

ARTICLE

‘What a Republic It Was!’ Public Violence and State Building in the Bohemian Lands after 1918[‡]

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Abstract

This article discusses the public violence that occurred in the Bohemian lands after the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918. It follows the tension between the self-empowered people, who expected a profound change in their daily lives, and the state, which sought stabilisation through the continuity of institutions. Using the examples of the *Železná Ruda* mutiny in July 1919 and the workers’ general strike in December 1920, the article shows that public violence was relatively easily manageable by a combination of negotiations and force, for it did not pursue a clear vision opposing Czechoslovakia but rather tried to participate in its formation.

Introduction

Violence during the periods of transition between war and peace and between one regime and another during the re-ordering of the world after the First World War is a frequently researched topic.¹ As Robert Gerwarth has shown, the First World War did not end with the ceasefires of 1918. On the contrary, in some regions its violent aftermath was almost as long as the war itself, and therefore the post-war transitional period deserves more attention.² Besides the experience of the mass violence on the battlefield and everyday hardships in the hinterland, it was the breakdown of the state and its subsequent reconstitution that opened up the possibilities for violent solutions in social interactions.

In the case of the Bohemian lands (Bohemia, Moravia and Czech Silesia) of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, however, this period was relatively short and smooth. Unlike many other places in East Central Europe, this region did not become a ‘space of violence’ (*Gewaltraum*)³ and it did not struggle with powerful armed groups that operated beyond state control, such as the paramilitary units that were typical of Austria, Hungary or Germany.⁴ Nevertheless, in the Bohemian lands the breakdown and reconstitution of state power was also accompanied by a hitherto unprecedented rise in violence after the end of the war and the establishment of Czechoslovakia as a state. This experience was also anecdotally reflected in the new slang expression used at the time by

¹ For overviews, see Robert Gerwarth, ‘The Continuum of Violence’, in Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, Vol. II: *The State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 638–62; Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora: Die Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*, 4th edn (München: C. H. Beck, 2014), 939–78; Jochen Böhrer, ‘Enduring Violence: The Post-War Struggles in East-Central Europe 1917–21’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 50, 1 (2015), 58–77. See also the contributions to the special issue ‘Aftershocks: Violence in Dissolving Empires after the First World War’, *Contemporary European History*, 19, 3 (2010).

² Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

³ Felix Schnell, *Räume des Schreckens: Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine, 1905–1933* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2012), 20.

⁴ Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Robert Gerwarth, ‘The Central European Counterrevolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War’, *Past and Present*, 200, 1 (2008), 175–209.

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Czech rowdies who exclaimed: ‘what a republic it was!’ (*To vám byla republika!*) when they reminisced about a massive brawl.⁵ In their view, the new form of the state was connected with the spread of collective violence in everyday life rather than with noble values propagated by political elites.

Historiographical interpretations of the violence that occurred in the Bohemian lands around the turning point of 1918 have often been embedded into the political history of long-standing ethnic or class conflicts.⁶ Seen from this perspective, the numerous clashes between Czechs and Germans (and other ethnicities) that appeared around 1918 represented another stage in the national struggle, which culminated in Czech national emancipation and the formation of their own state.⁷ Post-1948 communist historiography indeed paid more attention to grassroots actors in order to interpret both organised and non-organised violent acts committed by the lower social classes as a popular attempt to establish state socialism under the influence of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. ‘Thefts, robberies, lootings and disturbances’ were therefore not mere criminal offences, as the ‘bourgeoisie’ lamented, but instead a popular translation of the Bolshevik Revolution’s ideas into practice.⁸ Including such events in the political history of ‘class struggles’, this historiography maintained that despite people’s readiness to act, the lack of a revolutionary communist party enabled the bourgeoisie to ‘steal’ the revolution from the people.⁹

More recent historiography instead decouples studies of violence from political history and looks at violence in its own right. Studies on (ex-)soldiers have shown that the nascent Czechoslovak state was able to put most of the returning soldiers’ considerable violent potential to use within the Czechoslovak armed forces and to steer it towards state consolidation in the contested border regions where their violent capacity found its outlet.¹⁰ Besides military violence, spontaneous ‘collective’ or ‘popular’ violence demonstrated the civilian population’s radical energies and its readiness to participate in the transition process by presenting their subjective views on the new order that only slowly adjusted to the long-standing national discourse of the elites.¹¹

Searching for an explanation as to why the post-war violence was relatively easy to manage, I will focus on the phenomenon of Czech public violence in the Bohemian lands. I use the term ‘public violence’ here to cover situations in which an unauthorised group of people resorted to violent action in the public space. While demonstrations in support of competing state projects forged by national minorities in Czechoslovakia’s borderlands were put down by military force, the Czech nation state’s

⁵ Josef Holeček, *Prvé třilétí Československé republiky* (Praha 1922), 13.

⁶ For a bird’s eye perspective, see Martin Zückert, ‘National Concepts of Freedom and Government Pacification Policies: The Case of Czechoslovakia in the Transitional Period after 1918’, *Contemporary European History*, 17, 3 (2008), 325–44; for a local urban perspective of Prague, see Claire Morelon, *Street Fronts: War, State Legitimacy and Urban Space, Prague 1914–1920*, PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2015.

⁷ For example, Johann Wolfgang Brügel, *Tschechen und Deutsche, 1918–1938* (München: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1967), 75–7; Václav Kural, *Konflikt anstatt Gemeinschaft? Tschechen und Deutsche im tschechoslowakischen Staat (1918–1938)* (Praha: ÚMV, 2001), 25; Zdeněk Beneš and Václav Kural, eds., *Facing History: The Evolution of Czech-German Relations in the Czech Provinces, 1848–1948* (Prague: Gallery, 2002), 81; Piotr M. Majewski, *„Niemcy sudeccy” 1848–1948: historia pewnego nacjonalizmu* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2007), 175–6.

⁸ Michal Dzvonik, *Ohlas Velkej októbrovej socialistickej revolúcie na Slovensku (1918–1919)* (Bratislava: Slovenské vydavateľstvo politickej literatúry, 1957), 78. Out of the large communist scholarship, see, for example, Oldřich Říha, *Ohlas Říjnové revoluce v ČSR* (Praha: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury, 1957); *Ke vzniku ČSR: sborník statí k ohlasu Říjnové revoluce a ke vzniku ČSR* (Praha: Naše vojsko, 1958); Zdeněk Kárník, *Za československou republiku rad: národní výbory a dělnické rady v čes. zemích 1917–1920* (Praha: ČSAV, 1963); Jan Galandauer, *Ohlas Velké říjnové socialistické revoluce v české společnosti* (Praha: Svoboda, 1977).

⁹ Ines Koeltzsch and Ota Konrád, ‘From “Island of Democracy” to “Transnational Border Spaces”: State of the Art and Perspectives of the Historiography on the First Czechoslovak Republic since 1989’, *Bohemia*, 56, 2 (2016), 285–327.

¹⁰ Rudolf Kučera, ‘Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat: Uniformed Violence in the Creation of the New Order in Czechoslovakia and Austria 1918–1922’, *Journal of Modern History*, 88, 4 (2016), 827–55; Jakub S. Beneš, ‘The Green Cadres and the Collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918’, *Past and Present*, 236, 1 (2017), 207–41.

¹¹ Ota Konrád, ‘Jenseits der Nation? Kollektive Gewalt in den Böhmischen Ländern 1914–1918’, *Bohemia*, 56, 2 (2016), 328–61; Ota Konrád, ‘Two Post-War Paths: Popular Violence in the Bohemian Lands and in Austria in the Aftermath of World War I’, *Nationalities Papers*, 46, 5 (2018), 759–75; Ota Konrád and Rudolf Kučera, *Cesty z apokalypsy: fyzické násilí v pádu a obnově střední Evropy, 1914–1922* (Praha: Academia and MÚA AV ČR, v.v.i., 2018), 171–307.

authorities had to be more careful when it came to public violence committed by Czechs. In this regard, I understand public violence not only as a means used by self-empowered groups to enforce their goals but also as a medium of communication between ‘people’ and ‘authorities’.¹² The process of power reconstitution in interactions between the participants protected by ‘revolutionary’ legitimacy and the state’s legal monopoly on violence can be traced in these situations.¹³

I argue that Czech public violence in the Bohemian lands was neither a mere pathological obstacle on the way to a consolidated state nor a deliberate action underpinned by a clear-cut ideological agenda. Fuelled by the ethos of a new beginning after a victorious war, its participants pursued the goal of state building from below according to various popular ideals and by the means they had at their disposal. Czech public violence became an instrument with which popular ideals about what the republic should look like were negotiated with the state authorities. Taking a closer look at the grassroots level as well as stepping back to see the larger picture provides glimpses into the mentalities of the people who participated in acts of public violence and into the state’s responses to these challenges to its power.

In the first part of this article, I discuss how groups of people became self-empowered and motivated to take part in acts of public violence. Next, I focus on the state’s reactions to its shattered authority and its attempts to re-establish order. Finally, I analyse two notable cases of public violence – a soldiers’ mutiny in July 1919 and a general workers’ strike in December 1920 – that challenged the stability of the state but turned out to be manageable without the use of mass violence.

The Self-Empowered Nation

At the grassroots level, the overthrow of the state on 28 October 1918 in the streets of Prague may have looked more like a carnival rather than a serious political act that established the Czechoslovak Republic.¹⁴ A group of teenage boys were witnessed in the Old Town of Prague pulling a big metal Austrian eagle torn off from a public building on a string like a tamed beast while singing a verse of the Czech nationalist song *The Fourth of July* (*Čtvrtého července*), which was about ‘Czechia’, the female personification of Bohemia, who was ploughing ‘our old rights’.¹⁵ They passed by an indifferent policeman, who likely would have taken action against them had this happened a day earlier, and they continued on to the embankment where they drowned the eagle in the Vltava.¹⁶ Regime change suddenly empowered underage boys to participate in the politics of the public sphere and degrade and ritually destroy a hitherto respected state symbol, while the statutory guardians of the legal order hesitated in their appropriate reaction to this unprecedented situation.

The relatively peaceful occupation of public space by people supporting state overthrow eventually discouraged the military commander of Prague and his staff from issuing orders to use force. The power of Austria-Hungary had broken down and the Czech takeover in Prague could succeed without

¹² For violence as a communication medium, see, for example, Trutz von Trotha, ed., *Soziologie der Gewalt*, special issue of *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 37 (1997); Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹³ On this point, the article is inspired by Heinrich Popitz’s theory of power. See Heinrich Popitz, *Phenomena of Power: Authority, Domination, and Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). For a discussion of the relationship between violence and power, see Jörg Baberowski, *Räume der Gewalt* (Bonn: BPB, 2016), 195–213, or Teresa Koloma Beck and Klaus Schlichte, *Theorien der Gewalt zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2014), 111–21.

¹⁴ Jiří Pokorný, ‘Der Umsturz als Feier – die ersten Tage der Tschechoslowakischen Republik’, in Rudolf Jaworski and Peter Stachel, eds., *Die Besetzung des öffentlichen Raumes: Politische Plätze, Denkmäler und Straßennamen im europäischen Vergleich* (Berlin: Frank und Timme, 2007), 345–52.

¹⁵ For the lyrics of the song, see *Sokolský zpěvník* (Praha: Emil Šolc, 1912), 69–71.

¹⁶ Jan Hajšman, *Drobné obrázky z velké doby: Feuilletonů řada II* (Praha: Stanislav Minařík, 1922), 71–2; Josef Svatopluk Machar, *Pět roků v kasárnách: vzpomínky a dokumenty* (Praha: Aventinum, 1927), 41.

bloodshed.¹⁷ Czech politicians appreciated that the people had maintained order; their participation in the state overthrow was manifested mainly in ritualised violence against the symbols of the vanished empire and, in President Tomáš G. Masaryk's own words, 'not one hair on anyone's head was harmed'.¹⁸

Yet, in many other places, the establishment of the new state was accompanied by public violence that was not limited to the destruction of symbolic representations of the defeated power, but also had more tangible targets. One day later and some two hundred miles east of Prague in the Moravian village of Kudlovice, a group of locals occupied an inn and made its Jewish owner, Mořic Weiss, give them plum brandy and cigarettes. Meanwhile, the people waiting outside dismantled a wall and smashed the windows and doors of the house with bricks and stones. Afterwards, they broke into the building and plundered not only the inn but also Weiss's shop and private apartment. The local mayor arrived and tried to dissuade the people. The crowd urged him to leave them alone, and he did. Since gendarmes were not on duty that day due to illness, the looting continued until two o'clock in the morning. Besides considerable material loss, Weiss suffered several minor injuries, but the plunderers did not carry out their plan to hang him.¹⁹

This scenario was repeated in many other places where, from October 1918 to February 1919, mostly Jewish but sometimes also 'Christian' inns, shops and houses were stormed by crowds of people who understood regime change as a chance to settle their scores with their long-term 'oppressors'.²⁰ Locally, the collapse of Austria-Hungary manifested itself in attacks against those who were believed to profit enormously from other people's misery under the protection of the old regime. While the political elite urged these popular manifestations of revolutionary order to give way to a top-down process of state consolidation through legal political institutions,²¹ this period was not the climax of civic activism but rather its beginning.

The public violence that occurred in the Bohemian lands after 1918 is difficult to summarise quantitatively. One of the possible indicators could be the number of fatal casualties, but in the case of public violence this does not seem to be meaningful, since killing was not its main goal.²² Moreover, statistics based on court proceedings give only a rough overview of this sort of criminality, for not all acts of public violence were brought before the courts and categorised as such. According to these statistics, it was crimes against property that skyrocketed after the war compared to the pre-war average (thefts by 473 per cent in 1921 compared to 1902–6, embezzlements by 422 per cent in 1921, robberies by 250 per cent in 1922), while violent crimes increased less significantly (murders by 102 per cent in 1922) or had not yet reached its pre-war level (grievous bodily harm).²³ Communist historiography tried to calculate how many actions the workers' movement organised from January 1919

¹⁷ Antonín Klimek, *Říjen 1918: vznik Československa* (Praha, Litomyšl: Paseka, 1998), 222; Richard Georg Plaschka, Horst Haselsteiner and Arnold Suppan, *Innere Front: Militärassistentz, Widerstand und Umsturz in der Donaumonarchie 1918*, Vol. 2: *Umsturz* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1974), 142; in more detail, see Richard Georg Plaschka, *Cattaro – Prag: Revolte und Revolution* (Graz and Köln: Böhlau, 1963), 195–297.

¹⁸ 'Prezident Masaryk o některých časových otázkách', in Tomáš G. Masaryk, *Cesta demokracie I: Projevy, články, rozhovory, 1918–1920*, 5th edn (Praha: Masarykův ústav AV ČR, 2003), 76. However, the German consulate in Prague reported that officers who did not want to remove the symbols from their hats were being slapped or punched; see Manfred Alexander, ed., *Deutsche Gesandtschaftsberichte aus Prag*, Vol. I: *Von der Staatsgründung bis zum ersten Kabinett Beneš 1918–1921*, 2nd edn (München: R. Oldenbourg, 2003), 31; Morelon, *Street Fronts*, 207–8.

¹⁹ Zpráva o stavu přípravného vyšetřování v trestní věci proti Františku Snopkovi a spol. (St 4404/18), 8 Feb. 1919, 1–3, Národní archiv (hereafter NA), Prague, f. Ministerstvo spravedlnosti Praha, 1918–1953 (hereafter MS), k. 917.

²⁰ Seznamy o výtržnostech protizidovských, 22 Sept. 1919, NA, f. MS, k. 917; the bloodiest anti-Jewish pogrom took place in December 1918 in Holešov, Eastern Moravia, when two Jews were murdered by returning soldiers, Michal Frankl and Miloslav Szabó, *Budování státu bez antisemitismu? Násilí, diskurz loajality a vznik Československa* (Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2015), 65–7.

²¹ Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře první republiky: Vznik, budování a zlatá léta republiky (1918–1926)*, 2nd edn (Praha: Libri, 2017), 66.

²² Kučera estimated 150 casualties in ethnic and political skirmishes in the Bohemian lands between 1918 and 1920, Kučera, 'Exploiting Victory', 836.

²³ *Trestní statistika z Čech, Moravy a Slezska v letech 1919–1922* (Praha: Státní úřad statistický, 1925), 27.

to December 1920 based on the reports of the Regional Political Administration for Bohemia. According to these sources, more than two thousand events took place during these two years in Bohemia, out of which the most frequent were strikes (600), demonstrations (309) and public meetings (232).²⁴ These sources give a detailed overview of the political events in the public space, but, again, they were used in such a way so to document the political struggles of the working class over acts of seemingly non-political public violence.

The qualitative categorisation of public violence is problematic also because it often blends various motives and forms. Public violence against living conditions began to proliferate during the latter part of the war, but it was after the war and during the period of regime change when rifts in the social, ethnic, religious or political sphere opened up, spurring acts of violence.²⁵ In the chaotic situation of the liminal phase of state formation, public violence aimed to transform existing hierarchies and hegemonies, re-establish relations between the state and its citizens and reveal the character of the new polity.²⁶ In this regard, shifts in the understanding of law, legality and legitimacy are all meaningful. The German historian Michael Geyer's claim about the situation in the early Weimar Republic – 'those who kept on the right side of the law were at a disadvantage' – can be generally applied to other central European regions as well.²⁷ However, it was not always clear what the right side of the law was. Through the 'Adoption Law' (No. 11/1918 Coll.), Czechoslovakia took over, 'for the time being', the existing Austrian-Hungarian legal order, but in the popular perception this order was called into question if not invalidated by the state overthrow. The existing lines between legality and criminality became blurred and were replaced by arbitrary assessments of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of public violence by the participants themselves.

Public violence therefore differed from other types of crimes by a specific coding that lent these acts legitimacy.²⁸ Its collective character gave participants not only a physical dominance that was difficult to resist but also popular endorsement. Unlike criminals who preferred to operate unobserved in order to avoid punishment, public violence needed attention and affirmation. The more people took part in the acts or observed them, the more approval they seemed to garner.²⁹ When the Marian Column on the Old Town Square in Prague was being torn down on 3 November 1918, representatives of the Czechoslovak National Committee, the provisional governing body, arrived in a car decorated with little Czechoslovak flags. They tried to discourage people from destroying the valuable baroque sculpture, arguing that the authorities should make this decision. The crowd laughed them off, and their leader, Franta Sauer-Kysela, stressing the collective decision endorsed by the audience, replied: 'gentlemen, you are the National Committee, but we are the Nation!'³⁰ In other words, it was not the objective and abstract law, but the subjective and concrete will of the people that decided what was and what was not allowed.

²⁴ Alois Kocman, ed., *Souhrnná týdenní hlášení presidia zemské správy politické v Praze o situaci v Čechách 1919–1920* (Praha: Nakladatelství ČSAV, 1959), 9–11.

²⁵ For the so-called 'food riots' in Bohemia during the First World War, see Peter Heumos, '„Kartoffeln her oder es gibt eine Revolution“: Hungerkrawalle, Streiks und Massenproteste in den böhmischen Ländern 1914–1918', in Hans Mommsen et al., ed., *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Beziehungen zwischen Tschechen, Slowaken und Deutschen* (Essen: Klartext, 2001), 255–86; Karel Řeháček, 'Hladové a protidrahotní bouře na Plzeňsku během války a po vzniku Československé republiky (1917–1919)', in *Minulosti Západočeského kraje*, 40 (2005), 181–248; Rudolf Kučera, *Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life, and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914–1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 130–63; Konrád, 'Jenseits der Nation?'

²⁶ Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, 29–30.

²⁷ Michael Geyer, 'Grenzüberschreitungen: Vom Belagerungszustand zum Ausnahmezustand', in Niels Werber, Stefan Kaufmann and Lars Koch, eds., *Erster Weltkrieg: Kulturwissenschaftliches Handbuch* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2014), 341–85.

²⁸ Michaela Christ, 'Codierung', in Christian Gudehus and Michaela Christ, eds., *Gewalt: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2013), 191.

²⁹ Stefan Wiese, 'Pogrom', in Gudehus and Christ, *Gewalt*, 155.

³⁰ Franta Sauer-Kysela, *Naše luza, jesuité a diplomaté: historický doklad svržení mariánského sloupu na Staroměstském náměstí v Praze* (Praha 1923), 8; Cynthia Paces, *Prague Panoramas: National Memory and Sacred Spaces in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2009), 87; Nancy M. Wingfield, *Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands Became Czech* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 146.

Another important feature of public violence was its goal-directed character that aimed to arrange social reality according to the views shared by its participants. Although the crowd could destroy or kill, it often refrained from unnecessary violence in order to justify its actions. Even the looters of inns, shops and apartments often did not steal or murder in the first place, but they wanted to punish by consuming supposedly unjustly accumulated wealth. For example, during the looting of Jewish property in Tasov in western Moravia on 3 November 1918, which was staged as a celebration of the new state, one of the looters returned a box of money, saying that he did not want banknotes.³¹ Half a year later, the attacks against ‘usurers’ (*keřasové*), organised by workers in May 1919, were more clearly acknowledged as a punishment. Terrified by the effigies of gallows, wooden axes or rabbit snares, the ‘usurers’ were forced by the crowd to walk to a central public space, kneel down, ask for forgiveness and swear that they would not sell for too high prices any more.³² By the same token, when the participants in the ethnic riots that broke out in Prague in November 1920 searched German and Jewish public buildings, they neither looked for valuables, nor did they want to cause unnecessary damage.³³ Above all, they were interested in ‘Austrian souvenirs’, such as portraits of Francis Joseph I, Wilhelm II or Otto von Bismarck. With a collection of these images, the crowd marched through the centre of Prague to the seat of the Czechoslovak government where they wanted to hand them over to Prime Minister Jan Černý.³⁴

To this end, acts of public violence had self-regulating mechanisms. These were often guaranteed by Czechoslovak legionnaires, some hundred thousand soldiers who fought for Czechoslovakia alongside the Entente powers. Held in high esteem by the Czech population and having developed a collective mentality of being Czechoslovak revolutionary freedom fighters, they felt predestined to such a role.³⁵ Either still on active military duty or already demobilised, they were active in initiating and regulating acts of public violence. In the ethnic riots in Prague in November 1920, legionnaires made sure that they remained oriented towards their legitimate goals and did not turn into uncontrolled stealing or destroying. When they discovered that forks and knives, a shirt and pieces of a frame and a canvas were stolen during the search of the Prague Jewish Town Hall, they intercepted the thieves and handed them over to the police. However, the legionnaires’ authority was fluid and situational. Legionnaires who organised evictions from apartments without official permission could win the endorsement of passers-by, while a legionnaire who tried to prevent an anti-Catholic mob from entering the Church of Our Lady before Týn on the Old Town Square in Prague was spat on, beaten and humiliated.³⁶

As indicated above, acts of public violence often stood in for a state that did not fulfil its functions as expected by the participants. Public violence was therefore not only an act of defiance against the order to be guaranteed by the state, it also imitated its functions and even forced state authorities to cooperate. A crowd gathered in front of the district political administration in Chotěboř on 30 September 1919 and asked for better foodstuff provisions, the resignation of the compromised grain inspector Václav Vlk and the employment of male instead of female clerks.³⁷ Even though representatives were dispatched to hold talks with the administration, the crowd did not wait and they

³¹ Zpráva o trestní věci proti Matouři Kuchařovi a spol. (St 4709/18), 7 Feb. 1919, 2, NA, f. MS, k. 917.

³² Václav Šmidrkal, ‘Fyzické násilí, státní autorita a trestní právo v českých zemích 1918–1923’, *Český časopis historický* 114, 1 (2016), 89–115, here 98; Konrád, ‘Two Post-War Paths’, 759, 769.

³³ For the November 1920 riots, see Alfons Adam, *Unsichtbare Mauern: Die Deutschen in der Prager Gesellschaft zwischen Abkapselung und Integration (1918–1938/39)* (Essen: Klartext, 2013), 48–55; Wingfield, *Flag Wars*, 156–66.

³⁴ Zpráva o událostech ze dne 16. listopadu 1920, 17 Nov. 1920, NA, f. Presidium ministerstva vnitra, 1918–1940 (hereafter PMV), k. 179.

³⁵ Ivan Šedivý, ‘Legionáři a mocenské poměry v počátcích ČSR’, in Jan Hájek et al., *Moc, vliv a autorita v procesu vzniku a utváření meziválečné ČSR (1918–1921)* (Praha: MÚA, 2008), 16–28; Katya Kocourek, *Čechoslovakista Rudolf Medek: politický životopis* (Praha: Mladá fronta, 2011), 92. For the shaping of the agency of Czechoslovak legionnaires during their experience in Russia, see Dalibor Vácha, *Ostrovy v bouři: Každodenní život československých legií v ruské občanské válce (1918–1920)* (Praha: Epocha, 2016).

³⁶ Zpráva o událostech ze dne 8. ledna 1920, 9 Jan. 1920, 1, NA, f. PMV, k. 179; Tisk 1051, Společná česko-slovenská digitální parlamentní knihovna, NS 1918–1920; Kučera, ‘Exploding Victory’, 843–4.

³⁷ The Public Prosecutor’s Office in Kutná Hora to Regional Court in Kutná Hora (St 3794/19–34), 17 Jul. 1920, NA, f. MS, k. 918.

invaded the building. Some took tax clerk Červenka out onto the street where they swore at him; others dragged female clerks away from their tables and sometimes immediately put males who were disabled in the war in their place. When the mayor explained that while it was impossible to implement these changes immediately these demands would be satisfied in the future, the crowd dispersed.³⁸ However, in the afternoon, people gathered again, and, motivated by rumours of huge stockpiles hidden by Vlk in his private house in the nearby village of Svinný, they decided to go and get them. In Svinný, a couple of legionnaires and gendarmes dispatched from Chotěboř officially confiscated foodstuff in Vlk's house and the people loaded them onto a carriage. On the way back, the crowd ran into Vlk, beat him up and abducted him. Back in Chotěboř, Vlk was forced to unload the carriage and move the foodstuffs to the public building, from where it was expected to be officially redistributed. To prevent Vlk from further exposure to violence, the legionnaires and gendarmes pretended that they had officially arrested Vlk and they escorted him to the court of justice. Vlk waited there until he could return home safely.³⁹

As the above case shows, public violence could not establish permanent institutions or norms that would standardise future practices. Its goal-directed self-regulation often turned out to be weak: goods stolen during the lootings of 'usurers' were sometimes resold for higher prices; evictions from apartments were not only enforced on behalf of tenants in need but sometimes also for those who paid more to hire the crowd; people who were peacefully demonstrating for their social rights brought empty rucksacks with them in the hopes of filling them up during the lootings.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, these acts of violence were more than one-time eruptions of popular will that would easily go away by themselves. As a consequence, state authorities faced the problem of how to manage situations in which the law was obviously being violated, but the acts of public violence followed a recognisable 'republic-building' script.

The Unchanged State

During a drill exercise of border company reservists in the north-western Bohemian town of Kraslice in November 1921, private František Gal, irritated by the low bread rations and exhausting training, ostentatiously refused to carry out the commands of his superior. When he was brought before the company commander and received a warning from him, Gal roughly replied: 'what a mess in the army! Without having listened to me you were played off against me by lieutenant Vlach and I am talking now on behalf of all reservists! Is this a republic or a monarchy?'⁴¹ Likening the social practices in the republic to the monarchy became a way of questioning the existing rules and power structures that may not yet have been adjusted to the emerging republican order.⁴² In this case, however, Gal's argumentation remained futile not only because it was three years after 1918, but mainly because his demands were not backed up by group action. Instead of collective bargaining, the aggrieved private soon learned that the 'republic' would not treat his unruly behaviour much differently than the monarchy would have. Based on the provisions of the old Austrian military criminal code, he was sentenced in the name of the Czechoslovak Republic by the divisional court in Pilsen to fifteen months in jail for the crimes of insubordination and inciting a mutiny.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid., 2.

³⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁰ Kárník, *České země*, 57; Holeček, *Prvé třiletí*, 183; Document 101.B/8, in *Souhrnná hlášení*, 317.

⁴¹ Obžalovací spis, Dtr 537/21, 28 Feb. 1922, 1, Vojenský ústřední archiv-Vojenský historický archiv (hereafter VÚA-VHA), Prague, f. Divisní soud Plzeň, k. 21.

⁴² For 'de-Austrianisation' (*odrakouštění*) as a process of settling a score with the past in the urban space, see, for example, Adam, *Unsichtbare Mauern*, 44–8; Ines Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen: eine Geschichte der tschechisch-jüdisch-deutschen Beziehungen in Prag (1918–1938)* (München: Oldenbourg, 2012), 97–9; Morelon, *Street Fronts*, 215–8; in the military, see, for example, Martin Zückert, *Zwischen Nationsidee und staatlicher Realität: Die tschechoslowakische Armee und ihre Nationalitätenpolitik 1918–1938* (München: Oldenbourg, 2006), 80–96.

⁴³ Rozsudek, Dtr 537/21, 23 Mar. 1922, 3, VÚA-VHA, f. Divisní soud Plzeň, k. 21.

Despite the fact that Gal already had a criminal record and was probably insubordinate by nature, his case illustrates the tension between exaggerated popular expectations of the new polity and the actual continuity of the state administration, its practices and its personnel that marked the first years of Czechoslovakia. The new state was built on a fundamental contradiction: it was born out of the victory over Austria-Hungary and the state overthrow discursively did away with the old regime, but, at the same time, the new state sought stabilisation through continuity with the previous order.⁴⁴ Thus, the state that had become mistrusted during the First World War for its excessive and disastrous interventions into people's lives symbolically disappeared in 1918, but its structures did not.⁴⁵ Moreover, the 'National Committees' that were introduced in order to support the Czech overthrow of the state across the Bohemian lands and control the local bureaucracy were dissolved again in many Czech-speaking regions within weeks after 28 October 1918.⁴⁶ The symbols of the state changed and state employees swore an oath to the republic, but, concurrently, the same people in the same institutions were supposed to do the same work as before.⁴⁷ This stood in stark contrast to the popular opinion that the republic had to sharply and promptly differentiate itself from the monarchy, while the elites insisted that the new state had to evolve from the old one slowly in order to prevent disorder.

'In our district, an opinion is spreading that in the republic everybody can do what they like', a district captain from Chrudim in eastern Bohemia lamented in a report from 6 February 1919. According to him, people misinterpreted the enforcement of valid regulations by the district administration as 'hectoring in the Austrian way' (*po rakušácku sekýrovati*).⁴⁸ Marking the state administration's organisational routines as 'Austrian relics' could paralyse their efficiency and mobilise people to reject them. Popular accusations of being supportive of the old regime and having not changed their behaviour increased state representatives' uncertainty of what patterns of governing were actually compatible with the 'republic'.⁴⁹

The mismanaged suppression of the shop lootings in Čáslav, central Bohemia on 11 January 1919 reveals this insecurity. In this case, the military and the district administration failed to work together to pacify the upset consumers demanding goods for lower prices and to protect private property and shopkeepers' safety. Instead, while some rank and file soldiers who were supposed to stop the looting looked on passively, others joined the crowd and even took the lead, smashing a shop window with a brick and breaking into the private house from its backyard. Finally, the soldiers stole alcohol, which was in short supply and expensive, and drank it. The helpless commanding officers asked the district administration for support; they responded by sending commissioner Kvíčala to discourage the looters by making a speech. His appearance in public only exacerbated the situation, and he was intimidated by shouts calling for his hanging. The reason for this hostile reaction was that during the war Kvíčala had been responsible for requisitions of livestock and fats that were carried out remorselessly, and he was still charged with the same task in the new state.⁵⁰ Kvíčala was not an authority whom the crowd could respect or follow because he himself personified a state that did not and would not change. Like

⁴⁴ Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 435. For the transformation of the Czechoslovak military after 1918, see Václav Šmidrkal, 'Abolish the Army? The Ideal of Democracy and the Transformation of the Czechoslovak Military After 1918 and 1989', *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire*, 23, 4 (2016), 623–42.

⁴⁵ For the wartime everyday life experience, see Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kučera, *Rationed Life*.

⁴⁶ Václav Peša, *Vznik Československé republiky 1918 a české národní výbory* (Praha: Horizont, 1988), 69–86.

⁴⁷ Morelon, *Street Fronts*, 210; Aleš Vyskočil, *C. k. úředník ve zlatém věku jistoty* (Praha: Historický ústav, 2009), 293–326; Martin Klečáček, 'Převzetí moci. Státní správa v počátcích Československé republiky 1918–1920 na příkladu Čech', *Český časopis historický*, 116, 3 (2018), 693–732.

⁴⁸ Politická zpráva situační č. 3949, 6 Feb. 1919, 2, NA, f. PMV, k. 174.

⁴⁹ On the resentment created by state continuity, see Claire Morelon, 'Continuity and State Legitimacy: The 1918 Transition in Prague', in Paul Miller and Claire Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 43–63.

⁵⁰ Vojáček to the Presidium of the Provincial Political Administration, 31 Mar. 1919, 1, VÚA-VHA, f. Vojenský prokurátor Praha, k. 4.

the double-headed eagle in the public space, the official himself belonged to the hated remnants of the old order that were not removed after state overthrow. Similarly, officers of the armed forces or the gendarmes, which had become notorious for their brutal treatment of fellow soldiers and citizens during the war, could not win the trust of the crowd that they were expected to appease. In an exculpatory letter that the seasoned district captain Karel Vojáček wrote to his superiors after the incident, he admitted that the situation was hopeless. The military was incapable of action because of its 'low discipline' and the administrators had lost their authority. Vojáček concluded that he could only have prevented a bigger outbreak of violence by promising the crowd what they wanted.⁵¹

State authorities understood that acts of Czech public violence occurred under extraordinary circumstances and that they needed to be approached as such. In October 1919 a situation report by the Ministry of National Defence tried to analyse the psychological state of the Czech collective mind:

The Czech's spiritual mood is like that of a patient recovering from a long, difficult illness, who is angry that he cannot walk yet and is not healthy like he was before his accident, and his anger is turned against the whole world, but especially against the nurses around him; he blames them for his being sick and accuses them of negligence and incompetence, while forgetting that nobody on earth can perform miracles.⁵²

This paternalistic view, in which the state declared itself to be the 'nurse', may have indeed annoyed the 'patient', who actually saw the state as the cause of the social malaise and public violence as a medication against the state's incapability to govern. State authorities needed to find a way to combine the use of repressive force with concessions that would win back citizens' trust.

Unlike the excessive use of violence that had been perceived as a hallmark of Austro-Hungarian governance during the First World War, the new state was not supposed to regulate the public sphere by brute force. Moreover, in the Czech-speaking areas of the Bohemian lands, the state should not even behave 'provocatively' by showing off its force in public. On the contrary, concessions and temporary withdrawals played an important role in the de-escalation of public violence. After the young communist Alois Šťastný's unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Prime Minister Karel Kramář on 8 January 1919, riots against the Social Democratic Party broke out in the centre of Prague, and a protest march to the Prague Castle, the seat of the President of the Republic, was announced. The deputy commander of the Prague Garrison, Captain Zeman, ordered a machine gun company of Czechoslovak legionnaires from France to take up positions on the access roads to the Prague Castle. He thought that more soldiers deployed and more guns pointed at the expected rioters would increase the security of the president, while T. G. Masaryk sharply disagreed and ordered the withdrawal of the troops and an investigation of this case. In his opinion, through inverse proportionality, decreasing the presence of armed forces in the public space would actually increase security and prevent the further escalation of conflicts.⁵³

In the militarily occupied German-speaking territories, the presence of the armed forces was inevitable, but the Czechoslovak military's mismanaged suppression of German demonstrations on 3 and 4 March 1919, which left at least fifty-seven dead, became a cruel reminder of inappropriate use of firearms.⁵⁴ Although Czechoslovak authorities tried to downplay the fault of the Czechoslovak soldiers who opened fire against unarmed civilians by blaming Germans for their 'provocations', an internal memorandum by the Ministry of National Defence explained to the soldiers that the use of weapons must be limited only to self-protection against an attack on the physical integrity of the soldiers:

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁵² Situační zpráva za říjen 1919, 4 Nov. 1919, Vojenský historický archiv (hereafter VHA), Bratislava, f. Zemské vojenské velitelstvo Bratislava 1919–1939 (hereafter ZVV), k. 41.

⁵³ The Military Office of the President of the Republic to the Garrison Headquarters in Prague, 15 Jan. 1919, VÚA-VHA, f. Vojenská kancelář prezidenta republiky 1919–1939 (hereafter VKPR), 1919, k. 11, č. j. 68.

⁵⁴ Document 61, in Josef Harna and Jaroslav Šebek, eds., *Státní politika vůči německé menšině v období konsolidace politické moci v Československu v letech 1918–1920*, (Praha: Historický ústav, 2002), 85–7.

'rioters' various shouts, whistling, singing, threats of punching you, and even non-lethal shots, if soldiers are not injured, do not represent a reason to use a weapon, and especially not to fire one'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the instruction insisted that if fire was eventually opened, it must not stop until the opponent scattered.⁵⁶

Besides changes in the use of force, moral appeals, calming promises and visions of a bright future played an important role in pacifying upset crowds. After shops were looted in Klatovy on 9 January 1919, the town's mayor, Karel Hostaš, published an appeal to citizens in general and consumers and retailers in particular to maintain order and prevent the 'great victory of our national freedom' from spoiling.⁵⁷ Similarly, after looting in Německý Brod in January 1919, local teachers issued a poster that appealed to the Czech people to protect the republic, stressing that a Czech man cannot be a thief, a usurer or a Bolshevik, and must not break the law.⁵⁸

Appeals for pacification also included visions of a Czech revolution that would not materialise through acts of public violence, but rather would go through political institutions in the form of legislation. During the above-mentioned tearing down of the Marian Column, the voice of a 'decently dressed gentleman' was recorded who did not object to the participants' goal itself, but to the savage way in which they wanted to achieve it: 'it has to be done by law. We are not an Indian nation, we are a cultured Czech nation.'⁵⁹ Similarly, when a Czech crowd led by legionnaires occupied the German Estate's Theatre in Prague in November 1920, the magazine *The Czechoslovak Legionnaire*, published by the Ministry of National Defence, disapproved of this action, stating simply: 'this is not how revolution is done!'⁶⁰ In this perspective, revolutionary violence was believed to be a sign of weakness, whereas order and lawfulness a sign of civic unity and maturity.⁶¹

Although the legislative process addressed some of the topics articulated in acts of public violence, it took a long time until it came to fruition.⁶² Hence, the character of the Czech revolution had to be negotiated in direct confrontations between those who urged from the very beginning 'to terminate the revolutionary period and to create a lawful state' and those who mistrusted state institutions and were determined to enforce their will.⁶³

The Showdowns

The self-empowered nation and the insecure state pitted their strength against each another in countless minor, and a few major, conflicts after 1918. In this section I will focus on two notable attempts to change the political regime through acts of public violence. In July 1919 a group of Czechoslovak legionnaires from Russia mutinied against their superiors and attempted to establish a Bolshevik-like military dictatorship under President Masaryk's leadership. In the second case, the communist faction of the Social Democratic Party challenged the stability of the new order during a general strike across Czechoslovakia in December 1920.

The rise of public violence was most worrying in the armed forces that were expected to be a major contributor to the top-down state building process by upholding law and order in moments or areas of

⁵⁵ Použití zbraně při vojenských asistencích, 13 Mar. 1919, 2, VÚA-VHA, f. VKPR, k. 11.

⁵⁶ Návod pro přidělování a používání asistencí určených pro udržování veřejného pořádku a bezpečnosti, 11 Apr. 1919, 4–5, VHA, f. ZVV, k. 3.

⁵⁷ *Klatovské listy*, 11 Jan. 1919, 6.

⁵⁸ Výtržnosti v Něm. Brodě, 22 Jan. 1919, NA, f. PMV, k. č. 162, č. 192 N.

⁵⁹ Franta Sauer, *Franta Habán ze Žižkova: obrázky z doby popřevratové*, 2nd edn (Praha: Nakladatelství politické literatury, 1965), 111.

⁶⁰ *Československý legionář*, 19 Nov. 1920, 1.

⁶¹ Alexandr Batěk, *Jak jsem padesát let žil a pracoval: paměti za prvních 50 let mého života 1874–1924* (Praha: B. Kočí, 1925), 303; Alexandr Sommer-Batěk, *Válka a revoluce* (Praha, 1920), 36.

⁶² Among the most important was the land reform that raised the possibility of satisfying the landless population, the usury courts that punished profiteering or the new law on political crimes that forbade monuments of German monarchs. See Kárník, *České země*, 454–90; Šmidrkal, 'Fyzické násilí', 99–102; Wingfield, *Flag Wars*, 165–6.

⁶³ Bohumil Baxa, 'Autorita státní', *Národní listy*, 25 Sept. 1919, 2.

crisis. While officers were often motivated to stay in line, rank and file soldiers suffered from poor discipline.⁶⁴ Defiance to authority took the form of individual transgressions of service regulations, as well as both petty and serious criminality. The most critical moments were those such as the above-mentioned Čáslav looting in January 1919, when soldiers refused to obey officers' commands, and instead of crushing the unlawful attacks on private property, they tolerated, or even actively supported, the looters. Mutinies accompanied by violence appeared as a way for soldiers to protest towards the end of the war. Although they occasionally occurred also after 1918, they proved to be manageable without violence – unlike during the war –,⁶⁵ as shown by the so-called *Železná Ruda* mutiny on 21–22 July 1919 in western Bohemia. This action represented the most serious self-empowered attempt by soldiers to carry out a coup d'état.⁶⁶

Led by a group of some forty rank and file Czech legionnaires who served in the 'first battalion of Czechoslovaks from Russia' in the border town of *Železná Ruda*, the mutineers seized a train and set out in the direction of Prague on the evening of 21 July 1919 with the goal of establishing a dictatorship under President Masaryk's leadership. Their ideas contained a mix of classical soldierly demands for better food rations and criticism of the officers who used to serve in the Habsburg military, and the unclear grand design of a Bolshevik-like dictatorship that would bring 'order' to the republic. They held talks in advance with German social democratic leaders from nearby *Nýrsko*, who promised that the local German workers would join the uprising. As for the rest, the mutineers hoped that they would manage to persuade other soldiers to join them, thereby creating a snowball effect of an ever growing group of insurgents.

Fortifying themselves with alcohol stolen from local pubs in *Železná Ruda*, they armed the train with a machine gun and set off during the night. At their stops, they encountered neither the decisive resistance nor the boundless enthusiasm of the locals; drowsy and surprised soldiers as well as civilian officials adapted to a situation during which gun barrels were pointing at them. The mutineers occasionally managed to convince other soldiers to follow them, notably the Fourteenth Dragoon Regiment from *Klatovy*, but mostly their efforts were not very persuasive. In *Klatovy* they removed Captain *Holásek* from his post and made his servant, *Skeřík*, a former Czechoslovak legionnaire from Russia and accomplice of the mutineers, the new military commander. However, legionnaires from *Klatovy* did not agree that *Holásek* should be arrested and he was only ordered to go home and stay there.⁶⁷ Private *Skeřík* stitched three yellow stripes onto his sleeve, signifying the highest general rank, but this outer change in itself could not establish him as a garrison commander. Understanding that pretending to cooperate was a way of avoiding chaos in the awakening town and of eventually putting down the mutiny, *Holásek* returned to *Skeřík* a few hours later and offered his services as an acknowledged local authority.⁶⁸ He acted in the name of the mutineers, but, in fact, tried to regain control of the situation in *Klatovy*.

The mutineers' action lacked a clear message that would mobilise their followers. In the public notice that they ordered to be printed and pasted up in *Klatovy* in the morning of 22 July 1919, the leader of the mutiny asked the citizens to keep the peace. 'The point, I hope, is perfectly clear to all of you', he further asserted, and finished the notice with the exclamation 'long live the democratic Czechoslovak Republic'.⁶⁹ The point of the mutiny was not clear, though: it intermingled international class interests inspired by Bolshevism with Czech nationalism, the internal problems of military life with civilian politics. In *Nýrsko-Bystřice*, Sergeant *Houška* tried to dissuade the mutineers

⁶⁴ Letter by *Diviš*, 19 Sept. 1919, 1, VÚA-VHA, f. VKPR, k. 14.

⁶⁵ *Karel Pichlík, Vzpouř navrátilců z ruského zajetí na jaře 1918* (Praha: Nakladatelství ČSAV, 1964); *Vojenské dějiny Československa*, Vol. III: 1918–1939 (Praha: Naše vojsko, 1987), 87–8. For details about specific cases see, for example, VÚA-VHA, f. Vojenský prokurátor Praha, 1918–1939, k. 7 and 10; f. Divisní soud Praha, 1918–1939, k. 4.

⁶⁶ For a communist interpretation of this event, see *Jaroslav Křížek, 'Železnorudská vzpoura 22. července 1919', Historie a vojenství*, 4 (1953), 105–41.

⁶⁷ *Spis obžalovací*, 22 Sept. 1919, 31, VÚA-VHA, f. Vojenský prokurátor Praha, 1918–1939, k. 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 34–5.

⁶⁹ Leaflet 'Občané!', VÚA-VHA, f. Divisní soud Praha, 1918–1939, k. 37.

from continuing their plan by stressing Czech national interests. According to him, the mutiny would only play into the hands of the Germans, Hungarians or Poles, who could attack the republic from the outside during its moment of inner weakness. He received the answer that neighbouring states had guaranteed that they would not attack Czechoslovakia. Moreover, the goal of the mutiny was to establish an unspecified 'small Czech Communist Republic',⁷⁰ which indicated its distance not only from the political regime but also from Czechoslovak statehood. In Klatovy, in the early morning of 22 July 1919, the mutineers urged the town mayor to raise as many red and red and white flags as possible, combining thus the symbol of social revolution with the Czech national colours.⁷¹ However, it remained unclear in the name of what or whom they acted.⁷²

By morning their train with several hundred soldiers reached the suburbs of Pilsen, where they were encircled by military troops and negotiations with a delegation of officials dispatched from Prague were opened. Standing in a circle, armed with machine guns and hand grenades, it turned out that they lacked inner cohesion and a programme. What looked like a serious threat to the internal security of state ended up as a violence-free act of 'collective bargaining', once the mutineers were invited to formulate their demands and present them to the representatives of the state.⁷³ After the negotiations were concluded, the mutineers asked for a military band, which accompanied them to the train station from which they returned to their garrisons not as defeated traitors but as victors of self-empowerment.⁷⁴

The Železná Ruda mutiny was by far the biggest act of soldierly revolt and had two distinctive features. First, despite being armed to the teeth, the soldiers did not kill or seriously wound anybody; and second, in the end, they contented themselves with presenting their chaotic demands to the officials and triumphantly left the scene. The mutineers were not able to transform their 'power of action', based on guns and the moment of surprise, into a more durable power structure, however.⁷⁵ Instead of 'cleansing' (*očista*) and establishing order in the 'Russian way' (*po rusku*),⁷⁶ their action was perceived as a foolish and rather exotic attempt to import Russian revolutionary experience and practices into the Czechoslovak context.⁷⁷ Moreover, the soldiers who remained loyal to the state did not want to escalate the tension, and they preferred a peaceful resolution to the conflict over a violent confrontation.⁷⁸ Later on, the mutineers were arrested and tried. The verdict was strict – the death penalty for Corporal František Jelínek for high treason and severe punishments for others, but the President of the Republic recommended clemency for all because they had acted 'under the suggestion of the public opinion that they were authorised to cleanse'.⁷⁹ The general amnesty on political crimes in May 1920 brought this story to a close.

A more serious nationwide showdown in which popular support for the new state and the state's capacities to defend itself was tested took place during the split within the Social Democratic Party in late 1920.⁸⁰ This can be considered to be the most serious attempt to channel the potential of Czech public violence into orchestrated political action against the 'republic'. Sparked by the clashes between the moderate social democrats and the Bolshevik faction for the ownership of the Party headquarters

⁷⁰ Spis obžalovací, 22 Sept. 1919, 23, VÚA-VHA, f. Vojenský prokurátor Praha, 1918–1939, k. 7.

⁷¹ Ibid., 32.

⁷² Major Sýkora's report, 25 July 1919, VÚA-VHA, f. Divisní soud Praha, 1918–1939, k. 37, 1.

⁷³ Leonard V. Smith, 'Mutiny', in Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 196–217.

⁷⁴ Letter by Josef Krombholz, 20 Nov. 1919, VÚA-VHA, f. VKPR, k. 15, č. j. 1897.

⁷⁵ Popitz, *Phenomena*, 26.

⁷⁶ Vácha, *Ostrov v bouři*, 33.

⁷⁷ Fonogram okresní správy politické, 23 July 1919, 1, VÚA-VHA, f. Divisní soud Praha, 1918–1939, k. 37; Kučera, 'Exploiting Victory', 849.

⁷⁸ Křížek, 'Železnorudská', 126.

⁷⁹ Návrh na změnu trestu smrti na trest na svobodě, 4 Mar. 1920, 1, VÚA-VHA, f. VKPR, k. 19.

⁸⁰ The December 1920 general strike was closely studied by communist historiography, which saw it as a key event on the way to the establishment of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. See for example, Drahomír Bárta, *Prosincová generální stávkou roku 1920* (Praha: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury, 1953).

in the People's House in Prague on 9 December 1920, which was suppressed by the police in favour of the moderates, it spread throughout Czechoslovakia in the form of a general strike. While some regions like Kladno became epicentres of the strike, many others remained untouched.⁸¹ In the regions where the call for the general strike was followed, demands on the government were often formulated, but sometimes direct action was also taken. In many places, groups of radicalised workers and peasants under Bolshevik leadership attempted to carry out the 'socialisation' of the industry or the land by occupying factories and homesteads. In some localities 'workers' committees' were elected and 'Soviet Republics' were proclaimed. Workers were drafted into 'Red Guard' units; the laws of the republic were repudiated and replaced by the 'laws of our red republic'.⁸² However, what looked like a Bolshevik revolution that could threaten the very existence of the democratic republic was easily put down because the workers were ultimately not ready to use violence. On the contrary, they aimed to ensure absolute peace and maintain order.⁸³ In Prostějov, central Moravia, a delegation of three communists from the village of Kralice approached the local political administration, presented themselves as an 'Action Committee' and announced that they would seize the homestead and manor in Kralice. When the officials threatened them with military intervention and a criminal complaint, they withdrew their demands and stated that they just wanted to cooperate with the political administration when the homestead was turned into a cooperative.⁸⁴

The calm but resolute attitude of the state bureaucracy helped to overcome the loosely coordinated groups of workers who were driven by spontaneity rather than the political plan of a centralised leadership. However, in some places the situation could have easily escalated from a minor skirmish into massive bloodshed. One of the strike's epicentres was in the Oslavany mining district in southern Moravia, where some two hundred military troops and gendarmes dispatched from Brno occupied strategic points during the night of 12–13 December 1920. Besides the local railway station and post office, most of them were deployed in the Oslavany thermal power station, which supplied the whole region, including the regional capital of Brno, with electricity. The political demands on the government translated at the local level into concrete strike actions, such as switching off the power plant in order to make 'the lords go home from cinemas and hotels in the dark'.⁸⁵

In the morning of 13 December several thousand workers gathered in Oslavany and, irritated by a military occupation perceived as an inappropriate state reaction, decided to take back control over 'their' town and power plant. The crowd of workers did not dispose of, and did not want to make use of, arms, but they employed the tactics of workers' collective protests that helped them to overpower the uncertain military troops. They did not only vastly outnumber the soldiers, but thanks to their inner cohesion they did not look like a criminal mob of aggressive working-class men who would be an equal adversary to fight against. The first rows of the crowd approaching the soldiers consisted of female workers who utilised their gender and social roles as mothers, sisters or wives in order to dissuade soldiers from shooting.⁸⁶ While groups of soldiers guarding the post office and the railway station, including a newly arrived train with military reinforcements, succumbed to appeals of class kinship and the pointlessness of a violent confrontation with a massive crowd, the bigger unit of

⁸¹ Kárník, *České země*, 142–7; for agricultural workers, see Václav Peša, 'Venkovský lid Moravy a Slezska v prosincové generální stávce roku 1920', *Československý časopis historický*, 3, 3 (1955), 369–99; Jaroslav César, 'Prosincová generální stávka v roce 1920 na venkově v Čechách', in *Ke vzniku ČSR*, 140–70.

⁸² Document 117, in Irena Malá and František Štěpán, eds., *Prosincová generální stávka 1920: Sborník dokumentů* (Praha: Nakladatelství ČSAV, 1961), 113; Peša, 'Venkovský lid', 380; David Hubený, 'Prosincová generální stávka roku 1920 ve Slaném a okolí', in *Formování občanské společnosti ve Slaném a na Slánsku na přelomu 19. a 20. století* (Slaný: Knihovna Václava Štěcha ve Slaném, 2012), 136, 139.

⁸³ 'Ať žije socialistická republika!', in *Sborník dokumentů k prosincové stávce 1920* (Praha: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury, 1954), 46.

⁸⁴ Document 244, in *Prosincová*, 188.

⁸⁵ Oldřich Sirovátka, 'Rok 1920 v písních a vyprávěních dělníků na Rosicko-Oslavansku', *Časopis Matice moravské*, 75, 1–2 (1956), 129.

⁸⁶ Fr. Dosoudil, 'Komunistický puč v Brně-Oslavanech', in Josef Kudela, ed., *Komunistický puč v Brně-Oslavanech* (Brno: Moravský legionář, 1930), 27; Jan a Luba Durdíkovi, *Oslavanská stávka* (Praha: Naše vojsko, 1951), 45.

soldiers guarding the power plant was overpowered in hand-to-hand fighting. Despite the chaos, the workers' crowd had self-regulating mechanisms that prevented unnecessary provocations leading to the use of firearms. Worker Silvestr Nováček recalled more than thirty years later how, when the crowd of workers was going uphill to the power plant in Oslavany, he saw a ruffian from Nová Ves carrying a gun with which the military commander of the Tenth Infantry Regiment, Major Jan Zázvorka, could have been killed. Nováček knocked the gun from out of the hands of his fellow worker and reminded him of his class identity: 'not like this! We are workers!'⁸⁷

Within a few hours in the morning of 13 December 1920 the workers had managed to disarm the soldiers and occupy the town and its power plant. The 'First Oslavany Regiment', as it was mockingly dubbed by the locals, let itself be disarmed by unarmed workers because it consisted mostly of inexperienced and undertrained soldiers, who gave up when faced with the preponderance of workers. Although there were individual cases of soldiers who defected and joined the striking crowds, most of them were sent by trains back to their bases. The effectiveness of the 'military assistance'⁸⁸ was also curtailed because of the fear of using firearms that could cause loss of human life after the tragic bloodshed on 3–4 March 1919.⁸⁹

News arriving from Oslavany and elsewhere about the general strike and the unreliable armed forces spread panic about the actual strength of the communists and the ability of the state to deal with the situation, which re-mobilised citizens for the defence of the republic. As had been the case when Czechoslovakia was proclaimed in autumn 1918, in many places volunteers from the nationalist Sokol and the catholic Orel, as well as from the Workers' Gymnastic Associations, were mobilised to defend the law and order of the republic. While some legionnaires from the socialist Union of Czechoslovak Legionnaires issued a resolution expressing their support of the general strike, other legionnaires opposed this position both by words and actions.⁹⁰ Demobilised legionnaires from Brno activated their networks and within a few hours they reported to the Moravian regional commander, General Alois Podhajský, that they stood at his disposal, promising to mobilise 1,200–1,500 legionnaires within twenty-four hours.⁹¹ They were given weapons from military stores, uniforms or at least distinctive insignia, swore an oath to the republic and were sent on patrol or to improvised barracks as reserves. Martial law was imposed in the region. After a fanfare from the Czech national opera *Libuše* was played on a trumpet, a military officer loudly read the notice about martial law in the centre of Brno.⁹² The state, which could not completely rely on its military, made use of civilian volunteers. Although they could only act when accompanied by official authorities, in emergency situations they were allowed to act independently. This bore the risk of deepening a conflict that could spiral out of control. In Brno, the military commander sent a group of some eighty remobilised legionnaires to conduct a search for weapons in the Social Democratic newspaper *Rovnost's* editorial office without the permission of civilian authorities. This unlawful action was rectified by sending gendarmes and policemen over to authorise it with their presence.⁹³

On 14 December 1920 fresh and stronger military troops arrived in Oslavany. Although the strike was organised by the leftist faction of the Social Democratic Party, the December 1920 general strike was another link in a chain of rather primitive forms of public violence. Workers took possession of four submachine guns, some three hundred rifles and thousands of cartridges, but they were reluctant to use them because workers' protests were traditionally unarmed.⁹⁴ František Zublivý recalled that a

⁸⁷ Sirovátka, 'Rok 1920', 129.

⁸⁸ The practice of 'military assistance' (*Militärassistentz*) was adopted from the former Austria as a means of using soldiers to regulate public space during riots.

⁸⁹ Pavel Salák, 'Selhání vojenské asistence v Oslavanech v prosinci 1920', available online https://www.law.muni.cz/sborniky/cofola2008/files/pdf/history/salak_pavel.pdf (last accessed on 1 May 2019).

⁹⁰ Dosoudil, *Komunistický puč*, 43–6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹³ Document 235, in *Prosincová*, 182.

⁹⁴ Document 213, in *Prosincová*, 170.

deputation of three former legionnaires in their original Russian and French uniforms who went to negotiate with the commander of the new military force that was dispatched to Oslavany on 14 December told him: 'brothers, we are fighting for bread, we do not want to destroy the republic'.⁹⁵ The commander declined this attempt to fraternise and shortly afterward a shootout between his troops and the workers began. There were injuries on both sides, but, despite rumours to the contrary, nobody died,⁹⁶ unlike in other places, notably in the predominantly German town of Most in northern Bohemia, where five people were shot dead and twenty-two seriously injured.⁹⁷ Oslavany was soon controlled by the military, martial law was imposed and many workers were arrested, tried and sent to prison. In 1922 an amnesty by the president put a full stop behind this event. For the communists, the failure of December 1920 general strike lay in its primitive character caused by a lack of leadership in the revolutionary Communist Party.⁹⁸ For Czechoslovakia, it meant that the integrative idea of a national state proved to be stronger than social interests and that the crisis could have been managed with a limited number of casualties even though the state had to be strict in its punishment of these transgressions.⁹⁹ By preventing the revolting groups from achieving their goals and at the same time by avoiding needless bloodshed, the state solidified its power through successful crisis management, during which popular support for the 'republic' was demonstrated.

Conclusion

Various forms of public violence in the Bohemian lands shortly after the First World War were part and parcel of the state building process. Discrepancies between popular expectations of a radical break with the past and the everyday reality of continuity beyond 1918 provoked direct actions that translated the will of the citizens into acts of public violence. From the perspective of the state, the lootings of goods, the occupation of buildings or demands enforced by crowds were treated as transgressions, but there were also numerous signs that these acts delimited themselves from ordinary criminality. By stressing their dimension of legitimate civic engagement at a time when state power seemed to be established anew, they actually imposed limits on the use of violence upon themselves.

While the establishment of the new regime would have been unthinkable without popular support in autumn 1918, managing the self-empowered groups of people became a crucial issue for the successful consolidation of state power. The continuity of institutions contributed to stability but raised the question of reforming their working routines, which had become discredited during the war. Arrogant behaviour or the excessive use of brute force were to be curtailed, and state representatives would have to persuade citizens through reason, by listening to their demands and seeking to rectify the situation peacefully. Although the employment of violence seemed to be the easiest way to restore order, the massacre of unarmed Sudeten German demonstrators in March 1919 by undertrained and undisciplined soldiers caused irreparable damage to the reputation of the young state. It therefore turned out to be more prudent to make concessions that would prevent casualties and redress the situation later by institutions of the political system.

The diverse motives that were the driving forces behind acts of public violence were overshadowed by nationalist appeals for the protection of the republic as a Czech nation state against its numerous enemies, which helped to mobilise its supporters and reject the most radical revolutionaries among the Czechs. In the rather singular *Železná Ruda* mutiny as well as in the more significant December 1920 general strike, the alternatives were not compelling enough to be able to mobilise people for a ruthless

⁹⁵ Sirovátka, 'Rok 1920', 127.

⁹⁶ Early communist historiography tended to exaggerate the number of casualties. See Peša, 'Venkovský lid', 380.

⁹⁷ Alois Pěnička, *Kladensko v revolučních letech 1917–1921* (Praha: SNPL, 1954), 141; Klimek counted a total of thirteen strikers killed across Czechoslovakia. See Antonín Klimek, *Velké dějiny země Koruny české*, Vol. XIII:1918–1929 (Praha: Paseka, 2000), 224.

⁹⁸ Vláda Burian, 'Prosinec 1920', in *Památník prosincové persekuce roku 1920 na Moravě* (Brno: Nákladem Fr. Krčka, 1921).

⁹⁹ Statistics of the Ministry of Justice state that 3,732 strikers were arrested in December 1920, 1,504 were indicted and 461 sentenced; Kárník, *České země*, 145.

destruction of the emerging order. However imperfect it was, the republic itself was the most valuable fruit of victory in the First World War, such that most Czechs – both ‘ordinary people’ and state representatives – did not want to put it in danger but rather enhance it. With the stabilisation of both the international and domestic political systems in early 1920s, public violence came to be seen as unacceptable and unproductive behaviour. This does not mean that public violence could not reoccur later during the numerous conflicts that marked the history of interwar Czechoslovakia, but it did not appear in a situation when state building ‘from above’ by shattered state authorities and ‘from below’ by the self-empowered nation had to make compromises to transform the post-imperial chaos into republican order.

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