

# A Victim Among Martyrs? Czech Victimhood Nationalism during the First World War

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## Abstract

Victimhood nationalism has gained considerable attention in the past decade within nationalism studies. This theoretical article shows how recent research in the fields of international relations and victimology can help improve our understanding of Czech (Czechoslovak) nationalism. To do so, this study is using a selection of newspaper articles and unpublished archival materials from the period of the First World War, covering propaganda activities of Czechs (Masaryk, Beneš) and their allies or acquaintances in France, as well as those of Czech-Americans in the United States of America.

By drawing on the definitions of victimhood nationalism within the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Adam B. Lerner, and of Early Modern religious martyrdom by Brad S. Gregory, as well as on recent research conducted by Andrea Orzoff regarding the national identity of interwar Czechoslovakia, I highlight the importance and the singular aspect of the use of victimisation as a diplomatic and political strategy in the Czech case during the First World War.

## Keywords

nationalism, Czechoslovakia, First World War, propaganda, myth, victimhood, martyrdom, victimhood nationalism

## Introduction

Victimhood nationalism has gained considerable attention over the past decade, especially within the fields of international relations, political sciences, and of course a closely related interdisciplinary field, nationalism studies. Nevertheless, most of these recent research efforts have so far been concentrated on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as specific well-known cases such as Yugoslavia, Palestine, and Israel.<sup>1</sup> The Irish and Baltic cases were also covered by recent inquiries into the use of victimisation within a political framework and the theorisation of victimhood nationalism.<sup>2</sup> This theoretical study demonstrates that it

1 See for instance for the Palestinian and Israeli cases: CAPLAN, Neil: Victimhood in Israeli and Palestinian National Narratives, in: *The Middle East Book Review* 3, 2012, 1–19. For the Israeli and Yugoslav cases, see for instance: LERNER, Adam B.: The Uses and Abuses of Victimhood Nationalism in International Politics, in: *European Journal of International Relations*, 2019.

2 See: OKAWARA, Kentaro: A Critical and Theoretical Re-imagining of 'Victimhood Nationalism': The Case of National Victimhood of the Baltic Region, in: *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, 9, 2019, 4, 206–217; FERGUSON, Neil – BURGESS, Mark – HOLLYWOOD Ian: Who Are the Victims? Victimhood Experiences in Postagreement Northern Ireland, in: *Political Psychology*, 31, 2010, 6, 857–886.

is relevant to use an earlier case, namely Czech victimhood nationalism during the period of the First World War, to analyse the historical developments of victimhood nationalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, this type of national discourse and identity was already present prior to the Second World War in the Central European region, as research has shown for the interwar period for instance.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this article also aims to show how historical research could benefit from and contribute to recent interdisciplinary discussions within nationalism studies, especially by highlighting the existence of long-term developments of and patterns within victimhood nationalism. This could strengthen some arguments made regarding the (challenged, at times)<sup>4</sup> definition of victimhood nationalism, as shown later in this paper.

The fact itself of being a victim and the act that turns one into a perpetrator or a victim, namely victimisation and crime respectively, are the main subjects of one field, criminology, and one so-called sub-field, victimology. The latter has sometimes been defined as a sub-field due to its lack of complex and thorough scientific theorisation so far;<sup>5</sup> this situation is also a consequence, or side-effect perhaps, of its interdisciplinary character, which led to the neglect of the study of victims as a focus group.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, thanks to its multifaceted particularity victimology welcomes a diversity of scientific approaches, among them historical research – one that has been guilty of disregarding victims as a study subject in the past, though it also provided “a measure of empirical evidence to challenge the ‘marginality’ of victims in past centuries.”<sup>7</sup> Due to this lack of extensive research concerning the concept of victimisation from the perspective of the victims, recently addressed thanks to the introduction of victimology surveys in various countries,<sup>8</sup> another concept has been belatedly taken into consideration, namely the (mis)use of the status of victim in national and international politics. Indeed, despite a continuous use of victimhood nationalism by various national groups since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a proportionally small effort has been made within the scientific community to identify its characteristics, its economic and social developments or roots, its consequences on international law and international relations, or more importantly, what made and makes victimhood nationalism a successful strategy from the perspective of its advocates within a nation, and what precipitated or precipitates its downfall.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, the past decade has shown an increased interest in both victimisation from the point of view of criminology and victimhood nationalism from the field of international relations and political sciences. Therefore, up-to-date definitions of these concepts are now readily available, thus allowing other more peripheral fields such as history to build on these findings and enhance our understanding of victimhood nationalism as a *longue*

3 ORZOFF, Andrea: *Battle for the Castle: The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe 1914–1948*, New-York 2009; HEIMANN, Mary: *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed*, New Haven 2009.

4 OKAWARA, 214.

5 WALKLATE, Sandra: Perspectives on the Victim and Victimisation, in: *Handbook of Victims and Victimology*, WALKLATE, Sandra (ed.), Devon 2007, 13; ROCK, Paul: Theoretical Perspectives on Victimisation, in: *Handbook of Victims and Victimology*, WALKLATE, Sandra (ed.), Devon 2007, 37–61.

6 ROCK, 39–41.

7 KEARON, Tony – GODFREY, Barry S.: Setting the Scene: A Question of History, in: *Handbook of Victims and Victimology*, WALKLATE, Sandra (ed.), Devon 2007, 17.

8 ROCK, 48.

9 LERNER, 18–19.

*durée* phenomenon. This article addresses the topic from the Czech perspective, making use of updated definitions and recent theoretical advances originating from the fields of criminology, victimology, international relations, and cultural studies. I put the four key characteristics of victimhood nationalism as outlined by Adam B. Lerner to the test through the study of a selection of published and unpublished archival sources such as newspaper articles and personal correspondence, from the period of the First World War. These sources encompass propaganda activities of Czech diplomats (yet unofficial at the time) such as Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš, similar efforts from their allies and acquaintances in France, as well as Czech-American propaganda articles published in the United States of America. One Czech-Jewish source was also included for this study in order to demonstrate certain aspects with more clarity. By examining all these sources together, the relevance of Lerner's theoretical findings is highlighted and the definition of Czech nationalism as victimhood nationalism during the First World War can be established. The choice of the Czech case specifically (thus excluding the Slovak side) was motivated by three aspects: first, the Czech nation-building process was more developed than the Slovak one in 1914,<sup>10</sup> therefore the discourse offers an interesting picture of the narrative during the chosen period; second, due to the Compromise of 1867 and the structure of the Habsburg Empire prior to the Dual Monarchy, it is rendered difficult to associate both groups into the Czecho-Slovak (Czechoslovak) identity since they had significantly different historical experience;<sup>11</sup> third, as was shown previously, the Czechoslovak national identity that resulted from this phase of development leading to an independent state was predominantly Czech.<sup>12</sup>

## Defining Victimhood Nationalism

Adam B. Lerner draws indeed the following attributes from his analysis of victimhood nationalism: international, political, transgenerational, and adaptable. It is international since it involves at least two distinct nations, and often an additional third-party nation – with various degrees of political autonomy, ranging from full independence to severe limitations of political representation and rights.<sup>13</sup> The political characteristic can be explained from two approaches, the first one being that “victims have agency, they often have a political will and they actively give meaning to victimhood through various practices.”<sup>14</sup> Secondly, victimhood nationalism “politicise[s] collective trauma,” and therefore it has political consequences on the formation of a national identity and on the political process of

10 LASS, Andrew: Romantic Documents and Political Monuments: The Meaning-Fulfillment of History in 19th-Century Czech Nationalism, in: *American Ethnologist*, 15, 1988, 3, 456–71; COHEN, Gary B.: Recent Research on Czech Nation-Building, in: *The Journal of Modern History*, 51, 1979, 4, 772.

11 In addition to previously cited sources, see: BAKKE, Elisabeth: *Doomed to failure? The Czechoslovak Nation Project and the Slovak Autonomist Reaction 1919–1938*, PhD diss., Oslo 1998; SUDA, Zdeněk: The Curious Side of Modern Czech Nationalism, in: *Czech Sociological Review*, 9, 2001, 2, 225–234.

12 HÁJKOVÁ, Dagmar – WINGFIELD, Nancy: Czech(-Oslovak) National Commemorations during the Interwar Period: Tomáš G. Masaryk and the Battle of White Mountain Avenged, in: *Acta Histriae*, 18, 2010, 3, 425–452.

13 LERNER, 2.

14 HOONDEERT, Martin – MUTSAERS, Paul – ARFMAN, William: Introduction, in: *Cultural Practices of Victimhood*, 2018, 3.

nation-building.<sup>15</sup> Its transgenerational aspect lies in the fact that it implies grievances that transcends the generational boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Last but not least, it is adaptable in time and in space,<sup>17</sup> and therefore it can be re-framed and re-phrased within various contexts, geographical areas, and historical periods.<sup>18</sup>

As he rightly points out, the use of victimhood for political purposes is widespread throughout the world, and it was not a phenomenon that emerged only recently. The Central European region was submerged by victimhood and martyrdom narratives long before the use of such national discourses became a critical topic for political scientists in relation to post-Second World War conflicts in the Middle East or during the post-communist period in Europe, for instance. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and until the fall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918, all nationalities present in this region had elaborated their own version of nationalism with victimisation narratives at their core, and all were using it at various levels to put pressure on their respective governments. It is interesting to note here that this phenomenon also included national groups that were in a position of power or majority such as the (Austrian) Germans or the Hungarians. Victimhood nationalism in the Austrian case emerged as an official political discourse in the aftermath of the First World War and was “confirmed” following the Second World War, for instance.<sup>19</sup> In the former case, it was built on narratives present among the population already during the war and especially from 1916 onwards, as Maureen Healy shows through her thorough analysis of everyday life in wartime Vienna.<sup>20</sup> This period was crucial also for the Czech nation-building process since the official discourse that would prevail for the next two decades was elaborated during these years.<sup>21</sup>

The Czech propaganda organised mainly by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš on behalf of the Czecho-Slovak Council outside of the Czech lands during the First World War was no exception in terms of constructing their own version of official victimhood (or even tragic heroism)<sup>22</sup> narratives. Such propaganda was also present in a more limited scope within the Czech lands due to censorship. However, the example of *Rozvoj*, briefly mentioned later in this paper, is a very specific one that should not be considered as representative of the propaganda activities “from inside”, though it is relevant to include it in this study as will be explained. Most of the efforts within the Habsburg-governed territory were directed by the group of political figures around Karel Kramář as well as acquaintances of Masaryk. The new state that emerged from this period, the First Czechoslovak Republic also known as Czechoslovakia, was even described as the “child of propaganda” by British

15 LERNER, 3–4.

16 Ibidem, 9.

17 HOONDERT – MUTSAERS – ARFMAN, 1.

18 LERNER, 3–4.

19 HSIA, Ke-chin: ‘War Victims’: Concepts of Victimhood and the Austrian Identity after the Habsburgs, in: *Austrian Environmental History* 27, LANDRY, Marc – KUPPER, Patrick (eds.), Innsbruck 2018, 251.

20 HEALY, Maureen: *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*, Cambridge 2004.

21 HASLINGER, Peter: *Nation und Territorium im tscheschischen politischen Diskurs 1880–1938*, Munich 2010; ORZOFF, 35.

22 HAJKOVÁ – WINGFIELD, 436.

historian Herbert A. L. Fisher.<sup>23</sup> This significant impact shows how crucial it is to analyse discourses (and their spread or use) from a historical perspective: "Nations need a sense of the past but they also need the most accurate possible understandings of that past."<sup>24</sup> Incidentally, the most crucial phase of the Czech nation-building process occurred as the perception of victims in Western Europe was changing from that of a "real actor in the day-to-day practice of criminal justice" towards a "symbolic and generic construct in public discourse."<sup>25</sup> This corresponded to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; this switch of perception of the role of victims within the society was inevitably influenced by the images of pure and innocent victims within the Victorian era and the rise of Romanticism in literature and the arts.<sup>26</sup> Framing an entire nation as a – collective – victim thus became possible and legitimate, since the concept of victimisation ceased to be part of the sole judicial context of court proceedings and enforcement of justice for the preservation of public order and of the monarch's authority.<sup>27</sup> Besides, victims were not perceived solely as a technical element within the judicial system anymore: they were progressively incorporated into a public discourse framing them as passive, innocent, and vulnerable, seeking protection from a strong state that took an increasingly paternalistic image.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the Czech nation could theoretically be framed as a credible vulnerable and innocent victim of a terrible and oppressive Austrian-Hungarian state dubbed the "Prison of Nations" within this context, and it could even seek the protection of one or more of the great nations – France, Britain, or Russia in this specific case. We will see further in this article how this scenario corresponds to the definition of victimhood nationalism outlined by Adam B. Lerner.

At this point, it is important to clarify the choice of the term "victimhood" rather than "martyrdom". Indeed, the latter is traditionally used in historical research to describe the self-perception of Central European nations since most of them have their identity rooted in Christianity, and in their role as bulwarks of Christendom against Islam and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the Czech nation had a significant variation in its discourse embedded in the important religious difference of the Czech national myth during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup> Partly due to the influence of Masaryk – himself an advocate for secularism – and mainly due to the emphasis on the legacy of Jan Hus by the early Awakeners, who included among others Palacký and Dobrovský,<sup>31</sup> the Czech national myth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based on the recurrent centuries-old struggle of Bohemian (Czech) Hussite (Protestant)

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23 ORZOFF, 13.

24 HUNT, Lynn: *Writing History Today: From Postmodern Challenge to Global History*, in: *Czech and Slovak Journal of Humanities* 2, Olomouc 2018, 13.

25 KEARON – GODFREY, 24.

26 Ibidem, 24–25, 30–31.

27 See KEARON – GODFREY for more developed explanations regarding the evolution of the status of victims and the role of prosecution throughout history.

28 Ibidem, 30–31.

29 JOHNSON Lonnie R.: *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends*, New-York 2002, 64.

30 Ibidem, 92.

31 Ibidem, 66; ORZOFF, 17.

nobles against the Catholic Austrian (German) Habsburg oppressors.<sup>32</sup> The execution of Jan Hus in 1415 and the defeat at the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 were the main examples.<sup>33</sup> This motif was even overtaken by some Czech-Jews during the First World War to signal their loyalty towards the Czech state and their opposition to the Habsburg oppression.<sup>34</sup> Catholicism symbolically was or represented the main threatening “other” for the Awakeners, defining the Czech identity as a separate, different one from the rest of the region. In this context, a discourse in line with the traditional Central European and Catholic version of martyrdom or one that would defend the Roman Catholic Church was logically not the preferred options. This historical legacy, combined with the inclusion of non-protestant and non-secular national groups (such as Slovaks or Ruthenians, but also Jews, for instance) within the Czecho-Slovak nation project at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, oriented the Czech national discourse towards a relatively more inclusive<sup>35</sup> and secular version of the traditional Central European martyrdom, which drew closer to political victimhood. Though many publications focusing on this aspect of Czech identity prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century frame their studies in terms of (religious) martyrdom,<sup>36</sup> this paper shows how crucial it is for historians to use distinct terms that would accurately reflect this significant evolution in the Czech national discourse at the turn of the century. Thus, I use here the terms victimhood or victimisation specifically to establish a clear separation with the religiously connoted term martyrdom – which will not be the focus of this study. Besides victimisation and martyrdom, tragic heroism is a concept also used to describe another aspect of victimhood nationalism;<sup>37</sup> in this paper, it refers to the use of military heroism within a narrative focusing on victimhood, thus turning the act of war into an act of sacrifice for the nation (e.g. in the case of Czecho-Slovak Legions in Russia). As Ke-chin Hsia shows, certain categories of war victims in Austria were perceived as “dutiful hero-sufferers” during the post-war years leading to their inclusion into national victimhood discourses originating from all political sides. These discourses emphasised the difference between martyrdom, which was considered meaningless, and tragic heroism which was considered purposeful.<sup>38</sup> A similar situation, namely distancing from martyrdom and turning to a more political approach, happened in the case of the Czech (later Czechoslovak) national identity during the First World War, as this paper shows.

32 JOHNSON, 66–67; ORZOFF, 11; SUDA, 229.

33 HAJKOVÁ – WINGFIELD, 430.

34 Rozvoj, 1915, 10 July.

35 INGRAO, Charles: The Changing Face of Habsburg History: Truth or Consequences?, in: *Czech and Slovak Journal of Humanities*, 2, Olomouc 2018, 18.

36 JOHNSON, 66.

37 HSIA, 248–249.

38 Ibidem.

## Political Victimhood or Religious Martyrdom: The Czech Case

The notion of sacrifice is central to any study of victimhood and martyrdom, equally so; what defines whether this sacrifice belongs to one or the other is the way it is framed by the victim and by the society around them. The act of sacrifice can equally be a self-perception or an external one given by the society as a whole, or a specific community, for instance. This aspect of sacrifice is crucial for studies such as this one, since it means it can be both a personal story or storyline and a public discourse – whether official from a state or established government, or non-official from a minority (of any type) or a separate subgroup or community within the main official (national or not) group. Within the context relevant to this article, namely the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can find the former, personal storylines, in private letters, for instance, or in diaries. The latter, public discourse, can be found in a wide variety of sources such as newspapers, official documents including proceedings of parliamentary sessions, speeches, but also schoolbooks and any other material related to public life. This includes of course visual elements such as statues, ceremonials, clothes, and many others. Hence the need to have an interdisciplinary approach and to review progress made in such a broad range of fields.

In the case of the present study, the analysis focused on written forms of public discourse, mainly originating from newspaper articles. However, letters, therefore personal storylines, were also included for two reasons: first, these were written by public figures such as politicians who were aware of their status as such and who were using these storylines in their private communication; second, due to this fact, it is important to include these sources as they show the consistency (or disparities) between public and private discourses, as well as create a link between both. In his monograph about Early Modern martyrdom, Brad S. Gregory described the importance of this method of selecting sources to ensure that the resulting research would depict the Early Modern society and perception of martyrs with as much accuracy as possible.<sup>39</sup> This similar methodological approach helps defining both concepts (victimhood and martyrdom) in a comparative way. Furthermore, understanding Early Modern martyrdom is essential when focusing on the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Central European context. Indeed, most of the events that were used by the Awakeners of Central European nations to picture their national groups as victims took place during this period: in the Czech case, the Battle of White Mountain (1620) and the persecution of those considered rebellious or heretic that followed is one of the most well-known illustrations of this phenomenon.

It is important to underline that the border between martyrdom and its religious symbolism, on one side, and victimhood and its political struggle on the other, is very thin in Central Europe. The way sacrifice is interpreted by the public or non-public discourse defines whether a narrative belongs to the realm of religious martyrdom or political victimhood. As Terry Sullivan wrote, “nationalism took on the aura of a secular religion” and in Central Europe, the concept of nation as elaborated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was rooted in

39 GREGORY, Brad S., *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge Mass. 2001, 17–19.



one's language first, one's religion came second or was equally important.<sup>40</sup> Origins or ancestry came as a third criteria that had a symbolic though meaningful influence: tracing back noble Bohemian families to the Middle Ages and the so-called Golden Age of the Bohemian Crown.<sup>41</sup> Victimhood can be defined within the lines of International Relations and Political Sciences as seen previously, whereas martyrdom remains a very religious concept, anchored in liturgy and theological definitions.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, they both share some characteristics, as we can see when comparing Lerner's and Gregory's research. According to Brad S. Gregory, the requirements for martyrdom as a concept are: "the notion of martyrdom must exist and be available to contemporaries (...) there must be people willing to punish the heterodox with death (...) there must be people willing to die for their religious convictions (...) there must be survivors who view those executed for their religious convictions as martyrs."<sup>43</sup> The latter aspect also implies that martyrdom is transgenerational, as stories of those who are killed as martyrs are told by survivors to the next generations.<sup>44</sup> In the context of the First World War and the Czech case, martyrdom was indeed still present and widely used and recognised, though in terms that differed from the Early Modern perception; there was a regime enforcing rules through discrimination and sometimes persecution against those who did not comply with them, though these laws focused mostly on language and political affiliations or views; obviously there were survivors and people willing to die for their struggle, the latter being illustrated most famously by the Czecho-Slovak Legions abroad. Therefore, it is clear that despite all the shared characteristics, the main difference is the omnipresence of religious motives within martyrdom. As Gregory clearly states: "without [these elements], martyrdom either does not exist, does not occur, or is not understood as such."<sup>45</sup> The term "martyr" was often used by Czechs and Slovaks, as well as their allies, abroad and within the Czech lands, especially in press articles or politically charged publications or correspondence. It was not understood according to the religious definition of martyrdom, though, but rather based on political victimhood. There are many reasons for this that should be addressed in future research. Among them, the fact that the main bearer of this victimisation discourse during the period studied for this paper, Masaryk, was advocating for secularism;<sup>46</sup> the fact that the Czech and Slovak communities as national groups were diverse in terms of faith and religious affiliations; the fact that religion was increasingly becoming a secondary concern regarding how society defined itself and its struggles following the industrial revolutions and the rise of ideologies or doctrines such as nationalism and Marxism.

To illustrate this absence of religious motives, and therefore this shift from religious martyrdom to political victimhood, we can quote Ernest Denis' words from his major work about Czech history published in 1902: "Between persecutors and martyrs, between tyrants and victims, it is not possible for me to remain neutral; I hate oppression in every

40 SULLIVAN, Terry: Nationalism and the Nation State in Central Europe, in: *The Politics of Ethnicity in Central Europe*, London 2000.

41 JOHNSON, 28.

42 GREGORY, 7.

43 Ibidem, 26–27.

44 Ibidem, 25–26.

45 Ibidem, 27.

46 SUDA, 231.



shape and form, I believe in the triumph of justice, and that is why the cause of Bohemia is so dear to me."<sup>47</sup> Denis was close to some of the Awakeners of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he even had direct contact with František Palacký. Therefore, it was natural for him to use this term, "martyr", despite the religious connotations it had, since the original version of the Czech national discourse was rooted in the struggle of Hussites against Roman Catholics.

## **Czech Propaganda during the First World War: Victimhood as a Political & Diplomatic Tool**

When analysing sources from the First World War on the background of the model for victimhood nationalism presented by Adam Lerner, the use of this narrative as a political and diplomatic tool becomes clearer. This observation represents yet another significant element to argue that during this period, the Czech (Czecho-Slovak) national discourse was already evolving towards a strictly political version of victimhood nationalism – after a transition that has yet to be analysed thoroughly. This part of the study also shows how this model, coming from the field of international relations, can be applied to cases dating back to before the Second World War – offering a much-needed bridge between historical and political sciences in the study of nationalism(s). As mentioned previously in this article, we can summarise the characteristics of victimhood nationalism as follows, according to Adam Lerner: international, political, transgenerational, and adaptable. Besides these characteristics, it requires the existence of a collective trauma, or at least of a narrative of collective trauma – which needs not be rooted in empirical truth or experienced by the entire group that forms the nation.<sup>48</sup> During this analysis, attention must also be paid to the possible existence of a victim-perpetrator relationship that could be presented with the aim of performing victimisation, and the involvement of a third party. The First World War being a worldwide conflict, there were more than one third party; namely, we can say there were three main third parties, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America – the Entente powers fighting against the Central powers. Nevertheless, the sources examined for this article feature mostly two third parties: France and the United States of America.

In the Czech case, the international dimension of the discourse focusing on victimhood is perhaps the easiest to demonstrate. For instance, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Edvard Beneš, and the large majority of the architects of this political propaganda spent most of the war in exile outside of the Austro-Hungarian territory, thus intrinsically making their fight for Czecho-Slovak independence an issue of international diplomacy. This situation influenced the relations between the European states involved on all sides of the war (Central Powers, Entente Powers, and neutral states) in multiple cases, as well as the diplomatic communication. The Czecho-Slovak representatives were indeed not officially recognised as a government yet – and were even considered criminals from the Austrian-Hungarian government's perspective. It was therefore more complicated to avoid espionage from the enemy, as the instructions given by French statesman Louis Eisenmann in his letter sent

47 DENIS, Ernest: *La Bohême depuis la Montagne Blanche*, 1902, 2.

48 LERNER, 7.

on 11 December 1916 show.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, their private correspondence with and the numerous articles published by foreign diplomats, politicians, and scholars show the extent of their international outreach<sup>50</sup> beyond the Central and Eastern European region – and the traditional “allies” of Czechs within the Habsburg Monarchy.

A key document showing that all three characteristics were included in the Czech case during the First World War is the essay entitled “Austria Delenda Est” and written by Edvard Beneš in 1916. In one of his first handwritten drafts,<sup>51</sup> we can already see how Austria was designated as the perpetrator and the Slavic populations as the victims. A key observation that must be highlighted from this document is that it was introducing the main claims on the Czecho-Slovak side in a very detailed manner, thus defending their proportionality in relation to the charges made against the Austrian-Hungarian state. This is a crucial point since at that time, there was still a significant influence of previous approaches to victimisation within the political-judicial system in Europe; besides the symbolic role of victims, there was a tendency to emphasise the harm caused to a larger community (or the entire society in the eventuality it could threaten the established order) rather than the individual.<sup>52</sup> The text thus showed that Czech claims were not solely for the better good of their own community, but were made in the interest of all Slavic people in Central Europe and the Balkans – or even in the interest of the entire European continent. The “dismemberment” and “annihilation” of a sovereign state was and remains the ultimate sentence against this kind of perpetrator. Therefore, the alleged crime(s) had to be carefully characterised – in a similar manner as for an actual trial. The main accusation lies in the fact that Austria-Hungary, which is almost considered as one alleged criminal here, premeditated the murder of the Slavic communities. The “murder” here being the act of war, sending Slavic populations to the frontlines as an act of oppression. These, according to Beneš, were planned long before 1914 through fictional conspiracies that were invented by the Austrian-Hungarian government in order to target troublesome elements among Slavic political figures.<sup>53</sup> This accusation was also outlined with very similar arguments in articles published by a French scholar under the pseudonym Jules Chopin in the French journal *Le Mercure de France* on 16 March 1916 and 16 June 1916.<sup>54</sup> Both men were in contact through personal correspondence, which shows how coordinated the Czech propaganda was within the international diplomatic framework.

49 Masarykův Ústav a Archiv Akademie věd České republiky (Archives of Masaryk Institute and the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, hereinafter as MÚA), fund Edvard Beneš (hereinafter as EB) IV/1, cart. 73, sign. 240, folder R48/1/A1, doc. 48–50, letter from Louis Eisenman to Edvard Beneš, 11/12/1916.

50 For example, an overview of T. G. Masaryk's correspondence showing this international outreach can be found in: HÁJKOVÁ, Dagmar – ŠEDIVÝ, Ivan (eds.): *Korespondence T. G. Masaryk – Edvard Beneš (1914–1918)* (hereinafter as *Kor. TGM-EB*), MÚA, 2004; HLADKÝ, Ladislav – ŠKERLOVÁ, Jana – CIBULKA, Pavel (eds.): *Korespondence T. G. Masaryk – Slované; Jižní Slované*. Praha 2015; RYCHLÍK, Jan (ed.): *Korespondence T. G. Masaryk – slovenští veřejní činitelé (do r. 1918)*, Praha 2008.

51 MÚA fund EB IV/1, cart. 73, sign. 240, folder R48/1/A2, doc. 94, page 2, “Pourquoi l’Autriche-Hongrie doit être démembrée et anéantie ?”, handwritten notes (in French) by Edvard Beneš, 1916.

52 KEARON – GODFREY, 24.

53 MÚA fund EB IV/1, cart. 73, sign. 240, folder R48/1/A2, doc. 94, page 14, handwritten draft by Edvard Beneš, 1916.

54 CHOPIN, Jules: *L’Autriche-Hongrie : Brillant Second*, *Le Mercure de France*, 1916, 16 March; CHOPIN, Jules: *La Préméditation Austro-Hongroise*, *Le Mercure de France*, 1916, 16 June.

This can be linked to Lerner's argument that victimhood nationalism requires a malleable discourse that can be adapted to different audiences and contexts throughout space and time. The inclusion of all Slavic people of Central Europe within the narrative of victimhood enabled Southern Slavs, for instance, to claim a similar status of victim.<sup>55</sup> In a letter sent in December 1916, we can see how Masaryk coordinated these changes depending on the overall military situation: "Tell Dr Osuský to write an article about a) the Magyar atrocities against the Romanians – see Cantacuzino, the Romanians in Hungary, b) about the Romanian-Slovak and Serbian alliance – it was in the 1890s. The common programme is interesting now."<sup>56</sup> Even Romanians, who were not considered a Slavic but Latin national group due to their linguistic identity, were included in this political victimhood narrative hostile towards the Habsburg powers. It would be logical to interpret this as a will to show the proportionality of the harm caused by the Habsburg monarchy in comparison with the demands of its victims. Another explanation that is equally plausible is the intention to directly appeal to the third-party nation targeted by this article, namely France. Indeed, in early 1917, an article was published in the French journal *La Nation Tchèque* with this version of the victimhood narrative: "(...) all the oppressed nations of Central Europe, in Austria-Hungary and in the Balkans would have kept lamenting under the yoke of Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest."<sup>57</sup> At this point, *La Nation Tchèque* was already considered as the official propaganda channel of the Czecho-Slovak Council based in Paris. We must therefore consider this example within the context of diplomatic strategies on the side of the Allies.

In a telegram sent by Beneš to Masaryk in November 1916, we see once again that the focus was obviously political and not religious: he clearly states that an attack conducted against the Polish or Russian people represents an attack against "us", namely against Czechs and Slovaks.<sup>58</sup> Beside the fact that both these nations were not considered as natural allies of the Czechs, for both historical and religious reasons, it is interesting to note here that this "attack" was a strictly political one since it referred to a parliamentary reform. Once again, there was no trace of any religious motive, making this a clear case of political victimhood as outlined by Lerner: it was a political, international matter, that could easily be adapted to the (predominantly) Czech narrative.

Last but not least, the active involvement of Czech-Americans in the spread of this discourse focusing on political victimhood shows how Lerner's conceptual model can help with understanding the Czech case in the context of the First World War. Indeed, according to an article published in *Slavie* in December 1915, it was the "duty" of Czech-Americans to support the Czecho-Slovak struggle for independence in Europe.<sup>59</sup> This, despite the fact that most Czech-Americans reading this newspaper had emigrated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century or were children of those who emigrated to the United States. The example of *Rozvoj*,<sup>60</sup> a Czech-Jewish newspaper, also shows how this victimisation transcended generations

55 Německý Socialista proti Malým Narodům, in: *Slavie*, 1917, 29 June, 3.

56 Letter (in French) from T. G. Masaryk to E. Beneš, 8 September 1916, in: *Kor. TGM-EB*, 153.

57 La Bohême Indépendante et l'Italie, in: *La Nation Tchèque*, 1917, 1 February, 294.

58 Telegram from E. Beneš to T. G. Masaryk, 7 November 1916, in: *Kor. TGM-EB*, 174.

59 *Slavie*, 1915, 7 December, 2.

60 *Rozvoj*, 1915, July 10.

and traditional “national” group identifications. Indeed, references to the Czech struggle against the Habsburg were mirroring 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses, though stripping it from its divisive martyrdom elements.

The political victimhood discourse was thus transgenerational, political, international, and adapted depending on different contexts and audiences. It was done willingly in this manner in order to claim the right to independence.

By combining a historically accurate reading of the contemporary context of the Czech case during the First World War with the most recent research in the fields of international relations and nationalism studies, it is possible to show the existence of significant similarities between cases of victimhood nationalism from the second half and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this article, I showed that the Czech national discourse was rooted in victimisation narratives, but also that it is impossible to define it within the lines of religious martyrdom, unlike other Central European nations. Furthermore, this paper adds to recent historical research showing that there was a historical continuity in the use of such nationalism prior to the Second World War in Central Europe. For this region, political victimhood as featured during the Communist period<sup>61</sup> for instance was neither a recent nor a new phenomenon.

Future research could focus on analysing the characteristics that made this Czech-dominated national discourse of victimhood such a unique case within the Central European context already before the First World War broke out. If done in a thorough manner covering the main aspects of Czech (Bohemian and Moravian) society prior to the war, this would enable historians of nationalism, but also experts in international relations to have a clear overview of another version, namely an inclusive one, of victimhood nationalism, as well as its evolution in time, space, and (public, private) discourses.

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<sup>61</sup> With the example of the Communist interpretation of Jan Hus’ myth, for instance: JOHNSON, 68.

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