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Promoting the State through Food Scarcity: Czechoslovakia and the United States after World War I

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Abstract

After the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, Czechoslovak leaders sought ways to strengthen the state's position in Europe and considered the republic's good reputation as essential to stabilizing the state and securing food supplies. This article analyzes how the Czechoslovak authorities portrayed their country's image and the postwar food shortage, and who participated in its construction. Hunger and scarcity were interpreted as the result of years of deliberate exploitation by Austria-Hungary, and requests for aid were justified on the grounds that a democratic and moral state deserved aid as a matter of priority. Czechoslovak leaders sought to secure a favorable position among the victorious powers by establishing a consistent historical narrative, an elaborate system of publicity, lobbying networks, and personal relationships with Entente officials. They were able to present their country's situation in a positive manner, even in terms of scarcity, and to promise their citizens a better future. This article examines the ways the Czechoslovak state communicated its need for humanitarian aid, particularly from the United States. It argues that the Czechoslovak effort to capitalize on its self-proclaimed moral reputation was partially successful in attracting a circle of supporters, even promoters, and in creating and cultivating its international image as "an island of democracy in Central Europe."

Keywords: Humanitarianism; international relief; American Relief Administration; food supply; Czechoslovakia-United States relations; T. G. Masaryk

Introduction

The Great War, with its mobilization of all segments of belligerent society, tested the loyalty of the Habsburg monarchy's population to the state. Food supply was one of the areas that proved to be a barometer of state stability. Ultimately, the final years of the state came to be associated in the minds of the civilian population with black markets, profiteering, food queues, shortages, hunger demonstrations, and looted shops. Shortages of bread, a symbol of human survival, threatened the authority of the Austro-Hungarian state. The failure of the Austrian administration to ensure a functioning food supply was one of the major factors in the undermining of domestic support for the Habsburg monarchy.

During the war, the multinational Austria-Hungary could not mobilize society to endure the suffering of war by appealing to ethnicity as a unifying element.¹ However, the Czechoslovak movement for state independence abroad employed nationalist sentiment as a primary argument for breaking-up Austria-Hungary. This included references to the long-term economic and social mistreatment of Czechs and Slovaks under the monarchy and, above all, the promise of a better future living in a democratic society.

As recent studies by Friederike Kind-Kovács and Mary Elizabeth Cox have shown, after the war Germany and Hungary blamed postwar food shortages on their harsh treatment at the hands of Allies, especially the economic blockade imposed on the defeated, and hunger became a central

¹Ke-Chin Hsia, *Victims' State: War and Welfare in Austria, 1868–1925* (New York, 2022), 6.

motif in their communications with the victorious states.² Postwar Czechoslovak politicians could not blame the Allies who “liberated” them for their dismal economic and social situation and thus employed a different explanation for the lack of food. They explained the shortages of the nascent state as the result of having been the victim of “three hundred years of suffering under the Habsburg yoke,” employing the myth of the subjugation of the Czech nation following the Habsburg victory at the Battle of the White Mountain near Prague in 1620. In this interpretation, the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy represented historical justice and the new state was the result of the successful struggle of the Czechs and Slovaks for independence during World War I.

This overly simple, narrow view of Czech history, first popularized by nineteenth-century romantic nationalism, became part of the Czech national narrative. In her study of Czech national narratives, Muriel Blaive points out that the dominant nationalist discourse successfully added democracy as one of the main components of Czech identity.³ During World War I, the exiled Czechoslovak independence movement adopted this narrative, and after the war, it became the official interpretation of Czechoslovak national history. In the search for someone to blame for the disastrous postwar economic situation, the Czechoslovak historical narrative became a tool of anti-Habsburg sentiment. In this sense, there was continuity in the wartime and postwar arguments that Czechoslovak politicians presented to Entente representatives about economic aid.

In this article, I analyze how Czechoslovak authorities presented their country, how the Czechoslovak historical narrative interpreted the postwar food shortage, and who participated in its construction. I argue that the Czechoslovak effort to gain advantages through its self-proclaimed moral reputation was partially successful, because it helped to gain a circle of supporters, even promoters, and to create and burnish its international image as “an island of democracy in Central Europe.” In contrast to the pessimistic evaluations of the contemporaneous situation coming from the defeated states, especially Austria, Germany, and Hungary, Czechoslovak politicians focused on positive prospects for the future. They expected that a democratic and “most moral” state would naturally deserve preferential food aid from the Entente and neutral countries. The concept of Czechoslovak exceptionalism and the feeling that “we deserve it” became part of the country’s food aid communication with the Allies, especially the US.

Already during the war exiled Czech leaders, especially future president Tomáš G. Masaryk, and future foreign minister Edvard Beneš, were able to capitalize on the great powers’ philanthropic motivations and ambitions in postwar Central Europe. Czechoslovak politicians and officials employed foreign politicians and diplomats, humanitarian workers, academics, journalists, and the émigré community in communicating the need for food aid.

They came from circles interested in Central Europe, including the Scottish historian Robert William Seton-Watson and the English journalist Henry Wickham Steed, the American sociologist Herbert Adolphus Miller, and the French journalist Louis Eisenmann. Andrea Orzoff has analyzed the complexity of Czechoslovak state propaganda, describing how state institutions gathered and disseminated information, raised and distributed financial resources, and used personal relationships.⁴ Analyzing Czechoslovakia through hunger and scarcity, as a country that needed foreign food aid not only to avert a humanitarian disaster but also because it believed it deserved it due to its high moral standing, adds another tile to Orzoff’s mosaic of Czechoslovakia’s interwar propaganda.

²Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Budapest’s Children: Humanitarian Relief in the Aftermath of the Great War* (Bloomington, 2022); Mary Elisabeth Cox, *Hunger in War and Peace: Women and Children in Germany, 1914–1924* (Oxford, 2019). The same attitude was present in Austria, as analysed by Franz Adlgasser, “The Roots of Communist Containment: American Food Aid in Austria and Hungary after World War I,” *Contemporary Austrian Studies* 3, *Austria in the Nineteen Fifties*, eds. Günter Bischof, Anton Pelinka, and Rolf Steininger (New Brunswick, 1995), 171–88.

³Muriel Blaive, “National Narratives of Czech Identity from the 19th Century to the Present,” in Anton Pelinka et al., *Geschichtsbuch Mitteleuropa. Vom Fin de Siècle bis zur Gegenwart*, (Vienna, 2016), 163–64; Dagmar Hájková and Nancy M. Wingfield, “Czech(-oslovak) National Commemorations during the Interwar Period: Tomáš G. Masaryk and the Battle of White Mountain Avenged,” *Acta Histriae* 18, no. 3 (2010): 425–52.

⁴Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948*, (Oxford, 2011).

Humanitarian activities soon became an integral part of the life of the successor states. Czechoslovakia continued to use an already established network of aid organizations, while at the same time introducing new, mainly foreign initiatives. These included the American Relief Administration (ARA), American Red Cross (ARC), European Care for Children, Relief Mission of Lady Paget, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Foreign aid certainly helped alleviate postwar suffering, but it also served diplomatic and military agendas, as Julia F. Irwin points out. Similarly, Emily Rosenberg has depicted the American effort to spread its values through international relief missions, which "received special governmental blessing in return for fulfilling foreign policy objectives."⁵ Czechoslovak leaders employed humanitarian aid, especially from the United States, as a means of promoting the state and demonstrating the country's foreign policy orientation.

The political, social, and economic transformations of the successor states of East Central Europe in the early interwar years have already been well documented in the scholarly literature, as have been the various aspects of Herbert Hoover's food activism and President Woodrow Wilson's approach to the states of East Central Europe.⁶ Franz Adlgasser, Cox, and Kind-Kovács have analyzed the situations in defeated Austria, Germany, and Hungary. While an overarching analysis of the impact of American humanitarian aid on Czechoslovakia remains to be written, this article contributes to the study of food scarcity and food aid in postwar Czechoslovakia.⁷ It also considers differences in how the concept of the "hungry state" was used in Czechoslovakia as compared to neighboring countries.

The Vanguard of Democracy in Central Europe

During World War I, Masaryk had assured Entente leaders that the future independent Czechoslovak state would be economically and politically strong. Indeed, as Nicole M. Phelps has observed, members of the Czecho-Slovak National Council did an excellent job of telling US President Wilson, his chief foreign policy adviser Edward Mandell House, and Secretary of State Robert Lansing exactly what they wanted to hear: the Czechoslovak state would be a product of an orderly, liberal revolution that would take 1776 as its model.⁸ Wilson's knowledge of Eastern Europe was greatly influenced not only by the war but also by his circle of associates, some of whom became advocates for the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Larry Wolff employs the concept of "mental mapping" to examine the interplay of Wilson's personal views, the influence of advisers, and the changing geopolitical situation.⁹

In his meetings with Wilson, Masaryk sought to add the future Czechoslovakia to Wilson's mental map as the vanguard of American democratic values, underlining the idea of peaceful reconstruction of the world with American participation. Masaryk appealed to morality, humanitarianism, and human solidarity, and in this respect, he programmatically defended the same values as Wilson and US Food Administrator

⁵Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890–1945* (American Century) (New York, 1982), 117; Julia Irwin, "Taming Total War: Great War Era American Humanitarianism and Its Legacies," *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 4 (2014): 763–75.

⁶Ota Konrád and Rudolf Kučera, *Paths out of the Apocalypse: Physical Violence in the Fall and Renewal of Central Europe, 1914–1922* (Oxford, 2022); Larry Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe* (Stanford, 2020); Mark Cornwall and John Paul Newman, eds., *Sacrifice and Rebirth: The Legacy of the Last Habsburg War* (New York, 2016); Paul B. Miller and Claire Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York, 2019).

⁷Barbora Jakobyová, "Americká potravinová pomoc pre deti po prvej svetovej vojne" [American food aid for children after World War I], in *Dlhá cesta od monarchie k republike: zmeny režimov, myslenia a životného štýlu na Slovensku a v strednej Európe od polovice 19. do polovice 20. storočia* [The long road from Monarchy to Republic: changes in regimes, thinking and lifestyles in Slovakia and Central Europe from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century], ed. Matej Hanula et al. (Bratislava, 2021), 177–92; Halina Parafianowicz, "Americký mýtus a amerikanizace Československa po první světové válce" [The American Myth and the Americanization of Czechoslovakia after the First World War], *Lidé města/Urban People* 5, no. 9 (2003): <https://lidemesta.cuni.cz/LM-484.html>; Ondřej Matějka, "Un mur contre le bolchevisme? La Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) dans la Tchécoslovaquie de l'entre-deux-guerres," *Le Mouvement social* 2, no. 267 (2019): 25–46.

⁸Nicole M. Phelps, *U.S.-Habsburg Relations from 1815 to the Paris Peace Conference: Sovereignty Transformed* (Cambridge, 2013), 250.

⁹Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, 125; John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York, 2009), 438; George J. Kovtun, *Masaryk & America: Testimony of a Relationship* (Washington, 1988), 55f.

Herbert Hoover. A Quaker, religiously and morally educated, and a personally generous man, Hoover became the embodiment of American idealism; unlike Wilson, he was familiar with the situation in Europe, in part because of his humanitarian work in German-occupied Belgium during the war.¹⁰

Upon his return to Czechoslovakia in November 1918, Masaryk summarized his negotiations regarding food supply in a message to parliament on 22 December: “We have secured financial help from the Allied powers, the United States, and President Wilson himself has promised support for the necessary supplies during the transition period.” He also made the moral appeal that the people and the nation should not only live “on bread,” but that re-education was also necessary. Masaryk claimed that Czechoslovaks had the reputation among the Allies for being the best organized, prepared, capable, and loyal state. He also demanded that the country’s residents maintain order at all times, so that the republic could keep the sympathy of the Allies. Masaryk argued that a moral and democratic nation would be appreciated and helped by all, because it deserved help. He used the stereotypical dichotomy of “us and them,” with “us,” the “Czechoslovaks,” being on a higher cultural and moral level, fulfilling the civilizing mission and therefore guaranteeing that the aid received would be used properly. Masaryk’s approach was in line with the goals of American aid, that is, to ensure proper food distribution and to promote the image of America as a cultured civilization. Masaryk believed that he could influence Wilson’s decisions, but he overestimated his ability to do so. This belief, however, underpinned other communication strategies of Czechoslovak leaders.¹¹

The nascent Czechoslovak Republic’s population needed food aid and thus its politicians faced the issue of how to explain to the Entente’s representatives that a viable state was unable to feed its own population.¹² Masaryk’s strategy for doing this can be found in his letters to Beneš. In them, he instructed the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the arguments he should make at the Paris Peace Conference in order to obtain loans for food purchases. Beneš was told to lay the blame for the dismal supply situation primarily on the Austrians. Masaryk provided the explanation: “The Austrians plundered our entire country to punish us; we have no cows, no cattle, no horses, etc. There is not enough bread. We were not in the warzone, but we are more impoverished than others. This is why the Americans need to send us bread, etc. (condensed milk for children!!!).”¹³ It is possible to summarize Masaryk’s arguments based on his frequent instructions to Beneš: (1) Austria is to blame for everything; (2) Czechoslovakia is the worst off economically among the successor states; (3) Czechoslovakia is the most moral of these states; (4) Czechoslovakia promises peace in exchange for bread; (5) the country will prevent Bolshevism and radicalism; and (6) the country needs milk for its children.¹⁴

Paradoxically, following the armistice, Hoover, as head of the ARA, received a letter from Beneš, explaining that food was not a major problem for the new state because of its fertile soil.¹⁵ On 1 November 1918, Beneš also told American diplomat Hugh Simons Gibson that “[Czechoslovakia] does not need charity and the banks will take care of the payment [for the food supply] without

¹⁰Robert W. McElroy, *Morality and American Foreign Policy: The Role of Ethics in International Affairs* (Princeton, 1992), 70. Masaryk’s American wife, Charlotte, was an exponent of these values in the Czech context.

¹¹“Zpráva T. G. Masaryka ministerské radě o zahraniční činnosti 23. 12. 1918” [T.G. Masaryk’s report to the Ministerial Council on foreign activities], in T. G. Masaryk, *Cesta demokracie I, Projevy – články – rozhovory* [The Path of Democracy, vol. I. Speeches—articles—interviews] (Prague 2003), 48, 52; “Poselství prezidenta republiky 22. 12. 1918” [Message of the President of the Republic] in T. G. Masaryk, *Cesta demokracie I*, 24–33.

¹²On the food situation in the Bohemian Lands during the war see, for example, Claire Morelon, “A threat to national unity? The urban–rural antagonism in Prague during the First World War in comparative perspective” in *Frontwechsel: Österreich-Ungarns “Großer Krieg” im Vergleich*, eds. Julia Walleczek-Fritz, Wolfram Dornik and Stefan Wedrac (Vienna, 2014), 325–42; Peter Heumos, “‘Kartoffeln her oder es gibt eine Revolution.’ Hungerkrawalle, Streiks und Massenproteste in den böhmischen Ländern 1914–1918,” in *Sozialgeschichte und soziale Bewegungen in der Historiographie der Tschechischen und Slowakischen Republik*, ed. Peter Heumos (Essen, 2000), 148–76; Rudolf Kučera, *Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life, and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914–1918* (New York, 2019).

¹³Masaryk to Beneš, 21 January 1919, in *Korespondence T. G. Masaryk – Edvard Beneš 1918–1937* [Correspondence T.G. Masaryk – Edvard Beneš 1918–1937], eds. Dagmar Hájková, Richard Vašek, and Vlasta Quagliatová (Prague, 2013), 60.

¹⁴Ibid., 59f.

¹⁵*The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover. Years of Adventure 1874–1920* (New York, 1952), 380.

any outside help.”¹⁶ It is likely that Beneš wanted to present Czechoslovakia as a viable state. However, his remarks did not accurately reflect the alarming food supply situation in Czechoslovakia, especially in the so-called needy districts. These were located mainly in the poorer, mountainous, predominantly German-inhabited border areas, and in the industrial towns, including Moravská Ostrava/Mährisch Ostrau, Kladno, Brno/Brünn, Ústí nad Labem/Aussig, and Duchcov/Dux. Rudolf Kučera and Ota Konrád have shown the gradual ethnicization of violence in the Bohemian Lands after the war.¹⁷ The Czechs’ victorious narrative and politics of national exceptionalism added dynamism to this development. However, the reports that regional and local officials sent to the president’s office show that in the early years of the republic, officials applied a policy of rapidly meeting civilian food needs when riots threatened and when local leaders could not guarantee that they could maintain calm and order irrespective of the residents’ nationality.¹⁸

In January 1919, Hoover sent a special inter-Allied mission to Europe urging the investigation of the food situation in the successor states. Gibson, a member of the mission, provided a detailed account of the trip, which included his observations as well as conversations with state officials, their opposing politicians, and with ordinary people. He asserted that the main problem of these countries was that they suffered from mutual delusions about each other and ignorance of the conditions in neighboring countries. According to Gibson, the Czechs seemed to have the most ability and common sense, the best organization, and the best leaders. He also touched on the correlations among nationalism, food supply, and loyalty in a multinational state, noting that the Czechs had recently shown a high degree of imperialism and a desire to dominate Central Europe. Indeed, he wrote that “[Czechs] have, it seems, learned too well, the methods of the old empire, and in some instances are adopting them in their own country; for instance, in dealing with the Germans of Bohemia, where there has been discrimination in the distribution of food to such an extent that the deaths from malnutrition were staggering.”¹⁹

Czechoslovak leaders considered the republic’s good reputation an essential precondition for stabilizing the state and obtaining food supplies. On 13 January 1919, the presidium of the Ministry of the Interior in Prague instructed individual police directorates to issue, if necessary, a decree stating that “the good name of the Czechoslovak Republic abroad, especially in friendly states, must remain unblemished and that the people must prove themselves worthy of the freedom won after three hundred years of subjugation.”

The Moravian Ostrava Police Commissariat subsequently issued such a decree. It blamed the Habsburg monarchy for Czechoslovakia’s current economic difficulties and emphasized that the situation was still better than in neighboring countries. The decree promised the population a future “as rich as Belgium and as happy as Switzerland,” provided they remained patient and calm. In the event of civil disobedience, the Police Commissariat threatened to institute martial law.²⁰

The Ostrava region, with its coal mines, concentration of heavy industry, nationally mixed Czech-German-Jewish-Polish-Slovak population, and having been affected by the Czechoslovak-Polish territorial dispute over the Teschen/Cieszyn/Těšín coal mining region, was a matter of concern for the Czechoslovak government. In this tense region, with the regular threat of strikes, food supply played an important role in maintaining the population’s loyalty. This region attracted the interest of Hoover’s mission. On the basis of Hoover’s report to the Paris Peace Conference on the situation in the Polish and Silesian mining regions, a sub-commission was set up in August 1919. The commission, whose

¹⁶ *An American in Europe at War and Peace. Hugh S. Gibson’s Chronicles, 1918–1919*, eds. Vivian Hux Ress and Jochen Böhrer (Londenburg, 2022), 379–80.

¹⁷ Konrád and Kučera, *Paths out of the Apocalypse*, 290.

¹⁸ Reports on the situation in the Republic, Archiv kanceláře prezidenta republiky [Archive of Presidential Office] (hereafter AKPR), fond (hereafter f.)KPR, D 9868, sign. 625, box 275.

¹⁹ *Papers Relating to The Foreign Relations of the United States, 1919*, Volume XII, Memorandum by the Secretary of Embassy at Paris (Gibson) for the Secretary of State, c. 1 February 1919, accessed 20 Aug 2020, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv12/d75>.

²⁰ Zemský archiv Opava [Provincial Archive Opava], f. Policejní ředitelství Moravská Ostrava [Political Directory Mährisch Ostrau], sign. 548, 465, box 622.

members came from Czechoslovakia, France, Great Britain, Italy, Poland, and the US, was also in charge of the workers' food supply. Beneš was of the opinion that "if we take the right approach, we will gain politically and economically" and in his coded telegram to the presidium of the Council of Ministers he asked for the restriction of information about this commission.²¹

The Persuasion Campaign

From the outset, Czechoslovak leaders sought to secure a favorable position among the victorious powers through a consistent historical narrative, an elaborate system of publicity, lobbying networks, and personal relationships with Entente officials. They put particular emphasis on impressing the Americans, presenting themselves as good administrators and the country itself as an "island of democracy, order, and peace."

Representatives of the victorious Allies were welcomed with special pomp and generosity when they visited Czechoslovakia. In January 1919, American journalist George Creel was greeted by leading politicians, accompanied by a band and girls in national costumes.²² Gibson received a similar welcome. He was pleasantly surprised by his splendid accommodation in Prague and the abundance of food, which stood in sharp contrast to the situation in Vienna. The "real coffee, real bread, and sugar" available in the Czechoslovak capital astonished him and he was even offered chocolate cake when he visited Czechoslovak Prime Minister Karel Kramář. Gibson remarked that he did not know "whether they were doing something extra special for us but I would not want a better meal anywhere."²³ When the first American food train arrived in České Budějovice/Budweis on 18 February 1919, a band and ceremonial speeches welcomed it. American officer A.J. Barclay, who accompanied the train from the Adriatic port of Trieste, noted he had never before experienced such a welcome on this route.²⁴ The Czechoslovak officials' approach was intended to win the favor of foreign visitors, but at the same time, it created a great contrast with neighboring countries, especially Austria.

Several months later, Richard Teller Crane II, the first American envoy to Czechoslovakia, was similarly surprised by his welcome. He was greeted at Wilson railway station with the words, that "the United States has really saved the country of Czecho-Slovakia and that, had it not been for America, the country would in all probability now be in disorder." When Crane presented his credentials, Masaryk called on him to show the people of Czechoslovakia what the American spirit and American ideals meant, as the people of Czechoslovakia would be happy to "Americanize" in that sense. In his report to the State Department, Crane described the reception as an expression of true friendship with America.²⁵ Masaryk determined the communication strategies and his associates, including members of his family, worked along the same lines. An essential part of this, however, was the personal contacts that he had built up over decades abroad in a long and targeted manner.

Many of those officials who came to Czechoslovakia became the subject of political lobbying. They included the journalist Creel, who was also the head of the United States Committee on Public Information, which had been established in April 1917 as an independent agency to disseminate government intelligence and information to boost morale in the US and with the Allies. Creel's task was to build an information agency in Prague and one of this organization's postwar tasks was the targeted

²¹Beneš to Presidium of the Council of Ministers, 22 August 1919, in Alois Kocman et al., eds., *Boj o směr vývoje Československého státu I., říjen 1918–červen 1919* [The struggle for the course of development of the Czechoslovak state] (Prague, 1965), 365.

²²"Angličtí a američtí hosté s kapitánem Voskou v Praze" [English and American guests with Captain Voska in Prague], *Národní politika*, 14 January 1919, 1.

²³*An American in Europe at War and Peace*, 177–83.

²⁴Barclay to Gregory 20 February 1919, in Suda Lorena Bane and Ralph Haswell Lutz, *Organization of American Relief in Europe 1918–1919*, (Stanford, 1943), 267.

²⁵*Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1919, Volume II, 123C853/30, The Minister in Czechoslovakia (Crane) to the Acting Secretary of State, Prague, 15 June 1919, accessed 7 Aug. 2019, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919v02/d41>.

dissemination of American culture and democratic values in Central Europe.²⁶ Czechoslovak leaders relied on Creel to supply Wilson with relevant and favorable information about the republic.

Creel provides an excellent illustration of how the new Czechoslovak state communicated not only with the US and abroad, but also with its own citizens. We can assume that Creel received rather selective information from the Czechoslovak state-forming circles, which he then directly relayed to the American administration. At the same time, the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia were informed of his views in the newspapers, which in turn confirmed the legitimacy of the new conditions. Creel's findings also appeared in the British newspapers, including *The Times*. Its editor-in-chief was Masaryk's old friend, Henry Wickham Steed, a longtime expert on Central Europe. The newspaper published Creel's report from Prague on 28 January 1919, which claimed that:

In regard to food conditions in Bohemia, Prague is much more favorably situated than the rest of the republic, and yet in Prague conditions are daily becoming more and more disastrous. Even the mayor of the city has not eaten meat for six weeks, because his cook is unable to obtain any through regular channels. . . . Since the armistice the bread ration consists of a loaf and a half per week, and it is almost impossible to digest. Flour, potatoes, and vegetables appear only rarely in the market. The meat ration per week is 100 grams per person, but it can never be found.

Creel's report was also published in the Czech press and thus had an impact in the Czech environment, showing that there was great interest in Czechoslovakia from abroad.²⁷ Creel's observations more or less coincided with official information. Postwar Czechoslovakia continued the Austro-Hungarian wartime ration card system. From November 1918, the standard bread ration was 1,890 g per week, with heavy workers receiving 3,150 g. In January and February 1919, there was a noticeable shortage of meat (in February Prague received only 54 percent of its allocated meat quota). The meat ration in Prague was 150 g per person per week. Owing to the growing shortage of basic foodstuffs, the rations were regularly reduced, and on 9 March 1919, the bread ration was set at 1,400 g per week, with hard workers receiving 2,100 g.²⁸ For purposes of comparison, in Berlin, the overall bread ration was 2,350 g per citizen per week from November 1918, while in Vienna the quota of bread was 1,260 g, and 2,240 g for heavy workers.²⁹ In practice, however, this system could not guarantee an adequate food supply, because the goods were not available in sufficient quantities.

A meeting in Prague Castle with Masaryk may also have influenced Creel's reporting. As Masaryk wrote to Beneš: "[Creel] is completely ours, he is acquired entirely not only by me, but by us, that is, by people and circumstances. He tells Wilson that our state is the only one in the East that has a healthy core and that we must, therefore, be properly supported by America-Wilson." Creel simply had to turn Wilson "adequately" to a pro-Czech tune.³⁰ Creel was part of a relatively large group of American officials traveling around Central Europe at the time and whose reports influenced Wilson as well as other American politicians and American public opinion. Creel, the veteran propagandist, appears to have misjudged the situation, however. Gibson wrote that Creel, in many of his speeches, assured the Czechs that they were "the favorite child of the Allies and that they can get away with anything, including

²⁶George Creel, *How We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information That Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe* (New York, 1920), 417ff.

²⁷"The Isolation of Our Friends. Disastrous Conditions in Bohemia (from our Special Correspondent, Prague January 24)," *The Times*, 28 January 1919, 7; "Sekretář presidenta Wilsona o naši situaci" [President Wilson's secretary on our situation], *Národní listy*, 1 February 1919, 2. "Wilsonův tajemník Mr. Creel o krutých vyživovacích poměrech v Československé republice" [Wilson's Secretary Mr. Creel on the harsh maintenance conditions in the Czechoslovak Republic], *Venkov*, 1 February 1919, 6.

²⁸"Zásobování města potravinami" [Supplying the city with food], *Věstník obecní hlavního města Prahy* [Municipal Bulletin of the City of Prague] 2, no. 6 (20 March 1919): 86; "Úprava dávky chlebové" [Altering the Bread Ration], *Věstník obecní hlavního města Prahy* 26, no. 6 (20 March 1919): 96; *Aprovisace obce pražské za války a po válce 1914–1922* [The Provision of the Municipality of Prague during and after the War of 1914–1922] (Prague, 1923), 195, 197, 201.

²⁹Keith Allen, "Sharing Scarcity: Bread Rationing and the First World War in Berlin, 1914–1923," *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 2 (1998): 371–93; Hans Loewenfeld-Russ, *Die Regelung der Volksernährung im Kriege*, (Wien, 1926), 355.

³⁰Masaryk to Beneš, 23 January 1919 and 28 January 1919, in *Korespondence T.G. Masaryk – Edvard Beneš*, 64, 67.

murder.” Gibson came to the conclusion that due also to Creel’s propaganda “there were a distinctly more aggressive tone to the Czech attitude.”³¹

Other American personalities who influenced the dissemination of information about Czechoslovakia abroad included the diplomat and historian Archibald Cary Coolidge, diplomat Arthur W. DuBois, and, above all, American envoy Richard Teller Crane. Masaryk, for whom Crane had high regard, influenced his opinions. As Crane wrote the State Department: “This country, largely through the statesmanship of Masaryk, has shown greater stability than any one new or old in Central Europe”³² In general, most American informants relied on reports from Prague and considered Czechoslovak leadership as a democratic US ally. Although DuBois and Coolidge expressed some doubts about the Czechs’ organizational abilities, others saw them as committed democrats and accepted the Czechoslovak paradigm.³³

Historian Joseph Kerner was also a proponent of the narrative of Czechoslovakia as the only democratic country in East Central Europe needing aid. In 1920, he wrote in *The Survey*, the journal for social work, that the Habsburgs had left a sad legacy in Czechoslovakia:

Half-starved children, who played barefoot ankle-deep in the snow: a million infants and as many mothers anemic, underfed, and all but dying; a population, although happy in its new freedom, yet irritable, nervous, and temporarily unable to see things in their true perspective; idle factories; impoverished fields; depleted cattle stocks; and exhausted food supplies. . . .³⁴

The key words in the communication were bread, order, milk, and children. Order was dependent on having enough bread, and milk meant healthy children, a necessary condition for a good future. Maureen Healy has analyzed the malleable image of the child as central to changing Austrian evaluations and interpretations of the meaning and effects of war. Photographs of Viennese children taken by American aid workers documented their devastation.³⁵ Despite the lack of such documentation in Czech archives or newspapers, starving children also played a symbolic role in food aid negotiations in Czechoslovakia.

The president’s daughter, Alice Masaryková, who became the president of the Czechoslovak Red Cross in early 1919, put children’s aid high on her agenda. Her experience with immigrants in the Chicago Settlement for several years before the war had brought her into contact with well-known American social workers, including the founder of the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy Jane Addams and the head of the University Settlement Mary McDowell. She became acquainted with American society, and thanks to her American mother, her English was excellent. In April 1919, she met Hoover in Paris. She informed him about the dismal social situation in Czechoslovakia, especially regarding the nutrition of small children. She spoke of the working-class neighborhoods in Prague, where malnourished children had not seen milk since the beginning of the war. When she showed Hoover the ash-grey cornbread that people in Czechoslovakia were eating, he “burst into tears.”³⁶ It is difficult to prove that this incident occurred, but the tale played a part in the discourse of American sympathy for Czechoslovakia.

In spring 1919, Masaryková sent a message to the Czech community in the US: “We still have hundreds of children dying of hunger; there are hundreds of children dressed in rags, there are entire

³¹H. S. Gibson to M. Gibson, 24 January 1919, in *An American in Europe at War and Peace*, 525.

³²*Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1920, Vol. I, The Minister in Czechoslovakia (Crane) to the Secretary of State, 17 July 1920.

³³Michael R. Cude, “Wilsonian National Self-Determination and the Slovak Question during the Founding of Czechoslovakia, 1918–1921,” *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 1 (2016): 155–80.

³⁴Robert J. Kerner, “The Social Beginnings of the Czechoslovak Republic,” *The Survey* 43 (October 1919): 169–72.

³⁵Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, 2004), 255.

³⁶Ruth Crawford Mitchell (compiled by), *Alice Garrigue Masaryk 1879–1966. Her Life as Recorded in Her Own Words and by Her Friends* (Pittsburgh, 1980), 104; Memoir on Alice Masaryková by S.C. Molnárová, manuscript, Masarykův ústav a Archiv AV ČR [Masaryk Institute and Archive AV CR] (hereafter MÚA, AÚTGM), n. 8/96.

districts where the children are almost all dead . . . children as living skeletons. Austria sucked our blood; you must nurse us back to life . . .”³⁷ These claims elicited a response from the Executive Committee of Educational Association Comenius: “Is it even possible for us to live here contentedly, to sit at the table at a time when thousands of hungry, sick children in Czechoslovakia are calling in vain for pieces of dry bread to relieve their suffering?”³⁸ Masaryková wrote McDowell, asking her to send trained workers who would compile a survey of social institutions of Greater Prague, including what was left of the Austrian system. She also sought help designing the new professional welfare system.³⁹

In July 1919, Masaryková sent a young colleague, Emma Nováková, on a lecture tour of the US as a representative of the Czechoslovak Red Cross. This tour was intended to spread awareness of the abysmal food supply situation in Czechoslovakia and to obtain financial support. Lieutenant Sedley C. Peck, who was assigned to the Hoover mission in Prague, accompanied her. Nováková and Peck visited Czech immigrant communities, primarily in the agricultural states of Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota. The outline of her lecture in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, reveals the type of information that was relayed to the audience. First, the audiences learned of the great poverty, scarcity, and hunger that plagued Czechoslovakia. Peck demonstrated the food shortage through the example of beer in Pilsen/Plzen, which he observed was so weak, it could be sold in the United States without fear of violating the Prohibition Act. He believed that there was no danger of Bolshevism in Czechoslovakia, because “the people there are aware and are educated to a high level.” He had seen the very positive attitude toward the US and claimed that there were more American flags and portraits of Wilson on display in Prague than in Washington.⁴⁰

Masaryková’s brother, Jan Masaryk, the first Czechoslovak diplomatic representative to the United States, also described the difficult economic and social situation in Czechoslovakia in his lectures to Czech and Slovak émigré communities. He did not ask for charity in his speeches, but for raw materials and loans, emphasizing the need for “milk for children.” He spoke of a nation that wanted to live in peace and help others, but now needed help itself. “We don’t want donations, we just want a helping hand, and we can assure our American friends that our country will become the America of Europe.”⁴¹ His message was aimed at a segment of American society that has long been interested in its “old homeland.” His speeches showed a shift to a more balanced attitude toward publicity. He moved from the egocentric standpoint of “we deserve aid” to the promise of broader cooperation of the countries in Central Europe.

This aligned with the actions of Hoover, who skilfully linked financial aid to American diplomatic goals. Although his slogan “Food is not politics” was highlighted in the ARA bulletin, a contemporary observer wrote in 1919 that there had been an inseparable and inevitable link between food and politics since the beginning of the war.⁴² American food aid was not solely charitable but had the political goal to stabilize the new governments of Central Europe and to prevent the spread of Bolshevism. The Americans influenced both the local political situation in Hungary and Poland with food and relations between Czechoslovakia and German-Austria.⁴³

³⁷“The Czech Heart,” *The Czechoslovak Review* 3, no. 5 (May 1919): 121.

³⁸Vojenský historický archiv [Military Archives Prague] (hereafter VHA), f. České národní sdružení [Czech National Alliance] (hereafter ČNS), sign. Fond Alice Masarykové, 884–89.

³⁹Jaroslav Janko, *Adresář sociálních zařízení Velké Prahy* [Directory of Social Facilities in Greater Prague] (Prague 1919), 5; Mitchel, *Alice Garrigue Masaryk 1879–1966*, 104.

⁴⁰*Cedar-Rapidské Listy* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa), 24 July 1919, clipping in VHA, f. ČNS, sign. Fond Alice Masarykové, 889.

⁴¹“Chicagský debut Jana Masaryka” [Jan Masaryk’s Chicago debut], *Svornost*, 15 January 1920, clipping in MÚA, AÚTGM, f. Jan Masaryk, box 5.

⁴²*American Relief Administration Bulletin*, no. 1, 17 March 1919, 19; Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream*, 98–100; Gaines M. Foster, *The Demands of Humanity. Army Medical Disaster Relief* (Washington, DC, 1983), 80–81.

⁴³Tibor Glant, “Herbert Hoover and Hungary, 1918–1923,” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 95–109; Matthew Lloyd Adams, “Herbert Hoover and the Organization of the American Relief Effort in Poland (1919–1923),” *European Journal of American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2009): <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7627>; Christopher Blackburn, “The Rebirth of Poland. American Humanitarianism After the Great War,” *Studia Historyczne* 57, no. 4 (2014): 521–39.

Czechoslovak politicians actually had a powerful weapon to influence life in its neighboring countries: coal.⁴⁴ Despite the fact that Czechoslovakia and Austria signed an agreement on coal supplies, serious coal supply problems remained. In December 1918, Hoover raised the issue of coal supplies with Masaryk in Paris, asking him to lift the embargo on coal to Austria. Masaryk promised to do so, but he did make sure to remind Hoover of Austria's wickedness. Hoover believed that the prevention of disorder and anarchy in large urban areas such as Vienna should be a common goal of the Allied governments. In a letter dated 13 December, he reminded Masaryk that: "No service could be so gratefully received by our government as for you to intervene to cooperate in securing the purely humane issues in the city of Vienna, through the furnishing of coal and potatoes from Bohemia, while we intervene to furnish bread stuffs [for Czechoslovakia] via Trieste."⁴⁵ Here, the US indirectly used food as a means of coercion to ensure peace in the region. In spring 1920, James A. Logan, an ARA worker in Paris, sent a telegram to the Prague branch, in which he expressed some sympathy for "Czechoslovaks resisting coal shipments from Moravian Ostrava to Vienna," but he did not intend to allow any manipulation and would immediately recommend that the US cancel the Czechoslovak flour credit until the situation with coal supply was resolved. The Czechoslovak representatives were of course concerned about Logan's comments. They believed the termination of the loan threatened "incalculable economic consequences and, even, starvation," and therefore they promised to solve the problem with the coal delivery.⁴⁶ In this way, a complex system of mutual persuasion, influence, and coercion functioned. Sometimes it pursued strategic goals, sometimes just quick solutions to emerging situations.

The Impact of American Relief

A number of foreign humanitarian organizations, mainly British and American, operated in Czechoslovakia immediately after the war. The ARA, which rapidly organized and controlled the food campaign, was initially the most visible and active. On 24 February 1919, Czechoslovakia and the ARA signed an agreement for the postwar provision of aid. The agreement foresaw that 27,500 tons of flour, 4,000 tons of fat, and 500 tons of condensed milk (in total worth \$8,000,000) would be delivered every month to Czechoslovakia.⁴⁷

In the same month the ARA mission led by Lincoln Hutchinson, an economist and diplomat, was established in the center of Prague. In March 1919, Hutchinson wrote to President Masaryk about Hoover's position on the food supply situation in Europe and explained that Czechoslovakia received more aid per capita than Germany. He wanted Czechoslovak citizens to understand the situation and not fall prey to false reports that the Entente was doing more for its "enemies" than for its allies. Hutchinson requested that this information be widely publicized in Czechoslovakia. Indeed, his letter was published two days later in National Democratic Party daily, *Národní listy* [National Papers], under the title: "Food from America will come!"⁴⁸ The article reassured Czechoslovak society of its exceptional position in the eyes of the Americans. In fact, in March 1919, Czechoslovakia had received an even larger amount of aid than had been promised (see Supplementary Table S1).⁴⁹

In April 1919, ARA workers helped establish the Czechoslovak Child Care (CCC). This initiative worked within the framework of the non-governmental welfare organization ARA European Children's Fund (ARAECF), whose primary aim was to improve the condition of malnourished children

⁴⁴Ota Konrád, *Nevyvážené vztahy: Československo a Rakousko 1918–1933* [An Unbalanced relationship: Czechoslovakia and Austria 1918–1933] (Prague, 2012), 70–71; Aliaksandr Piahana, "Each Wagon of Coal Should Be Paid for with Territorial Concessions: Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the Coal Shortage in 1918–21," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 34, no. 1 (2023): 86–116.

⁴⁵Hoover to Masaryk 13 December 1918, MÚA, AÚTGM, f. TGM, sign. R-36-11d, box 463; *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover. Years of Adventure 1874–1920*, 393.

⁴⁶AKPR, sign. 211 D 7431; Masaryk's notes on his negotiations with Hutchinson, 10 July 1919, MÚA, AÚTGM, f. TGM, sign. R-36-11c, box 463.

⁴⁷Bane and Lutz, *Organization of American Relief in Europe 1918–1919*, 293–96

⁴⁸Hutchinson to Masaryk, 22 March 1919, MÚA, AÚTGM, f. TGM, sign. R-36-11c, box 463; "Potraviny z Ameriky budou!" [Food from America will come!], *Národní listy*, 25 March 1919, 4–5.

⁴⁹*American Relief Administration Bulletin*, no. 1, 17 March 1919, 4.

across Europe. Its Czechoslovak board included the country's top officials: President Masaryk became its honorary chairman, and members of the national committee included government ministers, politicians, church dignitaries, and prominent social workers and public officials. The involvement of officials helped to secure financial support and facilitate the logistics of food. The central office in Prague, administered by ARAECF and CCC, was responsible for feeding the children and coordinating local volunteers.

At the same time, a group of YWCA representatives arrived in Czechoslovakia. In cooperation with other American organizations, US soldiers, and local administrators, the YWCA representatives surveyed charitable and social institutions, sanitary conditions, and children's and youth facilities, including nutrition societies, orphanages, and sanatoriums. They helped to monitor the food supply and assisted in food allocation. In total, twenty-one US Army personnel were assigned alongside thirty-three ARC representatives, three YWCA representatives, and twelve civilian workers, all of whom worked throughout the country.⁵⁰ The fact that one person, Alice Masaryková, headed both the Czechoslovak Red Cross and CCC was important for cooperation with the Americans.

In Czechoslovakia, humanitarianism was based on the needs of a state that did not yet have internationally recognized borders. Initially, attention was focused on districts in greatest need. Kitchens were set up in the working-class districts of Prague, in far Western Bohemian Cheb/Eger, northern Silesian Opava/Troppau, the Erzgebirge, central Bohemian Kladno, and the Ostrava region. The last three were important coal mining areas. With the recognition of frontiers in 1920, aid to Slovakia and Subcarpathian Rus increased.

In September 1919, 128 volunteer committees of the CCC provided food for 404,115 children under the age of 6 (including pregnant and nursing mothers) and 259,709 children between the ages of 6 and 14. According to a survey by the CCC, in German industrial areas 60–80 percent of children were fed in ARA kitchens, while in some Czech regions, where the need was less, only 20–40 percent of the total number of children were fed there.⁵¹

Already during the war, the German districts were in a poorer nourishment situation than the agriculturally developed areas of central Bohemia or Moravia with predominantly Czech-speaking populations. Tara Zahra has analyzed how Czech and German children in the Bohemian Lands became the object of national activism and nationalistic battle for children.⁵² However, it does not appear that nationalism played a significant role in the distribution of food for children in CCC facilities. On the one hand, ARAECF and CCC strictly adhered to the rules of not distributing according to ethnic, religious, or political criteria, and on the other hand, it was in the interest of the state to remedy the situation in its worse districts. The new rationing programme of April 1920 increased the number of rations for Subcarpathian Rus and Slovakia and reduced the number of children receiving rations in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia.

The ARA introduced a more comprehensive approach to the way they worked. It was responsible not only for delivering food, but also for keeping accurate records (how many meals, to whom, and when) and dietary rules. Local committees were given instructions on food preparation and on kitchen and dining room equipment. Soup and cocoa, as well as biscuits, were prepared according to American recipes. American administrators asked local officials to make regular surveys about the social and health conditions of children. The rules and requirements for providing information gradually became more stringent. Children or pregnant women were provided with food as a nutritional supplement in public kitchens or similar facilities (such as schools). Only in rare instances were they permitted to take food home. Gradually, the administration was consolidated and rules tightened. Those who missed several meals or failed to attend medical examinations could have their food coupons revoked. Similarly, deliveries were stopped if the local committee failed to submit a weekly report. Each month, for medical statistics, the children were weighed, and the data was sent to the US.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Československá péče o dítě* [Czechoslovak Child Care] (Prague, 1920), 111–12, 117–19.

⁵¹ *Československá péče o dítě*, 120.

⁵² Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, 2008).

⁵³ Weekly reports about food distributions 1919–1920, Státní okresní archiv Havlíčkův Brod, [State District Archive] (hereafter SOKA), file 6, 8, 10; SOKA Rokycany, f. Okresní komitét Čsl. péče o dítě Rokycany, box 1.

As Julia Irwin has noted, despite the priority of emergency relief, American humanitarians also sought to achieve longer-term and more complex social welfare goals. They launched a wide range of hygiene and sanitation reform initiatives. Through their aid, they sought not only to alleviate the immediate suffering caused by the war, but also to fundamentally and permanently transform European health, welfare, and civil society.⁵⁴ Cooperation with other charitable organizations and the avoidance of political, national, or religious conflicts were emphasized. As stated in the ARA circular, its goal was not only to improve children's health but also "to contribute to the establishment of a permanent basis for further social work in Czechoslovakia. It is necessary to determine as accurately as possible what good Czechoslovak child welfare has done in various, even the most remote, parts of our republic." For this purpose, there was a need for accurate data on the activities of the Czechoslovak child welfare system.⁵⁵ Apparently, it was designed to protect against black-marketed American food. It is interesting that, given the emphasis on documentation, surprisingly little material on child welfare has survived in Czech archives.

Another Kind of Aid: American Expatriates

The war underlined the importance of immigrant communities and their ties to the homeland. The Czech expatriate community in the US was ideologically and socially diverse, economically established, and had its own intelligentsia consisting of journalists, teachers, priests, engineers, and lawyers. Some of them actively maintained their ethnicity by participating in compatriot associations, publishing dozens of titles in Czech-language periodicals and newspapers, founding Czech schools, libraries, and clubhouses.

From the beginning of the war in Europe, the Czechs in the US had organized large-scale charity events in support of Czechs at home. The Czecho-Slav Red Cross, the Czech gymnastic organization Sokol, the Catholic Cyril and Methodius Fund, and the Socialist Fund of the Proletariat organized fundraising campaigns for widows, orphans, and wounded soldiers. The Bohemian/Czech National Alliance (BNA) became the main organization advocating the establishment of an independent Czech/Czechoslovak state. American Czechs and Slovaks not only became financial supporters but also introduced the Czechoslovak issue to the American public and especially to politicians.⁵⁶

After the war, American Czechs continued their charitable work for their homeland. In the fall of 1918, the BNA and the National Union of Czech Catholics announced a national tax to raise money for the people of Czechoslovakia. In May 1919, various Czech and Slovak organizations, including BNA, the National Union of Czech Catholics, and Slovak League in America, developed another plan—United Czechoslovak Relief—for material assistance. Associations and individuals sent gifts to the American Czechoslovak Board in New York, from which they were then to be taken to Czechoslovakia by so-called "ships of love."⁵⁷ Donations from Chicago alone amounted to \$400,000 but the campaign ultimately ended in failure. Due to transportation and customs difficulties, the cargo was delayed, goods were damaged, spoiled or not delivered at all, and the American donors felt cheated. The BNA, as well as the Slovak League in America, demanded receipts and an explanation from Czech-American entrepreneurs Emanuel Voska and Carl Byoir, whose company was in charge of transportation to Czechoslovakia. The whole affair came to nothing and left an aftertaste of failure.⁵⁸ The case confirmed the opinion that appeared in an ARA *Bulletin*:

⁵⁴Irwin, "Taming Total War," 770–71.

⁵⁵Instrukce ARA komitétům Čs. péče o dítě, 31 March 1920, SOkA Havlíčkův Brod, f. Okresní komitét Čsl. péče o dítě v Ledči nad Sázavou, file 1.

⁵⁶Dagmar Hájková, "Naše česká věc": Češi v Americe za první světové války [Our Czech Cause: Czech in America during the First World War (Prague, 2011), 35–36.

⁵⁷Reports on United Relief Action 1919, VHA, f. ČNS, Amerika, Varia, sign. 974–79, box 1; "Krach a aféra Voskovy obchodní společnosti a soudní řízení u obchod. soudu: Czechoslovak Commercial Corporation of America" [The collapse and affair of Voska's trading company and the court proceedings], *Právo lidu*, 30 August 1921, 7.

⁵⁸Zápis plenárního zasedání Čs. národní rady v Americe, [Minutes of the plenary session of the Czechoslovak National Council in America] Pittsburgh, 7 October 1919, VHA, f. Krajanské spolky v Americe [Compatriot societies in America], sign. 2; Slovenský národný archiv [Slovak National Archives], f. Slovenská liga v Americe [Slovak League in America], box 3.

Needless to say, the unorganized effort to relieve from this side the destitution of individuals and families in Europe met with disappointment. The kindly disposed European in the United States who went to his corner grocery store, bought haphazard articles of food, packed them unskillfully and started them hopefully toward the interior of the old continent, will ever remain a tragic figure. There were thousands of them. But transportation in Europe was so chaotic, morals and the sentiments against petty thievery so lax, that the food consignees rarely received more than notice of shipment, or perhaps an empty box from which the contents had been looted.⁵⁹

In December 1919, Hoover launched a special food aid programme for Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Hungary, and Poland. The so-called Food Draft Program introduced a system that allowed US residents to purchase vouchers from banks in the US, Canada, and elsewhere for relatives and friends in Europe. These vouchers could then be exchanged for food packages in ARA warehouses (ARAW) that were supplied by the US. This method was relatively quick and safe, as the parcel could not be lost, damaged or stolen. An important reason and goal of this programme was to enhance the reputation of American food in Europe. As ARA mission member Edgard Rickard wrote: “With the determination that every Food Draft package should be an international evidence of America’s food faith and an advertisement of Americas modern methods, we put our own inspectors into even the proudest packing houses in the country.”⁶⁰

Masaryk praised this initiative in a December 1919 telegram to his Czech compatriots: “As the President of the Czechoslovak Republic, I ask your relatives and friends in America to continue to give their trust and financial support to the American Relief Action—European Children’s Fund, as well as to the Czechoslovak Child Care so that our children will be able to fulfill their future responsibilities as full citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic.”⁶¹ In February 1920, many Czech-language newspapers announced a new organization called ARA Warehouses, which was going to distribute food. The country’s citizens were encouraged to be active: “Residents of our republic who have relatives or friends in America can write to them to buy a food coupon for them in one of the American banks.”⁶² The voucher could be exchanged for a food package. The smaller one, worth \$10, contained 11.13 kg of flour, 4.55 kg of beans, 3.63 kg of bacon, and 8 boxes of condensed milk. A larger package, worth \$50, contained 63.4 kg of flour, 22.75 kg of beans, 7.26 kg of bacon, 6.82 kg of lard, 5.4 kg of beef, and 48 boxes of condensed milk.

The ARAW gave instructions that notices about action were to be put up in railway stations and post offices, as well as in cafés and gyms, in all the languages spoken in Czechoslovakia. They were to be placed especially in areas with a high rate of emigration. As the ARAW emphasized: “It is inevitable that all classes of the population, without distinction of nationality or religion, should be alerted to the organization of aid warehouses, since the import of food is of great importance for the whole republic.”⁶³ The applicant was asked to collect a special postcard and send it to an American relative or friend. Czech painter Adolf Kašpar designed the card, which depicted a boy and girl in national costume looking out from the mountains over the ocean and the Statue of Liberty (see Supplementary Image S1). Frequent appeals to local committees to use ARAW suggest that the vouchers were not used as extensively as the ARA expected. The problem seemed to be that the applicant had to have acquaintances or relatives in the US and know that they could be asked for help.

In July 1920, the Czechoslovak Ministry of Public Supply informed the Czechoslovak Press Office in Prague that the ARAW had approached the Ministry with a request for the state administration to

⁵⁹Edgard Rickard, “Genesis and the Development of the Food Draft,” *American Relief Administration Bulletin* 2, no 2 (15 October 1920): 6.

⁶⁰Rickard, “Genesis and the development of the food draft,” 8.

⁶¹“Vánoční telegram pres. Masaryka Čechoslovákům v Americe a nový podnik Mr. Herberta Hoovera” [Christmas telegram of president T. G. Masaryk to the Czechoslovak in America and new activity of Mr. Herbert Hoover], *Venkov*, 21 December 1919, 1–2.

⁶²“Potravinové dárky z Ameriky” [American food gifts], *Národní listy*, 12 February 1920, 3; „Potravinové dárky z Ameriky” *Venkov*, 12 February 1920, 4.

⁶³SOkA Havlíčkův Brod, f. Okresní komitét Čsl. péče o dítě v Ledči nad Sázavou, file 1.

promote the warehouses because there was little interest in them in Czechoslovakia, in sharp contrast with the situation in Vienna. The Ministry recalled that the great use of warehouses was not only in the interests of the republic, but also concerned the United States Food Administration as this was how they could measure need within the country. If the warehouses were not used, “false ideas could arise” in the US about food needs in Czechoslovakia.⁶⁴

In late autumn 1920, advertisements in newspapers appealed to citizens to pick up “Hoover’s post-cards” because the ARAW wanted to prepare the citizens of Czechoslovakia for a happier Christmas than the previous year: “Thousands have relatives and acquaintances in America who live in wealth and prosperity and would like to contribute to their friends in Czechoslovakia.”⁶⁵ A total of 12,024 packages valued at \$183,165 were issued from warehouses in Czechoslovakia between February 1920 and October 1920. In addition, food aid had been delivered from the warehouses to the gathering of Sokol, or to the YMCA.⁶⁶

The sales of food vouchers began in January 1920 and continued until 30 April 1921. The end of ARAW initiative was explained in the German-language newspaper *Prager Presse*: “In view of the fact that foodstuffs can be bought in Czechoslovakia today cheaper than they can be imported from the US, it is certain that the American warehouses have served their purpose, as a result of which their enterprises are now being liquidated.”⁶⁷ There were warehouses in ten cities in Czechoslovakia, thirty-two warehouses in Austria, seven in Germany, one in Hungary, and fifteen in Poland. During the period of warehouse operation, a total of 403,037 food vouchers of all kinds were sold and delivered, amounting to \$5,913,370. The most food was delivered to Austria, in comparison with other states of post-Habsburg Central Europe, Czechoslovakia received the least, confirming the low interest in the event (see Supplementary Table S2).⁶⁸

Conclusion

Food aid was an important element of Czechoslovak government communication during the economic and social upheavals of the early postwar period. In the newly created post-Habsburg space, Czechoslovak representatives employed the Czech historical narrative of a cultural and democratic nation. This narrative was designed to support their claims that they should have priority in the food supply: quite simply, they deserved priority owing to their moral and civilizational level, and long suffering under Austrian supremacy. Czechoslovak politicians identified defeated Austria as the clear culprit for the shortage of food. Proponents of this narrative aimed to create a positive image of a state deserving a firm place in the European order.

The Czechoslovak leadership expected the most aid from the United States, which was the strongest player in terms of its ability to supply war-weary Europe. Czechoslovak society considered the Americans as saviors or “uncles who with their gifts are saving a starving nation,” as they traditionally imagined the United States as a rich land of freedom.⁶⁹ Julia Irwin has pointed to the humanitarian aspect of American involvement in Europe, writing that they “believed they [the Americans] had an obligation to continue to make the world safe.”⁷⁰ Masaryk, who became a key figure in building Czechoslovakia’s international standing, also took this approach. He and his daughter Alice supported

⁶⁴Czechoslovak Ministry of Public Supply to Presidium of the Council of Ministers 21 September 1919, Národní archiv Praha [National Archives Prague], f. Presidium ministerské rady [Presidium of the Council of Ministers], box 3630.

⁶⁵“Naše vánoce a dárky z Ameriky” [Our Christmas and Gifts from America], *Venkov*, 18 November 1920, 5; “Vánoční balíky z Ameriky” [Christmas Packages from America] *Rudé právo*, 22 November 1920, 6, “Vánoční dárky z Ameriky” [Christmas gifts from America], *Venkov*, 5 December 1920, 8.

⁶⁶*Československá péče o dítě*, 164.

⁶⁷“Sperrung der amerikanischen Hilfslagerhauser,” *Prager Presse*, 10 April 1921, 5.

⁶⁸Bane and Lutz, *Organization of American Relief in Europe 1918–1919*, 93–94.

⁶⁹“Y.M.C.A.,” *Humoristické listy*, 1 October 1920, 415; Josef Švéda, “Reprezentace ‘pravého Američana’ a Spojených států amerických v českých cestopisech od sedmdesátých let 19. století po první světovou válku” [Representations of the ‘true American’ and the United States of America in Czech travelogues from the 1870s to World War I], *Česká literatura* 63, č. 3 (2015): 359–88.

⁷⁰Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford, 2013), 145.

the work of foreign, especially American, humanitarian organizations. Masaryk purposefully developed his international academic, journalistic, and political contacts over decades as the proponent of democracy and humanitarianism. He and other Czechoslovak leaders/administrators consciously promoted and protected the “good name” of the Czechoslovak state. They believed that foreign officials could be instrumental in this effort, so they treated them as well as possible to impress them. The goal was to have the Czechoslovak interpretation of the social situation in Central Europe accepted and spread abroad. As, for example, Kerner or Creel really did.

It remains an open question whether the Czechoslovak approach affected the level of relief the country received. Although Czechoslovakia ranked higher in food distribution among the Central and Eastern European states, it seems unlikely that the reason was moral standards and/or the promise of being America’s vanguard in Europe. American representatives politely assured the Czechoslovak public that they were basking in the sun of their favor. At the same time, they employed the threat of withholding food supplies if Czechoslovakia did not follow the rules they established for coal supply to Austria. It seems that the main reasons for the level of food Czechoslovakia received were that the country needed the aid and was able to limit violence within its borders. Indeed, the primary goal of Western food distribution was to maintain peace in Europe. The Czechoslovak authorities adopted the same principle when they distributed food to areas where the greatest shortages and outbreaks of discontent threatened. The Czechoslovak government gave priority to districts where the functioning of the state was threatened.

Although in the first few months following the armistice, the provision of food in crisis areas was somewhat ad hoc, foreign charitable aid, especially from the ARA, helped to bring order to the provisioning system, an organization based on expert medical approaches, accurate statistics, and control, emphasizing equal access regardless of nationality or religious affiliation. In the case of Czechoslovakia, personal ties, especially to the circles of American social workers involved in relief work, and a willingness to adapt to their methods were a distinct advantage. The work of the CCC organization exemplifies the effectiveness of the ARA. Moreover, Hoover’s Draft Action, which was intended to better organize individual aid from the US to post-Habsburg Central Europe, had its limits in Czechoslovakia and was used less than in neighboring countries. It was intended primarily for people who had relatives or acquaintances in America. This approach illustrates the problems that arise from a selective approach. And it also raises the question. Did this country really need help if they did not use this programme properly?

By closely analyzing the negotiation of postwar humanitarian aid on the basis of historical narratives and moral merit, we can better understand both the construction of Czechoslovak state identity and its relations with neighboring countries. Despite the postwar economic collapse, Czechoslovak politicians were able to present their country’s situation in a positive way, even in terms of scarcity, and to promise their citizens a better future.

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