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The Fluidity of Racial Hierarchies: Changing Racial Images in the American Mind and the Status of Czechs and Germans in the United States, 1877-1918

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On September 4, 1918, Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States of America, recognized the Czecho-Slovak nation as an independent country and co-belligerent in the European conflict. He did this a month after England and France recognized the new nation as an independent country. According to American editorials after Wilson's recognition, public opinion within the United States appeared to be in support of an independent Czech state. In fact a *New York Times* editor criticized Wilson, because he felt Wilson waited too long after British and French recognition to offer diplomatic support for the fledgling nation.^[i] Historians, like Victor S. Mamatey, Betty Miller Unterberger and Otakar Odlozilik, believed that Wilson did little to foster the initial Czech desire for independence from Austria. In fact, they conclude that through the persistence and propaganda of Czech groups, in America and abroad, coupled with Wilson's fruitless attempts to convince Austria to accept a separate peace treaty early in the war in order to keep its empire status quo antebellum, Wilson supported and recognized an independent Czech state.^[ii] However, Tibor Glant believed that Pro-Czech/Anti-Hapsburg propaganda, while influential in rallying foreign popular opinion in support of an independent Czech nation, did little to influence Wilson and other policy makers in support for Czech independence. He further concluded that Pro-Czech propaganda had a greater impact with British and French policy makers than policy makers in the United States. He believed that unlike the United States Pro-Czech propaganda in Europe not only enjoyed support of independent organizations, but also of the government in both France and England.^[iii]

Glant, while examining the influence this propaganda had on Wilson and other United States policy makers, failed to identify the impact that this propaganda had on changing American public opinion. In addition to the disadvantage that Pro-Czech groups faced working outside the sanctions of the United States government in influencing public opinion, they were also wholly unsuccessful in elevating the racial status of Czechs within the United States. The dual aim of Pro-Czech propaganda was to convince Americans that the Germans were uncivilized ruthless savages, while at the same time elevating the racial status of Czech civilization. The American press rallied around the idea that Germans were uncivilized.^[iv] However, Czech nationalist organizations failed to dramatically change the racial image of Czechs to most members of the American press. To understand the impact this propaganda had on American popular opinion, one must examine the western perceptions of Slavs and Germans before World War I, the decline in popular opinion, within America, of Germans as a "race" during the war, and the popular perception of Slavs and Germans by the end of the war.

With the popularization of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in the late nineteenth century, many social scientists of that era reinforced the notion of "race." They believed that certain "races" of people were inherently superior to other inferior "races" of people.^[v] In reality, these people did not belong to a separate "race," but a separate ethnic

origin. From this theory of human origins, the proponents of colonialism defended colonial rule under the banner of the "white man's burden." At that time many people believed that a more advanced "race" could benevolently rule a less civilized "race." In turn they believed the lesser "race" would eventually become more civilized as a result of this interaction as a subject people with the more advanced "race." According to contemporary social scientists of the period, Czechs (Bohemians) belonged to the Slavic "race." Throughout this time, the Austrian Empire ruled Bohemia. Since Austrians are ethnic Germans, according to nineteenth century social scientists they were members of the Teutonic "race." According to this classification, the Austrians were legitimate rulers over the Bohemians, because most people believed the Teutonic "race" was a more advanced civilization than the Slavic "race."^[vii]

These notions were not isolated within the social sciences. Many Americans in general accepted these notions, and the American press often utilized them when describing Slavs in their coverage of Eastern Europe. The *National Quarterly Review*, in an 1877 article, referred to the Slavic "race" as a:

race which through centuries of European civilization has never entirely rid itself of the traces of ancient barbarism; a race in fact which after a long period of comparative insignificance has suddenly emerged from obscurity to become the watchword of an upheaval which threatens to convulse all Europe.^[viii]

The author, critical of Slavic people, reinforced the notion of "race," and the idea that "races" could be superior and inferior to each other.

According to the popular perception of the time, Slavs were not a culturally monolithic group. Generally Americans perceived Bohemians as the most civilized of all Slavs. Allan Mc Laughlin, an American sociologist at the turn of the century writing for *Popular Science Monthly*, described Czechs as better educated than most Slavs and more civilized than most Slavs.^[viii] Booker T. Washington, an African-American educator and reformer at the turn of the century, traveled to Eastern Europe in 1911. Later that year, he wrote an article in *Outlook*, about his travels. As a black social reformer of the Jim Crow South, Washington in a rather ironic observation concluded that the people of Bohemia were less advanced than the rest of Europe, yet acknowledged that they were more civilized than the rest of the Slavic "race."^[ix] Czechs did not always receive praise in the popular press, however. A writer for the *Independent* stated that Bohemians suffered, because being a Slav meant that they lacked attractiveness and elegance.^[x] Even though Americans considered Czechs the most civilized Slav, Czechs still suffered from the generalized stereotypical notions of Slavs.

Many Czechs were conscious of the powerful notion of race and knew it was the key to their independence. Some tried in vain to rehabilitate their image as a subordinate race. In 1904, Count Lutzow, a Bohemian diplomat in Austria, wrote an article for an American magazine called *World's Work*, calling for international intervention for the independence of Bohemia. In the article, he tried to bolster support for such action by arguing that the Slavic people were truly an advanced civilization. In order to strengthen his argument he stated that the Slavs were actually an Aryan "race."^[xi] To social scientists, the Aryans represented an advanced civilized ancient European culture. While the Aryans did conquer the Slavic regions of Europe, social scientists did not accept this notion because they believed that the Slavic people were more Asiatic than Aryan.^[xii] Some Czech intellectuals believed if they could convince the public to

see their group as an advanced "race" then their independence would be more easily guaranteed. This attempt at "racial" uplift would eventually become the blueprint of Czech nationalist propaganda.^[xiii]

However, British and American writers accepted a different popular image of Austrians. A writer for the British magazine the *Spectator*, in 1890, described the Austrians and Czechs who both lived in Bohemia as "[being] separated by language, by degree of civilization, and by the indefinable aggregate of inherent differences which we call race."^[xiv] A 1909 British correspondent, commenting about the ethnic tensions between Germans and Slavs in Eastern Europe, professed that East Europe was a case of a lesser Slavic civilization absorbing a higher German civilization.^[xv] An *Outlook* reporter, in 1907, described the Austrian Emperor, Francis Joseph, as attractive, lovable, and benevolent.^[xvi] Before World War I, the popular press portrayed the Austrians as the ideal rulers of the Slavic people. Working to Czech disadvantage was the elevated perception of Austrians as a benevolent race. The popular image of Austrians was that of an advanced civilization, further bolstered by the portrayal of their king as a fair, impartial and benevolent ruler.

When World War I began in 1914, the popular press depicted it as a war between Teuton and Slav. Journalists who wrote about the war reinforced images of "race." In a paternalistic editorial one *Current Opinion* editor, complementing Slavic people, stated, "the slav, wayward and backward as he is, has in his character a universality that has been denied to more developed races."^[xvii] Another writer, summarizing the war for the *Independent*, described the Slav as "a peasant folk, placid when comfortable, savage when roused." In fact the writer further criticized Slavic people as incapable of producing any contribution to civilization.^[xviii] At the beginning of World War I, the idea of the Slav as a lesser civilization or "race" was still a popular notion among many and a hurdle for Czech nationalists to overcome.

Similar to late nineteenth century critics, writers during World War I depicted Czechs as the most advanced of the Slavic people. During 1914, Edward Ross, an American sociologist, commented that the Czechs were the most desirable of all Slavic immigrants to the United States. He stated that while Czechs were culturally acceptable, "the other slavs reveal the propensities of a rude, undeveloped people of undisciplined primitive passions." In fact he stated that Czechs were closer to Germans in cultural advancement than other Slavic groups.^[xix] A 1915 article in *Living Age* stated that the Czechs were really a culturally advanced people, and the vanguard of a refined Slavic culture.^[xx] The image of Czechs as an advanced Slavic civilization also remained at the outbreak of World War I, however they were still hampered by the popular belief that no matter how advanced they were, the fact that they were Slavic made them inherently inferior to Germans.

At the beginning of World War I, the image of the Teuton continued to be positive in the Western press. In late 1914, Robert Mc Elroy, a writer for *Outlook*, depicted the Germans as an advanced civilization. He claimed that the desire for democracy and freedom, which was the philosophical base of all advanced civilizations, was innately a Teutonic characteristic. While he praised the Germans as a people, he was critical of at least one segment of the population--the Prussians. He pointed out that they were militaristic and were responsible for the entire war. Mc Elroy reasoned that since the Prussians were a mixed race of Teuton and Slav, they were not as civilized as other Germans. He believed that since they were militaristic, warlike and uncivilized this was proof that Prussians were more Slav than Teuton. The author blamed the intermixing of

both civilizations in Prussia, for degrading the superior Teutonic people.^[xxi] Yet, even with the Prussian exception, the popular image of the Teutonic "race," as a high culture, was intact at the beginning of World War I.

These nineteenth century images however were not permanent. The Teuton image as a higher civilization suffered because of German involvement during the war in addition to Anglo media bias and coverage throughout the conflict. As the press in the United States favored the Allies during the war, the image of the German race as an advanced civilization came into question.

The Dumba affair of 1915 started to shatter the positive image of the Teuton. Constantin Dumba was the Austrian ambassador to the United States at the beginning of World War I. In September of 1915, the press leaked a letter from Dumba to an official in Austria. In the letter, Dumba asked Austria for money to encourage Austrians in America to help sabotage the manufacture of war materials. He claimed that he was going to accomplish this by publishing anti-American propaganda within German language newspapers circulated in the United States. Soon afterward, Wilson deported him.^[xxii] Many American newspaper editors were outraged by the incident. While reporting the incident, the editor of the *New York Times* demanded his deportation.^[xxiii] A writer in *Literary Digest* portrayed Dumba as untrustworthy and suggested the removal of all Austrian officials in the United States.^[xxiv] The American press in general reacted negatively to Dumba's actions and the coverage thus hurt the image of Austrians in the United States.

The Dumba affair was not the only incident that questioned Austrian character within the United States. The arrest of Alice Masaryk on October 28, 1915 stirred more controversy in the United States. Alice Masaryk was the daughter of Thomas Masaryk, an exiled Czech nationalist politician who at the time fought for Czech independence. The Austrian police arrested Alice Masaryk because they believed she was in possession of seditious literature against Austria. Alice Masaryk had close ties to America. Her mother was American and she spent some time living in Chicago at the turn of the century. While in Chicago, she became involved with a settlement house and interacted with other Progressive Era social activists in the United States.^[xxv]

In April, following the arrest of Alice Masaryk, Thomas Masaryk wrote letters to Mary McDowell and Charles Crane. McDowell and Crane were prominent social activists in Chicago and knew Alice Masaryk from the settlement houses in Chicago. Both also were proponents of Czech independence and were active in Czech nationalist organizations. They quickly wrote letters to the newspapers and arranged mass meetings in Chicago and New York to help encourage support for the Masaryk family and proselytize the American press to believe that the Austrian government was ruthless and partisan concerning the matter. They also formed the Alice Masaryk committee in order to bring attention to her arrest, while visiting women's clubs for support to pressure Wilson to act on Alice Masaryk's behalf.^[xxvi]

The newspapers and support groups emphasized Alice Masaryk's maternal ties to the United States. Because of her social work, the press also depicted her as noble and innocent, while portraying the Austrians as vicious and distrustful.^[xxvii] This propaganda challenged the earlier notions of a civilized benevolent Austrian people.

Perhaps the greatest attack on the Teutonic image was the unrestricted submarine warfare Germany declared on ships traveling to and from England. In 1915, German

leaders decided to use their "secret weapon," the submarine, to engage the British in ocean warfare.^[xxviii] Before this point, pre-war codes of military conduct required German submarine commanders to notify the captain of a commercial ship before he attacked. Once notified, the captain could remove any non-military passengers. Since German submarines were so sluggish that commercial vessels often escaped during this process, the German military command decided to violate that code of war. In May of 1915, the British passenger ship *The Lusitania* was an early victim of this new German policy. It was attacked off the Irish coast claiming over one hundred American casualties. According to many American editorials, the press wanted Wilson to take harsh measures against Germany, because of its new aggressive war policy. After the German navy sunk the *Lusitania*, the American press felt betrayed by Germany because they believed that the United States was truly a neutral country at that time in the war.^[xxix]

During the several months of German unrestricted submarine warfare, the American press portrayed the German people as bereft of any culture.^[xxx] A *New York Times* editorial stated, "[the] Germans should no longer make war like savages drunk with blood...Germany in her madness would have it understood that she is at war with the whole civilized world."^[xxxi] The *Washington Post* claimed that only an uncivilized nation could violate a humane code of war.^[xxxii] The press no longer depicted Germans as an advanced, truly civilized nation. In another example, a political cartoon in the *Philadelphia Evening Ledger* reenacted the sinking of the *Lusitania*. According to the cartoon, the *Lusitania* symbolized civilization. The German submarine symbolized Kultur. Kultur was the term given to the social force that causes evolutionary development to create a higher form of civilization. The cartoon depiction was metaphoric for the changing perception of German cultural advancement. Another cartoon in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, also critical of the *Lusitania* affair, depicted a skull patrolling the Atlantic Ocean in a German military helmet with the words, "cold blooded murder" written on it.^[xxxiii] These kinds of satirical criticism were typical of the changing belief in America that the German people had stopped evolving as a civilization and reverted back to barbarism. In fact another political cartoon, by the *Brooklyn Eagle*, depicted a German soldier as not as a human, but as a gorilla. The subtitle noted the picture as "THE BEAST TALKS LIKE A MAN."^[xxxiv] According to the World War I American press, Germans were now uncivilized and savage, similar to the late nineteenth image of the Slav.

While Austrians were not implicated in the sinking of the *Lusitania*, they also suffered. The Austrians and Germans were both ethnic Germans and ethnic Germans were "racially" Teutons. The Dumba and Masaryk affairs coupled with the wartime German submarine policy fostered an unsavory American image of Austrians during World War I and German people for the next two decades.

Whereas the image of the German changed during the war, the colonial idealism of "the white man's burden" had not changed much. In 1913, a British magazine published an article about the disturbing ethnic tensions in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The article suggested that an empire could no longer harshly rule over another race, as was the case in previous centuries.^[xxxv] One American magazine in November of 1918, commenting on countries in the former Ottoman Empire which were handed to England to administer as mandates after the war, stated that, "Arabia, Palestine and Mesopotamia already enjoy the blessings of British rule."^[xxxvi] Throughout the conflict, the popular notion of colonialism was intact, but now proponents loudly voiced a demand for benevolent rule.

Many Czechs, hopeful for an independent homeland, thought they could exploit the Austrian record of malevolent rule as a defense for Czech independence. Czech and Czech-American organizations, like the Bohemian Alliance and the Czechoslovak National Council, formed early in the war to distribute war time propaganda and persuade Wilson to support an independent Bohemia, often reported to the *New York Times* incidents of Austrian repression of Czechs in Bohemia. They informed the American press that many Czech newspaper editors and reporters had been executed and imprisoned as a result of Austrian repression during the war. These groups attempted to both undermine the Austrian image in the United States and to rally support for an independent Bohemia.^[xxxviii]

Charles Pergler, a Czech living in the United States and vice president of the Bohemian Alliance, knew the importance of not only discrediting Hapsburg rule but also presenting Czechs as an advanced civilization. In an article in an American journal, Pergler claimed that the Czechs should rule themselves because they have proven to the world that they were economically and culturally developed. He also noted that the Austrians were not benevolent rulers. He pointed out that the German (Austrian) minorities oppressed the Czech majority in his homeland. According to Pergler they were unfit to rule. He also highlighted the advancement of Czech civilization.^[xxxviii] While Pergler's article did not circulate to the masses of Americans, it was significant. Evidently Czech intellectuals realized that Austrians had lost some status as a high culture, and with some useful propaganda Czechs could assume responsibility for governing their own national destiny. Pergler, similar to Count Lutzow thirteen years earlier, attempted to uplift the popular perception of Slavs in order to gain Czech independence.

While the effort to gain Czech independence paid off in terms of an independent state, it was not a complete success in challenging popular archaic images of "race." Culturally, the image of the Slav remained. A November 1918 political cartoon in the *St. Louis Star* summed up the image of the Slav at that point. The cartoon editorialized the dismembering of the Austrian Empire. The artist depicted six of the new post-war countries formed out of the former Austrian Empire. The cartoon characterized each ethnic group as a small child at a dinner table awaiting a piece of pie. The pie represented the former Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The cartoon aptly showed that little change had occurred in the image of the Slav since the late nineteenth century. In the mind of the American press, little children were symbolic of Slavic people, representing a child like race. To the press, they were an immature civilization. The artist depicted the Czech child as the oldest of all the children at the table, which stemmed from the notion of Czechs as the most civilized of all Slavs.^[xxxix] Although World War I freed the Czechs from their colonial rule, the "racial" legacy of the late nineteenth social scientists remained with the Slavic people.

Czech nationalist groups protesting for independence and Austrian diplomatic stubbornness for peace influenced American public support for an independent Czecho-Slovakia. Their victory was not pervasive, however, because they could not overcome their image as an inferior civilization. They gained popular support for independence merely by default. Culturally, Austrians were no longer a civilization that could rule benevolently. If Austria did not suffer from a change in image and a reevaluation of its status as a culturally advanced civilized colonial power, the popular desire to support Czech independence in the United States would have been harder for Czech groups to win over. Luckily for Czech nationalists, perceived racial hierarchies by World War I were in a state of flux. By the end of the war, the popularly accepted racial hierarchy of colonial nations whose civilizations were perceived capable of carrying out the mission of "the white man's burden" was not as static as it was in the nineteenth century.

Ironically however, the racial notions of Slavs remained static throughout the period and Czechs did not enjoy an elevation in racial status as the racial status of Germans declined. Accordingly, Glant noted that pro-Czech propaganda was unsuccessful in influencing Wilson and other United States policy makers. In addition wartime propaganda also was not successful in challenging the pre-war racial image of Czechs and other Slavic people as a truly advanced civilization.

Endnotes

[i] *Washington Post*, 4 September 1918, 6; *New York Times*, 4 September 1918, 10.

[ii] Victor S. Mamatey, "The United States and Czechoslovak Independence," in *Czechoslovakia: Crossroads and Crises, 1918-1988*, ed. Norman Stone and Eduard Strouhal (London: Macmillan Press 1989), 64-68,73; Betty Miller Unterberger, *The United States, Revolutionary Russia, and the Rise of Czechoslovakia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 24-31; Otakar Odlozilik, "The Czechs," in *The Immigrants' Influence on Wilson's Peace Policies*, ed. Joseph P. O'Grady (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press 1967), 221-223.

[iii] Tibor Glant, "The War for Wilson's Ear: Austria-Hungary in Wartime American Propaganda," *Hungarian Studies Review*, 20(Spring/Fall: 1993), 25-51.

[iv] Note that it is hard to determine how much influence these specific Czech nationalists groups had in hurting the image of Germans during the war, since the government also successfully sponsored anti-German propaganda through the activities of the Creel Committee.

[v] Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought: The Interaction Between Biological and Social Theory* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 141-142; Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 335-340.

[vi] Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1979), 227-228.

[vii] "The Slavonic [sic] Races of Europe", *National Quarterly Review*, 35 (July 1877) 106.

[viii] Allan Mc Laughlin, "The Slavic Immigrant", *Popular Science Monthly*, 63 (May 1903) 30-31.

[ix] Booker T. Washington, "Races and Politics", *Outlook*, 98 (3 June 1911) 260.

[x] Trenaues Prine-Stevenson, "King of Bohemia", *Independent*, 53 (29 August 1901) 2037.

[xi] Count Lutzow, "American Influence on Austria-Hungry", *World's Work*, 9 (December 1904) 5645.

[xii] Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 59-60,62,132.

[xiii] Glant, "The War for Wilson's Ear: Austria-Hungary in Wartime American Propaganda," 25-51.

[xiv] "The 'Bohemian' Settlement", *Spectator*, 64 (25 January 1890), 109; While the *Spectator* was a British magazine, it was also distributed in the United States. Many editorials of the popular British magazines were also reprinted and debated in the American press. Generally the opinions of "race" during this period were similar in both American and British journals.

[xv] Robert Crozier Long, "Race Questions and British Policy: A Letter From Vienna", *Fortnightly Review*, 92 (1 July 1909), 165.

[xvi] Archibald R. Colquhoun, "Francis Joseph: The Man", *Outlook*, 87 (2 November 1907) 481.

[xvii] "A Contrast Between Two Souls--The Slav and the Teuton", *Current Opinion*, 57 (November 1914), 345.

[xviii] William Milligan Sloane, "Teuton Against Slav: Dynastic Ambitions and Racial Entanglements that Underlie the Great War", *Independent*, 79 (10 August 1914), 205.

[xix] Edward Ross Alsworth, "The Slavs in America", *Century*, 88 (August 1914), 592,590; Ross further explained that Slavs had a low capacity for learning, and innately they tended to be alcoholics. To Ross the Czechs were the exceptions to all derogatory rules regarding Slavs.

[xx] "The True Slav", *Living Age*, 284 (23 January 1915), 249.

[xxi] Robert Mc Nutt Mc Elroy, "The Prussian War Against Teuton Ideals", *Outlook*, 108 (4 November 1914), 540.

[xxii] Gerald H. Davis, "The Fall of Ambassador Dumba", *School of Arts and Sciences Research Papers Georgia State College*,

[xxiii] *New York Times*, 9 September 1915, 1,10.

[xxiv] "Dismissal of the Austrian Ambassador", *Literary Digest*, 51 (18 September 1915), 237-238.

[xxv] Ruth Crawford Mitchell, ed., *Alice Masaryk, 1879-1966: Her Life as Recorded in Her Own Words and by Her Friends*, Pittsburgh: University Center for International Studies, 1980, 69-70,85.

[xxvi] Mitchell, *Alice Masaryk*, 86-90; *New York Times*, 23 April 1916, 4; *New York Times*, 30 April 1916, 3; Mary Mc Dowell, "Tried in Her Father's Stead", *Survey*, 36 (29 April 1916) 116.

[xxvii] Mitchell, *Alice Masaryk*, 86-90; McDowell, "Tried in Her Father's Stead", 116.

[xxviii] William Carr, *A History of Germany, 1815-1990* (London: Edward Arnold 1991), 221-222.

[xxix] *Washington Post*, 9 May 1915, 4; *New York Times*, 8 May 1915, 10; *Chicago Tribune*, 8 May 1915, 5.

[xxx] "Rocking the Boat", *Literary Digest*, 50 (22 May 1915) 1200-1201; "The Poll of the German and American Press", *Outlook* 111 (1 September 1915), 26.

[[xxxix](#)] *New York Times*, 8 May 1915, 10.

[[xxxviii](#)] *Washington Post*, 9 May 1915, 4.

[[xxxvii](#)] *Literary Digest*, "Rocking the Boat", 1200.

[[xxxvi](#)] "Unscrambling 'Mitteleuropa'", *Literary Digest*, 59 (9 November 1918), 12.

[[xxxv](#)] "The Problem of Austria-Hungry", *Fortnightly Review*, 99

[[xxxiv](#)] *Literary Digest*, "Unscrambling", 7.

[[xxxiii](#)] *New York Times*, 13 December 1914, 2; *New York Times*, 4 January 1915, 2; *New York Times*, 18 January 1915, 3; *New York Times*, 7 February 1915, 3.

[[xxxii](#)] Charles Pergler, "The Bohemian Question", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 76 (July 1917), 151,156,160.

[[xxxix](#)] *Literary Digest*, "Unscrambling 'Mitteleuropa'", 9.