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Czechoslovakia ninety years ago

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Abstract:

T. Burda: *Czechoslovakia ninety years ago.* – Klaudyán, 5, No. 2, pp. 67–72. Fateful eights, as years ending with the number eight are sometimes called, have meant several very significant historical turning points for Czech society. In addition to the years 1618, 1848, 1938, 1948 and 1968; 1918 certainly represents one of these turning points. At that time, after many long centuries, Czech statehood was renewed. However, through the establishment of a new political state – Czechoslovakia – the foundations of the present-day organisation of Central Europe were also laid. In 1993, after more than 70 years of existence, the common state for Czechs and Slovaks was split to form two independent republics – the Czech and Slovak Republics – however, it left a legacy of relations, which should be remembered.

Key words:

Czechoslovakia – Czechia – foundations – history – turning points – Central Europe

1. The idea of an independent Czechoslovakia

Before World War I broke out in 1914, the Czech lands enjoyed a relatively peaceful political life. It is, of course, impossible to speak about an Idyll, primarily due to relations between Czechs and Czech Germans (these were called “Sudeten Germans” and, in Slovakia, “Carpathian Germans”), who represented members of the Austrian “national” (majority) state. Czech policies were directed at reconciling relations with these Germans, more specifically with the other parts of Austria-Hungary, and expanding democratic freedoms. The fact that the Czech nation would retain its unique identity, culture and language as well as its own political representation had been decided during the previous historical period. Initially, this situation did not escalate with the outbreak of a world war: the vast majority of the Czech political representation remained loyal to the House of Hapsburg.

The disposition of the political scene as well as citizens in general began to change during the war, with increasingly frequent problems on the battle fronts and in the interior. Even during the first year of the war, cases of Czech soldiers deserting, especially on the Russian front, can be found. Such desertions later grew to massive proportions and it was not uncommon for entire combat units, who did not want to fight against the Russians or other enemies of the monarchy, to cross over the front as deserters. There was no way back for these men: they were traitors and so, logically, they soon took up arms to fight against Germany and Austria-Hungary. “In enemy territory” they joined with units made up of their countrymen living abroad and established legions; first in France (Nazdar, the first such brigade was created in August 1914) and later, primarily in Russia

and Italy. It was these units that formed the foundation of the military forces of a new state, which, at the time of the first units' establishment, was not even a speck on the historical horizon.

Only a few Czech politicians joined with the anti-Austrian resistance. The most distinguished of these was the "Enfant terrible" of contemporary Czech politics T. G. Masaryk, a professor of sociology, who was forced to emigrate at the beginning of the war. Later, certain significant movers and shakers in Czech politics were apprehended. These included Karel Kramář and Alois Rašín, who were even sentenced with the death penalty. This also suppressed potential protests and, until 1916, the situation in the Czech territories (Czechia) was relatively calm.

Francis Joseph I (1848–1916), the longest reigning monarch on the Czech throne, died 21st November 1916, and his great nephew Charles I of Austria took his place. Charles I, in contrast to his predecessor, tried to get the monarchy's lands out of a war that was impossible to win. He even pardoned several people, including convicted Czech political leaders, and once again allowed political activities to take place. In the Spring of 1917, activities of the Imperial Parliament were renewed. However, Charles' attempts were not successful due to the deprecatory stance of Germany, an empire which had held sway over the monarchy (Austria-Hungary) since, at least, 1866, and whose ruler Wilhelm II would not tolerate any alternative to outright victory in the war.

2. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and foreign action

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), a professor of philosophy and sociology and a member of the Imperial Parliament in Vienna, remained abroad at the end of 1914. He decided to make this idea of Czech (or, as later formulated, Czechoslovak) statehood a reality in the conditions of the world war, which he viewed as an opportunity for a historical turning point. According to Masaryk, this was part of the process of a new order of Europe, in compliance with the direction of historical developments from feudalism to capitalism, from monarchy to democracy, from a lack of freedom and "rule of the fist" to freedom of assembly, ideological and religious plurality, respect for differing individual, civic and social rights; both within the various, individual countries as well as in international relations. In the middle of 1915, sociologist Edvard Beneš joined Masaryk in exile and very quickly became his closest co-worker. A significant step in their efforts came on 22nd October 1915 with the so-called Cleveland Agreement, between representatives of compatriot organisations in the USA, the Slovak League and the Czech National Association, which for the first time proclaimed a desire to create a mutual federalised state. The Czechoslovak National Council was created in February 1916 in Paris, with T. G. Masaryk as its head. General Milán Rastislav Štefánik, a Slovak, also played a significant role in this council.

1917 was a decisive year in changing the attitude of the Agreement in regards to the idea of retaining the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as a guarantee of central European stability, an idea which had been, up to that time, highly promoted. The agreement also began to receive further consideration thanks to the altered attitudes of various nationalities in the monarchy (not only Czechs and Slovaks, but also Polacks, Croatians and others), who were demanding, at least, federalisation and, in some cases, even political sovereignty primarily on the basis of historical state rights as well as newly discussed rights for self-determination.

On March 12th of this year, revolution broke out in Russia and on April 6th, the USA entered the war. Masaryk attempted to garner the support of political arguments; among such military arguments, the establishment and success of the Russian legions in the Battle of Zborov on 2nd July 1917 and their activities in Russia after the socialist revolution in November 1917 proved to be decisive. The legions gradually seized control of the entire Siberian railway corridor all the way to Vladivostok, along with part of the railway network in European Russia and, in so doing, made it impossible for the "liberated" armies to return to Europe and to the western front, after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had been signed.

3. The year 1918

Changes in global politics soon expressed themselves in the domestic political stage. Beginning in the spring of 1917 a series of public speeches, demanding national self-determination,

occurred. The first projects, advocating the establishment of a Czechoslovak state, also appeared. Viktor Dvorský, a geographer, prepared one of the most significant of these in the publication “Území českého národa [Territories of the Czech Nation]”, wherein he theoretically substantiated the limits or borders that a common country of Czechs and Slovaks should have. While, in the case of the Czech lands, this meant a renewal of historical statehood, for Slovakia it meant the first proposal of the nation’s own statehood (within the Hungarian Kingdom, Slovakia never had its own territorial unit and the simple term Horní Uhry [Upper Hungary] was used to describe the region). The border between what would become Slovakia and Hungary had to be artificially imposed, for the most part. The name Masaryk is not found in this project; however, the two concepts compliment each other in many ways.

After the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (3. 3. 1918), the Czechoslovak legions in Russia tried to return to their homeland, where the fighting was ongoing; eventually, however, they joined in to intervention efforts against the Bolshevik government and in the summer of 1918 they seized practically the entire Trans-Siberian Railway corridor, along which they began to move farther to the East. Some of these units did not return to their liberated homeland until 1920. In June 1918, France officially recognised the Czechoslovak National Council (as the highest institution and the foundation of the future Czechoslovak state), in August 1918 the British government followed suit and in September, the USA and other countries did the same. In the meantime, 30th May 1918, the intention to create a common state of Czechs and Slovaks was proclaimed with the signing of the so-called Pittsburgh Agreement in the American city of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania). At the same time at home a renewed National Committee was taking shape as the highest governing body for interim legislative and executive power for the emerging state: Karel Kramář became its chairman and Antonín Švehla and Václav Klofáč were selected as vice-chairman. Its sub-committees began intensive preparations for the transfer of power and organisation of the future country.

In October 1918 events took on a frenzied pace. Bulgaria surrendered; the front in the Balkans collapsed and German units had also been losing ground in the West, since the summer of 1918. American president W. Wilson presented his vision of the future form of Europe in his famous fourteen points. On 14th October, the Czechoslovak National Council was transformed into the interim Czechoslovak government; on 18th October, the Washington Declaration of Independence, which espoused the ideals of modern democracy, outlined the fundamental points of the future Czechoslovak constitution and proclaimed the new state a republic, was issued.

In light of the unforeseeable situation, the domestic national committee was also activated. This committee's delegation departed on 25th October for Geneva, where it met with E. Benes and his co-workers. Two days later the Austrian government accepted the conditions of surrender in a note from Foreign Minister Andrássy. The publication of this note, on 28th October, was the spark that ignited CSR's (the official abbreviation of the political name for the Czechoslovak Republic) declaration of independence. On the home front at this time, a decisive role fell upon the four-member “Prague” presidency of the National Committee – A. Rašín, J. Stříbrný, F. Soukup and A. Švehla, who were also joined by Slovak V. Šrobár. This group of five, later known as the “men of October”, created the first law, through which the “Czechoslovak state came to life”. Subsequently, on 30th October, a representative group of Slovak politicians met in Turčianský Svatý Martin and established the Slovak National Council. By resolution, this council then proclaimed support for the idea of a common state in Czechoslovakia.

4. Constructing a state

In Prague and other large cities, power was assumed quickly. Already on 14th November, the Revolutionary National Congress, formed on the basis of election results (in the Czech lands) from 1911, met; the congress decided on the republic form of the state and selected T. G. Masaryk as president (he was not able to return to his homeland until 21. 12.), while another Czech politician, Karel Kramář, became prime minister. The process took longer in rural areas, especially in German and Hungarian areas, i.e. mainly in the border regions, where Czech residents were frequently in the minority. There were more than 3.5 million Czechoslovak Germans, who more or less

involuntarily found themselves within the territory of the new republic. Before the establishment of CSR, they had represented the majority and reigning Austrian-German nation and afterwards they became a minority, actually a larger minority than the Slovaks (there were about 2.5 million Slovaks). Czechs and Slovaks constituted only 65 % of the population of the new state; this is why the previously touted idea of Czechoslovakism began to be promoted, i.e. the idea of one Czechoslovak nation (which possessed a Czech and a Slovak branch, just like the so-called Czechoslovak language).

It was necessary to affirm power in the border regions with military force, because efforts were being made to unite the predominantly (more or less) German inhabited border areas with the newly formed Republic of Austria (German Austria) or with Germany. The separatist districts Deutschböhmen, Sudetenland, Deutschesüdmähren and Böhmerwaldgau (about 30 % of the territory of CSR and 3 million inhabitants) were created in these territories, between 29. 10. and 3. 11. 1918. These claims had to be suppressed with military force, a process which lasted until the end of 1918. A Czech-Polish dispute, concerning the nationality-mixed Těšínsko area, began to heat up as well. It was resolved after a series of contentions (mostly during January and February 1919) and meetings with a contract on dividing this territory between both states in 1920, which split the contested area, including the city of Těšín, into two parts (the Olše River, a tributary of the Oder, served as the border). The peace conference, which began in January 1919 in Paris and at which Czechoslovakia participated in the Treaty as a victorious state, confirmed the otherwise historical borders of the Czech territory. In addition to Czechoslovak politicians, a group of experts, including several geographers, participated in these peace negotiations on behalf of Czechoslovakia. They were primarily responsible for the preparation of maps and additional documentation for the Czechoslovak delegation.

From its beginning, the Slovak interim government operated in Skalice in southwestern Slovakia, then in Žilina, and after February 1919 in Bratislava (as the new capital city of Slovakia was renamed in 1919 – previously it was called Prešporok or, in German, Pressburg and, in Hungarian, Poszony). Parties of Czechs, primarily made up of members of the fitness organisation Sokol and the first of the returning legionaires, gradually began to occupy Slovakia, especially its cities and southern border regions. They had to assert power both against the Hungarian government as well as against communist divisions, which, in 1919, proclaimed a Hungarian (and in June 1919, in Prešov, even a Slovak) Republic. The so-called Pichon demarcation line from 1918, following the course of the Danube and the Ipl'a Rivers and continuing south of Košice, became the basis for determining the new borders. This line became the basis of the new borders that were confirmed by the Treaty of Trianon (1920) with Hungary. Borders with Austria and Germany were confirmed by the Treaty of Saint-Germain or rather by the Treaty of Versailles. The final territory to be joined with Czechoslovakia as an autonomous region, based on the will of the superpowers and partially on the will of the region's inhabitants, was Sub-Carpathian Rus. Occupation of this territory began in the spring of 1919 and, during the following year, it was affirmed in the peace treaties.

At the peace conferences, a very active Czechoslovak delegation succeeding in asserting additional changes to benefit their new state. Their demands included, for instance, the addition of Kladsko and Lusatia, taking control of northern Hungary along with Miskolc and the creation of a corridor between Czechoslovakia and the newly created kingdom of Serbs, Croatians and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) in the area of today's Burgenland, an Austrian province. These demands were denied; however, a number of areas were added, primarily to improve transport routes, to the territorial state recognised before 1918. These included the Valticko region (82 km^2 and approx. 10 000 inhabitants) in southern Moravia, which was traversed by the railway from Znojmo to Břeclav, and part of the historical Vitorazsko region in southern Bohemia, where railway lines from České Budějovice (Plzeň) and Veselí nad Lužnicí (i.e. from Prague) met – this area measured 104 km^2 and encompassed 11 municipalities, including the railway junction at the city of Gmünd (now České Velenice). The largest territorial gain was the Hlučínsko region in the north, home to a mixed nationality group, the so-called Moravci. It included 350 km^2 and roughly 50 000 inhabitants in a territory that had previously belonged to Germany (Prussia, or rather Prussian Silesia). In order to improve the security of Bratislava, Petržalka and two additional municipalities (48 km^2) were added

to Czechoslovakia. A small part of the Orava and Spiš districts was, on the other hand, given to Poland. After signing these treaties, the area of the new state measured 140 508 km².

The idea of Czechs and Slovaks coexisting in one political unit survived even through the division of the republic during World War II. A great number of people fought and died for Czechoslovakia, both in domestic resistance against Nazism as well as on all fronts of this conflict. It was not until after 1989, with a change in geopolitical conditions, the end of a communist regime, and also due to the fact that the tasks for which the common state was established had been fulfilled, that a peaceful division of this project came about. Both nations emerged from their common state strengthened against their traditional rivals – the Czechs against the Germans and the Slovaks against the Hungarians. However, the division of Czechoslovakia brought about the weakening of the role of this area within Central Europe and, as a result, a weakening of the entire region, as well as a repeated resurrection of historical tensions, including the legacy of peace agreements after World War I and even timid attempts to revise the results of World War II. Since 2004, both states have met in the European Union as two of its equal members. Relations between Czechs and Slovaks are very good, perhaps even better than they were in the past. And yet, neither those more than seventy years together nor the establishment of Czechoslovakia, with its hope for a democratic space within an unsettled Central Europe, should be forgotten.

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