



Nationalizing Habsburg Regimental Tradition in Interwar Czechoslovakia

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In interwar Czechoslovakia, the construction of a well-founded military establishment was a core component of the state building process. Reflecting broader trends across the post-imperial, particularly post-*Habsburg* space, Czechoslovak state builders deployed a rhetoric of radical military transformation predicated in part on a rejection of the imperial military legacy. As this article shows, however, certain elements of Habsburg military tradition survived the transition from empire to nation-state. Focusing on the legacy of Bohemia's old Habsburg regiments, I argue that "imperial" military tradition could be adapted for use in the new republic through a process of selective reimagining. During the interwar period, regimental groups consisting of Czech-speaking Habsburg veterans dedicated considerable time and energy to the project of "nationalizing" Habsburg regimental tradition. By emphasizing the historically Czech character of their former regiments within the broader Habsburg military establishment, these veterans' groups provided a means by which Bohemia's old imperial regiments could be incorporated, conceptually, into prevailing interwar narratives of Czech military heritage.

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On March 25, 1936, President Edvard Beneš addressed members of the Czechoslovak 5th Infantry Regiment with a speech on "military tradition and its meaning for our armed forces."¹ Every army, he began, requires a sense of tradition, which "undergirds the soldier's self-confidence, strengthens his sense of self, and, at the decisive moment, his courage and bravery." Beneš then offered his listeners a litany of the Czech nation's martial heroes. He began with the warrior kings of medieval Bohemia, who "strengthened our once independent state and won it a proper position of power in Europe." Next, he continued on to the fifteenth-century Hussites, who had resisted the "political oppression" of the Holy Roman Empire. Then, skipping forward in time, he brought up the Czechoslovak "Legionnaires," who had fought with the Allies

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1 Beneš, *Armáda*, 35–39.

against the Central Powers during World War I. With these three eras in mind, Beneš confidently claimed that “our army, though young, already has a rich and old martial tradition.”

Conspicuously absent in this litany were five centuries of history during which the lands of Czechoslovakia had been part of the Habsburg empire and had contributed countless soldiers to its armies. At the end of his speech, Beneš meditated aloud on these soldiers’ proper place in Czechoslovak tradition. They were “sons of our nation,” Beneš conceded, but because they had served in “foreign armies” when “we did not have our own state,” these sons “did not belong to us.” Belonging to the *emperor*, these warriors of the past were unsuitable “for national and state tradition,” regardless of their personal bravery or soldierly competence. In Czechoslovakia, Beneš explained, the army should only draw inspiration from warriors of the past who had fought out of “zeal for a separate state community.” The Hussites and Legionnaires met these criteria, while the nation’s sons who had donned Habsburg uniforms did not.

Beneš’s speech illustrates a central problem of military tradition in interwar Czechoslovakia: how should the historical deeds of Czech Habsburg soldiers be interpreted? But it also elucidates a vital point about “military tradition” more broadly. Since states and armies do not officially celebrate every aspect of their past, military tradition is not synonymous with military history. Military tradition is better understood in processual terms as the careful *curation* of military history—the lifting up of certain eras or episodes and the downplaying of others.² In this way, the cultivation of military tradition creates a useable version of the past that is then instantiated by an army’s symbols, ceremonies, and customs. Ultimately designed to convey a certain set of desired values, the cultivation of military tradition is thus sensitive to changing societal attitudes, political ideals, and cultural conceptions of service and sacrifice. In the multinational Habsburg empire, official military tradition conveyed a vision of the past that emphasized service to the dynasty and loyalty to the empire above any one nation. When the empire collapsed in 1918, the history of its “supranational” army had little resonance in the new (or newly enlarged) “nation-states” of East-Central Europe. While Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Romania all resorted in varying degrees to the integration of formerly Habsburg officers and the repurposing of Habsburg military structures, there was little impetus in these

2 Abenheim, *Reforging*, 13.

states to celebrate such continuities in the realm of official tradition.³ Instead, evoking memories of the Habsburg army as an oppressive, “denationalizing” institution and explaining the need for radical military transformation, politicians and defense officials promised to build armies that were “brand-new and pristinely national.”⁴

If, as the dominant contemporary paradigm would have it, historical development culminated in the eclipse of empire and the emergence of nation-states, then official military tradition would be designed to celebrate those who had fought and died in service of this project. In Poland, for example, recently reconstituted after centuries of partition, the Poles’ long history of service in the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Romanov armies was sidelined in favor of more recent history, namely, Poland’s post-1918 border conflicts with Ukraine and the Soviet Union. Fought in defense of the reunified Polish state by soldiers in Polish uniform, these conflicts had a “national meaning” that was “undisputed.”⁵ The situation was somewhat different in Yugoslavia, which brought together into a single state the Habsburgs’ former South Slav territories and the preexisting Kingdom of Serbia. Many saw the Serbian army as the chief instrument by which this “liberation and unification” of the South Slavs had been achieved. By adopting the Serbian army’s prestigious mantle and many of its institutions and cultural assumptions, the Yugoslav army found little need to integrate the history of South Slav soldiers in Habsburg uniform into the narrative of its history, function, and future.⁶

The creation of new national military traditions and the obfuscation of Habsburg military legacies were thus important aspects of the nation-state project in East-Central Europe. As the speech by Beneš shows, Czechoslovakia was no exception. As one scholar has even suggested, it was in Czechoslovakia that the break with the imperial military past was pursued most vigorously.⁷ Yet the study of Czechoslovak military tradition also reveals countervailing attempts to reclaim certain elements of the imperial military inheritance. Importantly, the same language of nation used to reject the Habsburg military past could also be used to reclaim parts of it. As this article shows, this occurred primarily

3 Jedlicka, “Die Tradition”; Marin, “Imperial”; Newman, “Serbian”; Šedivý, “Legionáři”; Zückert, *Zwischen*, 80–95.

4 Newman, “Serbian,” 320.

5 Mick, “The Dead,” 234.

6 Newman, “Serbian,” 332.

7 Jedlicka, “Die Tradition,” 441.

at the regimental level. In other words, while the history of the Habsburg *army* proved difficult to incorporate, the history of its Czech-speaking *regiments* could be rewritten from a more national perspective and made to fit the needs of Czechoslovak military tradition. This “nationalization” of Habsburg regimental history thus offered a subtle means by which to reclaim a useable Czech military inheritance from the wreckage of the multinational empire.

As we shall see, this project had supporters and opponents in interwar Czechoslovakia owing to the ambiguous legacy of the empire’s Czech-speaking regiments. Therefore, we will begin in the late Habsburg era and examine two parallel discourses surrounding army regiments: one in which they served as vehicles for imperial propaganda and a second that framed certain regiments as “national” institutions. Next, we will look at the complex history of Czech-speaking regiments during World War I and their eventual deployment, under the Czechoslovak flag, in the young republic’s postwar border conflicts. The second part of the article then tackles the development of Czechoslovak military tradition. Here, we focus in particular on regimental veterans’ groups, which served as the chief interlocutors and translators of Habsburg regimental history for a Czech national audience. Part three concludes with an investigation of the process by which the Czechoslovak army eventually adopted the history of the empire’s Czech-speaking regiments as its own.

Between Nation and Empire: Czech-Speaking Regiments in the Habsburg Army

In the late Habsburg empire, military tradition served the needs of imperial state building. In 1867, after two unsuccessful wars and an ensuing political crisis, the Habsburg empire split into two separate halves: “Austria” and “Hungary.”⁸ While continuing to recognize the monarchical authority of the Habsburg dynasty, the two halves of “Austria-Hungary” were now legislatively and administratively independent of each other, with both halves having an elected parliament and governing cabinet. One of the few empire-wide institutions to survive this split was the Austro-Hungarian “Joint Army,”⁹ which continued to recruit soldiers

8 Officially, the two imperial halves bore the names “Kingdom of Hungary” and “the Kingdoms and Territories Represented in the *Reichsrat*.”

9 Alongside the Joint Army, there also existed two “National Guard” armies, the Austrian *Landwehr* and Hungarian *honvédség*. These forces were administered separately by the Austrian and Hungarian governments but would be deployed alongside the Joint Army in times of war.

from both halves of the monarchy and which was overseen by the Imperial War Ministry in Vienna. Many elites, such as Archduke Albrecht, thus touted the army as the “last cohesive ligament of the split-up monarchy.”¹⁰ Military tradition became an important arena for instantiating this claim, and the final third of the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of interest in military *Traditionspflege* (the cultivation of tradition).¹¹ Military symbols and celebrations conveyed a vision of the past that emphasized the army’s historical devotion to the Habsburg dynasty and the unified Habsburg “Fatherland.” Some tradition projects, such as the rechristening of Vienna’s armory collection as the more ambitious “Army Museum” in 1891, aimed at a broad civilian audience.¹²

Within the military, this project of renewal-through-tradition manifested primarily at the regimental level. This is unsurprising since, as one commentator wrote in 1861, “the history of our army lies in its regiments; in the individual regiments reside the elements of that immense moral force which is called the spirit of the Austrian army.”¹³ While the regiment had always been a pillar of Habsburg army culture, conscious efforts to cultivate regimental tradition increased dramatically in the late nineteenth century. Alongside its customary function as the focus of soldiers’ collective military identity, the regiment took on a second, more overtly political function. As another commentator observed during this period, regimental tradition projects contributed to the army’s goal of creating not just “internally competent warriors,” but also “loyal, contented subjects” inoculated against the “corrosive influence of modern subversive ideas.”¹⁴

One indicator of the regiment’s growing importance in the late nineteenth century is the upsurge in published regimental histories, since, to fulfill their dual military and political functions, regiments needed to codify their own mythical pasts.¹⁵ As the Vienna War Archive journal proclaimed in its inaugural 1876 issue,

there is hardly any means more suitable for lifting the military spirit, for invigorating the most noble warrior virtues—love of Kaiser and Fatherland, loyalty to the flag, courage, and willingness to sacrifice—

10 Allmayer-Beck, “Die bewaffnete Macht,” 94.

11 On the contemporary emergence of *Traditionspflege* in the German empire, see: Abenheim, *Reforaging*, 23.

12 Allmayer-Beck, “Die bewaffnete Macht,” 89.

13 L.W., “Die Herren,” 357.

14 “Die Pflege,” 249–50.

15 Meteling, “Regimentsideologien,” 30.

than a glance backward on the glorious past of the unit to which the soldier belongs as a family member...¹⁶

The same article then provided practical guidelines on the style, content, and structure of an ideal regimental history. With this sort of technical support and subsidized printing costs at court publishing houses,¹⁷ Austria-Hungary saw 198 new regimental histories published between 1860 and 1906, compared with only 24 in the preceding half decade.¹⁸ To supplement these tomes, which were usually written in German (the army's official language of command), many regiments published abridged versions for use by the common soldier. Written in the soldiers' native languages and focusing on acts of bravery by the humble infantryman, these volumes were often distributed to soldiers to mark special regimental occasions, such as the dedication of a new battle flag.¹⁹ As one commentator wrote in 1899, presenting soldiers with this sort of material offered a necessary corrective to public-school education, which the author considered overly fixated on local or national affairs. It was through army and regimental history, he argued, that soldiers would be exposed to "real history," that is, "the history of the whole monarchy" (*Gesammt-Monarchie*).²⁰ If, as many hoped, the army was to become a true "school of the peoples," then its regiments would be the classrooms.²¹

Yet while military elites idealized the regiment as an engine of imperial patriotism, there existed a parallel discourse in which the regiment embodied local or regional particularisms.²² The origins of this discourse lay in the late eighteenth century, during which Austria's regiments were "territorialized," that is, tied to specific recruiting districts. Thus, by the late nineteenth century, many Bohemian regions had been home to the same regiment for nearly a century. The 35th Infantry Regiment, for example, had made its home in the city of Plzeň since 1771.²³ To be sure, for most of the nineteenth century, the army purposely

16 "Ueber die Verfassung," 5.

17 Lukeš, "Plukovní kroniky," 40–41.

18 Zitterhoffer, "Die Heeres-," 1451–70.

19 See, for example: *Listy v úpomínku*.

20 "Die Pflege," 250–51.

21 On the "school of the peoples" concept, see: Leonhard and von Hirschhausen, "Does the Empire strike back?" 209–10.

22 For a discussion of regional and regimental identity during the Napoleonic wars, see: Baird, "According."

23 Von Wrede, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, 366.

stationed most regiments far from their home districts.²⁴ Nevertheless, these units saw generations of local men pass through their ranks, and as a result, they often became popular symbols of local or regional identity. Both inside and outside the ranks, colorful nicknames like the 28th Regiment's *Pražské děti* (Children of Prague) expressed the local character of particular units.

The territorialized nature of Habsburg regiments also tended to give them certain ethnolinguistic profiles. By 1914, the Bohemian lands were home to around forty infantry regiments, a few of which were quite homogeneous. Examples here include the mostly Czech-speaking 102nd and mostly German-speaking 73rd from south-central and northwestern Bohemia, respectively. But most Bohemian regiments, especially those recruited from districts along the Czech-German “language frontier,” included both Czech-speaking and German-speaking soldiers in varying ratios.²⁵ Even in these “mixed” regiments, administrators tried to organize soldiers into linguistically homogeneous subunits (i.e., battalions or companies). By requiring soldiers to select their preferred language and then organizing them accordingly, this practice encouraged soldiers to think of themselves in increasingly national terms.²⁶ This policy also affected public perception of local regiments. As Tamara Scheer has argued, regiments were often “not regarded publicly as Habsburg supra-national entities, but were identified by their regimental languages as, for example, Czech, German, or Hungarian.”²⁷ For Bohemia’s mixed regiments, this sort of national coding proved more complex. South Bohemia’s 75th Regiment, comprising about 80 percent Czech speakers and 20 percent German speakers, provides an interesting example. When the regiment received a new battle flag in 1912, the ceremony included a rendition of the Czech national hymn “Kde domov můj” (Where is My Homeland?) by the regimental band. But later, at a luncheon for military and civilian VIPs, one speaker pointed out that “both of the local district’s nationalities serve in the home regiment.” He continued by expressing hope that “the harmony of both nations represented in the regiment should shine as an example for the harmony of both nations inhabiting our beautiful homeland.”²⁸ In this way, people often discussed Habsburg regiments, whether homogeneous or mixed, in terms of their “national” profile.

24 Rothenberg, *The Army*, 110.

25 On the “language frontier” concept, see: Judson, *Guardians of the Nation*.

26 Scheer and Stergar, “Ethnic Boxes,” 583.

27 Scheer, “Habsburg Languages,” 67.

28 “Dvojí významnou slavnost,” 85.

These parallel discourses of the regiment—as embodiments of empire or nation—were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Even among military intellectuals, some suggested that celebrating regiments’ national character strengthened their ability to popularize imperial patriotism at the local level.²⁹ Regimental ceremonies, popular fixtures of the festival calendar, lend credence to this argument. In 1883, for example, Mladá Boleslav’s Czech-speaking 36th Regiment marked its 200th jubilee with an extravagant, weekend-long ceremony. In a printed address prior to the event, the city’s mayor encouraged citizens to help celebrate their “homeland regiment,” which “has our sons [and] our brothers in its ranks.”³⁰ On the day of the jubilee, inhabitants responded eagerly to the mayor’s call and thronged the streets in their thousands. Some adorned their homes with banners reading “To the success of the 36th Regiment!” and “God bless the arms of our regiment!”³¹ Crown Prince Rudolf attended the event, having served with the 36th from 1878 to 1880, and his presence lent it an air of imperial majesty. The nationally oriented regional newspaper *Jižerán* responded well to the event, noting that “our people [*lid*] has merged with the military to such an extent that it took this military celebration as its own and made it into a national celebration.” At night, the report continued, “a national celebration in the truest sense of the word” took place. Fueled by music from the regimental band and beer dispensed at tents for each of the regiment’s companies, soldiers and civilians celebrated well into the night.³² Public celebrations of this kind demonstrated the regiment’s capacity to embody local and national pride within an overarching imperial framework.

At the same time, particularly in the immediate prewar decades, Czech-speaking regiments increasingly found themselves the subjects of controversy. Around the turn of the century, Bohemia’s increasingly polarized nationality politics induced bouts of public unrest during which Czech-speaking formations sometimes refused orders to pacify protestors.³³ In 1898, Prague’s 28th Regiment also generated controversy after three of its reservists responded to their commanding officer with the Czech word *zde* (present) rather than the prescribed German response *hier* at an annual muster. This provocation, for which the soldiers in question received two days’ confinement, became a cause

29 W.P., “Ein Nachwort,” 3.

30 “Anläßlich,” 4.

31 “Slavnost’ plukovní (Dokončení),” 4.

32 “Slavnost’ plukovní,” 2.

33 Dvořák, “Kus,” 5–6.

célèbre for Czech politicians, who, by vigorously defending the accused, sought to solidify their nationalist credentials among the voting public.³⁴ During partial army mobilizations in 1908 and 1912 intended to cow neighboring Serbia, several Czech-speaking formations refused to board troop trains and were declared to be in a state of mutiny. Motivating factors here included pan-Slavist sentiment—that is, antipathy toward war with the “brother” nation of Serbia—as well as local squabbles between Czech-speaking and German-speaking soldiers.³⁵ Yet while soldiers usually held back from criticizing the empire or dynasty, per se, military officials increasingly associated Czech-speaking regiments with disloyalty and disobedience.

The outbreak of war in 1914 sharpened these suspicions. In the spring of 1915 on the eastern front, significant elements of Prague’s 28th and Mladá Boleslav’s 36th Regiment allegedly deserted en masse to Russian lines. At the time, military investigators explained this behavior as a function of the Czech soldier’s inherent disloyalty, and, after two centuries of service, both historic units were disbanded. But as recent scholarship has shown, these “mass desertions” often had less to do with nationalism or disloyalty and much more to do with poor logistics and planning, which left the accused regiments in untenable military positions.³⁶ Indeed, it was the military’s overzealous *reaction* to these events that tended to sharpen soldiers’ national grievances. One method used by the military involved reducing the percentage of Czech speakers in individual units. This meant assigning new recruits not to their local regiments, but to supposedly more “dependable” ones—usually German-speaking or Hungarian-speaking units.³⁷ Reducing the proportion of Czech-speaking soldiers also meant diluting traditionally Czech-dominated units. In 1914, for example, Čáslav’s 21st Regiment was 80 percent Czech-speaking, but by 1918, this figure had dropped to 75 percent.³⁸ This experiment often had unintended consequences. Assigning soldiers to regiments dominated by speakers of a different language tended to exaggerate their perceptions of national difference, which were even further inflamed in the later war years, as worsening supplies caused some to associate access to provisions (or lack thereof) with certain national groups.³⁹

34 Hutečka, “Politics,” 121–25.

35 Hutečka, “Politics,” 127.

36 Lein, *Pflichterfüllung*; Reiter, “Die Causa”; Schindler, *Fall*, 142–45.

37 Šedivý, *Češi*, 65; cited in Kučera, “Entbehrung,” 124.

38 Plaschka et al., *Innere Front*, vol. 2, 336.

39 Kučera, “Entbehrung,” 124, 134.

Nevertheless, in spite of mass casualties, dwindling supplies, continued outbreaks of insubordination, and the intensification of rank-and-file nationalism, Czech-speaking regiments proved themselves generally capable. This was particularly true on the Italian front, where pan-Slavist critiques of the war had less purchase.⁴⁰ In 1917, the Italian 3rd Army issued a report to subcommanders warning them not to assume that Slavic units would present easy targets. The report mentioned Czechs in particular, noting that they “defend themselves with unrivaled tenacity and would rather let themselves be killed in the trenches [...] than surrender.”⁴¹ By one account, soldiers of south Bohemia’s 91st Regiment had a particularly fearsome reputation among the Italians, earning them the nickname “Green Devils” on account of their green regimental facings.⁴²

In October 1918, as the empire reached its breaking point and national governments began to emerge across the Habsburg imperial space, these new states’ competing territorial claims led to new conflicts. In Prague, the new government faced a German separatist movement in the western borderlands, Polish claims to the contested city of Těšín, and a Hungary determined to hold its Slovak territories. In desperate need of troops, Prague made extensive use of Czech-speaking Habsburg formations returning from the front. In a few cases, entire Habsburg regiments escaped the collapsing front in good order and placed themselves at Prague’s disposal. Such was the case for west Bohemia’s 88th Regiment, for example. During its return voyage from the Balkan front, the regiment’s Czech-speaking personnel deposed their commander and elected a reserve officer to take his place. Swapping their Habsburg army badges for cockades in the red-white colors of Bohemia, they also decided to part ways with their German-speaking regimental comrades and proceed as a “Czech” regiment in the service of the new government.⁴³ In other instances, like that of the 75th, the brunt of the field regiment fell captive during the Italians’ last-minute Vittorio Veneto offensive.⁴⁴ In such cases, only the regiments’ reserve battalions made it home, where they then served as skeleton formations for the construction of new field units.

Whatever the specific circumstances, these formerly Habsburg units came to comprise the so-called “domestic army” and, with orders from Prague, they

40 Hladký, “Czech Soldiers,” 75–76.

41 Šedivý, *Češi*, 137; quoted in Hladký, “Czech Soldiers,” 78.

42 Beneš, “Vojákům.”

43 Prokop, “Stručné dějiny,” 285 (VHA, fond ppl. 38, k. 6 “Historické zpracování).

44 Solpera, *Komplikovaná*, 20.

helped pacify the German separatist borderlands. By December 1918, elements of the Czechoslovak Legions began to trickle home and join the “domestic army” in the field. After a brief showdown with Polish troops over the fate of Těšín, this composite Habsburg-Legionnaire army deployed to Slovakia, which had been claimed by both Prague and Budapest. The 1919 battle for Slovakia pitted the ad hoc Czechoslovak forces against a relatively well-organized Hungarian army and, while the conflict was ultimately decided in Czechoslovakia’s favor by Allied intervention, the campaign nevertheless exposed severe organizational weaknesses in the improvised Habsburg-Legionnaire army. Through the winter of 1919–20, in an attempt to place the improvised army on a more permanent organizational footing, the Czechoslovak Ministry of National Defense oversaw a process of army “unification.”⁴⁵ During this process, fifty-one formerly Habsburg regiments amalgamated with twenty-one formerly Legionnaire regiments to form forty-eight brand-new Czechoslovak regiments.⁴⁶ For the remainder of the interwar period, these forty-eight units, with institutional origins in the regiments of old Austria, formed the main combat branch of the Czechoslovak army.

As we have seen in this first section, the history of the Habsburg empire’s Czech-speaking regiments is one of ambiguity. On the one hand, regimental tradition became an important vehicle for Habsburg “Fatherland” propaganda in the late nineteenth century. Yet these same regiments often became equally important embodiments of Czech national pride at the local level. Within the ranks, regimental linguistic practice tended to increase soldiers’ sense of national self-identification, while controversial acts of insubordination—and their politicization by Czech nationalist parties—earned Czech-speaking regiments a reputation as “unreliable.” The war introduced its own ambiguities. Highly publicized instances of “mass desertion” seemed to confirm military elites’ worst suspicions regarding Czech-speaking regiments, even as some of these units proved to be model combat formations. Finally, in 1918 and 1919, formerly imperial regiments provided a central element of Prague’s improvised national army and, after 1920, the institutional basis of the permanent Czechoslovak army itself. Embodying both empire and nation, the old Czech-speaking regiments of the Habsburg army created interpretive controversy in the new republic.

45 Břach and Láník, *Dva roky*, 127–30.

46 Fidler, “Unifikace,” 165–68.

War Veterans and the Nationalization of Habsburg Regimental History

Like their Habsburg counterparts several decades earlier, Czechoslovak state builders understood the political benefits of a well-articulated body of military tradition. While official Habsburg military tradition conveyed a historical vision of loyalty to dynasty and Fatherland, the nascent Czechoslovak army was to embody the principles of democracy and national self-determination that had legitimized the Republic's creation. Thus, the army looked to the wartime Czechoslovak Legions as its chief wellspring of historical identity.⁴⁷ First organized in 1914 by émigré Czechs living in Russia and later bolstered by Czech-speaking and Slovak-speaking volunteers from Russian POW camps, the Legionnaire units eventually saw service with the French, Italian, and Russian armies. Having taken up arms against the empire during the World War, the Legionnaires best exemplified Czech national resistance to Habsburg rule and were widely understood as having played the key role in securing Czechoslovak independence. In popular culture, the Legions were also seen as the direct predecessors to the postwar Czechoslovak army.⁴⁸ In a process Martin Zückert has labeled the “state invention of military tradition,” the Ministry of National Defense created a number of memory institutions to cultivate this mythology.⁴⁹ New army traditions such as holidays, unit designations, and the uniforms of the Prague Castle honor guard were designed to reflect the army's Legionnaire origins.⁵⁰ For a civilian audience, the Legionnaire veterans became paragons of citizenship and masculinity, and their privileged “national warrior” status was underscored by public commemoration, political access, and generous social benefits.⁵¹

The state's invention of Czechoslovak military tradition thus promulgated an exclusive vision of Czech military identity. The Czech soldier worthy of emulation was one who had striven for political independence and who had resisted foreign (i.e., “Habsburg”) domination. The 1935 speech by President Beneš that opened this article made essentially the same claim. The Czech soldier in Habsburg uniform may have been a competent warrior, but he had not contributed to the project of Czech independence as had, for example, the

47 Jedlicka, “Die Tradition,” 441.

48 Zückert, *Zwischen*, 81–85.

49 Zückert, “Memory,” 112–14.

50 Šedivý, “Legionáři,” 228–29.

51 Stegmann, “Soldaten und Bürger,” 30–37.

Legionnaires or Hussites. Embedded within this distinction was a state-centric, teleological understanding of history in which the struggle for statehood gave conceptual unity to an otherwise disjointed Czech military identity. Thus, in terms of official tradition, the centuries of Czech service in the Habsburg military became something of a historical black hole.

In this context of institutional amnesia, custodianship of Habsburg regimental history passed into the hands of Habsburg war veterans. Numbering at least one million, Czechoslovakia's Habsburg veterans were a socially, politically, and ethnolinguistically diverse population with an equally diverse range of veterans' groups. Some veterans' groups organized on the basis of a specific political ideology, while others relied on a shared sense of unique victimhood (there were, for example, groups for war invalids and former POWs).⁵² Of interest here are those veterans who continued to value their Habsburg regimental affiliations and participated in veterans' groups based on these shared identities.

The Czech regimental veterans' movement can be roughly divided into two phases, coterminous with the two interwar decades. During the 1920s, Czech regimental groups were small, few in number, and disunified. Early examples include groups dedicated to Prague's 28th and Mladá Boleslav's 36th. At this point, though, Czech regimental groups paled in comparison to those of German-speaking veterans centered primarily in north Bohemia.⁵³ Wary of these German groups in particular, some military officials requested a ban on regimental organizing. After the administration refrained from a general ban, both Czech and German regimental groups were permitted to operate, though under government observation (see section three). Still, the number and size of Czech regimental groups remained low. This lack of interest, which was mostly self-imposed among Czech-speaking veterans, changed dramatically around the late 1920s. As historian Jiří Hutečka has suggested, the worldwide economic depression caused many veterans to lose their jobs and breadwinner status, which encouraged many to reappraise their wartime service in search of a lost sense of masculine pride. Simultaneously, the rise of Nazi Germany and the threat of another major war encouraged many Czech-speaking veterans to position themselves as sage witnesses to the last great European conflict.⁵⁴

This conceptual sea change resulted in an explosion of Czech Habsburg regimental groups. In south Bohemia, veterans of the 75th Regiment established

52 Šmidrkal, "The Defeated," 86–90.

53 Ibid., 87–88 and 93–95.

54 Hutečka, "Žižka, Not Švejk!"

an organization in 1932 that by 1936 had grown to 1,347 members and eight local chapters.⁵⁵ Veterans of the 102nd Regiment, meanwhile, organized a large association that eventually included 24 local chapters and 3,467 members.⁵⁶ This association even published its own monthly newsletter, *Stodrubák* (One-hundred-seconder). Western Bohemia's 88th Regiment also saw efforts to organize veterans. In 1934, the group's first annual reunion was attended by around 1,000 former 88ers, and within a few years the 88th Regiment association had several local chapters and a central administrative group in Prague. The 75th, 88th, and 102nd regimental groups are the most well-documented, but certainly not the only ones, and around a dozen Czech regimental groups cropped up throughout Czechoslovakia during this period. A particularly important development for the Czech regimental veterans' movement was the creation of an umbrella federation, the *Kamarádské sjednocení* (Comradeship Union), in 1935. Uniting some half dozen Czech regimental groups, including the 75th and 88th groups mentioned above, the Union also put out a monthly (later bi-monthly) journal called *Kamarádství* (Comradeship), which served the regimental veterans' movement as a central discussion forum.⁵⁷ By printing associational news and excerpts of regimental history from the union's many subordinate associations, *Kamarádství* not only encouraged the creation of additional regimental groups, but also helped weld diverse regimental narratives into a well-articulated and relatively coherent veterans' discourse.

This sort of organizing, based on shared regimental affiliation, reflected specific impulses and concerns, which in turn produced a unique sort of veterans' activism. For one, regimental organizing reflected a desire to socialize among former comrades. While veterans' groups of all stripes referenced "comradeship" ubiquitously, it often served as a byword for an idealized "frontline" experience in which social, political, and religious differences had ostensibly disappeared in the face of mortal danger.⁵⁸ Within the regimental movement, though, "comradeship" took on a more concrete meaning. Regimental comrades were often those with whom one had shared trench sectors or, as one German-language regimental history put it, "the last bite, the last sip."⁵⁹ As a Czech-speaking veteran wrote for *Kamarádství* in 1933, regimental comrades who had

55 Široký, "Založení spolku," 179–83.

56 Annual report, "Pokladní zpráva Ústředí za rok 1936," n.d. (SOkA Benešov, fond 1934, Balík spisů).

57 Hutečka, "Kamarádi frontovníci," 249; Šmidrkal, "The Defeated," 86 and 91–93.

58 For a thorough examination of "comradeship," see: Hutečka, "Kamarádi frontovníci."

59 Reuter, "Zum Geleit," 1.

served at different points in the war or in separate companies nevertheless shared an indelible regimental bond: “membership in the same regiment inspires mutual confidence, even if there had not been any previous acquaintance.”⁶⁰ This was especially important since many regiments, with a full combat strength of around 4,000 men and officers, saw four or five times that number of men pass through their ranks during the war.⁶¹

The regiment also framed veterans’ experiences of war, creating highly localized memory communities within which certain names, places, or dates conjured worlds of unique shared images and experiences. Within the 102nd Regiment association, for example, the regiment’s participation in the disastrous crossing of the Drina River on September 8 and 9, 1914, held special significance as a uniquely horrifying experience and became a concrete point of postwar commemoration.⁶² As a narrative device, the regiment also helped ex-soldiers demystify their disjointed memories of combat. After the war, the writing and reading of regimental war narratives helped the individual veteran contextualize his own role in the wider war by situating the regiment (and thus the ex-soldier himself) within the proper tactical and operational contexts.⁶³ Nearly every regimental veterans’ group engaged in the production of regimental histories, which they published in single-volume books or, more commonly, monthly newsletters. Contributing to regimental histories or newsletters allowed veterans to articulate individualized war experiences within the context of a comprehensible war narrative and a meaningful collective identity that they themselves controlled.

Herein lay the regiment’s most important function for Czech-speaking Habsburg veterans. Unable to claim Legionnaire status and invoke Czechoslovakia’s hegemonic “national warrior” archetype, Habsburg veterans encountered a public culture that ascribed little significance to their wartime sacrifices. This exclusionary war discourse was more than a matter of pride and was in fact inscribed onto Czechoslovakia’s welfare code, with the result that the vast majority of former Habsburg servicemen were not entitled to the same benefits enjoyed by their Legionnaire counterparts.⁶⁴ When Habsburg veterans *did* appear in public discourse, their experiences were usually reduced

60 Hajek, “K sobě,” 81–3.

61 Beneš, “Vojákům”; Trenkler, *Válečné děje*, 7.

62 Ruller, “Připravená porážka?” 6.

63 Cavell, “In the Margins,” 202–3.

64 Šustrová, “The Struggle,” 107–34.

to “forced and senseless suffering” endured while in “foreign service.”⁶⁵ With Czech-speaking Habsburg veterans trapped between two archetypes—one that was highly desirable but inaccessible and a second that reduced their sacrifices to “senseless suffering”—the ability to craft a unique regimental identity allowed veterans to ascribe significance to their war experiences on their own terms.

In the first issue of *Stodrubák*, the monthly newsletter of the 102nd Regiment veterans’ association, one of its editors declared that, “it will be up to us to inform the public how our regiment conducted itself during the war and how it contributed to the liberation of our homeland.”⁶⁶ In addition to the 102nd’s wartime record, the association also inherited responsibility for the regiments’ deeper history, and *Stodrubák* frequently published pieces by veterans who had served with the peacetime 102nd during the 1880s and 1890s. While the 102nd was a young regiment, only created in 1883, other Czech-speaking regiments had histories that stretched back to the eighteenth and even seventeenth centuries. Regardless of the age of the unit in question, constructing a regiment-based veteran’s identity involved the blending of history and memory, with both subjected to veterans’ collective control and reinterpretation.

That the onus to preserve the history of the 102nd and other Czech-speaking regiments fell on the shoulders of their former members meant that these men also had the freedom, collectively, to shape that history however they pleased. Herein lies the most important factor explaining the nationalization of Habsburg regimental history in interwar Czechoslovakia. Marginalized in a society where wartime service attained real significance only if it had contributed to national liberation, many Habsburg veterans attempted to “link their wartime experience to the story of the victorious Czech nation.”⁶⁷ While Habsburg army veterans could never attain a “national warrior” status on par with the Legionnaires, they could at least craft useable identities as 28ers, 36ers, 75ers, 88ers, 102ers, etc. As a result, the very people most motivated to cultivate Habsburg regimental history were those who also intended to use their regimental identities for demonstrating the national significance of their forgotten sacrifices.

In other words, by emphasizing certain elements of their units’ prewar, wartime, and postwar histories, veterans hoped to fashion new and thoroughly nationalized regimental identities. Central to this project of reimagination was establishing the historical “Czechness” of certain regiments within the Habsburg

65 Zückert, “Memory,” 112.

66 Majer, “Několik slov,” 5.

67 Šmidrkal, “The Defeated,” 86.

military. Veterans asserted that service in Czech-speaking regiments had insulated soldiers against the denationalizing impulses of the wider Habsburg army. A veteran-authored history of the 36th Regiment, published in 1923, argued that the 36th had been a space where there had been no need to hide Czech national sentiment: “The regiment was purely Czech and the ‘lads’ did not have to fear that they would be ratted out, and therefore loosened the reins on their national sentiment at every opportunity.”⁶⁸ Other veterans argued that the atmosphere of linguistic homogeneity within certain units even helped to “rescue” prodigal Czechs who had been lost to “Germanization.” As an older veteran wrote in 1933, remembering his time in the ranks during the early 1880s: “Within the 102nd regiment, the men were purely Czech up to the rank of sergeant—there might be 1–2 Germans in the company, but these were Germanized sons of Czech families who, in a few short weeks, quickly acclimatized to Czech attitudes and learned [to speak] Czech.”⁶⁹

In some cases, veterans connected their regiment’s Czechness with local or regional identities. Jan Vošta, chairman of the 75th Regiment association, prefaced a 1936 regimental scrapbook by arguing that the shared south Bohemian heritage of the regiment’s soldiers had helped bind them together during the war. As casualties mounted, he wrote, the 75er at the front had been joined by “his father and his brother [...] blood of the same blood, sons of the same part of south Bohemia.”⁷⁰ Another 75er, in an essay on the regiment’s wartime commander František Schöbl, fondly remembered how Schöbl had once given a speech to the men that began by addressing them as “South Bohemian soldiers, descendants of the Hussites, Seventy-fivers!” The author remembered the speech as an “historical moment” when a “Czech officer, even though in Austrian service, was able to awaken in us a feeling of national and state tradition.”⁷¹ Here, the 75th was made a symbol of south Bohemia’s special place within Czech military heritage and an embodiment of the Hussite revolutionary tradition.

Veterans also took care to frame their former regiments as having been bastions of Czech resistance to Habsburg imperial aims. As we saw above, the fin-de-siècle decades’ fraught domestic politics and a series of partial army mobilizations occasioned several instances of mutiny in predominantly Czech-

68 Musejní odbor, *Pamětní spis*, 3.

69 Dvořák, “Kus historie,” p. 5.

70 Vošta, “Úvodem,” 8.

71 Brumlík, “Vzpomínka,” 33.

speaking regiments. When the army mobilized in 1908 during the Bosnian Annexation Crisis, for example, elements of the 36th Regiment had been declared in mutiny after soldiers refused to board troop trains. “The incident,” 36er veterans claimed in their 1923 regimental history, “was a welcome opportunity for certain circles to demonstrate their disfavor towards every Czech regiment and *ours in particular*.”⁷² In the hands of veterans, of course, the “disfavor” of Habsburg military circles became a badge of national honor. Veterans also mythologized instances where Czech-speaking regiments had refused to carry out internal policing duties against their co-nationals. An older veteran of the 102nd Regiment, remembering his service during the 1890s, celebrated the 102ers’ refusal to use rifle or bayonet against street demonstrators during Prague’s 1897 riots. Thanks to instances like this one, he insisted, “Czech cities liked to see conscious Czech regiments in their garrisons.”⁷³

In addition to these prewar incidents, veterans celebrated acts of national “resistance” during the war itself. Members of the former 75th Infantry Regiment, for example, lionized their subversive role in the famous 1917 battle of Zborov. At Zborov, the Russian army had made use of independent Czechoslovak Legionnaire brigades for the first time, scoring a decisive victory over opposing Habsburg forces—among them the 75th. In Czechoslovakia, the date of the Zborov engagement (July 2) became “Army Day,” a holiday for celebrating the Legionnaires’ contributions to independence and the Legionnaire origins of the new army.⁷⁴ Hoping to capitalize on the mystique surrounding Zborov, veterans of the 75th Regiment framed their defeat by the Legionnaires as the product of intentional, nationally minded resistance. According to former 75ers, the regiment’s Czech-speaking soldiers had voluntarily ceded their positions at Zborov, allowing themselves to be captured by the attacking Legionnaires without firing a shot, thereby contributing to Legionnaire victory.⁷⁵

As they reconceptualized their regimental identities and sought to make them more “Czech,” veterans returned again and again to this theme of resistance. Tying together memories of the prewar period and the war itself, veterans commemorated their old regiments as islands of Czech nationalism within the Habsburg military. This narrative strategy was popular because it coincided with the hegemonic ideal of Czech military identity based on anti-

72 Musejní odbor, *Pamětní spis*, 13.

73 Dvořák, “Kus historie,” 5–6.

74 Wingfield, “The Battle of Zborov.”

75 Regentík, “Zborov,” 138.

Habsburg struggle. But as the example of the 75ers and Zborov illustrates, this strategy often required veterans to embrace a “passive” form of resistance that paled in comparison to more proactive forms of resistance embodied by the Legionnaires. Adopting the resistance narrative meant ceding traditional notions of martial masculinity and embracing such unmilitary acts as desertion, refusal of orders, or willful surrender.⁷⁶ For most of the 1920s, veterans were willing to make this compromise in order to carve a space for themselves within Czechoslovakia’s official culture of war remembrance. In the 1930s, however, regimental activists were more willing to scour their regiments’ histories for positive examples of Czech military virtue, even if these deeds had been done under the Habsburg banner. Following this impulse, veterans reappraised conflicts of the past in a way that allowed for the occasional confluence of “Czech” with “Habsburg” interests. Regimental histories published during the 1930s, for example, often celebrated the early-modern Habsburg-Ottoman wars as an acceptable collaboration between Czech soldiers and their Habsburg overlords in defense of Europe.⁷⁷

Rehabilitating memories of the distant past was one thing, but veterans in the 1930s also reconceptualized their regiments’ contributions during the World War itself. Reflecting new emphases on dutiful wartime service was a series of museum exhibitions staged by regimental veterans’ groups in the mid-1930s. Rather than shying away from the Habsburg soldier’s war experience, these exhibitions placed weapons, maps, medals, trophies, and other combat artefacts directly before the Czechoslovak public. A 1936 exhibition put on by veterans of the former 88th Regiment, installed at the Beroun city museum, even included a full-scale replica trench.⁷⁸ A much larger exhibition staged that same year in Prague brought together individual installations organized by veterans of the 21st, 28th, 36th, 88th, and 102nd Regiments. During its brief run at the Holešovice exhibition grounds, this display of regimental militaria was attended by an estimated 80,000 visitors and was even recommended to active-duty troops by Prague’s garrison commander.⁷⁹

In addition to the prewar era and the war itself, veterans highlighted the period between October 1918 and the summer of 1919, when their regiments

76 For a discussion of gender and Habsburg veterans’ memory politics, see: Hutečka, “Kamarádi.”

77 See, for example: Komárek, “Krátký náčrt,” 9.

78 Photo album, “Spolek příslušníků pěš. pl. Berounského ‘Cihláři’ – Odbočka Zdice,” (SOkA Beroun, fond 818).

79 Hornof, “Programové prohlášení,” 298.

had fought in Czechoslovakia's brief postwar border conflicts. As Hutečka has argued, this 1918–19 moment was central to the project of reimagining the role of Czech-speaking veterans.⁸⁰ For those involved in the regimental movement, it was also central to cultivating a national mythology for their old units. As noted in the preface to the 75th Regiment essay collection from 1936,

The question arises: If the 75th Regiment as a whole performed its duty so well throughout the entire duration of the war despite a series of debacles, reestablished and replenished again and again, how would its sons and grandsons perform their duty [...] once it was no longer defending a foreign dynasty, but rather, within the framework of the Czechoslovak Republic, its native [home region of] Jindřichův Hradec and Tábor? They gave a clear answer to this question in 1919 at Těšín and in Slovakia[.]⁸¹

Here, the 75ers deemphasized the “resistance” model and argued instead that theirs had been a regiment of model martial resilience under the Habsburgs. Even so, they claimed, the regiment's latent national fervor remained untapped until 1918, when it deployed alongside the Legionnaires in defense of the republic's threatened borders. For the 75ers—and the regimental veterans' movement more broadly—the postwar border conflicts came to represent a long-awaited moment of apotheosis when Czech-speaking regiments were finally able to demonstrate their *full* military potential in pursuit of national rather than “foreign” aims.

Regimental Continuity and Czechoslovak Military Tradition

As we have seen, nationalizing the history of the empire's Czech-speaking regiments offered Habsburg veterans a means with which to claim their own status as warriors for the nation. To self-identify as a former 36er, 75er, or 102er was to claim membership in a historically “Czech” military community that, while created to serve a “foreign” dynasty and empire, had nevertheless contributed to the Czech national cause before, during, and after World War I. In the remaining pages, I examine the Czechoslovak army's gradual acceptance and recognition of this vision. Here, too, regimental veterans' groups provided a vital interlocutory role. By establishing close ties with their Czechoslovak “successor”

80 Hutečka, “Completely Forgotten,” 13.

81 Vošta, “Úvodem,” 8.

units, these groups came to embody a certain continuity between the regiments of the old empire and those of the new republic.

This convergence was neither preordained nor without opposition. For one, while institutional continuities seemed to create a predecessor-successor relationship between Habsburg and Czechoslovak regiments, this concept had no weight in official tradition. As mentioned above, the Czechoslovak army began its life as an improvised force consisting primarily of formerly Habsburg and formerly Legionnaire regiments. In light of severe organizational shortcomings exposed during the 1919 Slovak campaign, the Ministry of National Defense mandated the *unifikace* (unification) of these Habsburg and Legionnaire units in early 1920. Resulting in forty-eight new “Czechoslovak” regiments, this process preserved many elements of the Habsburg regimental system. Czechoslovak recruiting districts, for example, more or less mirrored those in force before 1914 while, of the forty-eight new Czechoslovak regiments, thirteen carried on the same regimental numbers as their imperial predecessors.⁸²

With the benefit of hindsight, modern-day assessments tend to interpret the 1920 unification as a conscious and ultimately successful effort to preserve continuity at the regimental level.⁸³ At the time, though, the impulse to downplay the Czechoslovak army’s Habsburg legacy problematized these continuities, and there were many in the Czechoslovak military who completely rejected any relationship between Habsburg regiments and their Czechoslovak successors. In official terms, Czechoslovak regiments were not considered successors to the old imperial regiments at all, only to the “domestic army” regiments that had emerged from them during the imperial army’s collapse. As military publicist Karel Teringl wrote in 1938, for a twentieth-anniversary retrospective on Czechoslovak army tradition: “Since our regiments are not continuations of Austro-Hungarian regiments, and have no internal relationship to them, they began to form their own tradition from the moment they were created, that is, after the revolution...”⁸⁴

Officially, then, there existed a legalistic conceptual barrier across 1918 that severed Czechoslovak army regiments from their Habsburg forebears. Consider the case of the Czechoslovak 35th Regiment, created in 1920 through the unification of the Habsburg 35th and the Legionnaire 35th. In addition to the continuity in unit designation, the new Czechoslovak 35th was, like its

82 Fidler, “Unifikace,” 167.

83 Ibid., 168.

84 Teringl, “Vojenská tradice,” 51.

predecessor had been since 1771, stationed in the west Bohemian city of Plzeň. Despite the obvious continuities, incorporating the history of the old 35th was made conceptually difficult. In 1930, in an attempt to “awaken and deepen” soldiers’ “grasp of the regiment’s military tradition,” officers decided to furnish the 35th’s regimental canteen with a plaque honoring its fallen members. Seeking approval for the project from the Ministry of National Defense, the organizers were careful to note that the plaque would commemorate “those members of the regiment who fell in battles for the liberation of our homeland and the defense of its integrity—battles in Italy, at Těšín, and in Slovakia.”⁸⁵ The many Plzeňers who had fallen in service with the old imperial 35th did not count among this number. Thus, while unification preserved a level of institutional continuity between Habsburg and Czechoslovak regiments, that continuity did not necessarily translate into the realm of official tradition.

Meanwhile, during the early 1920s, Czechoslovak military officials maintained a deep suspicion of the nascent regimental veterans’ movement. By the mid-1920s, German-speaking veterans concentrated in north Bohemia had constructed a well-organized network of at least half a dozen individual regimental groups.⁸⁶ It was largely in response to these German groups that the Czechoslovak state first took notice of Habsburg regimental organizations. As early as February of 1923, senior military officials met in Prague to discuss the growing problem of regimental veteran organizing.⁸⁷ Military officials feared that the real purpose of German regimental groups was to maintain contact among former comrades so that these units could be “reactivated” in the event of a Habsburg war of restoration or a border conflict with Germany or Austria. As one government report put it wryly in 1925, in the event of a future war “these regimental associations among our Germans [...] might prove to be an unpleasant surprise.”⁸⁸

During this early period, the relatively small and disunified Czech regimental groups were considered equally subversive, but for different reasons. Not deemed security threats like their German counterparts, Czech regimental groups still appeared dangerous because, as one report put it, they too served to “revive

85 Letter, *Vojenské zátiší pěšího pluku 35 to MNO Presidium/1. odd.*, July 4, 1930 (VHA, MNO presidium, karton 8653, inv. č. 14081, sign. 59 8/32).

86 Šmidrkal, “The Defeated,” 87–88 and 93–95.

87 “Protokol porady v presidiu MNO dne 26./II.23,” February 26, 1923 (VHA, MNO Presidium, karton 12403, inv. č. 16067, sign. 45 ¼).

88 “Záznam,” April 20, 1925, 2 (NA, PMV, sign. 225-768-4, f. 64).

memories of the former military attitudes under Austria” and threatened “the development of C[zecho]s[lovak] military tradition.”⁸⁹ In 1923, the Ministry of National Defense asked the Ministry of the Interior, which regulated associational life and public assembly, to ban Habsburg regimental organizing entirely. While the Ministry of the Interior shied away from this request, the two ministries did begin cooperating to minimize what they saw as the most egregious aspects of regimental veterans’ activism. Throughout the interwar period, the government regularly intervened in the affairs of regimental veterans’ groups, instructing them to excise particular elements of reunion programs or parts of regimental publications.⁹⁰ Within its own jurisdiction, the Ministry of National Defense had greater freedom of action. In 1923, the Ministry banned active-duty military personnel from participating in or interacting with Habsburg regimental groups, though this ban proved to be quite flexible in practice.⁹¹

The result, as far as Czech-speaking regimental groups were concerned, was a process of accommodation between veterans and military officials. An instructive case here is that of the 36th Regiment veterans based in Mladá Boleslav. During the 1920 unification of the Czechoslovak Army, Mladá Boleslav’s 36th Regiment had been redesignated the Czechoslovak 47th Regiment. This change of regimental number, from 36 to 47, elicited powerful reactions from veterans, who allegedly “exhibited dissatisfaction and wonder at why they deprived a regiment with such grand history and tradition of such a dear title.”⁹² Former members of the regiment spent the early 1920s begging the Ministry of National Defense to return its original number 36. When these attempts failed, the veterans began organizing a mass rally to demonstrate publicly for the regiment’s re-designation. When military administrators learned of this plan, they immediately implored the Ministry of the Interior to ban the event. From their perspective, the event represented a “revival of traditions of the former monarchist army” and was thus “antithetical to present attempts to inculcate a conscious, lively state feeling and loyal allegiance to the Czechoslovak state.”⁹³ The 36er veterans strenuously rejected this interpretation. On March 3, 1924, a police observer sat in on a meeting of reunion organizers and reported that they

89 Šmidrkal, “The Defeated,” 84; Memo, MV to PZSP v Praze, July 13, 1925 (VHA, MNO Presidium, karton 12403, inv. č. 16067, sign. 45 ¼).

90 Šmidrkal, “The Defeated,” 85–86.

91 Memo, MV to PZSP v Praze, Brně, Opavě, August 12, 1923 (VHA, MNO presidium, k. 12403, inv. č. 16067, sign. 45 ¼).

92 Musejní odbor, *Pamětní spis*, 68.

93 Memo, MNO/HIŠ/ZO to PMV, February 26, 1924 (NA, PMV, sign. 225-768-5, f. 68).

consider it their duty to point out that the former infantry regiment no. 36, based in Mladá Boleslav and recruited purely from Czech districts, was never seen by Czech people as a militaristic formation belonging to the Austrian dungeon and Habsburg dynasty, but quite to the contrary, was always a symbol of national consciousness and manful defiance.

Later at the same meeting, the organizers further emphasized this point, arguing that their regiment had never been “an instrument by which Czech lads were transformed into unthinking creatures of Austrian militarism.”⁹⁴

After a series of negotiations involving the event organizers, local administrators, and the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of National Defense ultimately gave in. Their consent was given on the condition that the reunion focus not on the 36th Regiment, per se, but on its history of “resistance” to the Habsburg empire. In terms of public branding, then, the event took place as a “Celebration of Resistance by Former Members of the 36th against Former Austria,” rather than the originally intended “Reunion of 36ers.”⁹⁵ Agreeing to this compromise, the 36ers finally held their reunion in June of 1924 and drew some 25–35,000 attendees. The main event, which was held on a Sunday, included a ceremonial procession of veterans alongside “all local patriotic and national associations.” Most surprisingly, given its recent ban, the Ministry of National Defense even authorized the participation of active-duty Czechoslovak troops. Mladá Boleslav’s 47th Regiment took part in the ceremonies with gusto, treating veterans and locals to demonstrations of “modern assault tactics.”⁹⁶

To coincide with the reunion, the 36er veterans compiled a ninety-six-page history, which laid out the regiment’s Czech national credentials from its founding in 1683 to the present. True to their word, the veterans who authored the history focused on the 36th’s character as a “purely Czech regiment” as well as its history of rebellious “resistance” to Habsburg imperialist aims. The book’s chapter on World War I, for example, focused entirely on the regiment’s “mass desertion” to the Russians in the spring of 1915. At the same time, the booklet did not shy away from rehabilitating certain *positive* elements of the regiment’s long history under the Habsburg dynasty. Most surprising, perhaps, was its coverage of 1848–49. During the revolution, the 36th had deployed to Slovakia to battle the Hungarian revolutionary army. In the veteran-authored

94 Police report, “Schůze přípravného výboru, Šestatřicátníků,” March 4, 1924 (NA, PMV, sign. 225-768-5, f. 66).

95 Zückert, “Memory of War,” 116.

96 “Po sjezdu,” 1.

regimental history, this campaign was recast as “aid to the Slovak national guard against the Magyars.”⁹⁷ Formulated this way, the regiment’s participation in the dynastic counterrevolution of 1848–49 was reframed as an example of early Czech-Slovak solidarity, with obvious parallels to the 36th Regiment’s more recent involvement in the Slovak campaign of 1919.

In the end, the reunion’s main goal—the renaming of Mladá Boleslav’s 47th Regiment—went unfulfilled, rejected once again by the Ministry of National Defense for “technical and administrative reasons.” Where the reunion *did* succeed, though, was in popularizing the 36er veterans’ “Czech” version of their own regiment’s history. It also succeeded in establishing a relationship between the 36ers and their 47th Regiment “successor” that continued throughout the interwar period. When the Ministry of National Defense acquiesced to the 36er reunion of 1924, and to the participation of the 47th Czechoslovak Regiment, they framed this decision as a one-time exception to their “fundamental opposition” to Habsburg regimental organizing.⁹⁸ But by and large, army administrators ignored their own official stance and took a lax approach toward contact between Czech regimental veterans’ groups and active-duty military personnel. Indeed, the following year, when the city of Mladá Boleslav bequeathed a new regimental flag to the 47th, 36er veterans took an active role in the ceremony.

This was itself an important symbolic gesture. During the early and mid-1920s, towns and cities across the republic began commissioning new regimental flags for their local Czechoslovak regiments. Often involving local notables and patriotic societies, the commissioning of new regimental flags was meant to represent the birth of a new army. Indeed, recognizing their symbolic power, the Ministry of National Defense insisted to the country’s town councils that each of the army’s regiments be gifted a new flag in time to celebrate the republic’s tenth anniversary in 1928.⁹⁹ That veterans of Habsburg regiments often took part in the symbolically weighted dedication ceremonies gave informal sanction to the predecessor-successor relationship. And it is clear that Habsburg regimental veterans’ groups understood the flags of their Czechoslovak successor units to be *their* collective property too. When veterans of the 75th Regiment held their first annual reunion in 1929, they insisted that their successor unit, the Czechoslovak 29th, be represented at the reunion by a delegation of officers,

97 Musejní odbor, *Pamětní spis*, 10.

98 Memo, MNO/HIŠ/ZO to PMV, June 17, 1924 (NA, PMV, sign. 225-768-5, f. 52).

99 Letter, MO to Městská ráda v Berouně, January 21, 1925 (SOkA Beroun, fond 1326, folder 2 “Došlé dopisy.”)

its regimental colors, and the regimental band. In their letter to the Ministry of National Defense—whose approval they required for such a delegation—the veterans evoked the idea of an unbroken lineage between the Habsburg-era 75th and its 29th Regiment successor. Referencing “brotherly partnership” and the “joyful consolidation of our national army,” the 75ers wrote that “we would feel abandoned at the reunion if we were not able to walk in the shade of our [regimental] banner.”¹⁰⁰ On this occasion, as on others, the veterans’ request was granted. Several years later, in 1935, veterans of the Habsburg 102nd Regiment donated a ceremonial ribbon to be affixed to the battle flag of their successor regiment, the Czechoslovak 48th. Following the ribbon ceremony, soldiers of the 48th assembled alongside veterans of the 102nd for a joint inspection by a local brigade commander.¹⁰¹ This desire to foster relations between Habsburg predecessor and Czechoslovak successor regiments was not one-sided either. When the 102nd Regiment veterans’ association held their fifth annual reunion in May 1936, the Czechoslovak 48th Regiment was more than happy to accept honorary chairmanship of the festival committee.¹⁰²

As the 1920s gave way to the 1930s, Habsburg regimental veterans’ groups became constant fixtures at Czechoslovak army ceremonies. To be sure, many voices within the military community continued to reject the principle of regimental continuity and the army’s embrace of Habsburg regimental veterans’ groups. A 1935 editorial in *Vojenský svět* (Military World), insisted that the old regiments of Austria-Hungary “are known to our military only as dry numbers.” The author continued by pointing out that “we have our own regiments, which must lie in the hearts of the people more so than the Austrian ones.” In conclusion, he insisted that Habsburg regimental associations were “not something that our public life requires.”¹⁰³ His recommendation came too late. By this point, even the Ministry of National Defense had begun sending delegations to events hosted by, or in conjunction with, Habsburg regimental associations. In July of 1932, for example, the south Bohemian town of Písek hosted a celebration of its hometown Czechoslovak 11th Regiment. Veterans of its predecessor unit, the Habsburg 11th Regiment, were also in attendance, giving the appearance of a single regimental community that blended the imperial past with the national

100 Letter, Výbor Sjezdu Pětasedmdesátníků to MNO Presidium, June 25, 1929 (VHA, MNO Presidium, karton 7823, inv. č. 12812, sign. 45 6/13).

101 Ledvina, “IV. sjezd Stodruháků,” 152-XXXI.

102 Poster, “VI. sjezd v Dobříši,” (SOkA Benešov, fond 1934, Balík spisů).

103 K.M.B., “Kapitoly,” 179.

present. Also in attendance was the Minister of National Defense, Dr. Karel Viškovský, whose address reflected many of the arguments circulating within the regimental veterans' movement:

It is a wonderful habit of former soldiers to gather and thereby renew their bonds to their regiment. And the "Eleveners" are rightfully proud of their regiment and its history, which was glorious and heroic since the days of old Austria. Even then, the "Eleveners" were not considered Austrians [*Rakušaný*] but were already at that point the nucleus of a future independent nation!

The minister's further remarks included references to the "famous deeds of the regiment" during the early-modern Ottoman wars as well as its "meritorious" service in the 1919 campaigns for Těšín and Slovakia.¹⁰⁴ This speech, given by the republic's most senior military administrator, was a clear recognition of the attempt by Czech-speaking Habsburg veterans to recast their former regiments as useable symbols of Czech military heritage.

Conclusion

As a mechanism by which states and armies ascribe significance to the past, the creation of military tradition offers a powerful lens through which to observe moments of rupture and reconfiguration.¹⁰⁵ In interwar Czechoslovakia, debates about regimental numbers, flags, and lineages reflected much larger questions about the Czech nation's relationship to its imperial past. From one perspective, the empire was the very antithesis of the national republic, and the history of its Czech-speaking regiments offered little inspiration for the Czechoslovak soldier of the present. This assessment reflected a teleological understanding of history that culminated with the emergence of nation-states and thus marginalized people and institutions not linked to the realization of this project. The countervailing perspective was expressed succinctly by Rudolf Kalhous, a former Habsburg officer and architect of the Czechoslovak army's 1920 unification. Discussing the Habsburg army's Czech-speaking regiments in his 1936 memoir, Kalhous wrote that "it is true that they served foreign interests, but it was nevertheless our people [*lid*] who won these regiments their name and respect."¹⁰⁶ In Kalhous' eyes, the history of the empire's Czech-speaking regiments, some of which

104 "Sjezd Jedenáctníků," 77.

105 Abenheim, *Reforging*, 22.

106 Kalhous, *Budování*, 140.

traced their origins to the early seventeenth century, belonged collectively to the Czech people and deserved recognition in the new army.

Initially rejected by Czechoslovak state builders and military officials, this latter perspective nevertheless gained traction in the later 1920s and 1930s thanks to the motivated activism of Czech-speaking veterans in the Habsburg regimental movement. Sidelined within Czechoslovakia's culture of commemoration, these veterans sought to change the narrative regarding their wartime service by demonstrating their contributions to the Czech national cause. The result was a symbiotic relationship of sorts: the preservation of Habsburg regimental history depended on marginalized veterans, who in turn relied on regimental history for crafting useable veterans' identities. In short, Habsburg regimental history "became Czech" during the interwar period because its chief custodians needed it to be so. That this nationalized version of Habsburg regimental history was eventually sanctioned by the Czechoslovak army reflected the willingness of local army commanders and senior defense officials to permit increasingly formal ties between Habsburg regimental groups and their Czechoslovak successor units.

Ultimately, the story of how Habsburg regimental history became Czechoslovak military tradition suggests some limits to radical, post-imperial state building in East-Central Europe. Monopolized in theory by the state, the process of creating military tradition in interwar Czechoslovakia proved surprisingly sensitive to challenges by organized regimental groups. At least at the regimental level, this process was one of accommodation on the part of veterans and military officials alike. These findings also point to the ambiguous role of "nation" as a contemporary framework for interpreting the imperial past. After all, arguments both for and against the incorporation of Habsburg regimental history mobilized the language of nation and reflected specific interpretations of Czech national life under the empire. In a broader regional perspective, then, this case study of Czechoslovakia's old Habsburg regiments suggests further research on the *negotiation* of military tradition as a fruitful analytical tool for understanding nation building in East-Central Europe—not only after 1918, but also the region's many other moments of political caesura.

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Czechoslovak 38th Regiment collection

Abbreviations

1. odd. – *1. oddělení* (1st Section)

f. – folio

HIŠ – *Hlavní štáb* (General staff)

Inv. č. – *inventární číslo* (inventory number)

k. – *karton* (carton)

MNO – *Ministerstvo Národní obrany* (Ministry of National Defense)

MV – *Ministerstvo vnitra* (Interior Ministry)

PMV – *Presidium Ministerstva vnitra* (Presidium, Interior Ministry)

PO – *Památník odboje* (Resistance Memorial)

ppl. – *pěší pluk* (Infantry Regiment)

PZSP – *Prezident Zemské správy politické* (President of the Political Land Administration)

sign. – *signatura*

STRP – *Státní tajemník u říšského protektora v Čechách a na Moravě* (State Secretariat for the Reichsprotektorat of Bohemia and Moravia)

VO – *Vojenské oddělení* (Military Section)

ZO – *Zpravodajské oddělení* (Intelligence Section)

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