

6 The End of Darkness? Uncertainty and Revolution

In Czech national consciousness, the period following the Battle of White Mountain was characterized as “*temno*,” darkness, a moment when the nation went into decline under the Habsburg yoke. The creation of Czechoslovakia on October 28, 1918, as culmination of the national movement, was supposed to usher in a new era of freedom, breaking away from the dark Habsburg past. Yet, in the streets of Prague that autumn, the lights were still out. There were attempts to reintroduce public lighting after the regime change, but they were quickly interrupted by further coal shortages. By November 1920, Prague was still mostly dark at night. Dark streets impeded police work while crime had risen after the war. They made traffic less safe.¹ Darkness also robbed the city of its urban quality. Just as during the war, Prague was “drowning in the dark of a remote mountain village except for a few streets in the center.”² The brave new world did not always look as promised. As an article in *Národní politika* noted, the disappearance of many modern conveniences gave the impression of a movement backward: poor rail connections meant that a journey from Prague to a nearby city could take a whole day in an unheated, dark carriage; disrupted tramways made walking the most efficient urban transportation mode; telegraph and telephone connections to the outside world were much slower, and nonexistent public lighting made Prague look like “Paris or London when Zeppelin and planes bombarded these cities.”³

Recent work on the postwar period in Central and Eastern Europe shows that in this part of the continent war did not end in 1918. The Austro-Hungarian surrender in early November left the region with uncertain borders, demobilized soldiers going home, and contradictory political aspirations. With paramilitary groups continuing to lead

¹ Municipal gasworks to Police Headquarters, November 11, 1920, NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 2999, sig. L 20/2, no. 13726 and report, Police Headquarters, October 2, 1918; on the rise of criminality in the postwar, see Solnař, *Zločinnost v zemích Českých* 35.

² *Národní politika*, April 24, 1918 (afternoon ed.), 2.

³ *Národní politika*, January 18, 1920, 6.

smaller-scale wars, violence was an integral part of postwar societies characterized by state breakdown.⁴ In this regional context, Prague was not the stage of the most violent clashes. This image of a nonviolent revolution on October 28, 1918 and a peaceful, democratic nation was also the basis of Czechoslovak self-presentation.⁵ Yet, Prague's streets were the site of much contestation over the meaning of the regime change and over what should and should not happen in the new capital city. Violence was not the only factor that brought change or confusion to the postwar years. These small-scale fears, hopes, and disappointments were not as dramatic as paramilitary coups or Bolshevik revolutions, but they nonetheless shaped life around uncertainty.

The changeover to a democratic, republican, Czech-national government was supposed to be reflected everywhere in the city's streets. Prague was dreamed of as a modern, Slavic, "de-austrianized" capital city. The reality, with the continuation of food shortages and restrictions, was often disappointing. A satirical newspaper published in February 1919 a cartoon following a legionnaire on a walk around Prague and providing captions for his thoughts: in front of the train station, he wondered at the line of unemployed men and untended dirty streets; he was shocked to see that the bridge toll was not abolished; looking at the high prices in a butcher shop, he cursed the owner. He was also surprised to see the monument to Marshall Radetzky still standing (although veiled).⁶ The returning legionnaire, having fought for the country's independence, stood for an idealized version of the nation looking at the streetscapes of the new capital and disapproving of the remnants of the old order. Some of the vignettes related to the continuation of war conditions (prices, unemployment, dirty streets), while others pointed to an incomplete regime change (monuments, bridge toll).

The nonconformity of the streetscape with people's varied aspirations had an impact on struggles over the meaning of the revolution. Sociologist Henri Lefebvre famously argued that "a revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential."⁷ Many Prague residents might have agreed with that sentiment. They looked at their streets and realized that they did not correspond to their own

⁴ On paramilitarism and violence after the war, see Robert Gerwarth, John Horne (eds.), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jochen Böhrer, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁵ Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); for an account of violence that nuances this vision, see Konrád, Kučera, *Paths out of the Apocalypse*.

⁶ *Humoristické listy*, February 7, 1919, 54.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 54.

visions of a bright future. What did revolution mean for Prague's inhabitants? What did the transition to the status of postimperial capital city look like on the ground?

The many unfulfilled hopes explain the continued unrest analyzed in Chapter 5. The 1918 revolution has long been understood along rigid political lines in terms of success or failure, national or Bolshevik. The Russian revolution of 1917 was perceived as casting a long shadow over Central and Eastern Europe. Zooming in on the picture of Prague's streets, these strong dichotomies appear as largely irrelevant. "Revolution" was rather a vague slogan whose meaning changed based on the person using it. National revolutions were never complete, and wartime social changes meant that Prague had more in common with defeated Vienna or Budapest than victorious parades would suggest.⁸

For Prague's inhabitants, the "liberation" promised by the declaration of independence and the establishment of the Republic failed, in various respects, to deliver a clean break with the war situation. This chapter explores the chasm between the mental map of a new prosperous, modern, national capital city and the reality of the streetscape, still too Austrian, backward, and impoverished. The first two years after the fall of the Habsburg Empire were a period of uncertainty when the shape of the new state was still unclear.⁹ It opens with an examination of how events unfolded on October 28, 1918 in the streets of Prague, in order to better understand how regime change took place in urban space. It then considers how the juxtaposition between old and new elements in the city created friction over the next two years. Finally, it investigates the atmosphere of social uncertainty that characterized those years and the various meanings encapsulated by the word "revolution" in this context.

What Does Revolution Look Like?

October 1918 was a month of anticipation of the coming peace. Everywhere in Europe, not only in Prague, the Bulgarian surrender at the end of September had signaled the beginning of the end. The military

⁸ On 1918 in Austria, see John W. Boyer, "Silent War and Bitter Peace: The Revolution of 1918 in Austria," *Austrian History Yearbook*, 34 (2003): 1–56; On the meanings of revolution in Munich and Budapest, see Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence*.

⁹ On how people navigated the postimperial world order in Fiume, see Reill, *The Fiume Crisis*; on regime change and uncertainty in Ljubljana, see Rok Stergar, "Endloses Ende, unbestimmter Neuanfang: Die Entstehung des ersten Jugoslawien aus zeitgenössischen Perspektiven," in Sašo Jerše, and Kristina Lahl (eds.), *Endpunkte. und Neuanfänge: Geisteswissenschaftliche Annäherungen an die Dynamik von Zeiläufen* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2022), 199–214; on state-building in several post-Habsburg local contexts, see the articles in the special issue of *Südost-forschungen* coordinated by Gábor Egrý (79, no. 1, 2021).

defeats that summer on both the Western and Italian fronts had progressively dispelled hopes of victory for the Central Powers. In Prague, that summer had also seen the return of soldiers from the Eastern front, who only reluctantly rejoined their units to be sent to the Italian front. The army could only provide these men with shabby uniforms and meager food rations.¹⁰ Some of them deserted and remained in the city: "Prague was swarming with deserters" at the time, according to a Bulgarian journalist.¹¹ As a patrol came to arrest three deserters playing cards in a ditch in Nusle, the crowd turned against the intervening troops and threw stones at them.¹² The nearby countryside could also serve as hiding place, for example in the Prokop Valley: "many deserters roam in the bushes and the gendarmerie searches for them [...] overall in the Prague surroundings there are many robberies that are attributed to the deserters."¹³ The presence of former soldiers hiding in the city added to the global impression of nearing defeat. At the end of September, the mood was expectative: on Saint Wenceslas Day (September 28), flyers had circulated in Vršovice and Král. Vinohrady and were handed by volunteers from the Czech Heart collecting money: "In relation to any declaration from Vienna, keep calm and do not participate in demonstrations."¹⁴

By October, as the cold season was coming back, coal shortages meant that war factories had partially stopped working, hospitals were not heated, and of course private households could not get coal. The cold and hunger helped the rapid spread of the Spanish influenza, which killed many residents all over Prague during that month. The terrible conditions "radicalized all minds," according to the Governor. On October 18, he published an announcement asking the population to keep calm while waiting for peace: "the reordering of statehood is in progress," in reference to the manifesto by Emperor Charles two days earlier, which called for a restructuring of the monarchy.¹⁵ This does not mean that the Austrian state had collapsed in Prague: the army had still been able to prevent a coup during the general strike of October 14.

¹⁰ On the army's difficulties to provide uniforms, see the reports from several Prague military offices, VHA, 8. sborové velitelství, ka 1, sig. 1, no. 7/3–2, May 29, 1918.

¹¹ See attached report "Die Lage in Mähren und Böhmen," NAL, GFM 6/45, Ö101 Böhmen, 42, from the German Embassy in Vienna, August 20, 1918.

¹² Military police to Military Command. VHA, 8. sborové velitelství, sig. 32/34, ka 23, no. 1812, May 9, 1918.

¹³ AHMP, FÚ u kostela sv. Vavřince Praha – Jinonice, Pamětní kniha, 160; on deserters in the countryside, see Jakub Beneš, "The Green Cadres and the Collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918," *Past & Present* 236, 1 (2017): 207–241.

¹⁴ Police report, NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 3074, sig. P 55/35, no. 11942, September 28, 1918.

¹⁵ Report from the Bohemian Governor, October 17, 1918 and announcement, October 18, 1918 in *Sborník dokumentů*, V, no. 107, 334 and no. 108, 336.

Fully armed soldiers were again posted in the main streets during the following week. This temporary victory, however, also proved their nervousness as peace in defeat grew nearer. By then, Czech and Slovak politicians in exile around Tomáš Masaryk, who had lobbied in London, Paris, and Washington, DC during the war, had published a declaration of Czechoslovak independence on October 18.¹⁶

Despite this general context, the events on October 28 were not carefully planned and took the local Austrian authorities by surprise.¹⁷ One important factor adding to the confusion was the Emperor's manifesto of October 16, which announced a more federal system in Austria with "national individual states."¹⁸ The transfer of sovereignty to the National Committee (composed of parliamentary deputies from the Czech political parties) could be understood by civil servants as part of the manifesto's intent. Cries on the street calling for a republic were therefore more revolutionary than those in favor of a Czech state. The transfer from one state to the next happened in a blurry manner. The various symbolic buildings were not exactly stormed but rather claimed by the National Committee, with befuddled civil servants obligingly accepting. The first building seized was the Office for Grain (*Obilní ústav*), located in the new Art Déco Palace Rokoko on Wenceslas Square. Although the main protagonists presented it after the event as the first political act of the Czechoslovak state, it cannot be considered as the beginning of the regime change.¹⁹ Czech politician Bohumil Němec suggests in his memoirs that the taking over of the Office for Grain by a Czech administrative committee was agreed upon with Bohemian Governor Coudenhove for the date of October 28.²⁰ In the blur of Austria-Hungary's final months, the personnel of this office, who pledged an oath to the National Committee, could well have thought that they still acted according to the wishes of the central authorities.

The crucial step of the handover of the Bohemian Governor's Office to the National Committee in the afternoon of the 28th similarly happened in relative confusion. As Governor Coudenhove was away in Vienna that

¹⁶ The activity of émigré politicians in the creation of Czechoslovakia is a crucial part of the story that is here left out as it did not take place in Prague. See, Pichlík, *Bez legend*.

¹⁷ Richard Lein, "Der 'Umsturz' in Prag im Oktober 1918: zwischen Mythen und Fakten," in David Schriffl, and Niklas Perzi (eds.), *Schlaglichter auf die Geschichte der böhmischen Länder vom 16. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2011), 185–206.

¹⁸ On the manifesto, see Jana Osterkamp, *Vielfalt ordnen: Eine föderale Geschichte der Habsburgermonarchie (Vormärz bis 1918)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 19–42.

¹⁹ Antonín Klimek, *Říjen 1918: vznik Československa* (Prague: Paseka, 1998), 185; Šedivý, *Češi, české země a Velká válka*, 349.

²⁰ Bohumil Němec, *Vzpomínky* (Prague: Archiv Akademie věd České republiky, 2002), 527.

day, his deputy Kosina talked to the National Committee, and it is not clear what prompted him to accept the new state.²¹ His report to Vienna suggests that his main concern was to guarantee public order and that he was still awaiting clear instructions. The National Committee had told him that the transfer of affairs should take place “in agreement with the current functionaries.”²² Czech civil servants, in a meeting on October 27, had already declared that they would deploy all their energies in the service of the new Czechoslovak state.²³ As the National Committee crossed the street into the Baroque palace of the Bohemian Diet, seat of the regional autonomous administration, it encountered similar perplexity. The members of the National Committee persuaded the president of the commission which had replaced the dissolved diet to hand over the administration by stating that the Governor’s Office had just agreed. Count Schönborn also thought he was complying with the emperor’s manifesto. As the diet had not met since 1913, the main chamber was used as a warehouse for bags of flour and potatoes; it smelled of earth and mold.²⁴ In late 1918, even the historically significant symbol of state rights had been taken over by provisioning issues.

While Bohemian central and autonomous authorities had not opposed resistance, the nearby Military Command could have been expected to act more than it did, especially considering its resolute reaction on October 14. The station commander, Zanantoni, was taken aback and only sent troops in the afternoon to Wenceslas Square and Old Town Square. As the crowds were already thick, the soldiers would have needed to resort to violence to clear the squares. Zanantoni decided to withdraw the troops to preserve public order. According to the Sokol who escorted him after the regime change, a love for Prague had driven him to call for the troops’ withdrawal.²⁵ However romantic that explanation sounds, Zanantoni explained in his own memoirs that, in avoiding bloodshed, he also thought he acted in the spirit of the Emperor’s manifesto. According to him, Social Democrat member of the National Committee František Soukup, who called him to ask for the soldiers to leave Old Town Square, had also mentioned Charles’ declaration.²⁶ That evening, the generals met with the National Committee at the

²¹ Klimek, *Říjen 1918*, 198.

²² Phonogram, Governor’s Office to Interior Ministry, October 28, 1918, *Sborník dokumentů*, V, no. 120, 350.

²³ *Národní politika*, October 28, 1918 (afternoon ed.), 3.

²⁴ *Domov za války*, V, 496–497.

²⁵ NA, SP, ka 74, “Vzpomínky ze svého spolupůsobení a účasti Sokolské ...,” Antonín Jabůrek [February 25, 1920], 22.

²⁶ ÖStA, KA, NL, 6 (B), Zanantoni, Eduard, “Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben ...,” 471.

Municipal House and divided the command over soldiers in Prague: those who wanted to join the forming Czech ranks were free to do so and the Military Command kept control over the other units. The following day, the Military Commander Kestřánek attempted to resist the takeover of the Military Command building by Sokols, but it was too late and already clear that even Hungarian troops wanted to go home. The exile politicians, who wished to take most of the credit for the creation of Czechoslovakia, pointed out afterward the confusion exploited by the men of the National Committee.²⁷ Beyond these debates, it is important to underline how this revolution was institutionally a transition from one regime to the next.

What made the transformation so irreversible on October 28, 1918 were the crowds. And so, it is worth attempting to follow their tracks. The crowds, which gathered that morning on Wenceslas Square, were first attracted by a sign on the board of the newspaper *Národní politika* announcing: “Armistice.”²⁸ In fact, this information relied on a misunderstanding: Foreign Minister Count Andrássy had merely sent a note to the American president offering to start peace negotiations. Although the poster had remained for less than an hour, the news spread very quickly in the city’s streets. The official journal reported “jubilation shouts of ‘peace – peace!’ from all sides” in Prague and the suburbs.²⁹ The situation soon took another turn. Extra newspaper editions around noon reported that Austria–Hungary had accepted Wilson’s conditions regarding the rights of Slavic nations.³⁰ The red and white flags, symbol of Bohemia and of the Czech nation, invaded public space. In his memoirs, Vladimír Vondráček describes this atmosphere where the flags started appearing at a few shops and then throughout the day “the red and white flags slowly popped up everywhere.”³¹ As we have seen, these flags were not a novelty, not even in wartime, but most testimonies insist on their exceptional number on that day. “Never did Prague squares see so many flags,” commented a newspaper.³² Even German bank establishments on na Příkopě were sporting a red and white flag. Large banners floated on buildings and little flags brightened surfaces and passersby: they hung from windows or in shop entrances, adorned tramways, market stalls, or

²⁷ Jan Galandauer, “Muži 28. října a ‘spor o zásluhy’ na vzniku Československa,” in Rudolf Kučera (ed.), *Muži října 1918: osudy aktérů vzniku Republiky československé* (Prague: Masarykův ústav a Archiv Akademie věd ČR, 2011), 193–203.

²⁸ Plaschka, *Cattaro-Prag*, 222–228.

²⁹ *Pražské noviny*, October 29, 1918, 1.

³⁰ *Národní politika*, October 28, 1918 (afternoon ed.), 1; see Klimek, *Říjen 1918*, 182–224.

³¹ Vondráček, *Lékař vzpomíná*, 358.

³² *Národní politika*, October 29, 1918, 2.

the automobiles distributing flour.³³ A photograph shows singer Karel Hašler carrying a makeshift flag in Prague's streets, suggesting that some of them might have been made on the spot.³⁴

By the end of the morning, the crowds were getting larger on Wenceslas Square and a few guests at the café "Parlament" called "Long live the Czechoslovak Republic!"³⁵ By midday, the National Committee came back from Malá Strana. In the middle of the square, National Socialist member of the National Committee Jiří Stříbrný addressed the crowd from atop the automobile, declaring that "a free and independent Czechoslovak state is a reality."³⁶ This declaration might have felt momentous afterward, but contemporary newspapers did not report it, mentioning instead that many people, politicians or not, were holding speeches everywhere, from balconies, on street corners, or on top of monuments. A postman who attempted to hold a speech on Wenceslas Square was drowned in the cries of joy of a small group of students.³⁷ By the afternoon, more and more people kept flocking toward the center of Prague, including from the nearby suburbs. Jan Werich remembers being in Žižkov as a thirteen-year-old and feeling "a strange bustle": the tramways had stopped running, several shops were closed, and people walked "in one direction towards Prague."³⁸

All the streets in the center were then filled with people. On Old Town Square, the crowd gathered expecting speeches from the town hall balcony, as had been the case earlier during the war. A Hungarian battalion used bayonets to make them retreat into side streets before being withdrawn. After the troops left, František Soukup held a speech in his powerful voice, inviting the crowd to refrain from violence. Yet, the town hall, which had up until then been an important national symbol, did not become one of the main sites of the day.³⁹ The National Committee established its headquarters in the splendid Art Nouveau building of the Municipal House and remained there, guarded by boy scouts, over the following days. And Wenceslas Square remained the square associated with regime change.

Street-level regime change meant the removal of imperial insignias from people and from buildings, a zealously widespread activity among

³³ *Pražské noviny*, October 29, 1918, 1.

³⁴ *Domov za války*, V, 505.

³⁵ *Národní politika*, October 29, 1918, 2. (Zanantoni reports a similar scene around 11 a.m.)

³⁶ *Domov za války*, V, 497.

³⁷ *Prager Tagblatt*, October 29, 1918, 3.

³⁸ From a 1969 interview, available at: <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/wericha-28-rijen-1918-nejedl-nejedly-zas-tvrdil-ze-slo-o-velkou-zradu-7171052> (accessed October 19, 2021).

³⁹ *Domov za války*, V, 476.

the crowds on that day. Soldiers removed from their caps the little round sign with a K referring to Emperor Karl. If not spontaneously removed, these “apples,” as they were called, were soon forcibly taken by other men and women. The pressure on uniformed men to renounce Austria–Hungary in this manner was such that Hugo Bergmann preferred to walk the streets dressed as a civilian on that day.⁴⁰ Klara Hofbauerová–Heyrovská describes the people’s joy as they filled the streets, the smiles on their faces, and the soldiers replacing the ‘K’ on their caps with a revolutionary cockade.⁴¹ The German Consul, on the other hand, recounts more violent removal of insignia scenes with slaps and blows given to reluctant soldiers.⁴² All uniforms underwent the same treatment. A civil servant who found himself in uniform on Wenceslas Square by chance recalls removing from his coat the golden buttons (with double eagle) and stripes.⁴³ Some policemen tore off the feather and double eagle from their helmets, although the police overall seem to have followed the movement only the following day.

In the afternoon, several groups removed imperial street signs: from Habsburg eagles on the façades to “Purveyor to the Court” signs on stores. German-language signs on phonebooths and shop windows were covered, and k. k. (imperial royal) letters crossed out. The large black double eagles fell from many buildings in the center. They adorned every official state office, but also the front of secondary schools, tobacconists, and lottery sellers. The large eagle from the Court of Justice on Charles Square was triumphantly removed. A few youths took off the eagle from the Police Headquarters. To the sound of a funeral march played by a military band, it was carried by the crowd and thrown into the nearby Vltava. Interestingly, the official takeover of the police only took place the following day. Hofbauerová–Heyrovská remarks that the most enthusiastic in the crowd were those who had recently cheered for Austria.⁴⁴ Many such carnivalesque scenes took place in the streets: a hearse labelled “Austria” generated a lot of laughter. Zanantoni claims that the crowd had hijacked the official funeral of a retired officer, whose cortege crossed the city that day, and whose coffin was replaced by effigies of Wilhelm and Charles.⁴⁵ The numerous flags and cockades, the

⁴⁰ Letter to Arthur Bergmann, October 29, 1918, in Hugo Bergmann, *Tagebücher und Briefe*, ed., Miriam Sambursky (Königstein: Jüdischer Verlag Athenäum, 1985), I: 1901–1948, 114.

⁴¹ Klára Hofbauerová–Heyrovská, *Mezi vědci a umělci* (Prague: Jos. R. Vilímek, 1947), 327.

⁴² *Deutsche Gesandtschaftsberichte aus Prag*, 31–34.

⁴³ *Domov za války*, V, 552.

⁴⁴ Hofbauerová–Heyrovská, *Mezi vědci a umělci*, 327.

⁴⁵ Zanantoni, “Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben ...,” 469–470; *Národní listy* (October 29, 1918, 2) and *Prager Tagblatt* mention the hearse.

changed uniforms, and the removed signs all contributed to transforming the appearance of the city as the *Prager Tagblatt* remarked: “Anyone who walked on the street yesterday afternoon or night cannot anymore have the impression of being in an Austrian city.”⁴⁶

October 28 on Purkyně Square?

As people from the suburbs flocked onto Prague’s main squares, there were no celebration that day on Purkyně Square. Only that night in the municipal theater on the square, the director came to the stage before the performance dressed in full national costume to express his joy at the creation of the Czechoslovak state. The audience stood up to launch into the national anthem.⁴⁷

One of the National Committee’s concerns was to ensure that the demonstrations would remain joyous and not turn violent. Sokols oversaw public order and speeches invited crowds to avoid attacks on private property. A red and white poster signed by several Czech politicians with the mention “in the name of Prague citizenry” called upon “citizens” to maintain “dignified calm” during the demonstrations: “The Czechoslovak state finally became reality. We became free and you are the ones who should show that you are able to live like free citizens.”⁴⁸ While official announcements by the imperial authorities had been printed in black and white, the red letters on a white background matched the street decoration and marked a new government. On the next day, the posters were plastered on all street corners and on the windows of the few open shops.⁴⁹ It was a success: the mood stayed festive, with national songs heard across the city.

The atmosphere of national holiday continued into the evening. That night, streetlights were exceptionally back on, and a light rain did not deter the celebratory crowds. A Sokol who held guard on Wenceslas Square recalls new groups converging with flags and lanterns to the statue of Saint Wenceslas, where the national anthem “Kde domov můj” was being sung continuously. From the windows of the café “Parlament” opposite, people on the sidewalk could hear cheerful national music being played and sang along. Inside, strangers embraced, and officers and

⁴⁶ *Prager Tagblatt*, October 29, 1918, 3.

⁴⁷ *Národní listy*, October 29, 1918, 2.

⁴⁸ NA, PP 1916-1920, ka 3074, sig. P 55/35, October 28, 1918.

⁴⁹ *Prager Tagblatt*, October 29, 1918 (evg ed.), 1.

men shook hands. These merry scenes continued until 2 a.m.⁵⁰ Looking at the crowds on October 28th, we can see a will to celebrate both peace and the collapse of the old regime. As a parish chronicle explained: “The enthusiasm was universal, partly for the end of the war which had arrived after all and people looked forward to better times, and partly for Bohemia becoming again independent after 300 years.”⁵¹ The scenes on the streets in the morning are indeed reminiscent of Armistice Day scenes in other European cities. The interallied culture, for example, was an important feature of the celebrations in European capitals.⁵² In Prague, Wilson’s name was acclaimed by the crowd and American flags could be seen among the Slavic colors. The Marseillaise was played on Wenceslas Square. A bank even exhibited on its balcony a miniature Statue of Liberty with a lit torch.⁵³ Taken in the Armistice context, the Prague celebrations can be situated not just in terms of rupture with the Habsburg past, but also within a victorious Europe breaking off from war and hoping for a better future (independence suddenly placing the Bohemian Lands on the side of the victors).

The next day saw even more celebrations as the news traveled further. All the church bells, at least the ones which had not been taken, were rung in Prague.⁵⁴ People flocked to the main streets and gathered on Wenceslas Square, where pictures of the crowd were taken. Processions of soldiers, women, and youths in national costumes converged to the statue of Saint Wenceslas. Crowds from the suburbs and further away towns reached the center to celebrate, including half of the inhabitants of Modřany (10 km south of Prague), for instance.⁵⁵ Houses that had not yet displayed a flag were now doing so. Little flags and cockades suddenly became sought-after commodities. Women, men, and children were selling them for high prices on improvised stalls, where dense queues formed what a newspaper called the “cockade front.” Eagles continued to be removed from buildings, including now in the suburbs.⁵⁶ Once fallen, many wanted to keep a little piece of them, as material memento of the regime change. An art historian who was an adolescent in 1918 recalls picking up a piece of a downed eagle in the street and

⁵⁰ NA, SP, ka 74, “Vzpomínky ze svého spolupůsobení a účasti Sokolské ...,” Antonín Jabůrek [February 25, 1920], 3.

⁵¹ AHMP, FÚ u sv. Rocha Praha – Žižkov, Pamětní kniha, 143.

⁵² Victor Demiaux, “La Construction rituelle de la victoire dans les capitales européennes après la Grande Guerre (Bruxelles, Bucarest, Londres, Paris, Rome)” (PhD diss., EHES, 2013).

⁵³ *Pražské noviny*, October 29, 1918, 1.

⁵⁴ AHMP, FÚ u sv. Havla – Staré město, Pamětní kniha 1883–1929, 35.

⁵⁵ *Pamětní kniha obce Modřany*, 33.

⁵⁶ *Pražské noviny*, October 30, 1918, 2–3; *Prager Tagblatt*, October 30, 1918, 3.

putting it in his pocket.⁵⁷ A little song of the era mocked the eagles' fate: "Everyone wanted to have a piece of them, they sold like the hangman's rope."⁵⁸ By collecting remnants of the past and artifacts of the future, members of the crowd participated in making regime change tangible.

On Žofín Island, demobilized men came to register for a Czech national militia, which would become the new Czechoslovak army. Soldiers still in Austrian uniform, though already serving the new republic, were an important presence in urban space. Old Austrian general Zanantoni, appalled, recalled "the soldiers without sabers, without caps, wild in demeanor, unkempt in attire. No sign of breeding or discipline, not even towards the Czech officers who had crossed over. Nobody was saluting anymore."⁵⁹ These soldiers were vivid symbols of the transition to a new order marked by national but also democratic aspirations.

The demonstrations, processions, singing, and celebrations nevertheless had to stop. The National Committee, aware of the still potentially combustible situation, remained nervous and published an announcement as early as October 30, 1918 asking the population to get back to work and stop gathering.⁶⁰ Working-class Social Democrat Vojtěch Berger commented on these announcements in his diary that the bourgeoisie had no problem with a Czech state but had difficulty reconciling with the word "republic."⁶¹ Contests over the meaning of the new state were only beginning.

The Old beside the New

In the wake of the fall of eagles, Prague's streetscapes had to reflect the new Republican and Czech (oslovak) reality. The new rallying cry in public life was de-austrianization (*odrakouštění*). As a memoirist recalls, "though nobody could say what exactly it was supposed to mean, 'we must de-austrianize ourselves' became a favorite applause-winning formula and an unquestioned appurtenance of platform patriotism."⁶² What that concept concretely entailed was not always clear. On a

⁵⁷ Vladimír Denkstein, "Malá Strana v mém mládí," *Za starou Prahu: Věstník klubu za starou Prahu*, 37:2–3 (2007), 56.

⁵⁸ Jěnný Lancman, *Nová píseň o tom převratu* (Prague: Jožka Polenský, 1919), 4.

⁵⁹ Zanantoni, "Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben ...," 482.

⁶⁰ *Pražské noviny*, October 30, 1918, 1.

⁶¹ AHMP, Vojtěch Berger, inv. č. 8, II, 214; on Berger, see Bryant, *Prague*, 106–155.

⁶² Zikmund Konečný, *Changing Fortunes: A Central European Recalls: The Memoirs of Zikmund Konečný* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 27; on the process, see Emil Brix, "Die 'Entösterreichung' Böhmens: Prozesse der Entfremdung von Tschechen, Deutschböhmen und Österreichern," *Österreichische Osthefte*, 34, no. 1 (1992): 5–12.



Figure 6.1 Crowd in front of the Bohemian Diet for the first session of the National Assembly, November 14, 1918

Source: AHMP, *Sbírka fotografií*, sign. I 12115 a

political level, it implied a democratization of institutions and habits, but its application was broader and also concerned everyday life. What forms would “de-austrianization” take in urban space? And how fast was it possible to “de-austrianize”?

The immediate postwar period was rich in public celebrations of the new Republic and its heroes. In his memoirs, Václav Lacina recalls the festive atmosphere in the city in the months following independence: “Prague was in the middle of November still brightened up, full of national costumes and tricolors. She welcomed Masaryk, the legionnaires, and allied missions, celebrated colonel Husák and captain Voska and other now forgotten historical figures. [...] On the street were sold small enamel lions [Czech national symbol] and American flags, and plenty of satirical anti-Austrian newspapers.”⁶³ In the first moments of national independence, there was an appetite for national parades, folkloric costumes, and ever more Czech and pan-Slavic flags (see, for example, Figure 6.1). The colors which had been banned during the war regained pride of place. Commentators were now chasing public remnants of Habsburg symbols

⁶³ Václav Lacina, *Co Vám mám povídat* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1966), 44–45.

instead. Local newspaper *Vinohradské listy*, for example, approvingly noticed a new red-white-and-blue sign for a tobacco shop with the letters ČSR (Czechoslovak Republic) in a shield and thought it should be copied. The same newspaper frowned upon the remaining k. k. (royal and imperial) letters on the plaque of the Assay office.⁶⁴

Czechoslovak Military Culture

Purkyně Square was the stage of celebrations of the new military. Official funerals in great pomp took place there. When two pilots died in December 1919, the celebrations in the presence of the president saw speeches by military dignitaries, soldiers firing salvoes, and the crowd singing “Kde domov můj” in front of the theater. Military concerts also took place every week in September 1920 on the square and enjoyed an “exceptional appreciation in the population,” according to the local newspaper.⁶⁵

Similarly mirroring the wartime process of making the streetscape fit with state patriotism, renaming was a powerful tool to enshrine the political transformation in public space. It started spontaneously on the day of the regime change when someone posted a paper sign with the words “Wilson Avenue” on the Powder Tower.⁶⁶ The following day in the suburb of Vršovice, the sign of a street formerly known as Ruská (Russian), which had to change names in 1915, was reinstated in its former place.⁶⁷ The official renaming by the Municipal Council targeted the main symbolic avenues and sites of the city, especially those which had changed during the war, erasing references to the Habsburg dynasty. Franz Joseph square took the celebratory name of Republic square and the avenue leading to it was renamed Revolution Avenue. The main train station (formerly Franz Joseph) became the Wilson station, while the main thoroughfare, Ferdinand Avenue, became National Avenue.⁶⁸ The process of ridding all streets and sites of any Habsburg references took some time, however. Some barracks in Prague only relinquished their dynastic appellations in 1920.⁶⁹ Municipal authorities were instructed

⁶⁴ *Vinohradské listy*, May 4, 1919, 2; *Vinohradské listy*, June 30, 1919, 3.

⁶⁵ *Národní listy*, December 4, 1919, 5; *Vinohradské listy*, August 24, 1919, 2.

⁶⁶ *Národní politika*, October 29, 1918, 2.

⁶⁷ *Národní listy*, October 29, 1918 (evg ed.), 1.

⁶⁸ Václav Ledvinka, “Die Namen von Prager öffentlichen Räumen als Spiegelung des Wandels der politischen Realität im 20. Jahrhundert,” in Rudolf Jaworski, and Peter Stachel (eds.), *Die Besetzung des öffentlichen Raumes: politische Plätze, Denkmäler und Straßennamen im europäischen Vergleich* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2007), 338.

⁶⁹ Ministry of National Defence to Interior Ministry, NA, MV I SR, ka 279, sig. 12/427/14, no. 33326, June 2, 1920.

by the interim Mayor in 1919 to remove emblems and signs with a reference to the monarchy, a task that was not always simple without damaging buildings.⁷⁰

The visual political transformation of urban space happened through the removal of monuments and the creation of new temporary ones. The statue of Marshall Radetzky, which had been the site of patriotic demonstrations in August 1914, was first veiled in 1919 and later transported. Similarly, the equestrian statue of Emperor Francis I on the Vltava was taken away in June 1919.⁷¹ Little “trees of freedom” were planted in the city, generating small civic ceremonies following the French revolutionary fashion. The Slavic linden tree on Wenceslas Square, adorned with many small flags, had become a rallying point during the street demonstrations on October 28. In June 1919, another “linden tree of freedom” was planted in the courtyard of the army barracks at Pohořelec. The festivities organized on this occasion by an army regiment included a procession, a reception, and dancing.⁷² Two of these “trees of freedom” were planted in parks in the suburbs of Karlín and Král. Vinohrady in the spring of 1919.⁷³

Habsburg statues were obvious targets for the official purging of the imperial past from urban space, but the battle on the street extended to Catholic symbols, such as statues of Counter-Reformation saints. To fully exit the three-hundred-year “darkness,” the nation needed to repair the defeat of the White Mountain in 1620. As Czech nobles then had been executed on Old Town Square, it was on that square that the reconnection with Czech historical continuity had to take place. Following a celebration of the Battle of White Mountain on November 7, 1918, a crowd destroyed the Marian column on the square, a baroque monument associated with the Counter-Reformation.⁷⁴ Beyond this violent act, the marginalization of the Catholic Church on that square was also visible through the transformation of the Church of Saint Nicholas, the baroque church which had been turned into a garrison church during the war, into the main building of the new Czechoslovak Church in 1920. By September of that year, the new national church already counted 50,000 faithful in Prague. All over the city and the suburbs, they held recruitment meetings and Czech-language masses on

⁷⁰ Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen*, 98–99.

⁷¹ *Národní politika*, June 3, 1919, 3.

⁷² Invitation, AHMP, MHMP I, Presidium, ka 889, sig. 80/2, no. 1461(?), May 31, 1919.

⁷³ *Národní listy*, May 5, 1919, 2 and October 25, 1919, 5.

⁷⁴ Cynthia Paces, *Prague Panoramas: National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 87; on the battles over Czech religious identity in Prague, see also, Wingfield, *Flag Wars*, 148–150.

public squares.⁷⁵ In Žižkov, during one such mass, the municipal council had refused to lend them a proper altar, and so they erected a simple one with a portrait of Protestant reformer Jan Hus.⁷⁶ The strong post-war anticlericalism contributed to the challenge to any form of established authority, from the Church to the former state.

Yet, beyond the grassroots purges, the establishment of authority figures by the new state revealed the impregnation of the old imperial framework. The celebrations for the return of the Republic's new president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, to Prague in December 1918 epitomized this continuity. His automobile journey from the train station to the Prague Castle was similar to a triumphal royal entry. Indeed, it closely mirrors the entries of the Belgian and Romanian kings into their capital cities in November and December 1918.⁷⁷ The military prominently featured in all these celebrations. When Masaryk arrived at the train station, he was offered bread and salt, an old Slavonic welcoming ritual. Outside, Masaryk was supposed to ride in the imperial carriage drawn by two pairs of white horses and decorated with blue and white lilacs and red roses. However, he preferred to use an automobile (also decorated with flowers and wreaths) and left the carriage to his family. Masaryk himself might have felt that this mode of transportation was not republican enough, but the event's organizers had clearly prepared the procession according to the old customs.⁷⁸ The event drew enormous crowds in the city; not only were buildings decorated with white and red flags of all sizes, but also with portraits of Masaryk and Wilson. A banner "Long live little father Masaryk!" was also visible. Members of various national associations, political organizations, and of the different clergies lined both sides of the city's main streets. School children were mandated to attend the ceremony, and all the church bells rang out.⁷⁹ The ceremony underlined the direct link between the people and the president, as crowds saluted Masaryk with hats and handkerchiefs or songs. Numerous letters sent to the Police Headquarters warned of a potential assassination attempt against the returning "savior."⁸⁰ The president's

⁷⁵ Situation report, Regional political administration NA, PM 1911–1920, ka 5114, sig. 8/1/92/19, September 2, 1920.

⁷⁶ For a mass on July 11, 1920, AHMP, FÚ u sv. Prokopa Praha – Žižkov, Pamětní kniha 1911–1943, 78.

⁷⁷ Demiaux, "La Construction rituelle de la victoire," 182–196.

⁷⁸ *Návrat presidenta Masaryka do vlasti* (Prague: Minařík, 1920), 176–191.

⁷⁹ "Slavnostní uvítání presidenta Československé republiky," NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 2931, sig. 13/7, undated.

⁸⁰ Letter from Otokar Š, NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 2931, sig. 13/7, December 15, 1918. Other letters to be found in the same folder.

itinerary through Prague, giving a speech in Parliament, meeting municipal authorities at the Town Hall before making his way to the castle, resembled that of the Belgian king in Brussels, with no clear equivalent among democratically elected leaders.

Imperial habits still infused the official and public relationship to the new president. The official portrayal of Masaryk as a benevolent father figure borrowed many elements from the representation of Franz Joseph and contributed to a sense of continuity.⁸¹ His birthday, as had been the case of the Emperor, was celebrated as a national holiday: all official buildings in Prague had to be decorated with flags, and offices closed.⁸² Insults against the president were taken by the police as seriously as lese-majesty crimes in the former Empire. A woman was, for example, arrested for “impertinent statement about the president” as a deputation of women approached Masaryk in August 1919.⁸³ In another case, a journalist was denounced by a bank clerk for having insulted the president in a bar at 4 a.m. during a lively discussion on political issues.⁸⁴ These were minor offenses, but they show how the new ruler could be viewed by the authorities and – to some extent – by the population through the lens of the old monarchy’s political culture.

Masaryk elected the Prague Castle as seat of his presidency. Even before the building’s renovation works, which meant to turn a royal symbol into an embodiment of modern democracy, this move shifted the geography of power in the city.⁸⁵ The sleepy neighborhoods of Hradčany and Malá Strana with their baroque palaces suddenly became sites of bustling government activity. On the day after the regime change, the official journal had already noted the incongruity of the “old and pensive aristocratic palaces” decorated with Czech flags.⁸⁶ Soon the aristocratic mansions were rented out or commandeered to host new ministerial offices. Near the Castle, the Ministry of foreign affairs took over the

⁸¹ Andrea Orzoff, “The Husbandman: Tomáš Masaryk’s Leader Cult in Interwar Czechoslovakia,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 39 (2008): 121–137.

⁸² NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 2931, sig F 13/11, memorandum from March 4, 1920; Dagmar Hajková, “‘Dokud člověk ji klobásy, tak neumře.’ Oslavy narozenin T. G. Masaryka,” in Dagmar Hájková, Velek Luboš, et al. (eds.), *Historik nad šachovnicí dějin. K pětasedmdesátinám Jana Galandauera* (Prague, 2011), 218–235.

⁸³ *Souhrnná týdenní hlášení*, 87.

⁸⁴ Daily police report, NA, PMV, ka 179, sig. N, no. 297, March 21, 1920.

⁸⁵ Bruce Berglund, *Castle and Cathedral in Modern Prague: Longing for the Sacred in a Skeptical Age* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2017).

⁸⁶ *Pražské noviny*, October 30, 1918, 1; on the Bohemian aristocracy, see Eagle Glassheim, *Noble Nationalists: The Transformation of the Bohemian Aristocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Toskánský palace on Hradčany square, which formerly belonged to the Habsburgs, and the Ministry of Education found offices in the Nostitz palace. The left bank of the Vltava concentrated many of the Republic's buildings. The former cadet school housed the Ministry of Justice and other administrations and the Kolowrat palace the Minister council. The revolutionary assembly's first session took place on November 14, 1918 at the Thun palace, seat of the former Diet, before moving to the Rudolfinum on the other riverbank. In the Straka Academy, a monumental building on the river, several institutions found a home including the Ministry of Food Supply. A letter of an employee from the Ministry describes the "turmoil" when the Red Cross hospital "was kicked out immediately in November 1918" as the management was "crying in the corridors."⁸⁷ A few aristocratic mansions were also used in the Old and New Towns. The National Committee occupied the Harrach palace in Jindřišská Street near Wenceslas Square from October 31 to November 9, 1918, while the Ministry of Finance oversaw the development of a new currency from the monumental Clam-Gallas palace in the Old Town (Figure 6.2).⁸⁸

The presence of these new offices gave a renewed sense of activity to these neighborhoods. The tramway line up to the castle was constantly crowded. Petitioners came to visit the different ministries to plead their causes. Among the busiest ones was the Defense Ministry, which at the time occupied one of the wings in the castle, and where a constant queue of visitors came to ask about spousal support or invalid pensions. The offices were full of people waiting to be received and the telephones never stopped ringing.⁸⁹ Whereas the Governor's Office was the only central administrative presence in Prague up until then, the new democratic regime generated expectations of more direct access to government services among the public. Placing ministerial offices in aristocratic mansions was not only a way of giving prestige to the new Republican institutions through the magnificence of their buildings, it also placed them firmly on the city map and helped revive and reclaim certain areas. The fact that citizens regularly came to visit these offices also made baroque Prague more accessible than during the previous period.⁹⁰ Journalist Richard Weiner in his reportage "Fringes of

⁸⁷ Letter from Bedřich J, NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 3077, sig. P 56/1, April 6, 1919.

⁸⁸ František Stehlík, *Stehlíkův historický a orientační průvodce ulicemi hlavního města Prahy* (Prague: Stehlík, 1929), 112.

⁸⁹ *Národní politika*, February 24, 1919 (afternoon ed.), 2.

⁹⁰ On administrations occupying aristocratic mansions in the French Revolution, see Ralph Kingston, "The Bricks and Mortar of Revolutionary Administration," *French History*, 20, no. 4 (2006): 405–423.



Figure 6.2 Entrance of the Clam-Gallas palace (Finance Ministry), ca. 1920
 Source: AHMP, *Sbirka fotografií, sign. I 8313*

historical days” (*Třásníčky dějinných dnů*) conveys the novel sensation of walking around the Castle and feeling legitimate to do so as a Republican citizen. The aristocratic palaces transformed into ministries “opened their gates, let air in through their windows, the once locked rooms and

corridors resonate with the comings and goings of people, the ringing of telephones, and the clatter of typewriters.”⁹¹

Yet, the interactions of the public with civil servants also revealed a deep dissatisfaction with the idealized new state. Many complained about the inefficiency of the overburdened public bureaucracy. A military report noted: “In the offices, there is complaint of drawn-out procedures; favoritism everywhere; influence at the ministries is paid by political affiliation.” “Everyone vents ‘worse than under Austria’ almost as a reflex.”⁹² New buildings and democratic principles raised the hopes of direct access to the state, which were disappointed. Concretely, state agents had not changed much in the Republic. To ensure good government functioning, the provisional government kept most civil servants in their jobs. The top hierarchy (such as the Prague police chief) was removed, but in the overwhelming majority in the postwar years, the police officers, army officers, and government clerks the public encountered had been working in the old regime.⁹³

Complaints about the “Austrian” bureaucracy highlighted the discrepancy between the narratives of state renewal and the reality of navigating everyday administrative procedures. It was most obvious for the legionaries who progressively made their way back to Prague at the time. Officially feted as heroes having fought for the newly won independence, they actually struggled to find employment, even in public jobs. Despite a 1919 law that was supposed to guarantee them preferential treatment to enter the administration (allocating them 50 percent of available positions), the existing bureaucracy was slow to integrate them.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Richard Weiner, *Třásničky dějinných dnů* (Brno: Polygrafie, 1919), 20–21.

⁹² Situation report on Prague, Military regional command, NA, PM 1911–1920, ka 5114, sig. 8/1/92/19, no. 44847, December 18, 1919.

⁹³ On institutional continuity, see Ivan Šedivý, “K otázce kontinuity nositelů státní moci: jmenování vedoucích úředníků v kompetenci ministerstva vnitra v letech 1918–1921,” in Jan Hájek, Dagmar Hájková, et al. (eds.), *Moc, vliv a autorita v procesu vzniku a utváření meziválečné ČSR (1918–1921)* (Prague: Masarykův ústav, 2008), 184–197; on bureaucracy in the transition: Peter Becker et al. (eds.), *Hofratsdämmerung? Verwaltung und ihr Personal in den Nachfolgestaaten der Habsburgermonarchie 1918 bis 1920* (Vienna: Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, 2020); on the police: Samuel Ronsin, “Police, Republic and Nation: The Czechoslovak State Police and the Building of a Multinational Democracy, 1918–1925,” in Gerald Blaney (ed.), *Policing Interwar Europe: Continuity and Crisis, 1918–1940* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 136–158.

⁹⁴ Ivan Šedivý, “Legionářská Republika?: k systému legionářského zákonodárství a sociální péče v meziválečné ČSR,” *Historie a vojenství*, 1 (2002): 158–184; on legionnaires and Habsburg officers in the army, see Martin Zückert, *Zwischen Nationsidee und staatlicher Realität. Die tschechoslowakische Armee und ihre Nationalitätenpolitik, 1918–1938* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2006), 80–112; on legionnaires’ dissatisfaction with social provision, see Šustrová, “The Struggle for Respect,” 107–134.

They had come back after years of absence having dreamed of their homeland and what they saw in Prague contrasted with what they envisioned.⁹⁵ The public sided with their plight and they embodied the betrayed nation in unchanged postimperial Prague. Agents of the state were often portrayed in contrast as foreign elements who tried to pass as loyal Czechoslovak citizens. Indeed, some Czech civil servants from Viennese ministries had come back to serve the new Republic, generating some resentment among locals.⁹⁶ Cabaret plays satirized state representatives speaking a bad Czech mixed with many German words, giving the appearance of good Czechoslovaks, but under the veneer revealed as Austrians. In one of them, the Viennese wife of a ministry employee complains about the Czech patriotic parades that she must attend and a young lieutenant explains to another that he stupidly reported to his superior in German instead of Czech. At the end, a legionnaire who sat in the background voices the recurring complaint: "And that is what we fought for in faraway places?"⁹⁷ The rightful legionnaire standing for the nation can only watch and point the deficiencies of the new Czechoslovakia.

Attacks on the continuity of personnel also aimed to denounce the continuity of undemocratic state practices. Certain liberties, such as the freedom of assembly or of the press, were still limited despite the democratic ambitions of Czechoslovakia.⁹⁸ A small demonstration in May 1919 saw 120 cinemagoers head out of the movie theater Konvikt to the nearby police headquarters to complain about ill-advised cuts in a film. An American propaganda film denouncing Wilhelm II's crimes in the war had some scenes cut by an overzealous censorship officer. During the projection, the audience booed, shouting: "Shame on the censorship! We want Czech censorship!"⁹⁹ This incident illustrated a state apparatus ignoring the new Republican principles. German-speaking newspapers also criticized Czechoslovakia for being too much like old Austria. For example, censorship of the private post, which continued in the postwar period, was denounced by *Prager Tagblatt* as readers had found their letters opened with the mention "censored" on the envelope.¹⁰⁰ Social

⁹⁵ A sentiment common to many veterans, see Bruno Cabanes, and Guillaume Piketty (eds.), *Retour à l'intime: au sortir de la guerre* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009), Introduction.

⁹⁶ Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře první republiky (1918–1938)* (Prague: Libri, 2000), I, 156.

⁹⁷ Jiří Červený, Rudolf Jílowský, *Kapky jedu* (Prague: Josef Springer, 1919), 12.

⁹⁸ See Peter Bugge, "Czech Democracy 1918–1938: Paragon or Parody?," *Bohemia*, 47 (2006/07), 3–28.

⁹⁹ Daily police report, NA, PMV, ka 179, sig. N, 1919, no. 133, May 13, 1919.

¹⁰⁰ Censored letters from the period of the new Republic in NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 3077, sig. P 56/1; on the *Prager Tagblatt* (June 11, 1920), no. 328, June 24, 1920.

Democrats complained about the censorship of the press and deemed it, after the confiscation of an issue of *Sociální Democrat*, “worse than under Austria.”¹⁰¹

The frustrations of the population faced with the lack of visible change were expressed through the use of the adjective “Austrian.” It referred to any behavior that was seen as restraining individual freedom, contravening to democratic impulses or tolerating profiteering. Its use varied according to individuals’ conception of what the Republic should feel like. A young man who was brusquely pushed aside by an officer in a theater cried: “Don’t push me!” and told him loudly: “Do you know how you behaved? Like an Austrian corporal.” This remark caused a stir among the people present who split into two camps, one for and one against, debating the incident.¹⁰² In many cases, any attempt at authority was resented and seen as part of the old value system, which made the work of the police uneasy. In another example, two drunken soldiers who had been breaking windows and threatening clients in a pub insulted the policeman who was trying to stop them calling him an “Austrian murderer.”¹⁰³ “Austrian” thus became a popular insult, symbolizing both the desire for distance from the old regime and its persistence in the new order. Ferdinand Peroutka pointed to the increasing misuse of the concept of “Austrianity” (*rakušáctví*) as an insult in public life, citing the example of a deputy who, in Parliament, accused Alois Rašín (one of the men of the October 28 coup) of “Austrianity.”¹⁰⁴

The new postwar Prague was supposed to be Republican and it was also supposed to be the unchallenged capital of peaceful Czechoslovakia. Yet, there too, the continuities with wartime were glaring. The new state had to fight to secure its borders and Prague soon felt like a home front city again.¹⁰⁵ Many of the soldiers and Sokol volunteers who gathered in the weeks after the regime change in Prague then enlisted to go to German-speaking borderlands or Slovakia.¹⁰⁶ With men still fighting and dying there, the war was far from over for Prague’s inhabitants. Volunteers were departing from the city’s main train stations accompanied by crowds, as troops had been during the

¹⁰¹ *Tydenní kronika*, August 14, 1919, 4.

¹⁰² Daily police report, y, NA, PMV, ka 179, sig. N, 1920, no. 106, April 15, 1920.

¹⁰³ Daily police report, NA, PMV, ka 179, sig. N, 1919, no. 159, June 8, 1919.

¹⁰⁴ Ferdinand Peroutka, *Budování státu* (Prague: Lidové noviny, 1991), II, 952.

¹⁰⁵ Martin Zückert, “National Concepts of Freedom and Government Pacification Policies: The Case of Czechoslovakia in the Transitional Period after 1918,” *Contemporary European History*, 17, no. 03 (2008): 325–344; Kučera, “Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat,” 827–855.

¹⁰⁶ See the testimonies in NA, SP, ka 74.

war. In June 1919, for example, a group of 150 Sokols volunteering to go to Slovakia were cheered by “enormous groups of people” on their way to the Masaryk station.¹⁰⁷ Alarming false rumors of defeat circulated on the situation in the East.¹⁰⁸ Refugees from Slovakia were met by the association *České srdce* at the train stations and were eligible to receive state support, as refugees from Galicia had been during the war.¹⁰⁹ The charity programs for the benefit of soldiers and their widows continued even though they were renamed as for the benefit of “legionnaires.” As early as November 3, the National Theatre advertised its performances as “for the benefit of the bereaved families of legionnaires,” extending the wartime functions of entertainment.¹¹⁰ Similarly, the religious service celebrated in St. Vitus Cathedral for the deceased soldiers simply became a memorial mass for deceased Czech legionnaires.¹¹¹ Moreover, the new Czechoslovak state also appealed for war loans to save the finances of the new state, thus continuing Austrian policy in this realm as well.¹¹²

The ongoing peace negotiations left much uncertainty over the borders of the new state. Prague residents were aware that their city was a showcase for Czech credibility on the international stage. Numerous demonstrations for the incorporation of the duchy of Teschen (Těšín/Cieszyn) showed citizens attempting to play an active role in the redrawing of maps.¹¹³ This small territory in Silesia, particularly significant because of its coal mines, was disputed between Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Mayor of Prague, writing to the Peace Conference, emphasized the “nocturnal meetings to demonstrate publicly and loudly against this mutilation of Czechoslovak territory” and how it was perceived as a slight from the Allies and poor reward for their wartime support of the Entente, echoing the wartime language of sacrifice.¹¹⁴

Prague’s elevation to the status of capital city involved a projection both internally, for the rest of the country, and internationally. The

¹⁰⁷ Deposition from a policeman, NA, PP 1916-1920, ka 3039, sig. M 34/67, June 6, 1919.

¹⁰⁸ NA, PP 1916-1920, ka 3039, sig. M 34/67, no. 6007, June 15, 1919.

¹⁰⁹ NA, PP 1916-1920, ka 3025, sig. M 34/1/III.

¹¹⁰ *Věstník obecní král. hláv. města Prahy*, XXI, November 14, 1918, 307.

¹¹¹ See an invitation by the Archbishop’s consistory with the crossed out mention “warriors fallen in the present war” replaced by “Czech legionnaire soldiers”: NA, APA III, ka 1298, no. 15733, November 16, 1918.

¹¹² *Národní listy*, September 11, 1919, 1.

¹¹³ For example, by metal workers, *Souhrnná týdenní hlášení*, 35.

¹¹⁴ Letter from Mayor Baxa to the Secretary General of the Peace Conference, NAL, FO 608/6, 310-311, September 1, 1919; on the issue’s resolution, see Isabelle Davion, “Teschen and Its Impossible Plebiscite: Can the Genie Be Put Back in the Bottle?,” in *Beyond Versailles*, 38-58.

city had to definitively relinquish its provincial ways and enter the ranks of metropolises. In November 1918, a few days only after the independence, the most prominent suburbs (Král. Vinohrady, Žižkov, Smíchov, and Karlín) proposed to join the inner districts to form a large “Slavic Prague.” The negotiations started immediately and, in February 1920, led to a set of laws on the status of “Greater Prague” which took effect on January 1, 1922. Cubist architect Vlastislav Hofman presented his own vision of the extended city: “Greater Prague should be first a capital city, seat of the government, and secondly a democratic city. [...] Greater Prague should be forever a ‘royal’ city. Not a provincial one.”¹¹⁵ Greater Prague was also a means to an end in building a metropolis, as Mayor Karel Baxa noted: the city needed larger loans to be able to provide the basic urban infrastructure services such as water, light, and public transportation, that “make the metropolis.”¹¹⁶ Moreover, the war had highlighted all the deleterious consequences of disunion and separate rules in the domain of food supply.¹¹⁷ Before the formal unification of the city, the disappearance of the tax on food coming into the inner city in January 1921 already marked a step in erasing the border between the center and the suburbs. As Eduard Bass noted, with its little booths or even houses on main streets and uniformed border guards checking luggage: “the food line was a border, who lived inside was a real, hallmarked Prager, who lived outside was only Mister Anyone. Even suburban residents felt this distinction instinctively and still today if a Karlín resident has to go through the museum park for some shopping on Poříč avenue, he says quite earnestly that he ‘goes to the city.’”¹¹⁸ Greater Prague thus transformed the sense of place of Praguers with some nostalgia, for some, for the old Prague.

Postwar Prague still looked a lot like wartime Prague. Passing through the streets, the observer was likely to be struck by the continuation of wartime practices and the elements of continuity with the old regime, whose institutions, personnel, and habits could not be erased as easily as street names. Behind the façade of the great new capital city, laid the reality of the fundamental instability of these years, which shone through in the uncertain economic situation of most residents.

¹¹⁵ *Venkov*, March 1, 1919, NA, MZV VA, ka 1696, sig. 11g.

¹¹⁶ *Národní politika*, November 26, 1920, 4.

¹¹⁷ On the role of food supply in the making of Greater Budapest, see Károly Ignác, “The Emergence of the Outskirts of Budapest as a New Administrative District through the Organization of the Food Supply, 1917–1919,” *Südost-forschungen* 79 (2020): 71–95.

¹¹⁸ Written in 1921, Eduard Bass, *Potulky pražského reportera* (Prague: Otto, 1929), 87.

Social Uncertainty: Conspicuous Opulence amidst Plain Squalor

The enthusiasm for the new state, the parades, and celebrations could not mask the difficult material conditions in the new Republic. The social consequences of the war continued to be felt in the streets of Prague long after October 28, even if in a less pronounced form than in other Central European capital cities. Less than two months after the regime change, a crowd already complained in front of the town hall in Žižkov that “the food supply conditions did not change in the new state.”¹¹⁹ Months passed and the arrival of allied help was uncertain. As the American Relief Administration noticed, “almost since the day of the revolution [...] they had been expecting food from the Allies.” By the end of February 1919, there was “considerable criticism of Americans and the Allies because it is said Vienna is being supplied while food does not reach here.”¹²⁰ Rumors circulated in the city: “France is sending us generals but no food.”¹²¹ Contrary to the official dates of Republican celebrations, there was no known end date for wartime economic conditions.

The slow currency transition materially symbolized continued inflation and unsustainable prices. A rumor around October 1918 had made Prague residents believe that Czechoslovak money had been printed in Paris and would arrive immediately after the regime change. In fact, old Austro-Hungarian banknotes continued to circulate for a year with a red mark added to them. The process of getting the banknotes stamped was deemed “complicated” by a priest who described long “queues” and “disorganization” in Smíchov, as well as poor information to the public.¹²² The deadline to have notes stamped was also short. The banknotes were nicknamed “dysentery” for the facility with which they went from hand to hand at a time of great inflation, comparable with the spread of this disease at the time.¹²³ Paper money was not as valuable as postage stamps, as it could easily be counterfeited. An American observer noted: “No modern arcade in Prague would be complete without a postage stamp dealer. [...] Counterfeit money, however, does not seem to bother anyone, the holder least of all; [...] No one seems to have the slightest respect for money. Your waiter makes change in the same way that the stage hands in the small-town opera house used to make a

¹¹⁹ Deposition from Zdenka J, December 13, 1918, NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 2931, sig. F 13/7.

¹²⁰ “Report of Prague mission,” 9, HILA, ARA, EOR, Box 342, Folder 5.

¹²¹ Article by Eugène Besteaux published in *Národní listy*, April 21, 1919, HILA, ARA, EOR, Box 341, Folder 1.

¹²² AHMP, FÚ u kostela sv. Vavřince Praha – Jinonice, Pamětní kniha, 162.

¹²³ *Vínohradské listy*, October 12, 1919, 3.

snowstorm, dropping one piece of paper after another.”¹²⁴ At least one billion fraudulently stamped notes were introduced in Czechoslovakia between February and November 1919 according to an estimate.¹²⁵ The division of the Austro-Hungarian crown into different national currencies (when every successor state stamped the banknotes circulating on its territory) generated a situation ripe for traffic, speculation, and counterfeiting.¹²⁶ By mid-1921, the Czechoslovak state dismantled a Hungarian counterfeiting network that had introduced so many fake bills that the government was forced to pull out of circulation an entire series of 500 crowns notes with a Sokol design.¹²⁷ Counterfeiting, other than undermining state stability, added to the social uncertainty of the postwar years as the money one used on a daily basis had become unreliable: notes could be forged or turn worthless and were best spent quickly. In the gallery of social enemies, wartime profiteers were followed by currency speculators who took advantage of the rapidly evolving exchange rates between the new currencies. Their flourishing activities were visible in the streetscape as many banks and bureaux de change offered generous buyouts to struggling businesses. As Eduard Bass recalled: “after the regime change, a tornado struck Prague cafés, they fell one after the other, and were replaced by all sorts of little banks, changing booths, travel agencies and mainly export-import societies.”¹²⁸

As quick fortunes were made, a new form of nightlife appeared in the streetscape, which embodied the fears of social and moral dissolution in the new capital city. British diplomat Bruce Lockhart described the appearance of new nightclubs: “For every new bank there was a new Nachtlokal [night club] with a name as exotic as the mood of the moment. [...] Prague, however, with its sounder currency, showed the greatest transformation. When I arrived at the end of 1919, there was hardly a Nachtlokal in the place. Within a year and a half they were to be numbered by the score.” The clientele of these establishments, according to him, was a mix between the desperate “new poor” and the “new rich.” “The Prague of those early post-war years never slept.”¹²⁹ Hidden away wine bars and nightclubs cheated with the official closing time of

¹²⁴ *The National Geographic Magazine*, XXXIX, no. 2 (February 1921): 117.

¹²⁵ Reill, *The Fiume Crisis*, 95; on the experience of Fiumians with money see, 73–107.

¹²⁶ Máté Rigó, *Capitalism in Chaos: How the Business Elites of Europe Prospered in the Era of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 191–202.

¹²⁷ David Petrucci, “Banknotes from the Underground: Counterfeiting and the International Order in Interwar Europe,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 51, no. 3 (2016): 512–514.

¹²⁸ Bass, *Potulky pražského reportera*, 96.

¹²⁹ Bruce Lockhart, *Retreat from Glory [Reminiscences]* (London: Putnam, 1934), 116; 141.

11 p.m., staying open until dawn.¹³⁰ During the Sokol festival of 1920, the Prague branch compiled a list of fifty cafés and bars that they recommended to avoid, mostly located in the Old Town (18) and the New Town (18). Many of them were night cafés bearing exotic names such as “Arkadie,” “Chat noir,” “Chapeau Rouge,” or “Anglo-American Bar.”¹³¹ Night patrols kept a close watch on the streets of the New Town to check if visiting Sokols were seen in their uniforms in the wrong type of cafés.¹³² A Sokol uniform in a nightclub was a visually painful mix of the two types of postwar Prague, the ideal, healthy, national one and the shabby, inflationary, immoral one. Calls for the regulation of the number of nightclubs regularly surfaced in municipal politics. In 1920, measures were taken to limit the number of licenses for musical and singing establishments (cabarets and others).¹³³ A few years later, the Prague Mayor led a moral offensive on the number of bars in Prague, which were deemed a noxious influence and using excessive lighting.¹³⁴

The general atmosphere in Prague immediately after the war reflected a feeling of uncertainty which had come to replace the stability of the prewar order. The nightlife culture mirrored this new reality. As money lost its value, former luxuries also became new urban habits. The Prague passages, especially those which had developed around Wenceslas Square during these years with their pastry shops and beauty salons, epitomized this new form of consumption. A newspaper article described their double face in the postwar period: on the outside, they were devoted to commerce but inside, they housed the new places for entertainment. At night, large groups of “metropolitan loiterers” chose the passages for their evening promenades: “ranks of girls with short skirts and cheerful eyes and boys with most modern faces” occupied the new spaces.¹³⁵ An American social worker was shocked by the presence of numerous young women in dancing halls in the first months after the regime change. They would go there unaccompanied and, in order to look older, wear their national costumes, which ended the night in a deplorable condition.¹³⁶ National costumes stood as symbols of the pure nation defaced by the immorality of the postwar. The war had blurred the strict borders of moral female behavior. For the police, it

¹³⁰ *Vinohradské listy*, October 12, 1919, 3.

¹³¹ “Hostince, kavárny a vinárny které se nedoporučují ...,” NA, SP, ka 74, May 21, 1920.

¹³² See the reports of the patrols, NA, SP, ka 74.

¹³³ NA, MV I SR, ka 278, no. 31059, August 20, 1920.

¹³⁴ Tomáš Mozr, “The ‘Exotic’ Phenomenon of the American Bar in Interwar Berlin and Prague: Re-reading the Concept of Place,” *AUC Geographica* 54, no. 1 (2019): 100.

¹³⁵ *Národní politika*, January 2, 1920, 5.

¹³⁶ Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen*, 280.

became unclear who was a prostitute and who was not, as women walking alone became more common in the streets. The terrible cost-of-living crisis had also drawn into clandestine prostitution “respectable” women, even middle-class ones, to feed their families, eliciting greater sympathy from the police and the public.¹³⁷ Conceptions of morality, just as social positions, were in flux.

The “carnival of the post-war years” was symptomatic of the upheaval in the city’s social structures. A memo by a French man considered that the Prague lower middle classes had incurred the habit “quite new to them – of incurring debts” and observed “a sort of general demoralisation” in Bohemia: “the sight of a large portion of the population giving themselves up to pleasure – the Czech delegates recently back from Paris were very struck by the state their town is in, and have advocated the closing of restaurants at, for example, 10 pm.”¹³⁸ Inflation did not only bring impoverishment, but also general despondency on the values of society. The war had subverted the social hierarchies on which the Habsburg Empire had been resting. The librarian of the German university commented on the breakdown of material circumstances: “The responsibility for this lies with the unscrupulous profiteers who provoked the still prevailing inflation by abusing the unfavorable circumstances during and after the war. Those with set salaries in particular [...] became the victims of these hyenas.”¹³⁹ Civil servants, who had been one of the pillars of the Empire, were particularly hit by inflation. During a rally of state employees in October 1919, a speaker outlined their situation, insisting on the exterior signs of bourgeois behavior that were not accessible to them anymore: they had disappeared from theaters and concert halls, and pensioners had to find new jobs to support themselves. “The esteemed court councilor applies for a position as musician in a cinema! We cannot clothe ourselves, our families do not have anything to wear and around us, we see nouveaux riches and profiteers spend lavishly,” lamented the speaker.¹⁴⁰ The middle classes were not more severely hit by the food crisis than the working classes, but inflation transformed their relation to the bourgeois urban pleasures, which they could not afford anymore and begrudged others enjoying them.

The loss of status of the bourgeoisie generated resentment against profiteers who embodied the inversion of prewar values. Caricatures and

¹³⁷ Wingfield, *The World of Prostitution*, 236.

¹³⁸ “The situation in Bohemia and the transport question,” February 21, 1919, NAL, FO 608/5/18.

¹³⁹ Richard Kukula, *Erinnerungen eines Bibliothekars* (Weimar: Verlag Straubing & Müller, 1925), 226.

¹⁴⁰ *Národní listy*, November 3, 1919, 4.

satire were a form of social revenge for the newly impoverished middle class.¹⁴¹ For example, the owner of the café Arco near the Masaryk train station posted on the walls of his café a set of twenty-three rules for the “wartime and post-war nouveaux riches (*zbohatlíky*)” who did not know how to behave properly in his establishment.¹⁴² Patrons were, for example, not supposed to tear off pages from newspapers or cut their nails in public. Mocking the profiteers’ quest for respectability made it possible to maintain some of society’s former barriers. The weekly newspaper *Lucerna* remarked on the growing number of advertisements for courses on how to behave, keep a home, and get the required education to be presentable.¹⁴³ A satirical guide of good manners mocked the profiteers’ taste for luxury items of clothing, furniture, and food. One of the “rules” for example, indicated that it was poor manners to eat fruit on the street, except for the “precious kinds” such as “foreign cherries or Italian apricots,” revealing the objects of envy in postwar Prague.¹⁴⁴ One of the most derided aspects of the “nouveaux riches” was the ostentatiousness of their wealth, conspicuous on city streets, at a moment of great precarity for the majority.

Conspicuous consumption was chased even in private homes, where the sight of any luxury object was suspicious, and the potential sign of profiteering activity. A member of the housing office in Král. Vinohrady, also columnist at the leftist newspaper *Rudé právo*, reported a man whose large flat contained many precious items of dubious origin: silverware, tobacco boxes, and chandeliers. The man had a taste for antiques and had acquired some of them against sugar or soap from noble families during the war. He was shocked that his flat could be the object of such an inspection.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, a woman in Král. Vinohrady involved in trafficking with Italy was reported in the press as suspicious based on her lifestyle: her modern car and “her flat, wonderfully furnished with real ‘profiteer’ luxury.”¹⁴⁶ Set social divisions were disrupted as the nouveaux riches took on the old bourgeoisie’s outward signs of wealth and even the interiors’ furnishings. As memoirist Marie Schäferová deplored: “How many beautiful things moved from old bourgeois homes to the newly furnished apartments of these nouveaux riches who soon did not know what to do with their money as everyone gave everything

¹⁴¹ Martin H. Geyer, *Verkehrte Welt: Revolution, Inflation und Moderne, München 1914–1924* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 243.

¹⁴² See AHMP, Jiří Vlasák, *Inventář Kavárna Arco*, no. 529, (Prague: AHMP, 2011), 1.

¹⁴³ *Lucerna*, January 24, 1918, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Josef Skružný, *Bon ton pro válečné zbohatlíky* (Prague: Jos. Vilímek, 1924), 14.

¹⁴⁵ NA, MV I SR ka 279, sig. 12/384/74, 83611, November 16, 1920.

¹⁴⁶ *Právo lidu*, May 13, 1920, NA, PMV, ka 60, sig. V, B 45, 11484.

they had for food.”¹⁴⁷ Although the interwar period, and the stabilization that went with it, was marked by the reinforcement of the role of traditional elites, the impact of the years of social flux should not be underestimated.

The impression of abundance given by the life of nightclubs and restaurants was an illusion. American journalist Kenneth Roberts was more aware than other visitors of the deceptive external appearance of cities: “All the capitals of Central Europe, in spite of their misery, look normal. Berlin, Warsaw, Vienna, Prague, Budapest – all of them are big, roaring, magnificent cities with crowded streets and honking taxicabs and shops and cabarets and theaters.”¹⁴⁸ Scratching beyond the surface, however, he soon realized the true reality of the conditions: people, including state employees, spent most of their income on food, and could not afford to wear underclothes anymore. In the context of postwar scarcity, normal buildings’ façades hid terrible housing conditions, dark kitchens, overcrowded rooms, and apartments deprived of any modern comfort. The war had complicated access to fuel or water, delayed repairs, and even made maintaining a clean home more difficult.¹⁴⁹ The university building on Celetná Street, for example, had “a very handsome” baroque façade, “but only the façade.” Inside, one passed a dirty courtyard full of rubbish to reach the dark and musty rooms with no windows of university offices: “this is what the proud center of our science looks like.”¹⁵⁰ Another article lamented the dilapidated state of the Academic Home, the official student club. The refectory was so full that it could only be visited “with your own supply of fresh air.”¹⁵¹ The deplorable conditions of housing and feeding of students, the future of the nation, were a symbol for the threatened status of the country.

Others voices felt that the lingering signs of wartime squalor in the streetscape were harmful to the standing of Prague as a metropolis. Begging in the main squares and streets “defame[d] the metropolitan appearance of the seat of government, highest administrations, and envoys of foreign countries.”¹⁵² Uncleared streets after melted snow gave “the impression to have ended up in some remote Polish nest and you cannot believe that you are moving along the pavement of the Czechoslovak capital.”¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ AHMP, Marie Schäferová, ka 1, inv. č. 5, 17.

¹⁴⁸ Kenneth Lewis Roberts, *Europe's Morning After* (New York & London: Harper & Bros., 1921), 69.

¹⁴⁹ Michèle Harrison, “At Home in Prague: Representations of Home in the Czechoslovakian Interwar” (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2013), 132.

¹⁵⁰ Bass, *Potulky*, 110–112. Written in 1921.

¹⁵¹ *Šibeníčky*, 2, no. 5, May 29, 1919, 34.

¹⁵² *Národní politika*, January 4, 1919, 4.

¹⁵³ *Národní politika*, February 18, 1919, 3.

Finally, the complete dysfunction of the tramway system worsened the housing shortage and meant that Prague was not a metropolis.¹⁵⁴ Transportation difficulties highlighted the discrepancy with the ideal representations of a forward-looking modern state. A military report noted a “very big discontent against the railway management due to the disorganization and great delays of trains, which are absolutely not lighted or heated.”¹⁵⁵ The continued diminished urban experience damaged the image of the new state and participated in the disillusionment of the post-war years.

What Revolution?

Theoretically, after October 28, 1918, the revolution was over. Although the word most commonly used to refer to the regime change, “převrat” (overthrow), indicated a less radical change, the official discourse considered 1918 as a revolution. Masaryk and Beneš, the main actors of the National Council abroad, viewed the destruction of the Habsburg Empire as a national “revolution.”¹⁵⁶ Moreover, the Paris peace conference gave specific legitimacy to the Czechoslovak type of revolution. In recognizing the country as its ideal new nation-state, it established a blueprint for the democratic national revolution.¹⁵⁷ This official revolution was, however, paradoxical as it insisted on continuity. The National Council had argued that the establishment of Czechoslovakia was not a creation *ex nihilo*, but rather a reinstatement of Czech statehood after three centuries.¹⁵⁸ If the revolution was achieved and had consisted in national restoration, what was supposed to change in the new state? An exhibition held at the Municipal House from October to December 1919 exposed the new values of the revolution to the population. The “life of the revolution,” according to the catalogue, consisted in a dual process of destruction of old ways and thoughts, and creation of new ones. The transformation was in its infancy, but the legionnaire stood as a model, a hero and a martyr.¹⁵⁹ His odyssey in Siberia was depicted in paintings

¹⁵⁴ *Prager Tagblatt*, October 10, 1920, 2.

¹⁵⁵ NA, PM 1911–1920, ka 5114, sig. 8/1/92/19, no. 967, January 9, 1920; On the importance of railways in shaping popular conceptions of national space, see Felix Jeschke, *Iron Landscapes: National Space and the Railways in Interwar Czechoslovakia* (New York: Berghahn, 2021).

¹⁵⁶ As per the titles of their memoirs, see Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle*, 53; see also the collection, *Naše revoluce* (Prague: Nákladem Čsl. obce legionářské, 1923–1937), 14 vol.

¹⁵⁷ Leonard Smith, *Sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 199.

¹⁵⁸ Wheatley, *The Life and Death of States*, 181–216.

¹⁵⁹ *Náš odboj. Turné vystavy ‘Památníku odboje’* (Prague: odd. MNO, 1920), 8.

and statues by legionnaire artists. Newspaper *Národní listy* praised these artistic works and remarked: “in this respect our revolution is unique.”¹⁶⁰ This official presentation of the revolution interpreted it as an event both accomplished and to be perfected through an internal transformation.

Josef Žemla, the journalist who wrote an immediate account of the mobilization days in Prague, also wrote in early November 1918 a short essay about the advent of the Republic to make sense of these early days. He described the enthusiasm of independence and the suddenness of the upheaval: “all of that went through our mind as we walked through the streets, crowned with flags in our colors.” He also recorded the potential confusion generated by regime change: “in the first moments we did not understand what it all meant even though we were very much eyewitnesses of it.” “Because what comes in the future is for us, used to the century-old order, something wholly novel, it is no wonder that the representations of what will come are not completely clear.” His pamphlet emphasized the open-endedness of the times and aimed to clarify a few concepts. He distinguished the idea of revolution from blood and violence and defined it as a political change “caused by the collapse of a previous apparatus that had already become too obsolete [...]. We also had a revolution.”¹⁶¹ Here again, the revolution was presented as over a few days after October 28.

Yet, on the streets of Prague, the revolution was often yet to come. It was both wished for and feared. The regime change had only been the start of the debates on what democracy should look like.¹⁶² As a critical observer noted, “many of our compatriots fell in love so much with revolution that they wanted to turn it into some kind of permanent institution. Revolution for the sake of revolution. Revolution at any cost.”¹⁶³ Any demonstration could be viewed as the premises of a coup, and cries for a more radical republic as assisting obscure forces against the Republic. Indeed, the Republic in those days still seemed very fragile, as the attempted murder of prime minister Karel Kramář in January 1919 had shown. A letter from an ARA agent in Prague underlined the volatile atmosphere of 1919, when foreign newspapers misinterpreted any crowd movement in the city: “I suppose some day if there is a drunken brawl on one of the street corners in Prague, some Paris papers will

¹⁶⁰ *Národní listy*, November 1, 1919, 3.

¹⁶¹ Josef Žemla, *Co jest republika? Populární výklad* (Prague: V. Rytíř, 1918), 3–8.

¹⁶² On contests over the meaning of democracy in the interwar, Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1950* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁶³ Josef Holeček, *Prvé třetíletí československé republiky* (Prague: československé podniky tisk. a vydav., 1922), 16.

cry revolution. In short, if one happens to be standing on the particular street corner on which the ‘revolution’ takes place he may be somewhat impressed; if he has the misfortune of standing on the next street corner he probably will not hear of the ‘revolution’ until he reads about it in Paris newspapers.”¹⁶⁴ The revolution was not a firm political program but rather something always potentially happening amidst the numerous street protests of the period.

Correctly interpreting the meaning of these various demonstrations, evaluating their impact, and weighing their potential for violence was a difficult task for the police, let alone for the larger public. People relied on rumors to assess the mood on the street and the rumors mostly revealed the anxieties of the postwar order. War had undermined the trust in usual sources of information and authority. The information available in newspapers had become only partially reliable, alternative sources of information had become more trustworthy. Communications were also failing and transportation (within and outside the city) difficult. This context created the perfect ground for rumors of plots and revolutionary conspiracies to develop.¹⁶⁵

Some genuine social movements, as analyzed in Chapter 5, were sometimes interpreted as the darker plot of agitators and “enemies of the republic.” A leaflet calling for a demonstration on Old Town Square in March 1919 warned against “individuals” who tried with “fanatical fake promises of a socialist republic to bring about a regime change here. [...] They actually work for the renewal of the old monarchy.”¹⁶⁶ The September 1919 demonstrations of the Hussite women, for example, were accused of being manipulated by monarchists to discredit the new regime and restore the monarchy. Bohemian aristocrats were even interrogated as part of the police investigation into the demonstration.¹⁶⁷ Although monarchist restoration attempts were a real threat in East Central Europe after the war, the authorities in Prague seemed to have overestimated their capacity to generate a popular movement.¹⁶⁸ Press commentaries evinced fear of the repercussions of the demonstration on the Republic’s image abroad, especially while the treaties were still being negotiated. The French press, for example, reported on “incidents

¹⁶⁴ HILA, ARA, EOR Box 341, Folder 4, Unsigned letter from Prague to Lewis Strauss, April 18, 1919.

¹⁶⁵ On rumour, see Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence*, 79–119.

¹⁶⁶ Leaflet, NA, PM 1911–1920, ka 5043, sig. 8/1/90/32, no. 8498/19, March 15, 1919.

¹⁶⁷ Deposition by Erwein Nostitz, NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 2919, sig. D 6/11, September 8, 1919.

¹⁶⁸ See Timothy Snyder, *The Red Prince: The Secret Lives of a Habsburg Archduke* (New York, 2008), 121–148.

in Prague” of a certain gravity, and that the coup’s instigators hoped to create pogroms to “discredit the Republic [and] ... proceed to an anti-democratic coup.”¹⁶⁹ In this vision, everything was mixed: socialists could be the puppets of monarchists, crowds could act against the people. The revolution was something external, imposed by foreign agents who were manipulating the masses.

The most elaborate conspiracy theories concerned German-speakers who were suspected of plotting for a restoration or a coup against the republic. The military reported in March 1919 a series of secret meetings in Prague by German-speakers of all social classes, but especially former Habsburg officers, students, and also aristocrats. The goal of these meetings, according to the report, was to foment a pogrom on themselves.¹⁷⁰ Such a meeting, held in the café Elektra, not to plot a pogrom but to protest the suspension of a German-speaking newspaper, was disrupted by a crowd of 1,000 people – a sign of the potency of the rumor.¹⁷¹ During the same period, a letter to the police called for the prevention of violence “for the general interest”: “I know from a safe source that a certain part of the legionnaires in cooperation with the ‘street’ prepare for the next days a big riot on all the Jewish and German stores, cafés, bars etc.”¹⁷² Interpretations differed on who was revolutionary or counterrevolutionary and it was not always clear who was more dangerous for the new order. The “street” was viewed as an independent entity, both unpredictable and malleable.

The perception that the republic was in danger shaped the Czechoslovak authorities’ interpretation of various social movements. Anxiety over spies and internal enemies linked the immediate postwar to the wartime period: foreigners, social protesters, and former elites could all be suspected of threatening a precarious new order. Foreign agents could be fomenters of Bolshevism or of monarchism, with Hungarians combining both threats. Military reports in 1919 and 1920 reveal similar fears of so-called agitators, but with the paradoxical notion that an overthrow of the government and the instauration of a military dictatorship would solve the issue. A report from September 1919 noted that “all sections of the civilian population are strongly dissatisfied with the government,” considered as “German-Jewish,” and too passive against high prices; there were complaints the central agencies were staffed with Germans and

¹⁶⁹ *Le Gaulois* (September 8, 1919), 3.

¹⁷⁰ Situation report in Prague, Military regional command, NA, PM 1911–1920, ka 5113, sig. 8/1/92/19, no. 8255, March 10, 1919.

¹⁷¹ *Souhrnná týdenní hlášení*, 34–35.

¹⁷² Letter from student J. S., March 6, 1919, NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 3014, sig. M 33/20.

Jews, and that too many women worked in the offices. “It is universally rumored that a regime change is near. The mood of the largest sections is best exemplified by the impression received through the rumor on the 5 of a military dictatorship, that it would be a good thing.”¹⁷³ The rumored revolution could take the form of a military coup, a monarchist restoration, or a socialist upheaval.

The latter was not a straightforward project either. As seen in Chapter 5, social aspirations in Prague went beyond a simple reproduction of the Russian Bolshevik Revolution. Indeed, Bolshevik was a very widely used term in Prague at the time, but the label covered many different meanings. Just as the term “Austrian,” it often served to disparage a political enemy.¹⁷⁴ To be sure, some of the political agitation was clearly influenced by events in Moscow. During a “revolutionary meeting” in April 1920, several legionnaires and regular soldiers assembled to discuss the necessity of a revolution at home. This meeting was led by a legionnaire coming back from Russia who called for a similar type of revolution.¹⁷⁵ But, Austro-Hungarian veterans who came back from Russia during that time were less influenced by Bolshevik propaganda than by social-revolutionary ideas from their own experiences.¹⁷⁶ Overall, conditions in Russia were not well-known, and both revolutionary demands and “Bolshevism” took local forms. A threatening letter to the minister of finance from workers in Žižkov was signed off with “Long live bolshevism and anarchy!” but contained mostly complaints about the stamped banknotes and the inadequate provisioning of foodstuffs and coal.¹⁷⁷

The term was more often used for its frightening value and revealed, in turn, more general fears of upheaval. A priest considered that the May 1919 riots against profiteering constituted “the beginnings of bolshevism.”¹⁷⁸ The poet Josef Machar used it to criticize the climate of revenge of the postwar years, where rumors and the “street” could decide on the “Austrianity” of a man: “And the Bolsheviks with green eyes and oblique gazes wreak havoc through Prague and the countryside, sniffing

¹⁷³ NA, PM 1911–1920, ka 5114, sig. 8/1/92/19, no. 31905, September 20, 1919.

¹⁷⁴ Hans Lemberg, “Die Tschechoslowakei im Jahr 1. Der Staatsaufbau, die Liquidierung der Revolution und die Alternativen 1919,” in Peter Heumos and Hans Lemberg (eds.), *Das Jahr 1919 in der Tschechoslowakei und in Ostmitteleuropa* (München: Oldenbourg, 1993), 235; on the malleability of these labels in postwar Trieste, see Bresciani, “The Battle for Post-Habsburg Trieste/Trst.”

¹⁷⁵ NA, PMV, ka 179, sig. N, no. 103, April 12, 1920.

¹⁷⁶ Hannes Leidinger, Verena Moritz, *Gefangenschaft, Revolution, Heimkehr. Die Bedeutung der Kriegsgefangenenproblematik für die Geschichte des Kommunismus in Mittel- und Osteuropa 1917–1920* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2003).

¹⁷⁷ NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 2923, sig. D 18/19/10, postmark, July 1, 19.

¹⁷⁸ AHMP, FÚ u sv. Havla, Pamětní kniha, 37.

around the pasts of civil servants, teachers, mayors, Jews, Germans. No one is safe – justice became the concubine of the street, who is standing today does not know if he will be defeated tomorrow, this is why those above came to fear those below.”¹⁷⁹ These two examples reveal the middle-class anxieties over the overturning of social hierarchies hidden behind the term.

The numerous denunciations of the presence of Bolsheviks in the city highlight how the political threat was perceived as physically embodied in urban space. At a time when the city saw the arrival of many newcomers or returnees, the figure of the Bolshevik crystallized anxieties around the encounters with foreigners or outsiders. A young woman reported a discussion on a train with a returning POW who had declared that everything would be better when “Bolshevism begins.” A Jewish veteran was accused of suspicious behavior and potential Bolshevism by his neighbors, while a Russian or Polish Jewish Bolshevik agitator had been spotted in a pastry shop.¹⁸⁰ Antisemitism often surfaced in these suspicions. The idea of a Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy provided a simplistic explanation for the revolutionary threat of these years, which marked the revolution as “other” and imported.¹⁸¹ A letter from a servant woman, for example, explained that her Jewish masters “wanted to do the bolshevism here.” The letter denounced their supposed black-market activities and their plot to push the working class to looting.¹⁸² The Czech variation of the myth contended that Bolshevism was used as a Jewish conspiracy to eliminate the Czechoslovak Republic.¹⁸³

Lenin on Purkyně Square!

During this period ripe with fears of Bolshevik coups, one well-meaning citizen wrote to the police to inform them that he had seen a Russian-speaking man on Purkyně Square who looked like Lenin himself, a fact he claimed was confirmed by other witnesses.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Josef Machar, *Časové kapitoly* (Prague: G. Dubský, 1920), 27.

¹⁸⁰ Deposition by Kamila Č, November 28, 1918; Surveillance report on Pavel W, January 21, 1919; Police report, December 30, 1918, in NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 3074, sig. P 55/40.

¹⁸¹ On Judeo-Bolshevism in 1919, see Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence*, 193–206; overall, see Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

¹⁸² Letter from Anna Š. NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 2968, sig. J 25/10, November 21, 1918, no. 14423.

¹⁸³ Ferdinand Zahrádka, *Krise uhelná* (Prague, 1919).

¹⁸⁴ Letter in Czech, NA, PP 1916–1920, ka 3074, sig. P 55/40, no. 3754, April 7, 1919.

A poster published by the right-wing of the Social Democratic party in 1920 epitomized the mythical status that the “Bolshevik” had already reached and its fusion with antisemitic tropes. Entitled “Two murderers of the republic: the profiteer and the Bolshevik,” it depicted a woman with a Phrygian cap (standing for the republic) with a noose around her neck, from which hung a small devilish figure with sacks of gold and behind her a red specter with a knife. Social Democrats responded with a poster of their own: “kill the profiteer, there will be no Bolshevik.” As Václav Lacina recalled, “Bolshevik was always something secret, menacing, and improper” and most people would have balked at being called such.¹⁸⁵

Even the separation between Social Democrats and Communists at the end of 1920 reflected very local concerns as well as global political clashes over the October Revolution. The workers’ living conditions and access to goods of primary necessity were getting worse. In 1919 and 1920, they obtained many raises in wages, but the prices automatically followed and the progression of the nominal wages during the period was negative.¹⁸⁶ At the Congress of the Party in September 1920, most representatives and party officials were in favor of a non-Communist line for the party, but the conflict was about to break because a majority of the party members and voters supported Communism. The offices of the new organ of the Communist left *Rudé právo* were located in a building which was declared under Antonín Němec’s name, a moderate. On December 9, the right wing of the Party asked the police to occupy the building and restore it to the leadership of the Party. The left called for a general strike which lasted for a week and spread throughout the country. The demands of the leftist wing of the Social Democrats concerned both short-term political goals, but also profound social reforms. They asked for the resignation of the government, the complete freedom of assembly, a 30 percent increase in wages and the control of the food supply by workers.¹⁸⁷ The demands here were directly linked to what the Prague wartime and postwar unrest had been about, a more just distribution of food supplies, and more democratic freedoms.

The atmosphere of revolutionary spirit in Prague, while much less violent than in other cities of Central and Eastern Europe, is comparable to many of the local movements on the continent at the time, which

¹⁸⁵ Lacina, *Co Vám mám povídat*, 46.

¹⁸⁶ Ernst Fröhlich, *Die Entwicklung des Arbeitslohnes in der Tschechoslowakei 1918–1928* (Prague: Taussig & Taussig, 1931) 22–23.

¹⁸⁷ Call for the general strike by the Committee of the Social-Democrat Party (Left), December 10, 1920 in *Sborník dokumentů k prosincové stávce 1920* (Prague: Nakladatelství politické literatury, 1954), 26.

centered on material issues and democratic demands. This revolutionary spirit might have held different meanings for different people. It bred in the chaos of postwar circumstances characterized by continuity rather than a clear-cut revolution. This postimperial revolutionary spirit in Prague resembled the “social melancholy” of other victorious nations, made of disappointment, shattered hopes, the impression that the wartime experience and new forms of citizenship should give way to better material conditions, better government, no more profiteering, and more democracy.¹⁸⁸ In that sense, it can be compared to the “revolutionary spirit” in Paris, where material issues became the center of a contestation against the state among the working class.¹⁸⁹ Roberto Bianchi, looking at food riots in postwar Italy, also analyzed how they combined a recycled discourse of Bolshevism with much more traditional forms of contention (such as food riots). He argued for the reconsideration of 1919 as a pan-European revolutionary moment in the vein of 1848.¹⁹⁰ In this light, instead of understanding the revolutionary moment of 1918–1919 as a mere aftershock of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, we can see how the very local material issues and disappointed hopes for a more just redistribution after wartime hardship led to a disaffection with the state. This postwar discontent can be found (to various degrees) across Europe and was exacerbated amidst imperial collapse. The eventual return to order in the 1920s should not obscure the importance of this moment.

The second-year anniversary of the October 28 revolution in 1920 was much less festive than the previous year. In 1919, the atmosphere in the city corresponded to a popular national holiday: celebrating crowds on the main bridges and river banks were so numerous that they made circulation in the center difficult. In 1920, by contrast, the celebrations took a more official form, not many private houses displayed a flag, and some of the speeches denounced the Republic.¹⁹¹ The intervening two years had brought dissatisfaction commensurate with the hopes raised on October 28. The Czechoslovak declaration of independence and the subsequent creation of a Republic acted as a catalyst for expectations

¹⁸⁸ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Christophe Prochasson, “Sortir de la guerre en vainqueurs?,” in Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Christophe Prochasson (eds.), *Sortir de la Grande Guerre: le monde et l'après-1918* (Paris: Tallandier, 2008), 24.

¹⁸⁹ Tyler Edward Stovall, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919: Consumer Struggles, Transnationalism, and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁹⁰ Roberto Bianchi, “Les mouvements contre la vie chère au lendemain de la Grande Guerre,” in Pietro Causarano, and Valeria Galimi (eds.), *Le XXe siècle des guerres* (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier, 2004), 237–245.

¹⁹¹ Holeček, *Prvé tříletí*, 77–79; *Národní listy*, October 29, 1920, 1.

that peace would bring about a better world. As people walked through the streets of Prague in jubilating cries on October 28, 1918, it was not yet clear what the revolution meant.

The joyous atmosphere was, however, short-lived. It soon became clear that economic problems persisted and that not much had changed in the city. In order to function efficiently in those potentially unstable times, the young state had kept most of the civil servants from the previous regime. This pragmatic continuity fed resentment and calls for a more perfect Republic that would finally break with the wartime legacies. The background of these years remained a similar picture of demoralization, dark streets, and hunger. The new, pure, national façade often revealed an old, immoral, still Austrian interior marked by the four years of war. Both the state and Prague residents themselves needed imperial structures to navigate the chaos of the postwar years, the disorganization of trade, the lack of coal, which meant that factories could not work and that food rotted in train depots. The national parades, concerts, and national costumes, while an important feature of the streetscape in those years, could not hide deeper tensions. As student Hubert Misařík proclaimed at the time: “we live in a great time, but it is a dark time in many respects. Everything is in crisis democracy, parliamentarism, socialism in its pre-1914 meaning.”¹⁹² In this context, revolution was fundamentally a blurry concept, which generated both hopes and fears.

Despite official discourses, the national revolution was not achieved on October 29. Neither was Bolshevism a clear template for social revolution. Events in Russia represented a vague threat rather than a model to follow. Uncertainty was the most dominant emotion of the period. It was not just a political experience, but also reflected social structures in flux in the wake of war. The disrupted social hierarchies heightened fears of revolution, of Bolshevism that would further demolish social status. Fears of enemies also created a will for revolutionary purity, for purges of Austrianity, or of the nouveaux riches in the cityscape. The Prague example sheds new light on the 1918 revolution. This event emerges as a more-complex turning point in twentieth-century Europe than would suggest its traditional interpretation as either an aftershock of the Bolshevik revolution or a new wave of national self-determination.

¹⁹² From a speech quoted in his memoirs: Hubert Misařík, *Le Dernier témoin de Munich: un diplomate tchécoslovaque dans la tourmente européenne (1918–1941)* (Lausanne: Editions Noir sur Blanc, 2006), 63.