

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK STATE FLAG

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The state flag of Czechoslovakia ranks among those flags the creation of which has been obscured with a number of guesses and legends. Nevertheless, there are a number of documents in Czechoslovak archives which enable a vexillologist to conceive the course of the development and legislation of the Czechoslovak flag in the years 1918 to 1920.

These documents throw doubt on an often quoted statement that the state flag originates from a winning design from a competition for the state flag, which famous Czech artists entered. The artist of the winning design is said to be Jaroslav Jareš who drew a number of similar drafts. The competition committee was said to prefer and select his design of two horizontal stripes white over red, with a blue triangle at the hoist. This doubtful statement got abroad mainly owing to two brief newspaper articles, which appeared in 1966.¹ Bohuslav Hlinka, a Czech journalist, had interviewed Jaroslav Jareš and wrote them at that time. His articles glorified Jaroslav Jareš as the father of the Czechoslovak flag and showed some drafts from the competition for the state flag. However, archival documents mention no competition to create the Czechoslovak flag in the period from 1918 to 1920 and the only places, where the Czechoslovak state flag was officially considered and approved, were the Arms Committee, the Arms Subcommittee, the Constitutional Committee, and the Czechoslovak National Assembly. The committee minutes neither record Jaroslav Jareš among the participants nor mention his name. Nevertheless we cannot deny that it was Jaroslav Jareš who first suggested using a triangle on the Czechoslovak flag. Only six days after the proclamation of the independent Czechoslovak republic on 28 October 1918 Jaroslav Jareš published his proposal for the coat of arms and flag of the newly born republic in *Socialistické listy* on 3 November 1918. He suggested that the Czechoslovak state flag should be a black triangle

superimposed on a field with horizontal stripes of white, blue, and red.²

The proposal by Jareš was not the only suggestion that appeared in the press at that time. Other newspapers³ also considered the question of a flag and coat of arms for Czechoslovakia but they suggested to use the traditional Czech colours white over red which were hoisted among other flags on 28 October 1918 and were unofficially flown at celebrations before and even after the legislation of the Czechoslovak state flag in March 1920.

At first little concern was shown for the symbols of Czechoslovakia by the Czechoslovak Government and the Arms Committee was not appointed before 31 December 1918. The committee was composed of Professor Gustav Friedrich from the Charles University, Dr. Ladislav Klicman, Dr. Jan B. Novák, Dr. Václav Vojtišek and Jaroslav Kursá.⁴ The last mentioned possessed besides a broad knowledge of heraldry, a fine artistic sense. The Arms Committee was directed by the Cabinet Council and made decisions only on state coats of arms at first. The state flag was discussed only in brief and a simple design of white over red or an alternative proposal of white over red with a white wreath from lime blossoms were under consideration.

On 3 June 1919 the Arms Committee considered the question of flags in detail. It determined to add the blue to white and red. The combination of white and red would cause unpleasant confusions because flags of neighbouring Poland and Austria were also based on white and red. The national flag of Poland was white over red and that of Austria consisted of horizontal stripes of red-white-red. The combination of blue, white and red was well-founded for these colours form the so called "Slavonic Tricolour". The Arms Committee deputed Kursá, Klicman, Friedrich and Novák to prepare proposals for the Czechoslovak state flag and other flags and to take into consideration a design of a flag with the blue in form of a narrow stripe at the hoist.

The further meeting, held on 4 July 1919, was convened

by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Besides the committee members the representatives of Czechoslovak ministries took part in it. Jaroslav Kursá submitted his design consisting of two horizontal stripes of white over red, with a blue triangle extending to one third of the length of a flag. /One wonders if he was influenced by the proposal made by Jareš in November 1918./ He also explained what principles guided the selection of this design. The flag should be simple in design and different from the flag of any other country. The vertical and horizontal combinations of blue, white, and red should be excluded for the design similarities in flags of Yugoslavia, the Netherlands and France. The horizontal arrangement of red, white and blue would resemble the flag of Hungary as well, because the blue may look like green in the artificial lighting. A narrow blue stripe at the hoist should be improper for esthetical reasons. The triangle design was recommended by Mr Valšík, a representative of the Ministry of Defence, who as a sailor had practical experience in flag etiquette. On the other hand, a representative of the Ministry of Culture and Education asked the triangle design to be considered by some Czech artists.⁵

Practical fitness of the triangle design was proved on 28 and 29 September 1919 when this design was displayed on two ships of the Prague Steam-ship Company. The draft law describing this triangle design was elaborated in the Ministry of Home Affairs in September and October 1919.⁶ On 20 October 1919 the draft law was approved by the Cabinet Council and submitted for the discussion to the Czechoslovak National Assembly.

Though the careful selection of a new state flag design had been made by the Arms Committee, the triangle design was not approved and was criticised by the public.⁷ The triangle was said to be too provocative and the position of the white improper owing to the fact that the white would merge in the sky. Dr. Zahradník and Mr Záruba-Pfeffermann protested against this triangle design and both submitted their own proposals at a meeting of the Constitutional Committee where the draft law was discussed on 15 January 1920. The Ministry of Home Affairs had

to convene again the Arms Committee and to form the Arms Subcommittee for the re-examination of the triangle design and two new proposals. On 23 January 1920 the Arms Subcommittee considered all objections to the use of the triangle design and a number of other combinations, suggestions and proposals. The members of the Arms Subcommittee agreed on the principles that motivated the selection process: The state flag should consist of the combination of blue, white and red. The heraldic standpoint should be more important than the practical and esthetical ones. The state flag should be simple and therefore stars and other small heraldic figures being added to a flag are improper. Colours should not repeat for esthetical reasons and no colour have a subordinate position. The use of a triangle on a flag should be appropriate.⁸ It is one of the oldest figures in Czech heraldry and may also stand for three hills from the arms of Slovakia. Nevertheless, the Arms Subcommittee determined to modify the triangle design. According to the modification the blue triangle extended to half the length of a flag. This modified design was approved by the Arms Committee and by some artists on 26 January 1920.

However, the new draft law with a modified triangle design produced heated debate in the Constitutional Committee in March 1920. At every meeting Mr Záruba-Pfeffermann, a member of the Constitutional Committee, eagerly enforced his design of a white over red flag with a small flag of American Slovaks in the upper left corner. Impropriety of this proposal consisted in the fact that it was one flag on another and stood for dualism. This proposal was also improper for practical reasons. It was not easily recognisable from a longer distance because narrow blue and red stripes would merge in one another. The new draft law was confirmed in the Constitutional Committee only in the morning on 30 March 1920. At the same day the new draft law was discussed in the Czechoslovak National Assembly, was confirmed in the first and second reading and came into force.

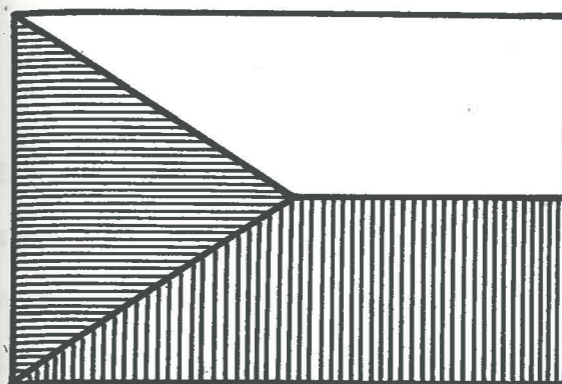
On 22 April 1920 the Law No. 252 of 30 March 1920 on the

state flag, state coats of arms and state seal was published. The first section reads as follows: "The state flag shall consist of a white stripe over a red one with a blue triangle extending to the centre of the flag. The correct proportions of a flag are 2 : 3 as may be seen in the illustration."

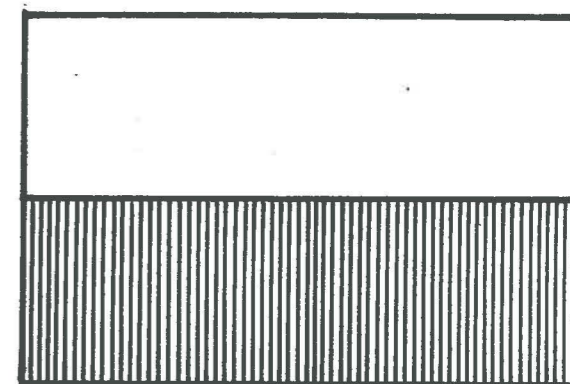
The Czechoslovak state flag is an emblem of national identity, which was created at a desk. Before it was approved, it was systematically and carefully considered by a group of experts in history, heraldry and arts. Nearly 60 years of its existence has proved its quality.

NOTES

1. Bohuslav Hlinke, "Jak vznikla naše vlajka?" Zázpisník 66, Volume X, No.9, p.59. Bohuslav Hlinka, "Jak měla vypadat čs. státní vlajka," Lidová Demokracie, 6 February 1966.
2. Jaroslav Jareš, "Návrh znaku České republiky," Socialistické Listy, Volume I, No.28, p.1.
3. F. Bělehrádek, "Naše barvy a znaky," Moravská Orlice, 20 December 1918, 21 December 1918 and 24 December 1918.
4. SÚA AR V 7a No.2260 N.V; this and similar citations denote the files of the Central Government Archives, Prague.
5. SÚA AR V 7a, the Minutes of the Arms Committee dated 4 July 1919.
6. SÚA AR V 7a 49407/1919.
7. SÚA AR V 7a, Letter from the Architects Club dated 18 December 1919.
8. SÚA AR V 7a 5939/1920.

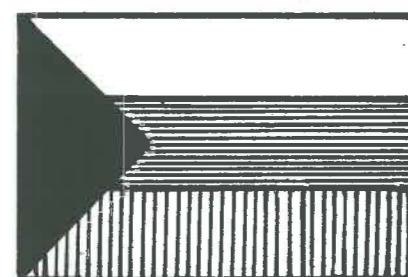


The State flag of Czechoslovakia since 1920

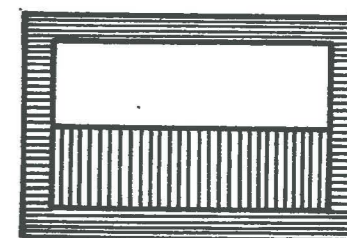
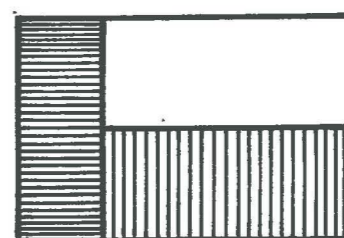
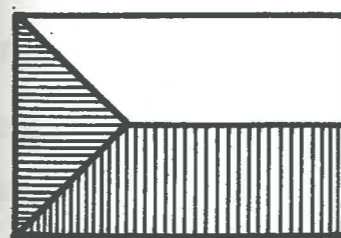


Traditional Czech flag

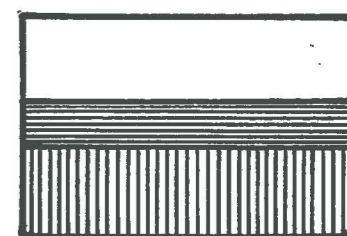
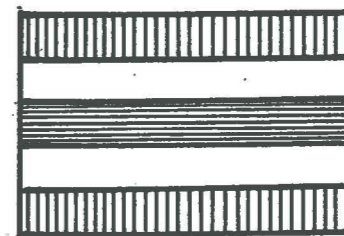
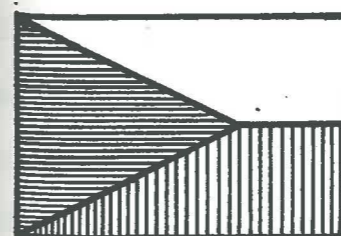
Proposals for the Czechoslovak State flag



A proposal by Jaroslav Jareš, dating from 5 November 1918



Designs drafted by Jaroslav Kursa in 1919



Proposals considered by the Arms Subcommittee on 23 January 1920