
Rezensiert von: Nancy M. Wingfield, Northern Illinois University

„Zwischen Nationsidee and staatlicher Realität“ is a welcome addition to the interwar history of the Habsburg successor states. Martin Zückert’s examination of the multinational army of the First Czechoslovak Republic provides an excellent case study of how one of the constitutive elements of the state—a modern mass army through which large numbers of young men came into contact with the military—sought to function between state politics and the daily life of a population that was characterized by national membership. In a multinational state founded—and governed—as a Czech/Slovak nation state, the army could not operate, as it did in Germany or France, as „the school of the nation.“ Established as national, with „Czechoslovak“ as the language of service and command, the First Republic’s multinational army mirrored the tension between the nation-state concept and multinational reality.

Building on István Deák’s classic study, „Beyond Nationalism“ 1, Zückert examines the social and national background of the rank and file and officer corps against the background of Czechoslovak politics. He seeks to modify the historiographic trend that focuses on the twenty-year history of the First Czechoslovak Republic as part of a historic continuity with that era interpreted as the prehistory of the National Socialist occupation until 1945 and the subsequent expulsion of the Germans from the Bohemian Lands. An important aspect of the study, which draws upon nationalities studies literature from the last twenty years, is his expansion of the focus from the bi-national Czech-German conflict in the Bohemian Lands, above all Bohemia, to a more complicated narrative that involves all of the nationalities in the country. Zückert’s analysis of the history of the Czechoslovak multinational army includes relations between the Czechs and the Slovaks, and considers the place of the Magyars, Ruthenians, Poles, and nationally identifying Jews. The author also considers the influence on the army of political organizations that did not necessarily accept the bourgeois-nationalist conception of Czechoslovakia propagated from the center by President-Liberator Tomáš G. Masaryk and his allies, who were informally known as the Hrad (Castle). Zückert’s study adds to the growing literature arguing that one of the major weaknesses of the interwar state (and postwar Communist state, for that matter) was the failure to integrate the Slovaks into the predominantly Czech Czechoslovak nation state.

Following a useful introductory overview of the national-political situation during the last years of the Habsburg Monarchy and the first years after independence in 1918, the book is divided into three sections, which are organized chronologically and topically. The first section discusses the conditions under in which the Czechoslovak army was created, while the second, „Die Armee in der Praxis,“ is a study of military life in the multinational army. The final section analyzes the impact of National Socialism in neighboring Germany and domestic politics in Czechoslovakia on the development of the army after the mid-1930s.

In the first section, Zückert carefully describes plans for the new army, which included rapid unification of Legionnaire units (Veterans of an army that was older than the state they served, Legionnaires were Czech—there were very few Slovaks among them—volunteers, who had served with Allied armies on all of the wartime fronts.) and veterans of the now-defunct Habsburg army. The Legionnaires were to provide the example of the new esprit de corps envisioned in the transformation Habsburg veterans into modern, „democratic and republican“ soldiers. The Legionnaires, did not, however, exercise a solely positive, democratic influence on the army. Because they fought for Czechoslovak independence, the Legionnaires, including those who returned only in 1920 from Siberia, made a variety

---


© Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved.
of claims on the Czechoslovak army, which Zückert carefully documents. (In September 1919, the most nationalist of the Legionnaires called for an „unlimited Masaryk dictatorship“ and the dismissal of Germans and Jews from the army and state offices, pp. 104-105.) These veterans of the field did not necessarily have the requisite education nor—especially in the case of Russian Legionnaires—experience with discipline of a modern army for military careers. Legionnaire demands also affected the officer corps, which remained overwhelmingly Czech. The majority of the officer corps initially comprised veterans of the Habsburg Army, who brought with them years of service in another multinational army. By 1927 Legionnaires would occupy 50 percent of the general staff positions. Despite internal tension, in contrast to other East Central European countries of the era, the officer corps did not threaten the country’s democracy. Indeed, the Czechoslovak army remained a trusted pillar of the state throughout the interwar period.

The second section provides a richly textured social history of the Czechoslovak army. Among the topics in Zückert’s analysis are discussion of replacement of the rejected Habsburg military tradition with an older one, that of the medieval Hussites, and the influence of the varying political strands of Legionnaire movements, including that of conservative-nationalist Rudolf Medek, veteran of the Battle of Zborov (July 1917 in what is today Ukraine), and later General and director of the Památník osvobození in Prague. Of great interest is the author’s discussion of the attempts of the Czechoslovak military, no longer a „caste,“ to win the hearts and minds of the country’s citizens for the new army. Among the actions he describes in the Western half of the country are the free concerts performed by the army orchestras during summer maneuvers and football matches between army and local teams. In formerly Hungarian-dominated Slovakia, but especially in Ruthenia, the army undertook theater and other cultural productions as well as athletic events to propagate the „Czechoslovak idea“ (pp. 195-198).

The third section is less focused on the army than the other two. Although Zückert considers the role of the army in the government’s movement toward „authoritarian democracy“ after 1935, he spends as much time discussing the domestic political situation. The weakest part of an overall excellent book is the last chapter, which addresses the events of September 1938 and their consequences. The author examines political events primarily from the point of view of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany, missing the opportunity to discuss the Sudeten German Party, whose politics did not necessarily coincide with those of the Nazis, into whose party it would be subsumed after Munich. Greater use of more recent work on the Sudeten German Party and the Second Czechoslovak Republic, including the new edition of Ralf Gebel’s excellent book, „Heim ins Reich!“ Konrad Henlein und der Reichsgau Sudetenland (1938-1945)2, would have enriched the analysis of the political events that surrounded the Munich Agreement of September 1938. Noting that that the question of whether the Czechoslovak military would have defended the country is still a topic of discussion, Zückert provides a detailed analysis of German reservists’ responses to the mobilization of the Czechoslovak army in September 1938. Although the topic has been the subject of recent discussion in Czech-language historiography, Zückert considers the Czechoslovak army’s withdrawal from the Sudetenland and elsewhere only briefly. Another lacuna is the lack of sustained discussion of the experiences of all of the ethnic groups that made up the Czechoslovak army in the wake of Munich. While Zückert addresses the fates of Jewish soldiers in the Slovak army after its formation in 1939—expulsion from the army, entry into forced labor units, and the threat of anti-Jewish measures, up to and including deportation into German extermination camps—what of those national Jews who had remained the rump Czech army? While the reader learns that some soldiers who identified as national Germans and a few who identified as Magyars joined Czechoslovak volunteers in France and Great Britain, what was the experience of those soldiers who

identified as national Poles? And, finally, how many members of these national groups participated in the Communist-dominated Czechoslovak army in Russia, which participated in bloody battles to liberate Eastern Europe from the Nazis?

In wake of Second World War Czechoslovakia’s multinational army, like the country itself, became far more national („Czechoslovak“) than it had been during the interwar era. There was, however, some continuity in policies towards German and Hungarian minorities. Between the wars, the Czechoslovak army had practiced a policy of „dislocation,” in which many recruits did their military service far from home. Dislocation to German-speaking borderlands of the Bohemian Lands played a „Czechoslovak” integrating role among Ruthenians and Slovaks. This policy also prevented possibly disloyal German and Hungarian recruits from serving in the sensitive border regions from whence they hailed. During the 1950s, when those national Hungarians and national Germans who remained in the postwar state were once again permitted to serve in the Czechoslovak Army, the vast majority of them were placed in unarmed auxiliary brigades, presumably due to lingering concerns about their loyalty (p. 298).

The book concludes with a brief summary of the content, rather than a conclusion. It serves to remind the reader that there was relatively little national prejudice or „denationalization” in the daily life of the garrison. Tension between the nation-state idea and multinational reality was more apparent in the relationship between the army and society. Precisely because it was a state institution, the army did come into conflict in nationally mixed areas. Although the author asserts the army sought to avoid these conflicts, there is plenty of evidence that in the first years after independence, Legionnaire members of the military played an important role in national conflict in the predominantly German-speaking regions of the Bohemian Lands.

In addition to several useful concordances for place names, this volume includes a Czech-language précis. The interesting, evocative, illustrations on the dust jacket would have been more beneficial to the reader had greater context for them been provided. Indeed, this book would have benefited from more illustrations and perhaps a map showing the extent of garrisons in the First Czechoslovak Republic.

Based on an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, „Zwischen Nationsidee und staatlicher Realität“ makes an important contribution not only to the modern military history of post-Habsburg Central Europe, but also to nationalities studies as well as to the social, political, and even cultural history, of the First Czechoslovak Republic. Despite sections where this reader would have wished for expanded analysis or greater use of more recent interpretations, Martin Zückert has produced an engagingly written book that should be of interest to many historians of modern European history.