

US Policy in Czechoslovakia during the Paris Peace Agreements: An Inconsistency and Oversight

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Abstract

This paper investigates the inconsistency of U.S. foreign policy during the Paris Peace Agreements of 1919, specifically regarding its support of Czechoslovakia's formation while denying the principle of self-determination to minority groups such as the ethnic Germans, Slovaks, and Carpatho-Ruthenians. This paper argues that this selective application of self-determination, backed by Czech independence advocates, was inconsistent. Through primary source analysis and historiographical review, this article demonstrates that the American delegation's decision-making was rooted in geopolitical pragmatism using limited information rather than consistent democratic ideals.

As the First World War drew to a close, the United States held a powerful position in negotiations (along with France and Britain) that would determine new borders in the post-war world. One of the United States' most important objectives for the end of the war was the establishment of a long-lasting peace in the world by granting self-determination to as many nation-states as possible. The American

delegation in Paris believed that the United States had a "solemn obligation" to divide central Europe in a way that "make[s] permanent arrangements that justice shall be rendered and peace maintained."¹ In the chaos of the collapsed Austro-Hungarian Empire, where many groups fought for independence and territorial control, President Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points

¹ Mario R. DiNunzio, *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar-President* (New

York University Press, 2006).

speech outlined American policy in this area by declaring that “the peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development.” Crucially, while this speech certainly expressed the United States’ post-war goals for this region, it did not specifically clarify what country each disputed territory should belong to.

This inconsistency in U.S. policy during the peace agreements was particularly evident in the establishment of the independent Czech state. Tomáš Masaryk, the leader of the Czechoslovak independence movement, declared the Republic of Czechoslovakia independent from Austro-Hungary on October 18, 1918, while he was in Washington, DC.² The United States government wholeheartedly supported Masaryk in the creation of Czechoslovakia led from Prague; in fact, the United States was one of the first countries to recognize its independence.³ However, the United States opposed statehood or autonomy of Germans, Slovaks, and Carpatho-Ruthenian minority groups within Czechoslovakia, denying the groups’ rights to

self-determination, which the United States government so vocally demanded for other nation-states. In the Paris Peace Agreement, the United States failed to advocate for independence for these minority groups and instead backed the Czechoslovak government’s appeals. The United States not only prevented the self-determination of the Czechoslovak minorities but also hindered the prospect of long-term stability and peace in the country.

While Masaryk secured American support for the establishment of the new republic, the question of where to draw the borders remained complicated.⁴ Masaryk claimed land that encompassed areas with only a small minority of Czechs.⁵ The status of the sizable ethnic-German minority in Czechoslovakia, comprising about a quarter of the total population, troubled many Czech leaders.⁶ The best censuses counting the population of ethnic-Germans in Czechoslovakia had results ranging from 2 million to 4 million, a difference too broad to make an accurate estimate.⁷ These Czechoslovak Germans confidently, yet mistakenly, believed that Wilson’s support for self-determination extended to them and that

² Patrick Crowhurst, *A History of Czechoslovakia between the Wars: From Versailles to Hitler's Invasion*, International Library of Twentieth Century History, 56 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 22.

³ The Commission to Negotiate Peace to the Acting Secretary of State, June 4, 1919, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1919*, vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1934), 86.

⁴ Guido Kisch, “Woodrow Wilson and the

Independence of Small Nations in Central Europe,” *The Journal of Modern History* 19, no. 3 (1947): 235–38.

⁵ Charles Percler, “Minorities in Czechoslovakia,” *Current History* 17, no. 2 (1922): 310.

⁶ Percler, “Minorities in Czechoslovakia,” 310.

⁷ Crowhurst, *A History of Czechoslovakia*, 25; Percler, “Minorities in Czechoslovakia,” 310–311.

the United States would support the formation of an independent state for Sudeten Germans.⁸ Instead, the United States backed the Czech claims on all historical Bohemian and Moravian territory, including the majority of German lands.⁹ In another attempt to achieve separation from Czechoslovakia, the ethnic-Germans vied to join the Republic of German-Austria, which had formed in Austria following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹⁰ However, the United States disapproved of this territorial change as well, and forced the ethnic-Germans to be a part of the Czechoslovak state unwillingly, and even forced German-Austria to revert its name to Austria to discourage ideas of a larger ethnically German state.¹¹ This instance of American inconsistency directly resulted in the denial of political freedoms for millions of German Czechoslovaks, who were subsequently excluded from high governmental positions for decades, and undermined the very principles that the United States claimed to champion.

Although Masaryk, who was of mixed Czech and Slovak ancestry, worked to promote a united identity between Czechs and Slovaks, not all two million Slovaks supported unity in statehood between the two ethnic groups.¹² Unlike the ethnically German lands in the west, the ethnic Slovak lands were never historically a part of Bohemia or Moravia and, thus, never a core Czech territory.¹³ Many Slovaks even considered themselves closer to Hungarians than Czechs since Slovakia had been integrated as a part of Hungary since the 10th century.¹⁴ The Slovak League of America urged the United States government to voice support for a self-governing Slovak state.¹⁵ Despite acknowledging the “uneasy relationship between the Czechs and the Slovaks,” the United States delegation accepted Masaryk’s position that the two groups of people should be united as one country administered from Prague, for “geographic and economic” reasons.¹⁶ The Czech majority would curtail the growth of Slovak political power and leave

⁸ Matthew Vink, “The Competition for Self-Determination in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1919,” *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 46 (2012): 44.

⁹ Vink, “The Competition for Self-Determination,” 43-45.

¹⁰ Crowhurst, *A History of Czechoslovakia*, 26.

¹¹ Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Austria,” *The American Journal of International Law* 14, no. 1/2 (1920): 1-5; Erik Goldstein, *The First World War Peace Settlements, 1919-1925*, Seminar Studies in History (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

¹² John D. and Sylvia E. Crane, *Czechoslovakia, Anvil*

of the Cold War (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 51-56; Crowhurst, *A History of Czechoslovakia*, 22..

¹³ Vink, “The Competition for Self-Determination,” 52.

¹⁴ Crowhurst, *A History of Czechoslovakia*, 23.

¹⁵ Michael Cude, *The Slovak Question: A Transatlantic Perspective, 1914-1948*, Russian and East European Studies (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022), 19-20.

¹⁶ Miklós Lojók, *Meddling in Middle Europe: Britain and the "lands Between" 1919-1925* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006), 159.

the Slovak population poorer than the Czechs for decades. The United States' decision to support the creation of a larger state left a large ethnic minority without their desired self-determination.

Similarly, the United States disapproved of the independence or autonomy of Carpatho-Ruthenia, a major detriment to their right to self-determination. This land was not majority Czech and hosted a variety of ethnic minorities, most notably the Ruthenians and the Hungarians.¹⁷ The Ruthenians were ethnically Ukrainian, but they had a rich and unique culture and history of their own.¹⁸ An informal poll in 1919 made it clear that a majority of Ruthenians in the region vied to join an independent Ukraine, shouting, "We are Ruthenians! Because we live in the Carpathians, we are called Carpathian Ruthenians. But we know that Ruthenians similar to us live beyond the Carpathians," referring to Ukrainians in the former Russian Empire.¹⁹ While Ruthenians advocated for unity with Ukraine, many ethnic-Hungarians in the region pushed for union with Hungary, an effort that was equally championed by the new Hungarian government.²⁰ While these ethnic minorities disagreed on which country to join, they all agreed on one belief: Carpatho-

Ruthenia should never become a part of Czechoslovakia.²¹ Yet, the American government sided with the Czechs, who made up only a fraction of the population in Carpatho-Ruthenia, to make the territory part of the Republic of Czechoslovakia. This decision is slightly more understandable than the American verdicts on the question of German or Slovak autonomy, considering that the advocacy for Carpatho-Ruthenian independence was limited in the United States.²² Still, this result had long-lasting ramifications for the Carpatho-Ruthenian people. Over the next twenty-six years, the territory would fuel Hungarian nationalist anger against the Czechoslovaks, a site of brief skirmishes between Slovak and Hungarian armies, and the battleground for fighting between Ukrainian and Hungarian political groups for decades following the Second World War. The United States' lack of support for the people of Carpatho-Ukraine was a crucial fault that would eventually lead to unnecessary havoc and ethnic strife.

The United States' inconsistency with the ideal of self-determination and the independence of every nation-state in Europe in the Paris Peace Treaties caused long-lasting damage to the Czechoslovak minority groups. Prominent

¹⁷ Percler, "Minorities in Czechoslovakia," 310-311.

¹⁸ Paul R. Magocsi, "The Ruthenian Decision to Unite with Czechoslovakia," *Slavic Review* 34, no. 2 (1975): 364-365.

¹⁹ Magocsi, "The Ruthenian Decision," 366, 369-370.

²⁰ Peter F. Sugar et al., *A History of Hungary* (United States: Indiana University Press, 1990), 298.

²¹ Magocsi, "The Ruthenian Decision," 369-370.

²² Crowhurst, *A History of Czechoslovakia*, 22.

Czech politician Vladimir Tusar, who would become prime minister of Czechoslovakia in 1919, stated that “Naturally must ensure that outwardly [Czechoslovakia] is a Czech state, filled with a Czech spirit, and driven by a Czech spirit.”²³ Although the Czech government intended to respect all minorities, nearly all of the political power in Czechoslovakia until the German occupation in 1938 would be controlled by the ethnically Czech majority governing from Prague. The United States not only failed to provide for statehood for the ethnic Germans, Slovaks, Ruthenians, or Hungarians living in Czechoslovakia, but never even attempted to advocate for such solutions during the Paris Peace Conference. Considering the foresight that the diplomats of 1919 did not have access to, the subsequent violence and political upheavals in Czechoslovakia and its neighbors in the 1930s spring to mind. Although the other great powers of France and the United Kingdom must also take the blame for failing to grant national statehood or even limited autonomy for the ethnic minorities of Czechoslovakia, the government of the United States must also take responsibility for this outcome that greatly impacted the lives of millions.

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²³ Vink, “The Competition for Self-Determination,”

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