

ARTICLES

American Czechoslovaks in the First Resistance

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American compatriots were also involved in the first Czechoslovak foreign resistance movement during the World War I. Their central organization was the Czech National Association, bringing together liberal and Protestant Czechs. The Czech National Social Association J. V. Frič was founded with the support of the Czech National Social Party. A very active part of the resistance was the American Sokol, Slovak Sokol and the National Association of Czech Catholics also participated in the resistance. The relationship with the resistance of the Czech department of the Socialist Party in America was more complicated.

Key words: *Czechs; U.S.A; the Bohemian National Alliance*

On August 25, 1914 the Czech-American National Council issued a proclamation in which it stated that, “in the interest of the independence of the Czech lands, our nation will need material and moral support, and only its Czech-American branch will be able to provide this. In the life of our generation, there has never been a time more serious than this one.”¹

The Bohemian National Alliance (BNA) was originally to be a global organisation taking in Czech minorities not merely in the U.S.A. (124 branches) and Canada (7 branches), but also in France (the Czech Colony in Paris), England (the Czech Committee), Russia (The Association of Czechoslovak Federations in Kiev) and Switzerland (The Alliance of Czechs in Switzerland). The headquarters of the BNA was to be in Paris, where the representatives of the foreign resistance who later established the Czechoslovak National Council (CNC) were located. The fortnightly publications *La Nation Tchèque* and *Československá Samostatnost* (Czechoslovak Independence) also came out here.

¹ The Central Military Archive – Historical Military Archive Prague, f. The Bohemian National Alliance in America, k. 1, no. 1.

The Bohemian National Alliance in America (BNAA), which took in Czech organisations in the U.S.A., Canada and Latin America, became the organisation for Czech liberals and evangelicals in America. Its organisational structure consisted of local branches, regional committees and a central committee. The local branches comprised Czech associations that elected a chairman, deputy chairman, secretary, treasurer and a committee of two to six members. They chose a regional trustee as a member of the regional committee of the BNAA. This committee was made up of a secretary, the trustees of local branches and outstanding individuals. The executive body of the BNAA was its central committee which was based in Chicago and which consisted of the trustees of regional committees, representatives of Sokol clubs, the American Labour Sokol, the Association of Liberals and the Czech Branch of the Socialist Party in America. The presidium of the central committee represented the BNAA outwardly. There were a total of ten BNAA regions: Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Omaha, San Francisco, Oklahoma City, Cedar Rapids and St. Louis in the U.S.A, Winnipeg in Canada, and Buenos Aires for Latin America.²

Personal agitation was considered the best way of gaining members and financial means for the resistance. There were even “races” to find members in Texas, where individual farmers drove around allocated areas in their cars and strove to obtain the greatest possible number of applications. In Boston, the compatriots said that, “A dollar a year is too little, just two cents a week. I will give 10 cents, I will give 20 cents, I will give a dollar a week.”³ Money was collected at public events – entertainments, festivities, lectures, concerts, excursions and evenings with friends. Old Bohemian fairs and charity bazaars were held. Valuable gifts and pillows and blankets embroidered by women were auctioned. State duty stamps, postcards, brochures and flowers were sold. Contemporary reports state that poor farmers from Louisiana and miners from Pennsylvania did more than the rich folk from the big cities.

The BNAA endeavoured to closely co-operate with other Czech organisations and also with Slovaks. The first advisory meeting of Czechs and Slovaks was convened in April 1915. The Slovak League expressed the standpoint that it is “definitely in favour of a joint political approach, since only in unison as two strong units within, but one entity outwardly, can we obtain political independence.”⁴

Czech-Slovak co-operation was to be assured by a joint organisation known as the Czecho-Slovak American Council which was made up of sixteen members, of which eight were Czechs and eight Slovaks. The council had four departments: political and consular, promotional and informational, military, and auxiliary.⁵

² Ibid., no. 2.

³ Ibid., no. 3.

⁴ Ibid., no. 7.

⁵ Ibid., no. 35 and 36.

A regular conference of the BNAA and the Slovak League was to be held once every two years.⁶

The J. V. Frič National Social Forum was an active participant in the first resistance in the U.S.A. It was founded in Chicago in 1907. It supported the Czech National Social Party of Václav Klofáč and issued its brochure *The Mission of the National Social Party in the Czech Nation*.⁷ After the outbreak of the world war, a large proportion of Czech Americans were of the opinion that the moment had come when it would be necessary to reckon with Vienna, though many insisted that the European conflict was nothing to do with the Americans. On July 28, 1914, the Forum convened a large number of people at the Pilsen Park Pavilion in Chicago. In mid-March 1915, the Forum sent the first consignments to the Czechs from the Austro-Hungarian army who found themselves in captivity in Russia and Serbia. They received requests from the captives for Czech books and magazines, while they also needed linen and clothing. They sent packages to 230 places in Russia and Siberia and to 52 places in Serbia and Montenegro before the last two mentioned states were occupied by Austro-Hungary. From 1916 onwards, they also sent fourteen crates of tobacco to captives in Italy. Financial means were obtained by the holding of charity bazaars. The proceeds from the great bazaar held in Pilsen Park in Chicago in March 1917, where the Frič Forum had a stand, amounted to forty thousand dollars.

During his visit to the U.S.A., M. R. Štefánik held talks in Washington in summer 1917 regarding permission to recruit his compatriots to the Czechoslovak legions in France. The U.S.A. was still not at war with Austro-Hungary (until December 7, 1917). Štefánik wanted to find twenty thousand volunteers in the U.S.A., though this was unrealistic. Men aged from 20 to 31 were subject to conscription to the American army, and the growth in armament production demanded new labour which was well paid. Štefánik issued a manifesto on national mobilisation in September 1917 under the motto "We will win, as our mottos are Love, Labour and Honesty, mottos for, God willing, happier times in the future!" The first Czechoslovak volunteers from America sailed to France in October 1917.

Nine hundred thousand Czechoslovak magazines, forty thousand books and thirty-six crates of clothing and linen were sent to Czechs and Slovaks in prison camps and to volunteers. Seven thousand letters from prisoners and volunteers were delivered. A national tax was collected during visits to individual compatriots.

The "treasonous activity" of the Forum was even monitored by the police bodies in Vienna. Part of the extensive indictment against T. G. Masaryk held in his absence before a military tribunal of the divisional court in Vienna in 1917 is devoted to the J. V. Frič Forum which "was engaged principally in spreading the treasonous

⁶ Ibid., no. 38.

⁷ Ibid., f. The J. V. Frič National Social Forum, k. 1, no. 1.

movement among Czech prisoners-of-war in Russia and Serbia. For this purpose, Czech-American newspapers of a treacherous inclination were sent in large quantities (612 packages by February 2, 1915) to prisoner-of-war camps in which Czech captives were held.”⁸ The Frič Forum issued a resolution, which the American dailies refused to publish, in which it stated that “today, no nationally conscious Czech can be neutral – he can be either with us, or against us... There will come a time when accounts will be settled with all traitors and enemies of our cause.”⁹

American Sokol physical education organisations also contributed actively to the first resistance. As the Concise Overview of the Activity of Sokol Chicago states, “our Sokol sisters sought fabric and wool, and sewed and knitted everything needed by the boys there in the trenches with the industriousness of bees. The music teachers held concerts and donated the proceeds to buy smoking material and various other items for our golden boys over the water.”¹⁰ The smallest Sokol club in Cleveland (Sokol Tyrš) with fifty-five members sent eight members to the Czechoslovak legions in France, while another nine joined the US army. It also contributed 600 dollars to the national tax. In 1915, Sokol Čech and Sokol Havlíček in Cleveland joined forces and at once held collections for the widows and orphans of fallen Czech soldiers. They also initiated the creation of the Slavic Sokol Association with the participation of Czech, Slovak, Slovenian and Croatian physical exercise clubs. In the same year, they held a collection of clothing, shirts and underwear for Czech captives in Serbia. In view of the continuing neutrality of the U.S.A., volunteers joined the Canadian army.

The National Association of Czech Catholics (NACC) joined the first resistance at the beginning of 1917. It could be seen from the circular of the NACC of October 18, 1917 that “the most important phase of our foreign movement to benefit the independent Czech lands and Slovakia is, at the present time, the organisation of the Czechoslovak army in France.”¹¹

Labour American Sokol also joined the first resistance. In addition to collections in support of the Czech nation, its members also attended meetings of Slovak associations “where we urged them to do something, too, to the benefit of the nation at the present critical time.”¹²

The most active of the Slovak organisations was the Slovak Sokol physical exercise union and its organ Slovak Sokol edited by Milan Getting. Slovak Sokol had 275 groups with eight thousand members at that time.¹³ While the older generation (conservatives) sought support in Russia, the generation of “Hlasists” saw a way out in a Czecho-Slovak cultural union. This group predominated

⁸ Ibid., no. 9.

⁹ Ibid., no. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid., f. Other Czechoslovak Associations in America, k. 2, no. 51.

¹¹ Ibid., k. 1, no. 32.

¹² Ibid., k. 2, no. 84.

¹³ Ibid., no. 96.

in New York and Chicago. At the celebrations to mark the 20th anniversary of the foundation of Slovak Sokol in 1916, 132 Slovak and 140 Czech male Sokol groups and 42 Slovak and 60 Czech female Sokol groups exercised in Chicago. A resolution was adopted at the IX convention of the Slovak physical exercise union Sokol in 1916 that included the following words: "The Sokol organisation, as a purely national Slavic organisation, sees at this time of world war the best opportunity for attaining the freedom and independence of the Slovak nation in the declaration of Czech-Slovak unity."¹⁴ There were 1,600 Slovaks in the French legions, of which a thousand, mostly members of the Sokol movement, came from America. They fought under the motto: "We are few, but we must be the best."¹⁵ According to a letter from Slovak Sokol to T. G. Masaryk, the aim was the "Liberation of Slovakia and securing its future in a fraternal and strong association with the Czech lands."¹⁶

A total of 2,309 volunteers answered Štefánik's call to leave the U.S.A. for the Czechoslovak legions in France from October 1917 onwards, of which 97 fell and 113 became invalids.¹⁷

The Czech socialists in the U.S.A. were torn in two directions, as they were in the Czech lands. One camp supported the nationalist liberationist movement along with other sections of the nation, while the second took the pre-war antimilitaristic and internationalist viewpoint. In June 1916, the executive committee of the Czech Branch of the Socialist Party received a letter from its French counterparts from the Parisian socialist organisation *Égalité* in which they wrote, "Under these historic circumstances, you have taken the right position on Czechoslovak independence, that you have spoken out against the oppressive endeavours of Germanising Austria and thereby defended the honour of the Czech socialist proletariat which must, under the present conditions at home, remain silent."¹⁸

In the second edition of the Bulletin of the Czech Branch of the Socialist Party in America in 1917, however, we can read that, "the BNAA has mostly fallen into the hands of extremely nationalist and jingoistic elements. Work for socialists is today mostly impossible within it unless they abandon their socialist principles."¹⁹ Party organisations complained that the Czech Branch of the Socialist Party in America supported militarism with the contributions it made to the first resistance. The BNAA "calls upon the Czech people in America to proclaim their agreement to militarism of the coarsest kind and offers the establishment of

¹⁴ BIMO, K.: Slovenské sokolské hnutí v Americe. Praha 1926, p. 18.

¹⁵ The Historical Military Archive, f. Other Czechoslovak Associations in America, k. 2, no. 96.

¹⁶ BIMO, K.: op. cit, p. 20.

¹⁷ The Historical Military Archive, f. Other Czechoslovak Associations in America, k. 1, no. 44.

¹⁸ The Bulletin of the Czech Branch of the Socialist Party in America, vol. 10, 1916, no. 5.

¹⁹ Bulletin, vol. 11, 1917, no. 2.

a Czech legion should there be war with Germany, and such activity and such a direction simply run counter to the principles of international socialism.”²⁰ The collection of money for the Czech national project was met with the criticism that the money should be given to the Czech Proletariat Fund: “If Vojta Beneš is truly a comrade, then he is not on the right path. If he takes down the whole Czech Branch of the Socialist Party, the Czech Proletariat Fund will be forgotten and all work will be performed exclusively for the Czech national project. We have also shown that we are in favour of Czech independence, though in a way that means that we working classes would truly be better off there, and we all well know that that will not happen with any Masaryk or any Kramář and Klofáč, and that we cannot expect that of them... Our comrades in the old land will need to support them financially to the greatest extent.”²¹

The greatest opponent of support for the Czech national movement was Karel Beránek, the editor of *Spravedlnost* (Justice), who refused to publish letters that he didn't agree with. He wrote to one author of a letter he rejected saying that, “Our position in favour of the Czech independence does not mean that we should give up the fight against militarism and capitalism... We are willing to make sacrifices for the Czech independence, but not to sacrifice our convictions.”²²

In contrast, in a letter from the Czech Branch of the American Socialists (of which there were around eighty thousand), editor Tony Novotný characterised the Secretary of the National Council in Paris E. Beneš as follows: “He is a useful person in this matter, he knows a bit, has achieved something, no one can deny his merit. He is a dictator. What does that mean? That he understands things and wants to move forwards. Everyone who stands at the forefront of a movement of this nature must be such a dictator.”²³

Certain socialists considered Masaryk and his provisional government to be anti-socialist. “The present provisional government headed by Masaryk and Kramář is clearly anti-socialist, as can be seen from their declaration of independence. Masaryk was sent to the Czech lands to keep the Czechs on a tight rein, and I am sure that he will not only be completely rejected, but that he will not even get as far as the Czech lands, but will remain in Paris... And all with the money and moral support of the Czechoslovak working classes in America... The Bolsheviks are purely international socialists who... instigated the present European revolution and are its greatest support, and also have the working classes in the Czech lands well organised... The Czechoslovak working classes should split from the BNAA at once, refuse all help to the CNC, this reactionary bourgeois

²⁰ Bulletin, 1917, no. 3.

²¹ The Historical Military Archive, f. Other Czechoslovak Associations in America, k. 2, no. 106, letter from the Labour Charity Association *Rovnost* Baltimore 7. 2. 1916.

²² *Ibid.*, no. 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, no. 108, letter to Jaroslav Pichert of 10. 7. 1917.

organisation, and not merely financially, but also morally, and the workers should be organised...”²⁴

In contrast, the nationally oriented social democrats headed by Vojta Beneš issued a call from Czech socialists to the American Socialist Party on February 25, 1918 in which they stated that they consider it “their socialist duty to call on the Socialist Party in the U.S.A. emphatically to at least now, in the interest of battered Russia, in the interest of democracy that is so sorely tried, to stand up for a serious standpoint articulating the necessities of life at this overwhelming moment in history. We ask that the Socialist Party in America declare itself in favour of the war against the Central Powers and to give this republic all its loyal help and support against enemies within and without everywhere where the social and democratic interests of this country are suffering in any way.”²⁵

They addressed another memorandum to the Socialist International in which they demanded “the independence of our nation leading to the uplifting of the social welfare of the people in a Czech state free of militarism and a nation so advanced and based on socialism under the influence of a powerfully and culturally developed socialist party.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., no. 109, E. Horáček to J. Chour 13. 10. 1918.

²⁵ Ibid., no. 115.

²⁶ Ibid., no. 116.