

# 18 ‘Our People is Free and Independent!’

*On 21 December 1918, after an absence of four years, Masaryk returned to Prague as the undisputed leader of the liberation movement and the elected first president of Czechoslovakia. The next day he addressed his first message to the members of the revolutionary National Assembly. The address, a remarkable historical document, is noteworthy as Masaryk’s own description and interpretation of his revolutionary activities in Western Europe, Russia, and America, presented with his typical poignancy and matter-of-factness. The following text is the complete translation of the speech, as it was published in the collection Cesta demokracie (The Road of Democracy) in 1934.*

I, too, trust the Lord that after the storms of wrath, brought upon our heads through our own sins, the rule over things will return to thee, o Czech people. In this hope I name thee heir to everything I have inherited from my forefathers and preserved through troublesome, difficult times, as well as everything that has thrived through the good work of my sons and the blessing of the Lord. All this I bequeathe to thee.

The prophecy and prayer of Comenius has now been completely fulfilled. Our people is free and independent and is joining the society of European nations, respected and cheered by universal sympathy.

Are we living in a fairy-tale? This is what the politicians of all nations are asking, and I ask myself the same question. And yet it is all real reality, the result of four years of struggle on the part of all the nations of the world. The world split into two camps, and in the terrible contest victory came to those who defended the ideals of justice - the idealists have won, spirit won over matter, right over violence, truth over deviousness.

The Central Powers, led by Prussian Germany, strove for mastery

over the old world, over Europe, Asia, and Africa. This was the chief aim of the Pan-German politicians, and it was expressed in brief by the slogan: Berlin-Baghdad. The century-old German 'drive to the east' was to have been capped by final mastery over eastern nations, above all Slavic nations, and the whole course of the war marked by a series of German victories brought the fulfillment of the German plan ever closer.

Subjection of the European East would have resulted in subjection of the West and of the entire old world. But the new world, America, shed its reserve, replaced tired, devastated Russia, and soon General Foch was able to dictate peace terms to defeated Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Theocratic autocracy succumbed to democracy based on principles of humanist morality. Berlin, Vienna and Constantinople had proclaimed the blasphemous doctrine that their states, in fact their very dynasties, not only existed through the grace of God but actually served as God's revelation and instrument. A state leaning on militaristic armed force was set up as the ideal against nationality: aggression and mastery over the world became the goals of czarist- imperialist Berlin, Vienna and Constantinople. Prussianism, Austrianism and Genghis-Khanism were not merely allied geographically; there was an inner harmony and affinity between these three surviving relics of medieval theocracy.

This theocracy was opposed by an alliance of modern democracies, non-militaristic democracies, defending the ideals of humanity. Prussian militarism, an army of military specialists, was defeated by a popular army which had to be organised and trained during the course of the war. The long-planned preparations of Germany and its calculated aggression failed. The Allies, faithful to democracy, consistently proclaimed the right of all states and nations, big and small, to independence. President Wilson formulated the leading principles of democracy, contained in the American Declaration of Independence and in the French proclamation of the rights of man and citizen. Revolution proved victorious over formalistic rigidity. All political power derives from the people, or, as Lincoln put it, of the people, for the people and by the people. President Wilson proclaimed the liberation of all mankind as the aim of the war. All mankind joined forces against the four Central Powers, and just as agreement of nations had once been considered proof for the existence of God, so now agreement of all nations in all parts of the

world is proof of democratic truth. Prussian militarism and its allies were, and are, morally isolated.

We Czechs and Slovaks could not stand aside in this world-wide struggle. We had to make the decision to oppose Austria-Hungary and Germany, we had to step forward, for our entire history, its content and meaning, allied us to the democratic powers. The building of our state and our resistance against German eastward expansion, our Reformation and its ideals, our suffering during the antireformation violence caused by the Habsburg rulers' misuse of religion for their base materialistic aims, as well as our national rebirth led by the idea of humanity and its consequence: democracy

- the fate of our people is quite logically linked with the West and with modern Western democracy.

That is why it was correct - and as we now see, fortunate - that from the very beginning of the war we took the side of the Allies. Nothing could induce us to join the ranks of those who vilified us, spurred by the barbaric slogans of the Mommsens, von Hartmanns and Lagardes.

Allow me, friends, to give you a report about our activities abroad. I must limit myself to the main points, for the history of this four- year activity is long and varied; I will concentrate on elucidating the principles that guided our work, rather than on explanations of individual actions.

It was clear to me from the beginning that I could not, and must not, remain in the service of Austria-Hungary. It is true that at the outset I was not sufficiently decisive in taking action; I felt the enormous responsibility, I thought of the results of possible failure

- but the sight of our soldiers refusing to serve and surrendering to the Allies, the criminal executions of our people responding to the promises of Russian general, and, above all, the entire murderous apparatus of Vienna and Budapest forced me to make a decision. I consulted political friends on an individual basis, for political parties had been dissolved. I also travelled to Vienna to speak with serious- minded Austrian Germans in order to learn what they actually hoped to gain from the war, especially in case of victory. I twice visited Holland; I travelled through Germany and tried to gather as much information as I could. In the middle of December 1914 I travelled to Italy, still neutral at that time, and to Switzerland. I thought I would return to Prague in order to report on my findings, but that was no longer possible. And so I remained for a time in Geneva and in the fall of 1915 I left for London via Paris. I settled in London,

from where I could readily visit Paris on a regular basis. Dr Benes and General Stefanik, devoted, faithful and efficient co-workers, remained in Paris. In May of last year I had to go to Russia from where at the beginning of this March I travelled across Siberia to Japan, and from Japan to the United States. I stayed in America seven months. Then I was called back by our government, after a four-year absence from home, as the first President of the Czechoslovak Republic.

This unusual, unexpected trip around the world was in reality a trip to publicise our cause, to gain the support of the entire Allied world for our national goals and our political program, a substantial aim of which was to destroy Austria-Hungary, thus isolating Germany and forcing it to be content at last with its own national territory. After all, this was the crux of the matter, Austria was Germany's strength and at the same time its weakness.

We organised our emigre colonies abroad and launched a well-planned propaganda campaign, in speeches and in print, as well as diplomatic activity. But political activity, especially of the revolutionary kind, is not possible without money - and in this we received help from our people in America and in Russia. I wish to stress emphatically that we did not take a single penny from the Allies - I stress it because our opponents speak of Russian, English and other funds. And I also declare that during this whole period we did not employ a single untruth against our enemies, not even one of those so-called diplomatic subtleties - I can say that such an honorable political struggle, such an honorable revolution, had hardly ever been waged before.

It became clear to me that neither propaganda nor revolution in the army and at home were sufficient; we needed an army of our own. The first legions came into being in France and in Russia. Soon, volunteers from many countries flocked to the colors: from England, America, Canada, Africa, Australia. At the beginning their numbers were small, but they grew out of the flood of prisoners. This was especially true in Russia, where there was a large number of our prisoners. The history of our army in Russia is a history of the whole country, for Russian historical developments are reflected in the evolution of our army. At this point I merely wish to remark that the old Sturmer regime was not favorable to the formation of a large army. Kerensky, too, was opposed to us at first, until he learned that his offensive had been to a large extent carried out by three of our regiments, and that our boys had protected the fateful

retreat of the Russian army. Laudatory comments about the courage of our soldiers by such figures as Brusilov and Alekseev as well as by French and Italian military experts are well known. After numerous attempts we succeeded in organising a whole army corps. I may say without exaggeration that the organisation of this army at a time of anarchy and total disintegration of the Russian army is best proof of the maturity of our boys and of the whole nation, for one hundred thousand men, one hundred thousand citizens, represent a substantial part of the nation. By the spring of this year, our army in Russia grew to about fifty thousand active soldiers, with another fifty thousand on the rolls. Their organisation, skill and national discipline were surpassed only by their heroic attitude, their love of freedom and faithful devotion to the people.

I cannot fail to ask you to pay silent homage to those of our dear boys who have fallen in battle, our heroes in Russia, the Balkans, France, Italy and the Salonika front, to whom we owe today's memorial session and our liberation. And let us not forget our martyrs to the Habsburg terror at home, and the thousands upon thousands of war prisoners in Russia, dying in Murmansk, Turkistan, all over the steppes of that unhappy land so incapable of caring for the health of our prisoners. How many of our people perished while trying to escape across Albania - Czech graves are scattered across all the warring lands.

And I cannot fail to express my thanks and satisfaction with regard to your own demeanor and political behaviour, my friends, and that of the entire nation, Czechs and Slovaks. There were times when I had not been quite satisfied, and thus my present judgement may carry a certain weight; of course, I will try to give you some evidence that my 'holy dissatisfaction' had its uses.

Our armies, fighting on three fronts, gained us our liberty. The history of our strivings and especially the history of our army, its battles and its heroism, the history of the Siberian anabasis - all this will serve as an instructive epic for future generations! In addition to the armies fighting in the field, many co-workers of mine in many lands worked tirelessly on organisational activity. Most of the work was naturally done in Russia. I thank all the members of the Russian branch of the Czechoslovak National Council, and I pay special homage to its late general secretary, Jiff Klecanda.

In February 1916 France was first to recognise the significance of our nation for the Allies and for Europe. Later it was first to recognise our National Council abroad, helped to organise and maintain

our army in France and also in Russia, and in general behaved in a truly magnanimous way toward us.

Italy had always been friendly toward us. We have a sizeable army there, and we signed our first treaty with Italy thus gaining recognition. Thereafter all the Allies turned to us in a friendly manner and we were recognised by England, the United States, Japan, Serbia, Belgium, Greece and Cuba. I do not know whom to thank first. Naturally, recognition by England and the United States, the most powerful of the Allies, greatly strengthened us, as was evident from the reaction of the enemy camp. Prosperous America has given us - and continued to give us - substantial help, and we have received certain promises for the future. President Wilson himself has devoted careful and sincere attention to the questions affecting us. We are indebted to him and to all the Allies, and they can always count on us. I can best express our feelings by citing the words of our Premier, Dr Kramar, who asked me by means of the first radio message between Paris and Prague 'to assure all the Allied governments and peoples of our gratitude and unshakable fidelity. Our Republic will forever remain grateful to the Allies.'

After official recognition by the Allies, we declared our nation's independence and organised a government. This was approved by our people at home and the government was entrusted to you and to me.

The actual aim of the war was the reorganisation of Eastern Europe, and the solution of the 'eastern question' in general. The war was a continuation and culmination of struggles to resolve the eastern question in the broad sense of the word. The German drive to the east has always been directed against a band of small nations living between the Germans and the Russians. Starting with the Finns and ending with the Greeks down below, it is a row of eighteen small nations. Pan-Germanists proclaimed that small nations had no future, that history aimed toward the creation of large states. This opinion is obviously incorrect, for from the eighteenth century until today a whole row of small nations has come into being. The imperialistic attempt of Napoleon did not succeed, and the imperialism of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia went aground in the same way. Small nations have been liberated.

The negative task of the war has been completed, Europe now faces the positive task of organising the east of Europe, and thereby Europe and humanity in general. We stand at the threshold of a new era, when all humanity feels its unity. Our nation, fully aware of

this grand and noble task, wants to contribute toward its realisation. We know that all nations expect new, creative and enterprising political action, and we promise to make an honest attempt in this regard.

Bismarck said that whoever is master of Bohemia is master of Europe. In this way he emphasised the special position of our nation in the world. We are the westernmost Slavic branch in central Europe, and we have successfully resisted German attempts at Germanising the east. Our present victory was made possible by our national steadfastness, and by a land well-endowed by nature. Our victory is also the victory of other small nations which had been threatened by Austria and Germany.

Similarity of fate and similarity of danger prompt us to close friendship with our neighbours to the east and southeast.

While I was abroad, I established friendly contacts with all these nations, with the Poles, Ukrainians, Yugoslavs, Rumanians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Finns, Greeks and Albanians. In America, we attempted to form the Mid-European Union. Twelve nations have joined so far, and negotiations are proceeding in a promising manner. America has taken a lively interest in this Union. In connection with the Union, a special Society for the Support of Central-European Peoples came into being, which I hope will strongly contribute to the great enterprise. President Wilson himself expressed strong sympathy for the Union, and its desire to contribute to the solution of problems facing smaller nations stimulated the President's lively interest.

As far as our immediate tasks are concerned, I can only give you a brief outline. In general, we want to form the most intimate contacts possible with our neighbours and the nations close to us.

A common frontier and similar history prompt us to political friendship with Poland. I have had a great deal of discussion with Polish leaders. We even considered a federation, but we recognised that in the near future each nation is likely to face much constructive work of its own and that it would be better not to complicate matters at this point. But we will attempt to reach economic and military agreements. These will of course be purely defensive. We also discussed the Polish question regarding Silesia. It should be easy to reach agreement - this problem is rather trivial as compared to the great tasks awaiting us. It is in the interest of both countries to be as strong as possible. I must say, however, that I consider the manner whereby some Poles are attempting to seize our territory to be

unacceptable. First we must unite the territory of our state and then we can voluntarily agree to the rectification of frontiers. We hope that the Poles will accept this viewpoint, especially since an unfortunate Polish example might tempt others to undertake similarly dangerous attempts against the Poles themselves. After they manage to stabilise their state, negotiations between the two states can begin.

We have already collaborated with Rumanians, especially in Russia, and a very promising friendship has developed between us. I myself visited Rumania and negotiated with the King and his government, mainly about attaching our forces to the Rumanian army, but this never materialised. Now there is a possibility that we will be neighbours, for the Hungarian Ruthenians, through their representatives in America, offered to join our country as an autonomous part. We have received a similar proposal from the so-called Carpathian Ruthenians. I lacked the authority, of course, to take action in this matter, but I expressed my agreement. According to reports, there is no doubt that the Ruthenian people in Hungary will approve the proposal.

I expect that the Rumanians and Yugoslavs will come to terms, especially regarding the Banat. I need not mention that our relations with the Yugoslavs are the most cordial possible, a friendship sealed in common struggles; our contact would become even more direct were we to become neighbours of Rumania. Our political experts as well as their Yugoslav counterparts are fully convinced of the need for direct geographic connection between us and the new Yugoslavia. Austrian Germans are now asking for the same territory, but they have recently been warned - by the Hungarians, in fact - that this territory contained numerous Croat and Slovene enclaves. In any event, in the absence of any territorial disputes with the Rumanians or Yugoslavs we should easily agree to maintain extremely intimate relations. I negotiated with representatives of both countries and reached agreement. The Greeks, too, through statements by their leading people, especially Venizelos, approved this agreement.

If the difficulties between Yugoslavia and Italy can be worked out - and there is some hope - then Pan-German *Mitteleuropa* would be replaced by an amicable group of states from the Baltic to the Adriatic, and from Switzerland all the way to France. It would serve as a strong barrier against Germany until the Germans abandon their expansive thrust eastward, and it would also serve to protect Russia by shielding it against Prussia. All of us, all Europe, needs a strong Russia, unified in a federal state.

Russia is experiencing a difficult crisis. Incompetent, degenerate czarism was toppled, just like the czarism of Berlin and Vienna. But the Russian revolution was not - and is not - sufficiently creative, the Russians failed to learn administration, and without administration there is no democracy. I doubt that Russia will be able to right itself soon without the help of the Allies.

I cannot go into greater detail about these plans, I am only indicating the direction along which our foreign policy ought to develop, but I must complete this sketch with some thoughts about our relations with the Germans and Hungarians.

Concerning the Germans in our lands, our programme has been known for a long time; the territory settled by Germans is our territory, and it will remain ours. We built and maintained our state in the past, and now we are building it anew. I wish that our Germans collaborated with us - that would be a better policy than their present questionable activity. I understand of course that they are in a difficult position, and I take that into account. Unfortunately, they were too willing to identify themselves with the aggressive Pan-Germanic, anti-Czech programme, they failed to understand the world situation, they were intoxicated by apparent early successes. Our Germans became victims of devious, mendacious Austrianism and the shortsighted Habsburgs. It is psychologically quite understandable they are now upset that they have been so fatefully disappointed, and that we were - and are - in the right.

I repeat: we built our state, and that fact determines the legal position of our Germans, who initially came to our lands as immigrants and colonists. We have a full right to the wealth of our own territory, essential for our industry as well as for the Germans living among us. We do not wish, and are not able, to sacrifice our substantial Czech minorities in the so-called German territory. Besides, we are convinced that for our German countrymen to orient themselves toward us is in the best interests of their own economic progress. It rests on them to take the proper attitude. Let them recall that in the year 1861 they joined us in requesting the emperor to have himself crowned Czech king. I sincerely hope that we will come to an agreement as soon as possible. I must admit it is hard for us to forget that our Germans and Germans in the empire in general accepted the cruelties of Austrian and Hungarian soldiers without protest, and it is hard for us to forget that our Germans were among the most furious adherents of Pan-Germanism. Nevertheless, we will be glad to accept them if they decide to collaborate with us.

Nobody can blame us if after so many bitter experiences we remain somewhat cautious, but I assure everyone that the minorities in our country will enjoy full national rights and equality as citizens. The American republic preferred civil war rather than permit secession of its South. We will never permit secession of our mixed North. By building a truly democratic self-government we will have an appropriate means for solving nationality questions. Direct division in a situation of such complex nationality composition is not possible, for the problem is not merely one of language but also, to a considerable extent, a social one.

**Our relationship to German Austria** is determined not only by the results of the war but by our entire national programme. After all, we joined Austria and Hungary to help create the Austrian empire. We were the pearl of Austria. We thus proved that we could coexist with Germans on a friendly basis. But the Habsburgs rewarded us poorly. I cannot review for you now our entire long struggle against Austria. The war proved that the one-sided policy of the Germans and Hungarians had to run aground, and indeed it disintegrated irretrievably and forever. Dualism capped the Habsburg incompetence and insincerity. It was a plot aimed in the first place against us. Austria and Hungary clearly became an organisation devoted to violence, the violence of a minority against a majority. Before the war, Europe was not aware of the situation but the war taught Europe about the real state of affairs and the French, English and Americans, in particular, began to see through the tremendous duplicity of Austrian and Hungarian policy as evident in numerous attempts to deceive the Allies. Habsburg and Hungarian propaganda actually proved to be our helpful ally. Even the Germans within Germany got a taste of the Habsburgs at first hand. Germany saved Austria-Hungary twice (against the Russians and against the Italians) but in the end Vienna betrayed its saviour. Of course, the immorality of German politics was manifested precisely in the close connection the Germans established with people for whom they really had contempt, and even though Berlin led Vienna it succumbed to Viennese influence too often, with unfortunate results.

It is not my task to offer advice to Austrian Germans. It is natural that due to past alliance of our lands with Austria we have inherited numerous ties, particularly of an economic kind. If the Austrian Germans give up their domineering ways, if they give up their Pan-Germanic plans, if they adopt a loyal attitude and keep out of our affairs, then a decent neighbourly relationship would be possible,

and Austria could maintain its independence. I believe that the difficult problem facing Vienna could be solved this way. Of course, we must bear in mind our sizeable minority in Vienna.

Our relationship to Germany will depend upon the way the Germans plan their policy. We will act in a correct fashion. We hope that the defeat of aggressive Prussian militarism will be a victory for the German people, that the German people will learn to fall back upon its own national resources, that it will abandon its expansionist Eastern policy and instead devote its great strength and capability to the cause of international organisation and humanity. That is a far greater and more noble goal than Pan-Germanism.

[The following paragraph of the speech was delivered in Slovak.]

There is no point in talking at great length about the Hungarians. Until the sixties of the last century they played a modest role. But around that time the fertility of their soil became an important economic factor for industrialised Austria. At the same time the Hungarians tried to exploit Bismarck's policy toward Austria, and became a devoted German avant-garde in the Balkans. The feudal nobility, supported by capitalists, erected an artificial state structure which collapsed through the impact of the war, along with the artificial structure of the Habsburgs. It was quite senseless for a nation such as the Hungarians to be allowed for so long to exploit four other nations - our Slovaks, the Ruthenians, the Rumanians and the Yugoslavs. Cavour had already seen quite clearly that the Hungarians did not respect the freedom of other peoples, even though they themselves had to protect their freedom against the Germans. Politically, the Hungarians have been living up till now on the prestige gained in 1848, but the falseness of their propaganda has been evident to everyone, and today the Allies see quite clearly that the Hungarians have no rightful claims except to their own national state. I hope that our relationship to them will be established on a sensible basis as soon as possible. The Hungarian minority in our country will enjoy all the rights of citizens. The Hungarians used to be quite cruel. They used to say: a Slovak is not a human being. We will not pay them back with evil, we only want the Slovaks to be accorded borders which favor their prosperity. The same applies to the Ruthenians who wish to join us.

I want to conclude. I know that we will not fulfill our national programme merely through our foreign policy, and that our main

effort will have to take place within our own land. Here, too, we will be guided by Havlicek's precept and follow an honest, sensible policy.

During the period of transition we will concentrate on maintaining order and devote ourselves to orderly administrative work. The essence of democracy rests in administration and self-government. Democracy is not a question of mastery but of work to ensure justice. And justice is the mathematics of humanism.

We must pay special attention to the perfection of our agriculture, industry and commerce. We will launch a new programme of rail transport and communications. In the light of the new conditions in the world, our ties with the Allies will be not only political but economic. I have already established economic and financial contacts with influential figures in America, England and France. The Allied countries have pledged financial aid; the United States, including President Wilson himself, have promised us support by way of needed supplies during the time of transition. Our government has already submitted a list of needed items; we asked only for the most necessary things, because we know that others need help also. America has strongly helped our army in Russia and continues to do so. The American Red Cross has done an exemplary job. The government and financial circles are willing to help us with a loan - I have negotiated a small loan myself, the constitutional approval of which will have to be discussed.

But neither individual human beings nor nations live on bread alone; we have all become aware that we need re-education. Concern for schooling and for the life of the mind requires most intensive care. And our legislative organs must of course create new laws, reflecting the new circumstances. Unhealthy Austrianism must be thoroughly transcended; real re-education requires more than surface change. All in all, we now have the possibility to put many theoretical concepts to practical use; but we must guard against rashness, we have enough time, we do not need to do everything at once. Let us begin with essentials and with matters that will facilitate further organic development.

Conditions in the world and in our own country require penetrating social reforms; democratic equality rules out all exploitation and class domination.

I am happy to see women in this gathering. I believe that women should devote themselves to public activity just like men.

Let us hope that the Paris peace conference will ensure us of

lasting peace. But this does not free us of responsibility for national defence; on the contrary, we must endeavour to build a nationwide system of effective defence. This goal also requires an active population policy. I am glad that our government already includes a Ministry of Health. The experience of a lengthy war virtually forces us to pay heed to the bodies and souls of future generations. The ideals of Fiigner and Tyrš have proven their value in our army.

Our armies are returning from France and Italy. I am hoping that our boys in Russia will also be able to come home soon, but this is impeded by distance and technical difficulties. Moreover, as a partner of the Allies we cannot take unilateral action in such a serious matter. We will utilise the army for maintenance of order and the security of our territory. Our armed forces are part of the Allied army, and I hope that our separatists will realise this fact and the consequences which flow from the armistice conditions.

My friends, I did not wish to present a detailed programme. I am merely presenting to you some of the leading principles of the political activity which is now required, and I tried very briefly to capture the meaning of those terrible - yet for us, fortunate - events of this war, a war which we hope will be the last. This meaning can be expressed quite simply: all of us, individuals and nations, wish to be truly human! The great sacrifices in lives and goods were not in vain. We have achieved our goal. Now we shall try to ensure its enduring safety, a task which is perhaps more difficult than the task of the war. All citizens of good will, without regard for political party, religion or nationality, have the opportunity to help build a model democratic state, whose task will be to care for the interests of all its free, self-governing citizens.

Gentlemen, grant me just a few more words!

We have gained the sympathy of the Allies and the respect of our antagonists by our organisational skill and by our ability to create and maintain order. And we must continue to preserve order, under all circumstances. There must be no violence in our country, and I fervently ask you, friends, to help establish calm wherever and whenever you can. Disorder would greatly harm us politically; England and America, in particular, would be very upset by disorder. I plead most fervently for your cooperation.

I came to Prague accompanied by a part of our foreign army; you will see that all of us really meant it when we offered our lives and earthly goods. I am certain that the whole nation will love those boys of ours just as I love them. I was an anti-militarist and did not

like the Austrian armies. We did not build this army of ours out of a taste for militaristic adventure, but in order to gain and maintain freedom and democracy. And for this purpose we must have our army. Those charged with building a republican, democratic army will have a serious job to do. And democracy in the army, just like democracy anywhere, cannot be created simply by removing the remnants of Austrianism, but by a rebirth of spirit.

I have ended. I wish you happy and merry holidays!

### Source

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