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CZECHOSLOVAKIA BETWEEN TWO WARS
(1918-1938)

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INTRODUCTION

In central Europe after the collapse of the World War I, the geopolitical frame profoundly changed. The reason was the fall of Austria-Hungarian Empire. The major changes were especially in the historical Czech lands. The new state came into appear on October 1918 and was the first democratic based Czechoslovak Republic in history. Its establishment was not so easy, but due to sagacious leaders as Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, Eduard Benes and some others the Czechoslovakia was established. Despite there were a lot of political pressure and territory aims of neighbour countries, but the state was conducted successfully for twenty years, until the German protectorate. However, the firstly founded democratic Czechoslovak Republic remembered as one of the first democratic republic in Central European experience. Even, after five decades Czech and Slovak people once again could gain their independence which in consequence completed the work started in the beginning of the century.

Czechoslovakia between two wars (1918-1938)

The end of the First World War also brought about to the collapse of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Several ethnic groups and territories with different historical and political views strived to the freedom. It was after four centuries long-awaited chance for Czechs and Slovaks peoples. They accurately used this chance to declare their liberation. On October 18, 1918 in Paris Czechoslovak National Council published the Czechoslovak declaration of independence, which was really a triumph after such obstacles to create a democratic state. Declaration was drafted by Masaryk and signed by him, Stefanik and Benes and independence was declared on 28 October in Prague. The First Czechoslovak republic was almost an ideal state which we can express as ‘an island of democracy in a sea of fascism and authoritarian regime’¹. However, Czechoslovakia-newly independency proclaimed state faced with some territorial problems and defining of the bounders, even it was the main task to secure of territory of newly established state. But there occurred problems which first (Cieszyn in Polish, Teschen in German) was related especially with the ambition and policy of the German population who inaccurately called ‘Sudeten Germans’, second threat was from the Hungarian side and the last and urgent territorial problem emerged around the Silesian duchy of Tesin where the ethnic comparison of the inhabitants was overwhelmingly Polish, with mix of minorities Czech and German origins, which continued to be a theme of conflict between Poland and first Czechoslovak Republic throughout the existence. The dispute around the Tesin was outstanding. But historical bounders were with difficulties defined and including the historical Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia was recognized the territories of the Czechoslovakia. However, at the Paris Peace conference the territorial claims of Czechoslovakia was almost gained its approval where the Czechoslovak delegation participated in the peace conference under the lead Karel Kramar and Edvard Benes. Benes’s using his wartime experience put forward the Czechoslovak claim consisted of Czech lands and Slovakia. Furthermore, he asked for a Ruthenia and Lusatia and for a ‘corridor’ across Hungary

¹Agnew, Hugh (2004): *The Czech and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown*. Stanford: Stanford University Press

which would connect Czechoslovakia with Yugoslavia. However, most of his claims were adopted and even the peacemakers gave Czechoslovakia some lands of the formerly Hungarian region including the territorial claim towards the Subcarpathian Ruthenia, only with the some exceptions: Lustina and 'corridor' of Yugoslavia. So, the finally bounders of Czechoslovakia were absolutely defined in according with the results of three main treaties which are Versailles, Saint-Germain and Trianon. So, inside the new Czechoslovak Republic from ethnic point of view was very confused. There lived about seven Czechs, two million Slovaks, more than three million 'Bohemian' Germans who settled in the Czech and Slovak lands, around 750,000 Hungarians, 500,000 Ruthenes and approximately 80,000 Poles.

On November 14, 1918 new created National Assembly assumed initial authority within Czechoslovakia. The provisional National Assembly was established on the basis of the Austrian Parliament which the elections took place in 1911. In newly created National Assembly the elections was impossible due to its uncertain territorial demarcations. In Assembly participated fifty-four representatives from Slovakia. However, the main shortcoming around the provisional constitution was the national minorities who live in both Czech lands and Slovakia. To them was not allowed to represent in Assembly. Instead, the German minority did not accept the authority and legality of the provisional national assembly, even aimed to join to the polling in the parliament elections of the short-lived Republic of German Austria and relying on Woodrow Wilson's principles of self-determination they strived for unifying with Germany. But the ethnic Germans faced with the refuse to allow them to participate in elections of a foreign state by Czechoslovak authorities, so on 4 March 1919, as a protest they did demonstration on polling day.

So, on 29 February 1920 the new constitution was adopted by the provisional national assembly, which it defined the new national assembly bicameral parliament with senate and a chamber of Deputies. The senate members elected for eight years and consisted of 150 members, but members for deputies elected for six years and consisted of 300 members. 'The government was to be responsible to the chamber, and the whole national assembly was to elect the president, for a term of seven years. The president himself was to have quite wide executive powers. There was to be both

universal suffrage and proportional representative. The electorate was to vote for a party, not a person, and a senator or deputy would have to give up his seat at his party's request; this ensured both stability and inner-party discipline. Parliamentary elections were held in April, and Masaryk was elected president on 27 May. He took up residence in Prague castle, formerly the seat of Czech kings, and adopted as the Republic's motto the words of Jan Hus, *Pravda Vitezi* ('Truth Prevails').² By constitution Czech and Slovak languages were established as official languages and "Czechoslovak nation" notion was used as meaning of creator of constituent of the Czechoslovak state. Also to the national minorities were given some exceptions, in regions where 20% of population constituted from the national minorities they could use their own language in their everyday life and in schools.

According to the proportional representative system in the national assembly could represent a few numbers of parties. 'Out of the fabric of cleavages brought together in the new republic, twelve significant parties emerged. Seven were nationwide parties, Czech and Slovak, and participated in all elections; four German parties and one Hungarian party participated in three of the four elections and also won seats.'³ But just some of them were substantial and up to 1938, all 17 governments were consequently coalitions. Each of them had its distinctive ideology and defined goal. There five parties were: the Agrarian Party; the National Democrats; the National Socialists; the Social Democrats and the Populists (People's Parties).

The largest party among them was the so-called Agrarian Party, which the official title was the Republican Party of Agriculturists and Small Peasants. Its supporters were among the Slovaks, the Ruthenes and some minorities who lived in Czech territories. Antonin Svehla, Varvo Srobor Milan Hodza and other leaders who played very important role within the country were the prominent members of this party. In 1922-1938s this party was the core party in all coalitional governments.

The second largest party was the National Democratic Party whose members were the 'Young Czechs' of the XIX century and was appreciated as the most conservative grouping per se. The leaders of this party were Karel Kramer and Alois

² Dowling, Maria (2002): *Czechoslovakia*. New York: Oxford University Press. Page 24

³ Lawson, K.; Römmele, A.; Karasimeonov, G. (1999): *Cleavages, Parties, and Voters*. Westport, London. Page 54

Pasin. Generally, party was much nationalist and anti-clerical. The supporters of this party were mostly in Bohemia. It was a post-World War I developed party with ideologically feature was national radicalism and economic liberalism. However, after 1920s in political activity of the party was evident decline.

The third respectable party was the National Socialist Party, however, its mane is similar with the German namesake, but there was no resemblance between them. It was one of the oldest founded parties which were founded before the First World War. Ideology of the party was against the class struggle and promoted nationalism. The leader of the party was its founder Vaclav Klofac and Jiri Stribny-who was afterwards a fascist. Mostly members were especially from the lower middle class, intelligentsia and civil servants. Party was called as the Czech Socialist Party until 1926.

‘The Social Democratic Party, being Marxist, was at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Later this party aided by the Moscow-inspired demands of the Comintern, engineered the secession of their Communist wing in 1920.’⁴

And one of dissidents and well-known parties were the People’s Party or Catholic Parties. However, there were distinctions between Czech and Slovak parties: so the main cleavage was in 1921 and after this date these parties continued with separate ways. The Slovaks remained as usually opposition, but the Czechs party participated in the constitution of the government. The leader of the Czech People’s Party was led by Monsignor Jan Sramek who was supporter of the right of centre. The leader of the Slovak People’s Party was Monsignor Andrej Hlinka, who was patriotic activist; even for his activity against the policy of Magyarisation of Slovaks, he was imprisoned. He led this party until his death in 1938 and then to the post of leader came Josef Tiso. Despite the party’s ideology was conservative, but it also tended to the fascist ideology and authoritarianism. The aim of the party while the chief of the party was Andrej Hlinka, was the struggle for gaining authoritarian status of Slovakia which was promised in Pittsburgh treaty in May 31, 1918.

However, in opposition also were four German parties. They were supported especially after the Nazis came to power and gained the authority. ‘Germans in the Czechoslovak Republic began to identify themselves with the idea that they too were

⁴ Dowling, Maria (2002): *Czechoslovakia*. New York: Oxford University Press. Page 26

“*Herrenvolk*”, the “*Übermenschen*”. They accepted the idea that some Czechs could be “Germanized”, and that the rest would be resettled somewhere beyond the Ural Mountains.’⁵

In general, above mentioned five parties especially participated and dominated in political life, for gaining exact results closely co-operated with President Masaryk. The relationship between Five (*Petka*) and Castle (*Hrad*) was not satisfactory and prevented the simultaneously development of the parliamentary democracy. Even, Masaryk was regarded per se as an authoritarian rather than a democratic actor who used largely his dominant personality. But from other point of view the stability in political scene was maintained due to his decisive and cold-bloodedly political personality. The stability remained until his resigning on 14 December, 1935. His successor was Edvard Benes who was chosen heir by him. He was a western oriented and in his foreign relations relied on almost the League of Nations, its status quo and security aim. As a political actor Benes was first the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia in 1918-1935 years. Until 1938 under his leadership republic determined very accurately its international stance. For tightening its relations he negotiated in his foreign ministered years the Little Entente (an alliance established in 1921, among Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania). Especially, he strived to improve the relations with Britain and France. The goal was the seeking of support from these countries, in case of any aggression against the Czechoslovakia. However, Benes could obtain an alliance with France in 1924.

Gradually, since the end of 1920s inside the country began to growth the conflict on a national level. Especially, the conflicts were arisen by the non-Czech nationalities. The predictive aggression came with German dictator Adolf Hitler’s catching the power. His coming to the power was wide-spreading aggression not only in Czechoslovakia but also in all Eastern-Central Europe. It would be risky to rely to the Central European alliance system, which was why Czechoslovakia sought the collaboration with western allies. Also they tried to bring together in one alliance the Soviet Union and France. Simply the essence of this treaty was that the Soviet Union

⁵ Lawson, K.; Römmele, A.; Karasimeonov, G. (1999): *Cleavages, Parties, and Voters*. Westport, London. Page 55

would begin to come to Czechoslovakia for aid only in that case if France aid came first.

‘Although Czech-Slovak relations remained problematic throughout the interwar period, the pretext for the break-up of the interwar Czechoslovak state was provided by the grievances of the smaller German minority.’⁶ The German minority of Sudetenland which was financed with Nazi money, demanded from Czechoslovakia territorial autonomy. The pretext was that they were oppressed by the Czech government. In the Parliamentary elections taken place in 1935, the new created SdP (Sudeten German Party) under the leadership of Konrad Henlein, won. In result the debased relations between the Czechs and the Germans further compounded. On March 28, 1938 for instructing the unacceptable demands from the Czechoslovak government Henlein met with Hitler in Berlin.

However, the destiny of Czechoslovakia was decided with Munich Agreement without any represent from the Czechoslovakia side. On 29 September, 1938 heads of the Nazi Germany, France, Britain and Italy met in Munich (Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain, Benito Mussolini and Edouard Daladier). The aim of this meeting was the discussion around the Sudetenland, the territory which Hitler demanded the annexation to Germany. Czechoslovakia government was obliged to cede the Sudetenland without any resistance, so also submitted to Hitler’s demands by this way. In October of that year, Slovak People Party created an autonomous Slovak government and between October 1938 and March 1939, Czechoslovak state was called as Czecho-Slovakia. In 1938, President Benes did not want to go on confrontation with Germany and resigned. He was succeeded by Emil Hacha. In March, Leader of Slovak People’s Party Josef Tiso was called to Berlin and was commanded by Hitler for establishment of Slovakia. At the same time the legal president Emil Hacha was obliged to accept German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Thus, the fate of second republic also was solved.

During its existence the population was more than 13.5 millions. Economically it had inherited of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, even the Czech lands

⁶ Sharon L. Wolchik (1992): Czechoslovakia’s Development after World War II. In: Held, J. (ed.): *The Columbia History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*. New York. Page 126

were the industrial centre of empire. Compare the west and the east side of the country, Czech lands industrially were developed. Czech lands inherited more 70% of its industry, 40% of all breweries and distilleries, refiner sugar industry, Bohemian chemical industry, also Plzen Skoda Works which known as automobiles-locomotives, armament and machinery producer. Despite in Slovak lands the industry was not as developed as in Czech lands, but also regarded industrial region. Due to all of its superiority, Czechoslovakia was among the world's 10 industrial countries.

Conclusion

Republic established in 1918-1938, despite was one of the democratic base states could not won its existence against the German invasion. However, the state established under Masaryk's presidency gave to the Czechoslovak nations to fell the taste of freedom which they return after five decades. The Czechoslovak statehood survived for twenty years, but during these years it could approve itself and displayed strictly persistence against neighbour hegemony-German and Hungarian invasion.

The Czechoslovak's freedom desire did not leave them, even if they were in post-second World War under the communist conduct. Thus, after half century nation could regain its independence and used the experience of the First Republic.

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