CHAPTER 4

World War I and the Founding of Czechoslovakia, 1914–1920

The outbreak of World War I on July 28, 1914, signaled the end of the Vienna Order. That diplomatic construct had governed international relations in Europe—and in extension around the world—for a century, namely since the Vienna Peace Congress in 1814–1815, following the Napoleonic Wars. But by 1918, the power center of continental Europe had shifted to France, and the peace negotiations were accordingly held in and around Paris (1919–1920, with follow-up treaties until 1923). Between the breakdown of the Vienna Order and the emergence of the Paris Order was an interregnum that was known at the time as the ‘Great War,’ including its chaotic aftermath.

In absolute terms, World War I was one of humanity’s most disastrous conflicts. Some ten million people were killed and millions crippled or shell-shocked, while millions of civilians became refugees.¹ The Great War also ushered in the scientific and systematic use of chemical weapons, which were first introduced by Germany on its eastern front. Further, masses of civilians were murdered under the cover of war. These were mainly Armenian Christians, perhaps well over one million people massacred in the waning Ottoman Empire, peaking in 1915, but also some 100,000 Jewish civilians murdered in Eastern Europe during and after the war.² In both cases it was minority similarities with the ‘enemy’ that spurred state suspicion of real or imaginary collaboration, a charge that further escalated during wartime. In the Ottoman Empire, Armenians were thereby blamed for Christian religious ties to Russia, while Jews in Russia were attacked for Yiddish linguistic ties to Germany.

In the Bohemian lands, too, the war effort was accompanied by a certain rise in Antisemitism, including even local Jewish hatred of Ostjuden refugees in Prague and elsewhere. After the exile lobby around Masaryk won Western sponsorship for the establishment of Czechoslovakia as an Austro-Hungarian

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² On Jews see Engel, “Jews in World War I.” Like in the case of Russia’s Jews, who had already suffered a massive wave of state-sponsored pogroms in 1881–1884, the genocide of Armenians had not come unannounced: Armenians had previously been massacred under Ottoman rule in 1894–1897. On the genocide of Armenians and links to Jews and the Holocaust also see Wein, Slavic Jerusalem, 89–94.
successor state, Prague was gradually taking over control of the areas earmarked for the future state. This process, too, was accompanied by several waves of anti-minority riots that swept the capital and many parts of the country, once again targeting mainly German-speakers and Jews.

Christians and Jews in the Great War

Among the soldiers drafted by Vienna and Budapest, there were perhaps some 320,000 Jews, ca. 40,000 of who were killed in battle. In contrast to the German and Russian armies, where Antisemitism was relatively widespread, there were only isolated attacks on Jewish soldiers in Austria-Hungary’s armed forces. Still, there was basic discrimination. For example, the army did generally not provide kosher food, which was a major problem for religious Jews, and most Jewish army chaplains were apparently Reform or Neolog (Hungarian-Reform) rabbis, neglecting Orthodox or Hasidic soldiers. At the beginning of the war, Jewish soldiers were buried under crosses, and then under crosses with a Star of David engraved in the middle, until more appropriate ‘tables of commandments’ stones were mass-produced to mark their graves. The impossibility of consistent religious observance was perhaps made up for by a distinct wartime folk Judaism, featuring stories of miracles on the battlefield, e.g. sets of tefilin [Aramaic: phylacteries] that had allegedly saved a soldier’s life in combat.

In contrast to Antisemitic stereotyping of Jews as cowards, many Austrian-Hungarian Jews were initially not unhappy at all about going to war. For many of them, the fight against Russia seemed an opportunity to exact Jewish revenge for the pogroms and persecutions of Jews in Russia during the last decades of czarist rule. Russia’s deportation of some 600,000 Jews from its German front in March to September 1915 on account of alleged collaboration with the enemy (overlapping with the deportations of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire orchestrated with the help of Germany!), and the Russian ban of all publications in Yiddish and Hebrew in July 1915, further increased Jewish anger. At times, the war against Czar Nikolay II was even styled into a Jewish “Holy War.”

3 Deák, Beyond Nationalism, specifically 172–78.