GLOBALIZING INTERWAR CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The First Republic and its Entanglements with Europe and the World

Contemporary historiography has depicted the interwar period as an era of "de-globalization" characterized by the collapse of empires, the drawing of new borders, protectionist retreat, and the rise of nationalism. The case of Czechoslovakia shows that this narrative is a simplification, for the First Republic was constructed upon a foundational ethos of cosmopolitanism, actively seeking to insert itself into global

flows of ideas, capital, and political networks to consolidate its legitimacy. At the same time, Czechoslovakia also saw the rise of particularist narratives and structures in politics and society. To examine both the extent and the limits of "global Czechoslovakia", the annual conference of Collegium Carolinum (13–16 November 2025) convened by Felix Jeschke (Munich) and Václav Šmidrkal (Prague) brought together an international panel of scholars in Fischbachau near Munich. The conference was held in cooperation with the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Department of East and Southeast European History at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München; it received funding from the German Research Foundation and the Bavarian State Ministry of Science and the Arts through the Bavarian-Czech Academic Agency. Its central ambition was to move beyond traditional bilateral studies to interrogate the structural depth of globalization in the First Republic: Was it a lived reality for the population, or rather a diplomatic construct driven by the elites?

Global Ambition Tested by Reality

From the outset, Mark Cornwall (Southampton) framed the debate with a stimulating keynote lecture on the "latitude and limits" of global Czechoslovakia. While the state undeniably played a role on the world stage for two decades – a status legitimized by the global odyssey of the Legionaries, whose return from Vladivostok via the United States or the Indian Ocean inscribed a "cosmic" and planetary dimension into the nation's founding myth–Cornwall insisted on a necessary methodological distinction between the "lived experience" of the elites and the "perceived experience" of the general population. For the ordinary citizen, the horizon remained essentially European, or even regional, despite the official rhetoric of figures like Masaryk or Beneš proclaiming that the "Czech question is a world question". Cornwall illustrated this tension by way of figures like the ballerina Jelizaveta Nikolská, whose international career embodied this cosmopolitanism even though her subsequent fascist trajectory revealed the internal contradictions of these networks. The strain between global ambition and the geopolitical reality of a small Central European state was tragically resolved in the late 1930s by a brutal contraction of horizons, a prelude to the Munich Agreement, the policy of appeasement, and the collapse of the internationalist ideal.

The Economy as a Vector of Power: Pragmatism and Illusions

The analysis of economic strategies reveals a pragmatism often devoid of idealism, where globalization served primarily as a tool for survival or power. Through a study of the shoe giant Baťa, Gregor Feindt (Mainz) depicted a form of "industrial cosmopolitanism": The Zlín-based company employed a model of social engineering inspired by American Fordism, exporting its "company towns" as far away as India and Latin America. Feindt demonstrated that this globalization remained strictly functional, however: Faced with the geopolitical threat of 1938, Baťa did not hesitate to sacrifice the cultural and "Czechoslovak" dimension of its project to safe-

guard its economic interests by way of a radical decentralization to the West, particularly to the United States.

This instrumentalization of the economy was equally evident in monetary policy, as analysed by Johannes Gleixner (Munich). The drastic deflation of 1922, orchestrated by Finance Minister Alois Rašín, aimed less at sanitizing the economy than at disentangling the Czechoslovak crown from the hyper-inflationary German economic sphere. This strong currency policy was designed to increase prestige on Western markets, making the crown the "dollar of Central Europe", but it came at the price of a major internal social crisis and a loss of industrial competitiveness, illustrating the high domestic cost of this quest for international respectability.

Expansion into non-European markets, explored by Adéla Jůnová Macková (Prague), confirmed the limits of Czechoslovakia's power. Despite the efforts of the Oriental Institute and figures like Alois Musil to structure trade with the Middle East (Iran, Turkey, Egypt), Czechoslovak ambitions frequently collided with the preserved spheres of influence of British and French colonial powers. While the export of arms (notably by Škoda and Zbrojovka Brno) and turnkey factories met with some success in the 1930s, it operated within a niche logic dependent on imperial infrastructures.

On a micro-historical scale, Kristýna Kaucká (Prague) reminded the audience via the case of the Bohemian Forest (Šumava) that globalization also encountered friction at local borders. The Czechoslovak land reform, in seeking to nationalize the cross-border Schwarzenberg estates, attempted to break traditional economic and ecological ecosystems that had existed long before the nation-state, revealing what might be called a "hybrid modernization" in which the state struggled to replace transnational aristocratic structures.

Prague, Crossroads of "Internationals": Parallel Diplomacy and Partisan Networks

One of the conference's major contributions consisted in highlighting Prague's role as a hub for transnational political networks often operating in parallel, or even in opposition, to the official diplomacy of the Castle (Hrad) around Masaryk and Beneš.

Miguel Cabo Villaverde (Santiago de Compostela) dissected the activities of the International Agrarian Bureau, nicknamed the "Green International". Headquartered in Prague, this organization served as a lever of influence for Czechoslovak Agrarians to unite peasant parties across Central and Eastern Europe. Cabo Villaverde showed how this "parallel diplomacy" frequently conflicted with the intentions of Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš, notably by supporting agrarian movements in Yugoslavia or Bulgaria that were hostile to the official allies of the Little Entente.

This phenomenon of partisan diplomacy affected the entire political spectrum. On the right, Jakub Drábik (Prague) re-evaluated Czech fascism (NOF) not as a marginal aberration but as an integrated component of a transnational European phenomenon. Although anti-German and Pan-Slavic, Czech fascism borrowed its codes

from Mussolini's Italy and actively sought financial and ideological support from Rome, attempting to insert itself into a nascent "Fascist International".

On the left of the political spectrum, Jakub Vrba (Prague) and Molly Pucci (Dublin) explored communist networks. Vrba underscored the constant tension within the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) between the global directives of the Comintern and the tactical necessity of a "Czechoslovakization" to survive electorally within a democratic framework. Pucci demonstrated how the "International Red Aid" transformed courtrooms into global political tribunals. By connecting local trials to celebrated causes like that of the Scottsboro Boys in the United States or Sacco and Vanzetti, Prague communist lawyers integrated Czechoslovakia into an "international revolutionary script", using the law as a weapon of class struggle on a global scale. As Daniela Kolenovská (Prague) poignantly showed in her analysis of letters from Czechoslovak migrants involved in the Interhelpo settlement project in Soviet Central Asia, global communism was not only an ideological horizon but also a lived and often disillusioning experience, refracted through the hardships and expectations of ordinary settlers.

Similarly, the Czech National Socialists, studied by Ondřej Holub (Prague), invested in the "Radical International" to legitimize their social liberalism. By aligning themselves with Herriot's French Radicalism through figures like Antonín Uhlíř, they sought external validation for their domestic programme, attempting to anchor their purely Czech party within a respectable European political family.

The Circulation of Knowledge: Building the State through Expertise

The conference also examined how the circulation of experts shaped the state. Tomáš Gecko (Prague) described attempts to institutionalize industrial espionage via the "Technical-Economic Foreign Service" (*Technicko-hospodářská zahraniční služba*). Initiated by Stanislav Špaček and the Masaryk Academy of Labour, this project aimed to transform diplomatic missions into centres for collecting American technologies. Gecko showed how this avant-garde technocratic vision clashed with the bureaucratic conservatism of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, illustrating the disconnect between modernizing engineers and traditional diplomats.

In the realm of public health, Vojtěch Pojar (Bucharest) showed how American philanthropy in the shape of the Rockefeller Foundation contributed almost inadvertently to forging the category of "East Central Europe" through its training programmes. By funding public health institutes and training experts abroad, these networks created a regional community of practice, distinguishing this space from the West while integrating it into global health standards.

Intellectual appropriation also took unexpected detours, as illustrated by Jaroslav Ira (Prague) with regard to the reception of Indian sociologist Radhakamal Mukerjee's ideas by Czech regionalists. Seeking alternatives to nation-state centralism and Western cultural hegemony, thinkers like Emanuel Chalupný found in this selectively exoticized Indian "regional sociology", as they themselves constructed it, arguments to legitimize Moravian or Czech regionalism as a global scientific trend.

Representing the Nation: Paradoxes and Misunderstandings

Finally, the question of self-image revealed striking paradoxes in how Czechoslovakia staged itself. Marta Filipová (Brno) pointed out the schizophrenia of Czechoslovak pavilions at World's Fairs (Paris 1937, New York 1939). Wishing to project an industrial and democratic modernity, the state paradoxically relied on Slovak folk art (costumes, folklore) to guarantee its "authenticity" and tourist appeal. This strategy often alienated the Czechoslovak diaspora in the United States, which preferred an image of modern progress to validate its own assimilation, rejecting these representations as archaic.

Conversely, the external image of Czechoslovakia as an "island of democracy" owes much to the pen of British journalist Elizabeth Wiskemann, whose work was analysed by Norman Domeier (Prague). Her writings, particularly *Czechs and Germans* (1938), fixed for the West the narrative of a constitutional republic besieged by dictatorship, a strong moral image that endured well beyond the betrayal of Munich, influencing Western perceptions of the region during the Cold War.

Sport did not escape these dynamics of representation either, as shown by Stanislav Holubec (Prague) and John Paul Newman (Maynooth). Holubec traced the rise of the Czechoslovak Ski Association, which used its alliances with France and the Little Entente to contest Scandinavian hegemony within the International Ski Federation, transforming slopes into diplomatic arenas. Newman, meanwhile, deconstructed the triumphalist narrative of the Sokol movement. He revealed how its glorification as a pillar of the state during the interwar period obscured its complex Habsburg roots and its controversial role in paramilitary violence during the consolidation of the state in Slovakia in 1919. Finally, Mikuláš Zvánovec (Hradec Králové) examined national school associations (such as the German *Schulverein* and the Czech *Matice*), showing that they acted as crucial intermediaries between central politics and local implementation, mobilizing civil society in a nationalist struggle for education well before 1918.

At the conclusion of these rich exchanges, "Global Czechoslovakia" appears less as an accomplished fact than as a complex—and often painful—dialectic between ambition and constraint. While the First Republic successfully inserted itself into global economic, intellectual, and political networks, this openness constantly collided with the reality of a small, landlocked state in Central Europe. The "global" experience was often one of a desperate struggle for survival and belonging, far from the cosmopolitan triumph displayed by the elites. The optimistic global horizon of the 1920s gradually closed, giving way to a defensive regional withdrawal as the liberal international order collapsed at the end of the following decade.

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