely applied.

At the end of the war Dobroslav Krejčí reverted to his proposal concerning the performance of the Czech statistics which he changed to reach a concrete wording of statistical draft act. Not in vain is Dobroslav Krejčí perceived as the “father of Czech statistics“ considering his concept of state statistics anchored in respective law on statistics in the new independent state born in 1918.

After the birth of an independent republic his draft act was taken by the above mentioned Karel Engliš. As a deputy of the Revolutionary National Assembly he revised it and, compared to the original draft, he made it shorter and more transparent. Subsequently, he pushed it forward for discussion in social-political committee of the National Assembly. It was him, who on 28 January 1919 presented the report of the respective committee along with the draft act. After his presentation of the draft when no remarks were raised, the draft act was approved. It came that after almost three months upon the date when the republic was born, the act on statistics was adopted. Having been signed by the president of the republic, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, and Antonín Švehla, prime-minister, by proxy, the act was promulgated in the Collection of Laws and Ordinances. Thereby, it became effective as the **Act No. 29 (28<sup>th</sup> January 1919) on Organization of the Statistical Service**. Intentional brevity of the act anticipated its detailed specification in two ordinances. These were adopted later, in November 1919 as Governmental Ordinance No. 634/1919 Coll., on composition, competences and operation of the Statistical State Council (Statute of the Statistical State Council) and governmental ordinance No. 635/1919 Coll., on composition and operation of the State Statistical Office (Statute of the State Statistical Office). It suggests an apparent split mentioned already in the Land Office into the advisory, decision-making and executive units.

Let us summarise now basic principles which were codified by the above legal provisions especially compared to the previous situation in Austria-Hungary:

- a) statistical surveying was concentrated into one place in the country – central statistical office,
- b) the scope of statistical data required from respondents was determined by the Statistical Council composed of a representative sample of representatives of state administration, universities, professional chambers and others including the public,
- c) duty to provide the information to statistical institutions was stipulated for both the population, and also for all associations, co-operatives and profit-raising institutions of all kinds,
- d) individual data protection was regulated including provision stating that the statistical data obtained may be used for statistical purposes only,
- e) non-observance of the duty to provide data shall be punished,
- f) all who collect and process data for statistical purposes are subject to confidentiality in respect of “matters discovered during surveying if they concern private aspects“ including specification of relevant sanctions for non-observance,
- g) administrative offices and municipalities are obliged to “support!“ statistical office in performance of its tasks and obey the instructions resulting from the Statistical Council’s resolution, and finally
- h) statistics was proclaimed as autonomous and independent activity which cannot be subject to any departmental body and so, at that time, it was directly subordinated to the Prime-Minister.

The above described process of building statistics in the new state was not so problem-free and peaceful. Setting aside proclamations on the importance of statistics, i.e., processing of statistical data for the operation of legislation and administration in the new state, it became obvious that a 10 months’ delay between very brief law and specifying conditions of practical operation formulated in ordinances, will make the performance of statistical service uneasy. This situation was aggravated also by a long time vacant post of the president of the office (president František Weyr was appointed at the beginning of 1920) and by problems accompanying practical running of the office (the draft amendment of the Act No. 49/1919 reducing the original wide independence of the office and proposing its subordination to the Ministry of Internal Affairs was finally withdrew and not presented). From the beginning of the establishment of the statistical office its location was a handicap. The office operated gradually in different

buildings, often not suitable for its purpose. Organisational problems were due also to the fact, that the office was not at one place but in many buildings rented in different Prague locations. This is attested to the number of its employees. While the Land Statistical Office at the end of 1919, i.e., before the war, employed 220 persons, two years later, in 1921, when its establishment was practically completed, the office staff increased up to 804 persons. Let us remark that this problem did not exist only in the first twenty years of its existence but it survived until 2004 when the office moved, after 85 years, to a new modern building in Prague – Strašnice. Let us add that before the office had been located for several decades in provisional buildings in Prague – Karlín and, as a paradox, the end of its existence was caused by a natural disaster – a 1000-year flood when water from the Vltava river flooded the above buildings up to the first floor.

An interesting fact is that all three persons contributing to creation of the Czech statistics were important representatives of public and political life of a new republic. At the beginning they met in the Land Statistical Office where they worked together. Dobroslav Krejčí after he had left the field of statistics acted as university professor at Masaryk's University in Brno and occupied the post of the a rector before his death in 1936. Karel Engliš was also university professor and the first rector in the new established Masaryk's University in Brno. During the existence of the first republic he was several times minister of finance and, by the end of the 1930s, he was also the National Bank governor. The career of František Weyr was very similar. In addition to being a deputy in the first Revolutionary National Assembly (together with Karel Engliš) he performed for 9 years the post of the first president of the State Statistical Office, he was university professor, professor at a secondary school, dean and rector at the Masaryk's university in Brno.

The above stated principles of the first law on statistics including detailed specifications of ordinances were included, most in form of certain amendments, in statistical laws effective for the whole period of hundred years without respect to changing social relations (e.g. period of building socialism), different period provisions or other ways of organization and structure of statistical bodies. To be concrete, it referred to principles of statistical work and provision of statistical service as defined in presented Act No.49/1919 and related governmental regulations. The last amendment to the Statistics Act (if partial amendments are not considered) dates back to 1995 and was adopted almost a quarter century ago. Changes which took place at that time, e.g. functioning of independent Czech Republic and its general government and mainly turbulent development of IT (let us remind only, at random, e.g. administrative data and its data base or currently distributed data, i.e. scanner data) require new legal regulation concerning the operation of the whole state statistics. Roughly after a hundred years, principles which were effective for that period (including most probably the issues of reporting duty or statistical surveys plan) will be most likely substantially modified and updated, but from a completely new aspect.

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