

## ARTICLES

## Contribution of Editor Věnceslav Švihovský to the formation of the national consciousness of Russian Czechs

Jaroslav Vaculík / e-mail: [vaculik@ped.muni.cz](mailto:vaculik@ped.muni.cz)

Department of History, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Vaculík, J. (2014). Contribution of Editor Věnceslav Švihovský to the formation of the national consciousness of Russian Czechs. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 6/1, 3–7.

doi: 10.2478/cphpj-2014-0001

*On the basis of personal estate of editor Věnceslav Švihovský, the author describes his life and work in the years 1875–1957, especially in the formation of national consciousness of Russian Czechs.*

Key words: *national consciousness; Russian Czechs; Věnceslav Švihovský*

According to the first Russian census, 50 thousand Czechs lived in the Tsarist empire in 1897, 27 thousand of whom in the Volhynia Governorate. One of the centres of the Czech life in Russia was Kiev, the seat of the Governor General of the Southwest Region including the Governorates of Kiev, Volhynia and Podolia. Here, in addition to Czech entrepreneurs and workers, also Czech intelligence was concentrated, whose goal was to maintain the Czech national consciousness of Russian compatriots. They obtained space for this after the political release brought about by the first Russian Revolution of 1905–1907. At this time, the Czech lawyer from Kiev, Václav Vondrák, founded the first Czech newspaper called the “Ruský Čech”, which opposed the Tsarist absolutism from liberal democratic positions and defended the rights of non-Russian nationalities. The two-year publishing of the newspaper “Ruský Čech” was followed by Czech autodidact Věnceslav Švihovský in 1911, who had come from Volhynia and begun to publish the Czech newspaper “Čechoslovan” in Kiev.

His parents, along with his older brother František arrived in Volhynia in 1868 and settled in Hlinsk in the Rovno District, where the Czechs

purchased the estate of Polish owner Weselowsky. Švihovský's father was a skilled furrier and cap maker, but also bought a small plot of land. Here, on 12<sup>th</sup> / 27<sup>th</sup> July 1875, son Věnceslav was born. After an envious Ukrainian muzhik lit their house, they moved to Odessa, but suffered from poverty and starvation there. Eventually they returned to Volhynia; only older son František remained in Odessa and attended training in the botanical garden of the University of Odessa to become a gardener.<sup>1</sup>

After a failed attempt to get training as a brewer in the Czech brewery in Olšanka in Zhitomir, Věnceslav left for Nikolayev in the Kherson Governorate in 1891, where his brother had meanwhile set up his own garden centre. Brother František had many friends in the circles of opposition intelligence, who mainly included the returnees from the Siberian exile. They were banned from Odessa, and therefore gathered in Nikolayev. Under their influence Věnceslav externally studied and graduated from six classes of Alexander secondary school in Nikolayev. In a secret social democratic educational group, Věnceslav got acquainted with the later Bolshevik People's Commissar of Foreign and Military Affairs, Lev Bronstein Trotsky.

For his political unreliability he could not continue his studies at the Academy of Mining and returned to Volhynia, where he worked as a private tutor. Then an idea came to his mind – to issue a Czech newspaper for Russian Czechs. In order to get well prepared for this challenging task, he went to study journalism in Paris, where he remained for nine years. He worked as a private clerk and attended lectures at the Faculty of Law, the School of Political Sciences and the School of Journalism. Later he became acquainted with the local Russian and Czech colony, where he gave lectures. From 1902, he worked as a correspondent for Czech and Russian newspapers and magazines. In the Russian Club he met future Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš and contributed to his befriending with the future First Lady of Czechoslovakia, Anna (Hana) Vlčková (Benešová).

In 1908 Švihovský left Paris and went to Prague, where he joined the editorial staff of *The Time*, published by Tomáš G. Masaryk. Then, after ten years away from home, he returned to Volhynia, where he converted to the Orthodox Church and married Ludmila Šmolíková. Along with Czech businessmen Václav Klich and Jindřich Jindříšek he formed a cooperative to issue Czech publications in Kiev. He became a director and editor of the new Czech newspaper, the “Čechoslovan”, whose first issue was published in January 1911. The newspaper endeavoured for

---

<sup>1</sup> The Archive of Pavel Tarnavský, Švihovský's autobiography 'From My Life'.

Czechs in Kiev and Volhynia to act together with progressive liberal democratic parties against Russian nationalists and the clerical monarchist Union of the Russian People. The motto of this newspaper was "Everything for the Czech branch in Russia". The newspaper aroused great success not only in Kiev, but also with Volhynian Czechs. During the Balkan wars, the "Čechoslovan" was issued twice a week, later on once every other day. The efforts to publish a daily newspaper were prevented by the First World War, when on 30 December 1914 Švihovský was forced to stop its issuance. In 1915 only the Sborník Čechoslovan and two issues of the magazine Česko-ruská jednota were published. The publication of Čechoslovan was restored only in February 1916 and in December 1917 the number of published copies reached 15 thousand. The last issue of Čechoslovan was released at the end of January 1918 before the occupation of Kiev by Germans. In 1917–1918 writer Jaroslav Hašek<sup>2</sup> also published his short literary essays in Čechoslovan. In one of his essays he claimed that Joseph II had written in his notes: "The Czechs are lazy and disobedient subjects; they have to be forced by the lashes to fulfil their duties"<sup>3</sup>. Švihovský in Čechoslovan supported Masaryk's anti-Austrian resistance. He also informed about Masaryk's stay in Kiev, for example about his speech at the meeting of the Kiev Commercial Institute on 23 November 1917 concerning the ideology of the war at that time. During the one-hour-long speech delivered in Russian, he portrayed the world importance of the war and emphasized the democracy of the plan of the allies to liberate small nationalities.<sup>4</sup>

At the constituent 1<sup>st</sup> Congress of the Union of Czech Associations in Russia in Moscow in February 1915, he drafted a resolution accentuating the Slavonic and international importance of the liberation of the Czech nation and restoration of the Czech state. On the basis of the resolution of the Moscow Congress, a Czech magazine of the same title was to be issued under editors V. Švihovský and Bohdan Pavlů in St. Petersburg instead of Švihovský's "Čechoslovan". Švihovský, however, withdrew from the initial agreement. At the Easter 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the Union of Czechoslovak Associations from 12 to 20 April (25/4–2/5) 1916 Švihovský became a member of the Union committee. But after the February revolution at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress of the Union in 1917 he had to step back to the political background together with other leaders of the Russian

<sup>2</sup> *Čechoslovan*, 1917, no. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 16, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53; 1918, no. 1, 2, 3.

<sup>3</sup> The same, no. 53, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> The same, no. 51, p. 12.

Czechs. In “Čechoslovan”, he supported Ukrainian efforts to reach independence. After the establishment of Czechoslovakia, he was appointed a Deputy Chairman of the Ukrainian Diplomatic Mission in Prague, where – among other things – he tried to meet the needs of Ukrainian Czechs.

After the demise of the Ukrainian People’s Republic he remained in Prague, where he established a press office Centropress, the task of which was to explain Czechoslovak policy to European newspapers. In this sense, he served as a Chairman of the Polish-Czechoslovak Press Agreement, Bulgarian-Czechoslovak Press Agreement, Baltic-Czechoslovak Press Agreement, and Small Press Agreement (Yugoslavia, Romania, Czechoslovakia) concentrated in the Central Board of the Czechoslovak press. In May 1938, he was elected an associate member of the Economics Department of the Slavonic Institute.<sup>5</sup>

Great attention was aroused by Švihovský’s sixtieth birthday in 1935. The Chairman of the Senate of the National Assembly František Soukup wrote to him from his holidays in Nice: “Right now I am rushing to most sincerely congratulate you on this jubilee. You know, dear boy, how much we love you from the bottom of our hearts, and wish you many more years of new precious and fruitful work.”<sup>6</sup> To the best wishes of the Inspector General of the Armed Forces General Jan Syrový Švihovský replied: “Who would have thought 20 years ago, when we had talked in the semi-dark room in Volodymyr Street (in Kiev – editor’s note) about the Czech Group, that today’s Inspector General of the Armed Forces of Czechoslovakia would wish happy birthday to the editor of Čechoslovan!”<sup>7</sup> In response to congratulations of Bohumil Bradáč, the Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the National Assembly, Švihovský expressed his appreciation that “the first dignitary after the President in the Republic, the head of the National Assembly of our free state, valued this work.”<sup>8</sup> The Vice Chairman of the Senate, Václav Klofáč, wrote to V. Švihovský: “You have an important mission to fulfil for us and I therefore wish you many more years of good health and success.”<sup>9</sup> Švihovský promised that “If I am strong enough, I will keep working for the things that are so precious to all of us and to which we have devoted a greater part of our lives”.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The Archive of Pavel Tarnavský, the letter of Slavonic Institute to V. Švihovský of 1 June 1938.

<sup>6</sup> The same, the letter of the Chairman of the Senate to V. Švihovský of 29 July 1935.

<sup>7</sup> The same, letter of V. Švihovský to J. Syrový of 25 July 1935.

<sup>8</sup> The same, letter of V. Švihovský to B. Bradáč of 25 July 1935.

<sup>9</sup> The same, letter of V. Klofáč to V. Švihovský of 25 July 1935.

<sup>10</sup> The same, letter of V. Švihovský to V. Klofáč of 25 July 1935.

V. Švihovský received congratulatory letters also from the social-democratic Minister of Welfare, Jaromír Nečas, writer Marie Majerová, and the President's Chancellor Přemysl Šámal. For his work he was decorated with a number of domestic and foreign awards, among them the Czechoslovak Revolutionary Medal for the 1<sup>st</sup> Resistance, the Polish Officer's Cross "Polonia Restituta" of the 4<sup>th</sup> degree, the Yugoslavian Grand Cross of St. Sava of the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree with a star, the Grand Cross of the Romanian Crown of the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree with a star, the Commander Cross of the Romanian Star of the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree, and the Latvian Commander Cross of the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree.<sup>11</sup>

After the foundation of the Czechoslovak Foreign Institute in 1929, Švihovský became its Vice Chairman. The work of the Institute was interrupted during the Nazi occupation, but after the war Švihovský became its Chairman (1946–1949). As in 1919 he led the delegation of Volhynian Czechs to President Masaryk, in 1946 he led a similar delegation to President Beneš. The topic of the discussion was the speeding up of Czechoslovak-Soviet negotiations on re-emigration.

In 1947 he was the main organizer of the 4<sup>th</sup> Masaryk Day of Czechoslovak Compatriots, where he gave a final speech: "In gratitude to fellow countrymen, who – as the first ones – provided support to T. G. Masaryk in his struggle, the Czechoslovak Foreign Institute was built as a place tasked by the nation to take care of its people scattered throughout the world. After Munich, the Institute was among the first victims as a significant holder of innovative efforts of democratic Czechoslovakia. There are numerous victims of fascist terror also among compatriots... The Foreign Institute intends to build in Prague a dignified centre for compatriots from all around the world to manifest the connection of home with Czechs and Slovaks beyond the borders... We want compatriots to draw from rich and immortal Czechoslovak traditions and resources and to be our helpers and supporters of Czechoslovak affairs before the world public."<sup>12</sup>

Under the leadership of V. Švihovský the Czechoslovak Foreign Institute was involved in the re-emigration of 200 thousand foreign compatriots in 1946–1949 and renewing contacts with Czechs and Slovaks abroad. After the post-February purges, he had to leave the function of the Chairman of the Institute and retreated to privacy, where he devoted himself to the history of Russian Czechs.

<sup>11</sup> The same, list of awards of V. Švihovský.

<sup>12</sup> *Czech Dialogue*, 2003, no. 3.