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Abstract

This article examines the intersection between disability, gender, victory, and defeat in interwar Czechoslovakia. We look at a small but prominent group of disabled veterans: men who lost their sight fighting in the Austro-Hungarian army in the First World War. These veterans, unlike men who had fought in the pro-Entente Legionary divisions, were not celebrated in official and patriotic discourse in the First Republic. They had to find alternative outlets to express their place in society as disabled men. Through analysis of the most important associations for blind veterans, interwoven with a series of case studies, we consider how disability weakened, but did not completely remove, the social and cultural barriers that existed in interwar Czechoslovakia between "victorious" and "defeated" war veterans. We also analyze a series of literary and professional responses to blindness that show how blind veterans' masculinity was renegotiated in the wake of their disability. Blind war veterans were considered throughout Czechoslovak society as the embodiment and the epitome of the disabled subject; their experiences thus speak more generally to the manner in which disability was experienced as a socially enforced category in Czechoslovakia.

Introduction

The First World War brought disability, as a personal experience and as a social category, to the center of attention in the societies of formerly belligerent states. Disabled care became an important part of the postwar processes of reconstruction and reconciliation throughout the European continent. This differed in extent from country to country, as did approaches to its handling. Differences in disabled care were shaped by prewar legislation or welfare and social contracts, the political configuration of the state in question, and its relationship with the war and its veterans. Deborah Cohen's ground-breaking comparative analysis of German and British approaches to war and disability in the 1920s has shown how expectations and preexisting legislative and care-giving traditions could shape opinions of policy, regardless of the concrete and demonstrable successes and failures of the policies themselves.[1] Martina Salvante and others have

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shown how Fascist Italy, despite its valorization of war veterans as central to the political presentation of the regime, failed to give them a package of welfare support that satisfied their demands and requests. It appeared disabled veterans—like war veterans more generally—were not simply passive matter for the Fascist state to shape as they pleased.[2] The same seems to be true of Germany under National Socialism.[3] In the Soviet Union, disabled veterans were incorporated, with mixed results, into the dramatic new economic policies pursued by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s.[4] The Bolshevik emphasis on the victory of the Red Army in the civil war and their dismissive attitude toward the First World War as an imperialist conflict had a corresponding effect on the treatment of war veterans and disabled veterans, with, unsurprisingly, former soldiers of the Red army privileged by the state over former combatants of the Tsarist army.[5] In all these states, disability was a cultural, political, and social concern: attitudes about the war(s), victory, defeat, the political make-up of the state in question, and economic concerns all contributed to the creation and the evolution of the social category of disability.

War disability in the states of east-central Europe shared many of the traits outlined above but also raised specific challenges for state-builders and populations. Here, the end of the First World War and the collapse of the great European empires dramatically altered the borders and map of the region.[6] This involved, among other things, the formidable task of reorganizing state bureaucracies to match the new realities of the era of the nation-state. The great empires had left in their wake a multitude of tax and legal codes, currencies, and administrative traditions and practices. This also impacted the fate of disabled war veterans. Their experiences were shaped by the efforts, often protracted and inefficient, to create or reforge new legislative and welfare arrangements that could be applied uniformly across the territories of the state in question.

In fact, it was not unusual for the new states to turn to the practices and legislation of the ancien régimes to address the matter of disability. Habsburg initiatives such as the state tobacco monopoly benefiting disabled war veterans were maintained and adapted in some of the successor states after 1918.[7] Fragments of imperial legislation continued to operate well into the 1920s throughout central Europe, often a necessity that, while providing basic financial and social care for disabled veterans, nevertheless contributed to a sense that a common community of fate for disabled veterans in the successor states did not exist. In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, for example, different disability laws—one for disabled veterans of the Serbian army, based on Serbian prewar and wartime arrangements, and another for the formerly Habsburg South Slav territories—continued to be used until a single "Invalid Law" was passed in 1926. This led to notions of unfair or uneven treatment on the part of disabled veterans.[8]

The war and its consequences also created cultural divisions in the new states of east-central Europe. The new borders, and the de facto designation of certain states as "victorious" (i.e., Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Poland) and "defeated" (Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria), belied the complexity of war experience throughout the region. Beneath these state-level designations there existed a multitude of cross-cutting, transnational experiences of mobilization, service, fighting, victory, and defeat. The populations of the new successor states had been mobilized to different causes in the war, causes often at odds

with new, national cultures and with many of their fellow subjects or citizens. The territorial and political gains of the victor states of east-central Europe at the end of the First World War were a mixed blessing: expanded territories also meant the presence within their borders not just of national minorities but also of people who had fought on a different side and for a different cause—people who did not necessarily share in the "culture of victory."[9] Thus, in east-central Europe, within the national borders of individual states, there often also existed a vertical hierarchy of war sacrifice and veteran recognition, one that privileged men who had fought on the right side against those who fought on the wrong side.

Where did disabled veterans fit into these intersections? Their predicament was complex. The unformed or semiformed legislative codes of the various successor states meant that the status of disabled war veterans was for a long time uncertain and fragmented (insofar as disability was constituted through a vocabulary of rights and welfare allowances). But differences between war veterans worsened these uncertainties. In many cases in the region, the legislative position of a disabled war veteran who had fought on the "right side" of the war was different from one who had not. The rights of disabled veterans could be altered drastically depending on where and for what cause one had fought in the war years.

Did such socially constructed divisions create significant difference between disabled war veterans, or did the facts of physical impairment and the social status of disability erase such differences based on wartime experience? In some cases, as elsewhere in Europe, disability acted as a kind of reconciliatory force, diminishing—if not entirely eroding—the divisions based on wartime experience and cultures of victory and defeat. A parallel existed within the international veteran movement between FIDAC (*Fédération Interalliée des Anciens Combattants*) and CIAMAC (*Conférence Internationale des Associations de Mutilés et Anciens Combattants*); the latter, whose membership was predominantly disabled veterans, often took the lead on matters of reconciliation between former enemies and formerly belligerent states (with FIDAC often following in their trail).[10] Disabled veteran associations in the successor states were also more likely to use a vocabulary that emphasized a community of fate and shared experience as disabled men in the postwar period. Even so, the fate of disabled war veterans who were not integrated into the national cultures of victory in the successor states was more difficult than the fate of those who were.

Gender and disability in Czechoslovakia must be understood within this context. In Czechoslovak society, as throughout Europe, the war itself was gendered, with the masculine sacrifice for the creation of the state privileged above all else.[11] And, as elsewhere in Europe, the masculine ideal in Czechoslovakia was able-bodied.[12] As we shall see, disability meant a potential diminishment of masculinity, the "feminization" of men through loss of capacity and through loss of social status.

Victory, Defeat, and Disability in Czechoslovakia

Typical of almost all postwar European societies, many thousands of Czechoslovak citizens returned from fighting in the First World War with serious or permanent physical impairments, and many required financial support or

care from the state or from their families.[13] As a newly formed successor state, the matter of care for disabled war veterans was complicated by the serious challenges of state-building in the interwar period. Welfare and legislative care for disabled veterans needed to be adjusted, if not created from scratch, to fit the new borders and the new realities of the postwar period—fitted, that is, onto a territory that was now an independent nation-state and not the province of a larger empire. Added to all this, was the divided legacy of the war itself.

By the end of 1923, the Czechoslovak Ministry of Social Care had classified 193,791 former Austro-Hungarian soldiers as having reached the level of disability necessary to make them eligible for state pensions. The applications of 68,133 others had either been rejected by officials or deemed not to have reached the required 20 percent disability threshold.[14] Neither of these figures included Austro-Hungarian officers or professional noncommissioned officers, who were separately classified and treated by the Ministry of National Defense. Additionally, a total of 10,345 Czechoslovak legionaries were also recognized as being disabled. Thus, in the early 1920s, roughly 5 percent of the adult male population of the republic was classified as being physically or mentally impaired as a result of the First World War. As the Czech Parliament member Rudolf Laube observed in April 1921, war victims "are a tremendous social problem given to our young republic."[15]

In Czechoslovakia, the highest point of the hierarchy of sacrifice was occupied by the men who served in the Czechoslovak Legions, the pro-Entente volunteer forces recruited by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (who would later go on to become president), Edvard Beneš, and Milan Rastislav Štefánik, whose fighting force became the central symbol of Czechoslovakia's war victory.[16] Their privilege took the form of financial and social compensation, but also of social and cultural capital, as the state recognized the legionary sacrifice virtually to the exclusion of all else. As the historians Marie Koldinská and Ivan Šedivý have observed, "the new stereotype of the legionary soldier-hero manifested strong signs of discontinuity with the previous development and of course automatically excluded from heroism everyone who had proved themselves in imperial uniform."[17] The legionary veterans themselves, as the figures above show, represented only a fraction of combat veterans in the First Republic, producing a cleft within the larger population of Czechoslovak war veterans, between those who had won and those who had not.[18]

The Social Construction of the Blind Veteran in Czechoslovakia

The patchy system of social care that existed after the First World War placed particular attention on the visually impaired.[19] Interwar Czechoslovakia appears to have treated blind people with a mixture of interest, curiosity, and pity, including those six hundred veterans with complete or nearly complete vision loss.[20] The few prewar institutes for the blind, as well as their newly established counterparts in places such as Levoča and Mukačevo, made up a disproportionate number of the institutions that worked with the disabled, a preponderance that may have its roots in the public perception in Czechoslovakia of blindness as the archetypal form of disability. The state, as well as the wider public in Czechoslovakia, tended to see its small blind population, including blind Austro-Hungarian veterans, as victims of supreme physical misfortune and

as passive subjects of pity and charity. Blindness was disability par excellence. Of the country's population of blind war veterans, just eight were former legionaries.[21] Given that the remaining majority had fought on the Austro-Hungarian side, blinded Czechoslovak ex-servicemen were unable to make use of most of the heroic tropes readily available to legionaries or other veterans elsewhere in Europe.

Both state and popular media were similarly sympathetic to the blind veteran. In a 1929 newspaper article, an anonymous author observed that "our statesmen do not want to understand that human society, if it had taken from them their most precious belongings—sight—it must seek to at least roughly settle up with the poor thing [i.e., the blind veteran] and provide him with at least [living standards worthy of] human existence."[22] A more telling example of such an attitude toward blind people can be seen in the reaction of the national press to a rally of blind veterans in 1928. Reports in Czech and German newspapers discussed the meeting and its participants with nothing but profound compassion and pity, interpreting their wounded and maimed bodies as a symbol of the horrors of the war. Several newspapers spoke with sadness about the difficult lives and suffering of these blind men, with *Venkov* (Countryside), the newspaper of the Agrarian Party, describing them as "the most unfortunate victims of the war."[23] Journalistic pity reached its climax in the daily newspaper of the Czech National Socialists: in an article emotively entitled "The Poorest Victims of War Fury Are Calling for Help," the author seeks to conjure a poignant image of pathos:

> All rallies of war victims, invalids, and widows of fallen soldiers are sad. As if the terrible curse of the war were hovering above the entire assembly. However, rallies of blinded soldiers are infinitely sadder, because the war has passed on them a possibly even crueler sentence than death.[24]

Similar attitudes were espoused by state officials involved in care for war victims. Throughout the interwar period, blinded veterans were singled out from other disabled ex-servicemen and regarded as a unique group with specific needs and demands. The official rhetoric surrounding these veterans placed particular emphasis on the gravity of their injuries, according them pole position in the hierarchy of disability. For example, in the early 1920s, prominent Czechoslovak official J. K. Skala, in summarizing the first three years of state care provided for victims of the war, chose to open the section of his chapter on blind veterans with the quotation, "To die is nothing—but to live and not see, that is misfortune."[25] Skala continued by observing that,

> [i]n the general care for war victims, the care for disabled soldiers holds an entirely unique place. and it is most certainly the first duty of the state to look after those who lost their sight and became blind in military service.[26]

Such attitudes and social expectations toward blindness and blind people also appear to be reflected in the contemporary novel *Žena válečného slepce* (Wife of the war blind),[27] written for the popular market by the prolific Czech publisher and author František Šupka. The book was published both as an independent volume and as part of the journal *Válečný slepec* (The war blind), which was owned by the largest blind veterans' association *Družina oslepených vojínů* Č.

S. R. (Fellowship of the Blinded Soldiers of the Czechoslovak Republic, hereafter "Družina"), suggesting that ex-servicemen did not find the novel and its presentation of blind people unusually demeaning or problematic.

The novel narrates the postwar story of Professor Vratislav Milič, who decides to visit his old friend Bedřich. Bedřich had been injured by an explosion in the war, which damaged his eyes, lungs, and left hand, leaving him capable of recognizing only the shapes of objects in darkness. As a result of his wartime injuries, Bedřich spends most of his time in the residence of his affluent family with his wife, and former nurse, Milada. However, as Vratislav makes his way toward the residence, he is confronted by a shocking scene, Milada allowing herself to be kissed by a mysterious stranger. The rest of the novel is then spent disentangling the complicated life stories of Milada and Vratislav's former sweetheart Irma, while the reader is entertained by ditzy working-class characters and astonished by the generosity of the wealthy. The book eventually reveals to us the sacrifice borne by both women, who appear to be the perfect embodiments of feminine middle-class values. The story concludes with a happy ending (entailing two weddings and a funeral).

Although the plot largely revolves around the marriage of Bedřich and Milada, curiously, the reader learns very little about the visually impaired character. Bedřich's military service in the Austro-Hungarian army is mentioned only in passing, in keeping with the collective silence around this issue in public discourse, perhaps merely to make clear that he was not a heroic legionary. The marginalization of the blind character in this uncomplicated book has an almost metonymic value and is emblematic of broader social issues and perceptions of blindness and blind masculinity that prevailed at the time. Throughout the entire work, Bedřich is relegated to an object of Milada's care and is largely devoid of his own agency. While his love for Milada supposedly rejuvenates him, little of his new will for life is discernible in the narrative: the educated young man from a wealthy family has very few pastimes, not to mention any sort of employment; he suffers from recurrent bouts of ill health at critical points of the novel; and his activities are limited to walking in the family garden and listening to Milada's voice as she reads to him. Even his marital issues have to be resolved by his father and best friend Vratislav, effacing any vestige of masculine agency and identity in the character.

In the novel, Bedřich's blindness is used merely to serve as a "test" of another character. In other words, he is not so much of interest in his own right, instead his purpose is merely to allow Milada to prove her wifely virtue as a reliable and loyal caregiver, thus dispelling fears of the masculinization of Czech women as a result of war, an issue alluded to at the beginning of the novel.[28] By the end of the story it is established beyond any doubt that Milada is willing to sacrifice her love for her former sweetheart, the wealthy lawyer Alfred, out of loyalty for her blind husband. The blind character, now an impediment after fulfilling his narrative function, is quickly and conveniently disposed of to allow Milada to find her ultimate happiness with the able-bodied Alfred. Bedřich's death is as unremarkable as his postwar life, and it underlines his position as a passive victim of his ill health:

> Despite all of Milada's care, [he] began to waste away and being devoured by tuberculosis, he died in Milada's arms on 5th July 1920 . . . She stayed with him

> until the final moment, alleviating his pain and dispelling his anxieties, which plagued him before the death.[29]

By the same token, the behavior and attitudes of other characters in the novel toward Bedřich betray contemporary society's infantilizing and emasculating perception of blind men. Despite being in his mid-twenties and a former officer and veteran of the Italian front, Bedřich is far from the archetypal masculine hero. Instead, numerous characters address and refer to him using the diminutive form of his name "*Bedříšek*," which roughly translates as "little Bedřich." Likewise, on numerous occasions, he is referred to as the "poor thing" ("*ubožák*"); his own father describes him as the "helpless cripple" ("*bezmocný mrzák*").[30] Similarly, after the plot has reached its climax in the revelation of Milada's unwavering loyalty to her disabled husband, Bedřich's father, pointedly not Bedřich himself, assures Milada of his son's love for her with the words, "Little Bedřich cannot live without you, he is constantly asking about you and he cannot wait for your arrival."[31] These words serve to infantilize his adult son, summoning up the image of a small boy as opposed to a young man.

The Self-Construction of the Blind Veteran in Czechoslovakia

Like other disabled ex-servicemen in the new republic, blind veterans often portrayed themselves as having been victims of the war, forced, against their will, into fighting for the Habsburgs. Indeed, in their public discourse, blind Czech men minimized their own roles in the Austro-Hungarian war effort, usually disclosing very little, if anything at all, about their involvement in the conflict. To illustrate this, we can consider a letter sent by a blind veteran in 1924 to "our dear father, Mr. President" ("*milí Otče náš Pane Presidente*") Masaryk. In this letter, Josef Růžička's service is conspicuous by its absence: he only mentions it once in a somewhat cursory fashion and does not elaborate on the heroism of his actions as one might expect of a veteran writing to a state official in pursuit of aid.

> I am a blind war veteran, who entirely completely [*sic*] does not see God's light; I had fought for the old Austrian mercenaries when the misfortune met me and I suffered an injury [because of] which I have lost both eyes.[32]

As it were, pain and suffering were recurrent motifs throughout veterans' depictions of their wartime and postwar years. This can be seen in veteran obituaries, published regularly in *Válečný slepec*. A simple template was used for these obituaries: the name and age of the deceased man and the medical cause of death followed by information about his spouse and children. Typically, and revealingly, no information pertaining to his service history or combat past was given. At best, the template may have been supplemented by gloomy details about the veteran's postwar life leading up to his demise, such as "died as a result of war suffering,"[33] "cause of death—desperation."[34] Even in extended obituaries (which themselves were rare), the lives of these men were associated solely with sorrow, agony, and fear for the future of their closest relatives. A 1928 article describes the death of one man with the following words:

> [being] completely paralyzed, [he] lay there like a poor thing in the local hospital in Invalidovna and waited for his hour of liberation, which eventually came to relieve him of his suffering and the agony experienced in this world. . . . In his grave illness, [he] constantly thought about his little daughter and whenever we visited him he was always worried about her future.[35]

In addition to portrayals of suffering, the rhetoric associated with blind veterans often described a sense of powerlessness. In contrast with those involved in providing care for blind people,[36] most blind veterans repeatedly argued they were unable to compete in the job market and perform remunerated work due to their loss of sight.[37] However, state attempts in neighboring Germany to employ blind veterans in industrial enterprises were met with disagreement by Czechoslovak ex-servicemen. As one of them noted, "We all agree that every blind man should have some employment . . . but he must not earn his bread through this employment."[38] Veterans believed rather that the onus was on the Czechoslovak state to provide for them. and although blinded men, who were classified as some of the most severely disabled veterans, were eligible for the highest possible pension and priority when it came to state benefits, their interwar discourse abounds with stories of abject poverty and helplessness.[39] According to the (perhaps somewhat exaggerated) claims of Družina, tuberculosis, which had been blamed on poor living conditions, caused 80 percent of all the deaths of its members.[40]

Unsurprisingly, this inability to provide for themselves and their families, as well as the prevailing social perception of blindness as the ultimate misfortune, appear to have had a detrimental effect on veterans' masculinity, particularly in regard to the archetypally male position as paterfamilias, or head of the family. The pages of *Válečný slepec* occasionally featured tales of men who lost their dominant position within the family. One example is contained in a 1925 letter received by Družina.[41] In this letter, an unnamed woman vociferously complains about the lack of state provision for her husband, whom she describes as being a "burden" on the family. The woman, who had erroneously identified the organization of veterans as being responsible for her husband's pension, palpably expresses her desperation. She threatens to take her husband to the headquarters of Družina in Prague and abandon him there unless his monthly income is raised, using language and imagery one would expect to be used in relation to a puppy, as opposed to an adult male.

Several other articles betray the fear and anxiety felt by disabled veterans regarding their family life. Loss of sight and the apparent powerlessness of blinded veterans is at times portrayed as rendering these men susceptible to trickery, lies, and loss of respect from their close relatives. Indeed, some of the stories found in *Válečný slepec* paint telling pictures of helpless men who, cast aside by those they had once trusted, begin to question their very masculinity. In one article, a veteran marries a woman who then has him declared insane in order to be able to run his tobacco shop herself.[42] In another, a man's wife and daughter squander his income behind his back, leading the anonymous author to argue that "he, the father, is in his own family a poor, pushed-aside Cinderella."[43]

Admittedly not all changes in the lives and domestic situations of veterans were this dramatic. Typically, they were on a smaller scale, which is not to say

their effects were not keenly felt by the subjects themselves. As would be expected, as a result of their injuries the brunt of both work and family care came to rest on the shoulders of the veterans' spouses; tobacco shops, often allocated to veterans by the state as a type of benefit as in the example above, ended up being run by their wives, who additionally retained their maternal responsibilities. This led, perhaps unsurprisingly, to repeated observations by veterans that their spouses often found it difficult to combine the archetypal feminine roles of caregiver and keeper of the hearth with that of sole breadwinner. As one of them noted with dismay,

> a loving, devoted and dedicated wife, whom the blind veteran would need and deserve, turns into a weary and exhausted worker, who not only neglects her husband, but often does not even have a kind word for him. . . . if I do not want my wife to be a robot, but [to be] truly my wife, partner and housekeeper, I have to surrender the tobacco shop and starve [and live off] my invalid pension.[44]

A somewhat different rhetoric is evinced in works of František Bohuslav. Bohuslav, who had been a Czech theatre actor before the war, was blinded in the conflict less than two months after its outbreak. Following his return from war, he became a prolific author with an output of numerous plays, collections of poems, and memoirs. Although these have been largely relegated to the periphery of Czech literary culture, Bohuslav's works offer us a rare glimpse of Czechoslovak blind veterans speaking publicly about their time in the armed forces, the injuries they sustained, and their postwar life. In keeping with the rhetoric coming from other blind veterans, Bohuslav's recollections accord little reverence to his service, which instead is treated with an almost weary contempt and sarcasm.[45]

Nevertheless, his observations and approach to life differ markedly from those espoused by many of his fellow blind men in *Válečný slepec*. Indeed, the war injury yields seismic change in his life: "gone away is the previous freedom" he observes in an introduction to his 1919 volume of poems tellingly entitled *V noci* (*At Night*).[46] However, he quickly reinvents himself; although Bohuslav remains indelibly and irreversibly affected by his loss of sight, he is keen to emphasize that he has been able to deal with its consequences through his artistic passion.

> and I live no longer sad in black jail!
> For theatre I have Poetry beautiful
> Which the Muse Thalia shall replace.[47]

Although Bohuslav constantly reminds the reader of his blindness, he faces it with a masculine grit. In the period of war shortages, Bohuslav notes that he "now has multiple advantages" as he does "not need kerosene . . . or [need to] queue for candles," not to mention that he can write whatever he wants regardless of censorship as he simply cannot see his own pen.[48] Similarly, his infatuation with women in no way finds itself quelled by blindness. Although his volumes show that his love life is not as carefree and spirited as it had been before the injury, they also make it abundantly clear that though he lost his sight, he did not lose his passion for women. In his poem "Tobě zpívám" ("I sing to

you"), he declares his ardor for an unnamed woman with the words, "I sing only of your lips/only you are the mistress of my dream soul."[49]

Common International Bonds: Czechoslovak and Yugoslav War Veterans

As a corollary of their position in society, Družina and its members established close ties with their civilian counterparts. While Družina's primary interest and concern was always focused on disabled veterans, its representatives did participate in the wider organizational life of blind Czechoslovaks more generally.[50] Similarly, *Válečný slepec* regularly published articles and information about blind civilians from the republic and abroad. In contrast with the disempowering perception of blind people, disabled Czechoslovak servicemen were far from inactive. Blind Czechoslovak veterans maintained ties and contacts with many of their foreign counterparts, be it through CIAMAC, personal connections, or the Braille journal *Esperanta Ligilo*. Throughout the interwar years, veterans closely followed the situation of blind people and war victims outside of Czechoslovakia. In particular, the state provision for veterans living elsewhere came to be a focus of their constant interest and attention.[51] Unfavorable comparisons between their own positions with those of their counterparts abroad, which often appeared on the pages of *Válečný slepec*, allowed veterans to question the adequacy of the care provided by the Czechoslovak state and to demand further steps from the government.[52]

Veterans from Yugoslavia were among some of the closest counterparts of the Czechoslovak ex-servicemen. There were numerous reasons for this. Both were new victor states that had emerged either fully (in the case of Czechoslovakia) or partially (in the case of Yugoslavia) from the decolonization war against Austria-Hungary. Diplomatic and political ties between the two countries were maintained through the Little Entente alliance (along with Romania), but those ties ran deeper, extending to a common sense of national culture and shared history. Czechoslovak war veterans, rightly or wrongly, mythologized Yugoslavia as a kind of promised land in which their fellow ex-soldiers, irrespective of their wartime service and allegiance, were aptly compensated with benefits and respect for their bodily sacrifice.[53] The cordial relations and solidarity between blind Czechoslovak veterans and the South Slav populations are perhaps best exemplified by the figures of Lujo Lovrić, one of the most important figures in the international veterans' movement in the interwar period, and Veljko Ramadanović, one of the leading Yugoslav specialists in the care for blind people.

The case of Lujo Lovrić, who was arguably the most celebrated and prominent disabled veteran in his own country, Yugoslavia, presents in a curious and unexpected light many of the most important intersections of disability and cultures of victory and defeat in the region. And, as we shall see, it is telling that his prominence extended beyond the borders of his own country and into those of Czechoslovakia, where his veteran and disabled identities were similarly acknowledged. Lovrić was a Croat who had been conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army early in the war. He surrendered (or was captured) on the Eastern Front, and in Russian captivity became one of the minority of non-Serbs who volunteered to fight within the ranks of the First Serbian Volunteer Division, a division formed from men, mainly taken from Russian captivity, who

wished to fight for the Entente.[54] There was a parallel between these volunteer divisions and the Czechoslovak Legionary divisions, both in terms of their recruitment and their use as pro-Entente propaganda that would build the case for a South Slav state detached from the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of the war. Lovrić was permanently injured when a bullet struck his temple, rendering him virtually sightless for the rest of his life and adding yet another layer to his varied, and contradictory, veteran identities. Lovrić would thereafter work for the Yugoslav Committee (*Jugoslovenski Odbor*, or JO). His work included a spell at Saint Dunstan's School for the Blind in Great Britain, a pioneering institute for the aftercare of blind war veterans founded in 1915 by Arthur Pearson. There Lovrić learned about the work being carried out in Great Britain to reintegrate blind men and women into the workplace and the family. He also became proficient in Braille. Lovrić brought these skills and this knowledge back to Yugoslavia at the end of the First World War, helping to modernize the School for the Blind in Zemun (just north of Belgrade), the flagship care facility that was renowned for its work throughout the region, including, of course, in Czechoslovakia.

This activism for the blind in Yugoslavia was just one part of Lovrić's career in the postwar period. As a former Serbian Volunteer fighter, Lovrić was part of the Yugoslav, and therefore also regional, culture of victory; he had fought and sacrificed for the winning side. This association had a corresponding place in Czechoslovak society as well. Here, as we have seen, the Czechoslovak Legionaries were the central (albeit minority) component of the national war culture of victory: it was their sacrifice above and beyond all else that was acknowledged in the state. Moreover, a significant number of Czechoslovak citizens had served, at least initially, in the South Slav volunteer divisions and fought at Dobruja, a battle that became an important symbol in war commemoration in Czechoslovakia.

Lovrić forged ties with the Czechoslovak Legionaries veterans soon after he became president of Yugoslavia's important Union of Volunteers (*Savez Dobrovoljaca*) in 1929. It coincided with a period of political transformation in Yugoslavia, which saw the state shift from a parliamentary democracy into a royal dictatorship (a move supported by Lovrić). Lovrić at this time contacted Czechoslovak President Masaryk himself, sending him copy of *Dobrovoljački glasnik* (*Volunteer Herald*), the union's most important journal, pointing out the many ties that bound the volunteers of Yugoslavia to the Czechoslovak Legionaries. Thereafter, Lovrić visited Czechoslovakia several times in the 1930s, each time underlining the patriotic traditions that linked the two countries: giving speeches praising Masaryk (not just for creating Czechoslovakia during the First World War but also for his support for South Slav causes in the prewar period) and discussing the importance of national armies and the Sokol gymnastics associations (which were a pillar of patriotism in both countries), among other topics. Lovrić was also known to visit the thermal waters in Karlovy Vary.

On these visits to Czechoslovakia, just as in his home country, Lovrić presented himself first and foremost as a wartime volunteer rather than a blind veteran (although he was, as we have seen, active in the public life of blind veterans); that is, he seems to have considered himself, and been considered by the veteran movements in both countries, as first and foremost a symbol of the

common cultures of victory of the two countries. It was, in fact, a recognition bestowed to him by the Czechoslovak state, which honored him with the "White Lion" distinction in March 1930, during his visit as part of a volunteer delegation from Yugoslavia.[55]

In contrast, the case of Veljko Ramadanović shows that not all Yugoslav veterans chose to interact with ex-servicemen from other countries solely within the context of the culture of victory. Instead, Ramadanović, who had studied in Prague before the conflict and fought in the First World War for the Serbian army, cooperated closely with blind Czechoslovaks—be they veterans or not.[56] In this time, *Nova Svetlost* (The New Light), the Yugoslav Braille publishing house, which had been established by Ramadanović with the help of American Braille Press for War and Civilian Blind Inc., produced several books in Czech that were sent out to Czechoslovakia for free. The publications were accompanied by the following inscription, which emphasized the ties between the two Slavic nations: "Blind Serbs dedicate this book to their brothers and sisters of the same fate from heart to heart."[57]

When Ramadanović visited Prague in late 1925, sometime before the publishing house was set up, he was greeted with much interest from blind veterans and met with their leaders. The latter's curiosity about state provisions for blind Yugoslav ex-servicemen and their praise for the Yugoslav state are easily seen in an article describing their meeting, in which the Czechoslovak veterans observed, perhaps with a modicum of wishful thinking on their part,

> After the revolution, [some] voices appeared [talking] about lesser or no credentials of the war blind, who brought their sacrifice in the foreign, anti-Serbian service. Thanks to the brave and undaunted action of Mr. Ramadanović based on his humanistic beliefs, these very rare complaints came to naught and today there is no difference between a war blind Serb, Croat, or Slovene.[58]

Notwithstanding the fact that Ramadanović admitted early on that the pension of Yugoslav veterans was very low, the article nonetheless proceeds to enumerate and extol the various benefits bestowed on blind ex-servicemen, taking the claims at face value. Indeed, if the article is to be believed, blind veterans were to receive the best land in the province of the Banat; they were encouraged to work, not for the purpose of earning their living but simply as a therapeutic means of entertaining themselves. Ramadanović even went to the lengths of searching for potential wives for them, "examin[ing women] thoroughly [to see] whether they are truly worthy of the calling of, and responsibility inherent in, being the companion of a blind man."[59]

Conclusion

The social, economic, and cultural standing of disabled veterans in successor states of empires, such as Czechoslovakia, was complicated by the ambiguous and divided legacies left by the war itself. Not only did disabled veterans face an uncertain legislative position in states that were grappling with myriad legal and bureaucratic legacies, but they were also divided by different experiences of war, differences that were made more acute by the new national states' emphasis on a war victory that, in reality, did not reflect the experience of large parts of the

population. The statistics for blind war veterans in Czechoslovakia are revealing: only a small fraction of this group had served in the victorious Legionary divisions in the First World War; the remainder, by definition, were removed from the postwar culture of victory. They instead found themselves objects of emerging stereotypes of disability: passive and emasculated. Connections with fellow victor states such as Yugoslavia, and the internationalist career of blind veterans such as Lujo Lovrić and Veljko Ramadanović, offered up an activist, transnational community of disabled veterans. But, especially in the case of Lovrić, this fellowship rested first and foremost on a shared sense of war victory and only secondarily on disability. These were opportunities for blind veterans of the Austro-Hungarian army (in both states) to escape society's impulses toward their marginalization as disabled veterans and as soldiers who fought on the wrong side in the First World War.

Endnotes

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1. Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley, CA, 2008).

2. Martina Salvante, "Italian Disabled Veterans between Representation and Experience," in *Men after War*, ed. Nicola Cooper and Stephen McVeigh (New York, 2013), 111–29.

3. Carol Poole and Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations: Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture* (Cambridge, 2016). See also William Mulligan, "German Veterans' Associations and the Culture of Peace: The Case of the Reichsbanner," in *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, ed. Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman (Basingstoke, UK, 2013), 139–60.

4. Alexandre Sumpf, "Une société amputée. Le retour des invalides russes de la Grande Guerre, 1914 –1929," *Cahiers du monde russe* 51, no. 1 (January–March 2010): 35–64.

5. Sumpf, "Une société amputée," 35–64.

6. Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 442–52. See also Iván Berend, *Decades of Crisis: Central and Eastern Europe before World War Two* (Berkeley, CA, 2001); Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle, WA, 1974).

7. Instances of postimperial continuities such as these went beyond east-central Europe. In the Irish Free State, for example, newly independent at the beginning of the 1920s, the residue of the British Empire was still present, to the extent that the British government continued to pay for Irish veterans of the British army (now citizens of the new republic), and the British Legion, a bastion of British imperial patriotism, even had a branch in Ireland in the 1920s. Anthony Farrell, "A Brief Outline of British Military Pensions in Ireland 1914–1922," unpublished conference paper. See also Michael Robinson, *Shell-Shocked British Army Veterans in Ireland 1918–1939: A Difficult Homecoming* (Manchester, UK, 2020).

8. See John Paul Newman, "Forging a United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes: The Legacy of the First World War and the 'Invalid Question,'" in *New Perspectives on*

Yugoslavia: Key Issues and Controversies, ed. Dejan Djokić and James Ker-Lindsay (Oxford, 2011), 36–61.

9. John Horne, "Beyond Cultures of Victory and Cultures of Defeat? Inter-war Veterans' Internationalism," in Eichenberg and Newman, *The Great War*, 207–22.
See also Ota Konrád and Rudolf Rudolf, *Cesty z apokalypsy: Fyzické násilí v pádu a obnově střední Evropy 1914–1922* (Prague, 2018).

10. See Eichenberg, "Veterans' Associations" in *1914–1918 Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel et al. (Berlin, 2014), accessed November 20, 2019, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/veterans_associations.

11. Maria Bucur and Nancy Wingfield, *Gender and War in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Bloomington, IN, 2006).

12. For an analysis of Czech military service motivation and wartime masculinity, see Jiří Hutečka, *Muži proti ohni: Motivace, morálka a mužnost českých vojáků Velké války 1914–1918* (Prague, 2016).

13. *Statistická příručka republiky Československé* (Prague, 1925), 382–83, 472; "Kolik je legionářů invalidů?" *Věstník Svazu invalidů čsl. legií*, November 1, 1928, 6.

14. For rough medical guidelines used to assess veterans' disability, see J. K. Skala, *Požitky válečných poškozenců v Československu* (Prague, 1931), 21–28.

15. *Zákon o požitcích válečných poškozenců*, ed. Rudolf Laube (Prague, n.d.), 3.

16. For Czech and German historiography, see Jan Galandauer, *2.7.1917—Bitva u Zborova: Česká legenda* (Prague, 2002); Jan Michl, *Legionáři a Československo* (Prague, 2009); Natali Stegmann, *Kriegsdeutungen—Staatsgründungen—Sozialpolitik. Der Helden- und Opferdiskurs in der Tschechoslowakei, 1918–1948* (Munich, 2010). In English, see Andrea Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948* (Oxford, 2011); Martin Zückert, "Memory of War and National State Integration: Czech and German Veterans in Czechoslovakia after 1918," *Central Europe* 4, no. 2 (2006): 111–21.

17. Marie Koldinská and Ivan Šedivý, *Válka a armáda v českých dějinách: Sociohistorické črty* (Prague, 2008), 295.

18. In his article, Otakar Frankenberger estimates that more than 1.4 million Czechs and Slovaks had fought for Austria-Hungary. Together with hundreds of thousands of Czechoslovak Germans, Magyars, and Ruthenes, these veterans constituted a considerably more numerous group than the approximately one hundred thousand legionaries. Otakar Frankenberger, "Čeští vojáci ve světové válce," in *Od Sarajeva k velké válce. Sborník příspěvků vědeckého semináře k 80. výročí vypuknutí první světové války*, vol. 2, ed. Jan Galandauer, et al. (Prague, 1995), 3–8, 3; Ivan Šedivý, "Družina československých legionářů v počátcích legionářského hnutí v Československu," in *Sborník k dějinám 19. a 20. století*, vol. 13, ed. Vlastislav Lacina (Prague, 1993), 93–113, 94.

19. For an overview of the interwar situation in Czechoslovakia, see Jos. Zeman, "Kulturní snahy v péči o nevidomé," *Válečný slepec*, October 1, 1923, 2–3. Also, see *Informační spisek Spolku nevidomých intelektuálů ,,Macan"* (Prague, 1935), 26–34.

20. "V našem čs. státě žije okrouhle 600 válečných slepců," *Válečný slepec*, July 15, 1925, 2–3. Czechoslovak social care defined blind veterans as those "who became blind in both eyes, or those who are socially, or practically blind, i.e., those who are unable to earn their living with the remnants of their vision (those unable to count the number of fingers on a dark background from the distance of one metre and unable to orientate themselves in a

previously-unknown place will be declared as such)." Václav Nedoma, *Péče o válečné poškozence (Příručka pro sociální pracovníky)* (Prague, 1919), 36.

21. "Kolik je legionářů invalidů?" 6.

22. Kr., "Politika a sociální péče," *Válečný slepec*, May 15, 1929, 4.

23. "Venkov: Manifestační schůze čsl. válečných slepců," *Válečný slepec*, July 1, 1928, 6.

24. "České Slovo: Nejubožejší oběti válečné litice volají o pomoc," *Válečný slepec*, July 1, 1928, 7.

25. J. K. Skala, *Tři roky boje proti následkům války: Zpráva o činnosti Zemského úřadu pro péči o válečné poškozence v Praze za léta 1919, 1920 a 1921* (Přerov, Czech Republic, n.d.), 35.

26. Skala, *Tři roky boje proti*, 35. Elsewhere, the author described blind veterans in similar terms, qualifying them as "the poorest of the poor." J. K. Skala, "Přehled činnosti Zemského úřadu pro péči o válečné poškozence v Čechách," *Sociální služba*, March–April 1922, 134.

27. František Šupka, *Žena válečného slepce* (Hradec Králové, Czech Republic, 1929).

28. Šupka, *Žena válečného slepce*, 3–8.

29. Šupka, *Žena válečného slepce*, 199.

30. Šupka, *Žena válečného slepce*, 10.

31. Šupka, *Žena válečného slepce*, 175.

32. Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta republiky, protokol R (žádosti jednotlivců o podporu aj.), 1919–1941, karton 16, signatura R 6950/25. The 1932 calendar published by blinded veterans describes the service of one of these men in a similarly laconic manner: "However, the cursed war came and I, just like hundreds of other comrades, was robbed of the most precious belongings." "Váleční slepci. Obrázky náladové a dojemné," *Kalendář válečných slepců. Kalendář pro zábavu a poučení. Na přestupný rok 1932*, ed. Svetozar Lípa (Kutná Hora, Czech Republic, n.d.), n.p.

33. "Dne 20. listopadu," *Válečný slepec*, January 15, 1932, 1.

34. "Náš milý bratr," *Válečný slepec*, March 1, 1924, 2.

35. "Opustili nás," *Válečný slepec*, October 1, 1928, 3–4.

36. J. K. Skala, *Tři roky boje*, 35.

37. "Nespokojenost," *Válečný slepec*, May 15, 1924, 1.

38. R. P., "Slepci v průmyslu," *Válečný slepec*, February 15, 1923, 2.

39. "Co nám píší naši čtenáři," *Válečný slepec*, February 1, 1924, 2–3.

40. "Pro zdraví našinců," *Válečný slepec*, January 15, 1924, 1–2.

41. "Na vědomí a pro výstrahu všem, jež by chtěli podobně jednati. Z naší korespondence," *Válečný slepec*, August 1, 1925, 3.

42. Rejfíř, "Náš úkol a cíl," *Válečný slepec*, January 15, 1923, 2.

43. "Pro zdraví našinců," 1.

44. František Ryšánek, "Nedávejte válečným slepcům prodej tabáku k samostatnému vedení!," *Válečný slepec*, December 1, 1923, 3.

45. František Bohuslav, *Ke konci komedie: Divadelní, životní a válečné vzpomínky* (Prague, 1928), 20.

46. František Bohuslav, *V noci. Hercovy zápisky 1915–1918* (Prague, 1919), 3.

47. František Bohuslav, “Lidské oči,” *Věčné jaro (ženy květiny a láska) a Lidské oči. Nálady a touhy herce vidoucího, později oslepeného* (Prague, 1936), 23.

48. František Bohuslav, *Literární náhražka. Poznámky prosou i veršem* (Prague, 1917), 4.

49. František Bohuslav, “Tobě zpívám,” *Věčné jaro*, 29.

50. “Ustavující valná hromada Svazu slepeckých spolků,” *Válečný slepec*, March 15, 1923, 2–3.

51. See the elaborate report produced for CIAMAC regarding conditions of blinded veterans in European countries and the United States, Otakar Hollmann, “Invalidní zaopatření válečných slepců (Zpráva pro CIAMAC),” *Válečný slepec*, November 1932, 3–8.

52. “800.000—Kč ušetřilo se v roce 1924 na válečných slepcích,” *Válečný slepec*, January 15, 1925, 1–2.

53. It was apparently not a mythology shared by Yugoslav disabled veterans themselves. See John Paul Newman, “Forging a United Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.”

54. Pero Slijepčević, *Naši dobrovoljaci u svetskom ratu* (Zagreb, Croatia, 1925).

55. Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí, 11/1 “Diplomatický protokol,” karton 55.

56. In 1933, he received a Czechoslovak medal in recognition of his work for disabled people. “Veljko Lj. Ramadanović,” *Zprávy Československé ústřední péče o slepé*, October 4, 1933, 2.

57. Jaromír Doskočil, *Naše slepecké tiskárny* (Prague, 1938): 19–20.

58. F., “Veljko Ramadanovič a váleční slepci v Jugoslavii,” *Válečný slepec*, March 15, 1925, 2.

59. F., “Veljko Ramadanovič,” 3.