Imperial Ambitions: The Campaign for Czechoslovak Colonies on the Eve of the Paris Peace Conference

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ABSTRACT

Following the conclusion of World War I, questions were raised about the fate of Germany's overseas territories. In the weeks leading up to the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919, plans circulated among the European powers about a mandate system in which former colonies would be placed under the "tutelage" of "advanced" European nations. This paper examines the campaign which took place during the first months of independence to appoint Czechoslovakia as a mandate power charged with overseeing Germany's former colonies. By describing the actors behind the campaign and analyzing the rhetoric in the Czech-language press, the paper argues that the demand for Czechoslovak colonies was deeply intertwined with postwar debates about civilizational development and Czech leaders' desire to demonstrate their nation's capacity for self-rule.

KEYWORDS: colonialism, mandate system, imperial internationalism, small nations, Czechoslovakia

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On the morning of 5 January 1919, a little more than two months after the founding of Czechoslovakia, an article appeared in the newspaper *České slovo,* the title of which combined three words that common sense would have relegated to the impossible: "Czech Overseas Colonies."[1] The short article and its provocative headline spurred a series of contributions to other Czech newspapers over the following months. Each featured an equally improbable linguistic combination. One announced the founding of a Czechoslovak Maritime Society. Another asked, "Do We Need Colonial Territories?," while a third exhorted: "To the Sea!" Other examples followed in the same vein: "Shall We Claim a Colony?," "Our Colonies," "About Those Czech Colonies," and so on. These articles, all of them penned by public intellectuals for mainstream newspapers, expressed the euphoria many felt in the weeks and months following the creation of an independent Czechoslovak state.[2] The irony of these articles, of course, is that the new country, Czechoslovakia, was landlocked in the middle of the European continent and thus an unlikely candidate for overseas expansion. Equally glaringly, the Czechs had only recently liberated themselves from imperial rule. Now spokesmen of this same nation seemed poised to claim the imperial mantel for themselves.

The occasion for this brief but intense campaign to acquire colonies was the upcoming peace conference in Paris, where the Allied forces were to meet and deliberate collectively on the future of the postwar world. The collapse of empires during World War I had left behind broad stretches of territory whose fate now rested in the hands of the great powers. These former imperial spaces now became blank screens upon which states both old and new projected their territorial ambitions. The future of the former Habsburg provinces hung in the balance, as did the fate of Russia's imperial borderlands, Ottoman holdings in the Near East, and those strings of islands in the South Pacific and chunks of Africa that Germany had claimed as colonies.

What was to be done with the borderlands of defunct empires and overseas possessions of a defeated state? The U.S. president Woodrow Wilson famously demanded a "peace without victory"; the war was fought, in his words, "for

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1 České kolonie zámořské [Czech Overseas Colonies], in: České Slovo, 1919-01-05.

2 *České Slovo*, at the time edited by geographer Stanislav Nikolaus, was the organ of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party, led by Václav Klofáč, Jiří Štřibrný, and Emil Franke. After 1923, it was also the party of the foreign minister, Edvard Beneš; *Národní listy* and *Národ* voiced the opinions of the National Democrats, the party of Czechoslovakia's first prime minister, Karel Kramář; *Venkov* represented the views of the agrarian party led by Antonín Švehla. CHARLES HOCH: The Political Parties in Czechoslovakia, Prague 1936; JIŘÍ MALÍŘ, PAVEL MAREK et al.: Politické strany: Vývoj politických stran a hnutí v českých zemích a Československu v letech 1861–2004 [Political Parties: The Development of Political Parties and Movements in the Bohemian Lands and Czechoslovakia 1861–2004], vol. 1–2, Brno 2005.

democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the right and liberties of small nations."[3]

Defending the weak against the strong and thereby making the world "safe for democracy" belonged to the more noble rhetoric of the Allied powers. The gospel of national self-determination, a powerful slogan used in relation to the war first by the Bolsheviks, made its way into Wilson's liberal vocabulary by early 1918 before being broadcast around the world.[4] It should not surprise that groups aspiring to independence adopted Wilson's rhetoric in the months and weeks before Paris. Erez Manela aptly designates the period surrounding the end of World War I, a time when unspoken promises of national sovereignty fueled independence movements across the globe, "the Wilsonian moment."[5]

But who belonged among the "small nations"—a flexible term with which Wilson referred to victims of German or Austrian aggression, minor allies, new nations emerging from empires, and all Asian countries except Japan?[6] It was a broad and heterogeneous category of national, ethnic, and cultural groups that appealed to the ideal of national self-determination. As Manela shows in his book, the Wilsonian moment catalyzed anti-colonial nationalism in the non-Western world. In addition to those peoples under the rule of Europe's overseas empires, those who had been the subjects of the continent's great land empires such as Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Germany also appealed to national self-determination as the basis for their claims to independence. Of course, the colonial subjects of European empires were to receive a much different hearing at the peace conference (if they received hearings at all) than did the delegations of the small European nations. Nonetheless, both movements of small nations—the anti-colonial nationalism of non-Western peoples and the anti-imperial nationalism of Europeans—eagerly adopted the anti-imperial vocabulary of national self-determination that spread across the world in the wake of the Great War.

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3 WOODROW WILSON: Address to the Senate of the United States: "A World League for Peace," January 22, 1917, in: The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-senate-the-united-states-world-league-for-peace (2021-09-27); WOODROW WILSON: Address to a Joint Session of Congress Requesting a Declaration of War against Germany, April 02, 1917, ibid., https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-joint-session-congress-requesting-declaration-war-against-germany (2021-09-27).

4 VLADIMIR LENIN: Die sozialistische Revolution und das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Nationen (Thesen), in: VLADIMIR LENIN: Werke. Vol. 22: Dezember 1915–Juli 1916, Berlin 1960, pp. 144–159 (October 1916); Woodrow Wilson first used the slogan in the so-called Four Points Address, Address to Congress on International Order, February 11, 1918, in: The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency. ucsb.edu/documents/address-congress-international-order (2021-09-27).

5 EREZ MANELA: The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism, Oxford 2007.

6 Ibid., p. 57.

All small nations borrowed from the Wilsonian language of self-determination and equality to advance their cause. Unique to the small nations of Europe or European descent, however, was the adoption of a second influential vocabulary. Besides Wilson and his pronouncements, above all the Fourteen Points speech, a pamphlet produced by the South African statesmen Jan Smuts belongs among the most notable documents shaping postwar conceptions of sovereignty. In his own words "a representative of one of the smallest and least of the states at the Conference," Smuts was an accredited representative of the Union of South Africa in Paris, and a powerful advocate of what he called "the Wilson peace."[7] In his influential work *The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestion,* published in 1918, Smuts characterizes the League of Nations as a successor to those multinational empires that had recently passed into history: "In a rudimentary way all such composite Empires of the past were leagues of nations, keeping the peace among the constituent nations, but unfortunately doing so not on the basis of freedom but of repression."[8] Empires, not nation states, were the rule in history; national communities flourished only within the context of international governance. Whereas multinational states such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire had failed to balance the integrity of empire with national self-determination, argues Smuts, the League would represent an empire of civilization, a democratic assembly to foster the independence of all nations. In a more recent publication, Mark Mazower traces the ideological origins of the United Nations back to this program of what he calls "imperial internationalism."[9]

The Wilsonian moment's anti-imperial premise seems to contradict the preservation of great-power influence implied by the concept of imperial internationalism. How to square the promise of national sovereignty with the perpetuation of empire? The answer that emerged in Paris during the first months of 1919 was that the former territories of Germany and the Ottoman Empire were to be administered according to an international system of colonial mandates. As stipulated in Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, "advanced nations" were to administer "peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world" according to the principle that "the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilization."[10] The relationship between "mandatory powers" and the inhabitants of the "mandated territories" was defined as one of "tute-

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7 ANTONY LENTIN: Makers of the Modern World: General Smuts, South Africa: The Peace Conferences of 1919–1923 and Their Aftermath, New York 2010, p. xiii.

8 JAN CHRISTIAN SMUTS: The League of Nations: A Practical Suggestion, London 1918, p. 9.

9 MARK MAZOWER: No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations, Princeton 2009.

10 Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 22, in: The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp#art22 (2021-09-27).

lage": organized into three separate stages of civilization—the so-called A, B, and C mandates—the mandatory powers were not to govern in the interest of their own states but rather to prepare the indigenous populations for eventual full-sovereignty. The reformulation of colonialism as guardianship salvaged empire in an era of national self-determination by providing colonial rule a new basis of legitimacy. As Susan Pederson shows in her study of the matter, the mandates system created an international forum for debating the great powers' right to rule and helped guide the transition from a world of formal colonial empires to the informal practices of global rule.[11]

Where did Czechoslovakia fit into this process of transition from formal to informal empire, and how did European notions of political and cultural tutelage shape a small nation's understanding of sovereignty? This paper describes the profoundly ambivalent nature of Czechoslovakia's relationship to the promise of self-determination, to the "Wilsonian moment," and the ways in which spokesmen for this small nation appealed to the idea of imperial internationalism to defend their right to rule. As such, it falls within a larger effort to place the history of Czech nation-building in the larger context of globalization in the decades before and after 1900. Following scholars such as Sebastian Conrad in the German context or Sarah Lemmen writing about interwar Czechoslovakia, this paper intends to show how modern Czech nationhood was, in important ways, constituted through its encounters with the non-European world.[12]

The campaign of the Czech elite for a share in Europe's overseas empire is not entirely unexplored territory, though no one has yet explained the purpose this campaign served in securing legitimacy for the new Czechoslovak state. Before 1989, the Czech orientalist Ivo Vasiljev authored a comprehensive and thoroughly researched overview of the "efforts of the Czech bourgeoisie to attain colonies in the era of the bourgeois Czechoslovak Republic."[13] The publicist and independent scholar Pavel Kosatík has more recently explored the place of overseas colonies in the Czech national imagination.[14] Other authors, finally, have examined the development of national-territorial arguments over decades, debates about national boundaries at the state's founding, or the "inner colonization" of borderland areas after 1918.[15] Supplementing

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11 SUSAN PEDERSEN: The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire, Oxford 2015.

12 SEBASTIAN CONRAD: Globalization and the Nation in Imperial Germany, Cambridge 2010; SARAH LEMMEN: Tschechen auf Reisen: Repräsentationen der außereuropäischen Welt und nationale Identität in Ostmitteleuropa 1890–1938, Köln et al. 2018.

13 IVO VASILJEV: K snahám české buržoazie o získání kolonií v době buržoazní ČSR [On the Efforts of the Czech Bourgeoisie to Attain Colonies in the Era of the Bourgeois Czechoslovak Republic], in: Češi v cizině 3 (1988), pp. 139–192.

14 PAVEL KOSATÍK: Sen o koloniích [The Dream About Colonies], in: PAVEL KOSATÍK: České snění, Praha 2010, pp. 192–206.

15 On the persistence of "borderland" and "Bohemist" strands of discourse, see PETER HASLINGER: Nation und Territorium im tschechischen politischen Diskurs 1880–1938,

these studies of mental maps and cartographical debates, this paper asks where colonial discourse placed the Czechs on the global map of cultural development.

Czechoslovakia counted among the "advanced nations" of the civilized world, but not unambiguously so. Like the other newly independent small nations, the Czechoslovaks belonged somewhere between the inhabitants of Germany's former colonies—"barbarians," Smuts explained in 1918, "who not only cannot possibly govern themselves, but to whom it would be impracticable to apply any ideas of political self-determination in the European sense"—and the apparently self-evident civilization of Western Europe. Smuts describes the subjects of Europe's fallen empires—Russia and Austria—as "mostly untrained politically […], either incapable of or deficient in the power of self-government; they are mostly destitute and will require much nursing towards economic and political independence."[16] It was this desire to break loose from dependency and demonstrate their status as a free, independent, and civilized people that motivated the call for overseas territories.

Czech Overseas Colonies

The men behind the main campaign for Czech colonies—they were all men, and Czechs rather than Slovaks—put forward extreme demands, but these were by no means voices from the political fringe. Contributors to the public debate all belonged to the national elite of interwar Czechoslovakia, and their ranks included academics, bankers, government officials, doctors, gymnasium teachers, and former Habsburg naval officers. Significantly, many of them held pretensions to be writers and adventurers. Jan Havlasa, whose article prompted the debate, was a well-known lecturer and much-read author of exotic novels composed in the spirit of Jack London.[17] He served a year in an Austrian prison during the war for a pamphlet and several newspaper articles about colonial politics in which he openly speculated about the (not neces-

München 2010. For debates about territory and inner colonization in Czechoslovakia, see MARK CORNWALL: "National Reparation"? The Czech Land Reform and the Sudeten Germans 1918–1938, in: The Slavonic and East European Review 75 (1997), 2, pp. 259–280; DANIEL E. MILLER: Colonizing the Hungarian and German Border Areas During the Czechoslovak Land Reform 1918–1938, in: Austrian History Yearbook 34 (2003), pp. 303–317. A longer-term overview of territorialization in the region is provided in: FRANK HADLER, MATTHIAS MIDDELL (eds.): Handbuch einer transnationalen Geschichte Ostmitteleuropas, vol. 1, Göttingen 2017.

16 SMUTS, p. 11.

17 Havlasova edice [The Edition of Havlasa], in: Nedělní zábavní příloha Národní Politiky, 1919-01-19.

sarily unenviable) consequences of the Central Powers' defeat.[18] By 1918 he had become a member of the National Council, the provisional government of Czechoslovakia, and a deputy to parliament for the National Socialists (Československá strana národně sociálistická; one of the pillars of interwar Czechoslovak politics and the party of the future president, Eduard Beneš). Havlasa went on to serve as the first Czechoslovak ambassador to Brazil, then Chile, and he later served a number of years on the League of Nations' opium commission.[19] In January 1919, his years spent abroad and interest in colonial questions earned him a place as expert advisor in the Czechoslovak delegation to Paris.[20] The ambitions of Havlasa and the other supporters of Czechoslovak colonial mandates can be taken as extreme, but by no means aberrant; they expressed views widely shared by the country's ruling elite—only their sense of the possible differed.

In his pamphlet, "Czech Overseas Colonies," an expanded version of the article written in early January 1919, Havlasa puts forward an argument other colonial enthusiasts subsequently repeated in various formulations.[21] The argument itself is not complicated and resembles apologetics for imperialism everywhere. In essence, he argues that interwar stability relied on a strong central Europe to counter German irredentism and Bolshevik Russia. In order for central Europe to be strong, Czechoslovakia must be independent. Czechoslovakia's independence could only be secured if it were granted Germany's former colonies.

Colonies, Havlasa argued, would provide the new republic with essential raw materials. As a highly industrialized country dependent on exports, Czechoslovakia required an inexpensive and secure source of raw materials in order to remain competitive.[22] Settler colonies, moreover, would provide an outlet for "excess population" while ensuring that emigrants did not become estranged from the nation. The Allies owed Czechoslovakia for their contribution to the war effort, not least for having subverted the Monarchy from within. The Czechoslovak Legions' campaign in Siberia, furthermore, had kept the Germans from obtaining Russia's natural resources and slowed the

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18 Originally published in October 1914, the pamphlet was released after the war as: Vztah osadní politiky k světové válce [Relation of Colonial Politics to the World War], Praha 1918.

19 MIROSLAV NOŽINA: Cesty za opiem [Travels for Opium], Praha 2001, pp. 23–24; KAREL KUČERA: Jan Havlasa a opiová komise [Jan Havlasa and the Opium Commission], in: Bulletin Národní protidrogové centrály 12 (2006), 3, pp. 57–60.

20 Under the heading "Spécialistes en qualité des conseillers techniques: Industrie, Commerce, Affaires coloniales, et Navales," he is listed as "Jean Havlasa, explorateur." A complete directory of the Czechoslovak delegation can be found in: Archiv Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky [Archive of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs], Prague, Pařížský Archiv 1918–1921, Mírová konference, sign. 43/4709.

21 JAN HAVLASA: České kolonie zámořské [Czech Overseas Colonies], Praha 1919.

22 Cf. Nová země—nové směry [A New Country—New Directions], in: Národní listy, 1918-12-15.

progress of Bolshevism in the east, a service for which, claims Havlasa, "Kamchatka would be but a small token of gratitude."[23] He also argued that transferring German colonies to the Czechs might be seen as an act of historical justice since the Czech people had suffered centuries of German misrule.

"The Sea to the Slavs": The Czechoslovak Maritime Society

If the argument for colonies was familiar, the language used by Czech colonial enthusiasts revealed something specific about this small, landlocked nation. The word "more" (the sea) figured centrally. In order to enjoy the benefits of colonies, Czechoslovakia would need access to the oceans. "Our relation to the sea would be incomplete," insisted one commentator, "without our *own fleet of merchant marines*."[24] Editorials urged delegates to the peace conference to arrange for the internationalization of Central European waterways. "With the Danube, there will open for us a gateway to the East," claimed one advocate, who celebrated the ruin of German Central Europe and the "fairy-tale like" rise of a "Czech Danube."[25] Others argued for unrestricted access along the Elbe to the North Sea, for Bremen and Hamburg to become neutral territories, or for a stretch of coastline to be placed under Czechoslovak sovereignty.

Nowhere did the word "more" figure more prominently than in the founding program of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society (Námořní společnost Československá, N.S.Č.S.).[26] From its founding in January 1919 to the end of the First Republic, the N.S.Č.S. pursued as its primary goal "that the Czechoslovak flag should appear even upon the world's oceans and constantly represent the strenuous efforts of our inland state to become a part of the global economic community."[27] The mission of the society was to increase the prestige and prosperity of their new state.

Jan Havlasa belonged to the founding members, as did a sea captain by the name of Josef Sirový (not to be confused with the army four-star general Jan Syrový, who became a member 18 years later) and Bořivoj Radoň, a former rear-admiral of the Imperial and Royal Navy and commander of naval aviation.[28] The original goal set by the organization's founders was to acquire a

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23 HAVLASA, p. 14.

24 Emphasis in original. K moři! [To the Sea!], in: Národní Listy, 1919-02-02.

25 My a Dunaj [The Danube and Us], in: Národní Listy, 1919-01-16.

26 "Czechoslovak Maritime Society" was the translation N.S.Č.S. offered in advertisements for the group's bulletin, *Věstník Námořní Společnosti Československé*.

27 Projekt námořní lodi NSČs: V meziministerském jednání [The N.S.Č.S. Project for a Merchant Marine: At the Interministerial Conference], in: Moře a plavba 9 (1937), 1, p. 2.

28 JOSEF MÜLDNER: Námořní společnost československá, její vznik a úkoly [The Czechoslovak Maritime Society, Its Development and Tasks], Praha 1920; RADKO VAŠÍČEK: Český velitel rakousko-uherského námořního letectva [The Czech Commander of the

mass base of support by means of political, educational, and economic activities.[29] In the pages of its monthly journal, *Moře,* the society promoted all things oceanographic, hosting public lectures and publishing popular science articles.[30] The N.S.Č.S. advocated closer relations with the seafaring nations of Yugoslavia and Poland and promoted oceanic endeavors of Slavs more generally.[31] They argued for leasing the ports of Hamburg and Stettin, the internationalization of major Central European waterways, and the canalization of the Danube, the Oder, and the Elbe. Taken together, this would enable the formation of a Czechoslovak merchant marine "to secure for Czechoslovak products an independent pathway into the world."[32] But this, they maintained, could only be achieved by mobilizing public support. At the same time, leaders appealed to the Czechoslovak business and industrial elite and encouraged members of the old Austrian *Flottenverein* to join the N.S.Č.S. in order "to support the economic blossoming of our state!"[33]

The leading spirit behind the organization was Havlasa's close friend Josef Müldner, a poetaster with a passion for political geography.[34] Müldner taught at various gymnasiums in central Bohemia before serving on the frontlines of

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Austro-Hungarian Marine Airforce], in: Militaria, http://www.militaria.cz/ archiv/291/clanky/291-22.html (2021-09-27).

29 The N.S.Č.S. printed its statutes in every issue of the association's journal during the 1920s and 1930s. Stanovy Námořní společnost československý [Statutes of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society], in: MÜLDNER, Námořní společnost československá, p. 25.

30 *Moře: Orgán "Námořní Společnosti československé," jeho odborů a "Svazu československých námořníků"* [The Sea: Organ of the "Czechoslovak Maritime Society," its Branches, and the "Union of Czechoslovak Sailors"] was published from January 1922 to April 1924. Its successors were: *Moře a plavba: Oficielní list Námořní společnosti československé* [The Sea and Navigation: Official Journal of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society], June 1929 to December 1932; *Československý plavební list: Oficielní orgán Námořní společnosti československé* [Czechoslovak Nautical Journal: Official Organ of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society], December 1933 to November/December 1936. From March 1937 until ceasing publication in August 1938, the journal appeared under the name *Moře a plavba: Oficielní orgán Námořní společnosti československé* [The Sea and Navigation: Official Organ of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society]. The editor from 1929 to 1938 was Zdeněk Fišer.

31 Shipping Enterprise in Slavic States, in: Moře a Plavba 4 (1932), 7, pp. 94–126; ČSL. podnik námořní? [ČSL a Maritime Enterprise?], in: Moře a plavba 3 (1931), 1, p. 16; ČSL. přístavní pásma v Hamburku a Štětíně? [ČSL Port Zones in Hamburg and Stettin?], in: Moře a plavba 2 (1930), 3–4, pp. 4–12. See also JIŘÍ JANÁČ: European Coasts of Bohemia: Negotiating the Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal in a Troubled Twentieth Century, Amsterdam 2012, pp. 45–57.

32 Recruitment advertisement, in: Moře a plavba 3 (1931), 9, inside back cover.

33 MÜLDNER, Námořní společnost československá, p. 23.

34 Josef Müldner, in: VLADIMÍR FORST, JIŘÍ OPELÍK (eds.): Lexikon české literatury: Osobnosti, díla, instituce. Vol. 3/1: M–O, Praha 2000, pp. 368–369.

war in Serbia and Italy.[35] In his literary work, he penned neoromantic tales of erotic desire and longing for the unattainable; politically, he supported maximalist territorial claims for the new state—a protectorate over the Sorbs in Lusatia, the annexation of Lower Silesia, guardianship over Slovaks and the Ruthenians of Carpathia, Slavic ports on the Baltic and Adriatic seas, and a land corridor connecting the Czechs to the southern Slavs. On the eve of the peace conference, in addition to helping found the N.S.Č.S. and editing the organization's regular bulletin, Müldner authored a study titled "Territory of the Czechoslovak Republic and the Sea," in which he portrayed European and global waterways as organic channels of Czechoslovak state expansion.[36] "Borders which today might appear immodest," he writes, "will, after a half-century of growth, feel confining […]. Only weak nations have their borders defined by others; strong nations tear through them."[37] Ultimately, this confinement would only be overcome through direct access to the ocean, a demand made explicit in the title of a journal Müldner edited during the 1920s, *Moře slovanům* (The Sea to the Slavs).[38]

In pronouncements released as newspaper feuilletons and in public lectures, the supporters of the N.S.Č.S. declared that only access to the open seas would assure Czechoslovak independence. At a lecture and film screening in Prague's central movie theater, Světozor, in April 1920, Müldner and Havlasa described the danger of Czechoslovakia's dependence on intermediary states as well as the threat of strikes by foreign dock workers and market fluctuations. Moreover, a Czechoslovak navy would encourage patriotism among workers at home (among the features shown that evening was a documentary titled "The Organization and Serial Production of Ships in the United States," which featured depictions of patriotic workers in American shipyards). Czechoslovak president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk reportedly stayed till the end of the presentation and accepted the title of honorary founding member.[39] If someone like Masaryk and other mainstream politicians did not subscribe to the more radical goals of the N.S.Č.S., they certainly appeared to have sympathized with the premise upon which the organization had been founded, that "the achievement of independence is not enough, independence without the sea does not make a state independent."[40]

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35 He later published a memoir: JOSEF MÜLDNER: Zvířata a lidé ve válce [Animals and People in War], Praha 1928.

36 JOSEF MÜLDNER: Území Československé republiky a moře [Territory of the Czechoslovak Republic and the Sea], Praha 1919.

37 Ibid., p. 12.

38 *Moře slovanům: Měsíčník Československé Obce námořníků-revolučionářů* [The Sea to the Slavs: Monthly of the Czechoslovak Association of Sailor-Revolutionaries], appeared 1925–1940.

39 MÜLDNER, Námořní společnost československá, pp. 12–18.

40 Námořní společnost Československa [Czechoslovak Maritime Society], in Národní Politika, afternoon edition, 1919-01-31.

Despite its ambitions to do so, the N.S.Č.S. never became a mass organization. This distinguishes the society from its counterpart to the north, the Polish Maritime and Colonial League (Liga Morska i Kolonialna).[41] Poland, unlike Czechoslovakia, had been promised full independence in Wilson's Fourteen Points as well as "free and secure access to the sea." This commitment was realized in February 1920 with the opening of a land corridor connecting Poland to the Baltic. In celebration, the Polish state orchestrated a "marriage of Poland with the sea" (zaślubiny Polski z morzem) as a carefully choreographed ritual.[42] Regimental standards were presented before an alter then ceremoniously dipped into the sea; the Polish general Józef Haller rode into the surf, tossing a ring made of platinum into the depths. "Today," he spoke, "is the day of freedom. The White Eagle spreads his wings not only over the Polish lands, but also above the Polish sea. […] Under the sign of the White Eagle, the Polish seafarer can go anywhere, the entire world stands open before him."[43] Members of the N.S.Č.S. could only look on with envy.

As Slavs, perhaps, Czechs could in some small measure partake in the achievement of their northerly cousins. But without access to a coastline, the N.S.Č.S. had little to offer the Czechoslovak public beyond rhetoric. They certainly could not offer anything comparable to the Polish Maritime and Colonial League. This represented a real pressure group able to shape government policy through the mobilization of public opinion, attracting thousands at its annual "Days of the Sea" and boasting a membership that skyrocketed from 70,000 in 1933 to 990,000 only five years later.[44]

Though never a mass organization, the N.S.Č.S. does appear to have propagated overseas trade and colonization at the highest levels of the Czechoslovak government. It did so not by exercising public pressure, but by concentrating the forces of the Czechoslovak elite. Alongside the imaginative Müldner and Havlasa, a founding member of the society included the (no less fanciful) shoe magnate Tomáš Baťa.[45] The President Masaryk, it will be remembered, also accepted the honorary title of founding member and even

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41 Prior to 1930, it was known as the Maritime and River League (Liga Morska a Rzeczna). TARAS HUNCZAK: Polish Colonial Ambitions in the Inter-War Period, in: Slavic Review 26 (1967), 4, pp. 648–656; TADEUSZ BIAŁAS: Liga Morska i Kolonialna 1930–1939 [The Ocean and Colonial League 1930–1939], Gdańsk 1983.

42 STEFAN TROEBST: "Intermarium" und "Vermählung mit dem Meer": Kognitive Karten und Geschichtspolitik in Ostmitteleuropa, in: Geschichte und Gesellschaft 28 (2002), 3, pp. 435–469, here pp. 461–463.

43 Cited in: TROEBST, p. 462.

44 Figure cited ibid.

45 Tomáš Baťa, zakládající člen Námořní společnosti československé [Tomáš Baťa, A Founding Member of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society], in: Moře a plavba 4 (1932), 8, p. 127; see also Trochu "baťovštiny" by nám neškodilo [A Little "Baťa-ism" Wouldn't Hurt Us], in: Moře a plavba 9 (1937), 5, pp. 85–89.

donated 100,000 crowns to the society's coffers.[46] In 1923, the N.S.Č.S. journal *Moře a plavba* was made the official organ of the Department of Economic Relations on Emigration and Colonization at the Masaryk Academy of Labor, and after 1931 the society operated under the sponsorship of the Czechoslovak ministry of trade.[47] As time progressed, therefore, the society became ever more closely aligned with the country's financial, military, and government elite. For example, nearly all the fifteen new members listed for 1937 belonged to the uppermost echelons of Czechoslovakia's military, industrial, and financial sectors. Among them we find two chief executives of the Škoda works, a director of the Baťa concern, the general director of the Czechoslovak Legions bank, the director of the Czechoslovak Danube Shipping Authority in Bratislava, and two army generals, Louis Foucher and Jan Syrový. The remaining newcomers included two members of the National Socialist Party (Josef Patejdl and Karel Moudrý), two lawyers, an author, a playwright, and a Bulgarian minister.[48] So while the N.S.Č.S. proved unable to mobilize the masses, it did successfully congregate a coterie of Czechoslovakia's economic, military, and political heavy weights.[49] This concentration of elite opinion proved the most tangible accomplishment of the campaign for Czechoslovak colonies in 1919.

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46 T. G. Masaryk, President ČSR, Čestný člen Námořní společnosti československé [T. G. Masaryk, President of the Czechoslovak Republic, Honorary Member of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society], in: Moře a plavba 2 (1930), 3–4, p. 1; President T. G. Masaryk, ibid., pp. 2–4; Zemřel nám první president Republiky [We Have Lost Our First President], in: Moře a plavba 9 (1937), 8, p. 2.

47 Beginning with the third volume in April 1924, the masthead of the journal read: "Organ of the 'Czechoslovak Maritime Society,' its chapters and the Department for Economic Relations on Emigration and Colonization at the Masaryk Academy of Labor." Ministr obchodu JUDr. J. Matoušek, Protektor Námořní společ. Československé [Minister of Trade JUDr. J. Matoušek, Patron of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society], in: Moře a plavba 3 (1931), 6, p. 81; see also JOSEF MATOUŠEK: Několik slov úvodem [A Few Words of Introduction], in: Moře a plavba 4 (1932), 7, p. 93.

48 Zprávy a události [News and Events], in: Moře a plavba 9 (1937), 1, p. 17; 3, p. 57; 4, p. 83.

49 It was partly for this reason that the characteristically nonconformist Havlasa and Müldner quit the organization in 1920 and 1925, respectively. Havlasa was named Czechoslovak ambassador to Brazil and Müldner founded the more militant *Moře Slovanům!*, "monthly of the Czechoslovak Union of Sailor-Revolutionaries," which he edited from 1925 to 1940. Jan Havlasa to Josef Müldner, 1920-12-12, in: Literární archiv Památníku národního písemnictví [Literary Archives of the Museum of Czech Literature], Prague, fond Josef Müldner, sign. 76/61, folder 277/49 III. On Müldner and the Union of Sailor-Revolutionaries, see Náš úkol a cíl [Our Task and Our Goal], in: Moře Slovanům! 1 (September 1925–January 1926), 1–5, and JINDŘICH MAREK: Piráti svobody: Čeští námořníci v letech 1918–1921 [Pirates of Freedom: Czech Sailors in the Years 1918–1921], Cheb 2002.

"The Decidedly Modest Colonization of Small Nations"

Returning to the campaign for colonial mandates on the eve of the Paris Peace Conference, there were reasons beyond economics that Czechoslovakia needed "at least a small colonial territory. *For the sake of the racial hygiene of the nation*," in the words of the psychologist and philosopher Vilém Forster.[50] It is surprising, although perhaps it should not be, how widespread the racial aspect of the argument for Czechoslovak colonies was (and that racism never factored in the critiques of more sober-minded skeptics).[51] Havlasa warns against the "yellow flood" (žlutý přiliv) represented by Asiatic hordes, on the one hand, and Bolshevism, on the other. Another proponent points to the characteristic Czech passivity, a trait passed down from old Austria, but one that could be overcome: "The Czech has at his core all the instincts of a healthy and able race, it is only necessary to give him the opportunity to cultivate it."[52] As with other imperial visions, expansion across a frontier would lead to national rejuvenation.

Havlasa takes the American homestead as his example—i.e., white settler colonialism—and points to the American West as "a model of white colonization as a spillway for the Anglo-Saxon race."[53] "Such a territory transferred, granted, or chartered," he continues, "would enable the deepening of [small nations'] individuality, subjecting them to the trials of a different climate and providing them opportunities to perform civilizing work on a grand scale."[54] The League of Nations, he argues, must place smaller nations on equal footing with the great by means of coordinating European colonialism: "The decidedly modest colonization of small nations would be a first step from the League of Nations to a United States of the white race."[55] Internationally mandated colonialism would place the Czechs on equal footing with Europe, open up Bohemia to the world, and thereby overcome the narrow provincialism of the past.

Havlasa entices readers with visions of a Czech Kamchatka, Czech West Africa, Czech New Guinea, and Czech Togo. In Paris, he aimed to convince the Supreme Council "how the world for its own good could benefit from small nations, if only they would be given the chance to become great."[56]

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50 Emphasis in original. VILÉM FORSTER: Je nám třeba koloniálního území? [Do We Need a Colonial Territory?], in: Národní Listy, 1919-01-30. Forster is remembered as a "bohemian scientist" ("vědec bohém") in ZDENĚK SMETÁČEK: Jak jsme vyrůstali [How We Grew Up], in: Přítomnost 13 (1936), 17, pp. 270–271.

51 For examples of critics ignoring the racism of Havlasa's call, see Máme se domáhati kolonie? [Shall We Get Colonies?], in: Venkov, 1919-02-02; JAN AUERHAN: Naše Kolonie [Our Colonies], in: Nové Čechy 2 (1919), pp. 75–76.

52 FORSTER.

53 HAVLASA, p. 8.

54 Ibid., p. 11.

55 Ibid., p. 10.

56 Ibid., p. 16.

Vilém Forster warns in *Národní listy* that new annexations by large countries would lead to another dangerous power struggle. But, if handed over to the care of Czechs—the quintessence of a small nation—these colonies "of course could not awaken the jealousy of any neighbor."[57] With Czechs, says Havlasa, "it is not necessary to fear imperialistic adventurism." On the contrary, mandates would guarantee the newly independent states "the ability to engage in civilizing work, to participate in a grand project."[58]

Like Jan Smuts, Havlasa distinguishes between the nationalistic imperialism of the Germans, whose aim was not to strengthen the white race but rather to rule over it, and what he proposes as Czechoslovak rule by international mandate for the "moral regeneration of mankind."[59] Against charges of "Czechoslovak imperialism" launched by some representatives of the German, Slovak, Hungarian, and Rusyn minorities (many of whom claimed national sovereignty on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points),[60] the Czechoslovak diplomat Ferdinand Veverka countered that "momentary historical reasons" necessitated an exceptional violation of the principle of self-determination.[61] In line with arguments put forward by the delegation in Paris that a viable Czechoslovakia required sovereignty over territories inhabited by non-Czech populations, Veverka appeals to the "higher purpose" served by the Czechoslovak state—securing democracy for Central Europe. "With the Czech nation there is no danger that it would abuse its power," he writes, pointing to the tradition of humanism and democracy in Czech history. "For a nation that nearly bled to death in the service of democracy and has found renewal in the current struggle for global democracy, there can be no danger that it would become imperialistic. For *imperialism is the opposite of democracy, the opposite of equality in interstate relations*."[62] Expanding this typical

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57 FORSTER.

58 HAVLASA, pp. 9–10; see also the identical argument in MÜLDNER, Území Československé republiky, pp. 29–30.

59 HAVLASA, pp. 6–7.

60 See, for example, RUDOLF LODGMAN: Lodgmans Antwort auf Masaryk, in: Bohemia, 1918-12-29, and MICHAEL YUHASH: Wilson's Principles in Czechoslovak Practice: The Situation of the Carpatho-Russian People under the Czech Yoke, Homestead, PA 1929.

61 Ferdinand Veverka (1887–1981), regarded as one of the most capable diplomats in interwar Czechoslovakia, entered the consular service of Austria-Hungary in 1914 and helped to maintain contact during the war between the domestic resistance and the Czechoslovak independence movement abroad. He was a member of the Revolutionary National Assembly (Revoluční Národní shromáždění) in 1918/19 and subsequently a member of the National Socialist Party (Strana Národně socialistická). Veverka served as ambassador to Romania, Switzerland (where he was also League of Nations delegate in Geneva), the United States, and Austria. Veverka Ferdinand, in: JOSEF TOMEŠ (ed.): Český biografický slovník XX. století. III. díl: Q–Z, Praha 1999, p. 453.

62 Emphasis in original. FERDINAND VEVERKA: Český "imperialismus" [Czech "Imperialism"], in: České Slovo, 1919-01-19.

justification for the violation of national sovereignty in Central Europe to cover the entire globe, the imperial internationalism represented by men like Havlasa claimed to rule in the interest of mankind.

The Problem of a Small Nation

The imperial ambitions of men such as Havlasa, Forster, and the founders of the Czechoslovak Maritime Society seem implausible, even absurd. Yet one might suggest that their vision of a small nation's role in the postwar international system was consistent with the vision of Masaryk or Beneš, and that it corresponded closely to the founding spirit of the League of Nations then being articulated in Paris. More closely, in fact, than did the actions of larger member states. Masaryk and Beneš both foresaw a special geopolitical role for small nations, above all the Czechoslovaks. In his inaugural lecture at King's College in 1915, Masaryk spoke on "The Problem of Small Nations," emphasizing that these peoples were not destined to be assimilated into greater states (the thesis of pan-Germanism), but would instead contribute to the development of democracy through their inherent characteristic of "many-sidedness" and their "more intensive inter-communion of men, ideas and feelings."[63] Lecturing on the same spot ten years later, Eduard Beneš developed the ideas of his mentor, reminding the audience that the war had been fought for the independence and emancipation of small nations from the reign of force.[64] Through the League of Nations, small nations would be provided, according to Beneš, "the opportunity of contributing, by means of their own national civilizations, towards the raising of the general level of human culture."[65] Whereas great nations contributed by means of force, small nations would carry out a "spiritual revolution" in the interests of humanity. This is because the quality of small nations' nationalism differed from that of large nations in one fundamental respect: it rested, says Beneš, on the premise of international equality. In other words, the independence of small nations implied universal independence for all nations. Czechoslovakia's very existence thus depended on the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination.

But not all small nations were equally capable of speaking in the name of humanity. In all modesty, Beneš identifies one small nation "that had already proven its worth"—his own, the Czechs.[66] Unlike the hegemonic nations of the German, Austrian and Turkic empires, Czechs had participated in every spiritual advance of modern European civilization. Over the centuries, in their

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63 THOMAS G. MASARYK: The Problem of Small Nations in the European Crisis: Inaugural Lecture at the University of London, King's College, London 1915.

64 EDUARD BENEŠ: The Problem of Small Nations after the World War, in: The Slavonic Review 4 (1925), 11, pp. 257–277.

65 Ibid., p. 259.

66 Ibid.

struggle for cultural autonomy under the Habsburgs, and finally in the World War, the Czechs had demonstrated their capacity to speak the language of humanity, of articulating, in their own claim to independence, universal interests and values. Placing the Czechs, a vanguard of small nations, along the scale of civilization as outlined by Smuts and codified in Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, these most paradigmatic leaders of interwar Czechoslovakia conceived of their people—the Czechoslovaks, with emphasis falling on the Czechs—as an "advanced nation" able to "stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world." The Czechs had proven themselves capable of taking on "a sacred trust of civilization," to act as guardians over less advanced peoples in Central Europe and, perhaps, across the world.

Of course, neither Masaryk nor Beneš waste any time talking about colonial mandates. They limit their ambitions for national expansion to the realm of intellect. "All nations have their inner ineradicable and instinctive impulse to expand," Beneš reflects, "they wish to be great. The small nations, too, wish to be great, but their greatness is not to be in numbers, it is to be in the sphere of thought and cultural progress."[67] Regardless of this emphasis on intellect rather than territory, Masaryk and Beneš's arguments differ from those of colonial enthusiasts like Havlasa more in terms of quantity than quality. Both groups employed a similar rhetoric in portraying their nation as a carrier of culture to developing parts of the world. While the former rested content with proving their worth in the realm of spirit, the latter wished to test their nation's mettle in the real conditions of global empire.

Czech colonialists cannot simply be labeled national chauvinists; the program was to overcome the narrow nationalism of big states, represented by German imperialism, through a supra-national organization in which small nations would play an essential role—the United States of the white race, i.e., the League of Nations. In the process of moral regeneration, Havlasa admits that "some sterile nations will succumb to their fate,"[68] but this would not occur through brute force, he insists, but by their "demonstrated incapacity for self-rule."[69]

This was nothing other than the "global civilizing mission within the bounds of international law" as proposed by Smuts, one that reserved national self-determination exclusively for Europe and thereby prolonged the life of empire through international cooperation. The difference was not in the vision of empire forwarded by the Czechs, but the fact that the language of imperial internationalism was being spoken by a small nation.

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67 Ibid., p. 277.

68 HAVLASA, p. 11.

69 Ibid., pp. 11–12.

Conclusion

On 28 October 1919, the National Committee released its first announcement to the public: "To the Czechoslovak people! Your age-old dream has become reality. This day the Czechoslovak state has taken its place among the independent, free, civilized states of the world."[70] These qualities—independent (samostatný), free (svobodný), and civilized (kulturní)—stood for the stolid liberal virtues upon which the Czech national movement had been built. After the revolution, the spokesmen for the nation cloaked their claim to leadership in the language of universal values. By doing so, they communicated a message outward, to Europe, as well as inward, to their own population. This message expressed legitimacy and the right to rule.

"Our liberators Masaryk and Wilson," the announcement continued, "must not be disappointed in their conviction that freedom has been obtained by *a people capable of governing itself.*"[71] The colonial debate in January and February 1919 can be interpreted as an attempt by Czech public intellectuals to pull their nation out from under the shadow of cultural, economic, and political dependency by claiming the right to become colonial masters themselves. What better way to demonstrate a capacity for self-government than to rule others? The League of Nations mandate system provided an internationally recognized vocabulary of cultural advancement that Czech leaders used to demonstrate their nation's status as independent, free, and civilized. Along with the historical discourses of territorialization and nationalization in Bohemia, Czech leaders seized upon the vocabulary of imperial internationalism to legitimize their claim to leadership in an independent Czechoslovakia.

Czechoslovakia never possessed colonies, of course. The possibility of awarding mandates to small countries did not even come up in Paris. But this is really beside the point. Important for those committed to the colonial project was that the international community recognize *at least in principle* Czechoslovakia's right to do so. This did not happen. In the days, months, and years that followed, from the moment when Czechoslovakia found itself stigmatized in Paris as a "nation with limited interests" to the slow and fateful withering of the Versailles system culminating in 1938, the Czechs would be made painfully aware over and over again that (allowing Jan Smuts to bring this paper to close) "conditions for self-determination, autonomy, or self-government vary very considerably."[72]

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70 Provolání Národního výboru o samostatnosti československého státu [Proclamation of the National Council on the Independence of the Czechoslovak State], in: CYRILL MERHOUT (ed.): Dokumenty našeho osvobození, Praha 1919, pp. 150–151.

71 Emphasis added. Ibid., p. 151

72 SMUTS, p. 16.

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