Jaroslava Roguľová
The Truth Shall Prevail
Office for Prevention of Usury as an Instrument against Black Market Activities and Corruption in the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938)

Foreword by Josette Baer

Major Ozunov to Khristo Stoianov:

Fair play, he called it. Not such a simple notion, perhaps, when you probe to find its heart. A kind of code, which each gentleman must honour individually in order for all to benefit. In time I came to understand that it was a good system for those who had more than they needed, for those who could afford to give something away. But I also realized that I had never known anybody like that. Nobody I ever knew could say «Here, you take it, I do not deserve it. I do not need it so badly that I will cheat and lie to get it.» Perhaps some day we may indulge ourselves in that fashion, we may have so much that we can afford to give some of it away, but not now.[1]

*American author Alan Furst (*1941) superbly described the mindset of a poor person in postwar Central and Eastern Europe; to lie and cheat had become survival strategies in that region during WWI and, also, in the postwar years. Such criminal behaviour would not chime well with the new life in the new state called Czechoslovakia.*

1 Alan Furst: Night Soldiers, London 2011, ebook, loc. 813, kindle edition. The quote is from Soviet officer major Osunov who was recruiting young Bulgarian Khristo Stoianov as spy.

Both Czechs and Slovaks wanted independence in a sovereign nation-state, and by 1918, philosophy professor Thomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937) established the Czechoslovak Republic, a new state what would be the only democracy in Central Europe. Contrary to the name of the common state, a Czechoslovak nation existed only in the minds of a few Slovak and Czech intellectuals. President Masaryk presented the Republic's political identity as the continuation of the Czech reformation and its essential principle: The Truth Shall Prevail, a saying by Jan Hus (1369–1415). Hus, the Czech Protestant spiritual leader, had given his life for the truth, criticizing the Vatican's money-making racket called selling of indulgences (Ablasshandel). *Priests had told people that they could pay for a shortage of their time in the obligatory purgatory, thus reduce their suffering in the afterlife. Hus' motto, apart from being a first and clear sign of Czech rational theism and the will to resist any governing entity considered to be illegitimate, had been also a blueprint for Martin Luther. In 1521, at the Diet of Worms, Luther would declare: «Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.»*

By creating a spiritual-religious and political continuation from Hus to himself, Masaryk thus was educating the Slovaks and Czechs to become democratic citizens, equipped with the moral and intellectual faculties any functioning democracy requires: do not lie, do not steal, do not be afraid.

When my friend and fellow historian Jaroslava told me last summer about what she had found in Prague archives – I immediately knew that she had a perlička in her hands, a little pearl or gem hidden in a dusty archive, waiting to be found. Jaroslava had found this gem, and this study is the result of her analysis. The key aspects of the political and economic historiography of the First Czechoslovak Republic have been established, and I dare to spare the reader a lengthy footnote here with the principal studies of our subject, the history of Czechoslovakia. It suffices to say that Jaroslava's research and analysis contributes a fascinating detail to Czechoslovak political and economic historiography: a most interesting insight into how the democratically legitimate government governed in his first months in Slovakia, thereby changing the social and political life of the Slovaks and Czechs from being underlings-Untertanen *to becoming citizens*-citoyens.

Usury, the black market and corruption are general and perennial problems of mankind, especially in times of upheaval and disruption of

public order, in war. What we can learn from Jaroslava's analysis is how the Czechoslovak government with Masaryk's ‹man in Slovakia›, physician Dr Vavro Šrobár (1867–1950),[2] *dealt with usury, the black market and overall corruption in the Republic's first years. Let us now delve into the complicated economic depths of Slovak Czechoslovakia after WWI.*

> Among other miseries, one of the most difficult post-war problems is usury, which is always intent on prolonging its life years after the war has finished […][3]

Usury as Concept in Context

Usury is, first and foremost, the defrauding of a person for financial gain. Lies and con tricks consist of many elements, such as emotions, designs, intentions and plans in a specific situation. In the war years, people used usury, lies and fraudulent activities very often not only for reasons of speculation and financial gains, but also as instruments of a survival strategy. These means were, however, not sustainable on a long term, since they were systematically causing the escalation of risk, provoking criticism and rejection by society. Therefore, the state's successful defence against these fraudulent activities required a combination of legislative, penal and educational rules and practices.

Usury and usurer are terms with an undeniably negative reputation. They have been a part of human life since time immemorial. Usury has two basic explanations: *first*, to demand an exorbitant interest rate on a loan. The borrower has not only to pay back the amount he has borrowed, but the amount plus the interest rate. If this interest rate was exorbitantly high, people used to call it usury. Is it right to claim interest on a loan, and under what conditions is usury acceptable? This question is one of the oldest moral and

2 See Josette Baer: A Life Dedicated to The Republic. Vavro Šrobár's Slovak Czechoslovakism, Stuttgart 2013; id.: The Vesels. The Fate of a Czechoslovak Family in 20th Century Central Europe (1918–1989), Stuttgart 2020.

3 Mlynárske listy (1.12.1923) IV/47, 6.

economic problems of Western civilization, and, until today, there is no clear answer to be found. *Second*, the issue of usury has preoccupied many philosophers, economists, and, also, ordinary people.[4] The interest rate referred to as usury also reveals a lot about the value systems of a society or a community. Both activities, that is, to demand and to pay an interest rate on a loan was considered justified in some places, with laws and regulations determining the interest rate's maximum figure and the punishment for the interest rate considered as usury. In other communities, people thought of usury as dishonest, and, thus, morally reprehensible. The subject is familiar even today in our contemporary societies, since the question of the interest rate, be it in in general banking or banking unities is part of the planning of their future.

This study's subject focusses on usury in war times. It deals with a number of minor and major offences related to supplies, black market trading, violation of regulations, corruption, skullduggery, that is, underhanded or unscrupulous behaviour, and other trade practices perceived as unfair. These phenomena were not only part of the problems that came along with the war, but they remained in effect after the war had ended. Therefore, the term ‹war usury› was consequently used in the Czechoslovak post-war legislation. We shall trace this theme in the context of the events of WWI.

Since the beginning of WWI, the Habsburg monarchy had been facing increasing economic and supply problems. Vienna took many social and economic measures to mitigate these effects.[5]

4 Many reviews and analytical papers have been published; they deal with different historical periods from a legislative, philosophical or historical point of view. For example, Josef Čihák: Lichva na soudu dějin a mravního zákona [Usury in the Court of History and Moral Law]. Praha 1918; Terézia Hišemová, Darina Kmecová (eds.): Loan or Usury? Compulsory Enforcement of Judgment – Roman Law, Law Foundations and Problems of Application Practise, Košice 2017; see also the definitions and history of usury on https://eh.net/encyclopedia/usury/.

5 Gabriela Dudeková Kováčová has analysed this issue in detail in several works, such as Človek vo vojne. Stratégie prežitia a sociálne dôsledky

It introduced a new price ceiling and issued ration cards, while appealing for austerity, which, according to the then wartime propaganda, was declared as being of a temporary nature. The growing economic problems were also being tackled by setting up centralized hubs in charge of the distribution of commodities. However, these measures proved to be ineffective.[6] The situation worsened with the set-up of requisitions and the conscription of men to be sent to the front; therefore, the burden of securing a livelihood or managing property was the women's task. The black market was rampant; for ordinary people, it was an illegal but affordable way to access the basic means of life. With the growing scarcity of supplies, illicit enrichment, corruption, large- and small-scale theft, smuggling and bootlegging were growing. Profiteers benefited from the overall deprivation, especially from the shortages of goods and supplies and the increasingly disastrous economic situation. People knew how and where to buy goods and where to sell them at an enormous profit rate.

War usury did not disappear with the end of the war, neither with the end of the monarchy – on the contrary. In many states, either those who had lost the war or those emerging from the collapse of the Danube monarchy, war usury grew even more rampant; it made the difficult post-war period even more painful. Examples here are Poland, Russia, Germany, and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and

prvej svetovej vojny na Slovensku [Man at War. Survival Strategies and Social Consequences of the First World War in Slovakia], Bratislava 2019, 166–211.

6 The strategic importance of the state emergency management and supply system, and, at the same time, their contribution to the defeat of the Central Powers has been pointed out in several works, for example by Roman Holec: Hospodárstvo [The Economy], in: Dušan Kováč et al.: Slovakia in the 20th Century, II: First World War: 1914–1918, Bratislava 2008, 99–160; Václav Šmidrkal, Rok Stergar: Food Shortages during the Post-Habsburg Transition in the Bohemian Lands and Slovenia, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/austrian-history-yearbook/article/food-shortages-during-the-posthabsburg-transition-in-the-bohemian-lands-and-slovenia/DE030AB51F550EB363778B44D19D93D4.

Slovenes.[7] The task of the post-war governments was therefore not only to resolve the supply problem, but also to find effective methods, means and mechanisms to fight illegal economic activities. We shall focus on the fight against poverty by the Czechoslovak Republic, using Slovakia as an example.

As a part of the new Czechoslovak state, Slovakia had broken away from the Habsburg monarchy in 1918. The foundation of Czechoslovakia materialized thanks to the Allies' victory of WWI. We shall look into the work of the Office for Prevention of Usury,[8] which was set up in 1919 as one of the state's measures to consolidate the economic and social situation. This study is thus the first comprehensive analysis of usury and the new state's fight against it in the post-war years in Slovakia.

In recent decades, historiography has produced many thought-provoking studies that focus on human survival strategies in war, and the impact wartime hardships and economic crises had had on the lives of individuals, groups, and families. For a long time, research had focused on political and military issues; in the case of Slovak and Czechoslovak history, ideological and national issues had dominated Slovak historiography. The socio-cultural and socio-economic aspects or issues dealing with public health that are now receiving much attention are significantly expanding and enriching previous research.[9]

7 See, for example, the contemporary press from the post-war years. Jakub Pokoj analyses usury in post-war Poland: Wpływ wojny na prawodawstwo antylichwiarskie w pierwszych latach II Rzeczypospolitej (1918–1921) [The Influence of War on Anti-Usury Legislation in the First Years of the Second Polish Republic (1918–1921)], in: Studia z Dziejów Państwa i Prawa 21/1 (2018) 181–192.

8 Forthwith referred to as ‹the Office›.

9 See the latest analysis by Gabriela Dudeková Kováčová, Jakub Rákosník, Juraj Benko et al.: Od almužny k nároku. Vízie a prax sociálnej politiky na Slovensku a v českých krajinách 19. a 20. storočia. [From Alms to Entitlement. Visions and Practice of Social Policy in Slovakia and the Czech Lands in the 19th and 20th Centuries], Charles University, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences 2024.

Political and Economic Instruments against Usury

Slovakia had been part of the Hungarian kingdom for many centuries. She constituted roughly a fifth of Hungary's territory and formed the northern border with Poland. Slovakia consisted of smaller towns and cities, which were the natural cultural, social, economic and commercial centres of numerous regions. The largest cities were Pressburg, today Bratislava on the Danube, and Košice in the east of the country. Slovakia's population amounted to nearly 3 million, with Slovaks (57.8 %) and Hungarians (30.3 %) as the largest nations in the ethnically diverse Hungarian state.[10] In the 19th century, the Slovak national emancipation movement emerged. Slovak patriots formulated their first political programmes, in which they demanded national and social rights from the Hungarian government. After the Austro-Hungarian settlement, referred to as the *Ausgleich* of 1867, these efforts were diametrically opposed to Hungary's domestic policy, which advocated the creation of a unified, read, ethnically homogeneous Hungarian nation. As a result, national movements, including the Slovak one, were subject to national oppression from Budapest. During WWI, the question of further allegiance to Hungary became a burning issue for the Slovaks. One possibility was to leave Hungary and form a common state with the Czechs. This became the goal of the Czech and Slovak foreign and domestic resistance (*odboj*); the new state came into being at the end of WWI.

The integration of Slovakia to the Czechoslovak Republic after 1918 was one of the most complex processes in modern European history. Slovakia was different: her political, administrative, legislative and economic development as well as her different cultural traditions had to be unified with the Czech regions of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, and the north-eastern Subcarpathian Rus.

10 Data on area and population according to the Hungarian census of 1910; see Juraj Žudel: Národnostná štruktúra obyvateľstva Slovenska v roku 1910 [The National Structure of the Slovak Population in 1910], in: Geografický časopis 46/4 (1994), https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/04211203GC_1994_4_4_Zudel.pdf

After the war, supply problems persisted in the new Czechoslovak Republic, and the black market proliferated. The long-term deprivation of goods and supplies was still having a serious impact on the population. Illegal trade as a war commodity was ingrained in the people's mentality, both on usurers and their customers alike. These phenomena had a detrimental effect on the public's material and mental perception; it provoked discontent that was increasing social conflicts. Usury was widely discussed and much debated about in the provisional, and later, the elected parliament. In November 1918, a few weeks after the foundation of the Republic on 28 October 1918, the Ministry for the Supply of the People (*Ministerstvo pre zásobovanie ľudu)* was established in Prague. As the central institution for supply issues, its agenda was very extensive; that was the reason why under its direction a network of subsidiary offices was created. This network specialised in a variety of issues related to usury, supplies and goods, and the black market. In Slovakia, the Czechoslovak government established the Office of Supplies (*Zásobovací úrad*), which was operative from early 1919 on, with headquarters in Bratislava.[11] One of its departments focused on usury. In practice, however, this department was more of an auxiliary institution for other branches, assisting them in matters related to the market, distribution of goods and the production of livestock.[12]

The Republic's situation was gradually escalating, and complaints of unfair business practices were increasing on a daily basis. It was quite evident that high commodity prices and persistent supply shortages were exposing serious economic problems. The Slovak press was spot on:

> How many mysterious lives do we see day in and day out, wandering around the cafés and lingering in front of the cafés. What is their craft?

11 The exact date of the foundation of the Office of Supplies is unknown; the law for its foundation was adopted in January 1919. The laws against usury originated in the Austrian and Hungarian legal systems.

12 National Archives, Czech Republic, Prague, fund Ministry for the Supply of the People, carton 392.

> Black trade, usury (*keťasníctvo*) […] These people are well privy to all the paths by which they are accomplishing their goals.[13]

War usury also immensely complicated the process of Slovakia's political and economic transformation. It had an impact on the economic behaviour of the population, its mentality, as well as the formation of its attitudes towards the new state authorities and the new government. One of the biggest problems was the lack of consolidated leadership. The inconsistent administration, various differing interpretations of official regulations, clashes about the authority of the representatives of the military and political administration were just one more aspect the Czechoslovak government had to deal with in Slovakia.[14]

The tense situation in Slovakia forced the Czechoslovak government in Prague to put the fight against usury on a firmer footing, in both legislative and institutional terms. In the autumn of 1919, the Czechoslovak parliament adopted two anti-usury laws.[15] The sections of act no. 568 defined the various offences of war usury, such as exceeding maximum prices, concealment of supplies, altering food to increase profit. Often, these added substances made the food unfit for consumption.[16] Even for minor offences, the law imposed heavy fines and imprisonment, which could mean many years in prison in serious cases or in cases of recidivism. Punishment included the liquidation of one's business, the loss of the right to vote and the right

13 Slovenský východ (6.5.1920) II/103, 2.

14 Slovak National Archive, Bratislava, fund The Office for the Economy of Slovakia 1918–1938, carton 1. The national and regional press often wrote about these problems; among them were newspapers such as Slovenský denník, Slovák, Trenčanské noviny, and Naša Orava. See, for example, Juraj Benko: Rok 1918 a demokratizácia Slovenska. Bodka za dlhým vývojom? [The Year 1918 and the Democratization of Slovakia. An End after a Prolonged Development?], in: «S ľudom a pre ľud». Cesty k demokracii na Slovensku za monarchie a prvej republiky, Bratislava 2020, 27–62.

15 Acts no. 567 and 568 coll. of 1919, https://app.beck-online.cz/bo/chapterview-document.seam?documentId=onrf6mjzge4v6njwhawta.

16 A widespread practise was to add water to alcoholic beverages, colour to fruit juices or plant waste to flour to increase profit. These added matters rendered supplies dangerous for human consumption.

to run for office. The laws against usury were based on the Austro-Hungarian Civil Code, targeting the difficult post-war times. In a first move, the strict laws of the Czechoslovak Republic were intent on preventing the overpricing of goods and protect the interests of the population with regard to supplies and goods. This legislation was based on the premise that, in view of these exceptional circumstances, consumers were severely restricted in their freedom of choice, meaning that they had to be protected against unfair practices exercised by retailers.[17]

The Second Anti-Usury act no. 567 introduced a new type of jurisdiction: the people's anti-usury courts (*ľudové protiúžerové súdy*). They were established in each district court. The courts' special task was, in addition to the president of the chamber who was a professional judge, to act as jurors when in hearings with usurers, such as peasants, workers, and merchants. The participation of laymen was expected to educate their families, acquaintances, and neighbourhood and to spread the law about the calamity of illegal trade. The people's experience with the anti-usury trials was a further factor of the government's campaign against usury. At the same time, the judge's further task was to instruct citizens of how to make unbiased and objective decisions as lay persons at court.[18]

However, from the very beginning, the anti-usury people's courts stirred controversy. On the one hand, thanks to their work, prices went down in some places, and the public welcomed and appreciated their work. On the other hand, it was sometimes difficult to set up a panel of lay judges at all. Persons designated to act as lay judges often avoided taking office, sabotaged their tasks and caused delays. The people's courts were simply overburdened with claims. Moreover, the lay judges often made judgements according to their

17 The legislative aspect of the Republic's fight against usury has received wider attention in legal literature, see for example Jaroslav Paul: Trestní čin lichvy [The Offence of Usury]. Rigorous Thesis, (JUDr.) Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, Olomouc 2018, 16.

18 For example, Slovenský denník (19.11.1919) II/252, 3–4; Slovenský východ (6.5.1920) II/103, 2; Slobodný Slovák (29.11.1919) II/49, 4.

feelings and personal allegiances than putting the law into practise. Various interest groups and thus political and class divisions were introduced to the courts, influencing the lay judges.[19] The people's court against usury stopped its activities after only four years of existence.

Office for Prevention of Usury

In addition to legislative measures, the Czechoslovak government created specialised anti-usury institutions. Six offices tasked to root out usury were established in Prague, Brno, Moravská Ostrava, Plzeň, Bratislava and Uzhhorod, a town at the border to what would become Soviet Ukraine in 1922. The Bratislava office was established in the autumn of 1919. It existed until 1928.[20] In addition to the Bratislava headquarters, offices opened in Žilina, Lučenec and Košice. They regularly reported to headquarters about the situation in the Slovak regions, considered to be of vital importance. The offices' agenda quickly expanded.[21] The public was demanding more detailed information about its activities:

> That crooked trade is flourishing in our republic in proportions unheard of, everybody knows that. Much is written and said about it without anything serious and appropriate having been done in this respect […][22]

Inspectors were the executive arm of the Office; 37 inspectors worked in all branches over the Republic.[23] They inspected businesses, stores, warehouses, homes, and hospitality establishments in large and small towns. They conducted market observations

19 Mlynárske listy (1.12.1923) IV/47, 6.

20 In 1928, the public administration reform for the provinces came into force. For the first time in history, Slovakia was defined as a separate administrative unit with designated borders and her own regional authorities.

21 National Archives, Czech Republic, Prague, fund Ministry for the Supply of the People, carton 458; Slovak National Archive, Bratislava, fund The Office for Economy of Slovakia 1918–1938, carton 1.

22 Slovenský východ (6.5.1920) II/103, 2.

23 Data from 1920, the number of officers varied.

and, with the assistance of the police, arrested and brought in persons for questioning. The authorities appealed to the public for cooperation, requesting that citizens should take the initiative to start investigations. The Office granted citizens anonymity so that they would not be deterred from cooperating by fear of reprisals from traders. The Office's personnel kept detailed records of the cases and the seized goods and reported them to Prague Ministry of Supplies twice a week. The Office's employees prepared the case files for the prosecution and sent the files to the Republic's tax authorities, state, regional and local courts, the police force, and, in particularly serious cases, to the Office of the Attorney General, the State Prosecutor (*prokuratúra*).

The Office's inspectors cooperated with various institutions across the country, dealing with representatives from institutions that span from state to municipal, and county level, being in steady contact with the police and the gendarmerie. They also participated in raids that focussed not only on having people keep to the economic regulations, but also on the overseeing of sanitary standards in shops, restaurants, pubs, bakeries and confectioneries. The inspectors took food samples, which they then sent to chemical laboratories for analysis.[24] For example, the dilution of milk or alcohol and selling

[24] National Archives, Czech Republic, Prague, fund Ministry for the Supply of the People, carton 458. In the autumn of 1923, inspectors conducted a thorough check of Bratislava's pubs, bistros, refectories and bakeries – their findings were shocking. Many of these businesses did not uphold the most basic hygienic standards: dirty floors around the beer barrels in the pub; dirty toilets disinfected in some premises twice a year; the storage of food close to the toilets; uncovered baskets of bread and food on the tables, inviting dirt, dust and flies. In some pubs, owners served beer to customers in unwashed glasses. Had one customer finished his glass of beer, pub owners just filled the glass with beer for the next customer. In some cellars, the controllers found walls covered in spider webs, and in some kitchens, food was stored on the floor, together with old clothes, shoes and rotten food. In some bakeries and tea rooms, fruit preserves were found covered with mould and parasites. Larvae crawled on cakes, nuts and poppy seeds. Such conditions usually prompted the immediate withdrawal of the owner's license and the closing-down of the business.

them at the price of a fraudulent alleged 100% milk or 100% alcohol content was a common offence.[25]

The field inspectors had to face challenging tasks, such as verbal insults, threats, and incitement against the authorities. Physical assaults were normal, read, commonplace, and, in some instances, the inspectors had to call in the gendarmerie. In 1921, the Bratislava office asked the Ministry of Supply of the People to purchase firearms to protect the inspectors! Czechoslovak state inspectors did have a hard time, especially in the communities bordering with Poland and Hungary. Often, people accused the inspectors of being unprofessional, biased and incompetent. Marketeers and traders from Trenčín, as *pars pro toto,* described their situation:

> This inspection consists of one to two gentlemen, whose previous occupation is unknown. They are coming into the shop, ordering goods, requesting bills, inquiring about the prices, and, finally, write a report called 'Findings', concluding that the trader is a usurer in the truest sense of the word. And he will not be spared a fine. It is enough to write an article if, according to the accounts, profit exceeds 5%. These inspectors receive a considerable share of the fines, and it is in their interest to settle as many irregularities as possible, so that traders are at the mercy of persons completely ignorant of business.[26]

The authority and credibility of the Office's inspectors did not improve since they themselves were subject to prosecution for corruption, fraud or misconduct; such accusations usually prompted their dismissal from service.

The majority of cases the inspectors investigated concerned violations of sections 6 to 13 of act no. 568. These were offences of overpricing, thus toppling the maximum of a sum for goods

25 See Ľudovít Hallon: Premeny pohostinskej živnosti a kultúry konzumácie alkoholu na Slovensku 1918–1938 [Transformations of the Hospitality trade and the culture of alcohol consumption in Slovakia 1918–1938], in: Jaroslava Roguľová et al.: Od osmičky k osmičke. Premeny slovenskej spoločnosti v rokoch 1918–1938 [From Eight to Eight. Transformations of Slovak Society between 1918 and 1938], Bratislava 2009, 73–89, https://www.forumhistoriae.sk/sites/default/files/osmicky1.pdf.

26 National Archives, Czech Republic, Prague, fund Ministry for the Supply of the People, carton 458.

and supplies. One wartime measure remained in effect: traders could not independently set their own prices for goods. State regulations determined the prices of various kinds of food, meat, milk, various commodities, and services; for example, the state determined the salary for manual or industrial work or the rent of a room at an inn. The merchants had to follow these state regulations. Top prices varied according to the prevailing circumstances and were regularly published in the relevant press. The law imposed an obligation on traders: they had to display the up-to-date price lists of goods in their premises, which, given the high frequency of price changes, was a heavy bureaucratic burden on them.

Particularly serious cases went to the criminal courts. These included offences under sections 2 to 5 of law no. 568: the hiding away of stock and the deliberate breach of the obligation to provide supplies. On an almost daily basis, the Office received reports about deals of various commodities that were being sold off illegally. A further serious offence was the unauthorized and speculative stockpiling of commodities managed by the state. This offence was very serious because the speculators, intent on enriching themselves, took advantage of a supply system that was gradually succeeding in meeting the needs of the population. Some merchants demanded customers pay them not in money but in goods such as grain and flour. Thus, they built up stocks in order to monetise them on the black market. Inspectors carried out searches of private houses and warehouses and checked train stations to keep track of the flow of supplies. They confiscated goods of all kinds, on which the state would put on a heavy fine. Such goods were, for example, soap, tobacco, cigars, liquor and spirits, milk, butter, white bread, gasoline, sugar, wool, tea, flour, kerosene, potatoes, corn, lemons, sardines, meat, peas, money in foreign currencies, boxes of matches, ether, bricks, paint, coal, wagonloads of lumber, canvas, cloth, iron nails, hides and skins.[27]

[27] National Archives, Czech Republic, Prague, fund Ministry for the Supply of the People, carton 458; Slovenský denník (18.6.1920) III/135, 3.

Price violations and the speculation with stocks were on a downward trend. However, usury concerning housing, i.e. unfair practices related to the sale and rental of living or business premises could not be completely eliminated in the interwar years (1918–1938). Even before the war, cities, especially Bratislava and Košice, had severe shortages of housing and commercial space. The expansion rate could not fulfil increasing demands in time. After the foundation of the Republic, Bratislava became the capital of Slovakia: the city was now the seat of the new state with public administration offices and various state institutions. There were, however, not enough buildings and office space available for the state institutions, and often, high rental costs imposed a disproportionate financial burden. Finally, the problem of high rents also affected the Office; it had to move its location several times. Add to this the employees of the Office, who needed accommodation too.

In post-war Bratislava, there was a hustling business: the property market with the selling of flats, apartments, and houses. Commissions for housing, sublease or severance payments for trade agents amounted to enormous sums. Hundreds of undercover housing agents moved about the city, and the many housing agencies were under suspicion of usurious practices. In the files of the Office, we can find many descriptions of truly inhuman practices. Absolutely inadequate premises were sold or let without any scruples whatsoever. Often, these apartments or houses were hastily converted non-residential premises such as drying rooms or dark, windowless cellars into which families with young children were forced to move. In such cases, anti-usury inspectors could not conduct investigations indiscriminately. Their intervention required reports from aggrieved citizens and police assistance. Despite the boom in housing and construction in interwar Bratislava and the state's efforts to ensure a fair social policy for tenants,[28] usury remained one of the city's biggest problems.

[28] On housing construction in interwar Bratislava see Peter Szalay: Moderná Bratislava [Modern Bratislava], Bratislava 2022. On housing legislation in

Conclusion

The analysis of the Office's activities is not only a vivid and interesting example of the state's fight against usury, but also a glimpse into the microcosm of post-war Slovakia's citizenry. Our analysis shows how people struggled with everyday problems and what survival strategies they used, be it consumers or merchants. Our paper explores how citizens dealt with the strict state measures that regulated the market. It provides many stories of individuals, ranging from ordinary people to large companies to persons in authority. The experience of the fight against usury shows us that retail traders were the most affected group. Yet, large and grave violations of law often did not make it to court, because there was no evidence at hand to build a case.

Yet, the economic situation in the Republic and in Slovakia was gradually consolidating after WWI, owing to the growing availability of goods, ensured by increasing domestic production, imports from abroad, reduction of prices, abolition of the tight war economy and the advance and promotion of economic competition. Although measures against war usury were being relaxed, state authorities tasked with the fight against usury kept their *raison d'être*. In 1928, the Office was transformed into the 8th Department of the Land Office, and the anti-usury inspectors continued to investigate. These employees gained a wealth of experience. Some of them also applied their former experience in economic policy during WWII, when, after the dissolution of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1939, they began to work in the service of the Slovak state (1939–1945). But that is an entirely different story.

****

interwar Czechoslovakia see Linda Osyková: Legislatívne riešenia bytovej krízy počas 1. ČSR a realizácia zákonov v praxi na príklade Bratislavy [Legislative Solutions to the Housing Crisis During the First Czechoslovak Republic and the Implementation of the Laws in Practice on the Example of Bratislava], in: Forum Historiae 9/2 (2015) 152–165, https://www.forumhistoriae.sk/sites/default/files/10_osykova1.pdf.

The study was prepared within the project APVV-20-0526: POLSOC – Politická socializácia na území Slovenska v rokoch 1848–1993 / Political socialization in the territory of Slovakia during the years 1848–1993.

conexus 8/1 (2025) 124–140

https://doi.org/10.24445/conexus.2025.08.008

Dr. Jaroslava Roguľová, Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Klemensova 19, 814 99 Bratislava, Slovakia
jaroslava.rogulova@savba.sk

Prof. Dr. Josette Baer, Universität Zürich, Philosophisches Seminar, Zürichbergstrasse 43, 8044 Zürich
baer@philos.uzh.ch