

The Road to October 28, 1918. The Idea of Czechoslovak Statehood

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Czechoslovak statehood took shape gradually from the middle of the 19th century onwards, progressing from the thoughts of František Palacký and František Ladislav Rieger during the course of the Great War to take the specific form of a new state. It originated both on the battlefields, where the legions fought for a new independent state, and, first and foremost, in the diplomatic efforts of the foreign resistance movement of our leading politicians and future statesmen. It was Masaryk's idea of a Czechoslovak state that came to fruition in October 1918. Masaryk pursued the creation of a liberal democratic state along the lines of the Swiss model, though with two ethnic nations, in which all citizens would have equal standing regardless of their nationality, race or religion.

Key words: *the idea of a Czechoslovak state; statehood; a liberal democratic state; ethnic nations; state independence; republic*

Was there a meaningful alternative to the creation of Czechoslovakia a hundred years ago? Was the foundation of our first republic a historical error? These are two of the questions that have been asked in our anniversary year. This anniversary has provided us with a unique opportunity of reflecting on our own past, while taking a close look at current events in the present day – of considering the questions of what is Czech identity, who we are and where we are headed. We are taught in school that Czechoslovakia was established by means of the actions of T. G. Masaryk and the circumstances accompanying and associated with the Great War. Today, we take this for granted. Was there, however, an alternative to the foundation of a republic before that time?

Let's begin by mentioning at least some of the alternatives. One of the other ways in which the complicated ethnic relations in the Austro-Hungarian union could otherwise have been organised was close co-operation between the Slavic nations which would have weakened the German elite and which may have led to possible federalisation; this option was known as Austro-Slavism. Another option was Austro-Marxism, consisting of the emancipation of national socialist democracies. A radical alternative was the vision of the now relatively unknown Czech writer, literary critic and journalist Hubert Gordon Schauer (1862–1892),

a pupil of Masaryk, who pondered in his introductory article *Our Two Questions*, which came out as an editorial in the journal *Čas*,¹ whether Czech society was large enough and morally strong enough to forge an independent culture and whether the effort put into the National Revival would not be better invested in general cultural work within the framework of German culture.²

The first Czech political programme was formulated by František Palacký in April 1848 when he refused to take part in the “Committee of Fifty” to which participants of all the countries of the German Confederation were invited. For the first time in modern history, a Czech bourgeois intellectual had acted as an Austrian statesman and European politician. The fact that Palacký had formulated the demands and ideas of the Czech national movement in their broader contexts shifted the original Brauner or Havlíček programme to a new level. In terms of its basic features, Palacký’s Frankfurt paper was the most universal formulation of the idea of the Austrian state as a common state of national communities living between the German lands and Russia. Palacký’s justification for his refusal to take part was the relationship between the Czech lands and Germany and, as a historian, he pointed out that all confederations to that time must be considered confederations of “ruler with ruler” and not of “nation with nation.” He took a stand, meanwhile, against attempts to break up Austria, not merely as a matter of principle, but also for considered tactical reasons, when he declared that “if the Austrian state had not already long existed, we would have to strive to create it as soon as possible ourselves in the interests of Europe and, indeed, humanity.” Palacký resolutely rejected attachment to Germany, since he believed that, in light of the given political situation and balance of power, the Habsburg Monarchy was a better guarantee of Czech national development than the German Empire as, “he who calls for Austria (and along with it the Czech lands) to join nationally with the German Empire is demanding of them suicide.”³ Later, however, the course of

¹ *Čas* (1886), volume I, no. 1.

² Schauer came from a linguistically mixed family from Litomyšl and studied law, philosophy and languages in Vienna. He published in the journals *Čas*, *Athenaeum*, *Politika*, *Literární listy* and *Národní listy*, and in *Ottův slovník naučný* (Otto’s Encyclopaedia). He was one of the founders of *Česká moderna* (Czech Modernism) and Masaryk’s Realist movement, and was an opponent of the Young Czech Party. The mentioned article caused great dispute about the meaning of Czech history; T. G. Masaryk was accused of co-authorship. For more detail see: Růžička J. (2002). *Hubert Gordon Schauer. Město Litomyšl*; Růžička J. (1969). *Litomyšlské dopisy H. G. Schauera T. G. Masarykovi* (H. G. Schauer’s Litomyšl Letters to T. G. Masaryk). In *Zprávy z muzeí od Trstenické stezky* (Reports from the Museums from the Trstenice Path), no. 7, pp. 35–40. Also: Dvořáková D. (1989). *Schauer a jeho koncepce národní literatury (Naše dvě otázky)* (Schauer and His Conception of National Literature (Our Two Questions)). In *Česká literatura* (Czech Literature), vol. 37, no. 6, pp. 496–514.

³ A letter from František Palacký to Frankfurt (1971). In *Minulost našeho státu v dokumentech* (Our State’s Past in Documents). Praha, pp. 205–210.

events in Austro-Hungary forced him to change his mind. He demanded the creation of an Austrian federation based on natural law.⁴ He elaborated his views in detail two years (1865) before the establishment of the dual monarchy in order to draw attention to its disadvantages. The Austrian government was meant to guarantee the independent development of smaller nations.⁵

Palacký's concept was followed up (and further elaborated) by his son-in-law František Ladislav Rieger who presented a political programme drawn up on the basis of historical law, though not including the Slovaks in joint self-determination, in *Národní listy* on 1 January 1861. From the 1860s, Rieger promoted a federalist solution to the constitutional issues of the monarchy. He defended a conservative conception of state-building that would respect historical entities. He arrived at the possibility of agreement with German liberals, while demanding national equality with extensive self-rule and basic liberal and civic liberties and freedoms "in the production of goods and their trade." It was becoming, however, more and more evident that a programme of national unity no longer corresponded to a socially developed society.

Over the course of history, there were also a number of German plans for the organisation of Central Europe that were gradually modified and shaped over time. "Pan-Germanism" (or the "all-German movement") first appeared in the form of the German nationalist movement during the Napoleonic Wars, when the Germans attempted to "join all German states in a single entity."⁶ This "Pan-Germanism" involved programmes promoting either "Greater Germany" or "Lesser Germany." While Greater Germany counted on the unification of Germany and Austria (including the lands of the Czech Crown), the Lesser Germany movement strived merely for the unification of the German states without Austria. There were also efforts to unify all Germans living in non-German states within a single entity.

The outbreak of the war paved the way for two programmes. In May 1914, the distinguished Czech politician Karel Kramář presented the first sophisticated theory about a new integration of the Czech lands and Slovakia in Central Europe. A group of his colleagues from the Young Czech Party worked with him on the elaboration of this theory. Kramář's secret project was inspired by the work *Deutsche Bundesakte* (The German Federal Act).⁷ His views were not always

⁴ Urban O. (1982). *Česká společnost 1849–1918* (Czech Society 1849–1918). Praha, pp. 33–34.

⁵ Ibid., p. 188.

⁶ The "All-Germany" movement can be characterised as a movement striving for the connection of all Germanic nations, including the extinct eastern Germanic languages (Gothic) and the still living northern Germanic (Scandinavian) and western Germanic (German, English, Dutch, Flemish, etc.) languages. Krejčí O. (2009). *Geopolitika středoevropského prostoru. Pohled z Prahy a z Bratislavy* (Geopolitics of the Central European Region. The View from Prague and Bratislava). Praha, p. 94.

⁷ Ibid., p. 149.

consistent; he was initially a leading opponent of Czech independence, a position he still expressed during a speech on the Sarajevo assassination in July 1914. He long sympathised with the idea of Slavism and attempted to develop relations between the individual Slavic nations. His position shifted gradually from loyal pro-Austrian politics to support for Austro-Hungary's war enemy Russia.⁸ The initial Russian military successes in Galicia and the Carpathians at the beginning of the war convinced him of Russia's possibilities. His project conceived of Czech statehood within a Slavic federation which, in addition to the predominant Russian Empire, was to be made up of the Czech, Polish, Serbian and Montenegrin Kingdoms and the Tsardom of Bulgaria. This empire would stretch from the Pacific Ocean to the Bohemia Forest and have a population of more than two hundred million people.⁹ Kramář prepared a *Constitution of the Slavic Empire* which envisioned the greatest powers being held by the Russian Tsar, who would appoint representatives (governors) in the individual lands. The principal language of command and communication would be Russian, with other Slavic languages being used only in the internal matters of the individual nations. Both Upper and Lower Lusatia, part of Glatz, and the territory below Weitra, Feldsberg (Valtice) and the southern border of Slovakia would be connected to the Czech lands. The connection of Subcarpathian Ukraine was also considered.¹⁰ Kramář was also among the first to count on a corridor along the southern and western borders of Hungary as far as Serbia. His programme soon become meaningless. In 1915 the author was arrested and put on trial, and was only released thanks to an amnesty in 1917, and in 1917 the Tsar of Russia was deposed and the revolution began. By 1918, Kramář remained the only proponent of this vision.

The second propagator of the idea of Czecho-Slovak mutuality, and the more significant and decisive for future developments, was Professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. His views also developed over the course of time. In the 1890s he had rejected the idea of state independence on principle (as had Palacký) and counted on the existence of Austria in the future as a democratically reformed monarchy. Under the influence of the new reality (the Hilsner Affair of 1899, the Zagreb Trial of 1908), he gradually came to the conclusion that the Habsburg Monarchy was "morally and physically degenerate", found itself in a deteriorated economic situation, and was increasingly controlled by Germany, making it practically unreformable. Practising a loyal pro-Austrian policy would not lead to equality for the Czechs within the monarchy. The war encouraged Masaryk in his demands for state independence under the assumption that Germany and Austro-Hungary

⁸ Galandauer J. (1988). *Vznik Československé republiky 1918* (The Establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918). Praha, pp. 20–22.

⁹ Krejčí O. (2009) *Geopolitika středoevropského prostoru* (Geopolitics of the Central European Region), p. 149.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 151–152.

were defeated.¹¹ Masaryk therefore decided to go into emigration in December 1914.

He arrived at the idea of joint Czecho-Slovak statehood during the course of his emigration.¹² In *The New Europe* he talks of cultural affinity and the closeness of the shared bond between the Czechs and the Slovaks.¹³ He did not look at them from a cultural and ethnic perspective, but as Slavic nations that must be supported in their fight for political independence. He saw himself as a Moravian Slovak which meant that he considered himself a Czech and a Slovak.¹⁴ He had considered the Slovak problem before the war and drew continual attention to Hungarian oppression. Ideas of joining the Czech lands with the Slovak lands were also born in the U.S.A. and Canada where around 650,000 expatriates lived.¹⁵ Masaryk gradually attempted to encourage other Slovaks living abroad to join the foreign resistance and managed to win them over to finance the resistance. The first document considering Czecho-Slovak coexistence was the *Cleveland Agreement* (October 1915) which guaranteed the Slovaks equal standing within a federative arrangement. Similarly, the *Pittsburgh Agreement* was also closed in the United States (in May 1918) declaring a joint political programme escalating in the establishment of a Czechoslovak state with a republican form and a constitution. This agreement gave Slovakia an autonomous position with its own administration and assembly.¹⁶ According to this agreement a hyphen was to be used in the name of the joint republic.¹⁷ It also counted on the connection of Subcarpathian Ukraine. Emigrants from America also played a large part in its connection.

Masaryk altered the territorial extent of the future state many times in his plans. He finally came to the conclusion that it would be appropriate to create

¹¹ Galandauer J. *Vznik Československé republiky 1918* (The Establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918), p. 31.

¹² Masaryk adopted the idea of joint statehood from Jan Kollár. They both agreed on the importance of the value of humanity. Kollár saw humanity in integrational relations that taught nations mutual co-operation and led them to “cosmopolitan sureties.” Városová E. (1993). *Filozofické zdroje Masarykovej československé štátnosti a Ján Kollár* (The Philosophical Sources of Masaryk’s Czechoslovak Statehood and Ján Kollár. In *Masarykova idea československé štátnosti ve světle kritiky dějin* (Masaryk’s Idea of Czechoslovak Statehood in the Light of Criticism of History). Praha, pp. 19–20.

¹³ Masaryk T. G. (1994). *Nová Evropa. Stanovisko slovanské* (The New Europe. The Slavic Standpoint). Supplement. Brno, p. 150.

¹⁴ Šabata J. *Masarykova Nová Evropa* (Masaryk’s New Europe). In Masaryk, T. G. *Nová Evropa* (The New Europe), p. 32.

¹⁵ Švorc P. (1993). *Slováci v Amerike a vývin myšlienky česko-slovenskej štátnosti* (The Slovaks in America and the Development of the Idea of Czechoslovak Statehood). In Lacina V. et al., *Sborník k dějinám 19. a 20. století* (Anthology on the History of the 19th and 20th Centuries). Praha, pp. 115–116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 127–128.

¹⁷ Krejčí O. *Geopolitika středoevropského prostoru* (Geopolitics of the Central European Region), pp. 221–222.

a Czech state primarily with the use of historical borders and a Slovak state with ethnic borders: Slovakia was to be bordered to the north by the Hungarian-Galician border, to the east by the River Uzh, and to the south primarily by the Danube and the River Ipel' (with the exception of Žitný (Rye) Island). Masaryk also considered the connection of Lusatia, part of Glatz, the Hlučín region and small revisions in southern Bohemia (Weitra – Vitoraz) and southern Moravia (Feldsberg – Valtice). Like Kramář, he also demanded a corridor to Serbia, thereby assuring access to the sea.¹⁸

As far as the form of the future state was concerned, Masaryk initially anticipated that the state would not be a republic, but a kingdom “headed by some western prince”, preferably from Denmark or Belgium, later possibly from Russia. In his work *Russia and Europe* (1913) he presented himself as an opponent of Tsarism. In *The New Europe* (1920), in contrast, he emphasised the need for a strong and independent Russia as a guarantor of stability for the small Slavic states of Central and Eastern Europe against Germany. In comparison with Kramář, he was more sceptical about the suitability of a closer relationship with Russia.¹⁹ He considered a decisive defeat of Germany by means of the combined efforts of all the allies to be the principal condition to the success of his programme. Masaryk became the first in this country to hold a western orientation. He turned to the western powers with memorandums containing the reasons for the desirability of creating an “independent Bohemia” (such as his memorandum to the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey entitled *Independent Bohemia*). In September 1914, before his emigration, Masaryk submitted to the British Foreign Service the first project for a Czechoslovak state incorporating the Czech lands and the “Slovak regions of Hungary” (as the Czech Kingdom).

Masaryk also performed one constitutional act important to the establishment of Czechoslovakia – in Washington, from the 13th to the 16th of October 1918, he wrote a *Declaration of Independence of the Czechoslovak Nation*, also known as the *Washington Declaration*, published in Paris, the formal seat of the provisional Czechoslovak government, which was also signed by Edvard Beneš and Milan Rastislav Štefánik. This declaration adopted American democratic traditions and declared the fundamental principles of the civic freedoms of the new state, the future state system and the principles of its domestic and foreign policy. It proclaimed the Czechoslovak state as a republic comprised of the Czechs and their brothers the Slovaks that would guarantee “the complete freedom of conscience, religion and science..., of the press and the right of assembly and the right to

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 187. Galandauer J. *Vznik Československé republiky 1918* (The Foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918), op. cit.

¹⁹ T. G. Masaryk espoused a monarchy until 1917. In Galandauer J. *Vznik Československé republiky 1918* (The Foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918), pp. 135–136.

petition.” The church was to be separated from the state, and a standing army replaced by a militia. Wide-ranging economic and social reforms were also to be performed – large estates expropriated and the privileges of the nobility abolished. This founding document of Czechoslovak statehood referred to historical and natural Czech law demanding independence from the Habsburg Empire.²⁰

The two main arguments used by our political representatives were historical and natural state law, and these were also used in the Washington Declaration. The doctrine of historical-legal individualities emerged in around the 1860s and was considered successively by the historians and politicians V. V. Tomek, J. Kalousek and K. Kramář. This doctrine asserted that the Czech state had, in practice, never ceased to exist on a legal basis, even during the long period of domination by the Habsburgs.

The domestic and foreign resistance began to take shape at the very beginning of the war. As has already been said, the leading representative of the foreign resistance was T. G. Masaryk, supported primarily by E. Beneš and M. R. Štefánik. The *Council of Czechs in Russia* was formed at the beginning of September 1914, being renamed the *Union of Czecho-Slovak Societies in Russia* in March of the following year. The first bodies of the Czechoslovak foreign resistance in the West began to be formed at the end of 1915 (14 November, the *Czech Committee Abroad*), while the *Czech (Czechoslovak) National Council* was established in Paris in February 1916. The *Czech Association* and *National Committee* were established on home soil. In Russia, the Russian government approved the formation of the *Czechoslovak National Council in Russia* at the end of January 1917, with the *Branch of the Czechoslovak National Council in Russia* in Kiev being formed six months later. The domestic resistance initially took a predominantly activist approach, and did not take more emphatic action until 1917 with the publication on 17 May of the signing of a *Manifesto of Writers* by 222 Czech writers and cultural figures. The *Branch of the Czechoslovak National Council in Rome* became the supreme body of the resistance in Italy in October of the same year. These organisations were joined at the beginning of 1918 by the *Three Kings Declaration*, a declaration by members of the general assembly in the Municipal House in Prague, and April's *National Oath*. Following agreement between the Czech political parties, the dysfunctional National Committee was reorganised in the middle of July as the new supreme body of the domestic resistance the *National Czechoslovak Committee*. Its task was to prepare for the assumption of power, to draw up new laws and to organise the future state administration. The leadership of the foreign resistance coordinated its steps with the situation on the front lines where the imminent end of the war was expected. On October 14, 1918, Beneš

²⁰ *Prohlášení nezávislosti československého národa zatímní vládou československou (1998) (Declaration of the Independence of the Czechoslovak Nation by the Provisional Czechoslovak Government)*. Praha, pp. 9–25.

notified the Entente states of the constitution of a provisional Czechoslovak government headed by a president, prime minister and minister of finance (in the person of T. G. Masaryk), a foreign minister (E. Beneš) and a minister of war (M. R. Štefánik). This provisional government subsequently received diplomatic recognition from a number of countries (France, Great Britain, Serbia, Italy, Cuba, the U.S.A. and Belgium). Fourteen days later (October 28, 1918) the date that we are now celebrating in connection with the number “100” appeared on the calendar. Prague and central Bohemia were followed a day later by most of Moravia, and on 30 October a declarative assembly of Slovak political representatives took place in Turčiansky Svätý Martin, elected a Slovak National Council and adopted a *Declaration of the Slovak Nation* (the Martin Declaration) which declared for the Slovak nation, referred to as “part of the linguistically, culturally and historically united Czecho-Slovak nation”, the right of self-determination and independence within a joint Czechoslovak state.²¹

This concluding state-forming finale at the end of October demonstrated the extraordinary harmony of the entire Czecho-Slovak resistance at the end of the war with broader international and global events and its complete satisfaction. Both these triumphal October days took place in such close and rapid succession that they were essentially both independent and, at the same time, absolutely identical.

²¹ Čapka, F. (2010). *Dějiny zemí Koruny české v datech* (The History of the Lands of the Czech Crown in Dates). Praha, pp. 594–621.