

# Security, Public Order and Paramilitarism in Poland and Czechoslovakia, 1918–1920: Comparative Considerations

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## Abstract

This article investigates the struggle for control over the violence that the Second Polish Republic and the First Czechoslovak Republic fought during their early independence in 1918. As violence had spread throughout the European continent during World War I, it became a crucial post-war question to control its expansion throughout the societies, as different paramilitary groups started to take the law into their own hands, either to protect their co-citizen's interests, or to enforce their own political or economic ambitions, and very often both at the same time. Thus, the use and limitation of violence were ambivalent: the newcomer states often relied on paramilitary units as policing forces and instruments to expand their state power into contested, ethnically mixed border areas. On the other hand, these emerging states faced difficulties to control paramilitary groups, which challenged the state's authority and followed their own – often criminal – agenda. This article aspires to comparatively examine the use of violence and its attempted regulation in Poland and Czechoslovakia during the first years of their existence. Furthermore, presenting the Polish-Czech conflict over Cieszyn Silesia, it aims to show how, immediately after the Great War, ethnopolitical tugs-of-war, fought between regular soldiers and paramilitaries of neighbouring states over borderlands created civil war-like scenarios and put the ethnically mixed population in these regions between a proverbial rock and a hard place.

## Keywords

Czechoslovakia, Poland, World War I, violence, military, post-war era, security, paramilitarism, terrorist violence, borderlands, inner security, Cieszyn Silesia, Allies

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*The axe fells you at Vienna's decree,*

*And you die slowly, you die calmly!*

*In silence you vanish, ocean of pine,*

*Unending, unending, your grief and mine!*<sup>1</sup>

A couple of years before the outbreak of World War I, Czech poet Vladimír Vašek published an anthology of poems titled *Silesian Songs*, in which he drew a picture of a world in turmoil: simultaneous to the Industrial Revolution, which left deep scars on the landscape of his beloved Cieszyn Silesia – a borderland of the Habsburg Empire – a struggle for the national and cultural identity of its ethnically mixed population had erupted towards the end of the nineteenth century. In the wake of the World War, the small yet economically important territory where Vašek grew up became the nucleus of a conflict between Czechs and Poles, during which local minorities suffered the consequences of this enmity.

One would imagine that, with the signing of the armistice in 1918, violence would be curbed sufficiently to secure a smooth start for the new nation-states which replaced the multinational European empires in the region. However, the armistice did not only bring an end to the Habsburg, German and Russian empires but to the brotherhood of Slavic nationalities that had united different national movements throughout their shared struggle against imperial patronisation as well.<sup>2</sup> The post-war years brought many changes to the geopolitical order of the European continent. With the irrefutable end of multinational empires, smaller nationalities received the opportunity of self-determination, while liberal democracy was witnessing its widespread expansion. Nevertheless, many new problems arose in the once imperial territories of Central and Eastern Europe: The redrawn borders created numerous territorial conflicts, political quarrels within the new republics destabilised the situation while the ethnic arrangement drastically changed following the division of the imperial territories, flipping the until now effective ethnic balance and creating new minorities within the successor states, adding national, cultural and religious disputes to the chaos.<sup>3</sup>

Following the Great War, Poland and Czechoslovakia both sought to achieve an internationally supported national autonomy; striving for a basic level of domestic, political and societal stability while staking claims over what they deemed their rightful territorial property. Czechoslovakia could, to a certain extent, overtake the state and security organs of the late Austria–Hungary, thus granting them the stability that other newly created states struggled to accomplish. Poland was finally able to create its national state as well, but it was facing a more complicated situation. During the long nineteenth century, the Polish-speaking lands had been partitioned between Russia, Austria and Germany – a rupture that greatly impacted not only the demographic composition but also the political, administrative and economic structure of these territories which were officially granted to Poland in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 more than a century after the partitions. Thus, while both countries faced internal security problems in their infancy, these problems varied in nature and intensity, as – consequently – did the measures the respective governments took to tackle them. As a matter of external security, following a period of failed negotiations in

1 P. Bezruč, 'Silesian Forests', in: *Silesian Songs*, trans. J. Milner, Brno 1966 (Czech original 1909). 'Petr Bezruč' was the pseudonym of Vladimír Vašek.

2 F. Pelc, *O Těšínsko: vzpomínky a úvahy*, Slezská Ostrava 1928, 11.

3 R. Gerwarth, *The Vanquished. Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923*, London 2016.

the autumn of 1918, the Polish and Czechoslovak sides engaged in a short yet intense military conflict over the Polish–Czech border region of Cieszyn Silesia in January 1919. Only the intervention of the Allies brought an end to the dispute; creating a demilitarised zone while dividing the remaining area between Poland and Czechoslovakia. In consequence, the immediate post-war security situation in the interior and at the borders of both nation-states differed significantly from the idealistic images of national unity and harmony they vociferously propagated.

It can, therefore, certainly be claimed that the formation of national states in the cases of Poland and Czechoslovakia was not completed, but only initiated with the declaration of their respective independence at the end of 1918. In this light, the period 1918–1920 appears as a transitional phase in which paramilitary violence, particularly in border areas with mixed populations, was used to intimidate and dominate those sections of the population not considered part of the titular nation. This situation was, however, not unique to the Polish–Czechoslovakian case. Indeed, it is rather typical of the transition from war to peace in the border regions of east-central and south-eastern Europe at the time.<sup>4</sup> Political unrest and ethnic struggle in the interior and at the borders of the new Central European nation-states created an atmosphere that many contemporaries experienced and described as times of civil war.<sup>5</sup>

This article asks questions about how the unstable situation in the centre and at the borders affected and interacted with the state-building process in Poland and Czechoslovakia. It will address the two countries' paths towards internal security and stability while focusing on the aspect of security and paramilitarism in the context of national borders between 1918 and 1920 – when violence became a collective communication tool as an after-effect of the war. It will approach the problem in three steps: First, the domestic security situation of Poland and Czechoslovakia and the respective states' means of tackling growing paramilitary unrest within its society will be described. Second, the ambiguous role of uniformed forces that acted as protectors of the country's integrity, which at the same time targeted parts of the civilian population will be examined. Here, emphasis will be put on how the post-war situation impacted the performance of both civil and military forces in both states. Third, the concept of security at the borders was closely intertwined with the relation between neighbouring states. Therefore, the 7-day war between Poland and Czechoslovakia in early 1919, but especially the ensuing period of paramilitary and terrorist violence in their bordering region Cieszyn Silesia until the final settlement of the Polish–Czechoslovak border in the summer of 1920 will serve as a case study.

## **I. The struggle for inner security**

The 28 October 1918 marked the birth of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Although national politicians had spent time preparing for it, they were arguably surprised by how fast it actually arrived. Foreshadowed by the last unifying efforts from the Habsburg Empire a few weeks before, which brought vague promises of a new constitutional monarchy, with ideas about national autonomy while maintaining the imperial framework.<sup>6</sup> Yet this offer came too late – the Czech political scene was striving to realise its uncompromising demands for a fully independent and sovereign state; an endeavour that was supported by US President Wilson's statements about self-determination in the wake of the old European dynasties. However, the critical date did not

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4 J. Eichenberg / J. P. Newman, 'Aftershocks, Violence in Dissolving Empires after the First World War', in: *Contemporary European History* 19 (2010) 3, 183–194.

5 J. Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921. The Reconstruction of Poland*, Oxford 2018.

6 F. Peroutka, *Budování Státu 1918–1919*, Praha 1991, 37.

catch the Czech politicians fully unprepared – a National Committee with a strong Czech representation had already been established since the summer of 1918.<sup>7</sup> When word from the national delegation in Paris came, the Prague National Committee's leading figures declared an independent Czechoslovak state and formed the first government of the new country.<sup>8</sup>

While in the Czech case the formation of a national government went relatively smoothly, things played out much differently in Poland. The Russian partition zone – known as Congress Poland – had been occupied by Germany and Austria since 1915. A Regency Council ran Polish affairs in Warsaw as a puppet government of the Germans but was largely discredited with the defeat of the Central Powers in late 1918. The head of the evolving new Warsaw government in November 1918 was Józef Piłsudski, famous in and beyond the Polish-speaking world as the leader of the Polish Socialist Party and, above all, as the legendary military commander of the Polish legions – military formations that had fought against Russia within the ranks of the Habsburg Army – in the War. In the Austrian partition zone – with Cracow as its urban centre – a so-called Liquidation Commission implemented the transition of imperial institutions into national ones. In the area around Poznań, which had been German-occupied for over a hundred years, a power centre of the Polish conservative National Democracy was quickly established, which stood in opposition to the left-wing Warsaw government and was supported in this by the Polish National Committee in Paris, which in turn regarded itself as the genuine Polish government. In Poznań, Upper Silesia and Cieszyn Silesia, local Polish National Councils were formed which often pursued a regional agenda that differed from that of Warsaw or Paris. In other words, while in Czechoslovakia, one power centre was established that cooperated with its representation in Paris, in late 1918 Poland there were at least three major power centres that maintained an – to say the least – ambivalent relationship with the Polish representation in Paris.

Independence brought many new tasks, ranging from the administrative organisation of the two countries and the creation of responsible institutions to the care of demoralised soldiers and the protection of the new borders. In the Czechoslovak case, new supreme constitutional bodies had to be created out of the remaining framework of the Austro-Hungarian empire's former governing institutions. The revolutionary beginnings of the new state were hampered by insufficient personnel and office accommodations, by last-minute changes due to conflicts of competencies between the newly created institutions and by the surge of volunteer groups who were prepared to help construct and protect their country.<sup>9</sup> To counteract the chaos and the wild excitement spreading throughout the republic, compounded by the absence of a national army, strong institutions that would put the country in order were urgently needed. The preservation of public order, the protection of the borders, the creation of a Czechoslovak army and other tasks linked with the repatriation of the soldiers from the fronts were, therefore, delegated to the new Czechoslovak Troop Headquarters, placed under the leadership of Josef Scheiner, the head of the gymnastics organisation *Sokol*.<sup>10</sup> As one of the 'only organised associations that had a sense of discipline in the country',<sup>11</sup> *Sokol* was used on many

7 Ibid., 5.

8 Ibid., 80. See also J. Kuklík, 'Proč nebylo Československo republikou hned od 28. října 1918?', in: *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Iuridica* 3 (2018), 71–77, 73.

9 Military Archive in Prague (Vojenský Historický Archiv, hereinafter VHA), coll. Committee of National Defence (Výbor pro Národní Obranu – hereinafter VNO), 'Administration', 73–98. Archived manuscript for evident internal use that deals with the time period of 1918–1919.

10 VHA, coll. VNO, 'Committee of National Defence October 30 – November 15, 1918', 1–20, 9. See also E. Stehlík, *Za službu vlasti smrt. Vznik, budování, rozvoj a zánik armády demokratického Československa na příkladu osudů generálmajora Karla Lukase (1897–1949)*, Olomouc 2016, 108.

11 VHA, coll. VNO, 'Committee of National Defence October 30 – November 15, 1918', 1–20.

occasions as a replacement for the missing soldiers, especially since its members had often volunteered to fight against the Austro–Hungarian oppression – before and during the Great War – and thus, after 1918, were trained in warfare and held a particularly strong motivation to secure their free homeland. However, before the Troop Headquarters could even begin with its activities, it was preceded by the sudden creation of many volunteer groups coming from the ranks of students, workers, reserve officers and *Sokol* members.<sup>12</sup> The country may have lacked an army personnel, but the civil population took a major part in the task leading towards stabilising the republic.

As most of the country's soldiers were beyond the borders when the armistice was signed, the many tasks coming hand in hand with the repatriation of the national troops and the requisite supplies were delegated by the National Committee to the newly created Committee of National Defence.<sup>13</sup> This committee existed for less than a month before being terminated, but it prepared the ground for its successors: the Ministry of National Defence and the Military Committee which were created mid-November 1918. After a month of complicated dealings between the Ministry of National Defence and the Troop Headquarters based on a vague division of tasks and competences, the latter was dismissed and replaced by a more distinct division of three – already existing – closely cooperating institutions: the Ministry of National Defence and two regional headquarters located in Prague and Brno.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the arrival of General Pellé's French Mission in February 1919 helped in further optimising the state's organisation.

In the Polish-speaking areas, the establishment of an orderly administration and the development of national armed forces as well as a functioning police force proceeded under much more difficult conditions. Until 1920, fierce battles were waged with almost all neighbours – including the Czechs in Cieszyn Silesia – over disputed border areas of the Polish Second Republic.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, there was no question of a unified domestic policy outside the core Polish territory with Warsaw at its very centre during this period. In the Polish sphere of influence, the north-eastern border areas to Ukraine and Lithuania – the so-called *Kresy* – were controlled in part by the Polish military, partly by a civil administration – which often acted as a mere occupational force – and partly by different paramilitary units and warlords.<sup>16</sup> In the summer of 1920, in the course of the Polish–Bolshevik war, the Red Army even briefly occupied the Polish northern territory up to the German border.<sup>17</sup> Upper Silesia was engulfed in a civil war in which Polish and German paramilitaries were at each other's throats; an international peace force doggedly trying to keep them apart.<sup>18</sup> Until late 1920, military authority was split between the General Staff (responsible for the operational zones) and the War Ministry (responsible for the hinterland); both were, more often than not, at odds with each other.<sup>19</sup>

In such an unfavourable situation, improvisation was the order of the day. Administering and policing the new-born Polish state which faced myriad supply problems and security threats at its border as well as in its centre would have been a sheer impossible task had it not been for

12 E. Stehlík, *Za službu vlasti smrt*, 109. See also: VHA, coll. VNO, 'Committee of National Defence October 30 – November 15, 1918', 1–20.

13 VHA, coll. VNO, 'Committee of National Defence October 30 – November 15, 1918', 1–20.

14 VHA, coll. VNO, 'Military Praesidium', 151–182.

15 J. Böhler, *Civil War*, 59–137.

16 J. Gierowska-Kałuża, *Zarząd Cywilny Ziem Wschodnich, 19 lutego 1919 – 9 września 1920*, Warszawa 2003.

17 S. Lehnstaedt, *Der vergessene Sieg. Der Polnisch-Sowjetische Krieg 1919–1921 und die Entstehung des modernen Osteuropas*, München 2019.

18 T. Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence. Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia 1918–1922*, Oxford 2010; W. Pieniazek, 'Subversive Kriegsführung in Oberschlesien 1920–1921', in: M. Białokur / A. Dawid (eds.), *Spór o Górny Śląsk 1919–1922. W 90 rocznicę wybuchu III powstania śląskiego*, Gdańsk 2012, 191–195.

19 J. Böhler, *Civil War*, 50.

several forms of self-organisation the Germans and Austrians had allowed for in occupied Congress Poland between 1915 and 1918. Various citizen militias that had formed during the war constituted the nucleus of the police force of the Second Polish Republic, thus preventing total chaos and guaranteeing at least a certain level of public security already within the first months of independence. On the other hand, given the heterogeneous nature of its core units and the different ways they were formed, the unification of the police apparatus was – unsurprisingly – not accomplished until 1922.<sup>20</sup> As in the Czechoslovak case, the first police formations of independent Poland were, to a large degree, made up of paramilitary personnel. Their herculean task was to break the wave of chaos and violence that the country faced when thousands of demobilised and demoralised soldiers and groups of bandits roamed the country – to a large degree devastated by the war, with an economy in shambles and whose population was suffering famine and diseases.

Under various decrees, two police bodies were created at the turn of the year 1918/1919: The People's Militia (*Milicja Ludowa*), which had emerged from the Polish Military Organisation (*Polska Organizacja Wojskowa*, POW – a paramilitary secret organisation from the occupation period) and dealt primarily with gangs, speculation and political affairs; and the Communal Police (*Policja Komunalna*), which was formed from former members of citizens' militias and other self-governing bodies. Occasionally, disputes and even armed conflicts broke out between members of the two formations. For example, in the course of workers' strikes were both found each other on different sides of the barricades, and where sometimes even the Polish military became involved.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, a functioning police system was dependent on a stable legislative body whose specifications it had to carry out. The Polish Ministry of Interior – a body that had already been established under German auspices in 1916 and which up to 1918 underwent a variety of changes – was responsible for matters which did not concern the military. Despite the changes that it underwent, it laid the foundation for administrative law and structure upon which the Polish Second Republic could build from 14 November 1918, onwards.<sup>22</sup> Thus, despite of the different legal and administrative systems in the three partition zones at the time before World War I, the organisation and control of the Polish public sector – whether organised by imperial, occupational or national institutions – was surprisingly seamless and uniform. At the end of 1918, due to the trouble at the borders, the authority of the Ministry of Interior in the Polish core country went relatively uncontested. The unification of civil law and criminal law from the three imperial systems was prepared rather pragmatically by a Codification Committee of legal experts, which met regularly and submitted its proposals to the Minister of Justice.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, alongside the creation of new supreme constitutional bodies, the Czechoslovak Republic maintained the Austro-Hungarian legal and administrative systems as well as its personnel to facilitate rapid developments. Although many functionaries of German or Hungarian nationality either left their position or faced distrust from the state, this continuity aided on the path towards a quicker stabilisation. However, the heritage of the dualistic system of the Habsburg Monarchy complicated the unification of the state administration throughout the whole country as well – this goal was achieved only in 1928 through the endorsement of organisational

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20 A. Misiuk, *Administracja spraw wewnętrznych w Polsce od połowy XVIII wieku do współczesności. Zarys dziejów*, Olsztyn 2005, 108–152; A. Misiuk, *Powstanie Policji Państwowej w odrodzonej Rzeczypospolitej, 1915–1922*, Szczytno 2009, 9–28.

21 A. Misiuk, *Powstanie Policji Państwowej*, 17–19.

22 W. Kozyra, *Polityka administracyjna ministrów spraw wewnętrznych Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w latach 1918–1939*, Lublin 2009, 40–56.

23 Sprawozdanie z działalności Komisji Kodyfikacyjnej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej za czas od 3 czerwca 1919 do 31 maja 1920, in: *Kwartalnik Prawa Cywilnego i Karnego* 3 (1920) 1–4, 285–311.

law.<sup>24</sup> The dissonance between both Austrian and Hungarian systems was, therefore, provisionally tackled by creating a specialised Ministry for Slovakia in December 1918.<sup>25</sup> This administrative disparity was particularly visible in the very rudimentary network of state police posts in Slovakia, where only 75 state policemen were in active duty in the year 1918.<sup>26</sup> Yet inequalities were seen throughout the whole country. State police existed only in bigger cities, while the tasks of criminal investigative duties and maintenance of public order in smaller cities required the city's own financial and administrative capacities. On the other hand, the gendarmerie system was better developed, and its posts were disseminated throughout rural areas, though it often lacked manpower. New rules were therefore put in place and both formations were put under the supervision of the Ministry of Interior, with the Ministry of National Defence overseeing the equipment of the gendarmerie. A gradual adaptation of the old system towards a fitting security apparatus was progressively executed through legal measures taken by the National Assembly.<sup>27</sup>

The same approach was used in the question of the judiciary organisation of the state. Through the 1918 reception law, the old Austrian–Hungarian judiciary system stayed in place while minor changes were accepted based on the current legal practices at the time. The post-war era was defined by a decomposition of the state's criminal justice apparatus – the administrative staff deserted its positions, ongoing investigations were suspended and prisons were left unattended – resulting in many escapes.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the supreme court and the general prosecutor's office in Vienna had lost their competences over the new Czechoslovak Republic due to the collapse of the Empire. Therefore, the traditional system of regional courts, high courts and a supreme court remained intact, while new leading institutions were formed: a Czechoslovak supreme court for civil and criminal matters and a supreme administrative court in 1918, and later a supreme constitutional court in 1920.<sup>29</sup> A similar approach was taken in the system of military justice.<sup>30</sup>

Although the Czechoslovak and Polish Republics approached independence from vastly different positions, they both had to deal with similar problems at the beginning of the interwar period – albeit on different scales. In both cases, the recipe for a relatively seamless transition from war to peace called for the large-scale adoption of pre-1918 administrative, structural and legal systems. In the Czechoslovak case, it was possible to draw extensively on the Habsburg administration and legislature. In the Polish case, the long-term goal was to reconcile the three different imperial systems and to integrate paramilitary and self-governing structures that had been built under German and Austrian occupation during the Great War. Here, as there, the adoption of the imperial order stemmed from pragmatism, to which there would have been hardly any alternative in consideration of the enormous challenges of the time. However, as Ingo Loose has shown with reference to the Polish administration of Greater Poland in the early post-war years, the adoption of pre-war state structures did not automatically mean the continued employment of the personnel who had directed these structures in the imperial era.<sup>31</sup> German and Austrian officials from the pre-war

24 P. Macek / L. Uhlř, *Dějiny policie a četnictva II. Československá republika (1918–1939)*, Praha 1999, 14.

25 J. Kuklík, 'Proč nebylo Československo republikou hned od 28. října 1918?', 74.

26 P. Macek / L. Uhlř, *Dějiny policie a četnictva II*, 21.

27 *Ibid.*, 19.

28 VHA, coll. VNO, 'Department of Justice', 670–677.

29 For more information about the changes in the legal system of the First Republic, see K. Schelle / J. Bílý, *Dějiny českého soudnictví*, Praha 2018.

30 VHA, coll. VNO, 'Department of Justice', 670–677.

31 I. Loose, 'How to Run a State. The Question of Knowhow in Public Administration in the First Years after Poland's Rebirth in 1918', in: M. Kohlrausch / K. Steffen / S. Wiederkehr (eds.), *Expert Cultures in Central Eastern Europe. The Internationalization of Knowledge and the Transformation of Nation States Since World War I*, Osnabrück 2010, 145–159.

(and in the case of Congress Poland: occupation) period were replaced as soon as possible with compatriots who were considered more reliable. As far as the executive was concerned, it was preferred to rely on trustworthy men from the very start: Czech and Polish veterans and members of paramilitary units such as citizens' militias and border guards who had started their service under German or Austrian rule but were eager to serve their respective newly formed national state. However, it would soon become apparent that it was not always the maintenance of peace and order these compatriots had in mind.

## 2. Armed men as the states' protectors and menace

The war and the related violence influenced the lives of the civil population in many ways. A sense of detachment from former moral paradigms throughout the wartime and the direct post-war years was witnessed, while violence became a common social practice in both defeated and victorious Central and Eastern European states.<sup>32</sup> Although the war did not reach the territories of Czechoslovakia, the country could still feel its effect through the rising influence of the military on the various civil and juridical institutions. As Rudolf Kučera states, the uniformed violence in the Czechoslovak Republic was framed by three aspects: the context of securing the new borders and disputed territories, the question of an official state monopoly on violence – which was embodied by the army, and later the import of violence through Legionnaires from the Russian Civil War. However, even the turbulent nature of the post-war years was still partially restrained by a sense of collective responsibility regarding the state's international reputation.<sup>33</sup> While paramilitary violence became an everyday occurrence in the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe, the Czechoslovak lands were arguably less affected by it than others.

Nevertheless, as the war ended, the Czechoslovak Republic experienced an influx of former Habsburg soldiers returning from the front to their now Czechoslovak homeland in an uncoordinated, disorderly way. Volunteers from the Italian and French Legions were among the first to return alongside those soldiers who had stayed in the Austrian army. The Czechoslovak Legionnaires from the Russian front needed until autumn of 1920 to return completely, which was particularly due to the turmoil linked to the Bolshevik Revolution as well as the Allies' inability to repatriate the soldiers in time. To leave Russia, the Legionnaires took control of the Trans-Siberian railway, which won them the status of internationally renowned war heroes, yet this was a title that did not take into account their capsized understanding of violence and war, which was darkly coloured by their experience of extreme brutality.<sup>34</sup> After having crossed the national borders, the soldiers, exhausted from the war, headed straight home without awaiting military orders. They then roamed the country, some still in possession of their weapons. Others continued their service in territories that were not assigned to them, such as the regiment no. 102 did in the Balkan.<sup>35</sup> Few methods were available to organise the scattered national army, as the sole concept of military authority was understood as an Austrian invention. The soldiers had spent years under a forced

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32 R. Kučera, 'Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat: Uniformed Violence in the Creation of the New Order in Czechoslovakia and Austria, 1918–1922', in: *The Journal of Modern History* 88 (2016) 4, 827–855, 829–830.

33 V. Šmírdkal, 'Dancing on a Volcano: Why the Czech Lands did not turn into Bloodlands after 1918', in: A. Markopoulos / E. Hatzivassiliou (eds.), *1914–1924 – The Years of Upheaval Europe and Greece*, Athens 2017, 293–320, 298.

34 Konrád mentions a reshaping of a collective identity based around their experience of excessive everyday violence, which complicated the Legionnaire's reintegration into Czechoslovak society. See R. Kučera, 'Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat', 842–843.

35 VHA, coll. VNO, 'General Inspectorate', 21–48.



Austrian–Hungarian rule and had taken many opportunities to rebel against the commands they received. Officers were therefore disrespected on a daily basis, not only under Austria–Hungarian rule but also after the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic. They maintained their rank, therefore, solely for formal reasons during the first year of the republic.<sup>36</sup> On 19 February 1919, in Pardubice, an officer had to threaten his drunk soldiers with imprisonment to stop them from robbing a train station's property and put an end to their additional harassment of present civilians.<sup>37</sup>

A report from the General Inspectorate on 22 March 1919, states that officers were reluctant to intervene in cases of insubordination because they were afraid their men would then question their authority.<sup>38</sup> Following the report, avoiding problems by – for instance – letting thieves escape or giving in to the demands of the soldiers were the easiest ways for officers to maintain basic military order. The absence of clear regulations and the lack of supervision in the regiments were the main problems in the absence of a strong leadership.<sup>39</sup> The soldiers' hostility towards military authority and the general lack of morale, therefore, complicated the formation of a functional national army, as military training proved problematic for the same reasons. Bad relations within the military were enhanced by the poor condition of uniforms, insufficient hygiene infrastructure and the looming winter, which strongly impacted the soldiers' morale while the feeling of a republican liberty exacerbated the soldiers' demands for a freedom of decision. As a result, the new republic was facing the important task of stabilising the country with an uncontrollable army and many paramilitary groups roaming the territory. Through the mission of securing national borders and later gaining back the territory of Slovakia from the Hungarian grasp, the Czechoslovak soldiers acquired a sense of a new collective duty. But more particularly, the state could send away the most uncontrollable regiments into the midst of the ongoing armed conflict against Hungary, where they could, in the eyes of the Czechoslovak state, do more good than harm. However, the context of active combat brought with it escalating violence towards the civilian population – in particular in the Slovakian territories – during which not only Jewish shop owners were targeted, but also representatives of the Catholic Church. The scale of the brutality reached such proportions that even the Allied states had to intervene.<sup>40</sup>

The relationship between the republican army and the civilian population was positive at the beginning as it was sustained by a collective pride of finally having a national army. However, this changed quite quickly, as the civilians noticed the passivity of the soldiers who were either demoralised or awaiting further orders. This led to a surge of civilian initiatives, which pressured the army into taking more radical steps, especially in the borderlands.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, the food and material shortages that the soldiers faced motivated many thefts. Especially if the target was of German nationality, the vindictive reasons for obtaining justice for years of oppression proved good enough to motivate action. It is in this context that the large estates in Baumgarten, Ochab and Kostkowitz filed a complaint for theft and destruction of private possessions against the infantry regiments 75, 102 and 93 that were housed on their property in early 1919.<sup>42</sup> The civilian

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36 Ibid.

37 VHA, coll. Czechoslovak Troop Headquarters for Cieszyn Silesia, box 11, folder 47, 'Soldiers' vandalism on the Pardubice trainstation before departure for Cieszyn Silesia', 31 March 1919 (unpaginated).

38 VHA, coll. VNO, 'General Inspectorate', 21–48.

39 Ibid.

40 R. Kučera, 'Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat', 848.

41 VHA, coll. VNO, 'General Inspectorate', 21–48.

42 VHA, coll. Czechoslovak Troop Headquarters for Cieszyn Silesia, box 8, folder 315/2, 'Damages done to the estates of Baumgarten, Oschab and Kostkowitz by czechoslovak troops', 2 March 1919 (unpaginated).

population and especially persons of German nationality were therefore often the target of looting and forced requisitions during the unruly times of the first republic. With reference to the General Inspectorate, an institution that was created in January 1919 and bore the responsibility of supervising the army, the soldiers were, due to their uncontrolled and violent actions, a danger to civilian property and furthermore to the state's own security.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the Czechoslovak republic managed to regain its monopoly over the use of violence quite quickly in contrast to its neighbours – through persistent weapon confiscations from civilians and a further deployment of returned Legionnaire officers in the regiments of the national army, who imposed more respect and compliance in the troops and were able to control them more effectively than their predecessors.<sup>44</sup>

The Polish Second Republic faced similar problems, but on a much larger scale. Thousands of Polish-speaking soldiers who had fought in the Austrian or German armies did not have to return from distant parts of the globe but were demobilised – or deserted – in Central and Eastern Europe. Many of them joined the Polish national forces, whereas others preferred to keep their arms but not report for duty. Most of them simply returned home, but others formed paramilitary gangs that harassed the local population; taking away their last possessions. Even soldiers of the new Polish Army became a menace when they marauded and plundered in the countryside. The Polish High Command viewed this development with concern. Hundreds of court-martial proceedings were initiated, and strict orders were issued to protect civilians from soldierly assaults. The sheer number of such orders issued in 1919 and 1920, however, testifies not only to the Polish state's determination to curb these developments – as they were damaging its reputation among its population and in the international arena – but also signifies that the problem was endemic. Military reports clearly stated that the authority of superiors within the ranks and files was fragile, and many officers would give their men a free hand when they disregarded military discipline. One reason for the soldiers' readiness to take whatever they needed from wherever they could get it was the bad supply of the Polish Army in nascence. The recruits lacked not only weapons but also such basic things as food and clothes.<sup>45</sup>

Above all, the non-Polish civilian population suffered from the attacks of Polish gangs, paramilitaries and regular units. Polish Jews in particular became the target of the attacks. Harassment, abuse and robbery of Jews in railroad stations and trains were commonplace between 1918 and 1920 and were hotly debated before the Polish parliament, but the violence was not limited to such acts. Several hundred Jews fell victim to pogroms in Polish cities such as Lviv or Częstochowa. Not only, but especially often, the perpetrators were members of the Haller Army, a force of about 80,000 men raised from Polish prisoners-of-war in France, who were shipped to Poland in the spring of 1919 and took part in the war against the Western Ukrainian People's Republic in the eastern parts of the country. Soldiers of the Greater Polish Army that was formed in Poznań also exhibited particularly violent behaviour toward Jews.<sup>46</sup> In some cases, Jews were protected by soldiers of one unit against transgressions of soldiers from another. Generally, the pervasive lack of military discipline and the virtual absence of policing forces created an atmosphere where Polish Jews were regarded as a fair game.<sup>47</sup>

43 VHA, coll. VNO, 'General Inspectorate', 21–48.

44 V. Šmirdkal, 'Dancing on a Volcano', 299, and VHA, coll. VNO, 'General Inspectorate', 21–48.

45 J. Böhler, *Civil War*, 157–166; J. Borzęcki, 'German Anti-Semitism à la Polonoise: A Report on Poznanian Troops' Abuse of Belarusian Jews in 1919', in: *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 26 (2012) 4, 693–707.

46 W. W. Hagen, *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914–1920*, Cambridge, MA, New York 2018.

47 Central Military Archive Warsaw (Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe), 'Soldiers' excesses in Zawada', 11 September 1920. Report by the commander of the military gendarmerie in Lublin [signed, illegible] to the Military Gendarmerie Headquarters in Warsaw, I.300.51.219 (not paginated).

A particular menace to the non-Polish civil population were paramilitaries deployed – openly or clandestinely – by the Polish government in the ethnically mixed borderlands. Here, the conflicts were not only fought over territories but also over loyalties. Polish paramilitaries in the *Kresy* or the Polish–German contact zone claimed to protect their co-nationals by harassing those inhabitants whom they regarded as alien. Here, paramilitary violence was also used as a means to force nationally indifferent people with mixed ethnic backgrounds to choose the Polish side. Of course, the same technique was similarly applied by Ukrainian or German paramilitaries.<sup>48</sup>

When it comes to military and paramilitary violence against civilians, the Czechoslovak and the Polish cases differ in intensity mainly because of the overall political situation during and after the global conflict. Except for the Slovakian territories – which suffered a Hungarian invasion in 1919 –, the Czech lands were largely spared the nightmare of intense military struggles in populated areas. In contrast, the Polish borderlands were fiercely embattled between Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Lithuanians and Germans, with the Polish–Ukrainian and the Polish–Bolshevik wars as full-blown military conflicts. Such armed clashes in areas remote from the new state’s capital created ample opportunities for regular armies, warlords and paramilitaries to act against the locals as they pleased. In contrast, the Bohemian lands had not been divided between different empires before the war, their territory was not struck by the Russian strategy of scorched earth, as did the western parts of the Russian Empire, and there were no warlords nor politically involved paramilitary troops which created havoc as it was the case in Ukraine and Hungary.<sup>49</sup>

On the other hand, lack of discipline within the army and paramilitary violence against civilians was quite common both in Poland and Czechoslovakia after the Great War, albeit on a different scale. Excessive violence against Jews, though, was a characteristic of the Polish and Ukrainian lands and of post-revolutionary Hungary, not of the Bohemian lands.<sup>50</sup>

### 3. The border conflict over Cieszyn Silesia

As a result of the fall of former multi-ethnic empires, their successor states faced problems related to their population’s national, religious and linguistic diversity. Together with the consequences of a global military conflict, the social and economic fissures – which had long existed yet were deepened by the war – presented a major burden on the new states. With the issue of establishing often entirely new national borders, inter-ethnic tensions intensified and the territorial demands of the new states increased. The disparate, post-war visions of the Allied states also played an important role in the development of Central and Eastern Europe, which each cultivated their own idea of a balanced region.

However, not all actions of the Allies were solely aimed at creating a stable region, which could act as a counterbalance to Russia and Germany – some of their actions were also influenced by economic considerations, as the French large shareholder rights of Schneider–Creusot in Třinec and Karviná proved in the conflict over Cieszyn Silesia.<sup>51</sup> The small territory of the former duchy very rapidly became the subject of disagreements between the Czechoslovak and the Polish

48 J. Böhler, *Civil War*, 166–186.

49 O. Konrád, ‘Die unfertige Nation. Überlegungen zur Gewaltgeschichte der Böhmisches Länder während des Ersten Weltkriegs und in der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit’, in: D. Neutatz / V. Zimmermann (eds.), *Von Historikern, Politikern, Turnern und anderen. Schlaglichter auf die Geschichte des östlichen Europa*, Leipzig, 2016, 105–120, 108.

50 See also E. Bemporad / T. Chopard (eds.), *The Pogroms of the Russian Civil War at 100, New Trends, New Sources*, Special Issue of *Quest. Issues of Contemporary Jewish History* 15 (2019); B. Bodó, *The White Terror. Antisemitic and Political Violence in Hungary, 1919–1921*, Abingdon, New York 2019.

51 P. Wandycz, *France and Her Eastern Allies*, Minneapolis, 1962, 150.

republics. Under Austro–Hungarian rule since the sixteenth century, the region was mostly inhabited by Czechs and Germans. The discovery of large coal deposits and the following rapid industrialisation of the nineteenth century had brought a major wave of immigration of mostly Polish workers, and subsequently Jews after the formal ratification of their community's equal rights, which drastically changed the ethnic and religious demographics of the territory. In this manner, the majority of the working class was built by Poles, while Czechs and Slovaks made up the middle class and Germans primarily belonged to the upper class. In the wake of the twentieth century, a new ethnic group of Silesians (*Ślonzáci*), claiming their regional historical background, formed around the figure of Jozef Koždoň, bringing another separate actor – neither Czechoslovak, nor Polish – onto the stage.<sup>52</sup> This multi-ethnicity played an important role in the violent dispute concerning the small, yet significant territory of Cieszyn Silesia. As an industrially important region with a strategic position enabling the communication with Slovakia and Cracow through a high-capacity railroad, the region was vitally important for both surrounding states: Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>53</sup> During the international negotiations that followed the armistice, the aspect of a Polish majority presented the main argument for Polish governance in the region. On the other hand, the Czech side argued that the historical attachment of the territory to the lands of the Czech crown (albeit under Habsburg rule) since the seventeenth century legitimised their claim to the region, also highlighting the industrial significance of the region and the presence of a railway track connecting the north with the south of the country.

The conflict in itself can be divided into two sections. From autumn 1918 to January 1919, the conflict over Cieszyn Silesia was based on the provisory Czechoslovak–Polish November agreements that provided a certain degree of calm. However, this period was ended by a military attack initiated by the Czechoslovak side, which reclaimed most of the territory and placed it under its military rule. It was only the arrival of the Allied forces that put an end to the fights. The second part of the conflict began in February 1919 and went on until the summer of 1920. It brought a new demarcation line, a continuous presence of Allied troops and the division of the region into Polish, Czechoslovak and neutral zones.<sup>54</sup> This international suspension of the open armed conflict brought a wave of paramilitary violence and hostile regional campaigns from both sides, with aim to coerce the population's political preferences. Thus, in parallel to the ongoing negotiations, paramilitarism and terrorist attacks from both sides increased, at some point also targeting the Allied commission.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, in order to sway the political preferences of the German and Silesian minorities, many coercive methods from Poles as well as Czechs were used.

The conflicted region faced many types of violence during the negotiations – collective actions against the local authorities were organised, order disturbances were a daily occurrence, and the populace was not safe from physical harm. The ethnically mixed communities of miners played a central role in disturbing public order by organising general strikes, imprisoning workers of different nationalities and arranging illegal distributions of weapons. A confidential report from the station commander of Orlová in February 1919 raised concerns about the worrying behaviour of miners, their unwillingness to follow orders and their attempts to achieve the creation of a military

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52 F. Buttin, 'The Polish-Czechoslovak Conflict over Teschen Silesia (1918–1920): A Case Study', in: *Perspectives* (2005/2006) 25, 63–78, 68. See also E. Długajczyk, *Polska konspiracja wojskowa na Śląsku Cieszyńskim w latach 1919–1920*, Katowice 2005; J. Bílek, *Kyselá těšínská jablčka: Československo-polské konflikty o Těšínsko 1919, 1938, 1945*, Praha 2011.

53 F. Buttin, 'The Polish-Czechoslovak Conflict', 63.

54 See J. Bílek, *Kyselá těšínská jablčka*.

55 *Ibid.*, 95.

base in the vicinity of their mines for protection in case of 'potential terror'.<sup>56</sup> Since the miners were seen as the most dangerous of all rioters, a Czechoslovak regiment was positioned in the area, provoking strikes from the Polish miners. Furthermore, organised mass demonstrations of both Poles and Czechs were held throughout the region and in front of the Allied Commission's headquarters in Teschen, during which the Commission would be accused of siding with one or the other party. These demonstrations were often used as an opportunity to exacerbate the national feelings of the involved party and to enable the unlawful distribution of firearms to the civilian population. This was the case in protest marches in Fryštát on 28 February and 2 March 1919, during which the Polish army shared its weaponry with the civilian population in order to support its active involvement in the conflict.<sup>57</sup>

When Polish and Czech regular forces withdrew from the contested area, the Czech gendarmerie and a civic guard were installed. Since November 1919, about 4,000 Polish paramilitary fighters were active in the region as well. Under the auspices of the Polish War Ministry, they infiltrated the Czech side of the demarcation line, committing terrorist acts against Czech activists and security personnel. The Czechs organised their own shadow armies and paid the Poles back in their own coin.<sup>58</sup>

According to Edward Długajczyk, paramilitary violence was an accepted form of political struggle on both sides.<sup>59</sup> Even the use of explosives and the arson of enemy buildings became a new norm between Polish and Czech neighbours. Violent clashes in the streets, shootings over the provisional border, attacks on individuals belonging to the other nationality were a daily occurrence. The Czech head of the Land Administrative Commission for Silesia, Ferdinand Pelc, mentions a change of tactic in the Polish brutalities during the spring of 1920, during which the number of bomb attacks rose sharply.<sup>60</sup> Explosives thus destroyed the houses of many individuals, especially during March 1920, and even struck the office of the plebiscite commission in Karviná on the 24th.<sup>61</sup> In reaction to the permanently rising hostilities, the perceived passivity of the Allied Commission and related to the insufficient forces of law enforcement, the Czechoslovak Civil Defence (*Občanská Obrana*) was created in the year 1919.<sup>62</sup> It acted as a protector of the Czechoslovak civil population and a vanguard to the national army in case of a Polish military attack. At first, based around mining sites, the paramilitary organisation grew very fast, spreading through the region and beyond the temporary border and even receiving support from Prague.

Between 1918 and 1920, the ethnically mixed border region between Poland and Czechoslovakia witnessed the same forms of violence and civil war scenarios as the Polish–Ukrainian and the Polish–German borderlands. While the thinned-out Czech security forces had a hard time to maintain law and order, Polish and Czech paramilitary formations, sent by and acting on behalf of their respective governments, did their utmost to destabilise the area to intimidate those parts of the local population they suspected to sympathise with the enemy state. The underlying aim was to create an atmosphere favourable for the integration of the contested territory

56 VHA, coll. Czechoslovak Troop Headquarters for Cieszyn Silesia, box 11, folder 6, 'Report from lieutenant Frič in Orlová', February 1919 (unpaginated).

57 VHA, coll. Czechoslovak Troop Headquarters for Cieszyn Silesia, box 8 and 11, folders 302/4 and 124, 'Reports to the Czechoslovak Troop Headquarters in Moravská Ostrava', 18 February and 2 March 1919 (unpaginated).

58 J. Böhler, *Civil War*, 115–121.

59 E. Długajczyk, *Polska konspiracja wojskowa*, 14.

60 F. Pelc, *O Těšínsko*, 131.

61 *Ibid.*, 132.

62 *Ibid.* For more information about the Czechoslovak Civil Defence, see also E. Długajczyk, *Polska konspiracja wojskowa*, 111–121.

into either Poland or Czechoslovakia. However, the conflict was finally ended in the summer of 1920 by the Allies, who unceremoniously assigned a major section of Cieszyn Silesia to the Czechoslovak state, when large parts of Poland had just been taken by the Red Army and the Warsaw government had no choice but to accept the territorial loss.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although their starting positions could not have been more different, the Polish and Czechoslovak states faced similar problems at the end of 1918 with regard to internal security, the building of state institutions and security organs, and controlling and containing the violence of military and paramilitary units at the same time. The parts of Poland previously divided among three empires were far more heterogeneous administratively and politically than the Czechoslovak lands that had emerged from the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Poland's military involvement on its borders well into 1920 far exceeded the deployment of Czechoslovak forces to secure the country's frontiers.

Nevertheless, both states encountered similar problems and reacted with similar means: Imperial organisational structures were maintained and adapted to the necessities of the new time, while the German and Austrian personnel were quickly replaced by members of the new titular nation. Yet the mission of an administrative unification of the national territories persisted throughout the next decade. The policing forces were, on both sides of the disputed border, facing problems relating to a lack of workforce and equipment as well as a deficiency of military discipline. While the lack of basic equipment weakened the soldiers' motivation for further deployment, the leaders of military and police forces rather closed their eyes when faced with transgressions of their subordinates in fear of losing the bit of authority and respect they had left, which only exacerbated the disobedience amidst their ranks.

Furthermore, both nations witnessed occasionally strained cooperation between the divergent armed forces that were supposed to establish order yet were often the ones that did not maintain it. The post-war famine and the shortages of food supplies additionally led to increased crime not only in the civilian population but also among both nations' policing forces. In the Polish case, an anti-Semitic pattern of pillaging and plundering can be detected, but violence was directed against other non-Polish ethnicities as well. The Czechoslovak case is harder to characterise, as the lootings seem as rather a consequence of social and economic causes. However, regarding the restriction of unruly behaviour, in contrast to an internally and externally torn and conflicted Poland, the Czechoslovak government could rely on efficient civilian organisations – such as *Sokol* – or on the authoritative reputation of comeback Legionnaires from abroad, who were of major assistance in controlling the turbulent country. Moreover, since Czechoslovakia faced an armed conflict only in the South, it could send off the problematic regiments into a war-torn region rather than letting them roam the rest of the country, enabling its stabilisation. Poland did not possess this comfort, considering the many militarised disputes it had to face simultaneously on its border territories.

When it comes to the deployment of military and paramilitary forces, in both cases they soon turned out to be double-edged swords: Because of the precarious security situation, lack of discipline and overstretched policing forces, there was ample opportunity for soldiers and paramilitaries to act at their discretion and harass the local population. Although there were attempts to stop these attacks, the new governments had little to counter them with. On the other hand, they did not hesitate to use military and paramilitary forces to sway the struggle for ethnically mixed border areas in their favour. This ambiguity portrays the governments' struggle well, where the rapid achievement of a stabilisation of the country was strived for, yet the means at their disposal were inadequate.

In the direct post-war years and despite the armed conflict over Cieszyn Silesia, Poland and Czechoslovakia managed to maintain a basic level of cooperation, for instance in matters of administration, since they shared documents dating from the Habsburg rule, or in the tackling of an epidemic that spread throughout the disputed territory. Nevertheless, the conflict took its toll on the relations of the two neighbours and was at the root of a poor affinity between Warsaw and Prague up until the Cold War, a period during which Cieszyn Silesia changed hands several times.


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