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ITALIAN LEGIONS AND CITIZEN SOLDIERS IN CZECH LITERATURE



Italian war front

Italian war front does not attract so much attention as fights on Western and Eastern fronts do. It did not involve any significant geopolitical dispute and it was not the reason of the start of WWI. Nevertheless many bloody battles occurred here the outcomes of which are to a large extent attributable to Czech legions units.

Fights on the Italian front started on 23 May 1915 between former allies from the Triple Alliance (Italy and Austria-Hungary). While Italy contrary to Germany and Austria-Hungary considered on a long-term basis the existence of the Triple Alliance as a defense treaty it had not joined the war from the very beginning in July 1914¹.

Italian front is particular for its mountainous terrain which made it hard for both parties to get ahead as can be illustrated by 11 battles on the Soca River taking place between June 1915 and September 1917. While the Italian army did not succeed in conquering Trieste and other strategic territories the Austrian-Hungarian army was not strong enough to push the Italian army inland².

Involvement of the German army marked significant breakthrough as the Germans redeployed their forces after Russia had collapsed on the Eastern front. When the Austrians won the battle of Caporetto (also referred to as 12th Battle on the Soca River) Italian soldiers were forced to pull back to the south to the Piave River where fights took place until November 1918³.

¹ V. Vaněk, *Cztery możliwości prozy wojennej*, [in:] *Wojna – retoryka walki*, ed. J. Goszczyńska, Warszawa 2015, p. 47-67.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

In October 1917 the Italian army who had been subject to some changes decided to make use of captured Czech and Slovak soldiers in sections outside war operations which clashed with the concept of the Czechoslovak international resistance. The formation started during February and March 1918.

It was only after Milan Rastislav Štefánik's intervention that the Italian army changed its approach with the Congress of Austrian-Hungarian Nations under Repression marking another important milestone; its outcoming declaration (right to self-determination and right to economic and political independence) having been approved by the then Italian prime-minister V. E. Orlando⁴.

The key activity took place on 21 April 1918: the Italian army signed with the Czechoslovak National Council *Agreement to Establish Autonomous Czechoslovak Army in Italy*. Having done so Italy became the Triple Entente country having recognized Czechoslovak National Council in Paris as governing body of future Czechoslovakia⁵.

Having undergone training Czechoslovak legions were used on the front line to defend Doss Alto di Nago as a key point from Lago di Garda to the town of Brentonico. The Battle of Doss Alto had mainly political importance. As soon as the Austrian-Hungarian army got the information that the area was defended also by deserters from their own lines it started to strengthen its ward and tried to capture Czechoslovak guard⁶.

Despite all the difficulties encountered (phone signal cut-off, failure of distress rockets) Czechoslovak soldiers managed to defend Doss Alto which largely contributed to positive responses received from Italian politicians and Italian media. On the other hand death of two officers and four executions of captured soldiers marked the dark side of the event⁷.

Doss Alto success resulted in significant extension of Czechoslovak intelligence (accounting in total to 78 officers and 1753 soldiers as of September 1918). Besides intelligence and promotion events these units were also responsible for direct fights on the Piave River having contributed among others to the liberation of Trent, Rovereto and Pergine.

On the other hand rifle divisions were temporarily withdrawn from the front as reserves and intended to be used for November offensive. However the offensive did not take place in the end as the war on the Italian front ended on 3 November 1918 after Austria-Hungary had capitulated⁸.

⁴ *Československé legie 1914-1920* (Czechoslovak Legions 1914-1920), compiled by M. Mojžíš, Praha 2017, p. 258.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 262.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 272.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 278.

On 17 September Czechoslovak volunteer units were reorganized into the First Czechoslovak Army Corps (comprising 19476 men) military oath was taken in Padova on 8 December and starting from 15 December the Army Corps were transported to the newly established Czechoslovakia⁹.

Nevertheless having come back to their home country the responsibilities of the Army Corps still continued. As Hungarian and Slovakian territories were sovietized (declaration of the Slovak Soviet Republic) the Czechoslovak army was sent to defend southern border of Slovakia and the Italian legion units largely contributed to the final victory¹⁰. In this connection we have to mention also the help of international allies (Romania; the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; the support of France and Italy) who also played a key role in the victory. The Slovak southern border was finally set by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon¹¹.

Legionary Literature

The first half of the 20th century saw a high number of literary work focused on the Czechoslovak legions and on the First World War in general. Using Jiří Poláček's typology we can mention e.g. Jaroslav Hašek (*Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*) Vladislav Vančura (*Pole orná a válečná*), Jaroslav Bednář (*Červená země*) or Jaromír John (*Večery na slavníku*)¹².

Nevertheless besides that there are also regional authors or writers nearly forgotten (such as František Horečka, Bartoš Vlček and Václav Fryček) whose efforts also largely contributed to the literature on Czechoslovak legions and citizen soldiers. Therefore the following parts of the paper will look at these authors.

František Horečka¹³

Born on 25 March 1894 in Frenštát pod Radhoštěm, František Horečka attended local elementary school between 1900-1905 with very good study results and thanks to his teacher he learned about folk songs and choir singing. Furthermore his classmate

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ J. Michl, *Legionáři a Československo* (Legionaries and Czechoslovakia), Praha 2009, p. 23.

¹¹ J. Kretší, *Vznik a vývoj československé legie v Itálii* (Establishment and Development of Czechoslovak Legion in Italy), Praha 1928, p. 229-240.

¹² J. Poláček *et al.*, *Průhledy do české literatury 20. století* (Insights into 20th Century Czech Literature), Brno 2000, p. 61.

¹³ *Osobní fond Františka Horečky* (František Horečka's Personal Resources), Památník Petra Bezruče, Opava. 48 cartons. It contains personal correspondence, manuscripts (short stories, novels, specialized articles, lectures) and printed material.

Miroslav Kála (son of Slovakist Karel Kála) helped him to get some insight into Slovak culture. During regular Sunday walks with his parents he would often climb hills around his home village (such as Radhošť, Ondřejník, Javorník etc.) as well as visit fairs; both of that helped him later in his studies of folk traditions and local people mentality¹⁴.

The year of 1915 marked key milestone of Horečka's life: in March his father died and in June he was drafted into a military unit in Frýdek-Místek to be sent to the Eastern front. However due to his poor health condition (overall weakness of the body and shade on the left lung apex) he could stay in the rear during his first year¹⁵.

It was only in June 1916 when he was enlisted in Galicia he started with building new trenches for the trench war later on the Austrians used his art skills and asked him to draw the complex trench system. It was at that time that František Horečka first thought about deserting from the Austrian-Hungarian army but finally decided to stay there to preserve family relationships (his mother had been suffering from a long disease and had several children at home to care about). Furthermore the political situation in Russia put him off so instead of leaving the army he answered the demand for pottery painting to earn more money for supporting his family¹⁶.

The Galicia stay was interesting for Horečka also from national and cultural points of view. The Rusyns made him write a short story called *Žena knězova* (Priest's Wife published in 1919) describing a psychological story of a young lieutenant and his relationship to a Greek Catholic priest's wife¹⁷.

After the Eastern front collapsed Horečka was sent to the Italian front. In July 1918 he got to Bolzano where his unit was supposed to wait until a date for the Austrian-Hungarian offensive is determined¹⁸. On 17 September the unit was commanded to move to the Sette Comuni plateau where the Austrian-Hungarian army was to push the Italian army to the south. As it was Horečka's first direct experience with the fight in the WWI he decided to make his will or rather draft a message to independent Czech nation¹⁹.

Let us greet the sun of freedom that will unfortunately not rise for those having fallen serving to others driven forward defenseless [...] and may our descendants never forget those who sacrificed themselves for your future days²⁰.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ L. Knězek, *S Radhoštěm v erbu* (Radhošť in Coat of Arms), Brno 2004, p. 40-43.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

¹⁷ M. Rusinský, *Návrat k domovu. K osmdesátému výročí narození Františka Horečky* (Coming back home. Published at František Horečka's 80th birth anniversary), [in:] *Listy Památníku P. Bezruč*, Opava 1974, No. 5.

¹⁸ L. Knězek, *op. cit.*, p. 53-55.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

Nevertheless the situation finally changed and the regiment was pulled back to the rear to protect the Austrian-Hungarian corps of general. And shortly afterwards Horečka was lucky again thanks to his artistic skills.

An Austrian officer sent him for a business trip to Bolzano to buy among others colours to be used for depicting the expected Austrian-Hungarian victory on the Italian front. Therefore he was not confronted with the decisive Italian offensive at Vittoria Veneta which most probably saved his life²¹.

After the Vittoria Veneta battle the Austrian-Hungarian army surrendered and demarcation line was set on the Italian front. At that time František Horečka was on the conquered Italian territory being therefore formally captured before getting in the hand of the Czechoslovak legions.

Having signed in the newly established Czechoslovak army in Rovereto in November 1918 he was assigned to battalion 21 and then to battalion 26 and sent to a study holiday that made him discover Milan, Pisa, Genoa and Florence. He left Italy only in May 1919 and after a short episode in Žižkovy barracks in Liberec region demobilisation decree granted him permission to carry out teacher profession²².

While the Eastern front inspired him to write a short story *Žena kněžova* his stay on the Italian front gave rise to an anti-war novel called *Za pět minut dvanáct* (Five to Twelve) work divided into three parts. The first part is dedicated to the Eastern front describing his personal experiences on the Galicia front between 1916 and 1918. The second part is focused on Northern Italian culture and institutions with the emphasis put on the decisive Vittorio Veneto offensive. The third part looks at the period in the war camp mentioning also the role in the Czechoslovak legions and depicting his return to Czechoslovakia connected with the state border preservation (especially with Hungary)²³.

The novel name is explained in the epilogue: i.e. that the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy had already heard its death bell finally confirmed by their defeat on the Italian front.

According to Vojtěch Martínek a writer and literary critic (proofreader of first texts written by Horečka) the novel truthfully depicts a Czech person in Austrian army coat claiming that Horečka managed to capture personal as well as national pain without unnecessary pathos²⁴.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 54-55.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 56-64.

²³ F. Horečka, *Za pět minut dvanáct*, Moravské kolo spisovatelů 1920.

²⁴ V. Martínek, *Několik vět o Františku Horečkovi* (Several Sentences on František Horečka), [in:] *Cestou k dílu, 35 let kulturní práce Františka Horečky*, Frenštát pod Radhoštěm 1949, p. 9-14.

This opinion is shared by writer and publicist Milan Rusínský promoter and motivator at various awareness-raising and cultural events and author of a study on František Horečka²⁵.

Bartoš Vlček²⁶

Born on 23 October 1897 in Růždka u Vsetína he attended elementary school in Bynina between 1903 and 1905 and in Brňov between 1905 and 1908. Then he attended lower grammar school in Valašské Meziříčí. Thanks to his brother Eduard (who graduated from a private education institute in Prague-Bubeneč) he received one-year scholarship at Maticе cyrilometodějská where he studied between 1912 and 1914. Due to religion-related disputes and criticism of methods applied by professors he continued his studies as privatista having been awarded his final diploma on 12 October 1915 that was to come into force from 1 July 1916²⁷.

Vlček's "military career" began just three days after the certificate was issued. He spent his first year as an No. 3 infantry regiment volunteer in Brno to be later transferred to No. 57 infantry regiment in Přerov and then he was sent to the Italian front. On 6 July 1916 a fragment of grenade injured him in Southern Carinthia and he had to undergo medical treatment in several hospitals (Klagenfurt, České Budějovice, Ivančice, Brno). Having attended two officer courses (one in Vienna and the other one on the territory of current Hungary) he was sent off as a warrant officer to Italian battlefield.

In October 1918 he was captured and transferred into Czechoslovak militia as a lieutenant. It was at that time he started to write poems studied Italian and edited hand-written magazine *Peresám*²⁸.

After the WWI he settled in Lipník nad Bečvou and worked as a temporary teacher. In August 1921 he married Helena Tiezová with whom he had two children daughter Helena (born in 1922) and son Jiří (born in 1924).

In the meantime he was forced to join compulsory military service (due to mobilization) then he was a reserve officer and only based on a demobilization decree (issued on 26 November 1921) he could start an ordinary teacher profession²⁹.

During his short life Bartoš Vlček wrote several collections of poems: *Slavnosti večerní* (Evening Festivities), *Vzpouř a samoty* (Revolts and Solitudes), *Jenom srdce* (Only Heart), poem *Milenci* (Lovers), short story cycle *Marný zápas* (Futile Fight),

²⁵ M. Rusínský, *op. cit.*

²⁶ B. Vlček, *Osobní fond*, SOkA Přerov: Badatelna – Zemský archiv v Opavě.

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

drama *Učeň* (Apprentice), over 600 columns and translated a wide range of works (thanks to his mastering Italian and Serbo-Croatian languages)³⁰.

Looking from the war experience point of view his most prominent work is *Marný zápas* divided into three parts: *Balady o věcech a člověku* (Ballads on Things and Humans), *Zamrzlé úsměvy* (Frozen Smiles), *Marný zápas*. The leitmotif of the first part apart from one short story is metamorphosis the second part is inspired from specific war experiences presenting the topics of corporal love as well as death with the latter being considered salvation (not accepting any moral or physical barriers). The third part *Marný zápas* is creating the corporeality as a symbol of a new beginning or as a notional grandeur in contrast to human smallness being at the same time his most autobiographical book. In fact *Marný zápas* (Futile Fight) might be read as a story depicting war tumult his troubles caused by his being injured by the grenade as well as his internal fight seen as his life-time search³¹.

Vlček was in regular contact with several Italian authors and publishers (Bruno Cicognani, Pietro Mastri, Arturo Marpicati, Mario Puccini etc.); they exchanged letters in the first half of the 1920s. In 1924 having been granted scholarship from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bartoš Vlček set off for a promotional trip. A year later he reapplied for the scholarship however this time unsuccessfully³².

The Italian representatives appreciated Vlček's interest in their country connected with its promotion in Czechoslovakia reminding him however lack of general overview of the Italian literature and reproaching him sometimes too personal interpretations with no external context³³.

Since his war injury Bartoš Vlček suffered from various cranial marrow inflammations and had to undergo several surgeries. He died in consequence to one of them at a clinic of Brno Hospital (Zemská nemocnice) on 23 January 1926 at 7 a.m.³⁴

Václav Fryček³⁵

Born on 29 August 1897 in Malesice (Pilsen District), Václav Fryček attended elementary and high schools in West Bohemian towns (Pilsen, Sušice) and passed his school-leaving exam in 1915. It was in his year he was recruited as cadet and assigned to No. 7 infantry

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ B. Vlček, *Marný zápas*, Praha 1925.

³² *Idem*, *Osobní fond*.

³³ F. Valouch, *Bartoš Vlček. Touha po životě. Výbor z díla* (Desire for Life. Extract from his Work), Ostrava 1979, p. 299-303.

³⁴ B. Vlček, *Osobní fond*.

³⁵ V. Fryček, *Státní okresní archiv Náchod* (SOkA Náchod), Inv. No. 529.

regiment and later on sent to the Italian front. On 12 July 1918 he entered legions having successfully defected and immediately after the WWI he was deployed as a legionary to fight in the south of Slovakia³⁶.

In 1919 he was awarded for his war credits Italian cross in 1922 he received Commemorative Medal of the War from the Italian Ministry of War and about 30 years after the WWI (21 April 1948) he was awarded Commemorative Medal of the Czechoslovak Volunteers Corps³⁷.

After the WWI he enrolled in a daily study programme at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Charles where he met his future wife Vlasta Knechtlová. While she was an editor of the magazine *Pozor* published in Olomouc Fryček wrote for the journal *Národní politika*³⁸.

He pursued journalist profession until 1928. Then he started working as a municipal librarian in the town of Náchod and since 1930 as a chronicler in the same town. Nevertheless his work was interrupted by Nazi occupation. Fryček had been repeatedly interrogated by gestapo and in 1942 he had to go to early retirement³⁹.

After WWII the situation for Fryček was no better. While in 1945 he could resume his professional activities 4 years later he was finally retired by the Communist Party. He pursued his writer profession until mid-1960s and died of a severe disease in Náchod on 17 January 1969⁴⁰.

His literary activities offer a large variety both as regards type and genre. He wrote poetry, prose as well as drama inspired from historic events Náchod region as well as personal experiences. His key war works include *Vojáčkové* (Little Soldiers) a novel written in autumn 1916 *Dítě horečky* (Fever's Child) poems in prose from 1919 and last but not least *Pluk Doss Alto* (Doss Alto Regiment)⁴¹ a novel from 1926 describing in detail the first important battle where the Czech legions had been involved⁴².

Conclusion

Legionary literature is a specific phenomenon that lasted due to Nazi occupation and subsequent communist regime only in the period between the wars in the time of the

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

³⁷ *Ibidem.*

³⁸ *Ibidem.*

³⁹ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁴¹ *Idem, Pluk Doss Alto*, Praha 1926.

⁴² *Fryček V., PhDr.*, Státní okresní archiv Náchod (SOKA Náchod), Inv. No. 529.

First Czechoslovak Republic. The role of the novels short stories or plays was not mainly artistic one but rather educative and patriotic.

The authors discussed above would most probably not have written about war however their fate led them to the Italian front and they decided to share their personal experiences with the public.

In 2018 a book by professor Lamberto Ferranti was published in Italy called *Illusory Alliance* which describes the role of Italy in the process of forming the new state of Czechoslovakia from Italian point of view. It mentions potential political expansion of Italy into Central Europe and underestimation of Slavic unity and the political impact of France who turned out to be dominant in post-WWI Central Europe⁴³.

This is also the reason Russian legions in particular received much more attention. And this is also the reason this paper aimed at presenting authors involved in the Czech legionary and war literature however whose role became only marginal or regional.

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⁴³ L. Ferranti, *Iluzorní spojení*, Praha 2020, p. 484.

Legiony włoskie i żołnierze – obywatele w literaturze czeskiej

STRESZCZENIE: Artykuł przedstawia fenomen czeskiej literatury legionowej jako integralnej części dziedzictwa kulturowego Czechosłowacji. W szczególności koncentruje się na mniej znanym froncie włoskim. Wydobywa na światło dzienne zapomnianych legionistów, którzy opisali osobiste doświadczenia i przyczynili się do rozwoju czeskiej literatury legionowej. Analizowane teksty tworzyli: pisarz i nauczyciel František Horečka; poeta, powieściopisarz, dramaturg, tłumacz i promotor włoskich realiów Bartoš Vlček oraz pisarz i bibliotekarz Václav Fryček.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: literatura legionowa frontu włoskiego z I wojny światowej, František Horečka, Bartoš Vlček, Václav Fryček

Italian legions and citizen soldiers in Czech literature

SUMMARY: The paper presents the phenomenon of Czech legionary literature as an integral part of the cultural heritage of the First Republic. It specifically focuses on the lesser-known Italian front. It brings to light the forgotten legionnaires and militiamen who entered based on personal experience in the literary field and contributed to the development of Czech legionary literature. The mentioned model examples are the writer and teacher František Horečka; poet novelist playwright translator and promoter of Italian realities Bartoš Vlček; and writer and librarian Václav Fryček.

KEYWORDS: First World War Italian front legionary literature, František Horečka, Bartoš Vlček, Václav Fryček