

Suicide and the Hermeneutics of Political and National Community in the Interwar Czechoslovak Republic

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The Life of Colonel Švec

In October 1928, amidst the celebrations marking ten years since the triumphant formation of the Czechoslovak state, many of the country's cultural and political luminaries gathered to witness on the stage of Prague's National Theater the resurrection of a famed Czech patriot. This was Colonel Josef Jiří Švec, a commander of the Czech Legions in Russia who in 1918 had taken his own life on a legionary train in Aksakovo. Švec's last days and moments had become the subject of a play, *Colonel Švec*, premiering at the National Theater. Its author was General Rudolf Medek, legionnaire, writer, director of the National Legionary Monument in Prague, and president of the right-leaning legionary association the *Nezávislá jednota československých legionářů* (Independent Union of Czechoslovak Legionnaires).¹ Švec's dramatized rebirth coincided with the jubilee celebrations of the "rebirth" of the Czechoslovak nation itself, a decennial commemoration marked with considerable ceremony and gravitas throughout the country.² But it may also have summoned a troubling ghost to the celebratory banquet: the problem of suicide was not confined to dramatic re-enactments of patriotic self-sacrifice, nor did it end in October 1918. In fact, in Czech society in general, but also in the newly-formed national army and amongst former legionnaires, suicide was apparently at alarmingly high levels.

Švec's life and his death, at least, had been cultivated by Medek and other veterans of the Russian legionary movement as an edifying story of

This article is the result of research supported by the Visiting Professorship provided by the Institute of History, Philosophical Faculty, University of Hradec Kralové, in the summer of 2020. The author would like to thank Dagmar Hájková, Tomáš Kykal, Kevin Roeper, Nancy Wingfield, and Johana Wyss for their help and support throughout the preparation of this article.

1. On Medek and the Independent Union see Katya Kocourek, *Čechoslovákista Rudolf Medek: Politický životpis* (Prague, 2011), and by the same author in English "In the Spirit of Brotherhood, United We Remain!": The Independent Union of Czechoslovak Legionaries and the Militarist State," in Mark Cornwall and John Paul Newman, eds., *Sacrifice and Rebirth: The Legacy of the Last Habsburg War* (New York, 2016).

2. Dagmar Hájková, "Republika slaví deset let," in Dagmar Hájková and Pavel Horák, eds., *Republika Československá 1918–1939* (Prague, 2018).

Slavic Review 82, no. 3 (Fall 2023)

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self-sacrifice for the national cause, entirely apposite to the jubilee. Švec was born in Moravia in 1883 and had before the war worked as a primary school teacher in Třebíč.³ An active Czech patriot, he had also become a member of the Czech Sokol Association.⁴ This Sokol training and knowledge took him in 1911 to the Russian empire, where Czech Sokols were establishing branches of the association, training Russian gymnasts and even soldiers of the imperial army.⁵ Švec was in Russia at the outbreak of the First World War, his convictions about Czech patriotism and Pan-Slavism had estranged him from the Austro-Hungarian military mobilization (in his war diary, Švec wrote of his joy upon hearing of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, “a great Slavophobe, a militarist, Wilhelm’s sledgehammer”).⁶ He instead joined the small group of Czechs in Russia who opted to put their services at the disposal of the Entente powers. Švec saw in these states and in this war against Austria-Hungary the possibility of national emancipation.⁷ The volunteer units in which Švec served were the kernel of what would eventually become pro-Entente volunteer divisions: the famed “Czechoslovak Legions.”⁸

Švec drew on his Sokol background to assist in the organization and training of these legionary units.⁹ He fought with the legions first against the Central Powers (Švec was a veteran of the legionary battle at Zborov, July 1917) and then in the maelstrom of the Russian Civil War. By this stage Švec was an experienced, long-serving legionnaire and had been promoted to the rank of colonel. In Aksakovo, he was given command of a legionary division charged with repulsing a Bolshevik attack. But in command he despaired at the infiltration of Bolshevik ideas and propaganda amongst his men.¹⁰ And, after soldiers under him refused to obey his order to attack the Bolshevik line, Švec took his own life (on the night of October 25, 1918). He left a lapidary note: “I cannot survive the shame that has taken hold of our army through the fault of many ill-disciplined [*nezřízených*] fanatical demagogues who have killed in themselves and in all of us that which is most valuable: honor.”¹¹ Švec’s suicide stirred the legion’s soldiers, who rallied under new command and did indeed attack the Bolshevik line.¹²

Even before the play’s 1928 premiere, Švec’s name was already quite well-known in Czechoslovakia, thanks in large part to Medek himself, who had since the end of the war been the main architect of a “cult” to his friend

3. Details taken from Josef Kudela, *Plukovník Josef Švec, Sokol, legionář* (Brno, 1926), 3.

4. Ibid. On the Sokol movement before 1914, see Claire Nolte, *The Sokol in the Czech Lands to 1914: Training for the Nation* (London, 2002) and Marek Waic, *Tělovýchova a sport ve službách české národní emancipace* (Prague, 2013), 15–99.

5. Irina Sirotkina, “The Sokol Movement in Russia: History and Contemporary Revival,” in Agnieszka Gašior, Lars Karl, and Stefan Troebst, eds., *Post-Panslavismus: Slavizität, Slavische Idee und Antislavismus im 20. Und 21. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2014).

6. Josef Jiří Švec, *Deník Plukovníka J. Švece* (Ekaterinburg, 1918), 5.

7. Švec, *Deník Plukovníka J. Švece*, 12–15.

8. On the legionary movement, see Karel Pichlik, *Bez Legend: Zahraniční odboj 1914–1918: Zápas o československý program* (Prague, 1991).

9. Švec, *Deník Plukovníka J. Švece*, 54–69.

10. Details are from Josef Kudela, *Aksakovská tragedie: (Plukovník Švec)* (Brno, 1932).

11. Kudela, *Plukovník Švec, Sokol, legionář*, 15.

12. Kudela, *Aksakovská tragedie (Plukovník Švec)*, 81–86.

and comrade, complementary in Medek's eyes to the cult of national sacrifice attached to the legionary movement itself.¹³ It was the last episode of Švec's life in Aksakovo that had been dramatized in *Colonel Švec*. The play depicted Švec's steadfast patriotism to the national cause as a stark contrast to the moral failures of the troops who turned to Bolshevism. Švec's death was not merely a personal tragedy, it was a national one, but Medek saw in it redemption: his friend had made the ultimate sacrifice so that the nation might live. According to Medek's biographer, Katya Kocourek, "in Medek's publications after 1918 Švec had become a symbol of national sacrifice" whose suicide "demonstrated the importance of individual sacrifice in the interests of a higher national ideal."¹⁴ The play was the culmination of this transfiguration. As the author of an unsigned review of Medek's play in the *Yearbook of the Czechoslovak Republic* noted "[Švec's] death was not due to weakness, as many psychologists would like to conclude, but rather to heroism, he was giving his life [for the sake of] thousands of others."

Švec had died just three days before the birth of the new state, offering a poignant symmetry between a heroic individual death and the nation's rebirth. This was not lost on the audience at the National Theater:

the tragic events, played out in the small Russian station of Aksakovo a few days before the historic event of October 1918. . . [came] at a time in which the nation was willing to forget the sacrifices that gave it freedom and independence, and when it was once again succumbing to indifference, similar to that which Švec had decried with a wound from a revolver.¹⁵

That symmetry gave Czech patriots such as Medek the perfect symbol of national sacrifice, as if Švec's death was a sacred offering at the altar of the new nation. In Medek's play, Švec's story became an example of the sacrifices that had been necessary for the state's creation: a dramatic re-enactment that both celebrated national independence and reflected on the sacrifice of those who had not lived to see it, in tune with the sense of hard-fought triumph that marked the jubilee celebrations.¹⁶ The search for meaning out of the mass death of the war years was common throughout much of Europe in the interwar years.¹⁷ Given the prevailing Czech culture of victory in the interwar republic,¹⁸ a culture that tended to emphasize first and foremost the exploits and sacrifice of the legionnaires, it was hardly surprising that a figure like Švec would feature so prominently.¹⁹ Švec's body was restored to political

13. Katya Kocourek, *Čechoslovakista Rudolf Medek: Politický životpis* (Prague, 2011), 94.

14. *Ibid.*, 161.

15. *Ročenka Československé Republiky*, 13 vols. (Prague, 1930), 9:87.

16. Hájková, "Republika slaví deset let," 455.

17. As argued, from very different positions, by Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 2013) and Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2014).

18. As noted by Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky: Vznik, budování a zlatá léta republiky (1918–1929)* (Prague, 2017), 54.

19. Hájková "Republika slaví deset let," 456. See also Nancy Wingfield, "The Battle of Zborov and the Politics of Commemoration in Czechoslovakia," *East European Politics and Societies* 17, no. 4 (November 2003); Rudolf Kučera, "Exploiting Victory, Sinking in Defeat: Uniformed Violence in the Creation of the New Order in Czechoslovakia and Austria,

life (to paraphrase Katherine Verdery's essay), and it came to symbolize an unyielding devotion to the new state.²⁰ There were many other tributes to Švec in the interwar republic: a statue put up in Prague (and taken down during the Second World War), a mass-produced bust depicting Švec at his desk penning his final words, a pistol resting in ominously Chekovian fashion next to his right hand,²¹ many editions of Švec's diary and articles, and testimonies of legionnaires and Sokols who had known him. Medek's play, hugely popular and revived to this day, is one of the most enduring of these monuments.²²

Švec's suicide and its re-casting as an act of altruistic self-sacrifice for the nation can serve too as a gateway to the study of suicide in the interwar Czechoslovak state. To date, the study of suicide as a social and cultural phenomenon in the interwar republic of Czechoslovakia—or more generally in the modern Czech lands—has not received sustained critical historical interpretation or reflection. This is a notable omission, for statistical data—data that, as we shall see, have been treated as more or less reliable by successive generations of scholars—have identified suicide as a social phenomenon of comparatively and anomalously high frequency in the Czech lands from the late-nineteenth century through to the last decades of the twentieth.²³ Perhaps remarkably, successive states have based the discussion of suicide rates in the Czech lands on demographic and sociological studies previously published, building on a corpus of statistical material and figures rather than rejecting the data of the past or revising them upwards or downwards.²⁴ Figures have thus been confronted by successive regimes, typically with a view to explaining, or *containing* the phenomenon within the prevailing socio-political norms of the time.

The socialist Czechoslovak state, for example, produced theories of class-based oppression and the ill economic effects of pre-socialist era industrialization as the causes of suicide, thus deflecting responsibility from their own socio-political order.²⁵ There was space beyond these clearly demarcated

1918–1922,” *Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 4 (December 2016); Jiří Hutečka, *Men Under Fire: Motivation, Morale, and Masculinity among Czech Soldiers in the Great War, 1914–1918* (New York, 2019).

20. Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York, 2000).

21. I am grateful to Dr. Tomáš Kykal and the staff of the Museum of the Czechoslovak Legionnaires in Prague for showing me the design of this monument.

22. Most recently at the National Theater in Prague, premiering in 2018 and marking the centennial of the foundation of the Czechoslovak state.

23. A statistical analysis focusing on the last four decades of the twentieth century but summarizing findings for previous periods can be found in Český statistický úřad, oddělení Olomouc (Czech Statistical Office, Olomouc branch) *Sebevraždy v České Republice v letech 1960–1995* (Prague, 1995).

24. The key studies that have built a cumulative statistical picture of suicide in the modern Czech lands are František Jaroslav Netušil, *Sebevražednost v zemích českých u srovnání se sebevražedností světovou* (Prague, 1923); Vladimír Srb, *Statistika příčin smrti a statistická klasifikace nemocí, urazů a příčin smrti v Československu* (Prague, 1956); *Sebevraždy v České Republice v letech 1960–1995*; Dagmar Dzurová and Eva Dragomirecká, eds., *Sebevražednost Obyvatel České republiky v období transformace společnosti* (Prague, 2002).

25. František Voráček, *Možnost života: Otázky kolem sebevražd* (Prague, 1967), 85.

parameters to provide dissenting counter-narratives of suicide. The most prominent of these was that of university student Jan Palach. Palach's self-immolation on Wenceslas Square in January 1969 in protest to the Warsaw Pact occupation of Czechoslovakia, served as a symbol (and example to be emulated) for anti-regime protesters throughout the eastern bloc, and his memory continues to be observed and honored in contemporary Czechia.²⁶ In the context of anti-communist dissidence, Palach serves the same role as Švec in the patriotic culture of the interwar republic: a lynchpin whose sacrificial suicide embodies the values and the coherency of the social system for which he is seen to have stood. In both cases, questions of individual motivation and action are subsumed into the social and communal sphere.

This is how the matter of suicide was explained and contained within the interwar Czechoslovak republic. The prevailing tendency in the interwar period was less to apply solutions to the problem than it was to explain it in terms that were acceptable to the patriotic national culture of the times. The crux of this problem was the need to distort a linear statistical fact so that it bent towards the notion that the national present had broken decisively with the imperial past. As Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy have argued in their study of suicide in early-modern England, each era, each society, has its own "hermeneutics" of suicide, a theory of rationalizing and explaining the phenomenon to suit the prevailing attitudes of the time.²⁷ The hermeneutics of the interwar republic of Czechoslovakia were based on certain fundamental principles: this was a largely secular society, organized according to *soi disant* modern, humane, national, and democratic principles embodied by the republic's first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who had himself written about the phenomenon of suicide in the modern period (see below). The rupture of 1918 was a moment of national emancipation, achieved through the efforts and sacrifices of men like Medek and Švec. The apparent survival of those democratic institutions and traditions, at least until the Munich Agreement of 1938, has contributed to the creation of a historiographical image of the 'First Republic' as a bulwark of improbably surviving democracy. It is an image that has been reinforced by critical interpretations of communist rule after World War II, and by historians and commentators in the 1990s searching for a democratic precedent for the post-socialist period.²⁸

In the interwar years, the suicide problem was acknowledged, but also contained through the application of the discipline of sociology, largely derived from Emile Durkheim's foundational work and arguments on the topic, and then interpreted according to the fundamental principles outlined above. Thus, the new Czechoslovak state, its organization and its institutions,

26. On Palach and his memory, see Petr Blažek, ed., *Jan Palach '69* (Prague, 2009).

27. Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990), 221.

28. Historiographical essays that examine this image and its component parts include: Ines Koeltzsch and Ota Konrád, "From 'Islands of Democracy' to 'Transnational Border Spaces': State of the Art and Perspectives of the Historiography on the First Czechoslovak Republic since 1989," *Bohemia* 56, no. 2 (2016); Peter Bugge, "Czech Democracy 1918–1938—Paragon or Parody?," *Bohemia* 47, no. 1 (2007); Josef Harna, "Czech Historiography in the 1990s," *Historica* 7–8 (2000–2001).

represented a largely coherent national community. Suicide as a social phenomenon either existed outside the borders of this political community, or, when it occurred within them, was typically explained in terms that would leave the integrity of those borders and the values of the political community intact. One means of achieving this latter rationalization was through the cultural embellishments deployed by Medek in *Colonel Švec*. Medek's play was the re-imagining of an individual suicide as an act of national self-sacrifice, one that could be presented in the public sphere of the interwar republic as an edifying lesson in patriotic national values. Švec's suicide existed only in so far as it symbolized the story of the birth of the Czechoslovak state itself.

Another rationalization was to posit suicide in temporal terms, to place the origins of the problem not within the timeframe of the republic but before it. Such a move relieved the current political community of blame for the problem, but also suggested that within time a solution would naturally arrive. The temporal border of the interwar republic's political community was of course 1918, which Czechoslovak elites posited as a moment of national emancipation and as a radical caesura from the past.²⁹ Beyond this border lay the defunct and defeated Habsburg empire. In the patriotic national culture of the interwar state, the kind of patriotism articulated in Medek's re-telling of Švec's last days, the era of Habsburg rule was fast becoming reconfigured as one of national enslavement.³⁰ The imperial past became the negative alter-ego of the national present, a simplification of a complex and often contiguous relationship between the pre- and the post-1918 period, one that was occurring elsewhere in the successor states of east central Europe.³¹ The continuing high suicide rate in Bohemia from the Habsburg to the interwar periods was refracted across this 1918 divide. The problem of suicide was presented with a Habsburg rather than a Czechoslovak etiology. Again, the case of Švec's suicide is exemplary, because it falls precisely on the 1918 threshold; his life and death represented a national passion play against the Habsburg empire and its allies; his afterlife was a story of beatification into the pantheon of the now realized national community.

The remainder of this article depicts these processes of sociological rationalization and containment in three cases studies. The first shows how sociology became the defining means of explaining the phenomenon of suicide in the interwar republic. This was thanks in no small part to Masaryk's interest and study of suicide, which gave the topic a kind of presidential seal of approval, even though the actual analysis of the problem wore Masaryk's

29. Similar to other parts of post-Habsburg eastern and central Europe. See John Paul Newman and Lili Zách, "Special issue on 1918 and the Ambiguities of 'Old-New Europe,'" *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 4 (July 2021).

30. On this, see Clare Morelon, "State Legitimacy and Continuity between the Habsburg Empire and Czechoslovakia: The 1918 Transition in Prague," in Paul Miller-Melamed and Clare Morelon, eds., *Embers of Empire: Continuity and Rupture in the Habsburg Successor States after 1918* (New York, 2018).

31. As the comparative work of the European Research Project, Gábor Egry, principle investigator, "Negotiating Post-Imperial Transitions: From Remobilization to Nation-State Consolidation: A Comparative Study of Transitions in Post-Habsburg East and Central Europe" has shown. See the project website at <http://1918local.eu/> (accessed September 12, 2023).

ideas and arguments fairly lightly. This emphasis on sociology also determined that the matter of suicide would fundamentally be understood as a question of the individual's relationship to society (in this case, the notional political community of the interwar Czechoslovak republic).³² The interwar Czechoslovak republic in this sense treated suicide, to cite Kenneth Pinnow's study of the phenomenon in the early Soviet period, "as a problem of modern government rather than existential drama."³³

The second and third sections show how notional suicide epidemics amongst enlisted men in the national army and former legionnaires were explained and contained in sociological terms. In both cases, the national army and the legionary veteran movement served as figurative micro-communities that embodied the more general values and principles of the Czechoslovak national community itself. Such figurative projections were central to the state-building culture of the interwar state. The national army was conceived as not only a means of defending the national space but also as the incarnation of the new patriotic and civic culture.³⁴ The legionary tradition was ostensibly central to its military ethos, and the legionnaire veterans themselves, whether serving or not, were the embodiment of the national revolution and the state-forming principle.³⁵ That raised the stakes on the occurrence of suicide within these micro-communities, since that occurrence also potentially implicated the values of the national community itself. Sociological interpretation of suicide in the army and amongst legionnaire veterans thus tended to downplay the institutional and hierarchical environment of the army itself as a potential cause of suicide amongst enlisted men, or the difficulties of coping with the transition from war and military service to civilian life in peacetime on the part of former legionnaires. Suicide was a problem that needed to be cast out of these communities. This appears to be part of a wider phenomenon in the interwar republic to re-interpret social problems, and especially violent social problems, as fleeting matters that could and would be resolved through the unity promised by war victory after 1918.³⁶

Masaryk: The Stepfather of Czechoslovak Suicidology; Netušil, The Father

It was Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk who largely set the parameters of the discussion on suicide sociology in the interwar republic. But this was due less to his intellectual contribution to the discussion than it was to his stature as

32. This was a means of understanding suicide rightly shown as problematic by Róisín Healy in her historiographical essay on the topic: "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 3 (September 2006): 906.

33. Kenneth Pinnow, *Lost to the Collective: Suicide and the Promise of Soviet Socialism, 1921–1929* (Ithaca, 2011), 4.

34. Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře První republiky: Vznik, budování a zlatá léta republiky (1918–1929)* (Prague, 2017), 163–64.

35. Jana Čechurová and Ivan Šedivý, "Legionáři a sokolové," in Hájková and Horák, eds., *Republika Československá 1918–1939*, 351–56.

36. See Ota Konrád and Rudolf Kučera, *Paths out of the Apocalypse: Physical Violence in the Fall and Renewal of Central Europe, 1914–1922* (Oxford, 2022), 140, especially their analysis of one of the most sensational murder trials in the interwar period.

the state's first president. The "President-Liberator" of the interwar republic was also an academic who had written voluminously on national and international topics pertinent to the new national culture, collating and synthesizing existing ideas about Czech history to offer a vision of a people spiritually connected to the perceived principles and the ideals of the Medieval Hussite movement.³⁷ These values for Masaryk were re-affirmed in the political and military struggle against empire in WWI, values now realized with the creation of the Czechoslovak republic.³⁸

Masaryk had been interested in the topic of suicide from a young age,³⁹ and had produced a sociological study on suicide and its significance, presented and defended as his Habilitation thesis at the University of Vienna in 1879.⁴⁰ In the work, he attributed the phenomenon of suicide in modern society to a falling away of the significance of religion and spiritual fulfilment, itself related to the spread of education.⁴¹ There was no indication in the text that at this point Masaryk sought to address the question of why suicide in the Czech lands was comparatively high.⁴² The work was more likely a response to the contemporary problem of a sharp increase in suicide rates throughout Europe, a startling general fact in which the specificities of the Czech case were perhaps lost, or at least not clearly demarcated at this early stage.⁴³

Masaryk continued to take an interest in this topic. In his published works, he returned to it in his book on the international and national dimensions of WWI and its consequences, *Světová revoluce za války a ve válce 1914–1918* (The World Revolution for War and in the War 1914–1918), a work based partially on lectures and talks he had given in emigration during the war.⁴⁴ Masaryk recalled his association of suicide rates with religion and expanded upon this, presenting Prussian militarism, a prominent target of Entente wartime propaganda and its valorization in Germany as a likely cause of the high suicide rates in that country.⁴⁵ Masaryk's papers at his personal archive in Prague reveal that the president continued to receive and read new literature and press clippings on suicide in the interwar period, scribbling in them his own marginal notes and ideas.⁴⁶ This was unsurprising, as the matter of the high post-1918 suicide rates in the Czech lands became ever clearer in the course of the 1920s (see below). Nevertheless, as Zdeněk R. Nešpor has noted, Masaryk's

37. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Jan Hus: Naše obrození a naše reformace* (Prague, 1896).

38. See Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Světová revoluce za války a ve válce 1914–1918* (Prague, 1925). The book was published in English as *The Making of a State: Memories and Observations, 1914–1918* (London, 1927).

39. Josef Král, "Na okraj Masarykovy 'sebevraždy,'" *Sborník Filosofické Fakulty University Komenského v Bratislavě* 48, no. 3 (1927): 3.

40. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, *Der Selbstmord als sociale Massenerscheinung der modernen Civilisation* (Vienna, 1881), published in English as *Suicide and the Meaning of Civilization* (Chicago, 1970).

41. Masaryk, *Suicide and the Meaning of Civilization*.

42. The work was published in Czech in 1904.

43. As suggested by Voráček, *Možnost života: Otázky kolem sebevražd*, 79.

44. Masaryk, *Světová revoluce za války a ve válce 1914–1918*, 420–22.

45. Masaryk, *Světová revoluce za války a ve válce 1914–1918*, 422

46. Notably in Archiv Akademie věd České Republiky, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Fond R "Kultura," svazak 443 (Vražda/Sebevražda) and 484 (Sebevražďost).

ideas on suicide remained essentially unchanged throughout his life, true to the principles he set out in his 1879 study.⁴⁷

If Masaryk's work was far from the most academically significant in the field of Czech and Czechoslovak suicide sociology, it nevertheless proved influential on account of the status of its author, giving presidential weight to the sociological study of suicide.⁴⁸ Subsequent attempts to interpret the matter of suicide in the interwar republic, whilst often not engaging comprehensively (or sometimes even at all) with Masaryk's ideas, nevertheless seem to have accepted that it was the academic field of sociology, Masaryk's field, wherein the most pertinent questions about suicide could be answered.⁴⁹ In this sense, Masaryk was the stepfather, not the father, of the study of Czechoslovak suicide. The emphasis on sociology meant that suicide was first and foremost understood as a problem of society rather than individual volition. Its causes were to be found in the collective socio-political forces of the time.

Far more influential in the interwar republic and beyond was the work of a sociologist named František Netušil, whose 1923 study *Suicide in the Czech Lands in Comparison with Suicide across the World* became the foundational text for twentieth century studies of suicide in the region.⁵⁰ Netušil had arrived at the topic of suicide in the Czech lands while in the United States, before WWI. It was there, in conversation with an acquaintance who worked at a New Jersey branch of the insurance company Prudential Life, while he was preparing a sociological study on suicide in the US that Netušil had learned that life insurance premiums for Czech emigres in the US were unusually high. This, he was told, was due to the higher statistical likelihood of American Czechs committing suicide.⁵¹ Netušil dedicated his next work specifically to the matter of suicide in Czechoslovakia, wanting to learn whether or not this high frequency was indeed a fact and, if so, why, and what could be done about it.

On this first point, the relative frequency of Czech suicides, Netušil tried to place his own nation's case into a global context. This was admittedly difficult work: as Netušil pointed out in the early sections of his study, uneven and unreliable statistical information made determining the exact figures of Czech suicides difficult, to say nothing of creating a statistical chart in which global figures could be reliably compared.⁵² Some countries (Switzerland, Japan) had excellent data, others did not. Figures compiled in the Habsburg empire were spotty, based as they often were on parochial or local records.⁵³ Hungary fared well, in so far as their records were reliably kept (the Hungarian suicide rates were notoriously high—far higher than the Czech—throughout the

47. Zdeněk R. Nešpor, "Filozof sebevraždy? Kritickou analýzu stavu společnosti ve své habilitační práci Masaryk postavil na nárůstu sebevražd" Dagmar Hájková," Pavel Horák and Lukáš Rous, eds., *T.G.M. v kostce* (Prague, 2020), 18.

48. Josef Král, "Na okraj Masarykovy 'sebevraždy,'" *Sborník Filosofické Fakulty University Komenského v Bratislavě* 48, no. 3 (1927).

49. *Ibid.*

50. Netušil, *Sebevražednost v zemích českých u srovnání se sebevražedností světou*.

51. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

52. Netušil, *Sebevražednost v zemích českých u srovnání se sebevražedností světou*, 12–13.

53. *Ibid.*, 15.

twentieth century). Nevertheless, Netušil concluded from the existing data that the suicide rates in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia had seen a significant per capita increase during the years 1870–1913, and that, more specifically, Bohemia had recorded the highest rates of these three regions.⁵⁴

The conclusion about a statistical spike in suicides in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was hardly novel in and of itself. Durkheim, and for that matter Masaryk, had concluded precisely the same thing. But Netušil went further: true to his comparative approach, he looked at the Czech lands alongside countries with apparently low suicide rates (in this case Spain, Italy, and Ireland), using standard variables to ponder these statistical differences, suggesting that religious and ethnic factors, or the existence of religious and ethnic differentiation, was a likely explanation, at least so far as it went.⁵⁵ All this was more than a little speculative.

Netušil felt far more confident when dealing with the post-1918 period. Here, he turned for his figures to Czechoslovakia's State Statistics Bureau, an institution that he found to be more reliable than the pre-war Habsburg records. But those figures essentially confirmed what Netušil thought he had found in the pre-1914 records, namely, that the suicide rate in Czechoslovakia was still disproportionately high in comparison to global and regional figures. Citizens of Czechoslovakia were killing themselves more frequently than most of the rest of the world.⁵⁶ Netušil had taken statistical extrapolations of the pre-1914 period and fused them with statistical figures thus far produced by the interwar state. His figures would become the basis for most of the subsequent discussion of the high suicide rates in the country in the decades to come.

According to Netušil's analysis the problem was concentrated in Bohemia. Suicide rates in Slovakia were beneath the global curve, nothing to be unduly alarmed about. The same was true in Moravia, slightly higher than Slovakia but still not out of the ordinary.⁵⁷ Standard arguments deployed in the basic texts of suicide sociology could in part explain this disparity: Slovakia and Moravia were predominantly Catholic lands with Catholic populations; according to Durkheim (and Masaryk) Catholicism provided a sense of integrated community that was far less present in non-Catholic lands. Bohemia, with its historic record of resistance to Catholicism dating back to the Hussite wars of the fifteenth century and passing through the Counter-Reformation up to the present-day, had looser communal ties. Spiritual and moral resistance to the Catholic Church was usually presented in contemporary Czech national discourse as a virtue, this had been Masaryk's interpretation, especially prominent in the interwar republic.⁵⁸ But it apparently came with a price, too. There was also the matter of industrialization, and Netušil rightly pointed out that, although wealthier, Bohemia was also far more industrialized than

54. *Ibid.*, 23.

55. *Ibid.*, 44.

56. *Ibid.*, 44.

57. *Ibid.*, 23.

58. Dagmar Hájková, "Rok Husova výročí," in Hájková and Horák, eds., *Republika Československá 1918–1939*, 391.

other parts of the new state.⁵⁹ These were fairly conventional arguments that helped Netušil explain differences of suicide rates within the state itself, if not why and how the Czech rate was still so disproportionately high in the global context.

Netušil now focussed on the perceived national and ethnic dimensions of this anomaly, and in so doing made several conclusions about suicide that were well suited to the contemporary political climate. Producing suicide figures by region and locality within Bohemia itself, Netušil found that the statistical anomalies could be pinpointed to certain regions, even districts. Thus, those bordering Saxony recorded high levels of suicide, perhaps less surprising given that Saxony had recorded extremely high suicide rates in the decades before WWI.⁶⁰ But Netušil's local statistical analyses also showed that in general, those parts of Bohemia that recorded the highest levels of suicide tended to be the ones with a high German minority population.⁶¹ Perhaps, then, this was not a problem inherently attributable to Czechs themselves.

From all these historical, contemporary, local, and global analyses Netušil elaborated an explanation of the suicide problem in Bohemia, arguing that: 1) suicide was higher in more densely populated parts 2) suicide was higher in the richer and more industrialized parts, and 3) suicide was higher in the parts of the country with higher populations of Germans.⁶² Netušil had somewhat ingeniously determined a stable interpretation of suicide rates in Bohemia that foregrounded the Czech/German division, at this time so prominent in public and political discourse. His interpretation was in accord with President Masaryk himself, who, as we have seen, had come to attribute suicide rates as a function of German national character (a slight departure from the original conclusions in his dissertation, but in line with the Entente propaganda in which he himself had played an important role).

Netušil's interpretation was highly questionable, and apparently a product first and foremost of the tendency to refract many national issues through an ethnic lens. Similar refractions were taking place in the national press over reporting of violent crime and murder, as Rudolf Kučera and Ota Konrád have noted, "Blaming murder on ethnic hatred reminded readers of the escalated ethnic conflicts in the young republic."⁶³ But it was not even clear at the level of Netušil's analysis whether these suicides were indeed German or Czech citizens of the new state: the regional and territorial units from which he had drawn his conclusions were not necessarily coterminous with ethnicity: Netušil simply presumed the link between the two. Moreover, and hardly surprising given the prevailing ideas of the times, Netušil had presented ethnic differences between Czechs and Germans as essential and impermeable.

Netušil's analysis thus rested on two decisive but questionable interpretive moves: that high rates of suicide in certain mixed territories could be

59. Netušil, *Sebevražednost v zemích českých u srovnání se sebevražedností světu*, 77.

60. W. Wolff, "Statistik des Selbstmords im Königreich Sachsen," *Leipziger Tageblatt*, October 15, 1913.

61. Netušil, *Sebevražednost v zemích českých u srovnání se sebevražedností světu*, 66.

62. *Ibid.*, 77.

63. Ota Konrád and Rudolf Kučera, *Paths out of the Apocalypse: Physical Violence in the Fall and Renewal of Central Europe, 1914–1922* (Oxford, 2022), 126.

attributed to national groups, and that within those territories, divisions between German and Czech communities were absolute. This allowed Netušil to conflate the matter of suicide in the Czech lands with the “minorities question” that had become such an important factor in state-building and consolidation throughout the region.

Displacement: The Suicide of Enlisted Men in the National Army

If suicide in Czechoslovak society could be deflected along ethnic lines in this way, there were other more specific examples that caused even greater consternation amongst patriots in the new state. One of the most worrying was the apparently high level of suicide among enlisted men in the new Czechoslovak national army, another area where continuities with the imperial past belied the rhetoric of revolutionary progress across the 1918 line.

Many people in the new state perceived national institutions as pillars of the new national order, counter-examples to the supposedly dysfunctional, unjust, and anachronistic political and military institutions of the Habsburg empire. Arguably, the institution in which this contrast was most clearly presented was the national army. It was a contrast that had begun already in the war: Masaryk and the émigrés, concerned that the many Czechs and Slovaks fighting in the Austro-Hungarian army were undermining their case for national independence as the will of the people, had worked hard against considerable odds to create opposing volunteer divisions that would fight alongside the Entente and demonstrate Slavic loyalty to the anti-Habsburg cause. Masaryk himself had “great moral authority” over the legionnaires.⁶⁴

After 1918, the national army was depicted as a representative institution based on the ties of citizenship, individual rights, and collective security that bound the individual to the state itself. As General Jan Syrový, veteran of the Czechoslovak Legions in Russia and Chief of Staff of the Czechoslovak army from 1926–33 put it, “In Austria we hated the army because it was foreign to us . . . today’s army is our own, national, with a completely different mission than the previous army.”⁶⁵

Claims of a *tabula rasa* separating the past and the present were overstated, as we have seen, but not entirely hollow. Political and military elites after 1918 strove to square the circle of their state being based on anti-militarist principles (one of the hard lessons learnt from WWI).⁶⁶ The first Minister of Defense, Václav Klofáč, was an avowed pacifist, chosen for the post partially for this reason. Throughout the interwar period military experts elaborated a sociology of the serving soldier that was responsive to his psychological well-being, including the considerable strains he would find himself under coming to terms with armed service in a state that was congenitally anti-militarist.⁶⁷

64. Karel Pichlík, Bohumír Klípa, and Jitka Zabloudilová, *Českoslovenští legionáři (1914–1920)* (Prague, 1996), 257.

65. Jan Syrový, *Občanstvo a vojsko* (Prague, 1932), 5.

66. On this apparent paradox, see Václav Šmidrkal, “Abolish the Army? The Ideal of Democracy and the Transformation of the Czechoslovak Military after 1918 and 1989,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 23, no. 4 (2016), esp. 624–26.

67. Karel Šmejkal, *Sociologie vojáka* (Prague, 1931), 117–39.

Just as the legionnaire mythology became central to state-forming patriotism in the interwar republic, so the legionnaires themselves, although comparatively small in number and often with limited institutional military experience, sought a central role in the newly-formed national army.⁶⁸ In reality, as Martin Zückert has shown, the army itself relied both on former Austro-Hungarian officers *and* former legionnaires, a cause of tension in the early interwar period.⁶⁹

There were other, even more disconcerting inheritances from the Habsburg period. It was known that in the late Habsburg period the suicide rate of serving soldiers was one of the highest among the great imperial or national armies, even if there was only limited research into this phenomenon.⁷⁰ The general problem of suicide among enlisted men had been set out by Durkheim and picked up by subsequent generations of sociologists. The reasons for high suicide rates were in many cases self-evident: a homosocial environment (men being more likely to successfully take their own lives), the disorientation of serving in an alien and strange environment often far from home, and access to lethal weapons.⁷¹ All this explained why armies *qua* armies would likely be *loci* of high suicide rates. But this reasoning did not offer distinct reasons as to why the Habsburg army specifically suffered so acutely from this problem.

In spite of the sociological and institutional innovations in the national army, the high rates of suicide continued after 1918. This alarming fact was identified at a relatively early stage, in 1923, around the time Netušil's general study of suicide in the Czechoslovak state was published. This was the work of another author, Klement Zrůnek, a medical doctor and an officer in the national army whose methodological approach and challenges were similar to those of Netušil: that is, sociological.⁷²

Zrůnek, like Netušil, attempted to update the story of suicide from the late Habsburg period into the early years of the interwar republic, to address the problem comparatively, and to show how, if not why, the numbers had altered or not since the end of WWI. Zrůnek was also working with incomplete data, for both the Austro-Hungarian period and that of the interwar republic, relying on virtually a single study for the Habsburg period and data that

68. Karel Pichlík, Bohumír Klípa, and Jitka Zabloudivová, *Českoslovenští legionáři (1914–1920)* (Prague, 1996), 258.

69. Martin Zückert, "Antimilitarismus und armeerfeindliches Verhalten in der tscheschischen Gesellschaft bis 1918," in Laurence Cole, Christa Hämmerle, and Martin Scheutz, eds., *Glanz—Gewalt—Gehorsam. Militär und Gesellschaft in der Habsburgermonarchie (1800 bis 1918)* (Essen, 2011).

70. See the study by Hannes Leidinger, *Die Bedeutung der Selbstausslöschung. Aspekte der Suizidproblematik in Österreich von der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts bis zur Zweiten Republik* (Innsbruck, 2012); and Anton Brosch, *Die Selbstmörder: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der militärischen Selbstmörder und ihrer Obduktionsbefunde* (Leipzig, 1909).

71. Noted in the Czechoslovak case by Jan Prokop, *O sebevraždě* (Prague, 1940), 38.

72. Zrůnek in fact cited Netušil's study on suicide in the United States in his own work. See Klement Zrůnek, "Sebevraždy ve vojsku," *Vojenské rozhledy* 9–10 (1923) and "Sebevraždy ve vojsku (Dokončení)," *Vojenské rozhledy* 11 (1923).

covered only October 1921 to September 1922 for the Czechoslovak army.⁷³ Apparently not having access to Netušil's still forthcoming study of suicide in Czechoslovakia, Zrůnek also expressed uncertainty about the level of suicide among the civilian population, making conclusions about how it compared to military suicides.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, he believed he had glimpsed a worrying trend: the suicide rates for the 1921–22 period, roughly compared to extant figures for other armies, were high indeed. Army suicide rates in Bohemia were likely twice as high as the civilian rate, and in Moravia two and a half times as high.⁷⁵ Zrůnek believed "it was not possible to rule out" that the Czechoslovak army had the highest recorded suicide of any contemporary army.⁷⁶ No less alarming were the historical data Zrůnek looked at: the Habsburg figures from 1912, for example, when broken down by regiment and battalion, revealed that the highest suicide rates came from (in this order): Bratislava, Litoměřice, and Prague battalions, all of which were now within the Czechoslovak state.⁷⁷

With such partial data Zrůnek's conclusions were necessarily tentative. He hinted at the "Czech national character," adapting some ideas put forward in Netušil's already published study of suicide amongst Czechs in the US, and he listed the standard explanatory factors about suicide among enlisted men, too, such as separation from home and family and access to lethal weapons.⁷⁸ Zrůnek went on to speculate that fear of punishment from commanding officers also drove enlisted men to kill themselves.⁷⁹

The problem of suicide among enlisted men in the Czechoslovak army persisted through the 1920s. According to data published in the *Yearbook of the Czechoslovak Republic*, "suicide" was routinely the second highest cause of death among enlisted men in the national army (behind tuberculosis).⁸⁰ As the years wore on, it was increasingly difficult to write off suicide in the national army as simply a teething problem of early state formation or a short-term legacy lingering from the Habsburg period: enlisted men killing themselves was a problem located at the heart of the institutional architecture of the republic, apparently related to the generally high level of suicide within Czech society.

The matter came to a head at the end of 1931. A rash of suicides recorded in a single year in a cavalry regiment in Prague had been the cause of a minor public sensation in the contemporary press and the Czechoslovak parliament. The suspicion, taken up in a parliamentary "Defense Committee" chaired by the Minister of Defense Karel Viškovský, was that the cause of the suicides was the "tyranny" of senior officers over enlisted men (bullying).⁸¹ This was taken up in the national parliament with particular vehemence by deputies of

73. Zrůnek, "Sebevraždy ve vojsku," 402.

74. *Ibid.*, 405.

75. *Ibid.*, 406.

76. *Ibid.*, 406.

77. *Ibid.*, 405.

78. *Ibid.*, 408, 410.

79. *Ibid.*, 485.

80. Josef Alexander, "Vojenské sebevraždy," *Ročenka československe republiky*, 1933:52.

81. Reported in *Národní Politika*, December 11, 1931, 1, and December 18, 1931, 1.

the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, who complained about the poor living standards of “proletarian soldiers” and the harsh disciplinary measures that were driving those soldiers to suicide:

Communist deputies have already submitted a large number of interpellations about soldiers’ suicides and the abuse soldiers receive, but the responses of the Minister for National Defense are always evasive, or else he simply denied the data in our interpellations, even though they were always based on truth.⁸²

No longer only a matter of sociological treatises, parts of the Czechoslovak public became acquainted with a problem that had in fact been present in the state virtually since its formation. Some response was necessary and demanded.

The Czechoslovak army, via General Alois Podhajský, now commissioned a report on the problem of suicide among enlisted men that would, it was hoped, describe the dimensions of the problem, explain its causes, and point towards a solution.⁸³ The person put in charge of this work was Ludvik Fischer. Fischer, like Zrůnek before him, was a medical doctor and an officer serving in the national army who applied the sociological method to the problem. It was hoped that he could understand both the dimensions and the nature of the matter of suicide in Czechoslovak society and the sociology of the Czechoslovak army itself.⁸⁴

Fischer’s study followed the same pattern as previous work. He accepted, first of all, the existing statistical analysis and therefore accepted the high rate of suicide both in the Czechoslovak state and now also the army itself.⁸⁵ His study essentially recapitulated in its early sections the conclusions of Netušil and now also Zrůnek: the suicide rate across Europe had been growing from the last part of the nineteenth century onwards; it was unusually high in parts of Bohemia and, where reliable statistical extrapolation was possible, it remained high since the formation of the state.⁸⁶ This was true in the army, too: where suicide rates reflected an elevation on an already high level throughout society.⁸⁷ Fischer went on to consider in general terms the social causes of suicide in society and how they might correspond—or not—to the causes of suicide rates in the army itself, a discussion again in line with the Czechoslovak army’s emphasis on attention to the sociology of the serving soldier.⁸⁸

It was in the interpretation of the causes of suicide specifically in the Czechoslovak army since the end of WWI that Fischer’s study truly added to the discussion. And on this, the author was clearly arguing against certain

82. “Poslanecká sněmovna Národní shromáždění republiky Československé (N.S.R.Č),” January 5, 1932, number 1580 at www.psp.cz/eknih/1929ns/ps/tisky/t1580_00.htm, (September 22, 2023).

83. “Vojenské sebevraždy,” 52.

84. *Ibid.*

85. Ludvik Fischer, *Sebevražďost a armáda* (Knihovna Svazu Československého důstojnictva: 1932) in Archiv Ustav TGM R—Kultura 484 “Sebevražďost.”

86. Fischer, *Sebevražďost a armáda*.

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Ibid.*

contemporary ideas about how and why the suicide rates were so high. As we have seen, the discussion in the press and in public debate had focused on the likelihood that bullying on the part of senior officers was the cause of many of the suicides of enlisted men. It was of course extremely difficult for the army (or indeed any army) to ascertain precisely why men were killing themselves. The ratio of successful suicides against unsuccessful suicide attempts strongly favored the former, for all the reasons that had been set up in general studies of high suicide rates in armed forces (such as access to lethal weapons or the means to kill oneself).

Fischer was evasive about the bullying explanation for suicide, apparently fearing that the notion of hierarchal bullying on the part of senior officers against enlisted men would reflect badly on the prestige of the army as a patriotic and state-forming institution. The notion that people continued to kill themselves just as frequently in the liberated state after 1918 as they had under Habsburg rule was a cause of concern, which became even more acute when high suicide rates were replicated in the national army itself. Vainglorious and overbearing officers belonged in the imperial past or in the fiction of Jaroslav Hašek, not in an army whose ethos was based on post-1918 emancipation and Masaryk's vision of a humanist and democratic nation-state.

Fischer's solution was ingenious. In the second half of his study, once the dimensions of the problem of suicide in the Czechoslovak army had been established, Fischer elaborated a sophisticated and dynamic demographic and sociological model that accounted for the longer-term trends that since the end of the war had caused such high numbers of suicides. It was essentially a generational problem: the current cohort of enlisted men, whose year group were conscripted coinciding with the scandal of high suicide rates in the Prague barracks, had been profoundly affected by the war years.⁸⁹ But this was not a direct correlation, for these men had been too young to actually serve themselves during the war years, which Fischer uncontroversially acknowledged as a disruptive and stressful period in the lives of many (born out by discussions about legionnaire suicides, as we will see below).⁹⁰ Instead, according to Fischer, these were the *sons* of parents whose lives had been disrupted by the war. They had spent some of their formative years in a state of disruption and flux caused by the fighting: their fathers had often been away at the front, some of them had been killed or wounded in the war, or had returned dramatically altered by their wartime experiences. Their mothers had endured hardships on the home-front and these too had created a sense of displacement in the family home.⁹¹

Fischer's solution was ingenious because it was so well-adjusted to the prevailing ideas about the challenges of political and social work facing the new state in the interwar period. His solution acknowledged the primacy of the war as an event that emancipated the nation *and* was a cause of persistent social problems in the new state. It was a similar formulation to Masaryk's aphoristic description of eastern and central Europe since 1918 being akin

89. Fischer, *Sebevražďost a armáda*.

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*

to “a laboratory atop a vast graveyard,” that is, a political and social space of unique opportunity and promise, but also uniquely blighted by the mass death and disruption of the war years.⁹² By locating the source of the problem inside the historical narrative of the formation of the state itself (rather than in the post-war flaws and problems of the institutions and their personnel), Fischer was suggesting that within time the problem would subside, as the work of state-building advanced and the generational disruptions caused by the war drifted further and further into the past.

Deathless Heroes: Legionnaire Mortality

The Czechoslovak legionnaires were not untouched by the discussion of suicide in the interwar republic. In order to understand the dimensions of this part of the discussion, it is necessary first to understand the prominent position of the legionnaires, both veterans and serving soldiers/officers, throughout all Czechoslovak society in the interwar period. Their recruitment during WWI became a central tenant of Masaryk’s pro-Entente propaganda drive, his efforts to persuade the *Entente* powers that Czechs and Slovaks were ready and willing to fight against the Central Powers. This public prominence was carried over into the post-1918 period, with legionnaires, as historians have shown, becoming central figures in the patriotic discourse of the new state.⁹³ It was the legionary divisions that fought for the emancipation and the establishment of the new state, under the vision and guidance of “President-Liberator” Masaryk.⁹⁴ Their sacrifice and victories became the material of a new national epic for the new state, and their battles against the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war enriched the legionary myth and added to it a potent anti-communist dimension. Monuments, parades, novels, poetry, plays (including Medek’s *Colonel Švec*, of course), movies, newspapers, and commemorative publications all became means through which the legionary sacrifice was celebrated. This valorization had material and institutional ramifications in the welfare policies designed to reward this relatively small group of combat veterans above and beyond the many more who had not served in the legions and in the new national army, where veterans of the legionary divisions rubbed shoulders uneasily with those who had fought in the Austro-Hungarian army.⁹⁵

92. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Karel Čapek, *President Masaryk Tells his Story*, trans. Dora Round (New York, 1935), 299, translation of the Czech-language original *Hovory s T. G. Masarykem* (Prague, 1928).

93. See Manfred Alexander, “Die Rolle der Legionäre in der Ersten Republik: Ein politischer Verband und sein Geschichtsbild,” in Ferdinand Seibt, ed., *Vereinswesen und Geschichte in den böhmischen Ländern: Vorträge einer Tagung des Collegium Carolinum in Bad Wiessee vom 25. bis 27. November 1983 und vom 23. bis 25. November 1984* (Munich, 1986); Ivan Šedivý, “Legionářská republika? K systému legionářského zákonodárství a sociální péče v meziválečné ČSR,” *Historie a vojenství* 51, no. 1 (2002); Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (Oxford, 2011), 84–86.

94. Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle*, 84–86.

95. Ivan Šedivý, “Legionářská republika?” *Historie a vojenství*; see also Martin Zückert, *Zwischen Nationidee und staatlicher Realität: Die tschechoslowakische Armee und ihre Nationalitätenpolitik 1918–1938* (Munich, 2006), and Václav Šmidrkal, “Abolish

These quantifiable advantages did not always directly translate into satisfaction on the part of the legionary leaders and their associations. In the interwar period a narrative of dissatisfaction and disillusionment emerged, one in which the legionnaires typically claimed that their blood sacrifice for the creation of the republic had been betrayed by a national leadership that now neglected them, and that in the most grievous cases this was leading to the suicide of former legionnaires. That theme appeared in literature, in the ex-legionnaire author Jan Václav Rosůlek's novel, *Veterans of the Republic*, published in 1930. Rosůlek wrote of the gradual disillusionment and eventual suicide of a legionnaire veteran heartbroken at the perceived failures of the interwar republic and his own poor treatment in it.⁹⁶ The leading legionnaire newspapers and periodicals regularly featured stories about how old soldiers had fallen on hard times since the end of the fighting, impoverished, cast aside, in some cases desperate.⁹⁷ In extreme cases this included stories of former legionnaires who, in desperation at their personal post-war state of affairs, took their own lives.⁹⁸ Indeed, the founder of the largest legionary veteran organization, Josef Patejdl of the Czechoslovak Legionary Association, wrote to the Prime Minister, František Udržal, in October 1929, outlining the difficult socio-economic position of former legionnaires in the republic, noting that straightened circumstances were leading to a higher suicide rate among them, claiming as many as 293 legionnaire suicides since the founding of the republic.⁹⁹ These were not redeemed sacrifices, like that of Švec, but rather evidence of a lack of due respect and care for the men who had fought to found the state.

Such was the concern that the legionnaire leadership conducted its own investigation into the rates of mortality among veterans of the legions. This was the work of the "Social Department of the Legionnaires" (*Sociální ústav legionářský*, or SŮL), a welfare organization established in 1926 with the aim of attending to the social care of former legionnaires. SŮL collaborated with the Office of the Legionnaires (*Kancelář československých legií*, or Kleg) and the State Bureau of Statistics.

the Army? The Ideal of Democracy and the Transformation of the Czechoslovak Military after 1918 and 1989," *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d'histoire* 23, no. 4 (August 2016): 628.

96. Jan Václav Rosůlek, *Veteráni republiky* (Prague, 1930). On the genre of legionnaire literature in the interwar republic, see Robert B. Pynsent, "The Literary Representation of the Czechoslovak 'Legions' in Russia," in Mark Cornwall and R. J. W. Evans, eds., *Czechoslovakia in a Nationalist and Fascist Europe, 1918–1948* (Oxford, 2007).

97. For example, a search for the word *sebevražda* (suicide) in the military publications section of the *Kramerius* digitized collections of the Czech National Library will return over one hundred and fifty results. See <https://kramerius.army.cz/search?q=sebevražda> (accessed October 4, 2023).

98. Typical of this genre was the published eulogy to Petr Korčák, a legionnaire veteran from Moravia who killed himself apparently on account of not receiving adequate social care. See Josef Fischer, *Případ Petra Korčáka. Vypravování o zoufalé bídě legionáře* (Brno, 1928); or that of railway worker Engelbert Jurášek, who died in similar circumstances, and whose case was reported in the legionnaire newspaper: "Zase jedna sociální tragedie," *Národní osvobození*, July 22, 1930: 4.

99. Vojenský historický ústav archiv, Ministerstvo národní obrany, Kancelář československých legií, box 4.

SŮL's findings on the topic of legionnaire mortality were counter-intuitive. The report compared their own figures on legionnaire mortality rates with those of the State Statistics Office on suicides throughout the country, finding—to their own apparent surprise—that the legionnaire rate stood at just 50% of the civilian rate throughout society.¹⁰⁰ The report's authors admitted that legionnaire records produced by SŮL and Kleg were likely incomplete, at least in comparison with the State Office of Statistics.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, this was a margin rather than a category error: the premise that legionnaire mortality was significantly lower than that of the civilian population was accepted.¹⁰²

The report went on to offer explanations for this, and in so doing deployed a number of questionable and speculative propositions, all of which were connected in some way to the patriotic valorization of the legionnaire movement and its members. Thus, low mortality rates amongst legionnaires were likely a consequence of their good physical condition and their relative youth.¹⁰³ As volunteers, legionnaires represented the very best section of wartime combatants, superior to the larger part of ex-soldiers who only fought in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army.¹⁰⁴ Astonishingly, the report considered the psychological impact of military service and conflict on the legionnaires. But here, instead of broaching matters of trauma and combat stress (which were admittedly imperfectly understood throughout Europe and the world at this time), the report suggested instead that the experience of war had likely hardened the legionnaires, strengthening their instincts and capacities for survival in peacetime.¹⁰⁵ The last pages of the report offered demographic projections on the basis of these low mortality figures, and put forward a projected budget for their members' welfare and social care in the coming years predicated on this.¹⁰⁶

As demography and sociological analysis, this was all highly questionable. The report itself admitted that its data were incomplete. But it nevertheless went on to project the causes of low mortality based on such data, and even projected the financial implications if such trends continued in the future. The explanations are not in accord with much of what is now known and understood about the physical and psychological impact of combat on the individual. But they did represent a more concentrated example of the same interpretations that had shaped the conclusions of the reports on suicide in Czechoslovak society and among enlisted men. The Legionnaires emerged from the report as the embodiment of stalwart survival, their apparent vitality attributed to their wartime élan and ardor. It was a highly effective way to consolidate their virtues as the archetypal patriots of the interwar state.

100. Archiv Akademie věd České Republiky, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Fond R 'Legionářů', svazak 432, *Umrtnost legionářů a konsumační plán SŮL*, 2.

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*

103. *Ibid.*, 4.

104. *Ibid.*, 4.

105. *Ibid.*, 6.

106. *Ibid.*, 6–12.

Conclusion: The Death of Colonel Švec

Statistics on suicide produced in Czechoslovakia and the Czech lands tended to point towards a problem deeply embedded within certain parts of society and its institutions, one that persisted through Habsburg rule, into the interwar republic, and then again into the socialist state. In the interwar period the evident continuities were handled evasively, typically by deploying explanations that were in accord with contemporary political and social problems already identified as such throughout the state: the minorities question as manifested by the supposed division between Czech and German ethnic groups in the interwar state; the disruptions cause by the war years that needed time to heal; the image of the legionnaires as heroic embodiments of national culture. These were apparently attempts to impose meaning and significance on to a problem that was in large part unknowable. But it was of course precisely this unknowability that allowed for the breadth and the length of the impositions and the projections. As Irina Paperno notes in her study of responses to suicide in nineteenth-century Russia, the phenomenon of self-killing “creates a void that asks to be filled. . . suicide—an individual act, becomes a cultural artifact.”¹⁰⁷ So it was in Czechoslovakia: the void typically filled with narratives of courage, honor, and self-sacrifice.

Solutions to the problem were far less forthcoming, as the statistical record for the remainder of the twentieth century seems to bear out. First and foremost, the sociology of suicide in the interwar republic was deployed, often at the official level, to provide acceptable explanations as to why the phenomenon of suicide could not be directly attributed to the institutions and traditions of the republic itself. Instead, suicide was attributed to the difficulties of the minorities question in the new state, or ghosts of the Habsburg period and the war were summoned and then exorcised, or, in the case of the legionnaires, the problem of suicide was virtually denied entirely. The intention was to maintain the pristine image of the state-building project of the interwar republic. This, then, was perhaps Masaryk’s greatest influence on the question: not to enrich the problem of suicide per say, but rather to offer a sociological framework of progress in the patriotic work of state-building within which the matter of suicide could be understood and effectively tamed.

The legionnaire playwright Rudolf Medek understood this needful work well. His play can be seen as one example among several attempting less to resolve the admitted problem of suicide but rather to alchemize it into a form that was palatable and well-adjusted to the new patriotic narratives of the interwar republic. Medek had used his art, but more typically answers were found in sociological and statistical analysis, whose purpose was often not to resolve the problem they addressed, but rather to interpret it in acceptable fashion. Medek’s play brought Švec to life in a state whose realization he had fought for and which he had not lived to see. But this was simultaneously the resurrection of a great Czechoslovak hero and the attempted exorcism of a

107. Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia* (Ithaca, 1997).

social problem that vexed and would continue to vex the state throughout its short lifespan.

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