

From Austro-Hungarian Empire to independent Czechoslovakia

By Hartmut Liebermann

The Austro-Hungarian Empire, established in 1867, as well as its predecessor states (the Hapsburg monarchy within the Holy Roman Empire from the 16th century until 1806 and later the Austrian Empire) had always been multinational states. During the middle ages and in the period of absolutism this structure did not lead to major problems, but in the period of industrialization and increasing self-consciousness of the citizenship during the 19th century the ideas of mono-ethnic national identities spread all over Europe. This became more and more a problem for the Austrian Empire which included 12 different nationalities (Fig 1). The foundation of the dual monarchy in 1867 complied with the interests of Germans and Hungarians but could not satisfy the upcoming national movements of the other nationalities. It is also important to know that while the Czech part of what became Czechoslovakia belonged to the Austrian part of the dual monarchy ("Cis-Leithanien"), the Slovakian part belonged to the Hungarian part ("Trans-Leithanien"). Czechs and Slovaks never had a common state in their history before 1918, they just had related languages.

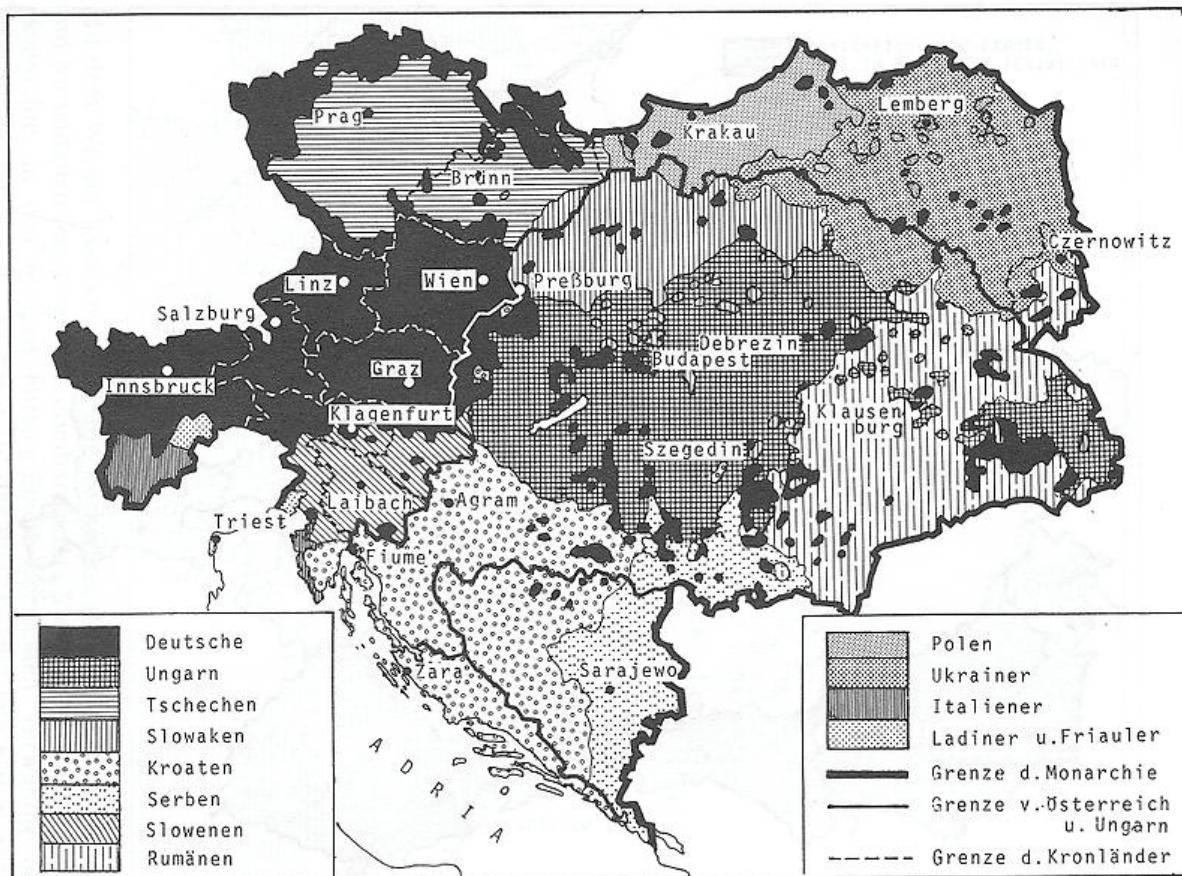


Fig 1: Map of the different nationalities (languages) in Austria-Hungary

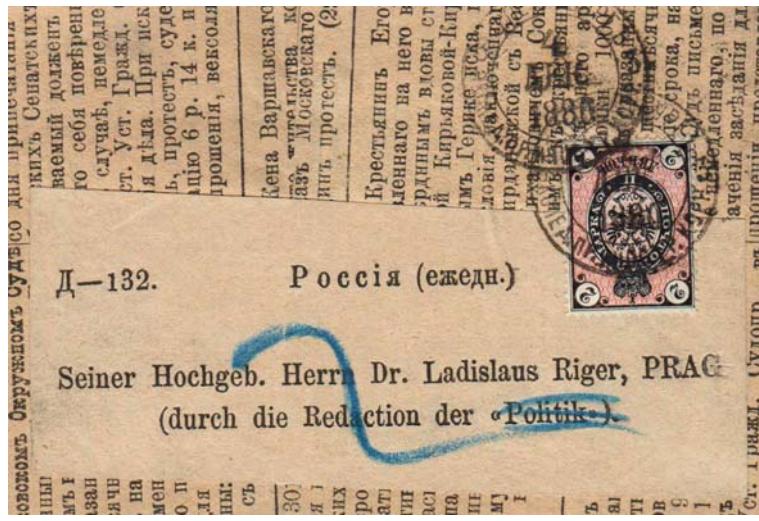
The formation of a Czech national movement

As to the Czech part of the population (the third largest in the Empire), **František Palacký**, a teacher and editor, made important contributions to the development of a Czech national consciousness during the 19th century. He wrote a "*History of the Czech people in Bohemia and Moravia*" and was co-founder of the cultural association "Matica Česká" (Czech National Club). In 1848 he was co-organizer of the "Congress of Slavs" in Prague. He became a member of the "Reichstag" (Parliament of the empire during the revolution of 1848) in Vienna and in Kremsier (Kroměříž). 1861 he became a member of the Austrian House of Lords ("Herrenhaus") and deputy of the Bohemian "Landtag" (state parliament). There he was a leading member of the parliamentary

party of the “Staročeši” (“Old Czechs”) and advocated a transformation of the Hapsburg Monarchy into a federation, in which the Slavic peoples would have played a leading part. After the Austrian-Hungarian Compromise (1867, Dual Monarchy) the Old Czech Party aimed at a similar arrangement for Bohemia (“Triple Monarchy”), but they didn’t succeed.



Fig 2: Registered letter from Prague to F. Palacký in Vienna, 1861, receiving postmark of the House of Lords



František Rieger, lawyer and son-in-law of F. Palacký, was also a member of the National committee in Prague 1848, participant of the “Congress of Slavs” and deputy in the Kroměříž Parliament – as his father-in-law. He also promoted the transformation of the Hapsburg Monarchy into a federal state. As a leading member of the Old Czech Party (founded in 1860) he was deputy of the Bohemian state parliament (1861-71 and 1878-95), of the Reichsrat (parliament of the empire, 1861-63) and the House of Lords (from 1897) in Vienna.

Left: Fig 3: Newspaper address strip, sent from Russia to F. Rieger in Prag (1880)

More radical than the Old Czech party, the **Young Czech Party** (“Mladočeši”, founded in 1874) stood up for the greatest possible independence of the country. Furthermore they demanded universal suffrage. After the elections of 1889 they were the largest parliamentary party in the Bohemian Landtag and forestalled the Czech-German balance which Prime Minister Taaffe and the Old Czech Party had negotiated. After the discharge of Taaffe his successor Badeni enforced an extended regulation for the use of languages, in order to gain the agreement of the Young Czechs. According to this regulation the Czech language should have become equitable with German everywhere in Bohemia, even in parts with more than 90% German speaking inhabitants. Thus all officials should have been obliged to have knowledge in both languages. This led to massive protests of German deputies in the Vienna Reichsrat; they tried to prevent the implementation of the new law by means of parliamentary obstruction. At the same time there were big demonstrations in the German speaking parts of Bohemia and Moravia (“Badeni-Krawalle”, the “Badeni riots”), which led to the dismissal of Badeni and the withdrawal of his regulation.



Fig 4: German propaganda postcards against Badeni's regulation of language use, 1891

Increasing national differences, sometimes even hate and contempt between Czechs and Germans, were characteristic for the last three decades before WWI. We can get an idea of it from these propaganda picture postcards which are typical for this era.

Dr. Alois Rašín belonged to the radical-autonomist wing of the Young Czech Party. Already in 1884 he was sentenced to 2 years prison in the course of a process against young Czech radicals. In 1911 he was elected in the Reichsrat. After the beginning of WWI he supported the Czech independence movement, and in 1915 he was arrested and sentenced to death. After the death of Emperor Franz Josef I in 1916 the death sentence was changed into a prison sentence, and in 1917 he benefitted from an amnesty. In 1918 he was co-founder of the new Czechoslovak state and was nominated as its first minister for financial affairs.

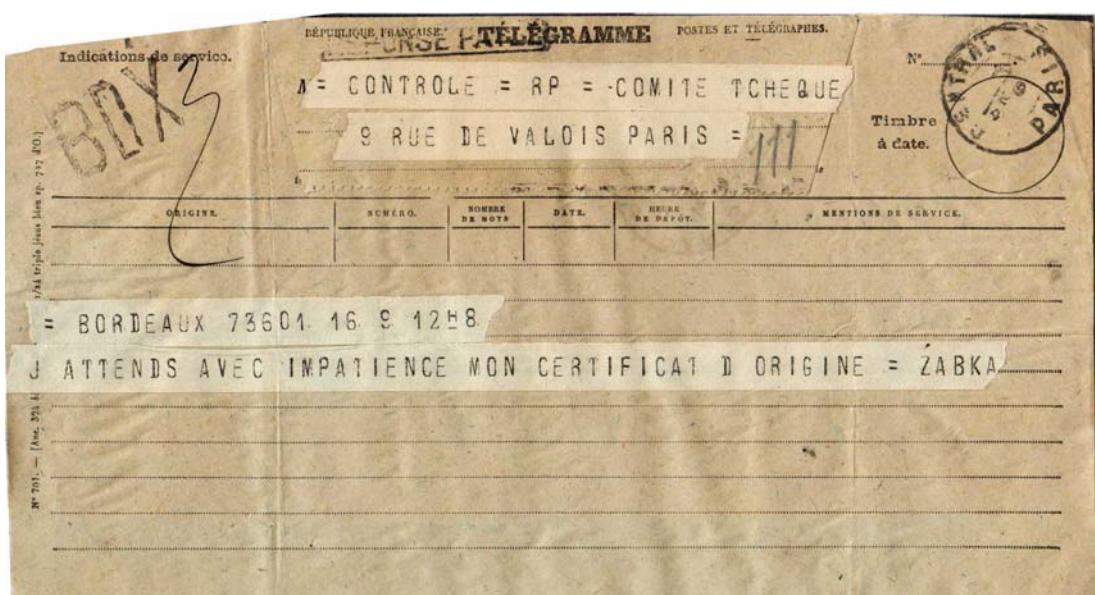
Fig 5 (below): Letter from Dr. Rašín, sent from the garrison arrest in Vienna to his wife in Prague, March 31st 1916; on the reverse a censorship mark

During WWI a Czech opposition was formed abroad. The objective was the dissolution of the Hapsburg Monarchy and national independence for Czechs. Key areas were Paris, London and the USA. In Paris the opposition was focused around the “Czech National Committee”, which later turned into the “Czech committee abroad”.



Above: Fig 5.

Below: Fig 6: Censored telegram from Bordeaux to the Czech Committee in Paris, September 16th, 1914



Who were the main protagonists of the Czech opposition abroad?

Tomáš G. Masaryk was elected to the Reichsrat as a member of the Young Czech Party in 1891, but resigned in 1893 because of dissension with the party line. In 1900 he founded the “Realistic Party” (“Česká strana lidová realistická”), which he represented in the Reichsrat from 1900 to 1914. After the beginning of WWI he pursued the target of an independent state. He escaped from being arrested in 1914 by a trip abroad. In Geneva he started to organize an exile movement. In the autumn of 1915 he was co-founder of the “Czech committee abroad”. His most important co-worker as a secretary of the committee was **Dr. Eduard Beneš**, who followed him to Paris on September 3rd 1915. He was also a member of the “Realistic Party”.

The transition to a movement for Czecho-Slovak independence

The Slovak **Milan Rastislav Štefánik** (1880-1919) met T.G. Masaryk and his thoughts as a student in Prague. He emigrated, went to Paris, became a French citizen in 1912 and fought as a fighter pilot in the French army during WWI. In 1915 he met with the Masaryk group. They shared the objectives of the dissolution of the Hapsburg Monarchy and the founding of a common Czecho-Slovak state. The Czech Committee changed into the “Czecho-Slovak National Council” in February 1916.

Štefánik was mandated by the Committee to establish an army, consisting of Czech and Slovakian war prisoners and of emigrants. He received support from the French state, but also from Slovakian emigrants in the USA. Štefánik subsequently organized Czecho-Slovak legions in Russia, France and Italy. In 1918 he was nominated for Minister of Defence by the provisional government, but in 1919 he died in an airplane crash.

The independence of Czechoslovakia

In April 1918, after some months stay in Russia, Masaryk went to the USA. On the one hand he needed the support of the American government for his plans, on the other hand there were important Czech and Slovakian emigrant associations in the USA, which he intended to unify. Important contact persons in the USA were Karel Pengler (press office, liaison office between the associations in America) and Vojta Beneš, brother of E. Beneš and responsible for financial affairs of the emigrant associations. On May 31st 1918, Czech and Slovakian exile groups concluded in Pittsburgh a basic agreement about the new Czecho-Slovakian state to be founded. The Slovaks were promised autonomy and equal rights.

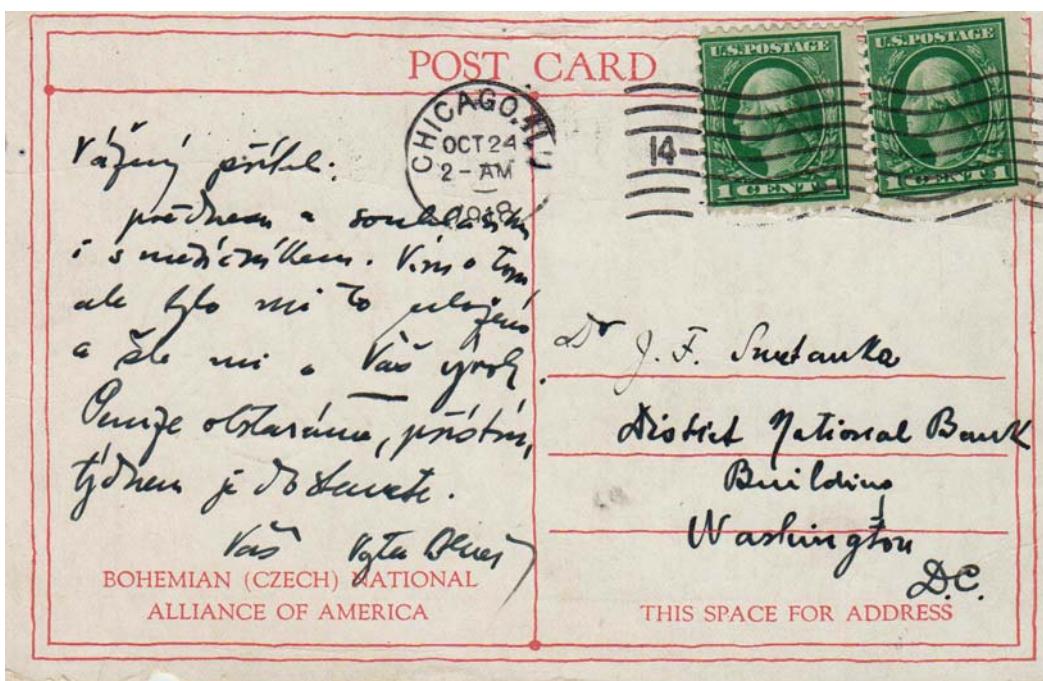


Fig 8: Autograph Postcard of Vojta Beneš, written from Chicago to Washington, October 24th 1918

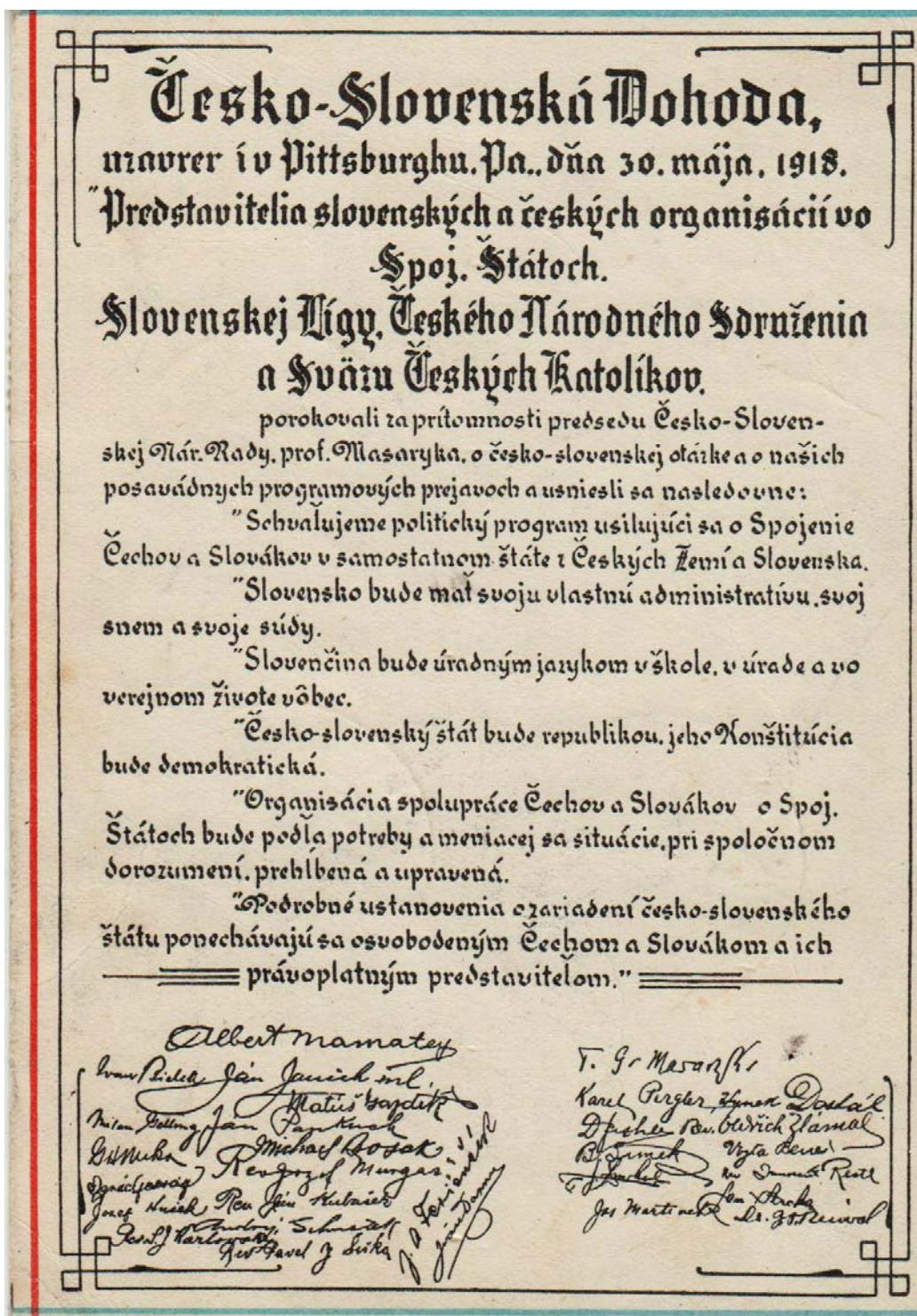


Fig 7: Picture postcard: The Pittsburgh agreement

After the conclusion of the Pittsburgh agreement Masaryk succeeded in getting the recognition of the Allies for the Czecho-Slovak National Council as the base of the future government. France agreed on June 29th, Great Britain did so on August 9th and the USA on September 3rd 1918. On October 14th, 1918, Edvard Beneš declared the Council for Provisional Government with T.G. Masaryk as Prime Minister. On October 18th Masaryk proclaimed the independent Czechoslovak state ("Washington declaration").

Decisive factors for the recognition were:

- The interest of the Allies in the destruction of the Hapsburg Monarchy,

- The confirmation that the new state would have democratic structures and would guarantee the rights of minorities
- Last but not least the military importance of the Czechoslovak legions.



Fig 9: Censored postcard from the USA, addressed to a second lieutenant of the Czechoslovak army in France, October 21st 1918

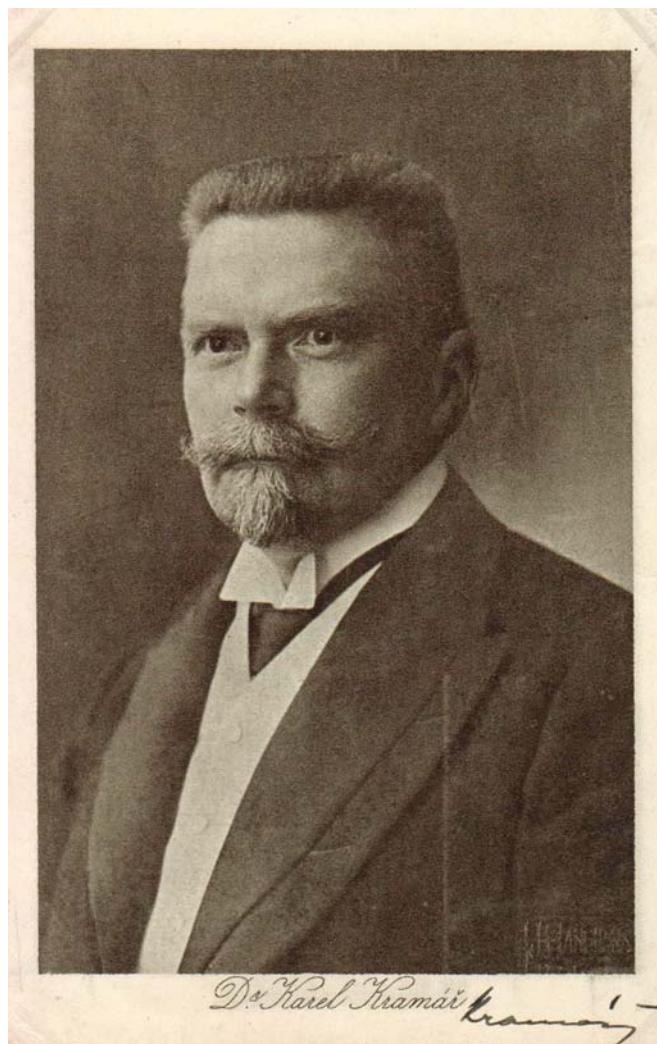
On October 28th 1918, the Austro-Hungarian government accepted the conditions of the American President Wilson for the termination of the war. One of these conditions was the right of self-determination for peoples. On the same day independent Czechoslovakia was proclaimed, simultaneously in Prague, Washington D.C. and Geneva, where members of the provisional Czechoslovak government and representatives of the internal opposition met for the first time.

Fig 10: Historic document from the first meeting in Geneva: greetings card sent to Prague, October 28th 1918. Addressee was Jan Svečený, deputy of the Reichsrat. The card is signed by G. Habrman, E. Beneš, Karel Kramář, Štefan Osusky, Antonín Kalina and František Staněk.





Fig 11: Picture postcard showing the members of the Czechoslovak delegation in Geneva



Karel Kramář was a member of the Young Czech Party and deputy of the Reichsrat since 1891; from 1901 he was group chairman and from 1907 also vice-president of the Reichsrat. After the beginning of the war he stood up for the independence of Czechs and Slovaks. In 1915 he was sentenced to death because of high treason, but later he benefitted from the imperial amnesty in 1917. In the summer of 1918 the Czech deputies of the Reichsrat elected him as chairman of the National Committee. On October 26th 1918 he went to Geneva, as leader of the delegation of the National Committee. Two days later he proclaimed the independence of Czechoslovakia. From November 1918 until June 1919 he was the first Prime Minister of the new state.

Fig 12: Picture postcard, signed by Kramář

Slovakia had no clear borders before the war (it was part of “Upper Hungary”). During the war there was hardly any movement for independence. The convergence with the Czechs was mainly supported by emigrants. It was only at the manifestation of the Social Democrats on the occasion of May 1st 1918, when Dr. V. Šrobar claimed the right of self-determination “also for the Hungarian part of the Czechoslovak tribe”. In mid-October a Slovakian National Council was created (“Slovenskej národnej rady”). At a meeting of some 100 representatives of different groups in Turčiansky Sv. Martin this National Council passed a declaration for the unity of the Czechoslovak people based on complete equality. The Hungarian offer for Slovakian autonomy within Hungary was rejected. A respective telegram, signed by Matúš Dúla, chairman of the Council, was sent to the National Committee in Prague.



Fig 13: Letter of November 16th 1918 to M. Dúla; postmark “Hungarian Republic”

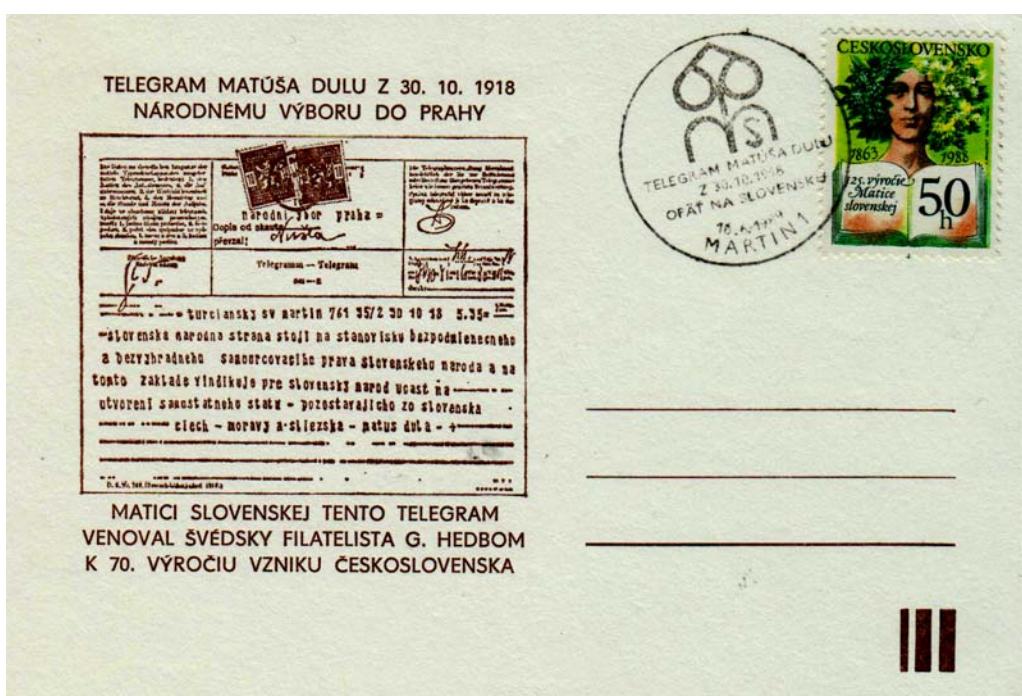


Fig 14: Commemorative Postcard from 1988 on the occasion of the 70th Anniversary of the Turčiansky Sv. Martin telegram

On October 18th Emperor Charles I issued a manifesto on the transformation of the monarchy into a federation. This came too late. On October 28th the independence of Czechoslovakia was proclaimed. Slovenes and Croatians became co-founder of the new South Slavic state on October 29th. Hungary terminated the Union with Austria on October 31st. Thereby Austria-Hungary was dissolved. Charles I resigned on November 11th and the “Republik Deutsch-Österreich” was proclaimed. The majority-German-speaking regions of Bohemia and Moravia declared their intention to join Deutsch-Österreich. Czechoslovak military prevented this connection by December 18th. The Treaty of St. Germain confirmed that these regions should belong to Czechoslovakia. The new Republic of Austria was forced to give up the prefix “Deutsch”.



Fig 15: Letter from Manetin (Manětín), October 30th 1918; German-excised cancel (originally bilingual); stamps of the empire overprinted “Finis Austriae” (“The end of Austria”)

On November 14th 1918, a revolutionary National Assembly passed a provisional constitution and elected T.G. Masaryk as President and Karel Kramář as Prime Minister. This assembly consisted of 216 Czech members (representatives of Czech political parties according to the 1911 election results) and 40 co-opted Slovaks. There were no members of German nationality or from the other minorities involved. On February 29th 1920 the National assembly (which had meanwhile expanded to 300 deputies) passed the definitive constitution of the Č.S.R. Only at the following elections to the parliament did Germans and other minorities participate.



Fig 16: Registered express letter from Nový Jičín (Neu-Titschein) to the president of the National Assembly, F. Tomášek (July 3rd 1919).

Problems of the new state: minorities, borderlines and separatist movements

The Czecho-Slovak movement for independence strove for a nation state, since the multinational state Austria-Hungary was no longer (or not in adequate time) able to solve the problems of its smaller nations. The problem: the newly-founded Czechoslovakia was just another multinational state – even if the protagonists of the new state had another self-conception. According to the census of 1921 there were Czechs (51.5%), Slovaks (14%), Germans (23.4%), Hungarians (5.6%), Ruthenians and Ukrainians (3.5%), Poles and others (2.1%). The circumstances of Czechoslovakia's formation were problematic:

- Germans, Hungarians and Poles were not involved in the elaboration of the constitution (the German parties boycotted the constitutional assembly);
- The preamble of the constitution mentions a “Czechoslovak People”, and only this one;
- The “Czechoslovak language” (does it exist?) was declared to be the only official language of the country.

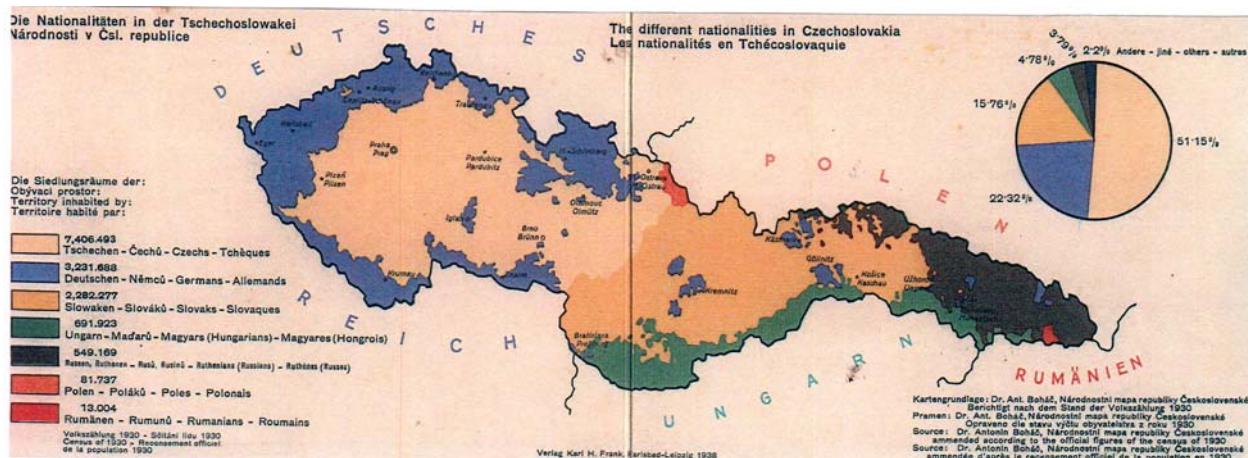


Fig 17: Map of the nationalities in Czechoslovakia

The numerically most important minority, the Germans, referred to the right of self-determination which had been proclaimed by President Wilson, and they contrasted it with the historic-territorial right of the state which was claimed by the Czechs. On October 29th and 30th 1918 the German deputies from Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia which had been elected for the Reichsrat in Vienna proclaimed for their settlement areas the provinces **“Deutschböhmen”** (capital Reichenberg/Liberec) and **“Sudetenland”** (capital Troppau/Opava) as parts of Deutsch-Österreich. On November 3rd the provinces **“Böhmerwaldgau”** in South Bohemia and **“Deutschsüdmähren”** in Moravia followed. So the new state was threatened by separation.

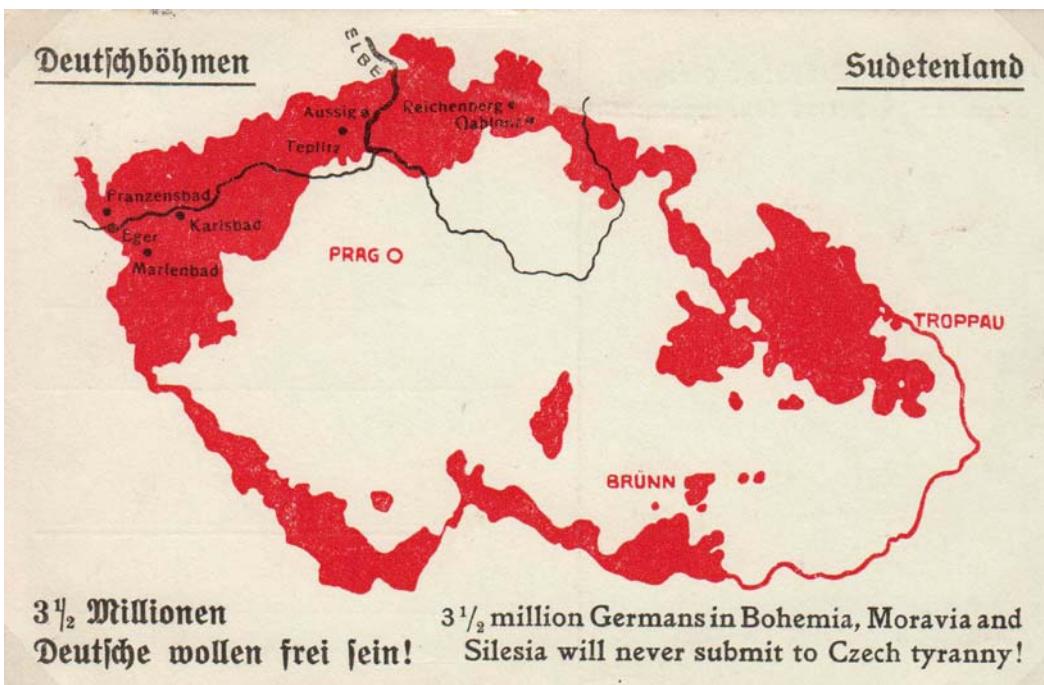


Fig 18: Propaganda postcard from 1919, showing the areas of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia which were settled mainly by Germans

Deutschböhmen, the largest of the disloyal provinces, had some 2.23 million inhabitants; 2.07 million of them considered themselves as Germans (according to the 1919 census). Following the proclamation of the province as a part of Deutsch-Österreich, a Provincial Government was formed in Reichenberg (Liberec), on October 29th 1918. The Governor was Rudolf Lodgman van Auen, from November 5th. Administrative bodies were established which were focused on Vienna, not on Prague. As to the Postal service, the “Deutsch-Österreichische Postdirektion” for Deutschböhmen was established in Aussig (Ústí nad labem) by decree of the General Postal direction in Vienna, November 10th 1918.

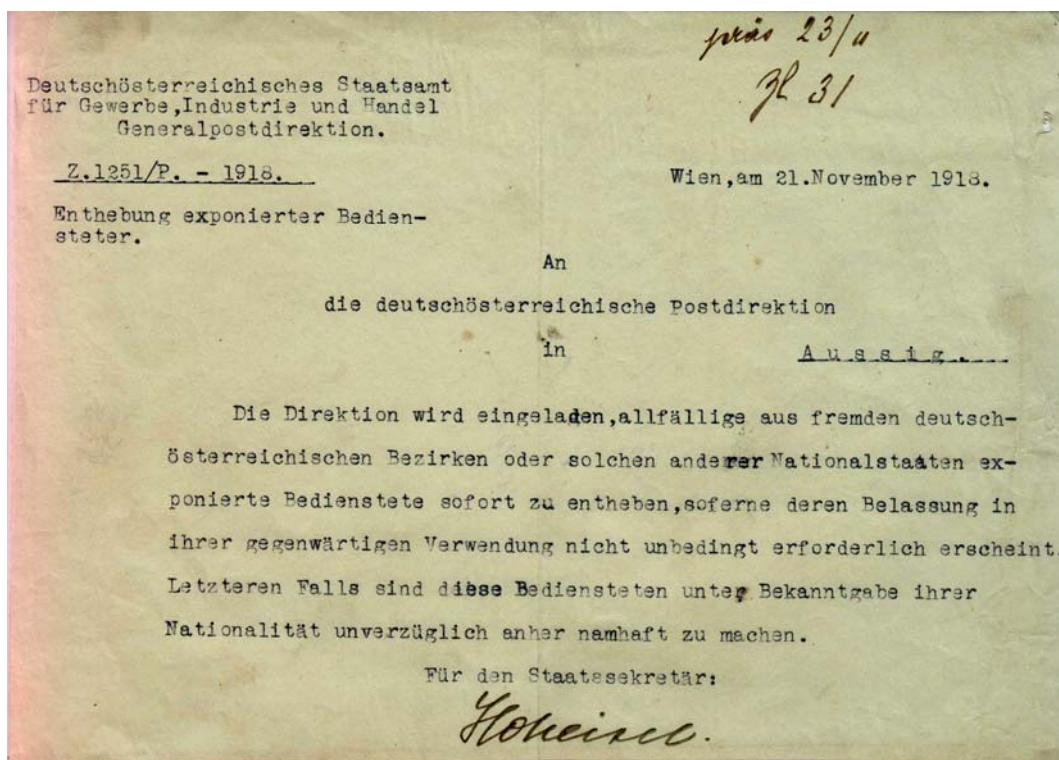


Fig 19: Official instruction by the General Postal Direction in Vienna to the Postal Direction at Aussig, November 21st 1918, concerning procedures with non-German employees

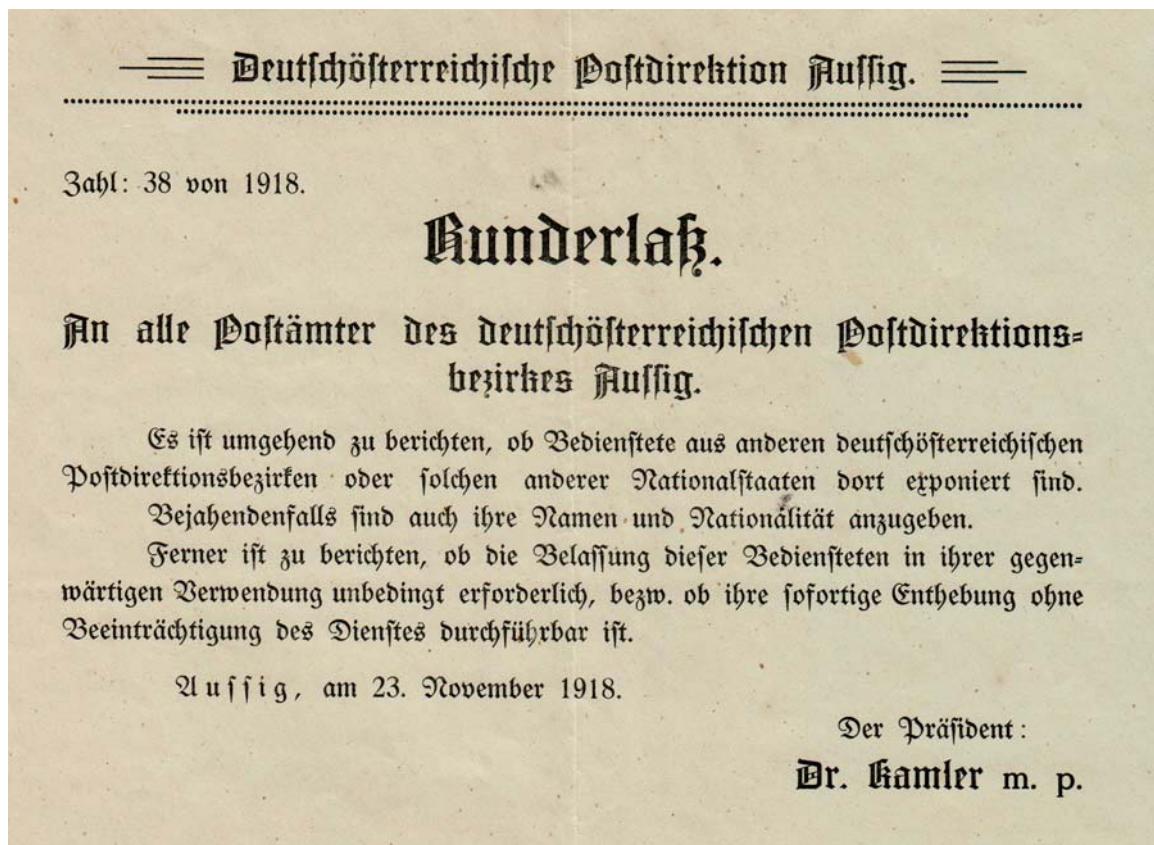


Fig 20: Circular by the Postdirektion Aussig fulfilling the instruction from Vienna, November 23rd 1918

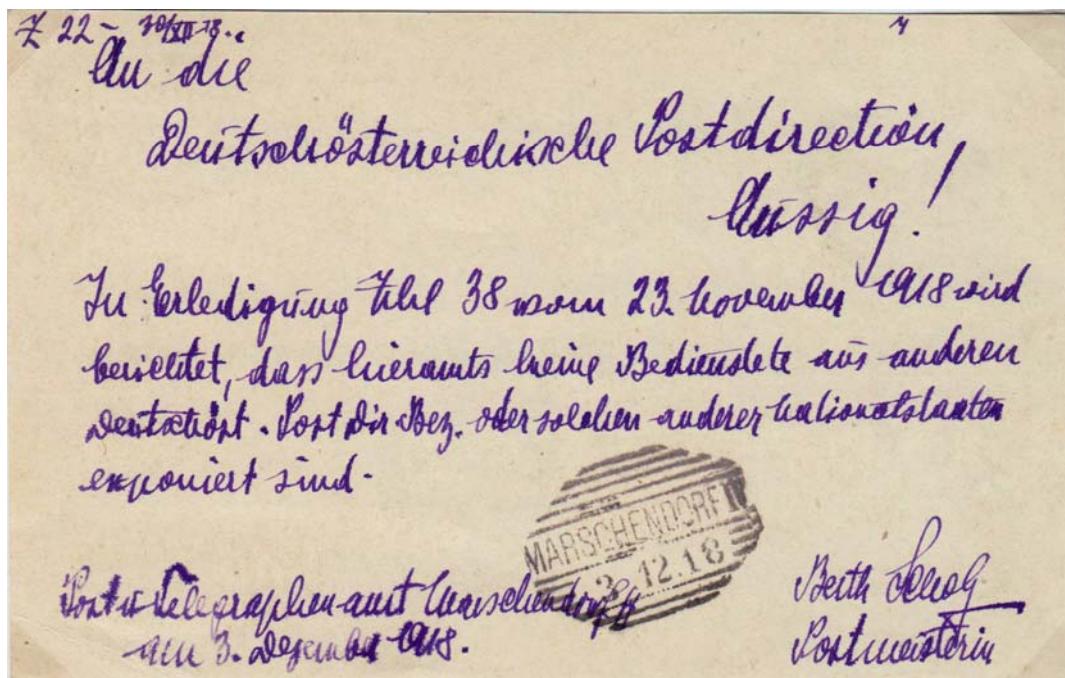


Fig 21: Answer by the Postal office Marschendorf (Maršov), December 3rd 1918

Employees of post offices in Deutschböhmen were supposed to take an oath through which they pledged loyalty to the German-Austrian state. This created conflicts for those who felt as a member of the new Czechoslovak state. If they refused the oath they were dismissed.

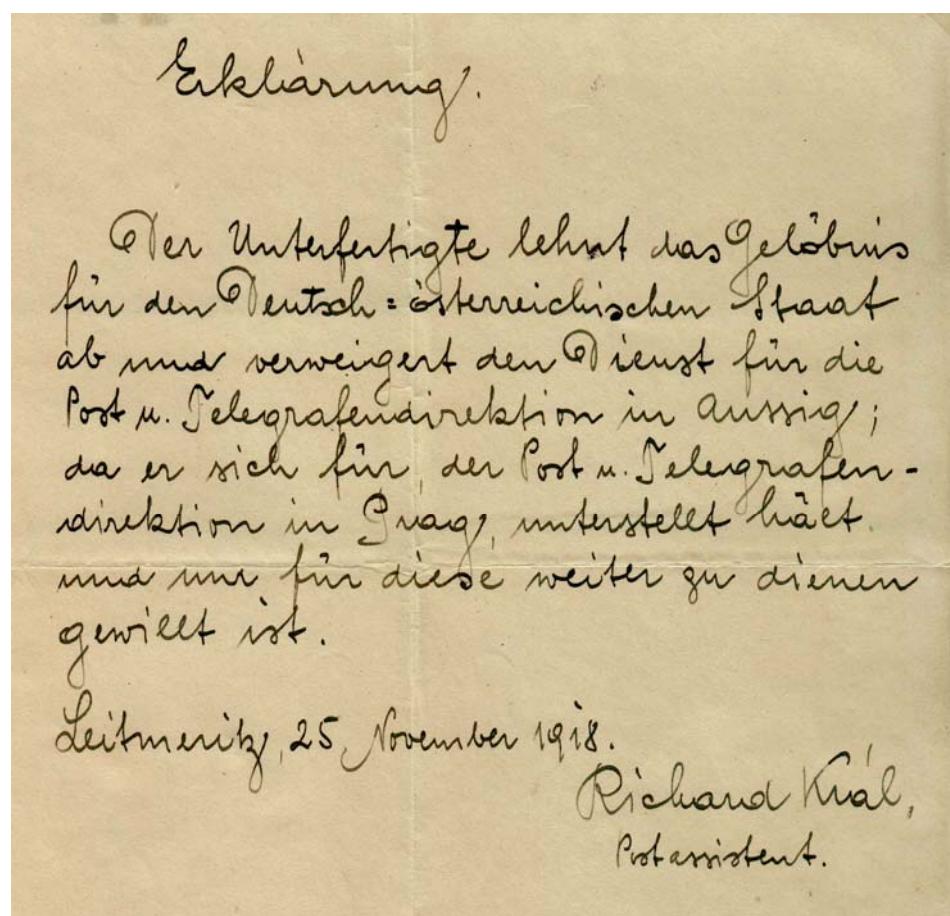


Fig 22: Statement of a postal assistant from Leitmeritz (Litoměřice) about his refusal of the oath, November 25th 1918

From mid-November Czechoslovak military started to recapture the separatist provinces. By December 19th 1918, all regions were occupied and *de facto* subjected to Czechoslovak sovereignty. According to the Treaty of St. Germain Austria was supposed to give up all Bohemian and Moravian regions.

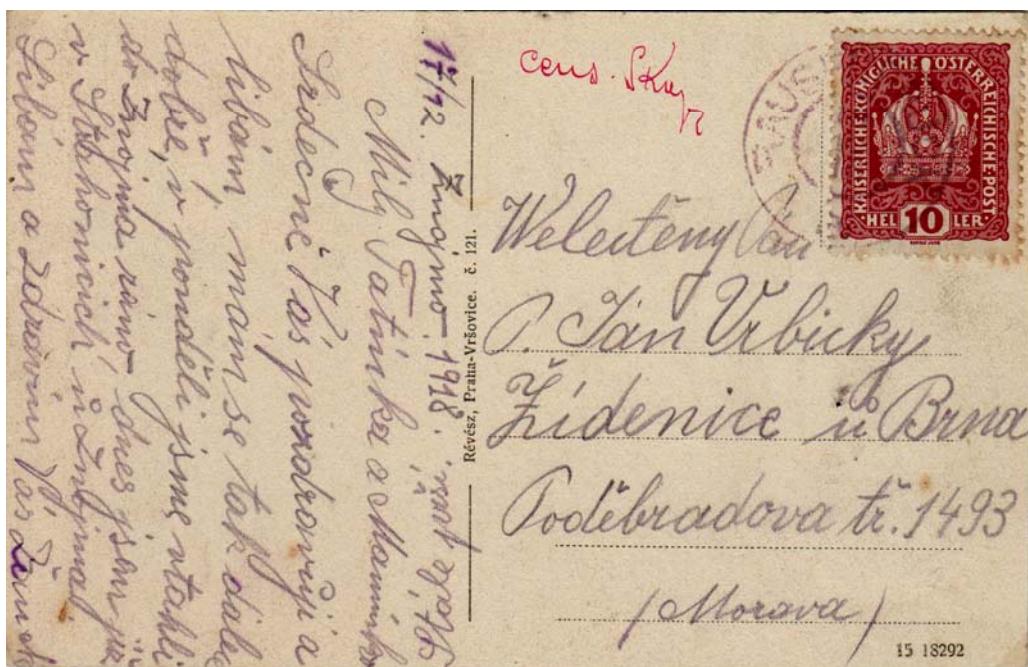


Fig 23: Censored picture postcard written by a Czechoslovak soldier from Znojmo (Znaim), December 17th 1918; "...on Monday we moved into Znojmo..."

The Slovakian territory had no historic borders. In its South-Eastern part there were armed conflicts with Hungary about the demarcation lines. On July 4th 1919, the Hungarian troops were forced to withdraw. Under the peace treaty of Trianon (June 4th 1920) Hungary had to hand over important parts of the former Upper Hungary to Czechoslovakia, among them regions with a majority Hungarian population.

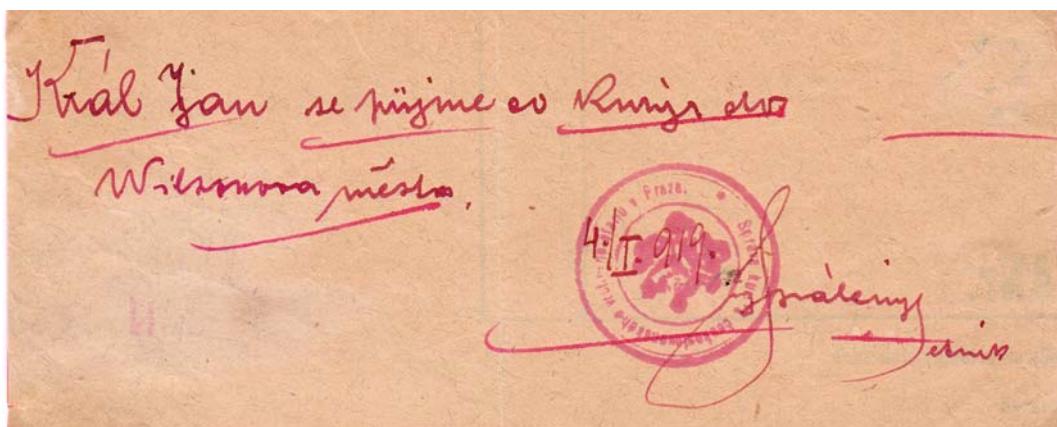


Fig 24: Military courier mail from the headquarters in Prague (January 4th 1919), sent to "Wilsonove Město", as the Slovak capital was briefly called in 1919 in honour of the American president. The former official name of the city was Pressburg until 1867, then Poszony; from 1919 it was Bratislava.



Fig 25: Fieldpost card from Csap (Čop) in South-Eastern Slovakia, sent by a soldier from the 88th Czechoslovak infantry regiment, May 21st 1919

For the settlement of **border disputes between (German-)Austria and Czechoslovakia** an international border commission was constituted. It settled in Horní Dvořiště (Oberhaid) close to the border with Upper Austria. Horní Dvořiště was a frontier station and the first place which was passed by T.G. Masaryk when he came back from his exile on December 20th 1918.



Fig 26: Letter from the Austrian delegation at the international border commission in Horní Dvořiště, sent to Linz



Fig 27: Philatelic influenced postcard, sent July 31st 1920 from Gmunt v Čechách; mixed franking of Czechoslovak and German-Austrian stamps. This was possible only for 3 days, after the transfer of Gmunt (which used to be part of the Lower Austrian Gmund) to Czechoslovakia. In 1920 Gmunt was renamed "České Velenice".



Fig 28: The map shows the plebiscite area with the final border line

The former administrative district **Ostschlesien (Eastern Silesia)** of the Crown land Austrian Silesia (the former duchy of Teschen) was a controversial region between Poland and Czechoslovakia. That's why during the peace negotiations in Paris the decision was made to organize a plebiscite. An inter-allied commission was established for the supervision of the plebiscite. The commission arrived in Teschen on February 1st 1920, and gave the order to use Polish or Czech stamps with the overprint "SO 1920" (for the Czech administrative district, according to a provisional demarcation line from 1918) and "S.O. 1920" (for the Polish district). The stamps were used from February 13th 1920. The planned plebiscite did not take place because the differences were solved by arbitration award on July 28th 1920. The stamps were officially valid until August 11th 1920 in Czechoslovakia, until September 1st 1920 in Poland.



Fig 29: Letter from Oderberg 2 (Bohumín 2), sent March 2nd 1920;
mixed franking of Czech stamps with and without SO 1920 overprint



Fig 30: Letter with Polish S.O. 1920 overprints from the divided city of Teschen (Cieszyn),
sent to Prague on April 11th with bilingual (German-Polish) postmarks.

Postal services of the new republic: The beginning



During the first weeks after the declaration of independence **Scouts** managed the local postal service for some time. For this purpose particular stamps were used (November 7th – 25th 1918). The postage was paid to the courier by the recipient.

Fig 31: Stamps of Scout's Postal service (showing different shades of blue)

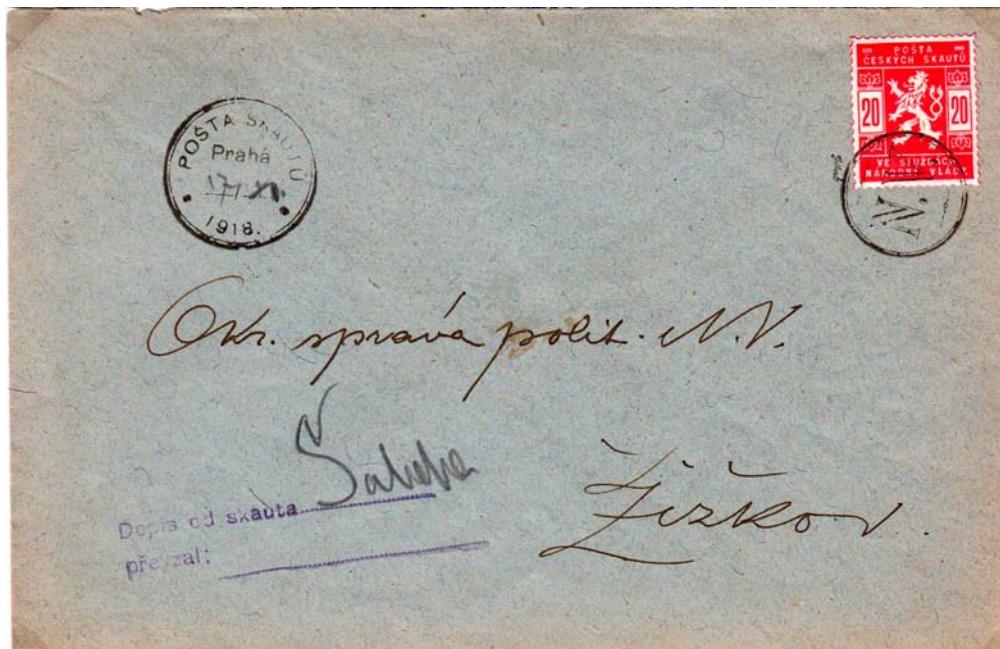


Fig 32: Letter from November 17th 1918, franked with 20h, postmark “POŠTA SKAUTU 1918” and “NV” (Národní Výbor), handwritten marking of delivery by the courier

From December 18th 1918, **the first set of stamps was issued by the Czechoslovak Post**. The famous Art Nouveau artist **Alfons Mucha** (1860 – 1939) designed the up-to-now most popular motif of Czechoslovak stamps, **the Hradčany issue**.

Fig 33: Black print with picture of A. Mucha, issued on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Hradčany issue (1958)

[Original margins trimmed. Ed.]

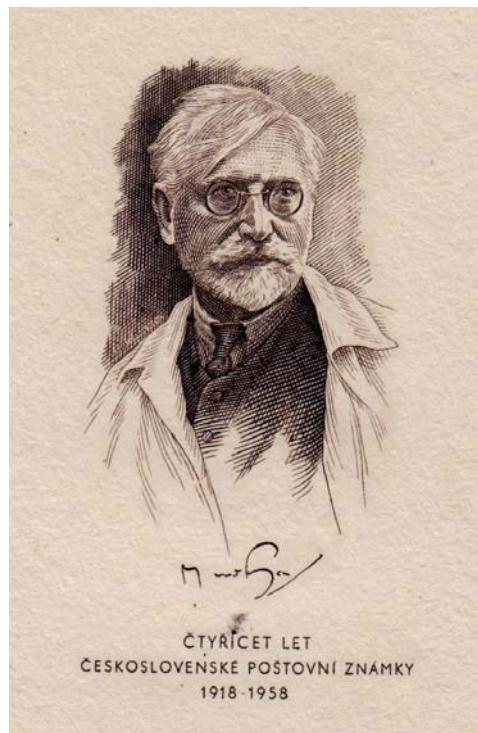




Fig 34: Express letter from Kralovice u Plzně (Kralowitz bei Pilsen), February 12th 1919; Hradčany mixed franking, German name excised from postmark

The constitution of Czechoslovakia

The circumstances of Czechoslovakia's formation were complicated. Nonetheless during the following years a functioning parliamentary democracy developed, to which also the members of the other nations eventually contributed. The system was based on the principles of sovereignty of the people and separation of powers. Legislation was allocated to the National Assembly, which had two Houses, the House of Deputies and the Senate; elections were based on universal suffrage.

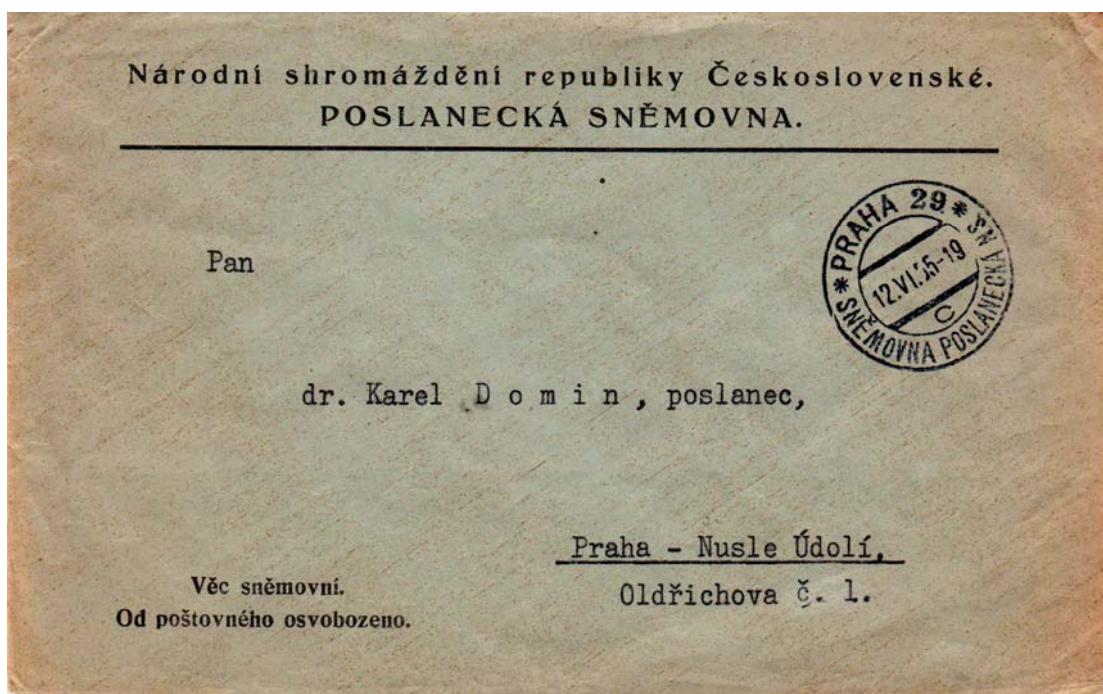


Fig 35: Letter from the House of Deputies, sent to a deputy (1935); postmark of the House of Deputies (Praha 29, Sněmovna Poslanecká)

The president of the Republic was the head of state. He was not only representative of the state, but he also appointed the government and was supreme commander of the army. The first president was T.G. Masaryk (1920-35), his successor was Edvard Beneš (1935-38), who held the office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs during the reign of Masaryk (1918-35).



Fig 36: Registered letter from March 1930, sent to President Masaryk, franked with a stamp of 3 Kč, issued on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Masaryk; receiving cancellation of the president's office.

Czechoslovakia received approximately 20% of the area and 25% of the population of the Hapsburg monarchy, but 66% of the industrial capacity. It developed into one of the most industrialized countries of Europe during the 20s. During the 30s it was the only democratic state in Central Europa, surrounded by fascist and authoritarian states, until its destruction by Hitler in 1938/39.

Hartmut Liebermann, 19/06/2017