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WOMEN OF THE LEGION: UNRECOGNISED MEMBERS OF THE FIRST CZECHOSLOVAK ARMY

This paper introduces the reader to aspects of service of women in the Czechoslovak legion in Russia and conditions under which they could have received status of a legionnaire after their return from Russia. This legal status was established in the year 1920 and was meant as a reward for those who served in any of the Czechoslovak military units in exile (the Czechoslovak legions) during the war and fought for independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but was awarded almost exclusively to men. The paper analyses the legal reasons for this, which is later demonstrated on several specific cases.

Key words: *Czechoslovak legions. – Women in the army. – Status of a war veteran. – World War I. – Russian Civil War. – Czechoslovakia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to look into the legislation which determined the position of female members of the foreign branch of the Czech and Slovak anti-Habsburg resistance units after their return home from the World War I and Russian Civil War.

As it is necessary to have some insight into the history of the resistance and particularly its eastern military branch – the Czechoslovak legion in Russia – for understanding this issue, the first chapters will provide a brief exposition concerning these topics.

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Later chapters are going to be focused on the usual role of women in the Czechoslovak legion in Russia and legislation passed after the arrival of the legionnaires home to Czechoslovakia in the 1919 and 1920, especially on the act no. 462/1919 Sb. and governmental regulation no. 151/1920 Sb., and the resulting effect this had on the possibility of women being legally recognised as legionnaires. This will be done through examining those parts of these legal regulations which are the most disputable from the examined point of view.

In the end, I will try to apply the conclusions extracted from the previous chapters on specific cases (typical and atypical) to demonstrate the way in which the status of legionnaire was or was not awarded, and the reasons behind this.

2. ROAD TO THE CZECHOSLOVAK REVOLUTION

2.1. Czechs and Slovaks in the Austro-Hungarian Empire

At the beginning of the 20th century, Bohemian crownlands were a part of the Austrian half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Cisleithania), while Slovakia was under the Hungarian half (Transleithania).

For nations in Cisleithania it was possible to develop their own culture, language and even a limited autonomy was guaranteed. For Czechs, this was a result of the so-called national revival in the 19th century, which led to a rise of the Czech language, the establishment of Czech political parties and associations (most importantly *Sokol*, an association aimed at the development of physical education in combination with national self-awareness), and generally to a renewal of national consciousness. A logical consequence to this was an effort to gain autonomy for the former Lands of the Kingdom of Bohemia, which was historically amongst the main constituents of the Empire, becoming the most industrialised part of the whole monarchy in the second half of the 19th century. This call for autonomy was even amplified by the change from the centralised Austrian empire to the dualised Austro-Hungarian empire.¹

Despite of what came after, at this time the Czech fight was purely political, and the nation was considered loyal.² The central government

1 Milan Mojžíš a kol., *Československé legie 1914–1920 [Czechoslovak Legions 1914–1920]*, Nakladatelství Epocha, Praha 2017, 6–7.

2 On the attitude of different Austro-Hungarian nationalities towards the war see: Richard Lein, *Between Acceptance and Refusal – Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Austria-Hungary)*, International Encyclopedia of the First World War 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914–1918-online.net/article/between_acceptance_and_refusal_-_soldiers_attitudes_towards_war_austria-hungary last visited on the 27th of February 2021.

tried to make concessions several times, but these efforts were regularly blocked by a considerable German minority living in the territory of the Bohemian crownlands, who feared this would lead to them losing their privileges.³ This led to a growth in tension between the Czechs and the Germans, whose relationship was already strained, and it all culminated in the late 1930s⁴ and after the World War II.

Until the beginning of the First World War, or The Great War, as it was called by some at the time, there was no considerable movement proclaiming an idea of an independent Czech (let alone Czechoslovak) state. The outbreak of the war was generally accepted amongst the population, although with a lack of enthusiasm which sprang from the sympathies felt for Serbia and Russia, fellow Slavic nations that were suddenly deemed enemies.⁵

It was not until the suspension of democratic institutions and national rights in the Empire in the month following the declaration of war, that the discontent started to grow among the population.⁶

For Slovaks, this period was very different. While Transleithania was democratic, the same as Cisleithania, the national policies were much tougher since the hegemony of Hungarians was considered the official policy.⁷

For this reason, Slovak national consciousness was systematically reduced⁸ and even the Slovak national revival, similar to the one experienced by Czechs, could not stop this decline. Thus, when the war came, a great number of inhabitants of what is today Slovakia identified themselves as Hungarians.

As a consequence, Slovak resentment towards the Habsburg rule, for the major part, did not come from the domestic population, but from the national diaspora in the USA.⁹

3 Kevin J. McNamara, *Dreams of a great small nation: The Mutinous Army that Threatened a Revolution, Destroyed an Empire, Founded a Republic, and Remade the Map of Europe*, PublicAffairs, New York 2016, 33 and 38–39.

4 Tim Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler: Chamberlain, Churchill and the Road to War*, Vintage, London 2020, 231–257.

5 Michal Rak (ed.), *Boj s rakouskou hydrou: Deník legionáře Čeňka Klose [The Struggle with the Austrian Hydra: Diary of Legionnaire Čeněk Klos]*, Československá obec legionářská, Praha 2016, 13.

6 K. J. McNamara, 15–16.

7 *Ibid.* p. 37.

8 M. Mojžíš a kol., 6.

9 *Ibid.* 328.

2.2. Declaring the Fight for Independence¹⁰

Despite of the aforementioned silent acceptance of the war amongst the Czechs and Slovaks, a small group of politically active figures almost immediately started to prepare a fight for independence. This group was centred around the Czech philosopher, politician and university professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk,¹¹ who left abroad to gain international support for the idea. In 1915, he was joined by his former student Edvard Beneš and a Slovak scientist, at the time serving in the French air force, Milan Rastislav Štefánik.¹² At this point, it would be good to mention that at the beginning of the war, all three of them were fringe figures. Štefánik and Beneš were also largely unknown amongst the public.

On the home front, the resistance founded an illegal organisation called *Maffie*. Its main aim was to provide information for Masaryk and his movement abroad and to prepare a *coup d'état* in case the Entente armies entered Bohemian lands.¹³

As for Masaryk, he rallied Czech and Slovak immigrants, especially in the USA, Russia, France and Switzerland, and gradually persuaded most of the leading politicians of the Entente to support the idea of dissolution of Austria-Hungary.¹⁴ The one exception from this were the British, who never saw this action as stabilising for the Central European region.¹⁵ Their voice was, however, left unheard, as another branch of the Czech and Slovak resistance gained international prestige and thus wide support of the public across the Entente powers – the Czechoslovak legions.

3. CZECHOSLOVAK LEGIONS

Before the resistance established *Maffie*, even before Masaryk left his homeland to start his mission, there were groups of Czech and Slovak ex-

10 More on the topic of the political branch of the resistance e. g.: Ivan Šedivý, *Češi, České země a Velká válka [Czechs, Czech Lands and The Great War]*, Nakladatelství lidové noviny, Praha 2014, 175–192.

11 K. J. McNamara, 18–23.

12 M. Mojžíš a kol., 370.

13 *Ibid.* 380.

14 Úmluva mezi italskou vládou a Československou národní radou o uznání samostatné čs. armády v Itálii, Řím, 21. dubna 1918 [Convention between the Italian Government and the Czechoslovak National Council on the Recognition of the Independent Czechoslovak Army in Italy, Rome, 21st April 1918], Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky 2018, https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/verejna_diplomacie/vyroci_2018/rok_1918/umluva_mezi_italskou_vladou_a.html last visited on the 2nd of August 2020.

15 K. J. McNamara, 169.

iles who saw the war as an opportunity to gain wider autonomy or, hopefully, even independence for their respective homes (Lands of the Bohemian Crown and Slovakia). They began rallying in the Entente countries and demanded the right to fight against the central powers.¹⁶

From these efforts sprang the first units of (at the time mostly Czech) volunteers in France (*Rota Nazdar* – 341 Czechs, 2 Slovaks),¹⁷ Russia (*Česká družina* – 744 Czechs, 266 Russians)¹⁸ and Serbia (several smaller units).¹⁹ Except for the Serbian unit, these grew in numbers and in 1917, after seeing their successes (especially on the eastern front), even the Italian government backed and allowed Czechoslovaks to create volunteer units in their army.²⁰ The number of soldiers in the Czechoslovak army reached almost one hundred thousand men.²¹

Another thirty thousand Czechs and Slovaks joined the American army and one thousand the British and Canadian army, but as these were not separate Czechoslovak units, their members were not called 'legionnaires' during the war (even though they received legal legionnaire status after the war).²²

While legions in France and Italy played an important part in the fight for Czechoslovak independence, their impact on the topic of this paper was minimal to none and so they will not be described further.

3.1. Czechoslovak Volunteers in Serbia

Even though not strong in numbers (around 1500 people), the Czech community in Serbia was very active, establishing many cultur-

16 Edmund Orián a kol., *Československá legie v Rusku: Díl I. [Czechoslovak Legion in Russia: Part I]*, Nakladatelství EPOQUE 1900 a NAŠE VOJSKO, Praha 2014, 12–13.

17 Karel Straka, *Rota Nazdar: nejen o památném boji z 9. května 1915 [Company Nazdar: Not Only about the Memorable Fight of the 9th of May 1915]*, Vojenský historický ústav Praha 2013, <http://www.vhu.cz/rota-nazdar-nejen-o-pamatnem-boji-z-9-kvetna-1915/> last visited on the 31st of July 2020.

18 M. Mojžíš a kol., 46.

19 Tomáš Jakl, *Čeští dobrovolníci v Srbské armádě za první světové války [Czech Volunteers in the Serbian Army during World War I]*, Vojenský historický ústav Praha 2016, <http://www.vhu.cz/cesti-dobrovolnici-v-srbske-armade-za-prvni-svetove-valky/> last visited on the 31st of July 2020

20 Karel Straka, *Čs. Jednotky za první světové války v Itálii měly až 20 000 vojáků [Czechoslovak Units in Italy during the World War I Had up to 20 000 soldiers]*, Vojenský historický ústav Praha 2013, <http://www.vhu.cz/cs-jednotky-za-prvni-svetove-valky-v-italii-mely-az-20-000-vojaku/> last visited on the 7th of August 2020.

21 M. Mojžíš a kol., 7.

22 *Ibid.* 300, 306 and 338.

al societies (*Lumír*, *Havlíček*) and even a local branch of the aforementioned *Sokol*.²³

With the imminence of war, a smaller part of the community left for Austria-Hungary, to be ready to serve in the army, while a larger part showed its sympathies for Serbia and a willingness to help in case of a defensive war (e.g. the property of Czech societies was donated to the Serbian Red Cross).²⁴

Drafting soldiers of the Czech nationality (Slovaks were not considered at this point) from the POW camps was very limited, since Serbia, fighting for its very survival, did not have the capacity to work out the plan for their recruitment.²⁵

This situation changed after the fall of Serbia and recreation of the Serbian army on the eastern front. At that moment, Serbians were willing to accept Czech volunteers even from prisoner camps. Even though it was possible for them to join Czech units in the Russian army, this was heavily obstructed by the Russian government until the battle of Zborov, while volunteering at the Serbian army in exile was way easier. Thus, most of the Czech POWs willing to join the fight for the Entente on the eastern front went to this army and were reassigned to the Czechoslovak legion in Russia later.²⁶

3.2. Czechoslovak Legions in Russia

The story of the legion in Russia is both the most interesting and most important for the topic of this paper as it was the Russian civil war, where the Czech volunteers had to fight in the worst conditions and against the worst odds, which led them to use all resources as effectively as possible, human resources included. Because of this it will be analysed in more detail in comparison with legions in other countries and on other fronts.

3.2.1. *Česká Družina*

Unlike Serbia, Russia was one of the two target nations for Czech and Slovak exiles (the second one was the USA).²⁷ This brought great potential

23 *Ibid.* 194.

24 *Ibid.* 194 and 198.

25 Tomáš Jakl, *Čeští dobrovolníci*.

26 E. Orián a kol., 21–22.

also: One such example is Jan Sergěj Ingr, who would later become a general and Minister of National Defence in exile during the Second World War. See his page in the legionnaire database: <http://vuapraha.cz/soldier/19138948>

27 Dalibor Vácha, *Bratrstvo: Všední a dramatické dny československých legií v Rusku* [*Brotherhood: Everyday and Dramatic Days of Czechoslovak Legions in Russia*], Nakladatelství Epocha, Praha 2015, 16.

for forming volunteer units. At the same time, the local Czech community in Russia was afraid of persecution due to its members being subjects of an enemy nation and thus needed to convincingly show allegiance to Russia and the Russian tsar.²⁸

This caused Czech compatriot associations to encourage volunteers to join the Russian army. As a result, on the 11th of October 1914 (the 28th of September by the Julian calendar used in the Russian empire at the time) a unit of 720 soldiers took an oath creating the so called *Česká družina* („Czech company”), a unit consisting almost entirely of Czechs.

However, due to their low numbers at the time, *Družina* was not used as a standard fighting unit. Instead, thanks to their knowledge of languages spoken in the enemy armies (German, Czech etc.) its members were used for reconnaissance, diversion, spreading pro-desertion propaganda amongst Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian army and as translators.²⁹ This had not changed for some time, since the recruitment from the ranks of Czech and Slovak POWs, although allowed since 1915, was strongly limited.³⁰

This practice was typical for Czech units in Russia up to the February revolution in 1917 and the end of the monarchist regime. The new government was struggling with demoralisation of the exhausted Russian army and was willing to use volunteer units more effectively, as their will to fight was at much higher levels.³¹ This led to the first appearance of the Czechoslovak riflemen brigade in Russia as a single unit in battle – the battle of Zborov.

3.2.2. *From the Battle of Zborov to the Battle of Bachmač [Bakhmach]*

The Provisional government of Russia attempted to restore the rapidly falling morale of the army by launching a new offensive in the beginning of summer of 1917 – the so-called July or Kerensky offensive (by the name of the contemporary prime minister Alexander Kerensky).³²

Due to the mentioned low morale, units that volunteered were used in the first place during the offensive. One of those was also the Czechoslovak rifle brigade, which succeeded the *Česká družina* and at the time

28 *Ibid.* 18–21.

29 E. Orián a kol., 15.

30 Daniela Brádlarová, *Vojáci nebo podnikatelé? Hospodářské a finanční activity československých legií během jejich anabáze v Rusku a na Sibiři [Soldiers or Businessmen? Economic and Financial Activities of the Czechoslovak Legions during their Anabasis in Russia and Siberia]*, Nakladatelství Academia a Masarykův úřad a Archiv AV ČR, Praha 2019, 24.

31 K. J. McNamara, 130–131.

32 *Ibid.*

already counted more than 3500 members. Since its fighting capabilities were not yet certain, it was supposed to lead only a relieving attack near the village of Zborov.³³

Czech and Slovak soldiers, used for unconventional reconnaissance tactics to cross the no man's land, proved themselves useful when they broke through three lines of trenches and defeated the enemy who was superior both in numbers and the equipment, despite the command's expectations.³⁴

This limited success could not save the disastrous offensive, but brought the legions to international recognition both in the Entente and Central Powers countries – the following investigation in the Austro-Hungarian army (its command suspected Czech units of retreating from the battle with the legionnaires intentionally without putting up a fight) inadvertently pointed out the existence of Czechoslovak legions to the population back in Bohemian lands.³⁵ As a result, the Russian government lifted all restrictions from recruitment into the legion, and the international community started to support the idea of an independent Czech or Czechoslovak state, which was invaluable for the political branch of the resistance.³⁶

By the time the Bolshevik revolution hit Russia and started the civil war, the legion already consisted of more than 40 000 members.

In this turbulent situation, it was decided that the legion would be evacuated to France and continue its fight there and until then it will not get involved in the civil war. At first, a small number of soldiers left through Archangelsk,³⁷ but when the winter made that way impassable, the Czechoslovak national council negotiated with the Bolsheviks and secured safe transport through Siberia to Vladivostok, where the legion was supposed to board ships and get to France around the world. The price for this was the continuing neutrality of the legion in the civil war and the surrender of most weapons in Penza.³⁸

However, at that moment most of the legion was still situated in Ukraine. This was after the Bolshevik government signed the peace of Brest-Litovsk but before it came into effect. Because of this, Austro-Ger-

33 E. Orián a kol., 24.

34 M. Mojžíš a kol., 62.

35 Výstava ke stému výročí bitvy u Zborova [Exhibition dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Zborov], Vojenský historický ústav Praha 2017, <http://www.vhu.cz/vystava-ke-stemu-vyroci-bitvy-u-zborova/> last visited on the 1st of August 2020.

36 K. J. McNamara, 133.

37 E. Orián a kol., 25.

38 M. Mojžíš a kol., 82.

man forces were still advancing into Russian territory and were threatening to encircle and capture the legion. They caught up with them near the railway hub of Bachmač [Bakhmach].

Here, for the first and last larger battle, the legion joined forces with the Red Army and managed to hold enemy forces at bay long enough to safely evacuate the whole army corps.³⁹

The battle of Bachmač [Bakhmach] was supposed to be the final battle of the legion on the East, but the path of history was way different.

3.2.3. *The War in Siberia and the Return Home*

After surrendering most of their weapons, the military transport trains carrying the legion entered Siberia, but very soon, the army found itself stretched along the whole Trans-Siberian railway. Soon after, the transports have stopped.

This was mostly caused by the ongoing civil war in combination with the Bolshevik government being obliged to repatriate all of POWs of the Central Powers.⁴⁰

The delay, along with a lack of supplies and the constant presence of communist agitators trying to convince legionnaires to join the Bolshevik cause, led to growing tension between the legion and the Red Army.⁴¹

The fragile relationship finally collapsed on the 14th of May 1918 in what is known as the Chelyabinsk incident.⁴²

The Branch of the Czechoslovak national council in Russia tried to calm the situation down, but the damage was done and on the 23rd of May People's Commissar of Army and Navy Affairs Leon Trotsky issued a telegram which ordered local soviets to either incorporate the legionnaires into the Red Army or arrest them and put them to use as labour force.⁴³ From the legion's point of view, this was considered an effective declara-

39 E. Orián a kol., 29.

40 M. Mojžíš a kol., 82.

41 D. Brádrlerová, 35.

42 While a part of the legion was waiting on the platform of the Chelyabinsk railway station, a piece of metal was thrown from a passing train carrying Austro-Hungarian POWs. This hit rifleman (private) František Ducháček in the head, causing him to fall unconscious. The rest of the legionnaires managed to stop the train and find the perpetrator, who was promptly executed. A delegation of Czechoslovaks then went to the local soviet to explain the situation but were immediately arrested. The same happened to an officer sent to negotiate their release. This led to a revolt, in which legionnaires occupied the armoury, city soviet and prison, released their comrades and then retreated back to the railway station. See: D. Brádrlerová, 38–39.

43 *Ibid.* 39.

tion of war and so it was decided that the road to Vladivostok shall be opened by force if needed.⁴⁴

In several weeks' time, the fragmented legion was able to reunite and control the whole railway from the Volga river to Vladivostok. While the original plan was just to open the way and leave war torn Russia, the Entente had other plans – the legion was to become a vanguard of an international intervention force against the revolutionaries.⁴⁵

At this moment, all the abilities of the Czechoslovak army in Russia were to be tested. It was underequipped and its numbers, slowly growing to almost 60 000 members,⁴⁶ were absolutely not comparable with the Red Army, even when joined with allied White armies. Also, not only fighting skills were needed, as in the turmoil of civil war, the legion had to maintain its own economy, healthcare, repair facilities and handle many more non-military aspects that usually stand behind an army. Because of this it had to put all available forces to their best use – pre-war bankers and economists were put in charge of banks or sent to Japan and China to trade, pre-war engineers were in charge of Siberian factories and mines, etc.⁴⁷ And because their numbers were few, this is also the first time we see the activity of women in the Czechoslovak army. Although they still mostly held positions of support staff, e. g. sisters of mercy (contemporary name for nurses), we can find exceptions.⁴⁸

Surprisingly, the legion was able to hold the gained territory for several months, and even expand it up to the city of Kazan for a time.⁴⁹ This success impacted even the war in Europe, as hundreds of thousands of POWs who were supposed to return to Central Powers states were delayed and thus could not join the fighting before the end of the war.⁵⁰

44 E. Orián a kol., 31.

45 M. Mojžíš a kol., 94.

46 Tomáš Jakl, *Evakuace československých vojáků z Vladivostoku* [The Evacuation of Czechoslovak Soldiers from Vladivostok], Vojenský historický ústav Praha 2013, <http://www.vhu.cz/evakuace-ceskoslovenskych-vojaku-z-vladivostoku/> last visited on the 3rd of August 2020.

47 This complicated topic is analysed in the already mentioned book: Daniela Brádlarová, *Vojáci nebo podnikatelé? Hospodářské a finanční aktivity československých legií během jejich anabáze v Rusku a na Sibiři* [Soldiers or Businessmen? Economic and Financial Activities of the Czechoslovak Legions during their Anabasis in Russia and Siberia], Nakladatelství Academia a Masarykův úřad a Archiv AV ČR, Praha 2019.

48 Such as Božena Seidlová, who gathered intelligence about the positions and strength of both the Bolshevik army and the Czechoslovak corps, and forwarded it to various groups of the Czechoslovak Legion, effectively acting as an intelligence agent and messenger. More on her story in: Božena Seidlová Holečková, *Přes bolševické fronty* [Across the Bolshevik Fronts], Nakladatelství Památníku odboje, Praha 1923⁴.

49 E. Orián a kol., 35–36.

50 M. Mojžíš a kol., 86.

However, the lack of promised help from the Entente, worsening conditions and witnessed atrocities started to undermine the morale, and a general reluctance to fight the Bolsheviks was soon spreading through the legion. The legionnaires did not see the Russian civil war as their own and did not wish to risk their lives in it,⁵¹ especially since they volunteered to fight for establishing independent Czechoslovakia, which was done on the 28th of October 1918.

This, in combination with the collapse of the anti-Bolshevik front on the border of Siberia, led to the final decision to evacuate the legion back to Europe. This was done from 1919 to late 1920 through Vladivostok, with the last transport arriving in Europe in November of 1920, two years after the ceasefire in the Great War.⁵²

3.3. The Fate of the Legions

After their return, the legionnaires were praised as national heroes and thus gained many benefits,⁵³ even though sometimes this was at the expense of veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army, who did not join the resistance before the end of war.⁵⁴ They also gained high ranks in the Czechoslovak army and fought in the so called „wars of integrity” with Poland and Hungary.⁵⁵

During the period of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) legionnaires formed the core of a new Czechoslovak army and other security forces (gendarmerie, police etc.).

The fame of legions had ended with the First Czechoslovak Republic, as both the Nazi and the communist regimes were seeking to erase the

51 *Ibid.* 102.

52 D. Brádrlová, 79–87.

53 Although many times these were limited to half-hearted political gestures, especially as the initial enthusiasm arising from the independence waned.

See e.g. Jan Michl, *Legionáři v Československu [Legionnaires in Czechoslovakia]*, Nakladatelství NAŠE VOJSKO, Praha 2009.

or Katya Kocourek, *Čechoslovakista Rudolf Medek [Czechoslovakist Rudolf Medek]*, Mladá fronta, Praha 2011, 142–152.

54 See Adam Luptak, *Veterans of the Great War in Interbellum Czechoslovakia* [doctoral thesis], supervisor: Robert Evans, University of Oxford 2020.

55 Tomáš Kykal, *Válka o Slovensko v roce 1919 [War for Slovakia in the Year 1919]*, Vojenský historický ústav Praha 2019, <http://www.vhu.cz/valka-o-slovensko-v-roce-1919/> last visited on the 7th of August 2020.

and Tomáš Jakl, Karel Straka, *Před sto lety: československo-polské boje o Těšínsko [A Hundred Years ago: Czechoslovak-Polish Fights for the Cieszyn Region]*, Vojenský historický ústav Praha 2019, <http://www.vhu.cz/pred-sto-lety-boje-o-tesinsko/> last visited on the 7th of August 2020.

legacy of the legionary movement from Czech and Slovak history and the modern Czech and Slovak republics have only recently started to restore legionnaires to their place in history, honouring both the benefits and damages their actions brought.

4. WOMEN IN THE LEGION

It is very difficult to find out the exact number of women serving with the legion, since none of the legionnaire databases allow a search based on sex or any other way, to determine the sought number.⁵⁶ However, the *Muzeum československých legií* [Museum of Czechoslovak Legions] attempted to get the number when it published a short memento dedicated to women serving with the legion in Russia on its Facebook profile.⁵⁷ The final number found was 99, but this is only an approximate number, as the method they used (searching for surnames with the typical Czech female suffix *-ová*) was not suitable for finding all of the women, nor was it expected to do so.

Even though Czech society was quite progressive in the area of women's rights (e.g. even the first Czechoslovak constitution, the Constitution of 1920, contained suffrage for women),⁵⁸ the idea of women serving in the army directly was still too far ahead of its time,⁵⁹ but we can find

56 There are two official databases of legionnaires.

<http://www.vua Praha.cz/fallensoldierdatabase> – the first one is run by the *Vojenský ústřední archiv* [Central Military Archive]. It is older, not as nice as the second one and contains a bit less information, yet it is backed by the Ministry of Defence and thus it seems more valid from the outside.

<http://legie100.com/krev-legionare/> – the second one is run by the *Československá obec legionářská* [Organisation of Czechoslovak Legionnaires]. Originally it contained the same information as the aforementioned one, but it is being constantly expanded, thus at the moment many entries contain photos or other details about the individuals described. On the other hand, it is not supported by any such strong authority as the first one, and it has its own flaws (e.g. extreme case sensitiveness).

57 See: <https://www.facebook.com/Muzeumlegii/photos/a.2280923871993305/2773026466116374/?type=3&theater>

58 „All citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic, regardless of gender, who have exceeded the age of 21 and meet the other conditions of the Rules of Election to the Chamber of Deputies have the right to vote in the Chamber of Deputies.” § 9 zákona č. 121/1920 Sb. kterým se uvozuje ústavní listina Československé republiky [Act no. 121/1920 Coll. introducing the Constitutional Charter of the Czechoslovak Republic, Art. 9].

59 This changed during World War II with the creation of the Czechoslovak Army in exile in the USSR.

The topic of women in Eastern Europe during the world wars is generally less covered, but some insight is provided by e. g. Maria Bucur and Nancy M. Wingfield

records about them serving at least with the army (not as its integral part, with one exception, which will be described later) since the 1918.

Through exploring the database, I was able to confirm that the absolute majority of women served as nurses in field hospitals, and later on even in full-fledged rear hospitals – since the revolt against the Bolsheviks began, hospitals were gradually established in the controlled cities, first of them being in Chelyabinsk and the others following soon after.

The need for them arose especially after the fall of the monarchy, when the Russian medical staff, originally assigned to the Czechoslovak unit, fled.⁶⁰ Since 1918 we can find nurses serving with the legion, even wearing signs of Czechoslovak organisations on photographs,⁶¹ although the majority of merciful sisters were still of Russian or other allied nationalities (e.g. Japanese), who were only rarely considered part of Czechoslovakian units in Russia and thus there are not many entries about them in the archives.

Generally, the hospitals set up by Czechoslovaks, and their respective staff, including its female members, enjoyed respect of the soldiers, as opposed to the local Russian hospitals.⁶²

Next to women serving in the field of healthcare, we can come across several individuals who by coincidence ended up doing specific tasks or serving the cause of the Czechoslovak movement in unusual ways. This includes females serving as reconnaissance, messengers⁶³ or being admitted into the army ranks virtually illegally.⁶⁴ Even though these formed only a minority, the abnormality of their cases makes them ideal for analysing the effect of the examined legislature.

5. LEGAL STATUS OF A LEGIONNAIRE

After the establishment of free Czechoslovakia, it became necessary to find a way to reward those who risked their lives and honour for the idea of independence.⁶⁵

(eds.), *Gender and War in Twentieth Century Eastern Europe*, Indiana University Press, 2006.

60 Dalibor Vácha, *Ostrovky v bouři: Každodenní život československých legií v ruské občanské válce [Islands in the storm: Everyday life of Czechoslovak Legions in the Russian Civil War]*, Nakladatelství Epoque, Praha 2016, 211–213.

61 E.g. E. Orián a kol., 292, obr. č. 537.

62 D. Vácha, 216.

63 E. g. aforementioned Božena Seidlová – <http://legie100.com/krev-legionare/94020/>

64 E. g. Věra Gatti – <http://legie100.com/krev-legionare/25616/> – see more later in the text.

65 M. Mojžíš a kol., 448.

A system was soon adopted, by which legionnaires were to receive special pension as well as privileges in the civil service. In practice, this meant that they were prioritised when applying for positions in the army, gendarmerie, police or other state controlled services, had priority in promotions, and every year of service in the legions counted as three years in civil service when it came to ranks and salary.⁶⁶ From a certain point of view, this could be seen as an injustice, as a thirty-year-old police officer serving for eight years was treated equally as a twenty-three-year-old novice who served for three years in the legion.

At this point, it was necessary to legally distinguish who was a legionnaire and who was not, so that it would be possible to distribute the benefits effectively.⁶⁷ In 1919 and 1920 the act no. 462/1919 Sb. and the governmental regulation no. 151/1920 Sb. were issued, determining who was considered a legionnaire. This regulation strictly defined a legionnaire as a person who applied to „join the Czechoslovak revolutionary army before the 28th of October 1918 and served until this date”⁶⁸ and who had done so „voluntarily, immediately and unconditionally, to serve wielding a weapon”.⁶⁹ Though there were more conditions present and even some exceptions existed, these two are going to be the ones important for the topic of this paper. The first one as the most questionable from the contemporary point of view (since many who fought in Russia joined later

66 Jan Michl, *Legionáři v Československu [Legionnaires in Czechoslovakia]*, Nakladatelství NAŠE VOJSKO, Praha 2009, 30.

67 M. Mojžíš a kol., 448.

68 „A legionnaire is any volunteer of the Czechoslovak Legionary (Revolutionary-Foreign) Army who was included in it on the basis of an application made to the competent authority or representative of the Czechoslovak National Council in Paris or one of its branches no later than October 28, 1918, completely voluntarily, without any coercion, or an order of the Czechoslovak National Council or another Czechoslovak revolutionary body given the authority, and on the day of the coup, i.e. October 28, 1918, actually served in it according to his assignment – or who credibly proves that for reasons not depending on his power and will, could not be present on that day in the place of the relevant enlisting and assigning Czechoslovak military authority for assignment – or who was duly released from it.” § 2 zákona č. 462/1919 Sb. o propůjčování míst legionářům [Act No. 462/1919 Coll. on granting jobs to legionnaires, Art. 2].

69 „Service in the legions begins if there is a written application, by which one voluntarily undertook immediately and unconditionally, with a weapon in hand, to fight for the liberation of the Czechoslovak nation, on the date of this application; the application can be substituted by a letter of confirmation issued by authorities entitled to accept applications– confirming that the legionnaire duly registered with them.” Vládní nařízení č. 151/1920 Sb., jímž se provádí zákon ze dne 24. Července 1919 č. 462 Sb. z. a n., o propůjčování míst legionářům [Governmental Regulation No. 151/1920 Coll., Which implements the Act of the 24th of July 1919 No. 462 Coll. z. a n., on granting jobs to legionnaires, Art. 2].

and still considered themselves legionnaires) and the second one as the piece of legislation which indirectly excluded women from gaining legionnaire status.

There were several exceptions to both rules. Joining before the 28th of October 1918 could be bypassed by proving that the applying person wanted to join the legion, but was unable to do so because of reasons beyond their means.⁷⁰ Leaving before the specified date was excusable if the person was duly released prior to that.⁷¹ As for serving with a weapon, it was obvious that some members of the legion would not be able to fulfil this condition because of their service as doctors, teachers, propagandists etc. Because of this, the governmental regulation no. 151/1920 Sb. included article 5 drafted specifically for these situations. This article stated that some kinds of service, explicitly marked as such by the competent authorities, are considered equal to the service in arms (with a weapon), but only if a person applied for service with a weapon first.⁷²

These two conditions are an understandable reaction of the legislator to the difficult situation which occurred after the war. Firstly, many POWs, especially in Italy, applied for the Czechoslovak army after the establishing of the republic, as this was the fastest way to leave Italian prisoner camps and get home to fight in wars for integrity (these soldiers were later called „Militia battalions” so that they could be distinguished from Italian legionnaires),⁷³ so it wasn't seen as fitting to award them with the status, since they had joined only formally. Secondly, many labour battalions existed in the legion in Russia, whose members, however, did not bear the risk of

70 „... or who credibly proves that for reasons not depending on his power and will, could not be present on that day at the place of the relevant enlisting and assigning Czechoslovak military authority for assignment – or who was duly released from it.” Zákon č. 462/1919 Sb. o propůjčování míst legionářům [Act No. 462/1919 Coll. on granting jobs to legionnaires, Art. 2].

71 „... or who credibly proves that for reasons not depending on his power and will, could not be present on that day at the place of the relevant enlisting and assigning Czechoslovak military authority for assignment – or who was duly released from it.” Zákon č. 462/1919 Sb. o propůjčování míst legionářům [Act No. 462/1919 Coll. on granting jobs to legionnaires, Art. 2].

72 „The service in arms is equated with political, promotional, defence service, teaching, etc., if an explicit provision of the competent authorities of the foreign movement (i.e. the Czechoslovak National Council in Paris and its branches and offices in Russia, Italy, America and England) declared it as such, *but only if the person concerned applied for service in arms within the meaning of Article 2 of this Regulation.*” Vládní nařízení č. 151/1920 Sb., jímž se provádí zákon ze dne 24. Července 1919 č. 462 Sb. z. a n., o propůjčování míst legionářům [Governmental Regulation No. 151/1920 Coll., Which implements the Act of the 24th of July 1919 No. 462 Coll. z. a n., on granting jobs to legionnaires, Art. 5].

73 M. Mojžíš a kol., 284.

being marked traitors (they were considered only working POWs) and so they were not to receive the benefits awarded to legionnaires either. Finally, an opinion which played an important role was that desertions from the legion, which occurred especially in Russia (soldiers defecting to the Red Army)⁷⁴ should be somehow punished, or at least not rewarded.

In the end, however, these regulations created a situation where many of those who served in the legion were not considered legionnaires (generally this meant members of the legion in Russia volunteering after the 28th of October 1918), and on the other hand many receiving legionnaire status although they did not actually serve in the legion (usually Czechs and Slovaks serving in other Entente armies, especially the US army). Even though there was no dispute about granting the status to soldiers fighting in other Entente armies, albeit not directly under the legion, there were voices objecting the fact that men who fought for almost two years against the Red Army were excluded from gaining the status,⁷⁵ even though they took part in gaining bargaining advantage for the Czechoslovak delegation at the Versailles peace conference.⁷⁶

This dispute largely overshadowed the fact that the law indirectly discriminated women, taking any chance to apply for the legionnaire status and benefits from them (although, truth be told, many of the benefits were not even suited for women – e.g. posts in the army).

This was caused by the fact that women were not even considered for armed service and thus it was not possible for them to join the legion the way article 2 of the regulation no. 151/1920 Sb. expected legionnaires to, thus their status was officially suspended.⁷⁷ It was not even possible to use the art. 5 of this regulation, because it still required enlistment to fight with a weapon based on the condition in art. 2, and this kind of service was still by default out of reach for women. The fact that women were not considered legionnaires from the legal point of view due to the construction of this legislation and the contemporary law is a logical deduction based on the aforementioned information. Originally, my intent was to use this conclusion as a result of my research. Recently, though, I have found this explicitly written in the entries of several women in the database as a reason for not being considered a legionnaire.⁷⁸

74 J. Michl, 16.

75 *Ibid.*

76 D. Brádlarová, 67–68.

77 They were declared „Not a legionnaire according to act no. 462/1919 Sb. z. a n.” the same way as soldiers entering service after the 28th of October 1918. Cf. documents of First Class Sergeant Josef Střeborský and merciful sister Anežka Kašparová.

78 E. g. Anežka Kašparová – <http://www.legie100.com/krev-legionare/37569/>

I was not able to find any reports about women objecting to the legislation and thus I assume that they either did not try to change this and accepted it as a fact, or the objections were not effective enough for any records to have been preserved.

In the end, due to general passivity and absence of any associating organisation, the women serving with the legion were sidelined and remained outside of the limits of official or public concern.

6. DEMONSTRATIVE AND SPECIFIC CASES

6.1. Merciful Sister Anežka Kašparova, the General Example

With merciful sister Anežka Kašparová⁷⁹ we can see a typical case of a Czech woman serving in the legion even before the 28th of October 1918, thus before the limiting date which is stated by act no. 462/1919 Sb.

From her entry in the database, we can find out that her service was not long, but officials back home still considered it important to look into her records and determine if she was to receive status of a legionnaire and if not, why. Because of this we can see explicitly stated that she was not eligible because of lack of service „with weapon”, thus the aforementioned art. 2 of regulation no. 151/1920 Sb. came into effect here.

Therefore, in her case we see the general answer of the official resolution to the issue of women serving with the legion.

6.2. Božena Seidlova, the Messenger

Božena Seidlová⁸⁰ was born in Prague in 1897, but in 1918 she lived in Chisinau in Moldavia. Here she was tasked by a Czechoslovak officer, cut off from the rest of the legion by the Red Army, to deliver a message to the Czechoslovak forces and find out their exact location.

He expected this to be a relatively simple journey by train, as he thought that the legion is to be found around Penza.⁸¹

From her published diary, we know that she had to travel up to Stavropol (near Samara, more than 300 kilometres east from Penza) to find the Czechoslovak army.⁸² There, after delivering the message and a few

79 *Ibid.*

80 Božena Seidlová Holečková, *Přes bolševické fronty [Across the Bolshevik Fronts]*, Nakladatelství Památníku odboje, Praha 1923⁴. – book version of Seidlová's diary.

Also entry in the database: <http://legie100.com/krev-legionare/94020/>

81 B. Seidlová Holečková, 12.

82 *Ibid.* 37.

days of rest, she volunteered to go back with a reply⁸³ and was able not only to get back to Chisinau, but also to turn around and find the legion again, this time at Abdulin.⁸⁴

After that, it was decided that the fourth journey would be too dangerous and so she travelled to Czechoslovakia with the rest of the army through Vladivostok.

From memories of Czechoslovak soldiers in the legion who mention her in written memoirs, we can see that she was popular and respected among them – *She is a true sister coming to her brothers. We all loved sister Boženka.*⁸⁵ This text, a part of a preface written by František Langer, a legionnaire, for a book release of her diary, not only shows the positive feelings the soldiers had for her, but also points out an important detail of how the soldiers perceived her. The legionnaires were used to calling each other brother, a custom inherited from the Sokol movement. To call someone openly „a sister” meant that she was considered one of them, member of the legion and their social group.

Nevertheless, even this woman has her documents marked by an austere stamp „Not a legionnaire...”⁸⁶ Since most of her documents were stolen from the archive in 1946,⁸⁷ the reason for this is not confirmable at the moment, but given the fact that she fulfils all the other conditions, it makes sense to assume that it was again because of the lack of service with a weapon (art. 2 of regulation no. 151/1920 Sb.).

6.3. Věra Gatti, the Rifleman Merciful Sister

Věra Gatti⁸⁸, a Russian student of philosophy, joined the legion as a volunteer on the 5th of September 1918 after completing a three months long nursing course. It is essential to point out that her joining was illegal – she joined the 1st rifleman regiment of the legion directly, being allowed to do so by the commander of the regiment. Since recruiting nurses was not within his authority, she joined as a „rifleman merciful sister” (rifleman was the contemporary name for the rank of private), thus being officially considered a soldier.⁸⁹

83 *Ibid.* 47.

84 *Ibid.* 139.

85 *Ibid.* 3.

86 VUA Praha, fond Kancelář československých legií, kartotéka – K [Documents from the Central Military Archive, Prague].

87 Legionnaire database – <http://legie100.com/krev-legionare/94020/>

88 Legionnaire database – <http://legie100.com/krev-legionare/25616/>

89 VUA Praha, fond Kancelář československých legií, kartotéka – K.

This conduct sparked a dispute between the commander of the 1st rifleman regiment and medical chief of the army, who considered this as interference with his authority. The situation was resolved by rifleman Gatti joining the legion again on the 13th of June 1919, this time officially and correctly, i.e. only as a nurse and with permission of the medical chief.⁹⁰

From other documents pertaining to this case we can find out that on the 27th of July 1919 she received praise from the commander for „heroic medical aid in battle” and also that she was discharged from the legion on her own request on the 21st of December 1919.⁹¹ I was not able to find out anything about the life she led after leaving the army, but as interesting as it could have been, it is not as important for the purpose of this paper as her theoretical legal position.

Her documents are remarkable in one more aspect – she is not marked as „Not a legionnaire...” in them.⁹² This could be just a mistake of the clerk, but given the thoroughness with which the other women were marked and her specific way of joining the legion, it is more likely that from the legal point of view this was actually impossible, as she met the requirements of receiving the status of legionnaire – she had joined the legion before the 28th of October 1918, did not leave before this date and thanks to the improvised way she was recruited, she actually volunteered (on paper) to serve with a weapon, thus even receiving a military rank. By this, she fulfilled the conditions expected from the exception offered by the art. 5 of regulation no. 151/1920 – although she did not serve with a weapon in the end, she volunteered to do so (at least from the official point of view) and thus there was no reason not to use this legal instrument.

Because of this coincidence, Věra Gatti may be the only officially recognised female legionnaire, though it is unknown (and highly improbable) that she has ever drawn any of the benefits arising from this status.

CONCLUSION

Although I have been able to determine the main legal requirements for women to receive status of a legionnaire, these have turned out to be indirectly discriminatory to the point that it was practically impossible for a common female serving with the Czechoslovak legion in Russia to fulfil them.

90 *Ibid.*

91 *Ibid.*

92 *Ibid.*

With this in mind, I was able to briefly describe the position of women serving the Czechoslovak cause during the World War I on the Eastern front and especially during the Russian civil war. This was due to the legislation, specifically act no. 462/1919 Sb. and governmental regulation no. 151/1920 Sb., which introduced the legal status of a legionnaire under conditions which were not reachable for women under normal circumstances – they were required to apply to join the legion serving with a weapon, which was not possible for women at the time. I was also able to identify several specific cases which demonstrate both the general and unusual service of women with this army. During this I was also able to identify a nurse who, due to a particular set of circumstances, is probably actually the only legally recognised Czechoslovak female legionnaire.

This paper aimed to offer basic insight into this yet unexplored topic and open the field for further research, which, in my opinion, should be aimed at exploring the individual cases in more detail, especially the unusual ones, such as those of Božena Seidlová and Věra Gatti.

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Јакуб НОВАК*

ЖЕНЕ ЛЕГИЈЕ: НЕПРИЗНАТЕ ПРИПАДНИЦЕ ПРВЕ ЧЕХОСЛОВАЧКЕ АРМИЈЕ

Сажетак

Овај рад упознаје читаоца са аспектима служења жена у чехословачкој легији у Русији и условима под којима су оне могле добити статус легионара након повратка из Русије. Овај правни статус успостављен је 1920. године и био је замишљен као награда онима који су током рата служили у било којој чехословачкој војној јединици у егзилу (Чехословачке легије) и борили се за независност од Аустро-Угарске. Међутим, овај правни статус ипак је додељиван искључиво мушкарцима. У раду се анализирају правни разлози за овако установљену праксу, а што ће касније бити показано на примеру неколико конкретних случајева.

Кључне речи: *Чехословачке легије. – Жене у војсци. – Статус ратној ветерана. – Први светски рат. – Руски грађански рат. – Чехословачка.*

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