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## Article Title: Relationships between Czechs and Slovaks in the United States during the First World War

Full Citation: Karel Pichlík, "Relationships between Czechs and Slovaks in the United States during the First World War," *Nebraska History* 74 (1993): 189-194

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1993CARelationships.pdf>

Date: 3/23/2015

Article Summary: Pichlík describes the rapport of Czech and Slovak ethnic organizations in the United States during the fight for an independent Czechoslovakia. During this exceptional period the interests of their adopted country coincided with the aspirations of their Old World relatives.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Albert Mamatey, Jan Janák, Milan Ratislav Štefánik, Štefan Osuský

Place Names: Slovakia, Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Hungary, Russia

Czech and Slovak Organizations in the US: Slovak League, Bohemian National Alliance of America, Union of Czecho-Slovak Associations

Keywords: *American Enlightenment*; Czech Foreign Committee (later Czechoslovak National Council); Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk; Milan Ratislav Štefánik; Štefan Osuský; Cleveland Agreement, 1915; Kiev Memorandum, 1916; Pittsburg Agreement, 1918; Czechoslovak Army

Photographs / Images: fig 68: ZČBJ lodge Jan Kollár 101, near DuBois; fig 69: map of Europe showing the Czech lands; fig 70: Omaha author Jan Janák; fig 71: Woodrow Wilson and Tomáš Masaryk, depicted on the backdrop curtain from the Vyšehrad ZČBJ Hall, Niobrara; fig 72: group at the Stamford, Connecticut, recruiting center for the Czechoslovak Army in France; fig 73: Czech-American troops at the Stamford recruiting center

# RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CZECHS AND SLOVAKS IN THE UNITED STATES DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

By Karel Pichlík

This article addresses the complicated and controversial history of cooperation between Czech-Americans and Slovak-Americans during the First World War in helping Czechs and Slovaks overseas fight for an independent Czechoslovakia. Eventually a mutually perceived need for cooperation came to prevail over differences of opinion regarding the nature and structure of the new Czechoslovak state; but after independence was won, neither these differences of opinion nor the means of their wartime resolution ever ceased to be topics for political discussion and historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> Such reassessment has always involved the interests and somewhat different historical experiences of two proud nationalities.

On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia split into two independent states: the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. On the causes and probable consequences of the establishment of these new republics, judgements and opinions have been expressed which do not always fit the historical facts. Though most Czechs reluctantly agreed to allow this division to take place as the least undesirable of a number of bad alternatives, increasing numbers of Czechs began in 1992 to question the wisdom of their ever having entered into a common state with the Slovaks. Some Slovak publicists and commentators still seek to find the causes of the recent breakup of Czechoslovakia in

the circumstances, events, and decisions at the origin of the Czechoslovak Republic during the First World War. It is widely believed in Slovakia that the Czechs in the first Czechoslovak Republic did not keep the promises and agreements that were concluded in the United States between the Czechoslovak National Council (*Československá Národní Rada*) and representatives of American Czech and Slovak ethnic organizations.

In order that the Czech and Slovak past may be better understood today, I have decided in this article to address the history of the mutual relationship between American Czech and Slovak ethnic organizations during the fight for an independent Czechoslovakia. This struggle began in the spring of 1915 when a group of Czech politicians, led by Professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, announced its intention to create an independent Czechoslovak



Fig.68. ZČBJ lodge Jan Kollár 101 near Dubois, Nebraska, whose members built their hall and theatre in 1921, is named after the Czech-language poet who promoted the unity of all Slavic peoples. (D. Murphy)

*Dr. Karel Pichlík is director of the Historical Institute of the Army of the Czech Republic in Prague*



Fig. 69. Map of Europe showing the Czech lands.

state on the basis of a British, French, and Russian victory in the war begun by Germany and Austria-Hungary in August 1914 (fig. 69).<sup>2</sup> Very concrete Czech interests conditioned all efforts to create this independent state through the combination of the provinces of Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia with the counties of northern Hungary, where most Slovaks lived.

One Czech objective in joining Slovakia to the historic Kingdom of Bohemia was to break out of German encirclement by establishing a strategic connection with Russia by means of a Slovak corridor. Many Czechs also persuaded themselves or were persuaded by the eloquence of T. G. Masaryk to expect that, given sufficient time and good will, Czechs and Slo-

vaks could build upon their cooperation—forged by wartime necessity—to create together a single, unified political nation in spite of their speaking two different but mutually intelligible languages and having had different cultural traditions and historical experiences. Surely this effort to create a unified Czechoslovak nation was also an expression of kinship, for which one could hardly find an analogy anywhere else in the world (fig. 68). For the Czechs, uniting with Slovaks was also a political necessity: only by this means could they obtain overwhelming numerical superiority over the German-speaking minority of three million in the new Czechoslovak state.

The idea of a unified Czechoslovak nation was also a source of strength and

confidence for two peoples fighting together to create an independent state. This idea gave expression to what appeared to be the most advantageous solution to the difficulties of maintaining Slovak national existence. At the time of the disintegration of the Habsburg Monarchy in October 1918, the primarily agrarian Slovak people did not possess the material means to achieve an independent national existence; and to have remained a part of Hungary would have meant subjecting themselves to a continuation of that aggressive Magyarization that had severely oppressed them from 1867 to 1918 and threatened their survival as a distinct Slavic nationality.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the idea of a unified Czechoslovak nation, both in its definition and possible implementation, was the source of serious disputes between Czechs and Slovaks at home and abroad. In the interest of defeating Germany and Austria-Hungary, these disputes were soft-pedaled during the war but were never resolved or overcome.<sup>4</sup> Although during the war, the idea of a unified nation gradually prevailed among the inhabitants of the Czech lands and Slovakia, the situation was more complicated among Czech and Slovak immigrants, emigrés, and expatriates in Russia and the United States.

For Slovaks residing in Russia, the traditional idea of Pan-Slavic mutuality was still alive. Many of the Slovaks in Russia therefore advocated the creation of an independent Slovakia under Russian patronage and would even have preferred the eventual annexation of Slovakia to Russia over its integration with the Czech lands in any Czechoslovak state. These Slovaks were, of course, supported by the highest political authorities in Czarist Russia, who saw in this Slovak affection for Russia a possibility for realizing Russian expansionistic goals and interests in the eastern part of Central Europe.<sup>5</sup>

In the United States, Slovak separatism and desire for national independence had different roots. At the beginning of the First World War, American Slovaks numbered approximately one-fifth of all Slovaks worldwide and constituted the most consolidated and politically active Slovak ethnic group in the world. Their opinions were influenced by the oppression of their fellow Slovaks in Hungary and by their own positive experiences with American democracy and federalism and the considerable powers Americans delegated to popularly elected and representative state and local governments.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, American Slovaks had maintained their ethnic solidarity and also their conservative sentiments and religiosity, encouraged among a seventy percent majority by the Roman Catholic church and among a twenty percent minority by the Lutheran and Calvinist churches.

The main ethnic organization of Slovaks in the United States was the Slovak League in America, founded in 1907 in Pittsburgh. Its president, Albert Mamatey, said at the end of 1914: "We, Slovaks, will insist on self-government regardless of which state we will become part of in the course of this war. This shall be our policy whether we will belong to Russia or be obliged to remain in old Hungary, or whether we will become part of the 'Czecho-Slovak state' that Czechs are hoping will be created." Mamatey went on to express his opinion that "it will be best for Slovaks to cooperate with our Czech brothers for creating after this war something like the Czecho-Slovak United States, which will consist of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Slovakia. Together with the Czechs, we Slovaks would form one federal state; but besides that, we Slovaks would have our own self-government, with which the Czech brothers may not interfere, just as the

states of Illinois or Pennsylvania cannot and may not interfere in the internal matters of New York state."<sup>7</sup>

The same words - the United States of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Slovakia - had already been published by Jan Janák, the editor of the Czech



Fig.70. Omaha author Jan Janák also wrote extensively on agricultural subjects. (NSHS C998-66)

magazine, *Osvěta americká* (American Enlightenment), in Omaha on August 12, 1914, in articulating the first public Czech-American proposal for Czech political independence (fig. 70). He gave a different interpretation to these words than did Mamatey and therefore to the nature of the proposed state. Janák talked about the independence that he thought should be given to the "Czechs" by a peace conference to follow the Allied defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Bohemian National Alliance of America (*Česká národní sdružení*), founded at Chicago in September 1914 by predominately freethinking Czech organizations, talked about "the rightful demands of the Czech nation," or about "the rights of the Czecho-Slavic

nation in Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Slovakia."<sup>9</sup>

During the first year of the war, the greatest obstacle to close cooperation between American Czech and Slovak organizations and the leaders of the Czech political emigration, including Professor Masaryk, was the unwillingness of these organizations to commit themselves to explicit political activity on behalf of the emigration. At this time, the Bohemian National Alliance—unlike the Czech countrymen (*krajané*) in Russia and the Slovak League—had no political platform of its own. When in March 1915 Czech ethnic organizations from Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Detroit, Omaha, and Cedar Rapids were uniting, they decided that their political activity should be restricted "to informing foreign countries about Czech goals and preparing the means by which the leaders of Czech political parties in Bohemia will be able to attain these goals which only they can define for themselves."<sup>10</sup> American Czechs decided to support Masaryk, while American Slovaks still professed to speak for what they perceived to be the interests of the entire Slovak nation.

In spite of these differences, the Bohemian National Alliance, within months of its founding, began cooperating successfully with the Slovak League. At a joint convention at Cleveland, Ohio, in October 1915, they hammered out a common agreement "to associate Czechs and Slovaks into a federal union of states with the full autonomy of Slovakia."<sup>11</sup> The signatures of the representatives of both organizations appeared on the proclamation of the Czech Foreign Committee (*Český komitét zahraniční*) published by Masaryk in November 1915 (fig. 30).<sup>12</sup> But cooperation between the Slovak League and the Bohemian National Alliance was continually retarded by differences of opinion over what should be the proper

relationship to *krajané* in Russia where, in addition to the Union of Czechoslovak Associations, a separate Slovak association, supported by the Russian government, had been founded with its own program for creating an independent Slovakia under Russian patronage. American Czechs put no trust in Russia. The conservative Slovak League hesitated to choose between the Slovak separatism espoused in Russia and the platform advocating a joint democratic state with the Czechs, motivated by Masaryk's idea of a unified Czechoslovak nation. The Slovak League was not satisfied with the Czech Foreign Committee's declaration that talked only about the Czechs' intention to create a Czechoslovak state without specifically mentioning the Slovaks.<sup>13</sup>

During its ninth congress held in Chicago in February 1916, the Slovak League reiterated its adherence to the 1915 Cleveland Agreement and in April 1916 decided to send two "ambassadors" to Europe, who "would make first-hand connections with the political authorities of the Entente" with the goal of informing them "about the demands of the Slovak nation." The league instructed its two delegates to be active "mainly in Russia." At the same time, the league rejected the opinion that the Union of Czechoslovak Associations should be the only representative of the Czechs and Slovaks in Russia, and designated the Slovak separatist association in Moscow as the only representative of the Slovaks of Russia.

After acquiring an understanding of the serious wartime situation in Europe, the two delegates from the Slovak League became adherents of the Czechoslovak National Council, as the Czech Foreign Committee had come to be called. One of its three leading executives was now a Slovak—the world-renowned astronomer and, since 1914, French Army officer, Milan Rastislav Štefánik. In France the Slovak-

American Štefan Osuský subsidized this National Council; in Russia, together with Štefánik and representatives of Russian Czechs and Slovaks, Gustav Košík signed in August 1916 the so-called Kiev Memorandum, declaring (1) "Czechs and Slovaks, being aware of the fact that they are closely united by their interests as well as by culture and by blood-relations, wish to develop into a unified, politically integral, and free nation," (2) Czech and Slovak ethnic organizations had "formed and recognized the Czechoslovak National Council," (3) the council had also been recognized by all qualified leaders of the nation in its old homeland, and (4) the council is "the only responsible and qualified" representative of the Czech and Slovak people in their struggle for Czechoslovak independence.<sup>14</sup>

In October 1916 the American Slovak League rejected the Kiev Memorandum. Osuský then wrote to Masaryk about his worries that the Slovak League instead "might support our separatists in Moscow." But de-

spite these fears, the situation developed unambiguously toward an agreement on goals between the league and the Czechoslovak National Council and ultimately toward coordination of their activities on behalf of an independent Czechoslovak state. These developments were powerfully facilitated by important events elsewhere at the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917, especially the December 1916 answer of the Entente to President Wilson's peace inquiry, an answer that declared the "liberation of Czechoslovaks" to be an aim of the Entente; the fall of Russian Czarism in the "February Revolution" of early March 1917; and the declaration of war by the United States against Germany on April 4-6, 1917 (fig. 71).

With Czarist Russia out and the United States in the war, mutual activity on behalf of Czechoslovak independence by the Bohemian National Alliance and the Slovak League became more intense. Recruiting of volunteers for the Czechoslovak Army



Fig.71. Woodrow Wilson and Tomáš Masaryk, heroes of an independent Czechoslovakia, as depicted on a backdrop curtain from the Vyšehrad ZČBJ Hall of Niobrara, Nebraska. (NSHS Museum 10146-27, C998.1-577)



Fig.72. Group assembled at the main recruiting center for the Czechoslovak Army in France, located in Stamford, Connecticut. (Courtesy Historický ústav AČR, Prague)

of France started during the summer 1917, and was promptly organized in the United States by the resolute Czechoslovakist Štefánik and by Czech and Slovak officers from the Czechoslovak Army in Russia (fig. 72 and back cover).<sup>15</sup>

From the spring of 1917 through the fall of 1918 in the United States, the movement for Czechoslovak independence further consolidated itself as Czech Catholics joined in the struggle and the Slovak League agreed on founding an American branch of the Czechoslovak National Council.<sup>16</sup> Masaryk's arrival in the United States in May 1918 accelerated and intensified what had been a gradual uniting of Czech-American and Slovak-American interests. His triumphal journey through Chicago and several other Czech and Slovak urban centers culminated in May at Pittsburgh in an agreement (*Pittsburská dohoda*) by the Bohemian National Alliance of America, the National Alliance of Czech Catholics, and the Slovak League in America to adhere to a program to create a common

democratic Czechoslovak Republic.<sup>17</sup>

The Pittsburgh Agreement no longer talked about any federal union of states or about Slovak autonomy—only about Slovakia's right to "its own administration, representative legislature, and courts of law and to having Slovak recognized there as the official language in schools, governmental administration, and public life." All of these concessions and the insistence that Czechoslovakia be a "republic with democratic institutions" were compatible with Masaryk's idea of a Czecho-

"Czechoslovaks" became internationally famous when the Czechoslovak Army, fighting in Russia against the Bolsheviks, seized and then controlled the Trans-Siberian Railroad, in effect dominating the whole of Siberia. The mutual efforts of Czechs and Slovaks in the United States concentrated on supporting the Czechoslovak National Council in its diplomatic struggle for the international recognition of Czechoslovakia by the Entente powers and the United States. The council succeeded in achieving recognition



Fig.73. Czech-American troops at the Stamford, Connecticut, recruiting center. (Courtesy Historický ústav AČR, Prague)

slovak nation. A very important addition to the Pittsburgh Agreement specified that "detailed enactments of law on the establishment of the Czechoslovak state are consigned to the liberated Czechs and Slovaks and their legitimate representatives."<sup>18</sup>

In the second half of 1918, the term

during September and thereupon constituted itself as the provisional Czechoslovak government.<sup>19</sup> Masaryk declared Czechoslovak independence in the Washington Declaration of October 14, 1918, followed by a ceremony in Independence Hall in Philadelphia. Among the first diplomats of the now

internationally-recognized Czechoslovak government were representatives of both American Slovaks and American Czechs: Štefan Osuský, a Slovak, became the Czechoslovak ambassador in Great Britain; and Karel Pergler, an Iowa Czech, became Czechoslovak ambassador to the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Allied defeat of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies in the fall of 1918 was the most important prerequisite for Czechoslovak independence; but Czechs and Slovaks would not have achieved Allied recognition of their independence had they not settled their differences of opinion and organized military units to fight with the Allies against the Central Powers. And, by contributing funds, recruiting soldiers, providing moral support, and applying political pressure to American and other Allied governments, American Czechs and Slovaks helped contribute to the achievement of Czechoslovak independence (fig. 73).

In the history of Czechs and Slovaks in the United States, the First World War was an exceptional period in which the national interests of their adopted country coincided with the aspirations of their Old World kinfolk to national independence. Immigrant ethnic organizations transcended the framework of their usual peacetime activities and became, domestically, an important political lobby and, internationally, an important source of support for Czech and Slovak political emigrés in their struggle for international recognition of an independent Czechoslovakia. Only gradually did these organizations unite in pursuit of this objective and for the duration of the war overcome their political, religious, and, above all, ethnic differences and antagonisms. They soon recognized that resolution of most of these differences was a prerequisite for Allied recognition of Czechoslovak independence and that postwar unity would be necessary to strengthen

the Czechs vis-a-vis the Germans and the Slovaks vis-a-vis the Hungarians.

Antagonism between Czechs and Slovaks became more noticeable after the war was over. Superficial and one-sided interpretations of the wartime and postwar relationships between Czechs and Slovaks in the United States became part of the argument of Slovak autonomists and separatists in Czechoslovakia during the 1920s and 1930s. Similar interpretations reappeared in the quarrels between Slovak-American opponents and supporters of the Slovak Republic during the period March 15, 1939, to December 21, 1941. The same or very similar interpretations are still being invoked in today's disputes between Czechs and Slovaks. And as usual, simplistic, one-sided, and highly emotional arguments have been gaining greater popular support than have the sober and factual interpretations of historians.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In May 1991 in Prague, when Bruce Garver and I talked about my presenting a paper on this topic to the 1992 UNL Symposium on Czech Immigration, we never suspected just how relevant this topic would become with regard to the developments of 1992 and 1993 in the Czech and Slovak republics.

<sup>2</sup> Much of what follows is based on research done for my book, *Zahraniční odboj, 1914-1918, bez legend* (The [Czech and Slovak] Resistance Movement Abroad, 1914-1918, without any Legends), (Prague: Svoboda, 1968), a work republished in Prague in 1991.

<sup>3</sup> In this issue of *Nebraska History*, Gregory Ference's article on "Slovak Immigration to the United States in Light of American, Czech, and Slovak History," addresses the political and psychological consequences of the oppression of the Slovaks by the Hungarian government from 1867 to 1918.

<sup>4</sup> The efforts of American Czechs and Slovaks in support of the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia are discussed in the context of U.S. foreign policy by Victor S. Mamatey, *The United States and East Central Europe, 1914-1918: A Study in*

*Wilsonian Diplomacy and Propaganda* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>5</sup> Pichlík, *Zahraniční odboj*, 47-58.

<sup>6</sup> These issues are discussed at greater length by Ference, "Slovak Immigration."

<sup>7</sup> Pichlík, *Zahraniční odboj*, 67-68.

<sup>8</sup> *Osvěta americká*, Omaha, Nebr., Sept. 12, 1914, article by Jan Janák. This article is also cited by Pichlík, *Zahraniční odboj*, 61-62. On developments in Omaha, see also the chapter titled "Omaha v čele" ("Omaha in the Lead"), in Vojta Beneš, *Československá Amerika v odboji* (Prague: Pokrok, 1930), 130-36.

<sup>9</sup> Pichlík, *Zahraniční odboj*, 62-64.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-58.

<sup>13</sup> On the complicated situation among *krajané* in Russia and the reaction of American Czechs and Slovaks, see Pichlík, *Zahraniční odboj*, 54-59, 150-58.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-34.

<sup>15</sup> An attractive recruiting poster—appealing to prospective American Czech and Slovak recruits—by the Czech artist Vojtěch Preissig is reproduced in color on the back cover of this issue of *Nebraska History*. The original of this poster is in the Czech Heritage Collection of the archives of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

<sup>16</sup> Pichlík, *Zahraniční odboj*, 374.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 372-87.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 376-77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 440-51.

<sup>20</sup> Pergler wrote a short account of the struggle for independence and his part in it: Charles Pergler, *America in the Struggle for Czechoslovak Independence* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1926).