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## The First World War in the Czech and Slovak Cinema

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# THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN THE CZECH AND SLOVAK CINEMA<sup>1</sup>

*Václav Šmídkal*

## *Introduction*

In a speech broadcast from the Vítkov National Memorial in Prague on October 28, 2014, the ninety-sixth anniversary of Czechoslovakia's declaration of independence, Colonel Jaroslav Vodička, Chairman of the Czech Union of Freedom Fighters (Český svaz bojovníků za svobodu), urged the Czech government to fund a new feature film about the Czechoslovak Legionnaires. He said, "we lack a film in our cinema that would show the audience the heroic campaign of the Legionnaires and their fundamental influence on the recognition of Czechoslovakia. It is one of the brightest points in our modern history, deserving of a high-quality film adaptation. It would be a great thing for 2018's hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War and would pay tribute to our brave ancestors."<sup>2</sup> In the history of

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1 This study was supported by the Charles University Research Centre program No. 9 (UNCE VITRI).

2 Speech by the President of the ČSBS, Jaroslav Vodička, given October 28, 2014 at Vítkov in Prague, accessed July 27, 2017, <http://www.ceskenovinky.eu/2014/10/29/projev-predsedy-csbs-jaroslava-vodicky-predneseny-dne-28-rijna-2014-na-prazskem-vitkove/>.

post-1989 Czech liberal democracy, this was rather unprecedented lobbying on the part of a veterans' organization for the involvement of the Czech state in a film production. The producers as well as their supporters stressed the point that such a film would be instructive and help strengthen the national identity. The last film solely devoted to the Legionnaires, *Zborov*, was made in 1938, and it soon became outdated after Germany's dismemberment and occupation of Czechoslovakia. Surprisingly, despite the large number of historical films made in the Czech lands every year since 1989, the theme of the First World War has for the most part not returned to the Czech cinema.<sup>3</sup> A 1993 Slovak-Czech television co-production, *Anjel milosrdenstva/Anděl milosrdenství* (*Angel of Mercy*), which was already in production before 1989, was one exception. Another was a Czech romantic drama about a returning First World War veteran, *Hlídač č. 47* (*Guard No. 47*, 2008, directed by Filip Renč), which was a remake of a film directed by Josef Rovenský and Jan Svíták in 1937. Otherwise, both the Czech and Slovak cinemas showed little interest in the topic. It was only with the coming of the centennial of the First World War that a need was felt to come to terms with this war from the perspective of contemporary

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3 Jaroslav Sedláček, *Rozmarná léta českého filmu* (Praha: Česká televize, 2012); Jan Čulík, *A Society in Distress: The Image of the Czech Republic in Contemporary Czech Feature Film* (Brighton: Sussex Academy Press, 2014); Sune Bechmann Pedersen, *Reel Socialism: Making Sense of History in Czech and German Cinema since 1989* (Lund: Lund University, 2015); for an overview of Czech historiography of the First World War, see Ota Konrád, "Von der Kulisse der Nationalstaatsgründung zur Europäisierung der Forschung: Die tschechische Historiographie zum Ersten Weltkrieg," In *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918, Bd. XI/3: Bewältigte Vergangenheit? Die nationale und internationale Historiographie zum Untergang der Habsburgermonarchie als ideelle Grundlage für die Neuordnung Europas*, eds. Helmut Rumpler, Ulrike Harmat (Wien: ÖAW, forthcoming).

hegemonic discourse, which resulted in a new film project about the Czechoslovak Legionnaires' adventures in Russia.

Yet, previous political regimes sought to establish a useful and meaningful relationship to the First World War through its cinematic representations, and filmmakers repeatedly showed interest in this turning point of Czech and Slovak history. This chapter gives an overview of the First World War as represented in Czech and Slovak feature films from 1918 until today. It identifies the cinematic interpretations of the war as filtered through the hegemonic ideology of each distinctive period. I use the term "hegemony" in Antonio Gramsci's sense, meaning the dominant ideology of an existing social order, which is projected upon history. For my analysis, I created a list of Czech and Slovak films dealing with the First World War, drawing upon existing film catalogues<sup>4</sup> and secondary literature.<sup>5</sup> My intention here is not to give an exhaustive

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4 *Český hraný film* [Czech Feature Film], 6 vols. (Prague: Národní filmový archiv, 1995–2010); Renáta Šmatláková, *Katalóg slovenských celovečerných filmov* [Catalogue of Slovak Feature Films] 1921–1999 (Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav, 1999).

5 Jiří Rak, "Obraz vzniku Československa v české filmové tvorbě dvacátých let," *Filmový sborník historický* 2 (1991): 9–19; Květa Kořalková, "Film Zborov ve společenském a politickém kontextu přelomu roku 1938 a 1939," *Filmový sborník historický* 2 (1991): 39–55; Tomáš Lachman, "Legionářská tematika v hraném filmu první republiky aneb Od Československého Ježíška ke Zborovu," In *Film a dějiny*, ed. Petr Kopal and Petr Blažek (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2005), 209–218; David Zima, *Reflexe první světové války v kinematografii: Audiovizuální válečná tvorba Německa, Ruska a Československa v letech 1914–1939*. Západočeská univerzita v Plzni, Master thesis, 2013; David Zima, "Interpretace první světové války v československé meziválečné kinematografii," in *České, slovenské a československé dějiny 20. století IX.*, ed. Tomáš Hradecký, Pavel Horák, Pavěk Boštík a kol. (Ústí nad Orlicí: Oftis, 2014), 181–196; Michal Kšiňan and Juraj Babják, "La mémoire de la Grande Guerre en ex-Tchécoslovaquie," *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 113–114 (2014): 15–24.

account of all such films, but to point out the hegemonic influences upon Czech and Slovak depictions of the First World War.

*The Battle for a Czechoslovak Nation-State (1918–1939)*

Despite a variety of genres, topics, and treatments, the hegemonic view of the First World War underlying the interwar Czechoslovak cinema was that of a resounding victory by the Czechoslovak Legionnaires. The War was seen in terms of anti-Habsburg resistance, leading to the breakup of Austria-Hungary and the creation of new nation-states. The soldiers who defected from the Austrian-Hungarian military and voluntarily enlisted in the Czechoslovak legions in Russia, France, and Italy enjoyed a privileged status in interwar society, and their reputations were particularly exalted in their public representations. To a significant extent, it was the former Legionnaires themselves who promoted their own importance and historicized their experiences in literature, drama, and film.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike in Slovakia, where in the interwar period only one full-length feature film was made, the Czech lands had a fast-developing film industry that produced a large number of films.<sup>7</sup> Although filmmaking was a loosely-regulated private business, it did not exist only to seek profit. In the wave of enthusiastic patriotism

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6 Ivan Šedivý, "Die Tschechoslowaischen Legionäre: ein historischer Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts," In *Mythen und Politik im 20. Jahrhundert: Deutsche - Slowaken - Tschechen* (Essen: Klartext, 2013), 91–99; Dalibor Vácha, "Výstavba moderního československého mýtu: Legionáři a legionářská literatura jako jeden z jeho základních kamenů," In *Čas optimismu a ctižádostivých nadějí: prezentace a reprezentace české vědy a kultury v prvním desetiletí samostatného státu (1918–1920)*, ed. Dagmar Blümllová (České Budějovice: Jihočeské muzeum v Českých Budějovicích, 2009), 357–378.

7 Václav Macek and Jelena Paštéková, *Dejiny slovenskej kinematografie* (Martin: Osveta, 1997).

that crested after 1918, film producers manifested their loyalty to the new state by their eagerness to shoot films on themes from national history. The historical film was believed to be a top artistic genre, a magnificent spectacle contributing to the building of the Czechoslovak nation-state by promoting the approved view of key events in Czech and Slovak national history.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, in the 1920s, Czechoslovak films were marked by a “pettiness” that did not allow them to withstand the test of time.<sup>9</sup> Film was still understood as a fairground attraction, a commodity, or an educational tool, and the artistic ambitions of authors remained low. Moreover, the interwar state was rather reluctant to develop a comprehensive film policy that would support steady conditions for domestic film production that might have increased the artistic level of films. It took years before the state began to protect its small domestic market from an overwhelming influx of U.S. and German films by regulating film imports and introducing systematic state aid for production of domestic films.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Jiří Rak, “Úvahy o národním charakteru českého filmu po roce 1918,” *Illuminace* 1, no. 1 (1989): 30–42; Ivan Klimeš and Jiří Rak, “Idea národního historického filmu v české meziválečné společnosti,” *Illuminace* 1, no. 2 (1989): 23–37; Ivan Klimeš and Jiří Rak, “Husitský film - nesplněný sen české meziválečné kinematografie,” *Filmový sborník historický* 3 (1992): 69–109.

9 Luboš Bartošek, *Náš film: kapitoly z dějiny (1896–1945)* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1985), 67.

10 Gernot Heiss and Ivan Klimeš, “Kulturindustrie und Politik: Die Filmwirtschaft der Tschechoslowakei und Österreichs in der politischen Krise der Dreißiger Jahre,” in *Obrazy času: Český a rakouský film 30. let / Bilder der Zeit: Tschechischer und österreichischer Film der 30er Jahre*, ed. Gernot Heiss and Ivan Klimeš (Prague: NFA and Österreichisches Ost- und Südosteuropa-Institut - Außenstelle Brunn, 2003), 392–483; for a more detailed account, see Ivan Klimeš, *Kinematografie a stát v českých zemích 1895–1945* (Prague: FF UK, 2016).

The democratic Czechoslovak state did not shrink from controlling public discourse by censoring potentially subversive attacks against the new order and unwanted representations of history. Censorship imposed by the Ministry of Interior followed political criteria and was slow to adapt to the specific needs of art films.<sup>11</sup> For example, there was no place in the Czechoslovak interwar cinema for a positive appraisal of the Habsburg monarchy or its legacy because that would contest the official mainstream narrative about an Austria-Hungary that oppressed the Czechs and Slovaks and was doomed to downfall.

The state sought to build a new national identity by supporting an interpretation of history that would help to cement the contemporary social order. Stories that challenged the prevailing hegemonic view were marginalized, either through censorship or negative reviews. For example, *Šachta pohřbených idejí* (*The shaft of buried ideas*, 1921, directed by Rudolf Myzet and Antonín Ludvík Havel), showed First World War-era miners in the Ostrava region from a socialist perspective. The film was censored before it was released. If a film did not provoke the attention of the censors, it could be still marginalized by negative reviews from exponents of the then-current hegemonic view. *Jménem Jeho Veličenstva* (*In the name of his majesty*, 1928, directed by Antonín Vojtěchovský), was based on the true story of an infantryman, Josef Kudrna. It illustrated the brutality of the Austro-Hungarian military machine, which sentenced Czech soldier Kudrna to death because he opposed the maltreatment of the troops by their officers. The film drew criticism from right-wing army officers such as Rudolf Medek because it championed

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11 Heiss and Klimeš, "Kulturindustrie und Politik," 396–398; Zima, *Reflexe*, 136–137.

an act of insubordination that did not have a clear basis in the cause of an independent Czechoslovakia.<sup>12</sup>

The early Czechoslovak films celebrated the victory of the Entente, cherished the heroism of the Czechoslovak Legion, and defamed the previous imperial order. The determination of private producers to combine both profit and patriotism resulted in a popular genre of romantic drama that stressed the passions and sudden turns in the intimate lives of ordinary people, played out against the background of the First World War. The film *Za svobodu národa* (*For the freedom of the nation*, 1920, directed by Václav Binovec), was based on the true story of a Legionnaire, Jiří Voldán, who fought on all three fronts, but after his return to Czechoslovakia had to go on to Slovakia to fight the Hungarian Bolsheviks. *Legionář* (*Legionnaire*, 1920, directed by Rudolf Měšťák), was a similar romantic drama set against the background of the First World War with a Legionnaire in the lead role. *Za čest vítězů* (*In honor of the victor*, 1921, directed by Antonín Ludvík Havel and Julius Lébl), dealt with the post-war demobilization and reintegration of a Legionnaire into civilian society. *Pražské děti* (*Prague children*, 1927, directed by Robert Zdráhal), was a love story on the home front between Jiří and Anna, whose brother, given up for dead, joyfully returned home as a Legionnaire.

Unlike the aforementioned romantic dramas, which coupled sentimentality and patriotism, attempts to give the Legionnaires' story a more overtly nation-building frame could result in an almost *agitprop* style. *Za Československý stát* (*For the Czechoslovak*

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12 Martin Zückert, "Antimilitarismus und soldatische Resistenz: Politischer Protest und armeefeindliches Verhalten in der tschechischen Gesellschaft bis 1918," In *Glanz, Gewalt, Gehorsam. Militär und Gesellschaft in der Habsburgermonarchie (1800 bis 1918)*, ed. Laurence Cole, Christa Hämmerle, and Martin Scheutz (Essen: Klartext, 2011), 218.



*state*, 1928, directed by Vladimír Studecký), was made with the support of the Ministry of National Defense for the tenth anniversary of Czechoslovakia's independence. It tells the story of three brothers who bravely fight with the Czechoslovak Legions in Russia, France, and Italy and whose sons also become soldiers when they grow up.<sup>13</sup>

Films based on an already successful novel or stage play, or ones written by an experienced screenwriter, were more likely to avoid an overdose of didacticism. The leading writer-Legionnaires, acknowledged for their poems, novels, and dramas, participated in the adaptation of their works for the screen. Rudolf Medek's *Plukovník Švec* (*Colonel Švec*, 1929, directed by Svatopluk Innemann), shows the Legionnaires enduring a crisis of confidence caused by Bolshevik agitation, which leads their commander, Colonel Josef Jiří Švec, to commit suicide. *Třetí rota* (*The third company*, 1931, also directed by Innemann), brought to the screen a digest of Josef Kopta's numerous literary works reflecting his overall experience with the Czechoslovak Legion in Russia. František Langer's *Jízdní hlídka* (*Mounted patrol*, 1936, directed by Václav Binovec), tells the story of a mounted patrol of Legionnaires in Siberia that is stranded in a solitary house and bravely fights against a Bolshevik horde. Interestingly, due to a rapprochement in Czechoslovak-Soviet relations in the 1930s, the Bolsheviks are not demonized in this film. The stress is on timeless military values and the patriotism of the Czechoslovak Legionnaires, rather than their anti-Bolshevism.

Generally, the introduction of sound and the gradual professionalization of the film industry had a positive effect on the quality of films. However, the limited availability of capital meant

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13 Jiří Rak, ed., "Rudolf Medek: Za československý stát," *Illuminace*, no. 1 (1993): 117–122.

that the stories of the Legion, typically taking place on the Russian front, eschewed grandiose battle spectacle in favor of wartime chamber drama. The directors sometimes got around this problem using documentary footage from the war, as in the film *Poručík Alexander Rjepkin* (*Lieutenant Alexander Rjepkin*, 1937, directed by Václav Binovec), which is a chamber drama about a Czech Legionnaire who is captured and taken to an Austrian army hospital, where he has to pretend he is a Russian soldier in order to avoid a court-martial.

As international tensions grew in the late 1930s, efforts to mobilize for defense and prepare for a war with Nazi Germany also grew in Czechoslovakia. Using heroic motifs from the First World War was one way to motivate the Czechoslovak population to increase their readiness. The Ministry of National Defense cooperated with filmmakers on such productions. The last of these films was *Zborov* (1938, directed by J. A. Holman and Jiří Slavíček), which depicts a legendary 1917 battle where the Legionnaires distinguished themselves and that was seared in the public memory of interwar Czechoslovakia.<sup>14</sup> The film presents patriotic values that were outdated after the Munich Agreement, the creation of a truncated second Czechoslovak Republic (1938–39), and the occupation of the Czech lands in 1939.

Despite the higher artistic quality of these films, none of them qualified for the all-time “honor roll” of Czech films. Forbidden during the Nazi occupation, they never returned to movie screens. Unlike many comedies from the 1930s and early 1940s, which have gained “retro” popularity and are retained in the collective memory, the Legionnaire films were replaced by a new generation of war movies.

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14 Cf. Jan Galandauer, *2. 7. 1917 - bitva u Zborova: česká legenda* (Prague: Havran, 2002).

During the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands between 1939 and 1945, the Czech cinema industry did not stop producing films, but none of them focused on the conflicts from the First World War. The intention of the Nazis to shoot a new version of *Colonel Švec* that would make use of the Legionnaires' popularity and recast them as fighters against Bolshevism, rather than fighters against Germans, did not materialize.<sup>15</sup>

*Beyond Regimes: The Good Soldier Švejk*

Despite changing hegemonic views of the history of the First World War that corresponded to different political regimes, Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik* is an evergreen that strikes a chord with audiences under different circumstances. The satiric mockery of militarized Austrian society embodied by the conscripted dog thief and pub idler, Josef Schweik (Švejk), deconstructs features that are intrinsic to every military machine. Not surprisingly, the interwar Czechoslovak military and the Legionnaires rejected the mindset Švejk reflected.<sup>16</sup>

The Legionnaires took up arms against their enemies and risked their lives at the warfront. They were an example of civic duty fulfilled. By contrast, Josef Švejk undermined state power with an exaggerated yet subversive obedience to authority. While the organized working class threatened the existing order with revolution, Švejk preferred simply to pursue his illicit trafficking in stolen dogs. Celebrations of the Legionnaires and the proletarian Bolshevik revolution attacked the old regime directly, with a clear didactic purpose. On the other hand, the Švejkian style employed

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15 Bartošek, *Náš film*, 348.

16 Cf. Sebastian Paul, "Die Rezeption des Švejk in der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen Republik: Eine Neubewertung und systematische Einordnung," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 63, no. 2 (2014): 249–278.

entertaining satire that exposed, step-by-step, the “rotten” foundations of the Austrian empire, without proposing any better alternative; it considered all systems to be more or less the same.

All attempts to adapt Hašek’s novel for the screen had to cope with the problem of Hašek’s narrative style, which was essential to the novel’s comic effect because it was in reality a bunch of unrelated stories. Silent film versions with subtitles or puppet films with a narrator were more likely to succeed than live-action feature films with sound. The first attempt to adapt the novel for screen was a three-part series of silent films from 1926 with Karel Noll as Švejk: *Dobry voják Švejk* (*Good soldier Švejk*), *Švejk na frontě* (*Švejk at the front*) by Karel Lamač, and *Švejk v ruském zajetí* (*Švejk in Russian captivity*) by Svatopluk Innemann. Those films were edited together in 1930 by Martin Frič into one single film, *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka* (*Good soldier Švejk’s fate*). Shortly thereafter, Frič shot a re-make with sound of *Dobry voják Švejk* (*The Good Soldier Schweik*), with a new cast, in 1931.

During the Second World War, the film *Švejk bourá Německo* (*Švejk destroys Germany*, released in English as “*Schweik’s New Adventures*,” 1943, directed by Karel Lamač), was shot in exile in Britain. It transported the character of Švejk into the anti-Nazi resistance in Germany. After the war, a full-length puppet film, *Dobry voják Švejk* (*Good Soldier Schweik*, 1954), directed by Jiří Trnka, was considered a successful adaptation of Hašek’s novel because its narrator (beloved Czech actor Jan Werich) commented in the author’s own words on the action played by the puppets.

The newest, and until today, most popular, adaptation was filmed by Karel Steklý. It was shot in color and divided into two parts. *Dobry voják Švejk* (*The Good Soldier Schweik*, 1956) tells Švejk’s story up to when he and First Lieutenant Lukáš are sent to war. *Poslušně hlásím* (*I Dutifully Report*, 1957) covers their war exploits. Rudolf Hrušínský, in the role of Švejk, brilliantly interpreted his

character. He became the ultimate version of Švejk on the screen, just as Josef Lada's illustrations have become iconic of the book in print. Steklý did not reduce Hašek's criticism of Austro-Hungarian bourgeois society and its military to a shallow lithographic poster, nor did he abuse it with a display of degraded humor. He picked out key stories from the novel and chained them together into a storyline. Despite rather negative reviews that considered these films to be mere shadows of the novel, and not particularly creative in transferring it to the screen, this film adaptation scored high box office numbers and became popular abroad.

A follow-up to these films was the Czechoslovak/Soviet co-production *Bol'shaya droga/Velká cesta* (*The great journey*, 1962, directed by Yuri Ozerov), which counted on common knowledge of Švejk's story in both countries. This comedy about Jaroslav Hašek's adventures in Russia during the First World War included an allusion to Steklý's film in the character of the soldier Strašlipka, supposedly the model for the literary Švejk, played here by Rudolf Hrušínský.<sup>17</sup> Despite its mythologization of the Bolshevik revolution and the ideological filter through which the story is told, the film is an almost post-modern culmination of the Švejk film adaptations.

#### *The Cradle of a Popular Pro-Communist Revolt (1945–1989)*

The reconstitution of Czechoslovakia and its society after 1945 made the Second World War into a new foundational watershed that assumed the role in the national psyche played earlier by the First World War. Unlike in Western Europe, where both world wars still remain deeply anchored in the collective memory, in East-Central Europe, the First World War was overwhelmed by

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17 N. Sumenov and O. Sul'kin, *Yuri Ozerov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1986), 78.

the memory of the Second.<sup>18</sup> The Second World War provided a legitimizing historical narrative for communist power as well as a bottomless well of inspiration for filmmakers, while cinematic depictions of the First World War were far less frequent after 1945. The films that were produced shifted their perspective from that of heroic patriots fighting in the Czechoslovak legions for an independent nation-state to the masses revolting against the existing social order under the influence of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. The First World War was generally characterized as a springboard for the socialist revolution and for its irresistible spread from Russia across Europe.

In the interwar period, film production was a private business seeking immediate profit, and the state only reluctantly made policy in the field of film production. After 1945, the whole film industry was nationalized in order to create stable conditions. Almost entirely freed from the Scylla of economic pressure, the film industry had to contend with the Charybdis of censorship in all its assorted forms. Despite the intrinsic drawbacks of the state socialist model of the cinema, state ownership allowed Czechoslovak films to achieve unprecedented success and worldwide acclaim in the 1960s. Nationalization also enabled the development of the Slovak film industry in Bratislava and the regular production of Slovak feature films, something that had not existed until then.

The First World War returned to the screen as the feature films of the first half of the 1950s sought to retell important events in Czech and Slovak national history in accord with their new Marxist-Leninist reinterpretations.<sup>19</sup> The First World War itself

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18 Cf. Robert Blobaum, "Warsaw's Forgotten War," *Remembrance and Solidarity Studies in 20th Century European History* 2 (March 2014): 185–207.

19 Ivan Klimeš, "K povaze historismu v hraném filmu poúnorového období," *Filmový sborník historický* 2 (1991): 81–86.

was not a key event in this new version of history. However, two films, based on novels, told the story of immediate post-war developments in the organization of the working class and of a stolen chance for a socialist revolution in early Czechoslovakia. The first of the films that popularized the Communist Party's pre-history on the big screen was *Anna Proletářka* (1952, directed by Karel Steklý). This was a socialist-realist adaptation of a 1928 novel of the same name by Ivan Olbracht. Whereas Olbracht combined the genre of women's fiction and political agitation, in his film version Steklý de-emphasized the former and magnified the latter in order to underline the communization of the working-class movement. In the film and the book, Anna, a submissive country girl working as a servant for a rich Prague family, was transformed into a self-confident urban proletarian determined to shoot down the bourgeoisie. The story on film was deprived of juicy moments depicting male-female relationships, sexuality, and violence, and it stuck to the history of the split in the Social Democratic Party that led to the establishment of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in 1921. A clear dichotomy between good and evil, one-dimensional characters, and a trite ending made this film into a lengthy political lecture of substandard quality.

Similar in theme, aesthetic, and even casting was the film adaptation of Antonín Zápotocký's autobiographical novel *Rudá záře nad Kladnem* (*Red glow over Kladno*, 1955, directed by Vladimír Vlček). Zápotocký, who succeeded Klement Gottwald as Czechoslovakia's President in 1953, again told the story of the split in the Social Democratic Party, this time from the perspective of a worker in the Kladno steelworks. The repetition of this story not only served the purpose of presenting the official version of the Communist Party's history but also contributed to Zápotocký's image as a working-class revolutionary leader, a long-time communist politician, and also as a successful writer.

The de-Stalinization of the mid-1950s shifted the focus in film from disciplined rows of workers marching toward unquestioned victory under Bolshevik leadership to unrestrained popular mutinies and social revolts, motivated more by fuzzy discontents than clear-cut ideology. The first Slovak film to deal with the First World War was *Štyridsaťštyri* (*The forty-four mutineers*, 1957, directed by Paľo Bielik). It told the story of a mutiny by soldiers of the 71st Austro-Hungarian Infantry Regiment (most of them were Slovaks from the Trenčín region) in Kragujevac, Serbia in June 1918. This uprising was suppressed by a decimation of the troops in which forty-four soldiers were sentenced to death and executed. What was initially non-ideological opposition to the war became onscreen a social protest by “tinkers against lords,” set against the background of the Serbian revolutionary movement.<sup>20</sup>

A similar mutiny by Czech soldiers in Rumburk, Northern Bohemia in 1918 was the subject of the Czech film *Hvězda zvaná pelyněk* (*A star called wormwood*, 1964, directed by Martin Frič), which was more overtly anti-war than revolutionary in the communist sense. The dichotomy between these two concepts is represented by a pacifist, Stanko Vodička, and a revolutionary, František Noha. A group of Austrian-Hungarian prisoners of war return home from Russia, tired of war, and mutiny against their forced re-enlistment into the military machine. Under the leadership of the utopian pacifist Vodička, they seize the town of Rumburk and march toward Nový Bor, where their mutiny is put down and its leaders are sentenced to death. The film eschews over-ideologization and focuses on the human face of the soldiers, who simply long desperately for civilian life at home, for which they are willing to risk their lives.

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20 Macek and Paštětová, *Dejiny*, 168–170; Petra Hanáková, *Paľo Bielik a slovenská filmová kultúra* (Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav, 2010), 144–150.



The Czechoslovak New Wave and historical films of the 1960s liberal era generally preferred themes that had been twisted or concealed after 1945, such as the Second World War and the early communist era. In the Czech lands, the First World War was not among those themes, but it remained important in Slovak cinematography, filling a gap in the national *historiophoty* (a term coined by Hayden White) as a catalyst for the Slovak's revolt against their national and social oppressors. In 1966 a classic Slovak novel, *Živý bič* (*The Living Whip*), by Milo Urban, was adapted for a two-part television series by Martin Ľapák, and it was also released on film for screening in cinemas. It showed the transformation during the war of docile, rural Slovak people into rebels who liberated themselves from the "yoke of Magyar administrators and Jewish businessmen" in a violent uprising initiated by the returning soldiers.

The artistic highlight among Czechoslovak war movies was the Slovak/Italian co-production *Zbehovia a pútnici/Il disertore e i nomadi* (*The Deserters and the Nomads*, 1968, directed by Juraj Jakubisko). It deals with the violence of war, offering three examples of how wars can end: the First, the Second, and an imagined future Third World War. Based in part on Ladislav Ťažký's novellette *Vojenský zbeh* (*The military deserter*), the film was originally shot for television and later remade and released in movie theaters. The first story shows a group of Slovak deserters in revolt against the elite of a village, killing gendarmes and plundering and torturing a rich farmer and his wife. In a torrent of imagination and incredible energy, Jakubisko depicts the brutality unleashed by the deserters, whose wild behavior gradually costs them the support of the local population.<sup>21</sup> Similar in its imagery and its "carnivalization" of war was the story of two veterans and the

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21 Cf. Peter Michalovič and Vlastimil Zuska, *Juraj Jakubisko* (Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav, 2005).

impossibility of their reintegration into civilian society, depicted in Elo Havetta's film *Lalie polné* (*Field Lilies*, 1972).<sup>22</sup>

The most successful period of Czechoslovak cinema that also produced important films about the First World War ended in the early 1970s, when the so-called "normalization" after 1968 caused a U-turn in cultural policy.<sup>23</sup> Across-the-board purges of personnel, bans on completed and unfinished films, and the reideologization of future productions based on a new political consensus reinforced a class-based viewpoint and conservative aesthetics. The three-part TV miniseries and film *Červené víno* (*Red wine*, released in 1972 for television and in 1976 for cinemas), directed by Andrej Lettrich, was a portrait of a wine-making family in southern Slovakia at the beginning of the twentieth century. This film already mirrored the new trend and lacked the vital energy of the 1960s aesthetic. Instead of the wild crowds of returning soldiers, looting and killing in *The Living Whip* and *The Deserters and the Nomads*, *Červené víno* showed soldiers as a disciplined group taking only what ostensibly belongs to them in the sense of "moral economy."

This shift was even more visible in Juraj Jakubisko's monumental epic *Tisícročná včela* (*The Millennial Bee*), a 1983 Czechoslovak/German/Austrian co-production for both television and movie theaters, based on a novel of the same name by Peter Jaroš. The war was again shown as a conflict between a destitute Slovak population that is rushed into war by an inhuman Hungarian- and

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22 Jozef Macko, "Karnevalizácia v diele Ela Havettu," in *Elo Havetta (1938–1975)*, ed. Václav Macek (Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav, 1990), 61–88.

23 Cf. Štěpán Hulík, *Kinematografie zapomnění* (Prague: Academia, 2011); Paulina Brenn, *The Greengrocer and His TV: The Culture of Communism after the 1968 Prague Spring* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

German-speaking military elite, against which the people cannot rise up in order to stop the pointless slaughter. Small but frequent hints of the Bolshevik revolution surface in the film, such as a red flag that appears in the final scene of a fantasized uprising. The film was a success in the context of the 1980s cinema, but a comparison with Jakubisko's earlier works made in the 1960s, which were subsequently banned, reveals some of its limits.<sup>24</sup>

As already indicated above, a number of films dealing with the topic of the First World War were international co-productions, beginning with 1962's Czechoslovak/Soviet *The Great Journey*. The theme of the First World War lent itself to co-productions that promised synergies in coping with a theme that spanned national borders and required a high level of international cooperation and funding. The majority of these films were made inside the Soviet bloc. There were, however, examples of co-productions across the "Iron Curtain," such the Czechoslovak/Austrian farce *Dýmky/Pfeifen, Betten, Turteltauben* (*The Pipes*, 1966, directed by Vojtěch Jasný), which was based on Ilya Ehrenburg's book *Thirteen Pipes*.<sup>25</sup> The last act of the film, entitled "Saint Hubertus's Pipe," involved a wife cheating on her husband, who had been called up to serve in the military during the First World War.

In the 1970s and 1980s, international co-productions became commonplace, but Czechoslovakia preferred projects that conformed to its redefined, post-1968 ideological consensus. The

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24 Macek and Paštětová, *Dejiny*, 416.

25 Cf. Pavel Skopal, "'Svoboda pod dohledem': Zahájení koprodukčního modelu výroby v kinematografiích socialistických zemí na příkladu Barandova (1954 až 1960)," in *Naplánovaná kinematografie: Český filmový průmysl 1945 až 1960*, ed. Pavel Skopal (Prague: Academia, 2012), 102–148; Pavel Skopal, *Filmová kultura severního trojúhelníku: Filmy, kina a diváci českých zemí, NDR a Polska 1945–1970* (Brno: Host, 2014).

Czechoslovak/Soviet co-production *Větrné more/Poputyi veter* (*Windy sea*, 1973, directed by Eldar Kuliev), tells the story of a Russian Bolshevik of Czech origin, Ivan Prokofyevich Vatssek, who organized the retreat of Bolshevik troops from Baku, Azerbaijan to Astrakhan, Russia during the Russian Civil War. Similar in its approach to class conflicts was the Czechoslovak/East German *Ostrov stříbrných volavek/Die Insel der Silberreiher* (*Island of the Silver Herons*, 1976), directed by Jaromil Jireš. The film is set on the home front in a Pomeranian town in summer 1918. It stresses growing class-based antagonisms and defiance of participation in the war. The Czechoslovak/Austrian co-production *Šílený kankán/Die Schieber* (*Insane Cancan*, 1982), directed by Jaroslav Balík, was a product of its time, depicting a former Austrian-Hungarian officer, Krumka, and his servant Scholef in a decaying, early post-war Vienna, where they take advantage of the general economic misery to run their scams. Emphasizing the “inhuman morality of money”<sup>26</sup> that makes both of them inconsiderately think only of themselves, *Insane Cancan* presents an unconvincing argument for the economic roots of fascism that was a flop with both Austrian and Czechoslovak audiences.

Two high-budget, yet dry and lifeless co-productions, suffered from the problem of being reduced to an illustration of textbook narratives. The Czechoslovak/Yugoslav film *Sarajevský atentát/Atentat u Sarajevu* (*The Day that Shook the World*, 1975), directed by Veljko Bulajić, was an epic reconstruction of the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by Serbian anarchists. Admiring the assassins as freedom-fighters for Greater Serbia, the film took an unsurprising approach, marked by conventional portrayals and shallow characterizations. The

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26 Ivana Richterová, “Nelidská morálka peněz,” *Tvorba*, no. 10 (May 11, 1983).

Czechoslovak/East German/Soviet co-production *Evropa tančila valčík/Europa tanzt Walzer/Evropa tantsevala valc* (*Europe danced the waltz*, 1989), directed by Otakar Vávra, was similar. It focused on the same period of time, summer 1914, showing the three emperors, Franz Joseph I, Wilhelm II, and Nicholas II, and their ill-fated decision-making that led to the First World War. The film combines a narrative of high-level politics with the story of a Czech archivist working in Vienna. With the help of a “Serbian connection,” the archivist manages to shred documents stored in occupied Belgrade that evidenced anti-Austrian agitation by Czech activists. This film is even more didactic than the others and teaches that the First World War paved the way for the Russian revolution and began a new era in human history. It tightly conforms to the then-reigning interpretation of history that was swept away by the flow of events just a few weeks after its release in late 1989.

Probably the most substantial contribution to the theme of the First World War in the 1970s and 1980s was the Czech/Slovak co-production *Signum Laudis* (1980), directed by Martin Hollý. As a study of a fanatic individual obsessed by war, scriptwriters Vladimír Kalina and Jiří Křižan chose a non-commissioned officer, Corporal Hoferik, a horse trader by profession, who became a reliable cog in a monstrous military machinery. Hoferik turns off his ability to think about the meaning of the war and his participation in it, proceeding blindly.<sup>27</sup> His devotion earns him the prestigious *Signum Laudis* medal. Although he tries to appeal to his superiors by enforcing their commands, he finds himself alone and despised by both officers and soldiers. Eventually, he is sentenced to death by the same officers who honored him with

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27 *Martin Hollý: život za kamerou*, ed. Richard Blech (Bratislava: Slovenský filmový ústav, 2001), 162–165.

the medal when he proves that he lacks enough cynical flexibility to carry out their most heinous orders. The film does not show any specific battle or real historical characters but focuses on the psychology of a non-commissioned officer who finds himself squeezed between different social groups.

*After 1989: A Missing Theme*

In reaction to decades of strictly-dictated discourse about history, the post-communist era brought about a re-interpretation of Czech and Slovak contemporary history on the screen, opposed to the previous narratives and aesthetic. In fact, there were more urgent and more attractive historical subjects than the First World War that had been twisted and made taboo during the communist period, which called for preferential artistic treatment. The film industry's most pressing need has been to reject the legacy of the communist past and its historical interpretations, and contribute to the new anti-communist, anti-totalitarian identity of society. Compared to the severe collective traumas experienced by the Czechs from 1938 to 1989, the horrors of the First World War seemed like a healed wound that did not need to be revisited. Moreover, the dramatic potential of the First World War might seem weak because the ethnic, social, and military conflicts provoked by the First World War present themselves in the Second World War in an even more drastic form. The fact that the heroes and victims of the totalitarian regimes were still alive and waiting for an homage played a role as well, while the last Legionnaires had died before the turn of the twenty-first century.

The rushed transformation of the Czech cinema from a state-run nationalized industry into a neo-liberal, market-oriented one has caused a long-term production crisis. The breakup of old industry structures, combined with high production costs and the limited

ability of the Czech distribution network to generate revenue, have created a vicious circle of increasingly mediocre productions pandering to popular tastes. Despite occasional successes, such as the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film conferred upon *Kolja* (*Kolya*, 1996), directed by Jan Svěrák, the Czech cinema has been looking for a viable organizational model in which public funding could offset the disadvantages of a small national market.<sup>28</sup> The situation became even more serious in Slovakia, where the national cinema broke down after 1989 and yearly output has dropped to a fraction of its average volumes in the 1980s.

Besides the impact of structural changes in the film industry, scriptwriters and audiences have been indifferent to the theme, which has seemingly been exhausted in the previous decades and has lost meaning to society. The Slovak/Czech co-production *Anjel milosrdenstva/Anděl milosrdenství* (*Angel of Mercy*, 1993), directed by Miloslav Luther, was an exception to this. However, that film was in fact connected more with the era before 1989 than with the 1990s. The screenplay was based on Vladimír Körner's novella of the same name, which was published in 1988 and then prepared for film or TV adaptation. Due to political and structural changes in the filmmaking industry, *Angel of Mercy* was finally produced as a Slovak-Czech TV film that also appeared briefly in cinemas. This critically acclaimed chamber drama about an aristocratic widow who wants to expiate the war crimes of her deceased husband by serving as a nurse in a military hospital resembles in its existentialist statement about people rendered inhuman by war to 1980's *Signum Laudis*.<sup>29</sup>

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28 Cf. Petr Szczepanik a kol., *Studie vývoje českého hraného kinematografického díla* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2015).

29 Vladimír Novotný, *Tragické existenciály Vladimíra Körnera* (Prague: Arsco 2013), 131.

Despite renewed sympathies that appeared for the first Czechoslovak Republic after 1989, which was idealized as a golden age of modern Czech history and the ultimate source of democratic traditions, there was no clear return to the exploits of the Legionnaires and the First World War as the key event that formed the sensibilities of that era. The story of the Legionnaires who fought the Russian Bolsheviks had potential appeal to a society redefining itself by anti-communism, but a need to produce a “Legionnaire film” only arose as the centenary of the First World War in 2014 approached. Despite a declared intention to fortify the national identity by paying homage to the Czechoslovak Legionnaires in Russia and their arduous Siberian anabasis, film producers have had difficulties to find funding for a film with a potential budget of approximately four million euros.

### *Conclusion*

The First World War has gone through several interpretational stages in the Czech and Slovak cinema. In the interwar period, stories highlighting the victorious Czech Legionnaires, their ethos, their nationalism, and their military prowess were emphasized. Other interpretations were marginalized or even forbidden. Unlike the 1920s, when the impact of “big history” on private lives was depicted in silent melodramas, in the 1930s the professionalization of filmmaking and a more active role by the state enabled the production of some high-quality dramatic films. Adaptations of Jaroslav Hašek’s *Good Soldier Švejk* for the screen provided a remarkable counter-narrative to the heroism of the Legionnaires. The timeless story of Švejk appealed to audiences in different countries and under different political regimes. After 1945, the Second World War replaced the First World War in its national identity-making function, and cinematic representations of the Second World War far outnumbered those of the First. In the early



1950s, the First World War was depicted mainly as the event that accelerated the formation of an organized working class, inspired by the Russian Bolsheviks. The serried ranks of workers loosened in the films of the late 1950s, to the point that they were replaced by violent mobs in revolt. The filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s usually did not challenge the new ideological consensus created after 1968. As a result, they at most offered tamer variations on themes already expressed in the 1960s. Many of these films were international co-productions, but that did nothing to dissolve the fossilized aesthetic and ideological attitudes dominant in the Czechoslovak cinema of the time. The almost total failure of the theme of the First World War to return to the screen after 1989 can be explained by the privatization and commercialization of film production and the press of more urgent historical topics. Nevertheless, a more detailed reappraisal of the First World War is expected in 2018 with the production of a new “Legionnaire film.”<sup>30</sup>

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30 Legionáři – Sibiřská anabáze, accessed July 27, 2017, <http://www.legiefilm.cz/>.