

## NEW METROPOLITANS AND THEIR POPULAR PRESS IN FIN DE SIÈCLE PRAGUE

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### ABSTRACT

The author of this article presents the relation between sensational pictorial press, its readers and their collective memory creating the shared image of the emerging metropolis. He demonstrates the role of popular culture in forming a collective memory using the example of the *Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr* [Prague Illustrated Courier] in the period of the rapid urbanisation of Czech lands at the turn of the 20th century. In the emerging urban environment the traditional oral method of transmitting information was no longer sufficient and popular newspapers assisted urban newcomers in developing a shared sense of urban self-identification.

### Introduction

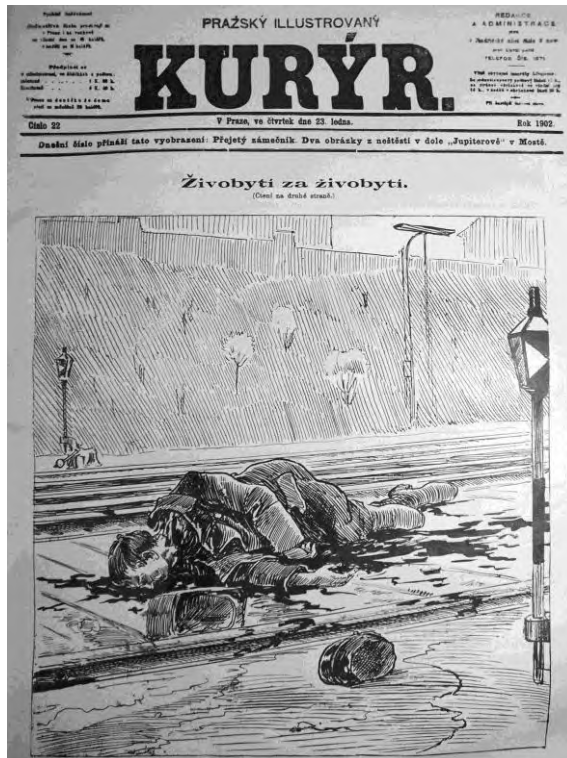
The processes of modernisation, of the rapid economic and technical changes, have led to an increased differentiation of society. The awareness of this differentiation was distinctly present in Central Europe, where the old cultural memory passed from generation to generation by means of repetition and drilling, and was gradually replaced by regional and interregional identities (Csáky 8, 9). Popular mass-press created a new urban space for communication used by readers from a non-elite stratum. According to Pierre Nora, the disappearance of peasant culture, the quintessential repository of collective memory, caused a fundamental collapse of the real environments of the memory. A sense of historical continuity persists in certain sites – the *lieux de mémoire* (the sites of memory) – instead of the no longer existing *milieux de mémoire* (the real environments of memory) (Nora 7). These sites of memory where memory crystallizes were formed by a new urban-democratized and mediatized mass society.

### Fin de Siècle Urbanisation and Pictorial Press

At the turn of the 20th century the main feature of central European urban popular culture was the sensational pictorial press. Its emergence was related to the formation of the urban areas, especially the metropolitan ones. During the period of the most rapid urbanisation (related to the process of industrialisation) an enormous stream of newcomers from rural areas came to the cities to find better places to live in – with a sufficient amount of job opportunities, higher wages, and more entertainment opportunities. During the period from 1870 to 1910 metropolises like Vienna or Berlin grew by nearly 150 per cent, and in the same period the population of Prague more than doubled while Budapest almost quadrupled

its population. Throughout the region, cities numbering more than 100,000 inhabitants nearly doubled from 1870 to 1910 (Wood 13; Boháč 14).

In this article, I will concentrate on the experience of the Prague metropolitan area dwellers (mostly newcomers) mediated by *Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr* (*Prague Illustrated Courier*), the first successful illustrated sensational daily, published between 1893 and 1918 by *Staročeská strana* (Czech National Conservative Party).



Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 23/ 1/ 1902, p.1

According to Ian Chambers, popular culture played a central role in the formation of urban culture. The development of popular culture was accompanied by a complex visual and acoustic response of the urban environment from which it is impossible to separate (Chambers 17, 18). For the migrants the move from the countryside to the suburbs of Prague meant the need to replace the traditionally oral method of spreading information; to find entertainment, and to search for a new culture and identity different from their rural origins. Sensational illustrated newspapers became not only a guide to life in the new environment but they also assisted readers in developing a shared sense of urban self-identification. During the period even the members of the urban lower social classes broadened their economic and cultural potency, and thus their capacity to absorb the development of a new common culture generated by the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation.

The publisher of the *Prague Illustrated Courier* adapted global patterns of successful mass daily press to address the Czech audience, its specific local beliefs, values and desires. In the case of the *Courier*, the need to accommodate readers' habits resulted in the newspaper's stream of information and entertainment remaining half way between the rural and the

metropolitan, between the traditional and the modern. The collective of its readers (and those who just overlooked headers and title illustrations at newsstands) used it as one of the important sources of information about their surroundings, about the life in the metropolis. It became some kind of a guide to Prague and its urban environment. The common experience of its reception – reading, overlooking of its pages, and discussing its contents and lurid illustrations – created in the process of negotiating of meanings kind of a collective notion about life in Prague related to their collective memory.

### **Prague Dwellers and the *Illustrated Courier***

The *Prague Illustrated Courier* helped readers to create a shared idea about life in Prague and to form its collective memory. On the one hand, the image consists of detailed reports of local and sensational events from small injuries, street accidents, misfortunes, and petit crimes to reports about associations and cultural life (popular theatres, music halls) including lists of funerals, bankruptcies and voluntary contributions. On the other hand, news about „serious“ events from Prague and the rest of world that – not graphically separated – created a kind of counterpoint to the urban everyday routine entering into the collective imagination from the same pages. Nevertheless, political news was often depicted as spectacle too, the same way as bloody crimes, disasters and riots. As a consequence of the regularity of their occurrence on the newspaper they fitted into the mosaic of the urban daily routine.



Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 19/ 5/ 1908, p.1

According to Jiří Štaif, Prague residents are found at the heart of the conflict between traditional mentality related to the rural and small town life (the origin about half of Prague

inhabitants) and the trends of modernisation brought by recent developments at the turn of the twentieth century (Štaif 18, 19). The example of popular press, closely related to the urban environment, can help us to observe this dialogue of tradition and modernisation. Compared to the sensational press of other Central European cities, the *Courier* and other Prague press did not offer their readers intense images of metropolitan life from all over the world. To the contrary, editors of the *Courier* specialised in local events. Its everyday summary of even smallest accidents including full name, occupation and address of people involved can be seen as a remnant of oral spreading of news and gossips. This was a feature of the provincial press that reported about persons known to most of readers situated in small areas – a significant contrast to the anonymous life in real metropolises.

### The Autumn of 1908 on the *Courier's* Pages

The following case study is meant to show the nexus of the *Courier*, its readers and their perception of Prague. The autumn of 1908 was chosen as a nice example of the blend of „great history“ with everyday urban bustle on the pages of the *Courier*.



Rvačka německých poslanců ve sněmu král. českého.

Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 17/ 10/ 1908, p.1

First I will introduce the political development in the Czech lands (more strictly Bohemia as a main part of the so called Czech lands) which were a part of the Austrian Monarchy during

this period. At the end of September the Bohemian Diet (regional parliament) session culminated in the obstruction of German deputies, who protested against the appointment of only Czech parliamentary clerks by singing *Wacht am Rhein* [Watch on the Rhine], the unofficial anthem of the Pan-German movement. This led to skirmishes between Czech and German deputies. A similar situation occurred after the Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, when anti-annexation protests led not only to the prorogation of the session, but also to the demission of the Cisleithanian government (government of the Austrian part of the Habsburg Monarchy) and the nomination of a new caretaker government. The turbulent political atmosphere developed into fierce and violent national disturbances all over Austria and especially in the nationally divided Czech lands including the expulsion of minorities from towns, attacks against minority associations' buildings and schools, and affrays between students of different nationalities and with the police. The turbulent situation in Prague resulted in the imposition of Martial law on December 2, on the day of the Emperor's jubilee of 60 years on the throne – ergo, it mostly spoiled long planned celebrations (the annexation used to be described as a jubilee gift).



Vyhlášení stanného práva na Václavském náměstí.

Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 4/ 10/ 1908, p.1

The research into memory follows works by Maurice Halbwachs, which are based on the idea that recalling is a group phenomenon. Membership in the group offers the source for memory and invites certain events to be recalled and others to be forgotten. The group cannot only help individuals to reconstitute memories, but even to evoke memories never experienced by individuals. The memory is a product of publicly accessible symbols and

narratives as well as the possession of individuals. But the individual memory is shaped socially as the memory is a matter of how minds cooperate in society. Individuals cannot continually and coherently remember outside of their group context. (Olick 334, 335)

In the case of the *Illustrated Courier* the mediated memory had a strong national character. Its publishers addressed Czech readers, who perceived Prague as a primarily Czech town, so they interpreted local as well as international events from the Czech national point of view. Especially during the period of national clashes, both in parliament and on the streets, the division of good and bad, of heroes and villains was strictly national. De Certeau uses the term *region* as a space formed by certain interaction. There can be as many regions in a particular place as interactions or conflicting programs can be found there. Texts of competing groups constantly form borders, and their members not only separate space but also styles and movements (Certeau 91). As a consequence, Czech and German national memories clashed (not only in a symbolic way) inside Prague city space. The *Courier* was instrumental by its emphasis on detailed descriptions of national hassles, national inequities and national alignments of businesses and spots. German counterparts were regularly characterised by a set of demeaning adjectives and verbs, used to describe their physical appearance, behaviour and negative attributes. The epitome of German nationalism was the figure of the deputy and protagonist of the Pan-German movement, Karl Hermann Wolf. He was not missed from any parliament disorder just like the positively perceived Czech nationalists Václav Březnovský and Jan Vašatý (ironically all of them were not only radical nationalists but radical anti-Semites too).

Deputy Wolf [...] finally roared in his razor nasty and repulsive voice. The others guffawed in the face of the Prince of Lobkowicz with a cheeky ridicule. German deputies stood in a huddle knot, barracked, and behaved forsooth as scamps (Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 15/ 01/ 1898, p. 2).

During the autumn of 1908, the pages of the *Courier* were filled with tense happenings. Reports of personal and associational life shrank in number with rising tensions, and they were replaced by sensational news about national riots, rumbustious parliamentary sessions and about the threat of a possible war conflict. The new popular motif of illustrations was aggression against Czech minorities in predominantly German borderlands. But pictorial reports from riots and national clashes were regularly supplemented with murders, suicides, court cases and natural disasters from all over the world to keep the reader's attention. Even some odd photographs kept their place as "'Consul Peter ' Ape-Human in Variété Theatre" (Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 18/ 09/ 1908, p. 2) or "Curious Hare with 8 legs" (Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 03/ 11/ 1908, p. 2).



Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 18/ 09/ 1908, p. 2

Reports of the national aggression were constructed the same way as the crime reports. Expressive phrases, direct speeches, and verbal expressions of empathy with victims were used. The reports in the following issues of the *Courier* were successively supplemented by additional pictures and articles to maintain the excitement.

We just received pictures from Carlsbad showing a part of the biggest damages – the work of a furious rabble, which perfectly characterises the quality of German nationalist propagators of Prussian culture. It does not need more words” (Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 15/ 10/ 1908, p. 17).

During November, the number of title illustrations (the main attraction of the issue) depicting crimes and disasters were equipollent to those depicting national violence, demonstrations, and to political cartoons. Because of the popularity of the *Courier* we can assume that this spectrum of news topics created the ideal spectacle, the inseparable blend of infotainment that the readers demanded and were looking for. The editors’ idea of the importance of different kinds of news for readers can be demonstrated on the issue of November 12, when news and illustrations about the suicide of the chief editor of the German Prague daily *Bohemia* were given preference to be on the title page to the picture of the nomination of the new Prime Minister Bienerath.

Both types of events – political news and human misfortunes – were reported in the same manner as the same kind of deviation from everyday reality with the same emotional charge. We can assume they were perceived by the resembling way too. The pictorial presentation of the most popular urban events formed the readers’ notion of the space of the metropolis. Thus it had the chance to be strengthened both in collective as in individual memory of Prague



dwellers. The stories reported on in the *Courier* and in the sensational sections of other dailies can be found both in written memories and in fiction written by contemporary authors years and decades later. The best repository of these remembered stories is the famous Jaroslav Hašek comedy novel *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* [*The Good Soldier Švejk*] published in the 1920s, where characters prefer to spend leisure time by narrating these stories the same way, with the name and addresses of their unfortunate heroes, as they were reported in the period's newspapers, and probably as they were told on Prague streets, in pubs and other public places for years.

At the time of the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the impending Balkans conflict genre pictures from the countries involved were published regularly. In this way regions considered as far as exotic in the Prague readers' notion of the world and in their mental space became closer and more actual under the influence of imminent war. Another nice example of the period's infotainment is the news about the imprisonment of a Slovak national activist in Szeged supplemented with several views of the city and a description of town's landmarks and places of interest.



Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 10/ 10/ 1908, p.1

The important events of the political life of the Habsburg monarchy were according to the *Courier* as humorous, breath-taking or moving as the usual local sensational events of the politically quieter periods. During the autumn of 1908 both on pages of the *Courier* as probably on the minds of its readers the dark world of politics intermingled with the dark world of criminals, the touching misfortunes with the touching violence against Czech minorities, the fear of impending natural disasters with the fear of possible war conflict, and the weirdness of a strange hare with eight legs with the weirdness of throwing sugar lumps.



Deputy Iro: Let's call Prášek. – Deputy Wolf: Let Prášek give the oration speech! – Deputy Kubr: Shut up! Do not yell all the time! – (Loud voices: Go to hell, hell, hell!) – Deputy Wolf: I have suggested deputy Prášek would be invited to give the oration speech. (Yelling and barracking: Sugar, sugar, sugar!)” (Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 2/ 10/ 1908).

The issue of December 2 is very telling, too. On the day of the Emperor's jubilee, six photographs depicting various moments of the monarch's life are supplemented by photographs of a bus accident in Bohdaneč and drawings of a Burschenschaft fraternities' riot in Prague. The following issues mostly focus on riots which completely erased the celebration of jubilee set for a month from the interest of readers. This manifests the prevalent interest of the *Courier* readers in the Prague area. It also shows which kinds of events were significant for them (Prague riots) and which kind of events could be omitted (Emperor's jubilee celebration).

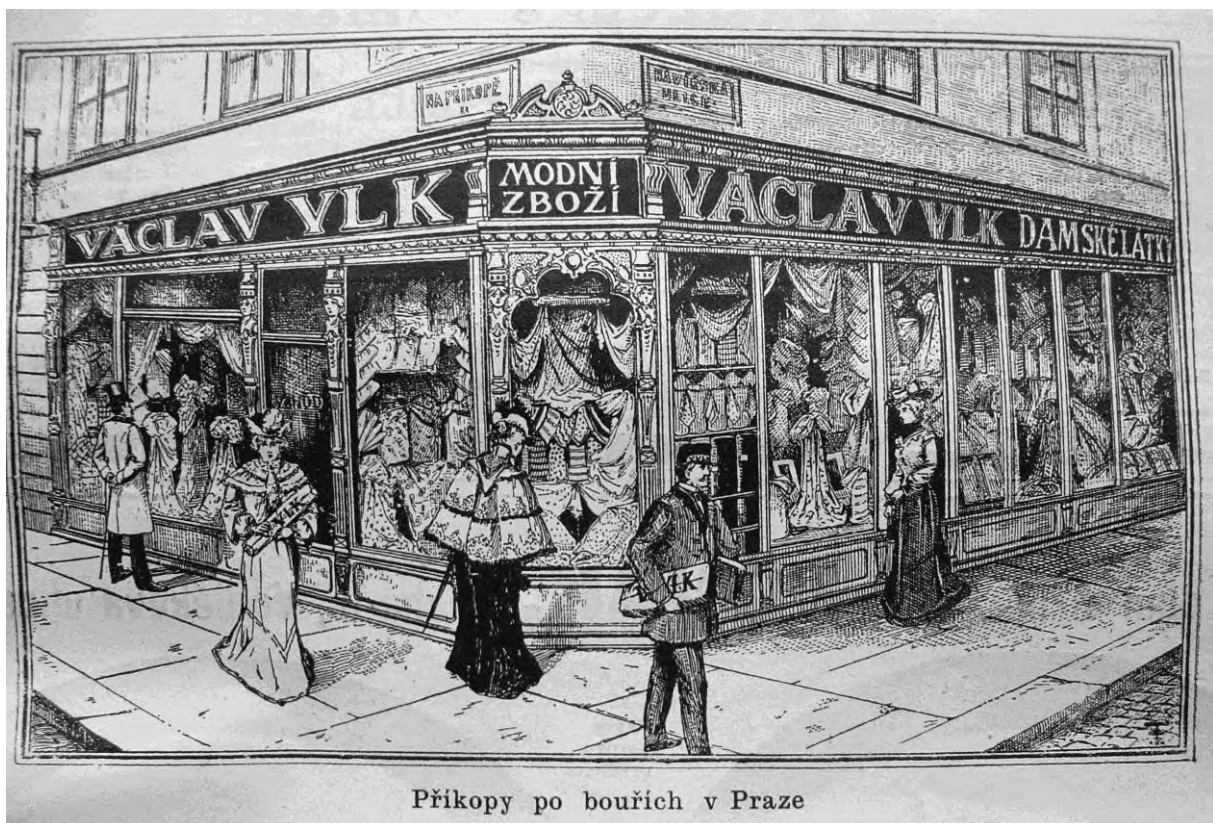


Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 2/ 12/ 1908, p. 4

### Sites of Memory

Prague places, highlighted by the touch of the great history, remained in the public awareness. Readers, informed by the *Courier* about a notable event, decided to come and take a look close up and newspapers subsequently published pictures of people gathering on the

place of the event. Even readers from the province made trips to Prague and enjoyed guided tours around places known from newspapers. The bond between the place and a past event deepened this. Thanks to the personal visit, the mediated memory related to the place intermingled with the own experience into an indistinguishable conglomerate. According to Wulf Kansteiner, collective memory is always medialised, even in the case of some members of the group being eyewitnesses, because the memory is structured, represented, used and passed on in a social environment (Kansteiner 190). The connection between the event and the site of readers' memory could be utilised commercially too: The report about the damage caused by yesterday's clashes on *Příkopy* street was supplemented by an illustration of the clothes shop situated there with an announcement to the public about a patriotic business that as „first Czech stronghold [...] has to face alien competition“ (Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 7/ 11/ 1908) as *Příkopy* street was known to all readers as a German high street. So readers who wanted to observe the place of yesterday's clashes could add patriotic shopping to their pleasure of participating in the event.



Pražský Illustrovaný Kurýr, 7/ 11/ 1908, p. 3

The editors' selection of notable and memorable information formed the image of the contemporary world for the readers. It was supplemented by the comparison with the biggest world metropolises to create a notion of how metropolises should be like. But editors also participated in the escalation of the further events by their images of metropolitan happenings. For example, the pictorial information about a parliament skirmish caused an anti-German gathering of Prague dwellers, which caused a police intervention. The

information (with a picture on the title page) led to another gathering of rubbernecks (with possible new police intervention in the case of martial law) as well as a parliamentary debate about the incident. The report about this debate in troubled times easily elicited another gathering of Prague dwellers.

The *Courier*, as a popular source of information for ordinary Prague dwellers, marked a Czech map of the city – a map of places undistinguishably linked to both the national and the sensational memories (as we can see in Hašek's novel). As this source of collective images of Prague was used not only by readers from Prague but from the provincial areas as well, the *Courier* focused on local events offered as components of collective memory related to particular places to a group of readers defined temporally, spatially and partly socially, i. e. broadly the non-elite Czech inhabitants of Prague.

The images of non-Prague localities could access to urban memory as well. Noticeable events in Bosnia-Herzegovina or in Viennese parliament as well as in the Czech borderlands elicited a strong reaction by Prague dwellers (both Czech and German). Mainly people from lower strata took to the streets and gathered on sites variously related to Prague Czech or German national memory. Symbolical or real fights of national domination took place on these sites. The memory mediated by the *Prague Illustrated Courier* related varied sites of the Prague urban area to diverse meanings and events, and thus influenced the image of the city on its readers' minds. The selection of the events depicted was done by the editors, but they tried to meet the expectations and needs of readers.

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