

“CRIMINAL REFUGEES”

Writing “Eastern Jews” into the Czechoslovak Nation-State (1918-1919)<sup>1</sup>

Every night the owners and guests of a restaurant in the Bellevue House in central Prague, close to the Charles Bridge, heard a strange noise. The mysterious clatter, which sounded like letters being stamped at a post office, and frantic activity seemed to occur regularly, followed by what sounded like furniture being moved. Foreign figures appeared and disappeared into the house, carrying suspicious pieces of luggage. This irregular activity was traced to the apartment of a “Polish refugee” named Wasservogel. That much was known, at least according to an alarmed article printed in the Agrarian daily *Večer* (Evening) in April 1920.<sup>2</sup> It was one of many reports in the Czech nationalist press about the alleged criminality of Jewish refugees still living in Czechoslovakia.

Research on the criminalization of those perceived as ethnically and/or culturally different, or on the criminalization of “minorities”, has shown how experts and popular discourses strengthened and confirmed persistent social and ethnic hierarchies and practices of control.<sup>3</sup> Building on this research, this article focuses on alleged criminality during a dramatic shift and a transition to new power relations: it examines the significance and meanings of the discursive criminalization of refugees during the period when Czechoslovakia was established. Using the concept of “moral panic”, it analyses the way accusations of criminality functioned in reframing communal identity and carving out the new nation-state’s citizenship and institutions.

In the first months of the First World War, more than 100,000 Jewish refugees from Galicia and Bukovina had already arrived in the Bohemian lands, alongside tens of thousands of refugees categorized as Italian, Ruthenian, Polish, or as belonging to other ethnicities. They were only one part of the wartime population displacement in the Habsburg monarchy: by early 1915, more than one million citizens

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<sup>2</sup> Tajemné klepání v bytě haličského uprchlíka [Mysterious Clatter in the Apartment of a Galician Refugee]. In: *Večer* no. 83, 13 April 1920, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Zimmermann, Volker: „Zigeuner“ als „Landplage“. Diskriminierung und Kriminalisierung von Sinti und Roma in Bayern und den böhmischen Ländern (Ende 19. Jahrhundert bis 1939). In: *Hlavačka, Milan / Luft, Robert / Lunow, Ulrike* (eds.): *Tschechien und Bayern. Gegenüberstellungen und Vergleiche vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*. München 2016, 207-223; Baloun, Pavel: Von der „Landplage“ zur „Fremden Rasse“. Die Repräsentation der „Zigeuner“ in der tschechoslowakischen Kriminalistik (1918-1939). In: *Bohemia* 59 (2019) 1, 50-76.

were on the move due to the military campaigns in Galicia and Bukovina as well as those on the southern fronts.<sup>4</sup> Their concentration in the Bohemian lands was a part of the wartime spatial management of forced displacement within the empire. At the beginning of the war, during the surprising Russian offensive into Galicia, many Jewish refugees fled to Vienna and other large cities where their relatives or acquaintances lived, and which promised better opportunities for making a living. By that time, there were about 100,000 refugees in the capital and about 20,000 in Prague, more than half of them Jewish.<sup>5</sup>

To prevent overcrowding, shortages, and possible instability, the authorities soon attempted to lock these cities: Vienna was officially closed for refugees from December 1914 and Prague, Brno, and Graz followed suit. The government also paired financial and material support for refugees with the imperative of spatial control. Many were dispatched to hastily constructed refugee camps, but most lived in close contact with the local population, in the officially defined "refugee communities", mostly smaller towns and villages.<sup>6</sup> Numerous sources document encounters with Jewish refugees and – ignoring the diversity among them – reflect especially on their real or perceived difference: their (Orthodox) dress, language (Yiddish), and behaviour as well as their lower hygienic standards. Their appearance attracted attention and helped to construct a discourse of difference. This discourse fit into pre-existing "knowledge" and fantasies about Jewish migration from the "East" as well as con-

<sup>4</sup> *Mentzel*, Walter: *Kriegsflüchtlinge in Cisleithanien im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Diss. Universität Wien 1997, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Národní archiv, Praha [National Archives in Prague (NA)], Policejní ředitelství Praha [Police headquarters Prague, PP], 1916–20, call number M/34/1, box 3015–21; *Morelon*, Claire: L'arrivée des réfugiés de Galicie en Bohême pendant la Première Guerre mondiale. Rencontre problématique et limites du patriotisme autrichien. In: *Histoire@Politique* 28 (2016) 10–11; *Rejzl*, Bohuslav: Haličtí uprchlíci v příbězích a kontextech české meziválečné literatury [Galician Refugees in Czech Inter-war Narration and Literary Context]. In: *Marginalia Historica* 7 (2016) 2, 237.

<sup>6</sup> *Mentzel*: *Kriegsflüchtlinge in Cisleithanien im Ersten Weltkrieg* (cf. fn. 4); *Mentzel*, Walter: Kriegserfahrungen von Flüchtlingen aus dem Nordosten der Monarchie während des Ersten Weltkrieges. In: *Bachinger*, Bernhard/*Dornik*, Wolfram (eds.): *Jenseits des Schützengrabens. Der Erste Weltkrieg im Osten. Erfahrung – Wahrnehmung – Kontext*. Innsbruck, Wien, Bozen 2013, 359–390; *Habartová*, Klára: Židovští uprchlíci z Haliče a Bukoviny v Čechách během první světové války [Jewish Refugees from Galicia and Bukovina in Heřmanův Městec during the First World War]. Diss. Univerzita Pardubice 2012; *Habartová*, Klára: Jewish Refugees from Galicia and Bukovina in East Bohemia during World War I in Light of the Documents of the State Administration. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 43 (2007) 139–166; *Dobeš*, Adam: Anti-Jewish Incidents in Jindřichův Hradec and Nová Bystřice in 1859. On the History of Modern Anti-Semitism. In: *Judaica Bohemiae* 47 (2012) 1, 55–83; *Rejzl*, Bohuslav: Váleční uprchlíci a vysídlení ve městech a obcích okresního hejtmanství Louny v letech 1914–1918 [War Refugees and Resettled People in the Towns and Villages of the Louny District in the Years 1914–1918]. In: *Poohří* 2 (2011); *Kuděla*, Jiří: Galician and East European Refugees in the Historic Lands. 1914–1916. In: *Review of the Society for the History of Czechoslovak Jews* 4 (1991–1992) 15–32; *Ruszała*, Kamil: *Galicyski eksodus. Uchodźcy podczas I wojny światowej w monarchii Habsburgów* [The Galician Exodus. Refugees during the First World War in the Habsburg Monarchy]. Kraków 2020.

structions of “Eastern Jews” which depicted them as deviating from notions of “civilized” culture and morality. Local chronicles, articles in the press, and reports about social protests and anti-Jewish violence document the shift from fascination to negative comments to outright antisemitism, which built on the tradition of antisemitic othering directed against the image of a primitive and untrustworthy “Eastern Jew”.<sup>7</sup>

Wartime intra-Jewish debates on the effects of the arrival of the often more traditional, Yiddish-speaking, and destitute brethren largely focused on Jewish identity and integration. On the other hand, non-Jewish reactions to the Jewish refugees in their midst increasingly revolved around the economy.<sup>8</sup> The wartime economic strain and shortages of food, coal, clothing, shoes, and other basic necessities further radicalized this discourse. Jews generally, and Jewish refugees specifically, were associated with both the state-introduced control of the economy and attempts to subvert it. They were blamed for the deficiencies of the state-created system of economic monopolies on purchasing and distributing food, coal, and other resources. On the other hand, an outsized role in the black market was also ascribed to them: hoarding supplies, smuggling, and *Kettenhandel/ketasení*, the chain trade, which led to a dramatic rise in prices.

The campaigns against Jewish refugees intensified from 1917 under the combined impact of growing hunger, the reopening of political life, and the relaxation of censorship. As demonstrations and protests grew in strength and radicalism, the remaining Jewish refugees were increasingly subject to violence, which persisted into the first months of inter-war Czechoslovakia.<sup>9</sup> The verbal and physical hostilities are often interpreted from the perspective of the wartime and early post-war shortages of food and other basic goods, and explained (away) as transitional phenomena

<sup>7</sup> Maurer, Trude: Ostjuden in Deutschland, 1918-1933. Hamburg 1986, 161-250; Aschheim, Steven E.: Brothers and Strangers. The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness 1800-1923. London 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Rechter, David: The Jews of Vienna and the First World War. London, Portland/Oregon 2001, 67-100; Rozenblit, Marsha L.: Reconstructing a National Identity. The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I. Oxford, New York et al. 2001, 59-81.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview see Frankl, Michal/Szabó, Miloslav: Budování státu bez antisemitismu? Násilí, diskurz loajality a vznik Československa. [Building a State without Antisemitism? Violence, the Discourse of Loyalty and the Creation of Czechoslovakia]. Praha 2015 (Židé, dějiny, paměť 2); see also Koeltzsch, Ines: Antijüdische Straßengewalt und die semantische Konstruktion des „Anderen“ im Prag der Ersten Republik. In: Judaica Bohemiae 46 (2011) 1, 73-99; Hadler, Frank: “Erträglicher Antisemitismus”? Jüdische Fragen und tschechoslowakische Antworten 1918/19. Stuttgart, München 2002 (Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts 1), 169-200; on violence see also Heumos, Peter: “Kartoffeln her oder es gibt eine Revolution”. Hungerkrawalle, Streiks und Massenproteste in den böhmischen Ländern 1914-1918. In: Mommsen, Hans/Kováč, Dušan/Mališ, Jiří (eds.): Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Beziehungen zwischen Tschechen, Slowaken und Deutschen. Essen 2001, 255-286; Konrád, Ota/Kučera, Rudolf: Cesty z apokalypsy. Fyzické násilí v pádu a obnově střední Evropy 1914-1922 [Roads Out of the Apocalypse. Physical Violence during the Fall and Reconstruction of Central Europe 1914-1922]. Praha 2018 (České moderní dějiny 5); Konrád, Ota: Two Post-war Paths. Popular Violence in the Bohemian Lands and in Austria in the Aftermath of World War I. In: Nationalities Papers 46 (2018) 5, 759-775. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2017.1354362> (last accessed 20 June 2022).

linked to the general chaos and lawlessness which marked the transformation to the new political order. Making the phenomenon temporary also means marginalizing it in terms of the history of inter-war Czechoslovakia and skipping over conflicts and campaigns about the presence of refugees "inherited" from the detested monarchy.

From 1915, after the Central Powers' counter-offensive, many refugees returned to Galicia and Bukovina as the authorities opened individual districts step-by-step for resettlement. Yet, thousands were still in the country after Czechoslovakia's declaration of independence. In the new nation-state, no longer citizens worthy of support, they immediately became unwanted aliens, or refugees, according to the current international definition. The Czechoslovak authorities excluded them from social entitlements and pressured them to leave. The actual departure of Galician Jews, however, was repeatedly postponed due to the unsettled situation in their home territory.<sup>10</sup> Returning proved to be difficult because of the widespread physical destruction, dispersal of families, and anti-Jewish violence as well as the refugees' general lack of documents and the post-war economic and political insecurity. The Czechoslovak state also temporarily tolerated the residence of those Jewish refugees who might risk their health on their uneasy way home.<sup>11</sup> The Jewish refugee committee estimated the total number of Jewish refugees from Galicia and Bukovina in Czechoslovakia at the beginning of 1919 at roughly 7,000. Only one-tenth of them still lived in Prague, mostly the elderly, sick people, and orphans.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the Prague police counted about 1,600 Jewish refugees in the entire Prague police district (which included the suburbs), a negligible number in a growing urban space of more than half a million inhabitants.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the number of Jewish refugees declined rapidly and only about 2,000 remained in Czechoslovakia by the end of the year. Since they were tolerated by the state on a temporary basis only, all Jewish refugees were *de facto* seen as alien, illegitimate, and potentially illegal migrants.

### *The Spectre of Jewish Criminality*

By 1918, constructions of a disproportional Jewish criminality were firmly established in public discourse and criminological science. Such notions accompanied discussions about the emancipation of Jews and were an integral element of anti-semitic discourses. As demonstrated by Daniel Vyleta and other scholars, the discussion about Jewish patterns of criminality played an important role in the rise of modern criminology (as did the construction of Roma criminality,<sup>14</sup> which was

<sup>10</sup> *Habartová*: Židovští uprchlíci z Haliče a Bukoviny v Čechách během první světové války 110-118 (cf. fn. 6).

<sup>11</sup> Flüchtlingslos – Judenschicksal. In: *Selbstwehr* 13 no. 12, 21 March 1919, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Die Flüchtlinge in der tschechoslowakischen Republik. In: *Selbstwehr* 13 no. 18, 2 May 1919, 5; Flüchtlingslos – Judenschicksal (cf. fn. 11).

<sup>13</sup> NA, PP, 1916-20, call number M/34/1, box 3022.

<sup>14</sup> For Czechoslovakia, see *Baloun*, Pavel: Metla našeho venkova! Kriminalizace Romů od první republiky až po prvotní fázi protektorátu (1918-1941) [The Scourge of Our Countryside! The Criminalization of the Roma from the First Republic to the Initial Phase of the Protectorate (1918-1941)]. Praha 2022; *Baloun*: Von der „Landplage“ zur „Fremden Rasse 50-76 (cf. fn. 3).

sometimes discussed in conjunction with Jewish criminality). Vyleta found that the criminological discourse defining the types of inborn criminals or inherited criminal traits showed little relationship to the alleged Jewish bodies and Jewish physiology outlined by the racial science of the time. Instead, in criminological discourse the Jew was depicted as a cunning manipulator, a master of deception conspiring and using a “secret” language, and a modern criminal created by the capitalist economy – a view which went hand in glove with antisemitic conspiracy theories.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, antisemitic publications and agitators conveyed a broad array of alleged Jewish transgressions which modernized traditional stereotypes and made it possible to translate them into modern discourses of criminality: for instance, Jews were described as usurers and speculators, weavers of conspiracies against the moral and political order, and drivers of prostitution and “white slavery”.<sup>16</sup> The medieval accusation of Jewish ritual murder, now modernized into the language of political antisemitism, even brought Leopold Hilsner from Polná to the dock. In 1899, this poor, vagrant Jew, who was often described in ways which were similar to later depictions of “Eastern Jewish” refugees, was accused of murdering a Christian girl. Against the backdrop of intense antisemitic campaigns, he was sentenced to death for a crime he didn’t commit. (The emperor reduced his sentence to life imprisonment.)<sup>17</sup>

The arguments on both sides of this debate remained relatively stable: from the time of Wilhelm von Dohm, the Prussian official who promoted Jewish emancipation, or Moses Mendelssohn, the German-Jewish proponent of the Jewish Enlightenment, the argument in favour of Jewish emancipation stressed the conditional aspect of Jewish economic criminality, deriving it from the restrictions under which Jews were forced to live and their unnatural occupational structure. Defenders would also consistently refer to a lower rate of other types of criminality such as physical violence and murder among Jews.<sup>18</sup> The echoes of the criminological debate about Jews in modern society in the Bohemian lands remain mostly unresearched and can only be illustrated through examples. For instance, in a long article in the journal *Čas*

<sup>15</sup> Vyleta, Daniel M.: Jewish Crimes and Misdemeanours. In Search of Jewish Criminality (Germany and Austria, 1890-1914). In: *European History Quarterly* 35 (2005) 2, 299-325; see also Vyleta, Daniel M.: *Crime, Jews and News. Vienna 1895-1914*. New York, Oxford 2007.

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of anti-Jewish stereotypes, see, for instance, Schoeps, Julius H./Schlör, Joachim (eds.): *Antisemitismus. Vorurteile und Mythen*, 2nd ed. München, Zürich 1996; and for an overview of accusations of Jewish criminality in Poland: Blobaum, Robert: *Criminalizing the “Other”. Crime, Ethnicity, and Antisemitism in Early Twentieth-Century Poland*. In: Blobaum, Robert (ed.): *Antisemitism and Its Opponents in Modern Poland*. Ithaca, London 2005, 81-102.

<sup>17</sup> Kovtun, Jiří: *Tajuplná vražda. Případ Leopolda Hilsnera* [Mysterious Murder. The Case of Leopold Hilsner]. Praha 1994; Černý, Bohumil: *Vražda v Polné* [Murder in Polná]. Praha 1968; Kieval, Hillel J.: *Blood Inscriptions. Science, Modernity, and Ritual Murder at Europe’s Fin de Siècle*. Philadelphia 2022, 139-182; Frankl, Michal: “Emancipace od židů”. Český antisemitismus na konci 19. století [“Emancipation from the Jews”. Czech Antisemitism at the End of the 19th Century]. Praha 2007, 272-303.

<sup>18</sup> Berkowitz, Michael: *The Crime of My Very Existence. Nazism and the Myth of Jewish Criminality*. Berkeley 2007, 5-14.

(Time), the organ of Thomas G. Masaryk's Realist movement, in 1889 an author (perhaps Masaryk himself) deployed Austrian criminal statistics to uncover specific patterns of Jewish criminality. Explained as a contribution to the discussion about the relevance of modern antisemitism, the argument was strongly based on anti-semitic ideas, for instance the presumption of Jewish cunning, which made it possible for their criminality to remain hidden. The data allegedly proved the prevalence of economic criminality and exploitation of the non-Jewish majority. Such transgression against the social order couldn't be explained by reference to the persecution which prevailed before emancipation. Quite the opposite: it testified to the modernity, education, and sophistication of emancipated Jews. Their equality should be made conditional, so the author argued, on ending such disproportional practices.<sup>19</sup>

By the end of the First World War, just as Hilsner was amnestied and released from prison, the growing intensity of anti-Jewish campaigns prompted a Jewish jurist to start a discussion about Jewish criminality in the Czech-Jewish journal *Rozhled* (Review): the author argued that accusations voiced against Jews during the war merited a more detailed statistical investigation. The core of the argument turned on the question of whether or not separate collection and analysis of data for "Jews" during the First World War was possible and how the available data was biased. While reacting to the rise of antisemitic criminalization, the debate was structured around traditional patterns of ideas about Jewish criminality and summarized criminological "knowledge" about Jews.<sup>20</sup> It also shows that to understand how established accusations were repurposed to explain the world of 1918, a more dynamic approach to discourses of criminality would be required.

In his book about Germany after the First World War, Richard Bessel considered the discourses of criminality part and parcel of the attempts to re-establish the moral order in a society allegedly broken by the war as a result of loosened social norms, laxer control over sexual relationships, an increase in the prevalence of venereal diseases, and an upsurge of prostitution.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the discussions of Jewish refugee criminality in Czechoslovakia need to be analysed in connection with the post-war social and political context. The 1919 campaigns built on the generally accepted understanding of a Jew as a modern criminal but reached beyond this framework. Although the continuities in the subjects and languages of antisemitism should be kept in mind, it is also important to note that the discourse of the criminality of Jewish refugees after the First World War was a part of a dramatic transformation.

<sup>19</sup> Příspěvek k objasnění židovské otázky [A Contribution to the Clarification of the Jewish Question]. In: Čas. List věnovaný veřejným otázkám III no. 36, 31 August 1889, 587-589; Příspěvek k objasnění židovské otázky (Pokračování a dokončení) [A Contribution to the Clarification of the Jewish Question (Continued and Completed)]. In: Čas. List věnovaný veřejným otázkám III no. 37, 7 September 1889, 601-607.

<sup>20</sup> Basch, Ant.: Kriminalita židů [The Criminality of Jews]. In: Rozhled no. 4, 25 January 1918, 3-4; Gutfreund, Pavel: K článku "Kriminalita židů" [More on the "Criminality of Jews"]. In: Rozhled no. 10, 8 March 1918, 5; Basch, Ant.: Ještě kriminalita židů [Again on the Criminality of Jews]. In: Rozhled no. 11, 15 March 1918, 6-7.

<sup>21</sup> Bessel, Richard: Germany after the First World War. Oxford 1993, 220-253.

While the policies and public picture of criminality are often analysed as functions of a more stable and durable system of social relations and hierarchies, Jewish criminality after the First World War was constructed at the same time as a new political order was being built. The subject of the debate was no longer Jewish emancipation or equality (although the anti-refugee campaigns affected them), but the new nation-state.

The campaign can be understood as a *moral panic*, a concept developed by the sociologist Stanley Cohen. It describes disproportional reactions to behaviour or acts which are understood as transgressions. It presupposes fear of a dramatic emergency and the sense of a threat to the social and/or political order. Cohen and many others pay particular attention to how the media distort and amplify often modest crimes and events into a perception of an imminent, dramatic danger.<sup>22</sup> To use the concept fruitfully, its temporary nature should be kept in mind. For instance, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, in their standard work on moral panics, highlight the limited duration of moral panics: “the fever pitch that characterizes a society during the course of a moral panic is not typically sustainable over a long stretch of time”. On the other hand, while such campaigns subside, some may become “routinized or institutionalized”.<sup>23</sup> The imagination of a group in radical opposition to social norms (“folk devils” in Cohen’s terminology) and the presentation of this group as a harbinger of social meltdown make the concept attractive for research on hostility to migrants and refugees; it is often invoked in this context. Cohen, for instance, highlighted the “culture of disbelief” in which refugees are primarily perceived as “bogus” economic migrants and the newspaper rhetoric which labelled refugees as criminals, described them as an invading army, and visualized them with the naturalizing metaphor of water (a “wave”, “flood”, etc.).<sup>24</sup>

Whereas Vyleta documented highly reported court cases that were investigated and mostly brought to trial, this article takes a different direction. The cases under scrutiny (provided there was any factual basis to them) were likely never properly investigated, and the culprits were probably not brought to trial and never entered criminal statistics. Even if the police really established the facts, the refugee would be expelled rather than heard in the courtroom. At least some newspaper articles refer to the individuals having been delivered to Fišpanka, the Prague facility for the

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, Stanley: *Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. London 2011. URL: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/knav/detail.action?docID=684015> (last accessed 20 June 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Goode, Erich / Ben-Yehuda, Nachman: *Moral Panics. The Social Construction of Deviance*. 2nd ed. Chichester/U.K., Malden/MA 2009, 41; Blobaum, on the other hand, deploys the concept to discuss campaigns spanning decades, but also locates the rise of the accusation in pre-First World War Warsaw.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen: *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* xxii-xxvi (cf. fn. 22); for further examples, see for instance Zahra, Tara: “Condemned to Rootlessness and Unable to Budge”. Roma, Migration Panics, and Internment in the Habsburg Empire. In: *The American Historical Review* 122 (2017) 3, 702-26. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/122.3.702> (last accessed 20 June 2022); Bauman, Zygmunt: *The Migration Panic And Its (Mis)Uses*. In: *Social Europe on 17 December 2015*. URL: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/migration-panic-misuses> (last accessed 20 June 2022).

deportation of unwanted foreigners (in Czech "postrk", in German "Schub") to their home communities and countries.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in these cases, the accusations are voiced against those stripped of significant aspects of legal protection by the state and no "courtroom drama" followed in which the characters of the alleged criminals would be put on display and confronted, facts established, and justice served. Consequently, none of the articles examined here was printed in a newspaper section dedicated to court trials or criminal investigation (as was usual for people who were put on trial). Instead, such articles were mixed indiscriminately with political and local news.

Accordingly, this article will give more attention to the function of the discourse of criminality than to the study of actual Jewish refugee criminality itself. It focuses on a short yet significant time frame and a specific type of transgression, which constitutes only a subset of the criminality attributed to Jews. It is based on non-expert coverage in the Czech press in approximately the first year of the existence of Czechoslovakia, with a focus on the spring and summer of 1919, which makes it possible to tease out the connections to nation-building. The article pays more attention to the Agrarian *Večer*, which had a significant impact on other journals and structured the arguments in the campaign. It explores how the discussion of criminal acts allegedly carried out by refugees, mostly of an economic nature, was transformed and repurposed in the process of building the new nation-state's institutions and citizenship.

#### *Moral Panic as a Genre*

A difficult matter it is – when those who opened the way for the [...] war-time high prices and usury have to part ways with us – the Polish Jews. This painful moment can break their hearts, these were indeed unforgettable years with us [...] No wonder that they are reluctant to leave, they walk the streets with sad eyes and their chins tremble with emotion as much as their fingers do.<sup>26</sup>

This ironic rendering of the forced departure of refugees, characteristic of many of the constructions of the Jewish refugee criminality in the Czech press after the First World War, appeared in *Národní listy* (National Papers) in August 1919, at the height of the campaigns against Jewish refugees and as part of the description of a case involving the Prague police and Galician refugees. Historians of criminality have paid attention to the discursive construction of crime and have analysed it as a form of social control.<sup>27</sup> For instance, Eric A. Johnson demonstrated how newspapers of different political stripes reported or omitted criminal cases according to their worldview: conservative papers, for instance, highlighted trials involving non-Germans and workers.<sup>28</sup> In a similar way, Regula Ludi, who has researched the development of modern criminal policies in Switzerland, stressed the politicization

<sup>25</sup> Co měl Isák na svém těle [What Isaac Had on His Body]. In: *Večer* no. 137, 20 June 1919, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Loučení [Farewell]. In: *Národní listy* 59 no. 191 (evening edition), 23 August 1919, 2.

<sup>27</sup> For an introduction, see *Schwerhoff*, Gerd: *Historische Kriminalitätsforschung*. Frankfurt am Main 2011 (Historische Einführungen 9).

<sup>28</sup> *Johnson*, Eric A.: *Urbanization and Crime. Germany 1871-1914*. Cambridge 1995, 70.



of criminality through which opposing ideologies and ideas about society are negotiated.<sup>29</sup> Scholars have also become sensitized to the role of language:<sup>30</sup> the above-mentioned article is an excellent point of entry into the specific genre of reporting on refugees' alleged criminality and the methods of personalizing and localizing such imagined crime.

Irony stands out as a key rhetorical device for criminalizing Jewish refugees, differentiating the genre from the usual courtroom reporting. Ironic description was more than simply a style that fed the public's demand for entertainment and easy-to-understand criminal stories. Based on a reversal of the real meaning, ironic communication divides the audience into those who understand and participate in the shared communicative act and those who don't and are thereby excluded. Ironic codes can only function if they are understood by the recipients; they require a shared frame of reference which makes it possible for readers to decode the message – and, by doing so, to confirm their belonging to an in-group and co-produce this shared cultural framework.<sup>31</sup> Used in this form, irony established solidarity and community and built or confirmed hierarchy. Poking fun at another group (while at the same time pretending to remain above the fray) established cultural supremacy and symbolically excluded the members of the ironized group from society. While used generally against marginalized groups and in connection with criminality, irony also had a particular relationship to established anti-Jewish language. The description of the physical appearance of Jewish refugees is often part of such ironic treatment, in line with the tradition of ridiculing Jews.<sup>32</sup> Trembling fingers, a code that appears in a number of articles, not only referred to a long-standing antisemitic visualization of gesticulating Jews,<sup>33</sup> but was also an alleged physical characteristic that denoted the criminality of "Eastern Jews".

In contrast, press reports about those who really were investigated for usury were much more informative and were often printed in the section dedicated to court cases.<sup>34</sup> For instance, newspapers provided in-depth coverage of the case of Václav Netušil, who was caught committing large-scale grain fraud in which he sold wagonloads to the "German" regions in Bohemia, an infringement of the state control of grain distribution. Although this case was harshly condemned as an example of

<sup>29</sup> *Ludi*, Regula: Die Fabrikation des Verbrechens. Zur Geschichte der modernen Kriminalpolitik 1750-1850. Tübingen 1999, 460.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, *Mayr*, Andrea/*Machin*, David: The Language of Crime and Deviance. An Introduction to Critical Linguistic Analysis in Media and Popular Culture. London, New York 2012).

<sup>31</sup> On irony, see, for instance, *Prestin*, Elke: Ironie in Printmedien. Wiesbaden 2000; *Groebe*, Norbert. Ironie als spielerischer Kommunikationstyp? Situationsbedingungen und Wirkungen ironischer Sprechakte. In: *Kallmeyer*, Werner (ed.): Kommunikationstypologie. Handlungsmuster, Textsorten, Situationstypen. Düsseldorf 1986.

<sup>32</sup> For instance, *Rohrbacher*, Stefan/*Schmidt*, Michael: Judenbilder. Kulturgeschichte anti-jüdischer Mythen und antisemitischer Vorurteile. Reinbek bei Hamburg 1991.

<sup>33</sup> *Haibl*, Michaela: Zerrbild als Stereotyp. Visuelle Darstellungen von Juden zwischen 1850 und 1900. Berlin 2000, 280-286.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, *Z úřadu pro potírání lichvy* [From the Office for the Eradication of Usury]. In: *Lidové noviny* 27 no. 62, 3 March 1919, 3.

wartime decay and profiteering, the press revelled in the details of his conspiracy and the riches he assembled. Nevertheless, these articles remained closer to the evidence, were more serious in tone, and lacked ironic scapegoating.<sup>35</sup>

As Regula Ludi recognized, personalization was an essential aspect of newspaper reporting about crimes committed by people whom readers did not know personally.<sup>36</sup> Describing an individual's path towards breaking norms offered valuable knowledge: a criminal's biography had educational value and could serve as a basis for social policy or policing strategy. Yet, unlike the usurer Netušil, whose history as a former high-school teacher and his family background were discussed in considerable detail, the alleged criminals who were Jewish refugees are only characterized in stereotypical terms as members of a despised group. While they were addressed by name, this naming was more of an antisemitic ritual drawing attention to their Jewishness than a focus on an individual.<sup>37</sup> The suppression of individuality in the discourse of criminality further contributed to the absence of the voices and agency of First World War Jewish refugees (almost no recollections and testimonies are available).<sup>38</sup> The distinctly contrasting strategies of personalization were most clearly articulated through the description of the policemen.

The above-mentioned article in *Národní listy* continued by putting the Prague police on the scene:

And since our detectives immediately get a bit too intimate, he [the detective] searched them head to toe [...] and found out that both Galician well-wishers of our people and of our state have a supply of various cute banknotes. [...] The jovial detective immediately offered the attractive triplets [the two Galician Jews and their local guide], of course innocent as the day, his company on the way to the police station where they were – with undiminished kindness – offered entertainment and a longer stay.<sup>39</sup>

The figure of the policeman takes on a particularly important role, especially in accounts of alleged Jewish refugee criminality in Prague. This strengthened the contrast between the vicious and criminal foreigners and the upright detectives, while simultaneously alluding to the popular genre of detective stories. However, the centrality of the policemen also played a twofold role: On the one hand, the police represented the nation, which allowed readers to identify with them. On the other hand, their investigations uncovered hidden truth, which implied a conspiracy – an essential building block of antisemitic discourses. The imagined and real deployment of

<sup>35</sup> "Císař" keřasů ["The Emperor" of Profiteers]. In: Večer no. 72, 28 March 1919, 3; Odhalení veliké aféry podloudného obchodu s obilím [Discovery of a Large Affair of Fraudulent Grain Trade]. In: Tribuna 1 no. 49, 28 March 1919, 2; Zásobovali Němce pomocí padělaných dopravních osvědčení [Supplies Sent to Germans Using Forged Transport Certificates]. In: Čech 44 no. 87, 29 March 1919, 7-8.

<sup>36</sup> Ludi: Die Fabrikation des Verbrechens 465-466 (cf. fn. 29).

<sup>37</sup> Bering, Dietz: Der Name als Stigma. Antisemitismus im deutschen Alltag 1812-1933. 2nd ed. Stuttgart 1988.

<sup>38</sup> Frankl, Michal: Exhibiting Refugeeedom. Orient in Bohemia? Jewish Refugees during the First World War. In: Judaica Bohemiae 50 (2015) 1, 117-129.

<sup>39</sup> Loučení. In: Národní listy 59 no. 191 (evening edition), 23 August 1919, 2. (cf. fn. 26).

policemen against Jewish refugees also validated the role of the police, which was widely delegitimized and criticized at the outset of Czechoslovak independence.<sup>40</sup>

In a series of mostly short articles, *Večer* and other journals claimed to follow the daily activity of Prague police detectives or the officials of the Office for the Eradication of Usury (Úřad pro potírání lichvy), a dedicated agency set up by the new nation-state to investigate profiteering from economic shortages and the controlled economy, which continued into the early post-war period. Journalists recorded stories of officials allegedly impersonating businessmen or waiters to gain access to illegal businesses and smuggling circles, or, for instance, to infiltrate gambling groups. This genre not only validated antisemitic discourses, but also set the righteous, courageous, honourable agents of the state against alien trespassers of the public and moral order.

In *Večer*, many of these stories were penned by Josef Hais Týnecký, a prolific author of popular novels and children's books who made his living as a journalist.<sup>41</sup> Neither antisemitic attacks nor coverage of the Prague police were new to him. In May 1918, he was even briefly detained by the police as he attempted to intervene on behalf of a group of angry women who demanded that a Galician trader to be searched for allegedly hoarding foodstuffs.<sup>42</sup> The episode also betrays an aspect of journalists' day-to-day interactions with police as well as the popular press's quest for attractive, if not sensational, criminal stories. In his articles, Hais Týnecký systematically described Jewish refugees as "unwelcome aliens",<sup>43</sup> which developed into an established, recognizable label. By using the phrase "Behold, 'unwanted aliens'", he contrasted this term with the biblical "Ecce homo", thereby discursively excluding the refugees from the community.

A long article in *Večer* (also possibly written by Hais Týnecký) reported on a police raid at the Café Passage, where it was suspected that an illegal gambling session was taking place. The article largely equated such gambling with Jewish refugees. While the police had information about this activity, it was as difficult "to catch this scum together [...] as forcing all 'unwelcome aliens' to leave our republic". To penetrate this secretive society and bypass their lookouts, a police commissioner dressed in a perfectly tailored tailcoat, attached false sideburns, and marched into the café with a white serviette over his hand, indistinguishable from a real waiter. Once in the saloon, he confiscated the jackpot and a unit of detectives rushed in to arrest the Jewish refugees described as "keřasové" (chain traders). One allegedly "incon-

<sup>40</sup> See also *Baloun*: Von der „Landplage“ zur „Fremden Rasse“ 55 (cf. fn. 3).

<sup>41</sup> *Lebrová*, Dobromila: Josef Hais Týnecký, novinář, beletrista, básník a dramatik [Josef Hais Týnecký, Journalist, Writer, Poet and Playwright], *Pozitivní noviny*, accessed 30 December 2013. URL: <http://www.pozitivni-noviny.cz/cz/clanek-2009040074> (last accessed 20 June 2022).

<sup>42</sup> *Náš redaktor zatčen* [Our Editor Arrested]. In: *Večer* 5 no. 102, 7 May 1918, 3; *Náš redaktor zatčen na policejním ředitelství* [Our Editor Arrested at Police Headquarters]. In: *Večer* 5 no. 103, 8 May 1918, 4; *Český žurnalista zatčen na policejním ředitelství* [Czech Journalist Arrested at Police Headquarters]. In: *Národní politika* 36 no. 105, 8 May 1918, 4.

<sup>43</sup> -is, Ejhle, "nevtíání cizinci"... [Lo and Behold, "Unwanted Aliens"]. In: *Večer* no. 118, 26 May 1919, 3.

spicuously stretched out his long fingers" in an attempt to steal a 100-crown bank-note from the commissioner, only to get caught. Once they have served their sentence for gambling, the article concluded, the "unwelcome aliens" will be expelled.<sup>44</sup>

While such cases were reported across the board in nationalist newspapers, it appears that Agrarian journalists enjoyed easier and confidential access to police information (after all, Antonín Švehla, the party leader, served as the minister of the interior during most of this period). It seems that the publication of such stories was a part of a deliberate strategy to expand the party's reach into the physical and political space of the city, using methods and language already tested in the countryside even before the First World War. For the Agrarians, who now played a central role in Czech politics, the city was a new type of political landscape, one in which they were competing under different, and arguably more hostile, conditions. Moreover, the image of the foreign Jew hoarding food and selling it for an exorbitant price conveniently countered accusations that city dwellers' voiced against farmers – the Agrarians' most important base – who were made responsible for shortages and the rise in prices. As Philip Jenkins noted in a study of polarization around alleged child molesters, moral panics are a group (a political party) agenda and they visualize and disseminate "a portion of its distinctive worldview".<sup>45</sup> Projecting Jewish criminality onto the new state's cities also offered a nationalist perception of the moral and social order which competed with socialist ideas.

### *Crime and Community*

An important function of these press articles was to give crime a clear location and to create an imagined geography of refugee crime. Using precise addresses and place names, the media figuratively populated the streets and cafés of Prague and of other Czech(oslovak) communities with criminal Jews and, by extension, brought anti-semitic conspiracy theories to the familiar spaces of everyday urban life. Wasservogel's alleged criminal activity was located in an identifiable house close to the Charles Bridge. In another article, the exact address of an apartment in Královské Vinohrady/Königliche Weinberge made the alleged wrongdoing tangible. The crime of Jewish refugees wasn't confined to a specific neighbourhood such as the former ghetto but rather permeated the city, which gave the impression of an omnipresent threat. While crime was often described as a by-product of the modern city, this discourse did not map onto a general critique of the city *per se* as immoral and decadent.

The production of community played a significant role in the formative phase of the creation of Czechoslovakia. Some of the most intensive campaigns against Jewish refugees occurred in towns undergoing a national transformation. In České Budějovice/Budweis, the municipal administration ordered them out of the city by May 1919, ahead of the government deadlines. In Brno/Brünn, local politicians from

<sup>44</sup> Policejní komisař "vrchním" v kavárně "Passage" [Police Commissioner as "Waiter" in Café "Passage"]. In: Večer no. 70, 26 March 1919, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Jenkins, Philip: Moral Panic. Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America. New Haven/CT 1998, 8.



Figure 1: Postcard "Poprask v Jerichu" [Turmoil in Jericho], approx. 1918-1919, ironizing alleged Jewish reactions to the declaration of independent Czechoslovakia. Private archive of František Bányai.

different parties complained about Galician Jews allegedly taking away precious resources and occupying apartments while Czechs froze and went hungry. In the summer of 1919, demonstrations and street violence were directed against local Germans as well as foreign Jews. Both cities were in the middle of a transition from German to Czech administration: while government-appointed commissions temporarily ruled, local politicians were busy changing the language of street signs and the language of instruction in the local schools.<sup>46</sup> The anti-refugee agitation in these cities was clearly related to the first communal elections in inter-war Czechoslovakia, which took place in mid-June 1919. The extension of the right to vote and the abrogation of the system of *kurie/Kurien* (dividing voters into bodies with unequal weight given to their votes) was a symbolic step in democratization in the new state and in the new construction of communal citizenship. At the same time, the elections – which were won by socialist political parties – contributed to political polarization and eventually to the demise of the first government of national unity, led by Karel Kramář.

Prague, while uncontested in terms of the majority nationality, had a symbolic value, which made its space a theatre of identity in the new state. The exclusion of Jewish refugees from the city space, however, had already started during the war. At the beginning of 1917, the city prohibited all Jewish refugees from Galicia from travelling on the electric tram lines. While the immediate rationale behind this measure was the appearance of typhus among refugees, the application of a quarantine across the board was also affected by stereotypes of the dirtiness and poor hygiene of "Eastern Jews".<sup>47</sup> Complaints about the presence and the alleged drain on resources that they caused was a recurrent discussion point during the sessions of the Prague Board of Aldermen (*Sbor obecních starších*, the city council).<sup>48</sup> The post-First World War stories of upright policemen and criminal refugees were more than just a discourse: these were at least partially related to the practice of policing and day-to-day criminalization as it developed during the First World War.<sup>49</sup>

In March 1919, in a widely discussed article, Josef Hais Týnecký described Prague as flooded by Jewish refugees:

<sup>46</sup> King, Jeremy: *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics. 1848-1948*. Princeton, Oxford 2002, 155-162.

<sup>47</sup> *Zákaz jízdy pro haličské israelitské uprchlíky na elektrických drahách král. hlav. města Prahy* [Galician Israelite Refugees Prohibited from Traveling on the Electric Lines of the Royal Capital City Prague]. In: *Věstník obecní král. hlav. města Prahy* 24 no. 3, 9 February 1917, 41; *Morelon: L'arrivée des réfugiés de Galicie en Bohême pendant la Première Guerre mondiale* 12 (cf. fn. 5).

<sup>48</sup> *Sbor obecních starších. V. řádná schůze dne 6. května* [The Board of Aldermen. V. Regular Meeting on May 6]. In: *Věstník obecní král. hlav. města Prahy* 25 no. 9, 9 May 1918, 146-52; *Sbor obecních starších. IX. řádná schůze dne 7. října* [The Board of Aldermen. IX. Regular Meeting on October 7]. In: *Věstník obecní král. hlav. města Prahy* 25 no. 19, 10 October 1918, 277-282.

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, lists of refugees investigated for criminality in NA, PP 1916-20, M/34/1, box 3020.

The police officers and the officials of the Office for the Eradication of Usury are literally worn out. For one Galician Jew whom they put on a train and – with financial support – send beyond the borders of the Promised Land, another seven arrive behind their backs!<sup>50</sup>

Using naturalizing language, Hais Týnecký decried the supposed fact that the city “swarms with Rosenschuits, Chaims and Razes” and that these “Eastern Jews” “suck the sap from our roots, our blood and our patience.” Every single case of “Kettenhandel” involved a Polish Jew and “no trickery can take place without catching a Jewish usurer!” Hais Týnecký called for the expulsion of this group, who were parasites on the local population and lived in abundance, occupying flats while Czechs were homeless and starved.

As happened in this article, intrusion into the city was often visualized by the alleged Jewish occupation of apartments and houses. The subject of the very real post-war housing crisis and its connection to the anti-refugee campaigns is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>51</sup> For a long time, Jewish private space remained almost unrepresented in non-Jewish press coverage.<sup>52</sup> However, the apartment, or home, in the city now appeared in journalists’ stories, depicted as the kernel of refugee criminality. In short, the Jewish home – and the Jewish refugee home in particular – was always suspected of being deviant, outside the norm. Likewise, refugee mobility appeared suspicious and was linked to norm breaking, be it moving across borders or just irregular, abnormal movement in and out of a house. Refugees were associated with the absence of a firm dwelling place, or a home, and the ever-present descriptions of their mobility stressed their foreignness. Their temporary and uncertain status, supported by anti-Jewish stereotypes and outright antisemitism, made crime a foreign and a passing phenomenon, something external to Czechoslovak society. In this view, any remedying of social norms and re-establishment of community were dependent on the speedy expulsion of Jewish refugees.

Hais Týnecký virtually populated Prague with an alleged 3,000 Jewish refugee households still present by March 1919, a number validated by a reference to “a police source”.<sup>53</sup> In another article, *Večer* wanted to believe that a large number of Galician refugees enriched themselves during the war so much that they were able to buy houses in Prague. Symbolically, through such possession, they would become city burghers, with the right of domicile. They allegedly terrorized non-Jewish tenants and evicted them to fill apartments with numerous family members. In other

<sup>50</sup> *Hais-Týnecký*, Josef: Kolik je v Praze ještě haličsko-židovských domácností? [How Many Galician-Jewish Households Still Remain in Prague?], In: *Večer* no. 69, 13 March 1919, 3; for reactions, see for instance: Haličských židů v Praze jest ještě na 3000 hlav [3,000 Galician Jews Still in Prague]. In: *Čech* 44 no. 72, 14 March 1919, 7; *Hais-Týnecký*, Josef: Česko- i německo-židovská “pomsta”... [Czech- As Well As German-Jewish “Revenge” ...]. In: *Večer* no. 67, 22 March 1919, 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Morelon*, Claire: Street Fronts. War, State Legitimacy and Urban Space. Prague 1914-1920. Ph.D. University of Birmingham 2015, 195-199. URL: <https://core.ac.uk/display/33528452> (last accessed 20 June 2022).

<sup>52</sup> *Frankl*, Michal: Jews Out of Place? Place and Space in Czech Antisemitic Caricatures. In: *Hauser*, Jakub/*Janáčková*, Eva (eds.): Visual Antisemitism in Central Europe. Berlin, Boston 2021, 99-122.

<sup>53</sup> *Hais-Týnecký*: Kolik je v Praze ještě haličsko-židovských domácností? (cf. fn. 50).

cases, small refugee families were said to occupy large, multi-room apartments, in defiance of the post-war regulations.<sup>54</sup> This information, which is characteristic of moral panics over refugees and migration, was highly inflated and contradicted the statistic about refugees cited above. Reports in the Jewish press as well as those of municipal and police officials documented the overcrowded conditions in which an absolute majority of refugees lived.<sup>55</sup>

Articles depicted Galician Jews as avoiding government regulations about apartment size and the required reporting of empty living space. This is often contrasted with the lack of accommodation for returning Czechs, including the members of the foreign legions or Czech returnees from Austria, who had to temporarily dwell in railway carriages or barracks.<sup>56</sup> Especially in Brno, such claims nourished anti-Jewish campaigns: local politicians described the remaining Jewish refugees as the main cause of the lack of housing in the city.<sup>57</sup> In these renderings, the city figuratively turned into a stage for national citizenship, dividing the nationals of the former monarchy into Czechoslovaks and foreigners. The community grew in significance with the ongoing validity of the *Heimatrecht*, or right of domicile, which remained the foundation and precondition of citizenship in the modern nation-state.<sup>58</sup>

#### *Crime against the Nation-State*

Whereas alleged transgression against the community was deeply grounded in wartime discourses, the positioning of refugee criminality against the state signified an important shift related to the transition from the empire. The changing object of the ascribed criminal activity illustrates this: whereas the reports from the second half of the First World War and the first few months of independence focused on food, in 1919 the object of alleged Jewish criminality shifted to currency. Food never stood only for what people eat:<sup>59</sup> by 1917, the discourse of hunger had already been

<sup>54</sup> Haličští židé vlastníky domů pražských [Galician Jews as Owners of Prague Houses]. In: Večer no. 40, 18 February 1919, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Flüchtlingslos in Brünn. In: Jüdische Volksstimme 18 no. 9, 24 May 1917, 5-6, NA, PP 1916-20, M/34/1, box 3015-3022.

<sup>56</sup> Židovské triky [Jewish Tricks]. In: Čech 44 no. 63, 5 March 1919, 5; Zbavíme se polských židů? [Will We Get Rid of Polish Jews?]. In: Hlas lidu 13 no. 45, 10 March 1919, 2; Polští židé z Českých Budějovic nepůjdou! [Polish Jews Won't Leave České Budějovice!]. In: Hlas lidu 13 no. 63, 15 May 1919, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Heinrich, Arnošt: Neklid v Brně [Unrest in Brno]. In: Lidové noviny 27 no. 237, 27 August 1919, 1; Pro židy bytů dosti má republika československá a jsou to židé z Polska [The Czechoslovak Republic Has Enough Apartments for Jews and These Are Jews From Poland]. In: Čech 44 no. 85, 27 March 1919, 6; Ze správní komise města Brna [From the Administrative Commission of the City of Brno]. In: Lidové noviny 27 no. 70, 11 March 1919, 5; Pro české vyhnance baráky – pro polské židy komfortní byty [Barracks for Czech Expellees – Comfortable Apartments for Polish Jews]. In: Čech 44 no. 76, 18 March 1919, 6-7.

<sup>58</sup> For *Heimatrecht* and Jewish citizenship, see Burger, Hannelore: *Heimatrecht und Staatsbürgerschaft österreichischer Juden. Vom Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts bis in die Gegenwart*. Wien, Köln, Graz 2014.

<sup>59</sup> See also Engel, Barbara Alpern: Not by Bread Alone. Subsistence Riots in Russia during World War I. In: *The Journal of Modern History* 69 (1997) 4, 696-721.



instrumentalized by nationalist newspapers against the monarchy. Jewish refugees (and Jews more generally) were seen as agents of the illegitimate state and as an antithesis to the new order: this was often visualized by accusing them of usury, *Kettenhandel*, and the alleged export of food to Vienna, Germany, or the German-speaking borderlands. After 1918, however, the new construction of Jewish criminality reflected the merging of the state and nation. In the early post-war rendering, the acts of refugees – non-citizens – were allegedly directed against the integrity and stability of the new nation-state itself.

This discourse of refugee criminality was part of the search for the meaning of legality in this transitional period, at a moment when the legal order was being transformed, asserted, and disputed. The campaigns took place before the adoption of the new Czechoslovak constitution at the end of February 1920,<sup>60</sup> while the law inherited from the “failed”, “illegitimate” monarchy continued to be valid. At the same time, expectations of a national and social transformation and widespread violence made the difference between acceptable forms of behaviour and transgression uncertain. Building on the social protest and riots that took place during the war, violent campaigns against “usurers” culminated in May 1919 as protesters marched through communities with effigies of “usurers” which sometimes had “Jewish” physical features and staged their execution on gallows. In many locations, the crowd opened shops and forced sales for a fraction of the price while such behaviour was tolerated and often supported by the police, and legitimized by the Czechoslovak legionnaires (who, unlike the gendarmerie, were considered legitimate representatives of the new order).<sup>61</sup>

The liberal daily *Tribuna* (which targeted a Jewish readership)<sup>62</sup> took critical aim at politicians’ legitimization of street violence. It criticized a speech by the Social Democratic minister of justice František Soukup in which he declared that the courts were unable to suppress usury and invited the people (in Czech, *lid*) to assume executive power and bring usurers to justice. Letting people take justice into their hands, so the journal asserted, not only caused material and financial losses, but also gave rise to humiliating injustices, raising doubts about the rule of law in the new state. A crowd’s intrusion into Vojtěch Österreicher’s shop in the Prague suburb Libeň/Lieben and the forced sale of his goods was an example. Österreicher, who published under the name of Vojtěch Rakous, was known for his short stories, which depicted an idealized view of the cohabitation of Jews and non-Jews in the Bohemian countryside.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Zákon ze dne 29. února 1920, kterým se uvozuje Ústavní listina Československé republiky [Law of 29 February 1920, Establishing the Constitutional Charter of the Czechoslovak Republic], 121/1920 Sb. Sbíрка zákonů a nařízení státu československého [Body of Law of the Czechoslovak Republic]. URL: [https://psp.cz/docs/texts/constitution\\_1920.html](https://psp.cz/docs/texts/constitution_1920.html) (last accessed 20 June 2022).

<sup>61</sup> *Frankl/Szabó*: Budování státu bez antisemitismu? 78–88 (cf. fn. 9).

<sup>62</sup> Čapková, Kateřina: Mit Tribuna gegen das Prager Tagblatt. Der deutsch-tschechische Pressekampf um die jüdischen Leser in Prag. In: *Schönbom*, Sibylle (ed.): Grenzdiskurse. Zeitungen deutschsprachiger Minderheiten und ihr Feuilleton in Mitteleuropa bis 1939. 1st ed. Essen 2009, 127–139.

<sup>63</sup> Ve vážné chvíli/Řeč ministra spravedlnosti/Demonstrace proti drahotě [In a Serious Mo-

The blurred sense of legality extended beyond violence and reflected the centrality of "usury", a real problem involving economic practices which took advantage of shortages, in the social and political discourse of post-war Czechoslovakia. The understanding of "usury" and the "usurer" reached far beyond economic behaviour and expressed ideas about (dis)loyalty to the new national order. What constituted a transgression in dealing with scarce goods and with currency was under question in a situation in which many citizens depended on and interacted with the black market. For as long as such practices were directed against the order of the Habsburg monarchy, such behaviour was largely considered legitimate within the framework of Czech politics and journalism. Yet, with the stabilization of the legal and political order in the Czechoslovak nation-state, the same actions were increasingly disputed. The accusations against Jews and refugees exemplified the tension between the reality and the norm and externalized the transgression by projecting it onto foreigners, who were defying the national order. The Czech-Jewish weekly *Rozvoj* (Progress) discussed the double standards applied: while many were involved in trading with currency, it was Jewish refugees whose alleged illegal practices were disproportionately targeted by the police and the nationalist newspapers.<sup>64</sup>

The story of the highly suspicious activity of the Jewish refugee Wasservogel demonstrates how the alleged illicit economic practices of refugees were considered not only a breach of law but acts against the very existence of the state. The sounds coming from his apartment were thought to be the noise of attaching (stamping) forged or illegally obtained Czechoslovak stamps on Habsburg banknotes. According to the rumour spread by *Večer*, his son was employed in the government printing shop where the stamps were produced.<sup>65</sup> In this rendering, Wasservogel not only enriched himself and his accomplices, but also deliberately undermined the currency reform and, by extension, Czechoslovak statehood as such.

The currency reform was a pivotal project of Alois Rašín, the finance minister, to establish Czechoslovakia's economic and fiscal independence. Rašín was concerned about the instability of the old Austro-Hungarian currency and by the printing of new banknotes in Austria, which contributed to inflation in Czechoslovakia. In a radical and controversial move, he introduced a quick separation of currency: in a secret session on February 25, 1919, the National Assembly passed a law mandating the obligatory stamping of banknotes and withholding half of the amount as a government loan yielding very low interest. The action was carried out on the territorial principle, stamping all currency circulating in Czechoslovakia (with the exception of low-value banknotes and coins and banknotes not recognized by Czechoslovakia): to prevent speculative transfer from abroad, the state abruptly closed the borders and temporarily prohibited money transfers. The stamping itself was carried out on March 3-9, 1919.<sup>66</sup>

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ment/Speech of the Minister of Justice/Demonstration against High Prices]. In: *Tribuna* 1 no. 95, 23 May 1919, 2-3.

<sup>64</sup> Když dva činí totéž... [Jove May Do What a Cow May Not]. In: *Rozvoj*. List Svazu Čechů-židů 11 no. 12, 22 March 1919, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Tajemné klepání v bytě haličského uprchlíka. In: *Večer* no. 83, 13 April 1920, 3 (cf. fn. 2).

<sup>66</sup> Rašín, Alois: Financial Policy of Czechoslovakia during the First Year of Its History.

Stamping the old banknotes issued by the monarchy and replacing them with republican currency possessed a symbolic value akin to the quest to remove all symbols of Habsburg power in public space. For Rašín, as for Jaroslav Preiss, the director of the Živnostenská banka (Trade Bank), a stable, strong currency was necessary to break free of dependence on Vienna and symbolically assert Czechoslovak independence and “moral strength” to the world.<sup>67</sup> It was also a demonstration that the government was able to effectively control the new borders.

While generally considered a success, the stamping did not proceed without irregularities. Sales of the official as well as fake stamps were widely reported, as was importing and speculating with lower-value banknotes or coins.<sup>68</sup> Yet Jews, mostly Galician refugees, were singled out for criticism and the antisemitic press depicted German Jews, or the “German-Jewish” press as extremely critical of the reform.<sup>69</sup> There were many accounts reporting that Galician Jews were smuggling currency across the closed borders with Austria and Poland or elsewhere, possessed unmarked banknotes, and were speculatively trading with the lower-value banknotes and coins.<sup>70</sup>

In a raid on Café Imperial in Prague, the police apprehended approximately thirty “Jewish-looking” guests who lacked the proper papers and subjected them to questioning. Some of these refugees possessed unstamped banknotes because they intended to leave for Poland, where the old currency was still in circulation, and they were released after they promised to leave the country.<sup>71</sup> The raid seems to have been part of increased police activity directed against suspicious foreigners in Prague. For instance, the military police were also reported to have disrupted a ceremony in a prayer room in a rabbi’s apartment and imprisoned sixty-five refugees who were later released after pledging to leave the country.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, the *razzia* in Café Imperial immediately attracted attention: a loud crowd gathered in front of the café and later in front of the police station, noisily protest-

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Economic and Social History of the World War. Oxford, Edinburgh, London et al. 1923, 25-30; *Peroutka*, Ferdinand: Budování státu [Building a State]. 3rd ed. Praha 1991, 453-467; *Klimek*, Antonín: Velké dějiny zemí koruny české, vol. XIII, 1918-1929 [The Great History of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown]. Praha, Litomyšl 2000, 101-5; *Kárník*, Zdeněk: České země v éře První republiky (1918-1938) [The Bohemian Lands in the Era of the First Republic (1918-1938)]. 1st ed., vol. 1: Vznik, budování a zlatá léta republiky (1918-1929) [The Origin, Building, and Golden Years of the Republic]. Dějiny českých zemí [History of the Czech Lands]. Praha 2000, 60-63.

<sup>67</sup> *Preiss*, Jaroslav: Za pevným cílem [Towards a Firm Goal]. In: Národní listy 59 no. 53, 2 March 1919, 1; *Kosatík*, Pavel: Bankéř první republiky. Život dr. Jaroslava Preisse [Banker of the First Republic. The Life of Dr. Jaroslav Preiss]. 2nd ed. Praha 2010, 63.

<sup>68</sup> See for instance Výroba padělaných kolků v Praze [The Production of Counterfeit Stamps in Prague]. In: Lidové noviny 27 no. 72, 13 March 1919, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Okolkování [The Stamping of Banknotes]. In: Čech 44 no. 60, 2 March 1919, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Židé pořád stejní [Jews Are Still the Same]. In: Čech 44 no. 62, 4 March 1919, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Polští židé a podvodné kolkování peněz [Polish Jews and Fraudulent Stamping of Banknotes]. In: Tribuna 1 no. 34, 11 March 1919, 4; see for instance the police note on the application by *Weiss*, Salomea: 16 August 1919, NA, PP, 1916-20, M/34/1/I, box 3022.

<sup>72</sup> Flüchtlingslos – Judenschicksal. In: Selbstwehr 13 no. 12, 21 March 1919, 1 (cf. fn. 11).

ing against "Jewish" usurers.<sup>73</sup> The press coverage was grossly distorted to highlight the criminality of Jewish refugees: Hais Týnecký claimed the police discovered twenty-nine "foreign parasites" who were caught with banknotes with forged stamps. They were mostly "Viennese agents, Jews from Galicia and suspect people".<sup>74</sup> And a report of the antisemitic *Hlas lidu* (The Voice of the People) illustrated the gradations of misinterpretation and bias: the secret police discovered suspect meetings of Polish Jews in the Imperial and caught them red-handed in a private saloon while forging the banknote stamps, in possession of a large number of banknotes. At the very last moment, they destroyed all their correspondence (which antisemites traditionally believed was written in a secret code), but they failed to do the same with the false stamps.<sup>75</sup>

Characteristically, trespassing borders rather than (just) norms of (middle-class) behaviour was a defining facet of these narratives. Borders possessed a special meaning: the new state was only in the process of establishing its control over the still insecure lines, especially those separating it from the former empire. Moreover, for many, travelling with a passport and controls at the new borders made for an unexpected novelty. In many of these articles, which discursively reasserted the border, Galician Jews were caught while smuggling money and goods, allegedly exporting scarce goods from Czech towns and villages.<sup>76</sup> The satirical journal *Humoristické listy* (Humourist Papers) for instance depicted a Jewish family on a train from Vienna busy hiding smuggled banknotes (cf. figure 2).<sup>77</sup> The imagined border could also include the nationality frontier within the Bohemian lands: for instance, an ironic article had three Polish Jews arriving from Vienna and trafficking with a cache of hidden tobacco. They would secretly meet in different towns and – a major transgression – they sold the precious goods in Ústí nad Labem/Aussig, the German-speaking borderlands.<sup>78</sup>

Keeping and making connections with the enemies of Czechoslovakia, across state or ethnonational borders, invited antisemitic conspiracy theories about Jews defying the national order. In this discourse, refugees' links abroad and with "enemies" of the new state, as well as their general foreignness, served to compromise the belonging, and, as a result, the citizenship, of local Jews. Numerous articles thus depict con-

<sup>73</sup> Když dva činí totéž. In: Rozvoj. List Svazu Čechů-židů 11 no. 12, 22 March 1919, 6 (cf. fn. 64).

<sup>74</sup> Hais-Týnecký: Kolik je v Praze ještě haličsko-židovských domácností? (cf. fn. 50).

<sup>75</sup> Polští židé vyráběli kolky na bankovky [Polish Jews Produced Stamps For Banknotes]. In: Hlas lidu 13 no. 47, 17 March 1919, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Celia Donert demonstrated how police "knowledge" of cross-border Roma criminality influenced the citizenship practices in inter-war Czechoslovakia: Der "internationale Zigeuner" in der Tschechoslowakei. Eine transnationale Geschichte der Grenzkontrolle 1918-1938. In: Duhamelle, Christophe/Kossert, Andreas/Struck, Bernhard (eds.): Grenzregionen. Ein europäischer Vergleich vom 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert. Frankfurt am Main 2007, 295-314. URL: <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/7516> (last accessed 20 June 2022).

<sup>77</sup> Vítek, K.: Nejpodnikavější jsou židi... [Jews Are the Most Enterprising...]. In: Humoristické listy 62 no. 39, 19 September 1919, 310.

<sup>78</sup> Milostná dostaveníčka polských židů [Romantic Rendezvous of Polish Jews]. In: Večer no. 217, 24 September 1919, 4.



Figure 2: Vítěk, K.: Nejpodnikavější jsou židi ... [Jews Are the Most Enterprising ...].

nections between foreign and Czechoslovak Jews as a form of conspiracy. For instance, Hais Týnecký – in a litany of complaints about the alleged exploitation carried out by the “unwelcome aliens” – reported on the clandestine export of gold: a Czechoslovak Jew who regularly trafficked gold and golden coins to Vienna was supposedly apprehended in Bratislava. Under interrogation, he identified an apartment in Prague where he made deals with “Polish Jewish women” (who are listed by name) and where the police arrested seven “Polish Jews” who possessed gold coins.<sup>79</sup>

The construction of connections between refugees and local Jews was used to delegitimize the Jewish and the liberal press, such as the Czech-Jewish *Rozvoj* or the liberal *Tribuna*, in their polemics with antisemitic journals.<sup>80</sup> In one ironic article, a Galician refugee who was expelled due to the intervention of the Office for the Eradication of Usury decides – after reading Czech-Jewish newspapers – not to leave for Vienna and to stay in Prague to get involved in one more “racket”. Yet the vigilant Prague police thwart his efforts and put him in jail, his offer of a bribe notwithstanding.<sup>81</sup> In many other stories, Jewish refugees conspire with local Jews, making the distinction between moral and civic eligibility for national citizenship blurry and insecure.

This reporting of Jewish criminality took place against the backdrop of the peace negotiations in Paris, during which the attributes of Czechoslovak statehood were still in flux. Its territory was disputed by minorities and neighbouring states, and Czech nationalists were bitter about the division of the Teschen region. The contours of formal citizenship also remained unconfirmed, and it is no coincidence that the most intensive campaigns against refugees took place during the period between the declaration of independence and the signing of the peace treaty in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in September 1919. The discourse of criminality was one of several factors that co-produced the – disputed – parameters of citizenship in the new state and wrote the refugees – in a negative way – into its very foundations.

### Conclusion

The moral panic of refugee criminality was soon overtaken by the charge of “criminal” communism which – in the field of antisemitic propaganda – represented a more stable set of ideas. Yet, accusations of the criminality of Jewish refugees, or of the “Eastern Jews”, had an ongoing presence in public space and informed the reactions of Czechoslovak officials to “Eastern Jewish” refugees throughout the inter-war period and beyond. Not surprisingly, in their appeals to the government for funding and support, Jewish and other relief organizations repeatedly argued that the material aid they provided, as well as their supervision, saved refugees from becoming part of the criminal underworld in large cities such as Prague.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> –is, Ejhle, “nevítaní cizinci”... In: Večer no. 118, 26 May 1919, 3. (cf. fn. 43).

<sup>80</sup> Milostná dostaveníčka polských židů. In: Večer no. 217, 24 September 1919, 4. (cf. fn. 78).

<sup>81</sup> Jak jezdí haličští židé do Vídně [How Galician Jews Travel to Vienna]. In: Večer no. 197, 30 August 1919, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Čapková, Kateřina/Frankl, Michal: Nejisté útočiště. Československo a uprchlíci před

Defining boundaries from below, against minorities that are imagined as foreign and criminal, was a persistent feature of public discourse and administrative practice, especially in multi-ethnic nation-states struggling with the meaning of citizenship. This article has shown how the process of transformation from the empire to the Czechoslovak state catalysed and radicalized notions of Jewish criminality, which remained durable and relatively stable through the period of Jewish emancipation and into the twentieth century. The campaigns aimed less at instances of real deviance, such as trading on the black market, but instead defined community belonging and citizenship in a negative way. Rather than punish and normalize, the imagined criminality established the border within the body of former citizens of the monarchy. Therefore, at the beginning of the Czechoslovak nation-state, the focus on refugees, unrecognized as such and “unwelcome”, helped to translate long-term discourses of Jewish criminality into a full-scale moral panic.

In contrast to the current international definition, the “Eastern Jews” still dwelling in Czechoslovakia were recognized as refugees until 1918 precisely because of their citizenship and were marginalized in the process of rearranging the formal ties of belonging during the transition from the empire to the nation-state. Refugees were inherently related to the construction of the new nation-state, not only in their capacity as non-citizens and ethnic others, but also as former citizens who symbolized the transformation of the political order itself. Figuratively, First World War refugees were positioned on the edge of insecure citizenship and the discourse of criminality was an expression of their non-recognition as fellow citizens. Their criminalization, therefore, was a part of the rearrangement of loyalties in the first months and years of inter-war Czechoslovakia.<sup>83</sup>

#### List of Figures

Figure 1: Postcard “Poprask v Jerichu” [Turmoil in Jericho], approx. 1918-1919, ironizing alleged Jewish reactions to the declaration of independent Czechoslovakia. Private archive of František Bányai.

Figure 2: Vítěk, K.: Nejpodnikavější jsou židé... [Jews Are the Most Enterprising...]. In: Humoristické listy 62 no. 39, 19 September 1919, 310. The reproduction has been provided by the Digital Archive of Journals operated as part of Czech Digital Bibliography research infrastructure by the Institute for Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences, P.R.I. – <https://clb.ucl.cas.cz/> (ORJ Code: 90243).

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<sup>83</sup> Schulze Wessel, Martin (ed.): Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918-1938. Politische, nationale und kulturelle Zugehörigkeiten. München 2004 (Veröffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum 101).