

# Prague's Urban Elites and the Problem of Spreading Hunger, 1914–1918



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First World War — Bohemian Lands — Urban Elites — Hunger — Social Legitimization

Among scholars there is broad agreement that the crucial part in the breakdown of social consensus in the Habsburg monarchy was the disruption of food supply in the last years of the war.<sup>1</sup> Through an analysis of discourses related precisely to the impact of a lack of food and other goods of daily consumption on the human organism this study strives to understand the sense that the actors attached to their actions in time of the Great War. At the same time, I endeavour to answer in this study the question whether hunger in the context of the shattered social consensus became the cause of delegitimation of the social actors, or, on the contrary, a source of their public authority.

I will focus on the urban milieu, which relied for the greatest part on food imports and in which a disruption of supplies had the most drastic corollaries, specifically on the largest city in the Czech Lands, Prague. An important role in the management of food supplies was played by urban elites,<sup>2</sup> for whom supplies, care for the poor and healthcare and raising funds to cover these activities went hand in hand in the decisive spheres of their activity.<sup>3</sup> In the penultimate year of the war a part of the urban elites, together with other actors, created the charitable organisation Czech Heart [České srdce], which served, inter alia, as a parallel structure for procuring and distributing food in the city. Discourses of these actors are the centre of attention of this study.

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- 1 Rudolf Kučera, *Život na příděl. Válečná každodennost a politiky dělnické třídy v českých zemích 1914–1918*, Praha 2013, p. 168. For basic information about town supplies during the war see also: Jan Havránek, *Politické represe a zásobovací potíže v českých zemích v letech 1914–1918*. In: Hans Mommsen — Dušan Kováč — Jiří Malíř (eds.), *První světová válka a vztahy mezi Čechy, Slováky a Němci*, Brno 2000, pp. 37–52; Peter Heumos, “Dejte nám brambory, nebo bude revoluce.” Hladové nepokoje, stávky a masové protesty v českých zemích v období 1914–1918. In: *Ibidem*, pp. 207–232; Barbora Laštovková, *Zásobování Prahy za první světové války*. In: Jiří Pešek — Václav Ledvinka, *Mezi liberalismem a totalitou. Komunální politika ve středoevropských zemích 1848–1918*, Praha 1997, pp. 111–117; Václav Ledvinka — Jiří Pešek, Praha, Praha 2000, pp. 549–558; Pavel Scheufler, *Zásobování potravinami v Praze v letech 1. světové války*, Etnografie dělnictva 9, 1977, pp. 143–197; Ivan Šedivý, *Češi, české země a velká válka 1914–1918*, Praha 2001.
  - 2 I use this term to define persons whose membership of self-governing bodies gave them executive powers in a municipality.
  - 3 Jaroslav Láník — Jan Vlk et al., *Dějiny Prahy. Sv. 2. Od sloučení pražských měst v roce 1784 do současnosti*, Praha 1998, p. 272.



## DEBATES ABOUT PREVENTION OF HUNGER AND EPIDEMICS AT THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

Hunger and epidemics became the subjects of debates of the urban elites right from the beginning of the war. For example, at an extraordinary congress of the Union of Czech Towns [Svaz českých měst] in the summer of 1915 one of the principal speakers thought it was surprising that no epidemic had struck the Czech towns during the war. He saw the cause in the development of modern science, although, in his opinion, the urban elites should not be lulled by it into a sense of false security. On the contrary, for health reasons it was necessary to prevent the spread of another threat — hunger — which might cause an epidemic in the future.<sup>4</sup> This speech bore testimony to the continuity of two traditional components of the urban elites' mentality — mental stereotypes of fears of hunger and epidemic — and their interconnection.

Both cases involved mental stereotypes deeply rooted in history because the urban elites of that time lacked a personal experience of widespread hunger, let alone an epidemic. The inhabitants of the Czech Lands had the last direct experience of the threat of hunger in the mid-1840s when a bad potato crop was followed by a bad grain harvest.<sup>5</sup> After this last traditional type of famine the possibility of hunger affecting a greater part of society seemed to become decreasingly likely during the modernisation. Before the outbreak of the Great War hunger did not directly affect the majority of the workers.<sup>6</sup> Otto's Encyclopaedia, published at the turn of the century, localised the reality of hunger outside the "civilised countries", adding that hunger was truly exceptional in Europe.<sup>7</sup> In spite of this, a nagging fear of the possibility of hunger in Czech society during the long nineteenth century "acted as the key component (...), determining the priorities of life's certainties," even, though just to a certain degree, in the urban milieu.<sup>8</sup> Repeated considerations of the urban elites of the threatening spread of hunger suggest that in the extraordinary situation of a war conflict this fear returned with much more strength to the order of the day.

The roots of the mental stereotype of an epidemic must have reached even deeper, perhaps until the last outbreak of plague. The strength of this component of Czech mentality, shared by the urban elites, was subsequently maintained by cholera epidemics, the last of which struck the Czech Lands in 1866.<sup>9</sup> Fears of the epidemic made disease prevention a high priority of the urban elites in the Prague agglomeration, who manifested in this case a far greater degree of willingness to cooperate than in

4 Mimořádný sjezd českých měst z království Českého, Věstník svazu měst v Království českém ["VSČM"], 5/3-4, 31.8.1915, p. 73 an.

5 Jiří Štaif, Peníze a společnost. Několik sond do vztahů mezi tradiční mentalitou a společenskou modernizací v české národní společnosti 19. století. In: Eduard Kubů — Jiří Šouša (eds.), Finanční elity v českých zemích a Československu, Praha 2009, p. 28.

6 Ibid, p. 51.

7 Hlad, Ottův slovník naučný, vol. 11, Praha 1897, p. 329.

8 J. Štaif, Peníze a společnost, p. 22.

9 Servác Heller, Válka z roku 1866 v Čechách, její vznik, děje a následky, Praha 1896, p. 335.



other matters. The charter of the newly established Central Health Commission for Greater Prague [Ústřední zdravotní komise pro Velkou Prahu] named among the diseases whose spread was provided against by the common disease prevention, besides typhus and smallpox and dysentery, the plague and cholera.<sup>10</sup> As no epidemic broke out in the first years of the war, subsequent considerations of epidemics receded temporarily into the background.

The stances of the urban elites in the first months of the war indicate that the attempt to prevent much feared hunger and epidemics was closely related to the endeavour of the urban elites to legitimise their political position. The urban elites had to legitimise themselves in the eyes of the inhabitants of “their” towns by effective food supplies, with which they tried to put a stop to rising prices, shortages of goods, and their consequences. At the same time, the state administration, which could curb their powers in various ways expected from them, as the urban elites were convinced, to keep law and order in the towns. The efforts undertaken to secure enough food were thus simultaneously efforts to prevent a wave of social protest.<sup>11</sup>

## HUNGER AND THE HUMANISTIC DISCOURSE OF THE BODY

In the first half of 1917 the quantity of food delivered to towns through supply depots created by the government was sharply reduced and stocks kept by municipalities were in effect exhausted. Prague went through the first real supply crisis.<sup>12</sup> It was not only a lack of fats and some types of meat that was evident in the preceding year, but unavailability of most staple foods, including potatoes and milk. The quality of the last available foodstuff, flour, went down perceptibly before the harvest: it was often musty, it smelled mouldy and contained insects.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the food shortages were accompanied by a lack of coal, already felt in the last months of 1916, which culminated in February to an extent that hit hard not only households, but paralysed the municipal infrastructure.<sup>14</sup>

In response to the spreading hunger the urban elites revised substantially their views on the current supply policy and the relation between the government supply policy and their ideas of public welfare: Until that time they had strongly advocated government and municipal interventions in the economy but now centralised distribution of food by the state became the object of their criticism. It was clear to them that the end of the war would bring about long postponed municipal elections probably based on a more democratic election system. The spreading hunger undermined the legitimacy of the urban elites in the eyes of their potential voters. They wanted

10 Statut ústřední zdravotní komise pro Velkou Prahu, Věstník obecní Královského hlavního města Prahy [“VOP”] 21/15–16, 17.9.1914, p. 289.

11 Zásobování města, VOP 21/13–14, 27.8.1914, p. 252.

12 P. Scheufler, Zásobování potravinami, p. 147.

13 Zpráva o činnost ředitelství Apropisačních ústavů král. hlav. města Prahy, Apropisační věstník Královského hlavního města Prahy [“AV”] 2/8, 10.8.1917, p. 2.

14 Zpráva ředitelství, AV 2/3, 10.3.1917, p. 1.



to fend this off by criticising the government supply policy. In the eyes of the city dwellers the criticism was to relieve them of the responsibility for the prevailing dearth of goods and, at the same time, to serve as an argument in negotiations with state administration, from which they expected an improvement of the supply situation in the city.

Concurrently, their standpoints from the beginning of 1917 began to resonate with a humanistic discourse of the body, which became, in addition to criticism of the government supply policy, the second foundation stone for the consensus built among the urban elites from all political parties. In the humanistic discourse of the body man is endowed with human dignity and starving means utter degradation. Human life and health are viewed from this perspective as values which must be protected without fail. Watching the spread of hunger in a modern country was perceived as being unacceptable in moral terms. Struggle against of hunger was furthermore a value in itself that was supposed to help the urban elites to forge broader coalitions.

The humanistic discourse of the body resonated strongly in a memorandum from September 1917 submitted by the Prague City Council to the Council of Ministers and its Presidium. A key passage from the text analysing the health impact of hunger on the human organism of Prague's inhabitants came from a report from Prague's principal physician. It accorded with the overall intent of the memorandum which was to inform the government about the threatening lack of food and its ramifications — the “terrible state of miserable existence, drawn-out dying, in which entire strata of poor and less wealthy inhabitants already find themselves” — to make the government reform food production and distribution leading to bigger and better allocations of goods for Prague. The urban elites were convinced that the rations were to guarantee people a dignified life rather than mere survival, which would degrade man to the level of an animal.<sup>15</sup>

This report supported the argumentation of the urban elites with the authority of medical science. According to the Prague physicians, the consequence of the shortage of food was perishing of the city dwellers and spread of infectious diseases. According to their statistics, mortality rates were increasing and tuberculosis spread among the population. Dysentery mortality rose from 5% to 20%, with the disease afflicting for the most part old people and children. The report saw the principal cause of the worsening state of health of the city dwellers in insufficient quantity of food.<sup>16</sup> Its supplies were moreover irregular and of late, incomplete. It identified a further cause in insufficient quality of food, which contained into the bargain parts which were irritating or indigestible for the human organism. Apart from substances that bakers added to flour illegally, some officially permitted additives were also unsuitable for digestion. The mandatory excessive degerming of flour was also inimical to health.<sup>17</sup> By presenting the sufferings of the city dwellers as a product of the govern-

15 Z pamětních spisů obce Pražské o zásobovací bídě obyvatelstva v hlavním městě českého království, VSČM 6/5-6, 31.12.1917, p. 214.

16 Pamětné slovo, VOP 24/18, 27.9.1917, p. 272 an.

17 Ibid.

ment policy it implicitly called in question the argumentation of the state administration and some experts, who suggested that the starving ones were to blame for their hunger.

The argumentation in the memorandum was to be supported by a report from the Prague Poor Relief Department. According to the report, thousands of mothers suffered from hunger and came to the Poor Relief Department to ask for food, children who were hungry had to beg in the streets, and inmates of poorhouses and hospices languished as they could not get food with what money they had. The report suggested that care for the poor which the urban elites understood as one of their moral obligations and which represented one of the sources of their legitimacy failed with the lack of food and spreading hunger.<sup>18</sup>

The report from Prague's principal physician shows that the role of the natural sciences was ambivalent during the war. Their generally accepted authority could be used to legitimise the government policy leading to shortages, as well as to criticize, often radically, its consequences and its human costs. What standpoint it would adopt about this was determined by its institutional underpinning and the value judgements of a specific scientist. The strength of the natural sciences as a tool for criticism of the government supply policy also lay in the fact that their public authority and hoped-for objectivity were taken at their face value by the wartime censors. Scientists from these disciplines could therefore voice their criticism publicly without much hindrance.

## HUNGER AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY DISCOURSES

The war brought about a marked increase in vertical social mobility, both descending and ascending. Despite this, the urban elites were still convinced in the first years of the war of the validity of their pre-war way of perceiving social inequality. Spreading hunger first brought into their position on this issue a considerable dose of uncertainty<sup>19</sup>; but after certain peripetiae the opinion spread among the urban elites that for description of urban society a dichotomic model of social stratification was most appropriate. This idea was reinforced by the conviction that social decline and hunger now struck the middle classes.<sup>20</sup> According to the urban elites, society was divided by the size of property and income that determined the possibilities and limits to access to food. The office of the Prague principal physician divided in the cited report the urban population into two groups: a large majority that depended on food rations and

18 Z pamětních spisů obce Pražské o zásobovací bídě obyvatelstva v hlavním městě českého království, VSČM 6/5-6, 31.12.1917, p. 220 an.

19 Archiv hlavního města Prahy [“AHMP”], Magistrát hl. města Prahy. Protokoly sborů městské správy [“Magistrát — protokoly”], Inv. č. 854, Protokol ze schůze z 2.4.1917; Zpráva o činnosti Aprovisačních ústavů za měsíc březen 1917, AV 2/4, 10.4.1917, p. 1.

20 AHMP, Magistrát — protokoly, Inv. č. 854, Protokol ze schůze ze 4.6.1917; *Ibid*, Protokol ze schůze z 3.9.1917.



suffered from undernourishment, dysentery and hunger, and “a wealthy population minority which lacked nothing”, as they could procure food on the black market.<sup>21</sup> The reference to the differences in the access to food in the towns and in the country played a relatively small role in the argumentation of Prague’s urban elites, which was further weakened by the growing willingness of the Czech Agrarian Party to cooperate with the urban actors, which found its expression in the creation of a common supply department of the Union of Czech Towns [Svaz českých okresů] and Union of Czech Districts in the summer of 1917, and in the operations of the charitable organisation Czech Heart, created in October 1917.

### **“COMPASSION FOR INNOCENT SUFFERERS”: THE DISCOURSES OF CZECH HEART**

Czech Heart was a parallel structure supplementing or substituting public food supplies and the existing charities, which cared for nutrition of the poor inhabitants of Prague and young people with support from Prague’s urban elites before the war and in the first years of the conflict. In many aspects Czech Heart was a follow-up to them: Apart from organisational similarities there was a non-negligible personnel continuity among them.

It was precisely the failure of legal supplies and charitable societies under the pressure of a lack of food that made some members of Prague’s urban elites and individuals associated with this milieu to begin to consider in the spring of 1917 an alternative supply method and assistance for the hungry people. The growing food shortage in the Prague agglomeration was also responded to by members of the Czech intelligentsia. The fight against hunger became in their texts a source of reinforcing their public authority, of which they made use in appeals for assistance for the sufferers and overcoming the threatening social polarisation. In texts of Ivan Olbracht and Růžena Svobodová, published at the beginning of October 1917, there was already an incipient humanistic nationalist line of argument, appearing subsequently in the documents of Czech Heart. It was above all the motif of the nation whose existence is threatened by hunger and the motif of a suffering child which would take the central place in the appeals of Czech Heart.<sup>22</sup>

The necessity of helping the starving people together with the conviction that it is necessary to reconcile social differences in a polarised society became the core around which the basic consensus was built among the actors taking part in the creation of Czech Heart. Two groups of actors were formed at the end of the summer of 1917, in both cases led by doctors (Ladislav P. Procházka and Jan Deyl), related to the Prague Council.<sup>23</sup> As their aims overlapped, it was decided to merge both planned campaigns and on 12 October 1917 the first conference could be held of a newly formed

21 Pamětné slovo, VOP 24/18, 27.9.1917, p. 273.

22 Ivan Olbracht, Návrh radě českých spisovatelů, Kmen 1/35, 11.10.1917, pp. 1-2; Růžena Svobodová, Nedejme zahynouti, Lípa 1/2, October 1918, pp. 29-30.

23 Ochrana mládeže v Praze, VOP 24/20, 25.10.1917, p. 291 an.



Committee for the Rescue of the Prague Population [Komitét na záchranu pražského obyvatelstva], renamed at this meeting to the more suggestive Czech Heart.<sup>24</sup> The names of the attendees show that those that made their mark in the nascent Czech Heart were Prague's urban elites, municipal officials, doctors associated with the new isolation ward in the hospital Na Bulovce.<sup>25</sup> Others who were represented in the society were middle-class women and representatives of Sokol sport movement.

Naturally enough, the participation of representatives of the agrarian party was crucial. As early as September the Agrarian Party deepened its collaboration with the urban elites on the platform of the Union of Czech Towns and Districts. Agrarian politician Adolf Prokůpek, president of the Czech Section of the Agrarian Council [Český odbor České zemědělské rady] and deputy chairman of the joint supply committee of these unions, was elected to head Czech Heart.<sup>26</sup> The agrarian press served as one of the tribunes publishing appeals of Czech Heart to help the starving. At a congress of the Agrarian Party, held on 17 November 1917, Antonín Švehla sided with Czech Heart: "If we are to starve, we must all starve, and there must not be among us people dying of hunger on one side and sated ones on the other side."<sup>27</sup> It follows from this speech that the Agrarians expected from Czech Heart that it would prevent further polarisation of society and it would enable the building of a new consensus, on whose basis the Agrarian Party could seek after the war coalition partners among the urban parties. It was precisely the participation of the Czech countryside that distinguished Czech Heart sharply from the existing charitable societies, and was a condition for successful achievement of the society's goals: Although Czech Heart turned also to the Czech bourgeoisie, its appeal was directed in the first place at the countryside.

Already in the early phase of the organisation's existence, the activists of the Czech Heart succeeded in forging a wide consensus over the necessity of helping those suffering from hunger. This ambition was manifest in the programme text ambition was manifest "Don't let them perish", written by a writer popular in the country, Růžena Svobodová and an editor of the Agrarian daily Večer, Josef Vraný, which the newspapers published on 25 October 1917. It appealed to Czech peasants to provide the starving inhabitants of the capital with food. This was to be followed by Czech banks and the Czech bourgeoisie making financial donations. This appeal was given authority by a number of the actors' signatures, perceived as leading members of the Czech national elite.<sup>28</sup> Their names affirmed that a consensus existed not only among the Agrarians and the Young Czechs, preponderant among the founders of Czech Heart, but it was built among all the main Czech political powers.

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24 Pět let Českého srdce. 1917–1922, Praha 1922, p. 4.

25 Adolf Prokůpek, Jan Deyl, Councillor Fischer, Josef Groh, Jaroslav Kvapil, Ladislav P. Procházka, Josef Scheiner, Václav Štěpánek, Jan Vošický, Josef Vraný, Anna Podlipná and Růžena Svobodová. Pět let Českého srdce, p. 4.

26 Pět let Českého srdce, p. 4.

27 Pět let Českého srdce, p. 8.

28 The declaration was signed by Jan Deyl, Gustav Habrman, Alois Jirásek, Josef Holeček, Václav Klofáč, Karel Kramář, Anna Podlipná, Jaroslav Preiss, Adolf Prokůpek, Josef Scheiner, Antonín Švehla, Renata Tyršová. Pět let Českého srdce, p. 5.



The humanistic-cum-nationalist discourse permeating the texts of Czech Heart worked actively with representation of hunger as an utterly unacceptable abuse, using images of the shortages in Greater Prague, symbols of a starving mother, a suffering child, and the “endangered existence of a perishing nation”. The texts of Czech Heart were to mobilise their readers with the parable of a dying Prague, where hunger and misery have swamped the suburbs and even reached some of the middle classes. In this interpretation, who did not have money to shop on the black market was condemned to die of hunger as the state was unable to provide the city population with foodstuffs.<sup>29</sup> Authors associated with Czech Heart pointed out the catastrophic extent of the hunger — speaking on several occasions, with some exaggeration, of a famine<sup>30</sup> — supporting their claims with an alarming estimate of the number of starving people. According to the estimate, in Prague and its suburbs 200,000 people starved, including 28,000 children.<sup>31</sup>

The first sentence of the appeal made by the Children’s Section of Czech Heart, written by Růžena Svobodová for country readers brought to mind the deep degradation caused by the failure of central distribution of food and coal: “Today’s individual is born in the dark, starves in the dark, and dies in the dark”.<sup>32</sup> The key role in the mobilisation of readers by the texts of Czech Heart was played by drastic descriptions of the suffering of starving human bodies. Hunger had reduced their figures to emaciated shadows dragging themselves along in the streets.<sup>33</sup> In most texts of Czech Heart the shadows took a more concrete form and attracted followers by emotional appeals to gender aspects of the hunger threat — by speaking about suffering and dying bodies of women and children and walking skeletons dressed in rags. The middle-class female authors and writers of the texts represented the woman in the first place as mother sacrificing herself for her family dying of hunger.<sup>34</sup> In the texts of Czech Heart mothers are represented as innocent victims, about whom the authors speak without hesitation as martyrs. According to them, children were compelled to live in conditions lacking fundamental civilisation gains: they did not breakfast, went about barefoot or had rags wrapped around their feet. They lived and died in rooms without furniture, blankets and clothes.<sup>35</sup> According to the Czech Heart workers, such suffering affected deeply their physical constitution. Just like their mothers, hunger transformed children into dying skeletons.<sup>36</sup>

29 Provolání “Nedejte zahynouti”. In: Pět let Českého srdce, pp. 4–5.

30 LA PNP, f. Růžena Svobodová, Materiály týkající se činnosti Českého srdce, Oběžník pro místní zástupce Českého srdce, LA 39/66/3209.

31 Ibid.

32 První provolání dětského odboru Českého srdce [2.12.1917]. In: Pět let Českého srdce, p. 27.

33 LA PNP, f. Růžena Svobodová, Materiály týkající se činnosti Českého srdce, Oběžník pro místní zástupce Českého srdce, LA 39/66/3209.

34 Provolání “Nedejte zahynouti”, in: Pět let Českého srdce, pp. 4–5.

35 První provolání dětského odboru Českého srdce [of 2.12.1917]. In: Pět let Českého srdce, p. 27.

36 Růžena Svobodová, Dědicům, Venkov 13/125, 1.6.1918, p. 2.

The logo of Czech Heart, a red heart encircled with a thorn wreath, symbolised, with an obvious Christian implication, love for innocent sufferers.<sup>37</sup> Love was to be inspired by the representation of hunger with which Czech Heart worked. The readers were to be inspired to help by their humanistic convictions but also by their national identity. A serried national community was to contribute, together with the results of the society's charitable activities, to blur social distinctions and to lessen polarisation of society. The texts of Czech Heart therefore emphasised that a great part of the Czech nation was dying as a consequence of hunger.<sup>38</sup> Lest the nation perish, the country folks and well-to-do city dwellers should realise that they are all part of the same nation, which was to find an expression in their material assistance for the hungry.<sup>39</sup> The notion that national identity was to bridge the divide between town and country was summarised in the society's poster depicting a Czech peasant woman handing a loaf of bread to a poor urban family. Symbolic representations of hunger in the texts of Czech Heart in the context of a dissolving consensus over the preservation of the Habsburg monarchy were intended to become a source for the forging of a consensus about a new community based on humanistic assistance for the hungry and the national identity, which was to bridge all dividing lines in modern Czech society.



## NATIONALISATION OF THE HUMANISTIC DISCOURSE OF THE BODY

The shortage of food in 1918 was catastrophic.<sup>40</sup> Shortages of meat, fats and milk (not to speak of insufficient coal supplies) before the harvest were accompanied by parallel shortages of flour, bread and potatoes.<sup>41</sup> The City Council had to reduce the weekly bread ration to half a loaf per person but this quantity did not often reach the starving population. Likewise, the weekly ration of 250 grams of flour per person belonged in the realms of fantasy.<sup>42</sup> The shortages of food, coal, clothes and footwear assumed such proportions that hunger and other manifestations of human suffering could not be ignored in Prague's public space. As this suffering was constantly in view the urban elites acquired a 'direct' experience of it, as it were, which became in 1918 a frequent point in their speeches. With the growing shortage of food the urban elites reached an accord that the best way to describe the situation in which the lower and middle classes were was in principle famine.<sup>43</sup>

In this situation the key role was played by medical science, which advanced arguments surrounded by an aura of objectivity, on the basis of which the urban elites

37 Dvacet let Českého srdce 1917–1937, Praha 1937, p. 27.

38 Růžena Svobodová, Dědicům, Venkov 13/125, 1.6.1918, p. 2.

39 LA PNP, f. Růžena Svobodová, Materiály týkající se činnosti Českého srdce, Oběžník pro místní zástupce Českého srdce, LA 39/66/3209.

40 P. Scheufler, Zásobování potravinami, p. 184.

41 Pro celkový přehled o nedostatku potravin viz Aprovisace obce pražské za války a po válce 1914–1922, Praha 1923, *passim*.

42 Slavný sbore obecních starších!, AV 3/7, July 1918, p. 2.

43 II. pamětní spis o zásobovací bídě obyvatelstva pražského, VOP 24/23, 6.12.1917, p. 341.



created a consensus about the need for radicalisation of their discourses as well as the appropriateness of a stronger nationalist framing of their arguments. Reports on increasing mortality in the city hospice presented in June 1918 by the Alderman and Professor of Medicine Jan Deyl, pointed to the extent of the humanitarian disaster that reigned in the city. While less than 20% of the inmates of the hospice died in 1915, in 1917 it was more than 60%. As a real shock to the Aldermen came a report from Prague's principal physician in the summer of 1918, which the Aldermen decided to immediately submit to the Governor's Office, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister for Food and the Council of Minister. The report pointed to the devastating impact of hunger on the health of inhabitants of Prague: The birth rate had dropped by 48%, mortality increased by 21%.

| Infant mortality | Prague* | Karlín | Smíchov | Vinohrady | Vršovice | Žižkov |
|------------------|---------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|
| 1913             | 14.18%  | 5.70%  | 8.80%   | 8.90%     | 9.60%    | 12.00% |
| 1917             | 13.70%  | 11.40% | 13.90%  | 12.00%    | 19.85%   | 19.60% |

Table 1: Infant mortality in the Prague agglomeration before the war and at its end.

\* The first figure relates to 1914.

Source: *Populační a zdravotní poměry v Praze za války*, VOP 25/11, 13.6.1918, p. 187.

For the authors of the report one of the symbols of the impact of food shortages became severely distressed inhabitants of the periphery, suffering and dying of hunger and disease. While in Prague infant mortality during the war remained basically unchanged, in its suburbs it increased greatly and in some quarters reached up to 20% in 1917 (see Table 1). Similarly, the tuberculosis mortality rate rose from 13.38% to 23.77% of all deaths in 1917. In this case too those who were hit the hardest were the inhabitants of the Prague suburbs: There were 41 tuberculosis-related deaths in Holešovice, and 55.7 of 1,000 people in Libeň. Prague doctors argued that households in the suburbs necessarily had to reduce housing costs, which led to mass migration in conditions that were not only unacceptable in a civilised country but also multiplied the health risks. According to the Prague doctors, hunger and its consequences did not hit hard only residents of the suburbs but also members of the middle class. Their medical examinations revealed an “desperate level of malnutrition and a terrible spread of tuberculosis.” Of the 65 municipal officials 35 were infected with tuberculosis.<sup>44</sup>

The best indicator of the desperate food shortages from which most of the city suffered, was, according to the report, a starving child's body, because the parents would rather starve themselves just to feed the children. There were many accounts of children coming to school and crying from hunger. In addition, parents used children to stand in queues and sent children begging from door to door and stealing coal. According to the report's authors, children's suffering drove their mothers to despair, which was confirmed by deputations of women who went to the office of Prague's principal physician and threatened that “they would poison or drown their

<sup>44</sup> AHMP, Magistrát — protokoly, Inv. č. 857, Protokol ze schůze z 3.6.1918.

children rather than let them die slowly of hunger.” Despair arising from the daily harrowing experience of hunger and other hardships of war was considered by the doctors as the most important cause of a possible outburst of the city dwellers’ anger.

Their report painted a picture of the city in which disease and hunger hit both the lower and the middle classes, and it pointed out that the victims of hunger included mothers and children. It contained cautionary figures, from which it should be evident that the demographic development of the city was unfavourable and the city was dying out. City physician Ladislav Procházka, who presented the report to the Aldermen, and who was the founder of Czech Heart, invoked the authority of medical science to buttress the arguments of the charitable society. The Procházka report and the humanistic-nationalist discourse of Czech Heart led to the humanistic discourse of the urban elites in the last year of the war was significantly nationalised. More generally, widespread populist considerations went in the same direction, in which demographic growth represented an assumption of the state’s or nation’s power, which acquired more resonance during the war in Czech society as well as in the other European societies.<sup>45</sup>

## HUNGER AND EPIDEMICS AS CAUSES OF DELEGITIMISATION OF EXISTING URBAN ELITES

By 1918, the urban elites were increasingly concerned about the health consequences of hunger, which they considered as a breeding ground for epidemics. The mental stereotype of the epidemic rose to the surface even stronger than at the beginning of the war. The urban elites warned that in other parts of Europe, such as Scandinavia and Spain, unknown epidemics broke out, and they feared that in Prague, where food shortages were far more prominent, their impact would be even more devastating. These fears were soon confirmed and Spanish flu broke out in Prague. The power of the mental stereotype of the fear of the epidemic, as well as the mounting panic, is substantiated by the fact that some Aldermen could not believe that the epidemic occurring in the conditions of hunger at the end of the war was not the plague: “One such poor devil was dissected on Friday and it was found that his lungs were completely black. In other cases it was similar. This is not a case of the flu but a plague infection.”<sup>46</sup> Repeated reactions of doctors in the press assuring that this could not be a case of the plague show that the beliefs about the identity of Spanish flu plague acquired a considerable resonance in Czech society.<sup>47</sup>

The humanistic discourse of the body allowed the urban elites to speak about the problems that the city was facing and urge the Government a reform of the centralised supply system, which would bring about an improvement in the unacceptable situation. The improvement did not materialize, however, and the gap widened between dearly paid sufficiency in the illegal distribution system and the failing

45 Mark Mazover, *Dark Continent. Europe’s Twentieth Century*, London et al. 1998, pp. 82–84.

46 AHMP, Magistrát — protokoly, Inv. č. 857, Protokol ze schůze ze 7.10.1918

47 See for example Chřipková nálezka v Praze, VOP 25/20, 24 October 1918, p. 298 an.



legal distribution system. Advancing hunger and epidemics eventually led to delegitimisation of the existing urban elites in the eyes of the residents of their cities. On 13 November 1918 the appointment of an administrative body of the capital city of Prague and municipal elections in 1919 then opened up a space for alternative elites.<sup>48</sup>

## HUNGER AS SOURCE OF PUBLIC AUTHORITY

In the case of Czech Heart, conversely, hunger became a source of public authority. The discourses of Czech Heart resonated strongly in Czech society. Most importantly, using the structures of the Agrarian Party, Czech Heart won massive support in the country. This is evidenced by the influx of food that farmers sent to Prague in November 1918. A report estimated that the quantity would fill about 133 wagons. Several thousand rural families took to their homes one or more children from towns. In addition, Czech Heart won the support of businesses and financial institutions associated with the Agrarian Party. Food from rural areas was transported by post or by rail to Prague. In this context it was essential that Czech Heart succeeded in winning the support of railwaymen. A special supply department of railway workers was created to oversee the shipments of food, marked with the symbol of Czech Heart. This ensured that the consignments sent by rail were not tampered with as they were excluded from the “moral economy” of petty thefts which was widespread in the last years of the war, in which hunger justified shady practices as being ethically acceptable.<sup>49</sup> The resonance of the appeal of Czech Heart in Czech public is substantiated by the results of cash collections. Over 140,000 Czech Heart badges were sold in three months.<sup>50</sup> The newspapers published incessantly lists of donors who gave the charitable organisation a larger amount of money. Czech Heart also used social events for fundraising.<sup>51</sup> Before the end of 1918 the society collected a total of 4.5 million crowns in donations.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the organisation enlisted in towns the support of middle-class women, Sokol members and teachers, and their male counterparts, who played the key role in the practical conduct of its charitable activities.<sup>53</sup> Czech Heart also enlisted support from municipal elites which gave it without exception large financial donations.

Thanks to this massive support Czech Heart could cover a wide spectrum of charitable activities. In the first place it became a parallel structure for supply and distribution. Its sections drew up lists of needy families in the individual parts of

48 J. Pešek — V. Ledvinka, Praha, p. 558.

49 Pět let Českého srdce, passim.

50 Pět let Českého srdce, p. 25.

51 Jaroslav Wiesner, České srdce. Slavnostní proslov pro dámu a pána, Praha 1918; V. Baldessari — Plumlovská, České srdce. Časový obrázek z nynější doby o 3 jednáních s dohrou, Praha 1918.

52 Dvacet let Českého srdce, p. 61.

53 AHMP, České srdce — místní odbor Nusle, Kniha protokolů, p. 61.

the Prague agglomeration according to set criteria, according to which the society began to distribute food, clothes, shoes, and for a certain period, cash to redeem necessary pawned items. In the end Czech Heart estimated that it aided up to 30,000 families.<sup>54</sup> This estimate had a high symbolic value. The state famine relief campaign in which poor families were rationed with food was estimated to involve in Prague, according to the urban elites, just over 26,000 households.<sup>55</sup> By giving a higher figure the officials of Czech Heart hinted that their parallel structure was more effective than state distribution. As early as January 1918 the actors involved with Czech Heart reached the conclusion that a more effective way of food distribution would be the establishment of canteens called “Czech Heart Fireplaces”. The Fireplaces were opened in traditional inns or hygienically suitable premises decorated for the purpose. Nevertheless, the Fireplaces were not intended only for the middle classes which would find the surrounding most convenient. Some Fireplaces were intended for children only, while adult clients, ranging from Prague’s dustmen to members of the middle classes went to others. Czech Heart Fireplaces were to transform this mixture of starving people into a national collective, being helped by the room decorations, where Czech Heart placed an emphasis on the use of national motifs. The first Fireplace was opened by Czech Heart in mid-January in the former Old Town. It is estimated that the Fireplaces, of which 25 were in operation, prepared in the summer of 1918 meals for about 20,000 persons a day.<sup>56</sup> This estimate was also to suggest that the parallel structure based on national identity was much more effective than the older canteens, run by the city council.

Apart from food distribution Czech Heart supported sojourns of children from Prague’s working-class and middle-class families in the country where they had much easier access to food than in the town.<sup>57</sup> Based on requirements of country-based foster parents Czech Heart selected and sent to adoptive parents as “national guests” in the country thousands of children before the end of the war.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, Czech Heart organised stays in children’s camps, the biggest one being near Německý Brod, where Prague’s urban elites sent, after some peripetiae, in collaboration with Czech Heart further thousands of children in the summer of 1918.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Pět let Českého srdce, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> By the end of 1917 the number of Prague households included in the category “poor” for the purposes of the famine relief programme was 26,408. Z pamětních spisův obce Pražské o zásobovací bídě obyvatelstva v hlavním městě českého království, VSČM 6/5–6, 31.12.1917, p. 226.

<sup>56</sup> Pět let Českého srdce, p. 22.

<sup>57</sup> LA PNP, f. Růžena Svobodová, “České srdce”, 4 letters concerning Czech Heart, LA 39/66/3194.

<sup>58</sup> Figures for the war period are not given in the texts of Czech Heart. For the years 1917–1921 Czech Heart specifies that 27,371 children were staying in the country and another 8,306 in holiday camps, sanatoria and healthcare facilities.

<sup>59</sup> Výpravy školní mládeže do tábora u Německého Brodu na zotavenou, VOP 25/9, 9.5.1918, p. 150.



## CONCLUSION

The urban elites' debates about hunger and epidemics began immediately after the declaration of war. We can regard them as activations of the older mental stereotypes of hunger and epidemics in Czech society, which the urban elites shared. At the same time, they showed that the urban elites realised the importance of their supply policy in the legitimisation of their elite position among the inhabitants of their towns and in the eyes of state administration. In reaction to the hunger spreading from the year 1917 on, in the discourses of the urban elites a humanistic discourse of the body was voiced strongly, emphasising that human life and health were values in themselves and it was essential to protect them. As time went by, this humanistic discourse of the body began to be strongly framed in nationalist terms. Despite criticism of the lack of food and repeated negotiations with the state administration the urban elites were unable to prevent the spread of hunger and epidemics, which became a conspicuous factor in their delegitimation.

The charitable association Czech Heart was created in response to the spreading hunger and its representation. Consensus was forged among doctors, middle-class women, the actors associated with the urban political elites and the agrarian elites in the autumn of 1917 about the necessity of organising a relief operation to procure food for the starving inhabitants of Prague and to care for starving children. The humanistic-cum-nationalist discourse of Czech Heart, working with the presentation of hunger and a starving body and with the notion that national identity should bridge dividing lines in Czech society gained considerable resonance in the last year of the war. This enabled Czech Heart to launch a relatively extensive relief campaign. The impact of hunger was thus ambivalent. Its consequences brought about the delegitimation of some actors, while becoming a source of public authority for the others.