

Between Hitler and Stalin (1938–1948)

Reasons for the fall of Masaryk's Czechoslovak republic were legion. Even worse than the republic's internal problems were the disastrous noninterventionist policies of the West European democracies. Already surfacing during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39, they culminated in the 1938 Munich cessions. Western democracies had been no match for Hitler's National Socialist dictatorship—and then, when Czechoslovakia had recovered from the Second World War, they were no match for Stalin's communist dictatorship. After Czechoslovakia had aligned itself determinedly with the Western European democracies, their betrayal in 1938 had far-reaching consequences for the political future of Masaryk's republic. Its postwar orientation toward communist Russia was a logical outcome of the events of 1938; the decade that began with the Nazi occupation of the predominantly German-speaking border regions of Czechoslovakia ended with a communist putsch.

Adolf Hitler was an Austrian, and he considered Czechs to be the dread enemies of Germans:

People in the old Empire [i.e., before Hitler] knew nothing about nationalities, they grew up surrounded by a cloud of stupidity, they had no idea about the problem of Austria. . . . Every Czech is a born nationalist, who subordinates to his interests all his other duties. Not to be mistaken by this, the more the Czech bows, the more dangerous he is. . . . [T]he Czech is the most dangerous of all Slavs, because he is diligent. He has discipline, order; he is more like a yellow race than Slav. He hides his real intentions behind a kind of loyalty. . . . I do not despise them, it is a fateful struggle. They are a race splinter which intruded into our national body, and one of us must get out, either they or we. With the Polish we are lucky, because they are stupid and conceited. The Czech state had a long German educational example of purity. Corruption did not exist here in a greater degree than elsewhere, officials had the right sense of honour. . . . Tzar Ferdinand



Czech Germans warmly welcoming Adolf Hitler in Ústí nad Labem, September 6, 1938. Photo used by permission of ČTK.

[of Bulgaria] told me once: You know, the most dangerous man who exists. . . . Titulescu [Romanian statesman] is corruptible, but Beneš, you know, I am afraid he is not corruptible. Ferdinand was really smart.¹

Inside Czechoslovakia, the ground for the annihilation of the nation was prepared by the Nazi politician Konrad Henlein, leader of the Czech Germans, who had never accepted their status as a national minority in Czecho-

slovakia. In his letter to Adolf Hitler of November 19, 1937, he confirms his party's agreement not only with Hitler's plan to annex the border regions of Czechoslovakia, but also with the incorporation of historically Czech lands into the German empire. He stresses that until this goal is achieved, his party must mask its sympathy for Nazi ideology and use a democratic vocabulary to deceive Czechoslovak authorities. During the escalation of the Sudetenland crisis, the writer Karel Čapek urged Czech Germans in vain not to contribute to the extinction of democracy in Czechoslovakia. He proposed that they consider what would happen to them if Nazi Germany were to be defeated in the future: their towns and villages would carry the greatest burden. Čapek's prophecy, unfortunately for Czech Germans, was fulfilled.²

Edvard Beneš, president of Czechoslovakia from 1935, was firmly convinced that the Western allies would support Czechoslovakia. He was prepared to lead the army personally and to resist German attack to the last man.³ Nevertheless on September 29, 1938, the Munich Agreement was signed by Neville Chamberlain (Great Britain), Édouard Daladier (France), Benito Mussolini (Italy), and Adolf Hitler (Germany); Czechoslovakia was not invited. On the basis of this agreement, the borderlands of Czechoslovakia with 4,879,000 inhabitants, including 1,250,000 Czechs, were annexed by Germany, and substantial parts were given to Hungary and Poland. Of the former Czechoslovakia there remained only a small, economically weak, and militarily defenseless fragment.

The Czechs were in shock, but not yet crushed. František Halas's poem "To Prague" evokes the St. Václav (Wenceslas) Chorale and the famous bronze statue in Wenceslas Square; the warrior-saint weighs his spear before the battle.⁴ Halas was a member of the avant-garde group Devětsil, and his poetic world was always weird and tricky; he was obsessed with time, nothingness, and death. At the time of Munich, however, he published patriotic poetry that is defiantly heroic. Still, not every Czech agreed with Halas, and by the end of 1938 the basic values on which the Czechoslovak Republic had been founded began to be heavily criticized. Masaryk, Beneš, and liberal intellectuals such as Karel Čapek, Voskovec, and Werich were attacked in the press, and democracy began to be blamed for the grim situation. Together with calls for stronger rule, anti-Semitism appeared and Masaryk's Czechoslovakia was slandered as a "Jewish-Masonic" state. In this campaign some Catholic writers, including Jakub Deml and Jaroslav Durych, took part.

Following Austria's "Anschluss" (annexation) by the Germans, Hitler's next target was Austria's neighbor, Czechoslovakia. In October 1938 he appropriated the German-speaking border regions of the Czech lands. On March 14, 1939, what remained of Czechoslovakia was partitioned. The puppet state



ber 6, 1938.

n who ex-
beneš, you
art.¹

ation was
zech Ger-
n Czecho-

of Slovakia was established at Hitler's direct initiative; in Ruthenia, an independent Carpatho-Ukraine state was proclaimed—but within days was taken over by Hungary, with the consent of Germany. The day after the creation of the Slovak state, March 15, 1939, the Czech lands were invaded by the German Wehrmacht, and the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was established. On March 16 Hitler issued a decree in Prague that equated the status of the Czech lands with the model of the 1881 French protectorate in Tunis. This formally independent status hardly masked Hitler's strategy of pacifying the territory that he intended to use as an economic base of German military expansion.

Germany needed Czech industrial workers for military production. Thus the "liquidation" of the Czech nation was postponed. During the war, German terror was selectively aimed at the intelligentsia and the communists, who were rightly suspected of sparking a resistance. On the anniversary of the creation of the independent Czechoslovak Republic (1918–38), there were demonstrations against the the Nazi presence—mainly in Prague. "On September 28," reports German police from Prague to Berlin, "great crowds of people assembled in the center of Prague, above all on Wenceslas square, in front of the building of the state secret police and in front of the Palace Hotel, where the secret police stayed. Before 5 p.m. about 200 people were arrested. The crowd shouted 'German police- German swine,' 'Murderers,' 'We want Stalin,' 'We want freedom'; German policemen were endangered during arrests. In the early evening the crowds in the center were reinforced by people from the suburbs. The participants were wearing badges in national and all-Slav colors. At different places it was observed that the crowd was stirred by members of the Czech intelligentsia."⁵ In the late hours the demonstrations were brutally put down.

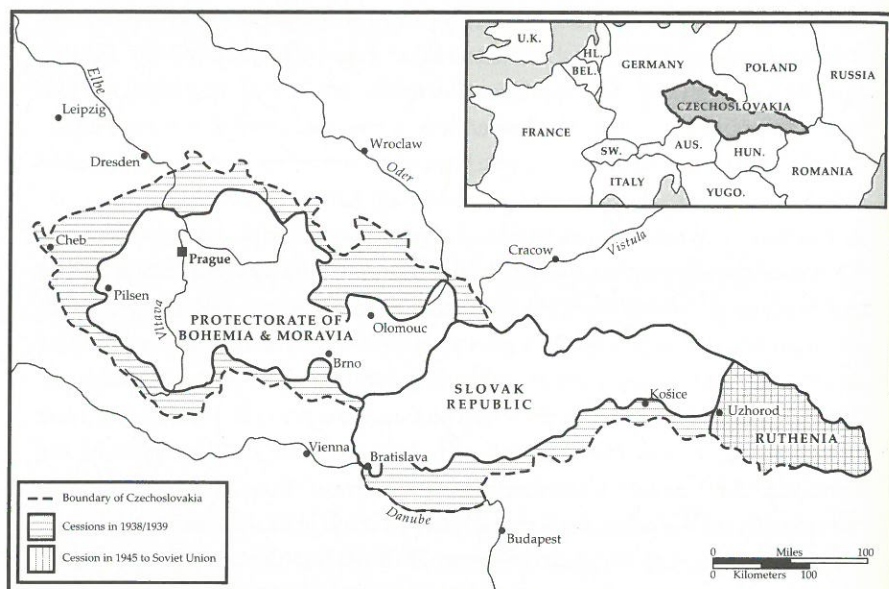
The funeral of one of the Czech protesters, the student Jan Opletal, on November 17, 1939, occasioned further demonstrations, and this time the German authorities decided a hard blow was necessary. Nine protesters were put to death, and twelve hundred Czech students were deported to the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg. Czech universities were closed down, and later the high schools began to close their doors. Based on a British initiative, November 17 was proclaimed as International Students' Day in 1941 in London, where President Beneš had organized a government-in-exile. At the very time that Hitler's Germany was at its zenith, supported by the Czech armaments industry, Beneš decided his government must do something to demonstrate that Czechoslovakia was actually against Germany. Thus the most famous act of Czech resistance—the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the governor of their occupied country, one of the main architects

of the Holocaust as well as one of the most intelligent and efficient Nazi functionaries, a possible successor to Hitler. Heydrich was the only leading Nazi figure assassinated by the Allies during the whole war, and his death had far-reaching effects. Hitler had intended to relocate Heydrich from Prague to Paris, where he would no doubt have repeated what he accomplished in Prague, namely total extermination of the resistance organization.

German revenge for the killing of Heydrich was terrible. Waves of arrests continued throughout the occupation, including young Czechs sent en masse to Germany as forced labor. Altogether 340,000 Czechoslovak citizens were killed during the Nazi regime, a greater wartime loss, in terms of portion of the civilian population, than in either France or Britain. The liquidation of Czech Jews began immediately after the Germans arrived. From September 1941 they had to wear the inscription "Jude" (Jew), and in November of the same year the Terezín (Theresienstadt) fortress was turned into a concentration camp. Until October 1944, transports of Czech Jews were sent from Terezín to extermination camps in the east. During the mass murders in the so-called family concentration camp of Birkenau-Osvětim, on March 8–9, 1944, the largest in the history of Czech Jews, more than 3,700 families were killed in the gas chambers. An eyewitness reported that women in the death bunker started to sing—to the great astonishment of the German officers—first the Internationale, next the hymn of Soviet Russia, then "Hatikva," the future anthem of the state of Israel, and last, the anthem of Czechoslovakia, "Where Is My Country?" During Nazi rule, only 14,045 Czech Jews who remained in the country survived the racial persecution; 78,154 were killed. Half of the people killed in Nazi concentration camps were Jews; the other half was composed of gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals, disabled persons, and opponents of the Nazi regime, above all communists.

In the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, German terrorism climaxed in spring 1945, at the very end of the Second World War. At that time, encouraged by the approaching Russian army, guerrilla warfare also reached its peak, especially in the Moravian mountains. On May 1 a Czech uprising started in Písek, Moravia; soon it affected the whole country. The fiercest fights were in Prague from May 5 to May 9. Altogether about ten thousand insurgents were killed by the Germans. The reaction was equally violent, and in summer 1945, the Czechs, encouraged by official authorities and even assisted by the army, began to force Czech Germans from the territory of the former Czechoslovakia. A similar process was under way in Poland, but less violent than in Czechoslovakia, where between twenty thousand and thirty thousand Germans were victims of these spontaneous "transfers."

Even before the end of the war, the Czech resistance movement had de-



Czechoslovakia's wartime cessions, 1938-1945

decided that after Hitler's defeat, it would be necessary to transport the Czech German minority, about 3.3 million, en masse to Germany. Immediately after the war, there were unplanned actions in which transferred Germans suffered all kinds of atrocities. One of the most tragic events was the massacre at Ústí nad Labem, provoked by an explosion in the ammunition warehouse. "Werewolves," German partisan-like units created to resist the occupation of Allied forces, were accused of the explosion, but it was never proven. It is true that on the Czech side there was little empathy for Germans, who had initiated the ethnic cleansing of extensive areas where Czechs had lived. Also fresh in memory was the fanatical support for the Nazis among Czech Germans.

On August 1, 1945, the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary was sanctioned by the Allies at the Potsdam conference. At the conference of the Allied forces, Josef Stalin, Harry Truman, and Clement Attlee, representing Soviet Russia, the United States, and Great Britain respectively, approved the expulsion, but insisted on its orderly conduct. This was meant to end the "wild" transfers of summer 1945. In Czechoslovakia the whole process was completed in spring 1947, leaving only about two hundred thousand Germans in the country. Besides Germans from mixed marriages and those who had actively opposed Nazi rule, who were allowed to stay in Czechoslovakia, there were also German skilled specialists, who were forcibly detained. This is the context of the Beneš decrees of 1945—still hotly

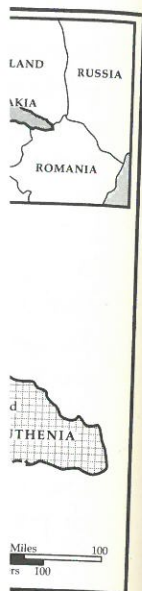
debated—concerning loss of Czechoslovak citizenship and confiscation of the property of Germans and Hungarians in Czechoslovakia.

In the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, social and cultural life had been drastically curtailed. Nevertheless, throughout the six years of German military presence, stadiums continued to draw fans of the traditional soccer rivals, Sparta and Slavia. Until 1944, exhibitions were organized, theaters staged Czech plays, and cinemas were open—for which the Barrandov Studios churned out comedies and sentimental romances. Before 1939, there were about sixty Czech newspapers; by the end of the war only eleven remained, and heavily censored at that, beginning in 1941. Nevertheless, Czech books and newspapers were published, even though many Czech and foreign authors were prohibited, and Czech fascists supervised the literary scene, denouncing suspect persons and political views.

From the beginning of the occupation, Czech literature continued to appear in local public media, in illegal underground publications, and through exile publishers centered in London, New York, and Toronto. This division, together with Nazi censorship practices, survived until 1989, with the notable exception of the years 1945 through 1948. Common during both the Nazi occupation and the later communist regime was a general retreat to the intimacy of the close family circle. In literature this escapism produced a vogue for fairy tales and literature for children. Czech novels published during the Nazi occupation returned to tradition and historical themes, and in poetry, folk songs became once again the main source of inspiration as they had been in the nineteenth century.

The most important Czech artistic achievements of the 1940s are connected with Group 42, named for the year it was formed. The group included poets (Josef Kainar, Jiří Kolář, Ivan Blatný, and others), painters (Kamil Lhoták and others), a sculptor, a photographer, and theoreticians. The group's manifesto was an essay by Jindřich Chalupecký, "The World We Live In," published in 1940. Chalupecký advocated "civilism," the return to what surrounds us, as the ultimate goal of art after the end of the avant-garde. While the preceding generation of Czech poets had looked to France, Group 42 was inspired by Anglo-American literary tradition, especially by the modern myths that emerge in the works of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. Everyday life is presented in incongruous narrative fragments, and these stories are at the same time banal and dramatic, trivial and immense. The movement had a lasting and very profound influence on Czech art.

Group 42's work is characterized by a fascination with technology, the city, and the routine life of its anonymous inhabitants. The chaotic periphery of the city was their preferred setting, because they never glorified modern city



e Czech
ely after
suffered
at Ústí
"Were-
f Allied
ue that
nitiated
resh in
ns.
ia, Po-
erence.
Clem-
Britain
t. This
cia the
ndred
riages
stay in
e forc-
hotly

life; it is presented as irresistibly attractive, yet always terrifying. This attitude certainly stems from the oppressive wartime atmosphere, but its roots are in the individual's feeling of alienation in the modern world. With Franz Kafka the members of Group 42 shared a conception of the world as a theater of the absurd. The group was dissolved in 1948, and many of its members were silenced, but its influence persisted—notably in the paintings of Kamil Lhoták. He too was spellbound by city peripheries and by technique, but in his paintings technology is never a threat. His slightly surreal paintings have a naive charm, often within an idyllic fin-de-siècle setting; but they are filled with the optimism of the era of the pioneers of aviation and automobiles.

Although the Beneš government-in-exile was in London, Czechoslovakia's future would be decided by the Czech Communist Party, based during the war in Moscow. The Czechoslovak state was restored in April 1945, when Beneš installed its government in Košice (Kassa, Slovakia), while Stalin's Red Army and the Czechoslovak troops under its command were liberating Czechoslovak territory. Meanwhile, troops of the fascist Slovak republic created in 1939 fought alongside the German Wehrmacht on the eastern front, and also against guerrillas at home. In 1943 the Slovak National Council was created in order to direct the Slovak national uprising launched on August 29, 1944. Its aim was to seize power from the Slovak puppet state and to fight for the renewal of Czechoslovakia as a common state of Czechs and Slovaks. The insurrection forces, called the Czechoslovak Army in Slovakia, about sixty thousand men, were, however, defeated by the end of October 1944 by the smaller but better equipped and trained German forces stationed there. Guerrilla warfare continued in the Slovak mountains until the end of the war.

On May 4, the American Third Army reached the line of Karlovy-Vary-Plzeň-České Budějovice (Carlsbad-Pilsen-Budweis), where General Eisenhower waited while the Soviet forces advanced through Moravia and eventually to Prague. We often read that the Soviet role was decided at the Yalta conference, on February 4, 1945. The Big Three, we were told, divided Europe, and the territory of Czechoslovakia was given to Soviet Russia by Churchill and Roosevelt. It is a historical myth, especially cherished by the Czechs because it presents the communist rule as something enforced on them from outside. The truth is that the future Czech dependence on Stalin was decided three years before Yalta, in the Czechoslovak-Soviet agreement of December 1943. The agreement was the fruit of negotiations between Beneš's provisional government in London and Czech communists in Moscow. After the Munich agreement of September 30, 1939, Edvard Beneš had most unfortunately lost confidence in France and England. The Košice Program of April 5, 1945, sealed the orientation of Czechoslovakia toward the Soviet Union and the dictator-

ship of
Czech
The
exist u
nists c
Ameri
absenc
of stat
Ho
of Sta
gers o
no ad
in spit
about
lectua
toward
Gide'
as a s
Great
ety a
artist
Štyrs
trials
it wr
Gerr
D
Sovi
Cze
faith
riers
to v
mov
parc
first
hen
poli
Par
ties
imj

ship of the proletariat. It was therefore of little importance that in June 1945 Czechoslovakia ceded Subcarpathian Ruthenia to the Soviet Union.⁶

The "National Front of Czechs and Slovaks," created in 1945, continued to exist until the end of communist rule in Czechoslovakia. After the communists came to power in 1948, and the Soviets vetoed Czech participation in the American Marshall Plan postwar aid program, the National Front masked the absence of political pluralism and became in fact a very effective instrument of state control.

How was it possible that the Czechs so fatally underestimated the dangers of Stalinism? The main reason was that they were overshadowed by the dangers of Nazism. In the 1930s its menace was evident and Nazi Germany had no advocates among Czech intellectuals. Stalinism found many sympathizers, in spite of efforts by Ferdinand Peroutka and others to inform Czech readers about Stalin's reign of terror. However, already in 1929 many writers and intellectuals had abandoned the Czech Communist Party when it reoriented itself toward Moscow and the extreme Left. In 1936 the Czech translation of André Gide's *Return from the Soviet Union* was published; Gide had arrived in Russia as a sympathizer, but what he saw there made him an anticommunist. The Great Purge initiated by Josef Stalin in the late 1930s was observed with anxiety also by other Czech intellectuals, and in April 1938 the leftist writers and artists František Halas, Jaroslav Seifert, Emil F. Burian, Karel Teige, Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen, and others signed a protest against a series of trumped-up trials in Moscow. In spite of all this, many Czech leftist intellectuals thought it wrong to attack the Soviet Union, by then in imminent danger from Nazi Germany.

During the war, Nazi terror served to reinforce Czech attachment to the Soviets, and the brilliant victories of the Red Army effectively silenced those Czechs who had criticized Stalin's regime. Socialism became a quasi-religious faith, promising an ideal world without suffering, with no racial or social barriers. Czech communists were traditionally well organized, and also used to working underground, having distinguished themselves in the resistance movement during Nazi occupation. All in all, the Communist Party was prepared for both electoral victory and subsequent government service. In the first postwar elections in 1946, communists won 40 percent of the vote in Bohemia and Moravia and 38 percent in Slovakia. This made them the decisive political power in Czechoslovakia, and on July 2 the leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Klement Gottwald, became prime minister.

The Czech bourgeoisie was weakened by the war, the democratic parties did not offer any long-term political vision, and—what was perhaps most important—they were without exception elitist. The Czech Communist

Party, on the other hand, went to the elections as the party of the masses. It was open to anybody who wanted to join, and after the election victory in 1946 its ranks swelled. At the beginning of 1948, Czechoslovak elections planned for May mobilized communists who were afraid that they would not be able to repeat their 1946 victory, given that a considerable part of the Czech population was already fed up with their political practice. However, the communists had strong support, above all among the workers, who began to arm themselves and create a so-called People's Militia. This illegal activity was made possible by the fact that communists controlled the army, police, and secret police.

In February 1948, a government crisis provoked by the communists ended with President Beneš accepting the resignations of the noncommunist ministers. After this, vacant government posts were assigned, with presidential consent, to communists, and communists were immediately placed at the head of local governments at all levels. Simultaneously, Czechoslovak police forces began to serve under the direction of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, launching a long-prepared hunt for anticommunists. Within a month the whole country was in the firm grasp of the communists. Two weeks after the communist takeover, Jan Masaryk, son of T. G. Masaryk, a diplomat who had served in the Czechoslovak government both in exile and after, jumped—or was pushed—from a second-story window of the Černin Palace. Jan Masaryk had become an extremely popular figure through his wartime radio broadcasts, and attempts to confirm his suicide or murder still continue, intensified, of course, after the end of the Soviet occupation.

Could all this have been prevented? Could President Beneš have changed the course of events by rejecting the resignations and calling premature elections? Hardly. Czechoslovakia alone among the European countries liberated by the Red Army was not yet under Stalin's rule. Germany and Austria were divided into zones ruled directly by the Allied forces, which meant that the Russian zones shared borders with Czechoslovakia on the northwest (eastern Germany) and to the south (lower Austria). In Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland communists had already established their dominance through a combination of vote manipulation and elimination of opponents; Hungary became communist in 1949. This was made possible by the Russian military presence and the continued passivity of the Allied countries.

Parliamentary democracy was bound to perish in Czechoslovakia. The communist takeover was not even actually a putsch, because it did not have to be imposed by the armed forces. President Beneš knew that if he did not give in to communist pressure, a civil war would begin, between fully armed communists backed by the Red Army and anticommunists with bare hands. And

President Beneš also knew very well that nobody would come from abroad to help the anticommunists. Still, there are those, such as Jan Patočka, who blame his character and his decisions for the subsequent course of Czech history. It was Beneš's personal tragedy that in 1948 he had to reenact the 1938 capitulation to the Nazis, this time to Stalin. On both occasions he decided, for better or worse, to prevent bloodshed: "Let there be no violence to things."

Notes

1. Adolph Hitler, *Monologe im Führerhauptquartier, 1941–1944* (Hamburg: A. Knaus, 1980), excerpt dated February 1, 1942.
2. Karel Čapek, "Epištola k sudetským Němcům" [Epistle to the Sudetenland Germans], *Lidové noviny* [People's news; Prague], September 18, 1938.
3. Edvard Beneš, *Mnichovské dny: Paměti* [Munich days: memoirs] (Prague: Svoboda, 1968), 301–2.
4. František Halas, "Praze" [In Prague], in *Torzo naděje* [Fragment of hope] (Prague: Svoboda, 1968), n.p.
5. B. Čelovský, *So oder so, Řešení české otázky podle německých dokumentů* [Solution to the Czech question according to German documents, 1933–45], (Šenov u Ostravy: Sfinga, 1995), 234–35.
6. Vít Smetana, "Czechoslovakia and Spheres of Influence towards the End of the Second World War," *Central Europe* 5, no. 2 (2007).