# Conclusion

In November 1920, an article in *Národní listy* offered a series of snapshots on the changes in Prague during war and regime change:

> And now to recall how the physiognomy (*tvářnost)* of Prague changed during the past six years! First the mobilization, then the departure of the regiments […]. Wave of refugees from Galicia, Ruthenian peasants in skin coats and Polish Jews in caftans. Germans' patriotic demonstrations, celebrations of victory, torch processions. And then other snapshots from the war film: desperate queues for bread and meat, hunger demonstrations. Hungarian soldiers with metal helmets passing through the streets of Prague. Fat Reich German soldiers in packs eyeing the foreign city. Tramways of the Red Cross, bursting with human suffering, sick soldiers, blind, crippled; reservists in rags […]. And then these few great Czech days, the general assembly, the theatre celebration, the meeting of nations – days, when the physiognomy of Prague geared up to the October 28. After this day, the film changes quickly: […] the first military French mission, Italian, British, new uniforms appear on the street. The French, Italian, Russian legionaries come back […]. And this kaleidoscope of uniforms becomes slowly simpler: our own army gets a uniform, the police make you rejoice with their American silhouette.[1]

These increasingly perceptible transformations in the image of the city and its streets have been the subject of this book, which also featured the various military uniforms, the wounded soldiers, the refugees, the queues, the demonstrations. However, the newspaper's forward-facing film of Prague streets only tells part of the story: patriotism was not limited to the Germans' torch processions; queues and protests continued after the war; the police after 1918 might have changed its uniform, but not necessarily its personnel or mode of action.

As we have seen, the daily experiences of war and revolution on the streets of Prague were more complex than narratives of national resistance and national liberation suggest. The Austro–Hungarian Empire was able to mobilize its population for the war effort even in Prague, while the establishment of the new Czechoslovak Republic after 1918

[1] *Národní listy*, November 19, 1920, 4.



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was not a straightforward process. Imperial collapse and national rebirth were not predetermined events.

Cheering departing troops, displaying a flag, supporting street collections, helping the wounded – these were all gestures that sustained the war effort. Exploring the different affiliations that framed such patriotic acts sheds new light on the mobilization of home fronts. Empire and nation were not incompatible with each other. In the context of Austria–Hungary, this meant that cultural mobilization could be construed in imperial, national, or even urban terms. This local solidarity as backbone of national wartime mobilization can also be found in the context of established nation-states.[2] Local initiatives of support for troops emphasized, in turn, solidarity with Prague's soldiers, Czech soldiers, or Austro–Hungarian soldiers. This case study thus broadens the focus away from national "war cultures" toward imperial "war cultures." As most belligerents were Empires at the time, a finer understanding of these dynamics helps contextualize the war experience of subjects and citizens elsewhere during the First World War.

Locality affords a new viewpoint on the relation of Czech-speakers in the Empire to the conflict. This is not to argue that people in Prague were nationally indifferent. But, even if feeling intensely patriotically Czech, it was hard not to succumb to the "suggestive force of war": the state was invaded and in danger, peers and family members were fighting. Wanting to participate, to "do one's bit" in this difficult time seemed natural, that is what societies at war do. It does not cancel Czech unease with the German alliance or the war aims of the High Command, but I would argue that these were not as relevant if you lived in Prague in 1915 than the family member freezing in the Carpathians who needed support. The same journalist, Josef Žemla, who captured the spirit of duty in Prague streets in 1914, reported the joy and confusion on October 28, 1918. Seeing an opposition between the crowds cheering Austro–Hungarian soldiers in 1914 on Wenceslas Square and the crowds cheering Czech legionnaires in 1919 because they were fighting for different sides in the world conflict therefore misses the point. For people in Prague, both were "their" soldiers, fighting for their homeland, fighting for them. They could be the same men, they could be the same crowds. And that does not necessarily imply an extreme side-switching on the part of those standing on the sidewalk.

This book has demonstrated the importance of the war experience in shaping the 1918 transition. There is no contradiction in stating that the Austro–Hungarian war effort produced its own self-mobilization and

[2] Purseigle, *Mobilisation, Sacrifice et Citoyenneté*.

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that the war saw a process of delegitimization of the Habsburg state. It is precisely because of the great sacrifices made by Prague residents during the conflict that the Empire lost the trust of its citizens. Czech nationalists in the interwar have judged Czech-speakers loyal to Austria as opportunists or even collaborators. This supposes a diametrical opposition between the Habsburg Empire and the new Czechoslovakia. The reality was more complex. Ivan Šedivý pointed out how questionable it was to use the word "resistance," with its reference to the context of occupation in the Second World War, to describe Czech political activity during the First World War.[3] The participation of Praguers in the war effort generated high expectations from the state in return. As Austria–Hungary seemed increasingly unable to respond to this challenge, it does not seem so surprising that many turned their hopes toward a new state that could promise a better future.

The concept that can help us make the link between these two polities, the Habsburg Empire and the Czechoslovak Republic, is patriotism. During the war and the immediate postwar, both states appealed to their citizens' patriotism. It could refer, depending on the context, to the patriotism for the Habsburg Empire or to the patriotism for the Czech nation. The abstract fatherland conjured up by this notion could in both cases be embodied in the locality, that is, urban identity in the case of Prague. Enthusiasm for the war is not the right category to analyze this phenomenon, it requires instead focusing on daily acts of participation. When collections for local soldiers became collections for legionnaires after 1918, the shift in the hinterland was not that radical. The rupture, which was so clearly emphasized by the new power, hid more ambiguous continuities. The bearers of state power remained the same and the political culture that developed in Czechoslovakia was still very much embedded in habits and structures from the Habsburg times.

To understand the shift of citizens away from the Empire, two elements have been revealed as crucial. First, the break in expectations of legality created by the repressive military regime transformed perceptions of the state. Prague is an interesting case study because it was not, by far, the region where the military encroached the most on civilian government. The situation was much worse in Galicia, Tyrol, or even Moravia, where crimes punished with prison sentences in Prague received death sentences. Yet, for Praguers too, one of benefits of Habsburg rule – its predictability – was gone. Wartime emergency measures meant a new regime of uncertainty. The rupture with a state ruled by the rule of law turned away many of those who spent some time in prison. The effect,

[3] Šedivý, *Češi, české země a Velká válka*, 58.

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however, remained limited to some circles: those who picked up leaflets on the street, who read newspapers in cafés.

By contrast, the question of food supply had a broader impact and consequently played a larger role. The war entrenched the significance of welfare in citizens' expectations from the state. Simply put, the fact that the state was not able to provide for its citizens undermined its legitimacy. Exploring the evolution of the street over four years – the widening restrictions, the growing queues, and the ever more impatient demonstrations – shows it was a gradual process. Protests related to food are particularly illuminating as hopes for state intervention propelled by polite deputations were progressively fading. Welfare had become an essential part of modern war and the Habsburg state, which had traditionally left this role to national associations and (often) national municipalities, was ill equipped to take it on. The national state appeared as a solution to step in where the imperial state had failed. The efforts of national associations to relieve the population from hunger gave legitimacy to national claims. In this respect, the significance of the association *The Czech Heart* (*České srdce*), which by 1918 played a major role in feeding hungry Prague residents, cannot be overemphasized.

The real shift observable during the war was in the reconfiguration of legitimacy. The old structures of authority were destabilized by the conflict. The first erosion to this system came from a wartime culture that subordinated the civilian world to military values. The lack of respect for civilian authority that was born during the war persisted after it ended. Returning soldiers, especially, felt entitled to have a say in the management of the state.[4] The traditional social hierarchies that the Habsburg state had been resting on were disrupted as a result of the food shortages, which impoverished the lower and middle classes and gave rise to a new class of wartime profiteers; a disruption which also contributed to the undermining of state legitimacy. As society was in flux, the sources of authority and legitimacy were too. The national legitimacy established after the war did not go unquestioned. The state authorities that officially represented the Czechoslovak state were often discredited by their association with the old regime. The new democracy raised expectations for a broader engagement with politics. The central state did not always know how to respond to this popular participation which sometimes implied a challenge to its authority.

These findings also contribute to a reassessment of the revolutions of 1918–1919. Beyond the fervor of national independence hid a more

[4] On the legacy of the Habsburg war, see Cornwall, Newman (eds.), *Sacrifice and Rebirth*.

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complex transition. Remnants of imperial structures were essential in a period of great instability and uncertainty. My research into the social movements in Prague shows a wide range of concerns not necessarily connected with the discourse of national elites on state-building. But, the very diverse social conflicts of 1917–1920 should not be understood as an aftershock of the Bolshevik revolution either. Discourses for fairer distribution, while taking into account events in Russia, above all reflected local concerns, responded to local conditions, and inserted themselves in local traditions of social conflicts. Viewing postwar protests as reactions to the Bolshevik revolution misses the complexity of aspirations generated by the war.[5] The low-level violence in Prague was more diverse and the meaning of revolution more plural. Popular demonstrations manifested a mix of subsistence issues, a will to engage more in state management, as well as national or antisemitic scapegoating. They were not only shaped by the demobilization from war to peace, violence, and a "culture of victory."[6] Street demonstrations, public speeches, and direct action such as forceful move-ins revealed transformed attitudes toward the state and the will to impose social justice. The instability generated by the formation of a new state created new aspirations for controlling state institutions. The unrest in Prague shared many characteristics with upheavals in Eastern and Central European cities (though less violent than in many cases), but also to the protests in France, Great Britain, or beyond Europe in the colonial Empires.[7]

Although this revolutionary moment ultimately failed and the rest of the 1920s could be characterized by a return to order, its legacy in the interwar period and beyond deserves reexamination. In the Czechoslovak case, the recovery from this initial phase of upheaval was surprisingly rapid. Nevertheless, everyday experiences of Prague citizens in the First World War and in the transition period nurtured disappointments and expectations that found repercussions in the struggles faced by the First Czechoslovak Republic at home in the interwar years.[8]

[5] For a similar approach on Red Army recruitment, see Tamás Révész, "A National Army under the Red Banner? The Mobilisation of the Hungarian Red Army in 1919," *Contemporary European History*, no. 1 (2022): 71–84.

[6] On cultures of victory, see John Paul Newman, "Volunteer Veterans and Entangled Cultures of Victory in Interwar Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia," *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 4 (2019): 716–736.

[7] See Stovall, *Paris and the Spirit of 1919;* Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-determination and the International Origins of Anti-colonial Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[8] On the rural context, see Jakub Beneš, "The Colour of Hope: The Legacy of the 'Green Cadres' and the Problem of Rural Unrest in the First Czechoslovak Republic," *Contemporary European History*, 28, no. 3 (2019): 285–302.

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Exploring Prague's urban space in war and revolution can therefore help explain imperial processes of social mobilization during the First World War, as well as the meanings of 1918 (both the birth of nation-states and the social aspirations of that particular historical moment). This study has examined these broader issues through an embodied investigation of the streetscapes. Space itself was the object of enquiry, rather than specific groups or institutions in the city. Many of the shifts that occurred between 1914 and 1920 found their expression in the streets. Transformations in military–civil relations were perceptible in the uniforms, the reduced traffic, and changed information channels. The constant presence of war in a space where it was absent manifested itself in street collections, departed bells, and wounded soldiers. The dialectics of the hidden and the visible (often overlapping with the legal and the illegal) characterized the circuits of food in the city as it disappeared from shops and market stalls to reappear in suitcases at train stations, in cellars, and on balconies. Boundaries between public and private were also shifted as more and more people took to threatening public officials (sometimes in their private homes) or considered private homes as public property. Finally, the new capital city could not completely erase the old regime, with its historic monuments, formed habits, and people. The old and the new had to find ways to cohabit on Prague's streets. In this sense, it was not only the larger historical events of war and revolution that impacted the street environment, but the streetscapes shaped them in return.

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