

HOSPODÁŘSKÉ NOVINY

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Two Essays on the Founding of the Republic

We asked American and French historians to comment on the key moments when the map of Europe was re-drawn in 1918

Why Masaryk and His Collaborators Succeeded

By Kevin J. McNamara | October 26, 2018

The single most important moment that led ultimately to the liberation of the Czechs and Slovaks in 1918, I believe, was when Tomas G. Masaryk, the philosophy professor from Prague, went into exile in December 1914.

Masaryk intended to return to Prague, but his secretive meetings with representatives of enemy Allied nations in Rome were discovered, and before he crossed back into Austria-Hungary he was warned that the police were searching for him in Prague. He certainly would have been arrested and sentenced to a long prison term if he were apprehended, and he very well might have been executed.

As a fugitive in exile, Masaryk resolved to destroy the Austro-Hungarian Empire for large political reasons but also, in part, because he would never see his wife, his children, or his home again unless he did so. This turned the independence movement into a very personal life-and-death struggle for the one person who, it turned out, was probably indispensable to that movement.

Among the many unusual factors working on Masaryk's behalf was his reputation in the United States, and his familiarity with Americans. Masaryk married an American and made two extensive speaking tours of the United States before the war, visiting virtually every urban and rural community of Czech-Americans and Slovak-Americans, speaking and granting newspaper interviews. As a result, once Masaryk launched the independence movement, he had the active support of about one million Czech- and Slovak-Americans, who pressured their elected representatives and raised a lot of money for the movement. Milan R. Stefanik also visited the States and rallied these Americans during the war.

Masaryk also knew American history, and with Americans he equated the independence desires of the Czechs and Slovaks in Europe with the earlier American drive for independence from Great Britain.

Masaryk was conveniently both Czech and Slovak, and there were no other spokesmen for independence who had as much stature (as a scholar and parliamentarian) and who also combined both ethnicities, which seemed to promise a harmonious union of the Czechs and Slovaks. He also made it quite clear that his movement and his new republic were oriented toward Paris, London, and Washington, rather than toward Berlin or Moscow, which of course also made a positive impression on U.S. officials.

Initially, the Allies hesitated to move forward to destroy the Austro-Hungarian Empire and grant independence to the Czechs, Slovaks, and other minorities of the empire. They had four reasons: (a) it



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would eliminate the possibility of negotiating an end to the war, since one cannot negotiate with a regime one is determined to destroy; (b) it would be more difficult to defeat Austria-Hungary militarily if its soldiers knew that losing the war meant the destruction of their homeland, army, and government; (c) fear that destroying the empire would leave its peoples vulnerable to internal turmoil and outside aggression; and (d) that Europe itself might be more vulnerable without the empire to help protect it.

It was not until the summer of 1918 that U.S. President Woodrow Wilson came to accept the necessity of destroying Austria-Hungary. In part, he accepted Masaryk's own argument that destroying the empire would strike a blow at Imperial Germany in a war that had dragged on for four long years without any strategic gains. Yet Wilson that summer also ordered U.S. troops into Russian Siberia, in reality to appease irrational British and French demands that Allied soldiers enter Russia to – *somehow* – reopen the Eastern Front, which collapsed when the Bolsheviks seized power in St. Petersburg and took Russia out of the war. That goal was impossible, but Wilson felt he had to do *something*, since significant U.S. forces had not yet reached the trenches on the Western Front.

So, Wilson dispatched U.S. troops to Siberia but insisted they limit themselves to rescuing the Czecho-Slovak Legionnaires, then still fighting the Red Army. This approach also made the troop deployment seem somewhat less aggressive toward Russia. However, the legionnaires were seen as traitors in Austria-Hungary, and an American president cannot risk the lives of American soldiers to rescue another people – only to turn around and turn these same rescued souls over to authorities who would jail them or execute them. In other words, once Wilson had launched his effort to rescue the legionnaires, he had to destroy Austria-Hungary so the legionnaires could return home as free men.

The legionnaires were not quickly rescued by America, since the Legion had seized all 5,000 miles of the Trans-Siberian Railway by the time the U.S. soldiers and their commander arrived. However, American newspapers had correspondents in Siberia and they lavished a lot of coverage of the Legion's epic struggle to traverse Siberia and circle the world in order to help the Allies on the Western Front.

Despite their inability to get to the Western Front, this was a thrilling story, and it was yet another unusual circumstance that helped Masaryk. The professor arrived in America just before the Legion's revolt broke out against the Red Army, so the newspaper coverage of the legionnaires linked dramatic fighting in Russia with Masaryk's independence campaign in the United States, all of it of strong interest to one million or more American citizens. The publicity brought all of this together just as Masaryk was seeking his first meeting with President Wilson, and it was a factor in persuading Wilson to support Czecho-Slovak independence.

The Czecho-Slovak independence movement was very well organized, and nowhere better than in the United States. Czech-Americans and Slovak-Americans organized themselves into several groups, the largest two being the Slovak League of America and the Bohemian National Alliance. Their many members raised at least \$1 million for the independence movement during the war. They also lobbied the White House and their elected representatives for political support. When Masaryk arrived in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1918, 27 members of the U.S. Senate and U.S. House greeted him at Union Station, and the White House was once so deluged with telegrams that the Associated Press wrote a story about it. There was also a very active publicity operation, which was based in New York

City and led by a Czech-born attorney, Charles Pergler, which regularly sent news releases to 500 newspapers.

Moreover, there was a very effective intelligence operation led by Czech-American immigrant Emanuel Voska, who ran 85 agents in the United States and a network of couriers worldwide. Voska turned into his spies the chauffeur for Germany's ambassador to the U.S., the personal maid to that ambassador's wife, and personnel in Austro-Hungarian and German embassies and consulates across the United States. The intelligence became so valuable to U.S. and British officials, as well, that Voska was commissioned as an officer in the U.S. Army.

All of these activities made the Czecho-Slovak independence movement unique. By comparison, the leaders of other peoples seeking independence could not gain the attention of Allied leaders, nor really prove that they and their followers were willing to fight and die for the Allies in order to gain their independence.

It is said that when French General Maurice Pellé, the leader of the first French Military Mission to Czecho-Slovakia saw the map of the new republic for the first time, he said the country could not be protected by an army. And, indeed, the small size of Czecho-Slovakia and its neighbors subsequently made them targets of German and Russian aggression. This is why the United States created NATO, so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and why it is necessary to include in this military alliance every country that wants and needs to be protected from larger, hostile forces. Today, of course, even Germany is a member.

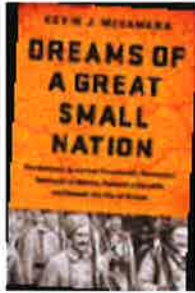
Despite the small size of the new republic, the Czecho-Slovak Army in 1938 was fairly large and well-equipped; it had an officer corps that was experienced in war (whether in the Austro-Hungarian Army or the Czecho-Slovak Legions); and morale was very high among both soldiers and civilians. An emergency drill conducted in 1938 demonstrated impressive military preparedness. In alliance with France (Paris had a formal military alliance with Prague) and with Great Britain (London had an informal understanding that it would help defend France if it got involved in another European war), the Czecho-Slovaks could indeed have defended themselves and their homeland – although at a fairly high cost. The real weakness was to be found among leaders in Paris and London, who were too traumatized by the horrors and destruction of World War One to resist Hitler.

Czecho-Slovakia also had the internal strategic challenges of trying to satisfy the demands for self-determination by its 3 million Sudeten Germans and demands for autonomy by its nearly 2 million Slovaks, which in war could have been fatal.

Could a very different kind of Austria-Hungary have survived the war and then have resisted Nazi aggression? In modern times, on almost every continent, there seems to be an historical inevitability about distinct peoples creating new nation-states for themselves. However, had it been possible for the Habsburgs and their agents to create a looser federation while maintaining a centralized Austro-Hungarian Army, and a centralized foreign ministry, under Vienna's control, it is possible the empire could have resisted Hitler's aggression – at least for a while.

It is unlikely Hitler could have used outright force to get his way with Vienna. Instead, he probably would have used the same tactics that eventually brought the Sudeten Germans and even Bratislava to

his side, meaning he would have sought allies in Vienna and in all of the federated capitals – such as Prague, Budapest, and Zagreb – using various appeals to any local political or military leaders who desired power, prestige, or money, and then help them to seize power, with Hitler’s support, with the expectation that they would support Germany’s more aggressive moves elsewhere. Indeed, some experts fear that there is another large country in Europe trying to do a similar kind of thing today. . .



***Dreams of a
Great Small Nation***

Kevin J. McNamara was traveling about 2,000 miles across Siberia in 1993 when he first heard stories about an army of 50,000 soldiers who at the end of the First World War seized all of Siberia and fought in the Russian Civil War. Since then, he has been researching the history and exploits of this Czecho-Slovak Legion, until he published a book about them, *Dreams of a Great Small Nation* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016) in the USA.