

The Revived Statehood (1918–21) in the Reflection of the Czech (Slovak) and Polish Post Stamps and the Didactic Applications

Kamil Štěpánek / e-mail: stepanek@ped.muni.cz
Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic.

Štěpánek, K. (2021). The Revived Statehood (1918–21) in the Reflection of the Czech (Slovak) and Polish Post Stamps and the Didactic Applications. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 13/2021/1, 44–54.
<https://doi.org/10.5817/cphpj-2021-004>

The text analyses the historical, didactic and methodological aspects of the use of post stamps in the educational process. It focuses on the reflection of the renewed Czechoslovak and Polish statehood after the end of the First World War through the period and jubilee post stamps. Like posters, post stamps are a historical source reflecting mainly modern (national) history and, for example, the changes in the statehood. On the basis of an appropriate selection, the mechanisms of legitimization of the state power or propaganda can be concisely and effectively explained in history lessons. The described procedure creates an effective alternative educational medium that strengthens the interdisciplinary cooperation of school history – media education.

Key words: *teaching history; didactics of history; post stamps; Media Education; restoration of statehood; territory; army; Czechoslovakia; Poland*

The Introduction

The end of the First World War enabled, among other things, the declaration of the Republic of Poland and the Czechoslovak Republic, with the volunteer units playing important roles in restoring the statehood of both countries. The post-war uncertainty and contradictions/conflicts, whether between the neighbours or the winners and losers, immediately led to a number of other conflicts in this area, the interpretation of which underwent a number of changes in the creation of a collective memory. The presented text focuses on the reflection of this history (approx. 1918–21) through post stamps.

Although the efforts of both states to restore historic borders and other territorial claims gained support from the victorious powers, the implementation led to a number of conflicts and, in fact, permanent tensions not only between the two neighbours, but also throughout the Central European region. The simplified reminder of the territorial changes must include the connection of the southwestern

part of Lithuania with Vilnius and eastern Galicia in 1919 to Poland. Practically in parallel, this state also fought with Czechoslovakia to obtain Cieszyn (Poland got the greater part on the basis of a peace treaty) and with Soviet Russia for Ukraine and Belarus. By the Peace of Riga (1921), Poland was given a part of western Ukraine and Belarus. At the expense of Germany, Poland gained the area of West Prussia and Poznań. Upper Silesia was divided between Germany and Poland on the basis of the plebiscite in 1921. The historical Czech lands united with Slovakia and acquired the area of Vitorazsko and Valticko from Austria, the area of Hlučínsko from Germany, and Carpathian Ruthenia from the east. However, the young Republic first had to secure militarily the restless border inhabited by the Sudeten Germans and in the spring of 1919 to fight for Slovakia's territory with Hungary. The existence of both states, however, did not last long. Soon after the breaking up of Czechoslovakia in 1938–39, the Polish state disappeared again, and the renewed post-war revival meant more or less the changed borders for both. Although the Polish losses in the east were partially balanced at the expense of Germany, the final shape of the territory depended entirely on the victorious powers. Similarly, Czechoslovakia was forced to give up Carpathian Ruthenia in favour of the USSR.

When interpreting the stamp motifs, we follow, or for teaching, it is usually sufficient to use popularization works and encyclopaedias by military experts. However, it is also possible to rely on the thematic elaboration of military fighting traditions¹. One of the few texts in the Czech language written by a Polish author² deals with the connection between regime policy and history on the philatelic material of the Eastern bloc. In thinking about the tasks that an annotated mass media could perform in modern history teaching, the introductory lesson is one of the core works of modern German media didactics by H. J. Pandel³, as well as a text by a British historian and a didactic Robert Stradling promoting the principle

¹ Cf. more: Řezník, M. (2002). *Poland*. Prague: Libri, pp. 168–173; Jurek, T. – Wihoda, M. – Friedl, J. – Reznik, M. (2017): *History of Poland. (Dějiny Polska)* Prague: NLN – Lidové noviny Publishing House, pp. 270–306; Šedivá Koldinská, M. – Šedivý, I. (2008). *On the militant traditions of the army in the Czech lands or Czechoslovakia Wara and the Army in Czech History: Sociohistorical Features. (O bojových tradicích armády v českých zemích resp. Československu Válka a armáda v českých dějinách: Sociohistorické črty)* Prague: NLN – Nakladatelství Lidové noviny; Chwalba, A. (2018). *Polish Legions 1914–1918*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie apod.

² Libionka, D.(2005). Poselství poštovních známek. *Dějiny a současnost 1*. (Postage stamp message. *History and Present 1*), 21–24

³ Pandel, H. J. – Schneider, G.(2005) (eds.): *Handbuch Medien im Geschichtsunterricht*. Schwalbach/Ts., p. 211–255.

of multiperspective viewing of information sources and understanding their relationship to the present.⁴ From the Czech author's workshop, it is possible to recommend a media-oriented didactic synthesis of the author's tandem Labischová – Gracová with links to other sources⁵. The author's own collection and philatelic catalogues available via the Internet became a source of the research and selection of suitable post stamps.⁶

A post stamp – a witness and reminder of the restoration of independence

Very soon after the collapse/disintegration of the Central European monarchies and the establishment of the 1st Czechoslovak Republic and 2nd Polish Republic in 1918, the old imperial stamps were exchanged for new domestic issues. The pictorial messages, they gave about the struggle for a new form of the homeland, will first interest us in Czech (Slovak) philatelic material. This story begins in a distant foreign country and is related to the activities of foreign troops/units on the fronts of the First World War, for which the collective designation of the Legion was gradually adopted in both countries.

Although the Czechoslovak troops declared neutrality in Russia's civil war, after several incidents, a war front against the Red Army was opened in eastern Russia. The Czechoslovak troops occupied the Trans-Siberian Railway and from August 1918 became a decisive military force in Siberia, which significantly helped the declaration of independence of the Czechoslovak state. However, hasty return to the homeland became more complicated, and therefore it was necessary to establish, among other things, a field post office. According to the conditions of that time, a reliable institution operated (for soldiers free of charge) a section of several thousands of kilometres. The stamps with the text *Post of the Czechoslovak Siberian Army* or *The Czechoslovak Army in Russia*, which are witnesses of these activities, were mainly propagandistic and the proceeds from the (charitable) sale to the civilians was intended for the Disability Fund of the Czechoslovak troops.

⁴ Stradling, R. (2003). *Multiperspectivity in Teaching History: A Handbook for Teachers (Multiperspektivita ve vyučování dějepisu: příručka pro učitel)*. Praha: NLN – Nakladatelství Lidové noviny.

⁵ Labischová, D. – Gracová, B. (2008). *A guide to the study of history didactics. (Příručka ke studiu didaktiky dějepisu)* Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita v Ostravě.

⁶ The Internet offers, for commercial, advertising, information or propaganda reasons, easily accessible, practically complete, production of stamp countries around the world. You can search not only in the catalogues of renowned companies such as the British Gibbon, the German Michel, Catawiki, but also the Czech Pořís with user-friendly filtering according to vintages or motifs.



Fig. 1: The first stage of the promotion of the renewed Czechoslovak statehood (1918–38). The legionary post stamps with traditional militant symbolism (1918–20); resistance during the 1st World War (here the Battle of Bachmač) as a reminder of a series of stamps on the 20th anniversary (1938).

The original postage stamps, both chronologically the oldest ones and later with the annual themes, were to form a collective memory of the citizens of the young state.⁷

A significant didactic potential (the analysis and interpretation of allegorical promotional strategies) is revealed in the issue of six stamps issued on the first anniversary of the independent state. The first trio captures the Czech heraldic lion with the torn shackles/chains in different shades and pay-out stamps values, on the background of the scenery we can see a reminiscent state-building date. The symbolism of the Czech lion, self-relieved of its shackles/chains (i. e. by the armed resistance to the oppression of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy) should have been comprehensible/understandable to every citizen of the new state. The second trio (as it will be the case several more times) uses the motif of a mother-republic with a child. The occasional issue also served charitable purposes for the benefit of legionary families. In 1920, an issue of stamps was issued entitled *The Liberated Republic*, again in an unprecedented allegorical sense. This time, the central symbolic figure is a woman – republic, which rises with her arms outstretched above her head with the remnants of just torn prison ties above the Czech (and Slovak) country.

⁷ Cf. more: <http://www.pevinox.cz/propaganda.php>; <http://csol-mb.net/legionari-napostovnich-znamkach-prvni-ceskoslovenske-republiky-id1427.html>; http://www.filabrno.net/namety/CS%20legie_1914_20.htm; [online] [cit. 2020-08-02]; Trojan, M. (1996). *The catalogue of post stamps of Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic*. Prague: Philately Trojan.

The growing unrest in foreign relations in the mid-1930s can also be read between the symbolic lines of postal issues. The shift of interest to the anniversary of the battlefields was not only intended to strengthen the fighting spirit of the citizens and armies of both countries, but most likely already responded to the deteriorating international political situation in Europe. In the relevant lesson, we can work not only with a wide range of the factual data related to foreign units in France, Italy and Russia, but also with the eloquent symbolism. The Czechoslovak stamps show a foreign action and correlations of the company/platoon *Nazdar*, *Czech companies*, the battles of Zborov, Bachmač, Doss Alto or Arras from 1914–1918.⁸

The communist coup in February 1948, of course, caused a significant breakthrough in the concept and themes of stamp making. The legionnaires were replaced by workers, and a commemorative stamp from the same year took the position of the model on the anniversary of the restored the statehood.⁹ In the reform atmosphere of *the Prague Spring* and the release of the regime conditions in 1968, the Czechoslovak Post tried to rehabilitate the neglected anniversary with a number of actions. The most striking evidence of a temporary change in the political conditions is given by a stamp sheet with the current jubilee date copying the theme from 1919 (a lion with torn shackles/chains) – an obvious attempt at a restoration of the First Republic and Legionnaire traditions.

The “normalized” regime under the renewed control of the Soviet Union (1969–89) joined the traditions of the struggle for independence, but in its own way. The key point of the ideologized design of the post stamp was now taken over by the unmistakably five-pointed red star.

The motifs from the recruitment posters and postcards by Vojtěch Preissig¹⁰, promoting the anti-Habsburg resistance and the struggle for the independent Republic at the end of the World War I, became the basic inspiration for the postal activities celebrating the anniversary of the *Velvet Revolution* in the 1990s. The series consists of three commemorative stamps and, with their partly legionary motifs, indirectly follows the First Republic themes of the commemorative stamps.

⁸ On the belated series officially celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Czechoslovak stamp, cf. more: Karásek, J. – Papoušek, J. – Žampach, F. (1979). Monographs of Czechoslovak stamps. (*Monografie československých známek*) Part 3. Postage stamps (*Výplatní známky*) 1923–1939, Prague: Philately Trojan, pp. 309–310.

⁹ This time, the Czech state is expressed here by an allegory of a young family, and Marxist and workers’ symbolism is now becoming the core of the persuasive strategy.

¹⁰ Renowned graphic artist Vojtěch Preissig belonged to the representatives of our foreign resistance. He left for the USA before the war and it was here that in 1916–1918 he created designs and prints of promotional posters for Czechoslovakia. legions in France, Russia and Italy. <http://www.vhu.cz/vojtech-preissig-v-new-yorku/> [online] [cit. 2021-02-02].



Fig. 2: Second (1948–89) and third (1989–present) stage of promotion of renewed Czechoslovakia. statehood. A lion tearing hand cuffs – a copy of the legionary stamp from 1919 (1968); the example of the original draft of Viktor Preisig's agitation legionary poster and thematically identical motifs of annual stamps (1998); the attack of legionnaires, commanders and politicians in an allegorical collage for independence on a postage stamp from the cycle to the centenary (2017).

Although the adoration of the fighting traditions of the First Republic Army at the time did not explicitly equate the creation of the independent state thanks to foreign troops, it nevertheless represented an important argument for its legitimization. In 1998, the Czech Post thus “dusted off” the importance of the legions for achieving the independence after a long pause. It is interesting to compare a relatively surprising lack of interest in the jubilee commemoration of the statehood in 2008 with the anniversaries that were given the opportunity to be presented: 100 years of the Czech ice hockey, 100 years of the National Technical Museum in Prague and George of Podebrady – 550 years since his election as Czech king.

The increased activity around the centenary is clearly indicated by the whole cycle of emission activities. The sheets united by the title *Struggle for the Czech Statehood*, which have been featured in plans since 2015 and have been attracting attention with a distinctive composition and colour. For example, *The Road to the Statehood during the World War*, dated 1916, presents the scenes reminiscent of the war years before the establishing Czechoslovakia, as well as the historical figures from the important Czech monarchs through the representatives of Austria – Hungary up to the state-forming representatives of the Czechoslovakian foreign resistance. The significant historical events are briefly listed around the perimeter of the miniature sheets. The frequency of issues and the concept of the theme as a historical collage is not satisfied with a mere reminder of personalities and symbols

but it indicates higher ambitions. The composition of pictures and texts on the background of the war conflict probably also seeks to enlighten the communicative change of views on the post-war developments in the Czech lands and Slovakia.

Even the Polish legionnaires during the World War I organized a field post, which used some special stamps. The characteristic charitable stamps with the text of the *Polish Legionnaires* were also preserved in order to obtain some financial resources for the Legion Fund.



Fig. 3: The forms and development of the promotion of the restored statehood of Poland (1918–2018). (Above:) The annual stamp on the occasion of the establishment of the legions in 1914, headed by General Piłsudski (1939). An example of a propaganda stamp of the forbidden Solidarity movement celebrating the Polish legionnaires (1980s); The examples of issues for the 100th anniversary with the emphasis on the struggle for the Polish territory – (Top right:) The Polish Post celebrated the Silesian uprisings in the separate philatelic series (2019). (Down:) The so-called. first day cover/envelope with places of fighting; the commander of Polish divisions in the seven-day war with Czechoslovakia for Cieszyn (2019); the stamp on the occasion of the jubilee of the establishing the Blue Army under the command of General Józef Haller (2019).

The annual stamps of the establishment of the first legions (1914–1939) headed by General Piłsudski on the 20th and then especially on the 25th anniversary (1939) should have to, similarly to Czechoslovakia, support the ability of resistance of all sections of the population, including the Polish army. During the communist regime, the subject matter underwent a predictable taboo period and did not experience its restoration until after the fall of the Eastern Bloc.

The Polish Post also shows the increased issuance activity around the centenary of its return to the map of Europe, similarly to the Czech Post, with several cycles of thematic stamps: *the 100th Anniversary of Poland's Regained Independence*, *the First Days of Independence*, *the Army of the Reborn Republic* and *the End of the War*. The most interesting stage for us began with a series of six stamps with sepia-toned historical photographs on the occasion of 100 years of the Independence Day. They represent the government of Jerzy Moraczewski, a parade of the Polish cavalry in Sejny and Białystok, the occupation of Vilnius and generals Józef Haller and Józef Dowbor-Muśnický. A year later, it was supplemented by a similar cover/envelope on the first day with a map of the places for which the struggle was won. It consisted of stamps depicting posing the Silesian insurgents and the unit commanders (Edward Śmigły-Rydz, Franciszek Ksawery Latinik) or the guards in Lublin, Krakow, Lviv and Cieszyn – the places and territories that the new Polish army sought to either gain or defend. The commander of the Polish divisions, General Latinik, in *the seven-day war* with the Czechoslovak Republic over the Těšín region, will undoubtedly be remarkable for the Czech readers. After the pressure from the treaty powers, this short conflict of January 1919 was stopped and both sides were forced to make a ceasefire. After the Munich dictatorship, the Polish troops reoccupied the disputed territory and the problem was not contractually resolved until 1958.

The list also includes a stamp for the jubilee of the creation of *the Blue Army* under the command of General Józef Haller, whose name is derived from the blue-grey colour of the French uniforms, who went down in history as *the Blue General*. In the background, you can see a white eagle with the national emblem in a modification from 1916. In the separate philatelic series, the Polish Post celebrated a series of three armed uprisings in Silesia from 1919–21. The photo collage is accompanied by a necessary map of the local rebel bases and the claimed territory.

As in previous cases, the *Wielkopolska Uprising* for the control and annexation of the territory of the hitherto German Poznan ended at the urging of the treaty states in February 1919. The local Wielkopolska army was officially declared an allied army of the entente states, as well as, for example, the Czechoslovak legions in Russia and the territory was annexed to Poland.

An unusual chapter in the history of the Polish post stamps is represented by the activities of the banned Solidarity movement, especially in the 1980s. The stamps with the designation Poczta Solidarność still do not have a clear philatelic classification, as they lacked a connection to the postal service.¹¹ They are considered propaganda publications and testimonies of the time in the form of a stamp. Of course, they also played a role in the activities of opposition movements in overthrowing communist power, but their importance was only complementary. These stamps did not spread widely and rather served to raise funds for the activities of other unauthorized/illegal organizations. Another example is the propaganda stamp of the Solidarity movement celebrating Polish legionaries from the fronts of the First World War (Fig. 3 above).

On the didactics and methodology of the topic/theme

The didactic potential of the relevant philatelic material is basically contained in the detailed explanation of the previous subchapter. Through the post stamps, the students can perform a wide range of tasks from factually unpretentious to assignments that strengthen their understanding of deeper contexts. We thus support the competence of perceiving a post stamp, rather than as an apparent “mirror” of historical events, more as an interpretation of a historical reality. It is, of course, desirable that any analysis and interpretation of the chosen historical topic/theme by the pupils – and thus also the reflection of the renewed Czech-Polish statehood – took place from several visual or comparatively selected information sources. However, the thematically compiled set of the post stamps will also provide us with an emergency simulation of the heuristic activities. The decisive stimulus for their application in the teaching of history is not necessarily just the timeline. In addition to documenting changes in attitudes to the beginnings of the renewed independence, we can also consider various interdisciplinary relationships. It is by no means difficult to imagine that postal issues can be perceived in addition to the regime propaganda and social reflection as an alternative material to the media education or geography.

In methodological terms, we follow the basic rules of applying an iconic text in teaching: The description of the image (persons, objects, symbols of the place, – and their arrangement). The analysis (How are persons, etc. portrayed? The meaning of the symbols? To whom does the mark address his message?).

¹¹ Thus, they differ, for example, from the stamps issued and put into circulation during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 or by post of the 2nd Polish Army, operating, inter alia, at the end of the war in the Czechoslovak territory. territory, etc.

The interpretation (For what purpose, the goals of the creator or the client of the work was created, what and why was not depicted?). The pupils can perform the following tasks, which are mainly used to fix or repeat the curriculum: to organize the stamps chronologically according to the depicted events. To organize the stamps by their putting into circulation. We can find out/identify the students' knowledge of the depicted events, the type of media from which they have the information about events or people from, and assign small tasks from the media (Internet etc.) to deepen this information.

The reflection of historical events through the lens of the thematic philately also represents a possible solution to the primary student task – the correct orientation in time – in the arrangement of unsorted philatelic material with a distinction between the period and commemorative issues. It will strengthen the students' skills in the field of their knowledge, expertise and communication. For many decades, the stamp production has been naturally offering a variety of independent graduated demands. Whether they place the stamps in a blank form and thus practice the mentioned knowledge of chronology or they try to reflect on the political and regime changes in the relationship to individual topics/themes of history.

Examples of task formulations for work in teaching:

1) Analyse and compare pictorial, textual and numerical data on the submitted post stamps! Arrange chronologically and insert into the table! When sorting the philatelic material, distinguish between the period and annual (i.e. commemorative) depictions!

2) On the map of the *World War I 1914–1918*, search the places of formation of the individual military units (Kiev, Bayonne) and places of the battles with the participation of legionnaires by the data from the Czechoslovak commemorative issue of the foreign units!

3) On the map of *Central Europe at the beginning of World War II*, search the places of the uprisings, the military campaigns and the battles for the restoration and the territorial claims of the Polish state by the data of the commemorative Polish issue (2019). Use the Wikipedia to find out the result of the conflicts and enter them in a blind history map. Compare with the post-war (1945) changes of the boundaries. Estimate the primary consequences of these changes, especially the migration of the population!

4) Compare the two post stamps reflecting the same theme, which are separated by decades. The older one documents the current historical change, the annual one commemorates it in order to form a collective memory. Compare the texts, the individual objects, their symbolism, explain the differences!

In conclusion

The broad topic of modelling the political memory as a space of civic identification and cultivation of historical consciousness was presented here through a narrow sample of visual media. At the same time, the comparison of the philatelic material clearly pointed out the different traditions and approaches of both countries to the observed issues. The Czech Post primarily reflected the changes in the regime's relationship to the legionary tradition, but always limited itself to its symbolic significance for the legitimization of the statehood. In addition to Legionnaires' history, the Polish post stamps present and consolidate specific territorial claims and their legitimacy as a fundamental theme in the collective memory.

We also found a number of strongly propagandistic, symbolic and allegorical elements on the post stamps of both countries with the defined motifs. The elements described above have retained their legibility and unambiguous interpretation even with a retrospective look of the present. However, the use of this iconic text in teaching should not be limited to one source of information. Multiperspective is a desirable matter of course in modern (historical) teaching. The post stamps indicate tendencies in the priorities of the former society regarding stereotyped symbolism, personality cults, martial traditions or the legitimization of the existing establishment or adoration (or negation) of the previous regimes. However, as a reliable measure of the existence or extent of these propaganda manifestations, they are not sufficient and require further media comparison. At the elementary level, it is desirable to transfer this principle to the history teaching (although the contribution to the popularization of the medium will be, with regard to the age of the students, even a mere motivational or factual application).