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## Contending Views of Czechoslovakia's Demise

*Michael Kraus and Allison Stanger*

If 1989 will go down in history as the *annus mirabilis*, marking the peaceful demise of communism in Eastern Europe, the 1990s will be remembered as "the springtime of ethnicity." In the wake of the collapse of the Cold War order, conflicts and not only have tensions between ethnic groups brought about the disintegration of the multinational federations of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia, but many of the new successor states also face the prospect of further territorial divisions. At the time of this writing, the Czech and Slovak republics are in their seventh year as independent states. The Czech Republic has received the honor of NATO membership, while Slovakia remains at the margins of international life, despite the ouster of its authoritarian prime minister, Vladimír Mečiar, in November 1998 (after his electoral defeat in September of that year). The divergent paths that each took over the course of the past seven years only serve to confer an additional aura of inevitability upon Czechoslovakia's extinction.

As scholars, however, we need to be wary of declaring historical events inevitable, particularly since the former Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Soviet Union each disintegrated in very different fashion. The most striking feature of Czechoslovakia's demise was the peaceful resolution of ethnic conflict. If Czechs and Slovaks were able to part ways in civil fashion, the question arises of why they were unable to work out their differences within the framework of a common state. In this sense, the presumption of inevitability can potentially obscure more than it reveals. To advance our understanding of the sources of state cohesion, the key question should instead be: At what point in time did Czechoslovakia's disintegration become inevitable, and what steps, if any, might political elites have taken to preempt the country's arrival at this point of no return?

Cataloging the most salient forces, the collapse of the Czechoslovak federation might be seen as the product of (1) the legacies of the communist and precommunist eras (the inevitability thesis), (2) the rational or erratic actions of postcommunist political elites, (3) constitutional deadlock, (4) the absence of political parties as well as other associations and groupings that unite people across ethnic lines, (5) the role of the mass media, (6) regional economic disparities, and (7) demonstration effects (international factors fostering separatism). Obviously, these factors are often overlapping and interrelated, but approaching the question of Czechoslovakia's breakup from each vantage point yields valuable insights. Although they are largely applied to the Czecho-Slovak case in this volume, each of these categories of explanation might also be used to shed light on disintegration processes in other countries and contexts.

## HISTORICAL LEGACIES

The first analytical framework emphasizes those factors that rendered national division a potent political force in the precommunist and communist phases of development. They include the ideological character and the institutional structure of the new state created in 1918; the bipolar imbalance of power pitting the less numerous Slovaks against the more numerous Czechs; the cultural and economic disparities between the two societies during 1918-1989; the nature of Leninist politics as a source of ethnonational identification; and the impact of external factors upon Prague's policies of centralism.<sup>1</sup> In short, the tortured history of Czech-Slovak relations is the obvious point of departure for examining Czechoslovakia's fate.

Carol Skalnik Leff's opening essay builds on the work of her successful 1987 book on the Czech-Slovak relationship, which remains one of the best available in the English language. Leff puts the events of the 1990s in their appropriate historical context, demonstrating that Czechoslovakia suffered from what Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan have termed a "stateness" problem since its very inception. Since Czechoslovakia was forged in an atmosphere of crisis largely generated beyond its immediate borders, the institutional solutions that were successively embraced during both the interwar republic and the communist era were products of that context. Consequently, Czechoslovakia's internal political stability or lack thereof was strongly influenced by external factors.

Leff's chapter also highlights the elements of continuity in Czech-Slovak relations before and after 1989. In three important areas – quarreling over the constitutional form of the common state, the relationships between Czech and Slovak elites, and the attempts to forge a Czechoslovak national identity—she finds that history repeated itself. Mutual suspicion and institutional failure were historical constants throughout Czechoslovakia's relatively short lifetime. Do these historical patterns suggest that Czechoslovakia's dissolution was inevitable? Leff answers in the negative, concluding that the Velvet Divorce was "a probabilistic outcome . . . the historical deck was stacked, not definitively, but still substantially, against" the survival of the common state.

In exploring the possibilities for Czech-Slovak compromise that existed in 1989-1992, Jan Rychlík's contribution complements that of Leff, assessing the weight of history through a different lens. The first part of his chapter provides a retrospective look at Czecho-Slovak relations and institutions in the postnormalization period. Rychlík points out that while the normalization reforms never succeeded in fulfilling Slovak expectations, they did create a strong managerial class in Bratislava where one had never previously existed, which turned out to be useful for the newly independent Slovakia after the dissolution of the common state. Rychlík then surveys the subsequent negotiations over Czechoslovakia's constitutional future, emphasizing the further divergence of Czech and Slovak perceptions as the conflict unfolded. In his view, the Czech side believed that "Slovak negotiators were bent on squaring a circle, aspiring to have a Slovak state while at the same time resisting the same. From the

Slovak perspective, however, it seemed that the Czechs did not want to accept legitimate Slovak demands.”

Despite these differences, a compromise agreement was forged at Milovy in February 1992, which was then passed on to the Czech and Slovak national councils for ratification. A ratification vote would never take place, as the Milovy accord was killed by the Presidium of the Slovak National Council, which could not obtain a majority in favor of bringing it to a vote. After the failure of the Milovy compromise, both sides agreed that further negotiation should be left to the victors of the June 1992 elections. As Rychlík concludes, the outcome of the June 1992 elections rendered further compromise impossible. The negotiations between the victorious parties focused on how the existing federation was to be undone, with the most significant point of disagreement taking place over the optimal tempo. If the common state had no future, Václav Klaus’s Civic Democratic Party (ODS), triumphant in the Czech lands, wanted to move as quickly as possible toward independence; in contrast, Vladimír Mečiar’s Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) was interested in slowing things down in order to negotiate the most favorable separation agreement. Opposition parties tried to save the state but were ultimately unsuccessful, for any talk of a renewed political union was a ”project without a future.”

### **THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ELITES**

The second potential explanation focuses exclusively on the role of postcommunist political elites in the development of ethnic conflict. Research on ”constitutional nationalism” in the former Yugoslavia and on ”the politics of national identity” identifies political elites as critical agents in the rise of postcommunist nationalist ideologies.<sup>2</sup> The political dynamic whereby the quest for national self-determination serves as a vehicle for enhancing the political power of certain leaders and elites was a factor in both the Czech and Slovak contexts. Individual leaders such as Vladimír Mečiar and Václav Klaus, whose parties and coalitions emerged dominant from the June 1992 elections in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, respectively, increased their personal power through the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.<sup>3</sup> Repeated promises of a referendum on the country’s fate were never fulfilled; the narrative chronology found in the appendix to this volume highlights the critical role of political elites in Czechoslovakia’s demise.

Given that the supporters of Slovak independence never counted more than a third of those polled (and the champions of Czech independence were even fewer) during 1990 to 1992, the fact that Czech and Slovak voters gave the largest electoral support to leaders who swiftly negotiated the separation merits investigation. In an effort to probe this seeming paradox, Petr Kopecný’s chapter interprets the peaceful breakup of Czechoslovakia through the consociational lens first developed by Arend Lijphart. Lijphart argued that democratic stability could be maintained in a segmented society if political rule was based on power sharing – i.e., the inclusion of representatives of each group in decision-making structures so as to facilitate compromise. Kopecný argues that the pre-1989 institutional structure, largely retained

until the end of the common state some three years later, should be viewed as a consociational system that failed.

To demonstrate that the newly democratic Czechoslovakia’s inherited institutions and practices were consociational, Kopecný begins by reviewing the main tenets of consociational theory. Having surveyed the relevant literature, he then accounts for the failure of consociational democracy in Czechoslovakia. Put simply, consociational institutions alone are never enough to sustain democratic stability; as Lijphart emphasizes, the requisite groundwork must be in place for consociational democracy to flourish. In postcommunist Czechoslovakia, where there was no strong tradition of elite accommodation and compromise, the volatile, uncertain, and competitive nature of postcommunist politics mitigated the otherwise stabilizing factors of consociational arrangements. Kopecný points out that six out of Lijphart’s nine preconditions for consociational democracy did not pertain in democratizing Czechoslovakia. In this soil, not surprisingly, consociational democracy did not take root.

While consociational institutions alone cannot ensure democratic stability in a divided society, they can potentially play a positive role when the common state fails to hold. Kopecný maintains that the same consociational institutions that proved incapable of holding Czechoslovakia together eventually fostered its peaceful partition. As he puts it, ”Indeed, the impressively legalistic manner in which the dissolution was carried out the agreement to form a federal government to divide the state, followed by a number of agreements to divide the assets of the state, as well as an agreement for accomplishing the division in legal fashion-was possible, at least in part, precisely because of the integrative and inclusive nature of existing consociational procedures.”

### **CONSTITUTIONAL DEADLOCK**

According to the third analytical framework, the origins of the split can be traced to the institutions that the makers of the Velvet Revolution willingly inherited from the outgoing order. Instead of taking decisive and immediate action to institutionalize the revolution in the form of a new federal constitution, the dissident leadership in Czechoslovakia wound up accepting the legitimacy of the communist constitution as an interim document, one that would be amended to be suitable until a replacement could be negotiated.<sup>4</sup> In this, the symbolic and substantive value of a legal break with the communist era for the cause of democracy was perhaps squandered at a time when there was a high degree of cooperation between Czech and Slovak political leaders.

Where Kopecný asks why bona fide consociational institutions did not produce democratic stability, Allison Stanger seeks to explore why democratizing elites embraced communism’s institutional legacy in the first place when they were not forced to do so and what the consequences of those early choices were for Czechoslovakia’s subsequent political development. She argues that dissident views of the relative importance of constitutional transformation changed after they had assumed power. Embracing the communist constitution as a stopgap measure ”had

the unfortunate byproduct of underscoring and encouraging what divided rather than united citizens of the common state.” With the benefit of hindsight, the decision to set a two-year deadline for the drafting and ratification of a new federal constitution appears to have been a flawed strategy. The task of reconstructing federalism should have been either tackled in the Velvet Revolution’s immediate aftermath or pursued without timetables.

Taking a closer look at the inherited constitution, Stanger points out that federalism Czecho-Slovak style had two distinctive features. First, it featured the sweeping *zákaz majorizace* (minority veto), which banned majority voting for extraordinary as well as a broad range of ordinary legislation. Given the structure of the federal parliament, the minority veto gave extraordinary powers to the Slovak nationalist minority and fostered unfathomable gridlock. Second, the fact that the federation was comprised of only two members meant that negotiations on any agenda item were easily perceived by both parties to be a zero-sum game. In Stanger’s view, Czechoslovakia’s institutional forms, especially as a backdrop to the democratic transition, were a recipe for disaster, for they were never designed to function under democratic conditions. “If the potential for Czechoslovakia to survive communism’s demise indeed existed,” she concludes, “the negotiation and implementation of new constitutional first principles for a democratic life were a necessary condition for the common state’s continued viability.”

Given that elite behavior was a critical variable in both the end of Czechoslovakia and the peaceful transition to two new states, to what extent can we fault the actions and inactions of members of the Czech, Slovak, and federal governments and the leadership of the major political parties for generating the irreconcilable differences that led to the dissolution of the country? Peter Rutland has argued that “Czech politicians (such as Klaus) who pressed for a clean break were largely motivated by economic considerations,” while their Slovak counterparts “were motivated more by questions of identity and pride than by worries about the economy.”<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to evaluate Rutland’s proposition, for studies relying upon survey research data point in different directions. For example, one concludes that “the creation of an independent Slovak republic was more an unintended outcome of the postcommunist panic and confusion exploited by ambitious politicians than the culmination of Slovak national emancipation.”<sup>6</sup> Another study based on many of the same sources suggests a more tentative finding, explaining the “increase in the political salience of ethnicity” on the basis of both the role of elites and the “important differences in the objectives and perspectives of the two groups involved.”<sup>7</sup>

In an effort to weigh the relative role of mass and elite sentiment in Czechoslovakia’s demise, Sharon Wolchik builds on the findings of Kopecký and Stanger to shed light on some of the less commonly appreciated factors that contributed to the election of pro-autonomy Slovaks and the parallel election of Czechs uninterested in making concessions to Slovak aspirations. The second section of Wolchik’s essay traces the development of Slovak nationalism and discusses the rapid post-1989 politicization of ethnicity—the rapidity of which was facilitated by Czechoslovakia’s

institutional structure. Wolchik concludes that “the interaction of institutional forms and political factors, with underlying ethnic cleavages and economic change” were responsible for Czechoslovakia’s fate. Czechoslovakia’s peculiar variant of federalism discouraged cross-national interaction, which contributed to the drifting apart of the two national groups twenty years later, when the rule of law was allowed to be restored, albeit on a less than stable institutional foundation. In the final section of her essay, Wolchik reflects on the tumultuous state-building process in Czechoslovakia’s two successor states. In some sense, Wolchik warns, Czechoslovakia’s developmental trajectory may point to the limits of federalism as a device for containing ethnic conflict.

## POLITICAL PARTIES

The fourth explanatory framework highlights the critical role of the political parties and of substate institutions and organizations that emerged in the transition period. The revolutionary movement in Czechoslovakia, while united in its general objective to overthrow communist power, was organized from the start along republic or regional lines (e.g., Civic Forum in the Czech lands and the Public Against Violence in Slovakia). Political parties in Czechoslovakia were quick to form and equally quick to splinter; twenty-three political parties participated in the 1990 federal elections.<sup>8</sup> Among these, no party—with the important exception of the communists—transcended the regional/ethnic divide; no party, that is, had strong appeal in both the Czech and Slovak republics. Though several parties made a modest effort to overcome the national division in the 1992 elections, none succeeded in winning seats in the parliament.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in the Czech lands, Moravia-based parties, and in Slovakia, Hungarian-based groupings further fragmented the sources of cohesion during the rapid repluralization of politics. Put another way, political parties in postcommunist Czechoslovakia did not successfully perform the integrative function that mass political parties typically provide, compromising the prospects for preserving state unity.<sup>10</sup>

Relatedly, both Czech and Slovak political leaders faced the challenge of fostering the growth of civil society in postcommunist Czechoslovakia. A robust civil society is an essential facet of democratic consolidation. The presence of interest groups and voluntary associations plays a key role here, inasmuch as they draw and empower citizens to participate in the political process. The weakness of such actors on the Czechoslovak political stage, especially those seeking to organize around the platform of the common state, can be singled out as a crucial factor in the demise of the federation.<sup>11</sup>

Through a rational choice analysis of the June 1992 federal elections, the outcome of which sealed the fate of the common state, František Turnovec assesses the role of the electoral system in Czechoslovakia’s deepening political crisis. Czechoslovakia’s last elections were conducted under proportional representation with a relatively high threshold (5 percent for singleton political parties, 7 percent for coalitions of two parties, and 10 percent for coalitions of greater than two parties). Using simulation

techniques, he then varies the electoral rules and assesses the impact of these changes on political stability.

Turnovec finds that "proportional representation with thresholds led to a significant decrease in the number of parliamentary parties," yet its imposition did not succeed in eliminating extremist parties, largely due to the powerful effects of strategic voting (voting only for parties that have a chance of actually winning, rather than for one's top choice). The net effect of strategic voting was to increase the gap between what the electorate preferred in absolute terms and what it actually got representing it in parliament. "For the Czechs and Slovaks," he contends, "the choice of a high threshold may have enhanced 'governability' but also increased the relative power of the common state's enemies."

### THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA

Long before the country's dissolution, the Czechs and the Slovaks lived on separate islands of information. Slovak newspapers, for example, were virtually unobtainable in the Czech lands, thereby depriving any interested reader of Slovak perspectives on many issues dividing the leadership. Conversely, Slovak political leaders routinely complained about what they perceived to be biased coverage of Slovak issues emanating from the state-controlled Federal Czechoslovak Television, by far the most important source of news for most citizens. What role did the Czech and Slovak mass media—print, television, and radio play in exacerbating or ameliorating the Czech/Slovak conflict? Contributions from Owen Johnson and Martin Vadas provide complementary answers to this question.

Throughout Czechoslovakia's existence, Johnson notes, the media were less likely to shape public opinion than they were to reinforce existing political attitudes. It follows that the media in and of themselves did not significantly increase the likelihood that the common state would break up; their influence was more subtle than that. In postcommunist states, the media's power did not rest in their ability to change people's minds but rather in their ability to reinforce the strength of the public's convictions. In post-1989 Czechoslovakia, the media did not so much tell people what to think as tell them what they should and should not be thinking about; in this way, they framed the agenda for the public. Although this meant different things in the Czech lands and in Slovakia, in both republics the media took their cue from political elites, who nurtured and manipulated the historical experiences of their respective nations for their own ends, just as they had in the first republic and under communism.

So did the media contribute to Czechoslovakia's demise? The media's lack of objectivity and balance reminds Johnson of the sort of "schizophrenic" journalism that was practiced in the United States in the nineteenth century. In both cases, the media wanted to be independent and professional while at the same time wanting to support particular political positions. With these conflicting aspirations, truly objective coverage was an unattainable goal. In serving as the political elite's megaphone in post-1989 Czechoslovakia, especially in Slovakia, the media inadvertently became a

"transmission belt" for the voices of dissolution. Had a referendum actually been held, it would have been easier for the media to play "an informational and organizational role," in turn sparking genuine public debate on critical issues facing the besieged federation. For that to happen, however, journalists would have had to relinquish their long-standing leadership position, thereby bringing the public more directly into the political process. This they did not do, and as a result, the media were unable to play an independent role. Johnson concludes, therefore, that journalists "largely did not seek to serve the public" but rather the political elites—thus unintentionally and indirectly contributing to the breakup of Czechoslovakia.

While Johnson's chapter focuses on the print media, the contribution from Martin Vadas assesses the role of broadcast media, especially television, in the breakup of Czechoslovakia. Having served as Czechoslovak Television's last news director, Vadas provides unique insight into the challenges of reporting the news objectively as the drive for Slovak autonomy intensified. Vadas argues that the mass media "played an important, if subsidiary, role in the unraveling of the federation." At a time when Czechoslovakia was gearing up for its most important elections in June 1992, Czechoslovak Television, which might have served as a unifying force, was in its death throes.

For coverage of the run up to the June 1992 elections, both republics had at least three sources of television news: Czechoslovak Television, Czech Television, and Slovak Television. During his tenure as news director, Vadas assigned top priority to providing quality coverage from Slovakia, yet both organizational and personnel problems rendered this task quite difficult. After over forty years of communist rule, professional journalists were virtually nonexistent. The choice was often between an individual with experience and hence a tainted past or a person of character with no experience whatsoever. Since many television employees, both federal and national, were culpable for their service to the old regime, they were equally eager to assist the new regime. The result was a continuation of the unfortunate tradition of mass media servility to political power. The new political elites, acting out of self interest, did not object to this subservient relationship.

After the official creation of an independent Slovak Television (ST) in 1991, federal television had to rely almost entirely on the work of ST for its Slovakia coverage. Since Slovak Television needed to justify its independent existence, it was unlikely to provide federal television with wholly objective coverage of the Czech-Slovak conflict; friction was built into this relationship from the start. In this context, Vadas admits that he was relieved that the matter of Czechoslovakia's future was never actually put to a referendum. He feared that the referendum campaign would only have further exacerbated existing tensions. As for the official position of Czechoslovak Television, Vadas tells us that it endeavored to present the full array of views on the referendum issue, while never advocating that one take place.

As Vadas's account amply illustrates, federal television faced extraordinarily difficult obstacles, which account "for the very superficial and inadequate way in which radio and television covered political events and developments during 1990-

1991.” Like Johnson, Vadas believes that ”this coverage almost always failed to serve the public interest.” Yet Vadas sees a silver lining in this lackluster tale. Unlike its Yugoslav counterpart, federal television in Czechoslovakia ”contributed to a peaceful parting of the ways.”

### **REGIONAL ECONOMIC DISPARITIES**

With respect to the sixth working hypothesis, theories that focus on economic factors postulate that ethnic separatism is likely to emerge when one substate is discriminated against economically by the state.<sup>12</sup> Put another way, ethnic conflict is likely to develop as the product of growing regional economic disparities. At first glance, such explanations would seem to be of little relevance to the Czechoslovak case, since the Slovaks received a disproportionately larger share of state investment during the communist era. While the status of Czechs and Slovaks was markedly different at the beginning of the communist period, because of a higher level of capital investment per capita in Slovakia than in the Czech lands, the communist regime in Czechoslovakia had largely eliminated gaps in the living standards and levels of economic development by the end of the 1980s.<sup>13</sup> However, those funds were disproportionately devoted to the development of heavy industry, especially the weapons industry, for which markets largely dried up after the collapse of Soviet power.

The economic inequalities thesis also pertains to the differential impact of economic reforms enacted by the postcommunist government, which hit the Slovak economy harder than that of the Czech lands. Slovakia’s experience with high rates of unemployment during 1991 and 1992 vis-à-vis the Czech lands (the ratio was about 3:1) was readily translated into the conviction that the Czech-dominated economic ministries of the federation failed to serve Slovak interests. Side by side with Slovak grievances, the Czech public grew increasingly weary of the proposition that Czech revenues should continue to pour into Slovakia, where they seemed to meet with little or no appreciation. By the fall of 1991, both Czech and Slovak government leaders engaged in mutual recriminations over who subsidized whom and issued their respective projections concerning the economy in the event of dissolution.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, actual or perceived regional economic differences played a role in fueling the forces of separation.

To assess the role of economic factors in Czechoslovakia’s disintegration, Jan Svejnar compares the economic performance of the Czech and Slovak republics before and after the dissolution of the common state. Svejnar presents a time series analysis of key performance indicators in both the Czech and Slovak republics and by drawing comparisons with the economic performance of other postcommunist states, places those figures into a broader context. The chapter begins by surveying the relative economic performance of the two republics from 1918 to 1989. By 1989, Slovakia had for all practical purposes caught up to the Czech lands, so there were surprisingly similar initial economic conditions at the onset of the transition to a market economy. The chapter then evaluates seven economic indicators from the

period 1989-1998 (the rate of inflation, unit labor cost, budgetary policies, income distribution, foreign trade rates, gross domestic product numbers, and unemployment). Contrary to the prevailing conventional wisdom, which emphasized Slovakia’s relative economic failure in the immediate post-November 1989 years, Svejnar concludes that the recorded economic performance of the two republics was more similar than different in all examined areas, save that of the unemployment rate, especially when compared with the performance of other East-Central European economies. Though they went largely unrecognized at the time, these shared economic realities prevailed in both the predissolution 1989-92 period as well as in the postpartition 1993-98 epoch. While some of these similarities were not fully known to the decision makers at the time, Svejnar maintains that even had ”full knowledge of the economic similarities between the two countries and the growth potential of Slovakia” been attainable, it probably would not have been enough to prevent the breakup. Politics and perceptions largely trumped economic realities. ”The struggle,” Svejnar concludes, ”was elsewhere.”

### **DEMONSTRATION EFFECTS**

The demise of Czechoslovakia cannot be viewed in isolation from the larger international context. By demonstration effects, we simply mean the influence of international developments on domestic political developments.<sup>15</sup> The debate preceding the separation took place at a time when the successful negotiation of the Maastricht treaty had captured the imagination of European politicians. Concurrently, subnational units in Western Europe, such as the Scots, demanded greater autonomy within the larger European Union context. Drawing their own conclusions about what was possible, Slovak leaders repeatedly insisted that what they wanted was a ”Czechoslovak Maastricht,” which for them meant Slovak sovereignty, international recognition, and preservation of a loose union with the Czechs.

Another source of external influence working in the same direction stemmed from the successful quest for sovereignty and independence by some of the republics comprising the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, which received a stamp of Western approval in the form of international recognition. These developments, though they reflected forces and factors working at cross-purposes, provided grist for the mill of Slovak advocates of independence. Moreover, they fueled demands for a greater expression of the Slovak national interest in foreign affairs than that provided under the auspices of the federal ministry.

Like most studies of ethnic conflict, the majority of contributions to this volume focus on the domestic factors that spawned the demise of Czechoslovakia. Michael Kraus’s chapter fills an important gap by emphasizing the critical role of the international context in determining whether states succeed or fail. History shows that regime change in Central and Eastern Europe in general and Czechoslovakia in particular was typically shaped by outside powers or by changes in the international environment. As Kraus’s contribution highlights, disintegrative forces in Czechoslovakia were similarly a product of an international system in transition;

"domestic conflict was ultimately inseparable from the international context." He makes this point by analyzing the influence of external factors from three distinctive perspectives: (1) the impact of a transformed international system on the shared Czech and Slovak sense of vulnerability; (2) the legacies of federalized totalitarianism, an import from Moscow, for Czechoslovak political development; and (3) the influence of integrative forces at work in the West on the manner in which Czech and Slovak individual actors perceived the realm of the possible for their own futures.

Kraus begins by reminding the reader that states form in response to "external dangers that unify people across class and ethnic boundaries." For Czechoslovakia, fear of German and Hungarian domination forged an uneasy alliance between the Czech and the Slovak peoples and continued to reinforce state cohesion in the First Republic. Hitler's rise destroyed this bond, which was replaced by Soviet imperialism. The end of the Cold War further diminished a long-standing shared sense of Czech and Slovak vulnerability. In 1989, the threat from Hungary and Germany seemed minimal, and the imploding Soviet Union's attention was focused inward. In these circumstances, a vital link between Czechs and Slovaks was severed.

The legacy of what Havel called "federalized totalitarianism," a constitutional import from the former Soviet Union, is another factor that played its part in Czechoslovakia's demise. It is important to note the extent to which Czech-Slovak agreements from the communist era were shaped by Moscow's self-interested designs. The asymmetrical constitutional model, whereby Slovaks had party and government institutions in a federal structure with no Czech counterparts, was very much tailored to Soviet specifications. The Soviet experience also shaped patterns of resource allocation in communist Czechoslovakia. In this way, the international balance of power was embedded in Czechoslovakia's political institutions.

What might be labeled the Maastricht phenomenon played a profound role in the divergence of Czech and Slovak attitudes after November 1989. Calls for a Czechoslovak Maastricht accompanied the birth and institutionalization of Slovak foreign policy as an entity distinct from the foreign policy of Czechoslovakia. By 1991, Czechoslovakia's foreign policy wore two faces: federal and Slovak. As Kraus puts it, "Clearly, Maastricht encouraged the illusion in the Slovak ranks that the hard choices between national sovereignty and supranational institutions were fast losing their salience."

## **THE VIEW FROM THE GROUND: CZECH AND SLOVAK PERSPECTIVES**

The fourth section of the book presents the views of prominent Czechs and Slovaks who were actually firsthand witnesses to and participants in the process of dissolution. Ján Čarnogurský, prime minister of the Slovak Republic at the time of the split, leads off by arguing that the reasons for the Czech-Slovak breakup have an interesting and paradoxical intellectual kinship with Francis Fukuyama's end-of-history hypothesis. In Čarnogurský's view, Europe's multinational states first had to dissolve for rationalism to triumph in Europe. The dominant Czech theme in the early 1990s, Čarnogurský

tells us, was economic autonomy, with each republic living on the basis of its own means. In contrast, the predominant Slovak theme was the demand for equal treatment and autonomy both within the common state and on the international stage. These two animating aims became irreconcilable over time, making divorce the only feasible option. That is the reason why Čarnogurský insists that even had the common state held together, it still would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to put together a federal budget for 1993.

The Velvet Divorce was possible only because of the heightened rationalism that now characterizes the majority of European relations (the situation in the former Yugoslavia being a prominent exception). The relative stability in the relations of post-Cold War Europe had rid the Czechs and the Slovaks of their longstanding historical suspicion of their neighbors. The common state, Čarnogurský suggests, was never really more than a pragmatic solution and was therefore rendered obsolete by post-Cold War events. He describes the futile negotiation effort to save Czechoslovakia, in which he was an important participant; it lacked any sort of overarching idea or aspiration that might have united both parties to the conflict. The national mood in Slovakia was unprepared to accept a continuation of status quo constitutional arrangements. For all of these reasons, Čarnogurský's political party, the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), believed that the Slovak "process of emancipation" was best accomplished "in the framework of European integration." In his view, the June 1992 elections, which resulted in the almost complete defeat of the former dissident parties, severed one of the last remaining bonds of solidarity between Czech and Slovak political elites. Čarnogurský concludes by suggesting that the subsequent deterioration in relations between the Czech and Slovak republics proves *ex post facto* that "we were peoples too different to comprise one state."

In a provocatively titled chapter, "The Division/Dissolution of Czechoslovakia: Old Sins and New Forms of Selfishness," Petr Pithart, the prime minister of the Czech Republic at the time of the split, provides an alternative perspective. While it might have been possible to preserve the common state, the costs of completing this agenda were far too high. Pithart was an opponent of partitioning Czechoslovakia until the bitter end, which was a politically suicidal stance to take at the time.<sup>16</sup> For Pithart, those who advocated that each republic go its own way took the easy way out. In so doing, they compromised liberal principles and in some sense still do so, since legitimacy had to be bestowed on the division after the fact. Not surprisingly, relations between the Czech and Slovak republics are today less than neighborly. The split established unfortunate incentives for continued ill will between the Czech and Slovak governments; contemporary flashpoints of conflict only appear to prove that it would have been impossible for Czech and Slovak political elites to cohabitate in democratic times.

Urging us to let the Slovaks speak for themselves, Pithart goes on to consider the principal causes of the dissolution on the Czech side. First, Czech chauvinism and Pragocentrism vis-à-vis Slovakia is a long-standing phenomenon, one that made it easy for Czechs to misgauge the seriousness of Slovak strivings for autonomy.

Second, over forty years of "real socialism" destroyed any sense of civic community that had once existed. The absence of civic community made short-term material arguments for dividing Czechoslovakia only all the more appealing. Third, it is surprising how little Czechs actually knew about their Slovak sisters and brothers. "Czech haughtiness was sky-high—not only did they know nothing about the Slovaks, but they didn't even know that they knew nothing. As a result, the Slovaks were in a state of permanent alert." Finally, Czechs and Slovaks interpreted and recollected the forty years of communist rule in wholly different ways. The Slovaks, who, according to Pithart, were "initially less enamored of communism, experienced the normalization years favorably, while the Czechs lived through the same period as the most repulsive of times. After November 1989, the Czechs imagined that they were reawakening into freedom as right wingers, while the Slovaks were concurrently the most receptive to socialism." Obviously, this gave rise to "a host of misconceptions and misunderstandings."

From Pithart's perspective, therefore, the processes that ultimately culminated in Czechoslovakia's end had been under way, even though many did not realize or refused to acknowledge that this was indeed the case. There was no decisive moment in the process of division" but rather an "unending series of . . . misunderstandings, conflicts, and embarrassments." Pithart cites only one post-November 1989 error as fundamental, concurring with Stanger's assessment: the two-year deadline for drafting a new constitution was a mistake. He goes on to tell us that the two-year deadline was primarily a product of Havel's initial hesitation to assume the presidency. A two-year deadline for constitutional renovations meant that Havel would have to be president for a maximum of only two years, which was important to Civic Forum's leader, who, interestingly enough, could not at that time contemplate serving any longer. "In the final analysis," Pithart concludes, "the state fell apart, above all, because neither the Czechs nor the Slovaks showed at any time enough political will to create a common political nation."

Responding to the first two contributions in this section of the book, Daniel Kroupa criticizes Čarnogurský and Pithart for conflating sociological (deterministic) and subjective (free will) factors in their accounts. In Kroupa's view, sociological analysis is a legitimate approach, but it does not get one very far in explaining post-1989 events in the former Czechoslovakia, nor does the attempt to identify whether the Czech or the Slovak side is most to blame. As Kroupa puts it, "The differences between the Czechs and the Slovaks are far smaller than the proponents of the theory that Czechoslovakia broke up because of these differences would allow. Such disparities did not prevent the existence of a common state, and such differences are often far greater within each individual republic than between them."

Instead, Kroupa points a finger at a very small group of elite political figures and the choices they made as bearing much of the responsibility for the breakup. For those who would identify Slovak nationalism as the source of the common state's disintegration, Kroupa responds that the more important question is why nationalist forces acquired such great political influence, since survey research indicates that their

platforms were initially embraced only by marginalized social groups. In Kroupa's view, nonnationalist political parties in Slovakia, such as the Public Against Violence, made a tactical error when they decided to co-opt the nationalist agenda—thereby legitimizing it—in an effort to court additional voters rather than continuing to take a firm stand against the nationalist orientation. Echoing a point emphasized by Pithart and Stanger in earlier chapters, Kroupa insists that "the main cause of the dissolution was the inherited constitutional framework, which narrowed considerably the range of options after the 1992 elections." Czechoslovakia's centrifugal forces "could not have brought on the dissolution of the state without the federal constitution's minority veto."

In contrast, the contribution from Miroslav Macek provides evidence for Pithart's assessment of the Czech contribution to the split. A flamboyant leader of the now-fragmented Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Macek was one of the earliest and most outspoken advocates of Czechoslovakia's dissolution.<sup>17</sup> Macek begins by laying out the two fundamental reasons why he subscribed to this view. First, the Czechs and Slovaks had had wholly different historical experiences, which accounts for the unbridgeable differences that developed following the November 1989 revolution. Second, Czechoslovakia's two-member federation was by nature institutionally dysfunctional and unstable. Without external or internal coercion, it was incapable of independent existence.

Macek proceeds to support his argument with five eyewitness anecdotes from 1989 through 1992. Macek's vignettes provide insight into previously undocumented incidents of Czech-Slovak friction as well as into some of the major political personalities of the time. They also demonstrate how the stance of key members of ODS accelerated the formal dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

Macek's fifth illustrative story is a firsthand account of the post-June 1992 election negotiations between ODS and HZDS on preserving the union. Macek recounts how he engaged the Slovak Republic's future president, Michal Kováč, in conversation just before the formal negotiation session began. In that corridor exchange, Macek claims that Kováč committed a negotiating blunder: he prematurely revealed that HZDS planned to resurrect the 1968 notion of an economic and defense union, a loose Czech-Slovak administrative arrangement that involved a common currency defended by two separate armies and treasuries. Macek coined the phrase for this arrangement as "Slovak independence with Czech insurance." Mečiar's negotiating style, however, where "yesterday's concession is presented as today's starting point," required that HZDS's extremist positions only be revealed gradually over time. Of course, Macek immediately informed Klaus (in Mečiar's presence) of HZDS intentions, and this new piece of information only confirmed the Czech side's preexistent opinions about Mečiar's lack of good faith. Mečiar turned ashen, Macek reports, at the realization that one of his deputies had revealed his ultimate goals.<sup>18</sup> In Macek's view, this critical incident sealed the fate of the common state: "The battle was over before it had begun. It was time to haggle and to sign a peace treaty." For Macek, that such an

event could determine the outcome of this most serious of questions proves that the ties that had connected the Czech lands with Slovakia were uncommonly weak.

The chapter by Milan Zemko, historian and presently (1999) chief of staff of the president's office in the Slovak Republic, draws comparisons between the 1939 and 1989 demises of Czechoslovakia. In each instance, external factors played an important role, yet in 1939, totalitarianism was ascendant and in 1989, democracy. The latter international circumstances made independence an easier step for a small state to take. This changed environment was a necessary although not sufficient condition for the split. Zemko argues that the entire trajectory of the Czech-Slovak conflict after 1989 was very much a product of unacknowledged nationalism on both sides. That neither party recognized its own nationalist orientation generated the most difficult obstacle to overcome: a lack of empathy for the other. In this way, the revival of nationalist sentiments discouraged feelings of a shared future. Without some degree of empathy, no negotiation process can move forward.

Like many Slovaks, Zemko sees the March 1990 quarrel over what name the newly democratic country should wear—the so-called hyphen war—as symbolic of larger problems inherent in the Czech-Slovak relationship. In this dispute, Czechs displayed limited sensitivity to long-denied Slovak aspirations. Slovaks demonstrated an equally limited understanding of the significance for Czechs both of tradition and of their preferred hyphenated name, which reminded Czechs of the post-Munich republic.

In subsequent sections, Zemko provides the reader with an account of the ill-fated efforts to maintain unity. Zemko usually refrains from blaming one side more than the other, although he does criticize Czech hockey-style "power plays"—i.e., Czech attempts to preserve the common state by controlling both federal- and republic-level institutions—more than he does Slovak threats of unilateral action in such areas as foreign policy and economic development. While there were numerous searches for solutions to the federation's structural problems, no proposal was ever agreeable to the elites of both sides at the same time. Interestingly, Zemko touches on the failed Milovy accord, for which he cast the fateful "no" vote, yet he does not present it as a turning point. Zemko reports that he voted against the Milovy compromise simply because he felt it had no chance of ever being approved by the Slovak National Council. In general, throughout the constitutional discussions, Czechs were inclined to endorse the notion of a functioning federation, while Slovaks proposed a range of alternatives to federalism. The problem, in Zemko's view, was that the Slovak elite was highly divided on the question of optimal future constitutional arrangements, so any sort of forward momentum was difficult to generate. Despite these trends, as constitutional deliberations ground to a halt and the support for dissolution increased among the political elites of both nations, it did not for the public at large. In this way, peaceful partition became the "second-best solution," and hence one that the public in neither the Czech lands nor Slovakia openly protested.

A contribution from a former leader of the Public Against Violence rounds out the final section of the volume. Peter Zajac seeks to understand why Czechoslovakia dissolved in the absence of significant public pressure to do so. He notes that,

paradoxically, "at precisely the time when a petition supporting the common state had secured more than a million signatures, the Czech and Slovak national councils were incapable of agreeing on practically anything." Surveying the competing explanations, Zajac points out that many of them

are interrelated. This fact needs to be acknowledged if students of state disintegration hope to get to the heart of the matter.

In the course of elaborating on his thesis, Zajac provides many important details about the gridlock that surrounded the numerous constitutional negotiating sessions from 1989 to 1992. He concludes that one can view the dissolution of Czechoslovakia from two perspectives: "The first is a historical-teleological one, where the event is seen as a historical inevitability. The second argues that Czechoslovakia might have been preserved as a common state only if it had been capable of changing, to quote Tomáš Masaryk, 'the ideas that gave rise to it,' and for that, after 1989, there was neither opportunity nor time." Zajac faults the "arrogance of *nomenklatura* capitalism," a characteristic shared by all postcommunist elites, for eventually leading to the loss of public support for new and hence fragile democratic arrangements.

## CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S DISSOLUTION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The concluding section has two components. In the first, Stanley Hoffmann provides a distinguished and incisive survey of the international context in which Czechoslovakia's peaceful partition took place. In inimitable style, Hoffmann begins by comparing the Cold War international system with that of the present to assess the key factors underlying the increased prevalence of ethnic conflict. Through numerous illuminating examples, he demonstrates not only that ethnic conflict has "multiple faces" but also that it has "multiple parents." Having established the importance and the consequences of the problem, Hoffmann then turns to an examination of potential solutions, from international intervention to prevention. Placing it in comparative perspective, he characterizes Czechoslovakia's Velvet Divorce as an unusual case of voluntary secession, where political elites decided the country's fate over the heads of the people. Hoffmann points out that most political philosophers insist on indisputable popular support if a secession effort is to be considered legitimate.

Looking to the future, Hoffmann ends with "three sets of exhortations." First, the tasks of prevention and settlement "cannot be left to often questionable, fragile, and selfish states"; the distinction between interstate and intrastate conflict is no longer viable and should cease to be treated as such. Second, the tension between the norm of state sovereignty and the principle of self-determination is best addressed through "strict limitations on both." International and regional organizations can combat the excesses of the former. As for the latter, despite the Czech and Slovak example, secession should always be a last resort and "endorsed by a qualified majority of the people who claim independence." Finally, efforts to reduce the significance of ethnicity in international relations, as represented by the European Union, must be



encouraged. While this task may at times seem impossible, Hoffmann concludes by reminding us "that it is not necessary to hope in order to undertake, or to succeed in order to persevere."

In the second component of the concluding section, Michael Kraus and Allison Stanger reflect on the larger implications of this collaborative project. To accomplish this task, we begin by comparing the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and Czechoslovakia to shed light on the question of why the Czechs and the Slovaks were able to part ways without violence. We then survey the general findings of this volume and end by reflecting on the lessons of the Czecho-Slovak case for other states torn by ethnic conflict.

## NOTES

1. Carol Skalnik Leff's *National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State, 1918-1987* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), identifies several similar "conflict-intensifying" factors as determinants of Czechoslovak national conflict. See esp. ch. 9.
2. See Robert Hayden, "Constitutional Nationalism in the Formerly Yugoslav Republics," *Slavic Review*, 51, no. 4, Winter 1992, pp. 654-673; Julie Mostov, "Democracy and the Politics of National Identity," paper presented at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Ill., September 1992.
3. Noting the different levels of economic development, Ellen Comisso writes: "Czechs may have needed the Slovak hinterland in 1918 but in 1992 it was Václav Klaus, not the Slovak nationalists, who forced the separation." See her "Prediction versus Diagnosis: Comments on a Ken Jowitt Retrospective" (review article), *Slavic Review*, 53, no. 1, Spring 1994, p. 191.
4. This is a decision that merits explanation, given that the dissidents around Václav Havel had worked on constitution drafting prior to November 1989 and had actually prepared a draft of a new federal constitution. Interview with Rudolf Battěk, Prague, July 1994.
5. Peter Rutland, "Thatcherism, Czech-style: Transition to Capitalism in the Czech Republic," *Telos*, no. 94, Winter 1993-94, p. 104.
6. Martin Bútorá and Zora Bútorová, "Slovakia: The Identity Challenges of the Newly Born State," *Social Research*, 10, no. 2, Winter 1993, p. 720.
7. Sharon L. Wolchik, "The Politics of Ethnicity in Post-Communist Czechoslovakia," *East European Politics and Societies*, 8, no. 1, Winter 1994, p. 187.
8. On the role of political parties in national integration, see William N. Chambers, "Parties and Nation-Building," in Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner, eds., *Political Parties and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 98-104.
9. On this point, see David Olson, "Dissolution of the State: Political Parties and the 1992 Election in Czechoslovakia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 26, no. 3, September 1993, pp. 301-314; and Sharon Wolchik, "The Repluralization

of Politics in Czechoslovakia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 26, no. 4, December 1993, pp. 412-431.

10. Otto Kirchheimer, "The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems," in LaPalombara and Weiner, eds., *Political Parties and Political Development*, pp. 188-189.
11. Martin Bútorá and Zora Bútorová, "Slovakia: The Identity Challenges of the Newly Born State," *Social Research*, 10, no. 2, Winter 1993, p. 721.
12. For a list of social scientists who have ascribed great significance to economic forces in explaining nationalism, see Walter Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 161-162, note 1.
13. For evidence, see Sharon L. Wolchik, *Czechoslovakia in Transition: Politics, Economics and Society* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1991), pp. 186-195.
14. See, for example, the December 1991 report of the Slovak government on this subject, "Správa o ekonomických dosledkoch pripadného rozdelenia ČSFR na dve samostatné republiky," *Hospodárske noviny*, 12 December 1991, pp. 7-10.
15. The "demonstration effect" is Arend Lijphart's concept. See Arend Lijphart, "Political Theories and the Explanation of Ethnic Conflict in the Western World: Falsified Predictions and Plausible Postdictions," in Milton J. Esman, ed., *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 63-64.
16. His views initially cost him a position in the newborn Czech Republic's political leadership, although he has subsequently returned to political prominence, in no small part because he is seen as a man of principle.
17. Macek served as Klaus's campaign manager during the 1996 elections.
18. This story is consistent with the public animosity that existed between Kováč and Mečiar after Kováč had become president.

In: Kraus, Michael, Stanger, Allison (eds.), *Irreconcilable Differences? Explaining Czechoslovakia's Dissolution*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2000, pp. 7-25.