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The well-known Czech artist David Cerny, most famous for his statue of two gentlemen urinating in front of the Franz Kafka Museum in Prague, complained in a 2009 New York Times interview that, “The Czech attitude is not to be proud of being Czech…Here in this country we are taught to be silent and invisible…because of decades of watching out.”¹ Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century followed a tumultuous path that led them to freedom from the long time yoke of the Habsburg Empire, to an existence as a small democratic nation surrounded by dictatorship, to Nazi occupation twenty short years later, and finally to total and complete de-individualization under Soviet communism. All of these experiences contributed to a fear of expression and the repression of a national identity. While arguably much of collective Czech national history is based on victimization and “watching out,” the way in which Czechs approached the conditions of World War I and the emergence of Jaroslav Hašek’s The Good Soldier Švejk from this period established a precedent of perseverance and a strong intellectual background founded in the “spiritual strength and the humanism of their national traditions.”²

At the outbreak of war it was evident that many Czechs hoped to improve their position within the empire. There was little indication, however, of a push for complete independence. While foreign émigré leaders such as Tomáš Masaryk and Edvard Beneš attempted to win appeal in the international circle, propaganda and military action on the ground level helped the Czech people to grasp the national movement in their own hands. This is where the legend of Švejk comes into play.

“Great times call for great men,” Jaroslav Hašek wrote in the preface of his legendary work The Good Soldier Švejk. “You can meet [him] in the streets of Prague…not even aware of his significance…If you asked him his name he would answer you simply and unassumingly; ‘I am Švejk…’” This beginning highlights the importance of the Czech everyman’s small effort to
the escape from the Austrian Empire. The character of Švejk speaks so loudly that the term Švejkism resonates, characterizing the historically “passive resistance of the Czechs.” Set in World War I, The Good Soldier Švejk precedes Joseph Heller’s Catch 22 by thirty-eight years in the representation of double-talk, with Švejk constantly protesting his patriotism and devotion, while his actions clearly undermine the Austrian effort, even if in his own small way. The novel is important to the development of the Czech national character and understanding the history of the movement because it came to epitomize the development of the Czech national movement and began the literary trend of “comedies of defiance” that appear throughout each occupying period (WWI, WWII and Soviet) of the twentieth century.

The novel begins with the news, “And so they’ve killed our Ferdinand,” to which Švejk’s response is, “Which Ferdinand, Mrs. Müller?” This question illustrates the Czech lack of awareness or concern of the larger events affecting the Empire. Similarly, the bar owner, Palivec, thinks that Sarajevo, referred to by the plainclothes officer Bretschneider, refers to a bar rather than the capital of Bosnia. Not only that, but it is not long before the rheumatic and already “certified by an army medical board as an imbecile” Švejk is called to war. When his charwoman, Mrs. Müller, protests that he cannot even move, he insists that he will go to the war in a bathchair, because “except for [his] legs [he is] completely sound cannon fodder, and when things are going badly for Austria every cripple must be at his post.” Despite the doctor’s prescription of bromide Švejk continues to prepare for his appearance before the draft board. Waving his crutches and shouting “To Belgrade!” he causes a scene when Mrs. Müller wheels him to the draft board in the bathchair, and is reported in several newspapers for displaying “the most sacred feelings and sympathies…sacrificing his life for his emperor.” The Czech crowd that
follows him beats up an enthusiastic German student who cheered in response, “Down with the Serbs!”

As Švejk’s example aptly illustrates, the outbreak of the First World War, while obvious to historians in hindsight and perhaps even clear to residents of the major powers involved at the time, caught the Czech population completely off guard. Count Franz Anton Thun-Hohenstein’s report of Czech troops leaving for Prague described older soldiers like Švejk, “accompanied by relatives and by children… obviously drunk… Yesterday their behavior was still worse… they carried three large white, red and blue flags, and a red flag with the inscription: We are marching against the Russians and we don’t know why.” The actual words to the chant, “Ceverny šátečku, kolem se toč, pudeme na Rusa, nevíme proč (Red handkerchief, wave through the sky, we fight the Russians, though we don’t know why),” indicate the Czech loyalty to the colors of the Bohemian red and white flag, in contrast to the yellow and black of the House of Habsburg. Both the soldiers’ attitudes and even civilians’ shouts not to “shoot your Slav brothers” indicated that the Czechs were not wholeheartedly invested in a battle and contributed to the Austrian command’s uneasiness about Czech support in the war.

![Figure 1. Josef Švejk in the Bathchair. Josef Lada’s illustration of Švejk reporting to the draft board is compellingly accurate to the Bohemian Governor Count Thun-Hohenstein’s description.](image)

This initial description of the Czechs does not depict exemplary service, and yet the authorities observed that the mood of the population had “soured” even more in the months after the outbreak of the war. Increasingly evidence indicated that the Czechs sympathized with the
“enemy” Russian army and had little sympathy for the Habsburg cause, which the Emperor attributed to “unhealthy political conditions at home.” The unreliability and suspicion of the Czech soldier gave the AOK, or Austrian High Command, excuse to argue for complete militarization of the Czech lands, although the autocratic appointed Prime Minister Count Karl von Stürgkh felt the existing “emergency laws” were sufficient to quell unrest. Stürgkh’s “emergency laws” included the following: the forced resignation of Thun-Hohenstein, who was considered too pro-Czech, the disbanding of the Sokol in 1915, and the repression of the anniversary celebration to honor the martyr Jan Hus. The laws also led to the removal of the names of the leaders of the Bohemian Estates executed after the Battle of White Mountain from Prague’s Old Town Hall, the rewriting of textbooks, and the censorship of books, pictures on postcards, matchboxes, and even playing cards. The level of press censorship was also severe. The KPQ (Kreigspressquartier- War Press Office) very obviously left large blank spaces where the censor had taken effect, leading Prague newspaper vendors to cry, “What is white is the truth – what is black is lies!”

*The Good Soldier Švejk* also depicts the tightening of control over civilian life and the perception of the unreliable Czech. The plainclothes German police officer Bretschneider, who frequents The Chalice bar hoping to catch civilians uttering treasonous statements, is the perfect caricature of a nosy and suspicious tool of the state. When both Švejk and the bar owner Palivec are arrested for treason (the latter for saying that he removed a portrait of his Imperial Majesty because “the flies shitted on it”), they encounter five other civilians arrested “because they did away with His Imperial Highness at Sarajevo.” The sixth prisoner, arrested for attempted robbery and murder, avoids the other prisoners in order to not implicate himself as one of them, implying that the baseless charges of treason are more reprehensible than true criminal actions. Švejk, as a
loyal citizen of the Empire, agrees to everything in Bretscheider’s deposition, including the possibility that he might have murdered the Archduke.\textsuperscript{14} 

The chief army doctor Bautze, a German widely famous for the remark “The whole Czech people are nothing but a pack of malingerers,” also aptly exemplifies the German perception and mistrust of the Czech population. Having turned away 10,999 malingerers of the 11,000 civilians reported to him, Bautze also labels Švejk a malingerer despite Švejk’s vow that he “will serve His Imperial Majesty to [his] last drop of blood.” “Army doctors took unusual pains to drive the devil of sabotage out of malingerers” and suspected malingerers, which included “consumptives, rheumatics, people with hernia, kidney disease, typhus, diabetes, pneumonia, and other illnesses.” Although Švejk continually insists upon his allegiance to the Empire, he becomes a victim of a combination of the comical ineffectiveness of the military bureaucracy and the suspicion of Czech soldiers, and is sent from the asylum to the prison to the garrison gaol before being allowed to serve as a batman.\textsuperscript{15} 

The reputation of the Czech soldier for unreliability was reinforced by a few uncommon but resonant cases of wholesale surrenders of Czech battalions to Italian or Russian troops. In April of 1915 almost every man in the Czech infantry regiment 28 surrendered rather than fight the Russian army, whom the soldiers considered their Slavic brethren. The Czech soldiers of the infantry regiment 36 followed the 28\textsuperscript{th}’s example.\textsuperscript{16} In contrast to the 28\textsuperscript{th} regiment, the 36\textsuperscript{th} Czech regiment was massacred after their mutiny, while the 88\textsuperscript{th} regiment was destroyed in crossfire between the Germans and Hungarians. The men of the 102\textsuperscript{nd} contributed to the defeat of the Austro-Hungarians through fraternization with the Serbs. The members of the 35\textsuperscript{th} were immediately welcomed into the Russian trenches upon their arrival at the Galician front, and the Germans and Austrians shot them if they did not join the Russians. The surviving deserters of
these and other regiments joined other volunteer prisoners of war and became the basis of the Czechoslovak legion in the autumn of 1914.17

During the Battle of Zborov in 1917, the Russian-based Czechoslovak legion fought in the first directly confrontational battle with Habsburg forces since the Battle of White Mountain. The Habsburg force they encountered was dominated by the 35th and the 75th regiments, who were sixty-one and eighty-two percent Czech respectively. Most of the sixty-two officers and 4,000 enlisted men taken prisoner by the Czechoslovak legion were also Czech. Nonetheless, the battle was seen as an overwhelming success, because it brought the Czechs and the Slovaks a favorable reputation among the Western Allies and strengthened the claim to independence that developed as the war continued. Many Czechs felt that the Battle of Zborov signified a “retaking” of the Battle of White Mountain of 1620. It became immortalized in the newly independent post-war state as a national holiday.18

Figure 2. The Battle of Zborov. A Czech soldier refusing to fight his Slavic brothers at Zborov. (From the Muzeum Rakovník online archives.)

The Russians realized early in the war that the Austrian Army’s multinational character could be exploited, and they did so by promising a Pan-Slavic freedom. The pre-war period shows that the Czechs had neither cultural heritage nor linguistic commonalities with the Germans, while the Russians claimed both. Thus the Czechs proved especially susceptible to the 100,000 manifestos proclaiming liberty for the peoples of Austria that were scattered by Russian planes while troops marched into Galicia. Soon afterwards the Czech Intelligence Unit (Družina)
was formed and became the basis of the Czech legion in Russia. Russians often used these Czech troops to encourage “Austrian Czechs” to desert. Despite the early presence of propaganda, especially on the side of the Russians, it was not until 1917, with the fall of the Tsarist regime, that Germany and Austria-Hungary launched their first propaganda counter campaign.19

“Humbly report, sir, I belong and I don’t belong to the 91st regiment and I haven’t the faintest idea how I really stand,” Švejk states, unable to grasp his place in the war, reflecting the Czech loss of place on the European continent.20 Jostled back and forth throughout the story from batman of the Lieutenant to the Chaplain to the next officer, Švejk has no place on the Austrian front. He famously takes an elongated anabasis to rejoin his regiment, only to discover that he is going the wrong way. The Austrian army forces Švejk into the arms of the Russians when the ill-equipped Austrian army gives him a clownishly large and poorly fitting uniform. Švejk comes upon a bathing Russian prisoner, who runs away in fear, and tries on the Russian uniform to see “how it would suit him.” Unfortunately for Švejk, a Hungarian gendarme comes upon him, mistakes him for a Russian, and takes him as a prisoner of war. The Russian transport is a medley of Eastern prisoners who “looked at Švejk in full understanding” even though they don’t speak Czech, implying that the wayward Czech is more comfortable in the company of the Slavic prisoners than in the Austrian army machine. Major Wolf finally discovers that Švejk is a ‘Czech dog’ in a Russian uniform. In this scene Hašek highlights the failure of the Austrian Ministry of the Interior to recognize the “military organization of Czech deserters,” again illustrating the declining competency of the Army and the Empire. 21

The Russians were not alone in benefitting from the lack of Czech allegiance to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Italians realized that they too could exploit Austro-Hungary’s nationalist tensions, and focused explicitly on the Czech and Yugoslav populations because their
émigré movements possessed the best organization. Italian statesmen were thus the first to suggest that the Austro-Hungarian Empire needed to be outright destroyed.\textsuperscript{22} Well-known and respected Czech leaders such as Milan Stefanik wrote nationalistic memoranda appealing to “you who are honorable of spirit and have Slav blood in your veins” to “give yourselves up to the Italian army at the first opportunity,” and challenged Czechs by asking, “Do all of you who are Slavs wish to sacrifice your lives to a contemptible band of criminals who have set as their goal the extermination of our whole nation?”\textsuperscript{23} Nationalist appeals and the propaganda campaign allowed for the development of a Czechoslovak national rhetoric, connecting the intellectual movement of the émigré leaders to the ground movement of the everyman. The Italians claimed to have the goal of unification and presented themselves as freedom fighters, thus appealing to the Czechs’ own desires for statehood. The savvy Italian exploitation of the multi-national nature of the Habsburg Empire led to the Rome Conference of April 1918 “of representatives of all of the oppressed nations,” an important step in the international attempt to change the landscape of the European continent.\textsuperscript{24}

As the war continued, the Czechs became considerably more useful to enemies of the Empire both in the legion and in the supply of information on the propaganda front. Despite ideologies that influenced Czech action during World War I, hunger was the most common reason listed for surrender to the Italian Army among the diverse populations of the Empire during the war.\textsuperscript{25} H. Louis Rees argues in \textit{The Czechs during World War I: The Path to Independence} that economic conditions and the “steady deterioration of the state’s ability to provide the basic necessities of life” pushed Czech citizens and soldiers toward a “rebirth of political life.” The political condition improved for the Czechs after the assassination of Stürgkh, which assured the dismantling of the wartime dictatorship and promised the reestablishment of a
parliamentary government in 1916. However, the worsening economic situation dictated increased demonstrations, riots, and strikes in the Czech lands. As late as 1916 the Czech Union (formed of the Agrarian Party, the Young Czech Party, and the Social Democratic Party) rejected Woodrow Wilson’s claim of “liberation of the Czechs from foreign mastery” in the Fourteen Points, because they saw the future of the development of the Czech people “only under the scepter of the Habsburgs.” Notably, the key political figures responsible for the push for the independence, Masaryk’s Realist Party and the Maffia, were not a part of this coalition. 26

Economic conditions appeared disastrous by the winter and spring of 1917. Food supply problems worsened and popular unrest became more common. Initially, strikes were apolitical and consisted largely of women and children. Potato shortages caused a series of strikes that closed four mines in one district alone and severely damaged the Empire’s coal production. Summer demonstrations included more violence and the robbing of food stores. In Prague, demonstrations grew increasingly political with national justifications. 27 Political tensions heightened as the war continued, and food shortages caused even more unrest in the Czech lands. Threatened by the growing emphasis on the natural rights of nations and general radicalization of the Czech parties, the Empire called military force to quell the outbursts. The rationing of flour quickly led to large, widespread demonstrations. Rioters looted food stores, and troops sent to quell the riots opened fire on the demonstrators after being met with a barrage of stones. 28

Hašek’s portrayal of the incompetence of the Austrian Army and the bureaucratic Austrian machine is one of the most memorable aspects of the story of Švejk. Characters that exemplify Hašek’s depiction of the Austrian Army include the Chaplain Otto Katz, a drunk and gambling clergyman who loses Švejk as a batman in a game of cards, and the Colonel van Zillergut, an Austrian officer characterized by long explanations of ordinary objects (for example
a cart hits him while he is explaining what pavement is). The victim of the most biting satire is the pro-Monarchist Czech 2nd Lieutenant Dub, who is constantly portrayed in embarrassing situations (such as drunk in a brothel, falling off a horse, etc.). Only the Czech characters, Švejk’s companions, and his Lieutenant Lukas, are portrayed sympathetically, although as a member of the machine of the Austrian army Lieutenant Lukas is not free of ridicule either.29

Of course Švejk never complains about conditions in the Army, but other characters make the discomforts of the Austrian soldier’s condition well-known. The ravenous former miller Baloun is forced to eat sausage skins and raw dough when nothing else is available. The ill-equipped army provides Švejk with a uniform clearly fitted for someone larger than him, with “trousers [that] three more Švejks could have got into.” The Russian uniform he finds fits him better than his own “old military uniform.”30 Švejk serves as “a personality in the face of mindless authority,” paralleling the character of the Czech’s population’s resistance.31

![Figure 3. Josef Švejk in his Uniform. The uniform supplied by the Austro-Hungarian army was obviously fitted for someone else. (Josef Lada’s illustration in the novel.)](image)

As the condition in the Czech lands worsened, the radicalization of the political stance and deterioration of Czech moderates increased proportionately. At this point, for example, a New York Times report indicated that censorship had worsened, calling Austrian government control “terrorism.” The prohibition of national music is evidence of the Empire’s fear of the threat of growing nationalist fervor. The report also speaks of “wholesale arrests upon the slightest provocation” and says that “political executions have numbered between 2,000 and
Meanwhile thousands of intellectuals were placed in insanitary internment camps and subjected to every kind of privation.” After the revolution in Russia in early 1917, the Austrian military intelligence also decided that all homecomers would undergo an exam assessing the effect of Russian captivity, intended to assure that they had not been swayed by Bolshevism.

By January of 1917 Allied war aims included the liberation of the Czechoslovak peoples as part of Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points. The “Epiphany Convention” in January of 1918 called for a sovereign state for the Czechs and the Slovaks with an actual area bounded by the “Bohemian lands and Slovakia.” American recognition of the Czechoslovak National Council followed Paris, and the international powers officially proclaimed the provisional Czechoslovak government. Masaryk, with his history of commitment to democracy, was named president, with Beneš as his foreign minister and Stefanik as his minister of national defense. The Czechoslovak declaration of independence affirmed democratic beliefs and principles of separation of church and state, equal right to vote, and “freedom of conscience, religion, science, literature and art, speech, press, assembly and petition encouraged by Woodrow Wilson and the major Western powers of the world.”

The 1918 independence was short lived. The Czechs fell again under German (Nazi) domination in only twenty years, and were liberated from Nazism only to fall under Soviet communism. Through these periods of equal if not increased repression under foreign influence that characterized the remainder of the twentieth century for the Czechs, the legacy of The Good Soldier Švejk becomes apparent. Literature remained a crucial component of national solidarity during even the most intense periods of Stalinist oppression. With language already developed as a strong basis of singular Czech identity, narratives continued to play a part in both carrying and expressing an identity independent of the ruling powers. The precedent of The Good Soldier
Švejk not only inspired writers such as Bohumil Hrabal, Joseph Škvorecký, Milan Kundera, Karel Čapek, and the later president Václav Havel to create their own novels of defiance, but the character Švejk himself also provided an example of “pinprick” resistance that Czechs would utilize during the occupations that characterized the remainder of the century. The Czech people would embrace the method of “pinprick resistance,” brought to life by the example of Švejk, when reprisals to overt action were essentially guaranteed.

The connection of national identity to literature only grew as the Czechs were prevented from outwardly expressing themselves. By 2005, when a Czech television station hosted a “Greatest Czech” contest, inspired by a series on the BBC that had elected heroes such as Winston Churchill in Britain, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and Konrad Adenaur in Germany, the Czechs voted en masse for Jára Cimrman, the fictional brainchild of Jiří Šebánek and Zdeněk Svěrák, the “hidden genius behind key European discoveries, inventions, and musical and literary masterpieces, forgotten merely because he never made it to the patent office on time.” While it may seem a laughable joke that Czechs elected for the character Jára Cimrman to represent them as the “Greatest Czech,” his popular appeal says a great deal about the nature of Czech identity today. The choice of a comic fictional character also speaks to perhaps one of the only consistent elements in the Czech tumultuous history, writers who persistently continue to encapsulate Czech characters and their motivations with the dark light-heartedness of irony. Maybe the Czechs were opportunists, maybe it took almost 100 years to realize that there was more to being Czech than not being German, but their writers had attested to the “spiritual strength and the humanism” of the Czech people that Masaryk had hoped for all along.
APPENDIX

FOOTNOTES

21 Ibid 666-81.
23 Ibid 129.
24 Ibid 191.
25 Ibid 301.
27 Ibid 33-8.
28 Ibid 58-63.
36 Chad Bryant, Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 121.