

## CHAPTER 4

# THE FASCIST APPEAL

The Second Czecho-Slovak Republic, which lasted from 6 October 1938 until 13 March 1939, is usually skipped over in history books in a sentence or two. After the Munich Crisis and the loss of the Sudetenland, we are told, Hungary and Poland cynically helped themselves to further chunks of Czechoslovak territory. The final destruction of the state by Nazi Germany was completed on 15 March 1939, with the occupation of Prague and the takeover of what remained of Bohemia and Moravia. Within another six months, Europe was at war, unmasking Hitler's real intentions and showing the policy of 'appeasement' to have been morally bankrupt. Czechoslovakia had been proved right and the rest of the world wrong.

Even though the Second Republic lasted for only half a year, it should not be relegated to a footnote; nor should it be conceived of simply as a postscript to the Munich Crisis or prelude to the Second World War. It was a crucially important period in turning Czechoslovakia from an imperfectly democratic to a frankly authoritarian state, one whose central and autonomous governments ruled by decree, promoted racism, neutralized political opponents, rigged elections, set up forced-labour camps and persecuted Jews and Gypsies, all before any of this could plausibly be blamed on Nazi Germany. However brief, this disturbing chapter in the state's history went well beyond what is usually described euphemistically as Czechoslovakia's post-Munich 'disillusionment' with 'democracy' and 'the West'. The Second Republic shows us what Slovak, Ruthenian and Czech variations on the contemporary European themes of anti-Semitism and Fascism looked like at the time and hints at how they might have developed had Germany and the Second World War not intervened. It also introduces us to a number of totalitarian tricks and techniques – mainly Slovak, but also Czech – that were later to be perfected and used state-wide by the postwar Czechoslovak Communist Party.

It all began on 6 October 1938, the day after Beneš's resignation as president, when the promised 'Manifesto of the Slovak People's Party' was read aloud from the balcony of the *Katolícky dom* (Catholic House) at Žilina to cheers and prolonged applause from the crowd below. 'We Slovaks,' the manifesto

began, 'as an independent nation which has inhabited the territory of Slovakia since antiquity, hereby put into effect our right to self-determination.' In the hope of being able to contribute to 'a Christian disposition of affairs in Central Europe' and vowing to remain 'at the side' of 'all nations fighting against Jewish Marxism', the Žilina manifesto demanded that 'legislative and executive powers' be granted 'to Slovaks in Slovakia'. It ended with the rousing slogans 'Long live the freedom of the Slovak nation!' and 'Long live the Slovak Government in Slovakia!'<sup>1</sup> The manifesto, widely understood to represent the fulfilment of the promises of Slovak autonomy made in the Pittsburgh Agreement, was immediately endorsed by all Slovak political parties that were represented at the meeting (but not by the Communist, Social Democratic and Jewish parties, whose leaders had deliberately been kept in the dark).

The Czechoslovak prime minister, Syrový, gave in to the demagoguery without protest. When, on 10 October, Jozef Tiso (as minister plenipotentiary for Slovakia) met for the first time with his fellow ministers, he was able to announce that authority for Slovak affairs would be taken immediately, ahead of any formal alterations to the constitution, and ministerial portfolios could simply be parcelled out. The Hlinka Slovak People's Party naturally took the top prizes, Tiso declaring himself prime minister and minister of the interior, while Ferdinand Ďurčanský became deputy prime minister and minister of justice, social welfare and public health, and Alexander Mach was made the first chief of the Office of Propaganda. Matúš Černák, who had yet to join the party but had been instrumental in bringing down the Czechoslovak government, was made minister of education.<sup>2</sup>

Prime Minister Syrový, who had evidently hoped to shelve the Slovak problem by offering Tiso a cabinet post, together with a free hand in Slovakia as minister plenipotentiary, had presumably hoped to be able to make the Ruthenian Question disappear in the same way by having Ivan Párkányi, the president's secretary for Ruthenian affairs, appointed to the newly created post of 'minister' (in effect, governor) of Subcarpathian Ruthenia. He was outmanoeuvred on 8 October 1938, when, at a copycat meeting called by the First Ukrainian Central National Council in Užhorod (*Uzhhorod*), it was 'unanimously decided' to 'demand the same rights' for Subcarpathian Ruthenia 'as have been or will be granted to Slovakia'.<sup>3</sup> After a couple of days' negotiations in Prague, it was agreed that the newly autonomous government of Subcarpathian Ruthenia would be led by Andrei Brodii (Andrej Bródy/Andrij Brody) in a cabinet made up of one fellow Russophile (Stepan Fentsik/Fentsyk) and four Ukrainophiles (Edmund Bachinskii/Bachynsky, Ivan P'eshchak/Pieshchak, Iuliian Revai/Yulian Revay and Avhustyn Voloshyn).<sup>4</sup> Syrový accepted the Ruthenian demands with the same weary resignation he had shown in accepting the Slovak autonomists' and, on

11 October, dismissed Minister Párkányi so that the Bródy cabinet could take over the administration of Subcarpathian Ruthenia.

Slovak and Ruthenian autonomy were thus seized within ten days of the signing of the Munich Agreement, although only passed into law retrospectively, through separate bills which went through the Czecho-Slovak parliament on 22 November 1938.<sup>5</sup> According to the new constitutional arrangements, the central government in Prague continued to be responsible for foreign affairs, defence, customs, foreign trade and state loans (as well as taxation relating to any of these purposes); but Slovakia and Ruthenia were responsible for everything else within their own *krájiná* ('land' or 'region').<sup>6</sup> Since Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia now had their own diets (the Slovak *Snem* and the Ruthenian *Soim*), whereas Bohemia and Moravia continued to be governed by the central Czecho-Slovak government in Prague, it was not – as George Kennan, the new US *chargé d'affaires*, put it – entirely 'facetious to say that in Czechoslovakia [*sic*] everyone now has autonomy except the Czechs'.<sup>7</sup>

The first political party to be suppressed by the new leadership of autonomous Slovakia was the Carpathian German Party led by Franz Karmasin, the Slovak equivalent of the Bohemian and Moravian *Heimatsfront*, which was abolished on 5 October 1938. Presumably because someone pointed out that the international climate was not propitious to indulging too publicly in anti-German feeling, the party was reinstated within the week, renamed the *Deutsche Partei* (German Party). As if to make amends, Karmasin was also put in charge of a new 'State Secretariat for German National Minority Matters in Slovakia', which was allowed to form its own *Deutsche Jugend* (German Youth) and paramilitary *Freiwillige Schutzstaffel* (Voluntary Protective Brigade) organizations.<sup>8</sup> The extreme right-wing Carpathian German Party (*Deutsche Partei*) was to prove loyal to the equally extreme right-wing Slovak state, often taking its side in misunderstandings or disputes with the German Reich.

On 9 October, the activities of the Communist Party in Slovakia were suspended, but this time as a prelude to the party's actual dissolution, which was ordered by the Slovak Ministry of the Interior on 23 January 1939, when the Jewish and Social Democratic parties were also axed. At a stroke, this removed the entire left wing from Slovak politics. It was not until May 1939 that a secret underground organization, whose goals included the establishment of 'an independent, Soviet Socialist Slovakia', created an illegal Communist Party of Slovakia (*Komunistická strana Slovenska* or *KSS*), to be considered of equal standing to all other national Communist parties affiliated with the Communist International.<sup>9</sup>

On 8 November 1938, the Slovak branches of the Czechoslovak People's Party, Czechoslovak National Socialist Party, Agrarian Party, National Democratic Party, Tradesmen's Party and the National Community of Fascists merged into a single political party, the awkwardly named 'Hlinka Slovak

People's Party – the Party of Slovak National Unity' (hereafter referred to simply as 'Slovak National Unity'). Only *Národná strana*, the (traditionally Protestant) Slovak National Party, initially refused to come on board, preferring to dissolve itself on 23 November; but most of its members merged with Slovak National Unity on 15 December 1938.<sup>10</sup> This left autonomous Slovakia with just three permitted political parties: Jozef Tiso's Slovak National Unity, now the only 'party' for Slovak-speakers; Franz Karmasin's *Deutsche Partei* for German-speakers; and János Esterházy's *Egyesült Magyar Párt* (United Hungarian Party) for Hungarian-speakers. Slovakia's Ruthene, Jewish, Czech and Gypsy minorities were left without even the pretence of political representation.

The merging of all centrist and right-wing Slovak-speaking political parties into a single mass political organization called Slovak National Unity corresponded well to the Fascistic outlook of the new Slovak leadership, with its high-minded disdain for compromise and politicking, its self-image as a repository of Christian culture and Christian values, and its notion of politics, not as a means of resolving conflict, but rather as a vehicle through which to express the united 'will' of the 'nation'. Quite what former deputies of the Slovak People's Party, suddenly catapulted into power as the leaders of Slovak National Unity, were actually supposed to do all day was not so obvious, since there were no longer any political parties with which to compete and their own party's objectives – which for years had consisted of the single aim of implementing the terms of the Pittsburgh Agreement – had just been satisfied. Small wonder that the Tiso leadership floundered, issuing decrees, making proclamations, setting up new departments and running up debts as it tried to carve out a separate Slovak – and, increasingly, Fascist – identity for itself.

One of the new Slovak diet's first acts was to establish a 'Hlinka Youth' movement, modelled on the *Hitler Jugend*; and it could think of no better way to mark 28 October 1938, Czecho-Slovak Independence Day, than to order the dissolution of all associations and organizations (most notably *Sokol*, *Orol*, *Sedliacka Jazda* and the Workers' Gymnastic Union) whose head offices were to be found outside Slovakia. It then drew on the *Rodobrana* to form the nucleus of its very own SA-style paramilitary organization, the Hlinka Guard (which was subdivided into various branches, such as the Hlinka Transport Guards, the Hlinka University Guards, the Academic Hlinka Guard and so forth) to be the 'moral auxiliary organ' of 'all government offices'.<sup>11</sup> Under the leadership of Karol Sidor and, from 4 December 1938, his deputy Alexander (Šaňo) Mach, the Hlinka Guard steadily broadened its remit. Although unsuccessful in trying to make membership in the Hlinka Youth compulsory for all Slovak boys aged 6 to 18 and in the Hlinka Guard for Slovak men aged between 18 and 60, from 1 December 1939 the Hlinka Guard was re-established as a 'corps' within 'the framework of the Hlinka

Slovak People's Party'. Explicitly organized according to 'military principles', and with the legal right to bear arms and to wear uniforms, it had duties that were defined as providing 'pre-military training', submitting 'appropriate reports and proposals' to the 'authorities', helping to maintain 'public order' and 'public security', and defending 'the state'.<sup>12</sup> Within three weeks, the same protections and privileges had been extended to the *Freiwillige Schutzstaffel* and *Deutsche Jugend*, the German minority's equivalent organizations. Sidor's other big project – to replace politically lukewarm municipal boards with fiery pro-autonomist organizations called 'National Committees' (*národné výbory*) – did not take off in the short term,<sup>13</sup> but his idea of resurrecting National Committees succeeded spectacularly after 1945 – only, this time, to the benefit of the extreme Left rather than the extreme Right.

In the other newly autonomous Czecho-Slovak province, Subcarpathian Ruthenia, the political transition was less smooth. Prime Minister Bródy and Minister Fentsyk, in addition to complaining about an overabundance of Czech schools and personnel, called loudly for all Carpathian Rusyns, from the Poprad to the Tisza rivers (in other words, from eastern Slovakia as well as Subcarpathian Ruthenia), to join together in a 'unitary, free state'.<sup>14</sup> The provocation might have been overlooked by the central government in Prague had it not been for the fact that the new leaders of autonomous Ruthenia appeared to be trying to engineer plebiscites to return Ruthenia – together with the eastern Slovak region of Prešov – to Hungary, this time as an autonomous 'Rusyn' province. Since the central Czecho-Slovak government was just about to enter into the negotiations with Hungary and Poland required by the Munich Agreement, the very last thing it needed was to have further chunks of its territory being loudly offered, by groups of its own citizens, to a hostile power. On 26 October 1938, Czecho-Slovak prime minister Syrový met with the Ruthenian ministers in Prague, where he had Bródy arrested for treason; Fentsyk apparently escaped to Hungary by way of the Polish Embassy.<sup>15</sup> The first autonomous Ruthenian, and pro-Rusyn, government, which had lasted a fortnight, was replaced by a new, pro-Ukrainian government led by Mgrs Avhustyn Voloshyn, supported by local Ukrainian Blackshirts (*Chornorubashechnyky*), and with Iuliian Revai/Yulian Revay and Edmund Bachinskii/Bachynsky – both Ukrainophiles – kept on as ministers. It was all so sudden that Voloshyn apparently had to be appointed – and even sworn in – as prime minister in telephone calls between Užhorod and Prague.<sup>16</sup> Subcarpathian Ruthenia (*Podkarpatská Rus*) was immediately renamed Carpatho-Ukraine (*Karpats'ka Ukraïna*) and Ukrainian made the official language for all administrative and educational purposes. All Czech inscriptions in Chust/Khust were ordered to be changed to Ukrainian by 10 December.<sup>17</sup> The new Carpatho-Ukrainian government even got a reluctant central government to agree that all laws and decrees that pertained to the territory would henceforward appear, in the official

*Sbírka zákonů a nařízení* (Bulletin of Laws and Decrees) published in Prague, in Ukrainian rather than Czech.<sup>18</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Munich Crisis, Slovak and Ruthenian political leaders had sought to save their territories from Hungary by distancing themselves from the Prague government on the assumption that this would win them preferential treatment in negotiations with Nazi Germany. Instead, in what looked alarmingly like a prelude to the occupation of Bratislava, Germany immediately helped itself to two small, but strategically important, territories on the outskirts of Slovakia's regional capital: Petřalka (*Engerau*), opposite Bratislava on the right bank of the Danube; and Devín (*Theben*), a sacred place in Slovak national myth because of its associations with the Greater Moravian Empire, but of interest to the Reich for its situation at the confluence of the Morava and Danube rivers. Not only the German consul, but also the leader of the Carpathian German Party urged the Reich authorities to leave the ruins of Devín castle alone since, as Karmasin explained to Göring, 'All Slovak history books would have to be burnt if the Slovaks were to lose the castle.'<sup>19</sup> On 10 November, in response to formal Slovak protests, Germany informed the central Czecho-Slovak government (rather than the Slovak diet) that there was no question of the territories being returned; indeed, it had additional claims to make in Slovakia. These turned out to represent about 43 sq km (16.6 sq miles) of Slovak territory, inhabited by some 15,566 people, which ended up being directly annexed by Germany.<sup>20</sup>

On 1 October 1938, the day after the Munich Agreement was signed, the governments of Czecho-Slovakia and Poland exchanged diplomatic notes on changes to their common border. This time, the Silesian coalmining areas of Karviná and (Moravská) Ostrava and the railway junction at Bohumín, which had been assigned to Czecho-Slovakia at Versailles, went to Poland. The Slovaks' turn came the next day. But the First Vienna Award, which followed on 2 November 1938, although supposed in theory to settle disputed territories with Hungary by means of an 'international commission', was in fact left to Germany to decide.<sup>21</sup> To the horror of the Slovaks, who had assumed that only the Czechs would lose large chunks of their territory, Germany decided to award Hungary the entire strip of predominantly Magyar-inhabited territory that ran along its border with Hungary, representing a further 10,390 sq km (4,011 sq miles) of territory, inhabited by 854,217 people, of whom some 270,000 were claimed as Slovak.<sup>22</sup> Even Poland then took a few villages beyond its southern borders.<sup>23</sup> Tiso, appalled, went on radio to complain 'that a terrible injustice has been committed against the Slovak nation', but also to make explicit that 'all responsibility falls upon those politicians who have been deciding our fate without us, and against our will, for the past twenty years'.<sup>24</sup>

Official Slovak propaganda had blamed the Czechs for the Munich disaster. Now it sought to blame the unexpectedly heavy losses of Slovak territory to Hungary on Jews, giving the green light to the first in a series of semi-official Slovak pogroms and expulsions launched by the Hlinka Guard with the slogan 'With Sidor and against the Jews!'<sup>25</sup> For Leopold Löwy, a German-speaking Jew living on Schanzstrasse in Bratislava, whose father had never bothered to take out Czechoslovak nationality, the knock on the door came on 4 November 1938, when a Slovak and a German policeman informed him that he and his family had ten minutes to prepare themselves to leave Czecho-Slovakia; buses were waiting outside to deport them, together with other Jewish families, to Hungary, where they were presumed 'to belong'.<sup>26</sup> Jews, dragged out of their homes, 'usually at night', were informed that they could take with them no more than 60 kg (132 lb) of personal luggage and 500 crowns in cash. They were then shoved into trucks and dumped across the border, only to be sent back to find that the Hlinka Guard had taken possession of their businesses, workshops, houses and flats. The Hlinka Guard fell with equal enthusiasm upon Czech employees, who were evicted from their homes and deported to the Slovak-Moravian frontier, where, after being robbed of their valuables, they were pushed across the border.<sup>27</sup>

Subcarpathian Ruthenia, though no one seemed to notice or care, came out of the Vienna Arbitration even worse than Slovakia, losing the whole of its south-western corner to Hungary, including the important cities of Mukačevo/Mukachevo and Berehovo and even the provincial capital, Užhorod, which the autonomous government was given just one week to vacate. After the loss of Užhorod, the regional capital was moved eastwards, to Khust (formerly *Chust*), a backwater of eighteen thousand inhabitants that could boast a 'decent' Government House, airfield, prison, a few churches and a synagogue, and a block or two of modern flats, but whose streets were mostly unpaved and overrun with chickens and geese.<sup>28</sup> Only because Germany had decided to support pan-Ukrainianism as a means of dividing and weakening the Soviet Union, judged American diplomat George Kennan, was it willing, for the time being, to leave the pro-Ukrainian Voloshyn government in power and the truncated province of Ruthenia in Czecho-Slovakia. The Voloshyn government, however, seems actually to have believed that, in the fullness of time, the Third Reich would see fit to organize and fund the unification of fifty million Ukrainians into an independent state that would stretch from the Carpathian Mountains to the Sea of Azov. It therefore eagerly signed agreements with the German Foreign Ministry to develop Ruthenia's infrastructure, preserve its forests, export its raw materials and concentrate German capital in the country.<sup>29</sup> The Prague government helped to sustain the local dream of a bright pan-Ukrainian future to the extent that, in order to prevent any further incursions by

Hungary (or, indeed, Romania) into what was still Czecho-Slovak territory, it gave permission to the Ukrainian National Defence to turn itself into yet another SA-style uniformed, paramilitary organization on Czecho-Slovak soil: Dmyto Klempush's Carpathian *Sich* (Owl).

In total, Czecho-Slovakia's territorial losses in the weeks after Munich added up to 41,098 sq km (15,868 sq miles) and about 4,879,000 people, of whom about 1,250,000 were said to be Czech or Slovak. This left Czecho-Slovakia with a territory of just 99,395 sq km (38,376 sq miles) and a population of about ten million. Just as territorial losses exacerbated pre-existing anti-Hungarian, anti-Czech and anti-Jewish feeling in Slovakia and Ruthenia, so they also intensified traditional anti-German sentiment – which had long included a distinctly anti-Semitic element – in Bohemia-Moravia, where local xenophobia was intensified by the arrival of unwanted Jewish-German refugees from the Sudetenland, the former Austria, and elsewhere. In order to 'solve' the 'problem' of refugees from the Third Reich, the Prague and Berlin governments agreed (20 November 1938) that Czecho-Slovak law should be changed in such a way as to remove the protection of Czecho-Slovak citizenship from all refugees from Nazi Germany or post-*Anschluss* Austria: in other words, primarily German Jews, together with German-speaking political opponents of the Nazi regime.<sup>30</sup> The extradition of political refugees to imprisonment in the Reich was undertaken not only with punctilious thoroughness but also, according to at least one eyewitness, with malicious satisfaction. Kurt Weisskopf, a left-wing, German-speaking Jew from Prague, remembered watching incredulously as a unit of Sudeten German Social Democrats, who happened to be passing through Prague, were rounded up by Czech guards in Masaryk railway station, loaded onto trucks and sent by armed train to Germany, where they could expect to be taken into German concentration camps. When he tried to protest, the Czech official he got on the phone called him a 'stinking Jew' and a 'Red pig' before slamming down the receiver.<sup>31</sup> While the central and regional governments sought to contain unemployment by transferring some 41,000 Czech, Slovak and Ruthenian workers to paid work in Germany, a law against vagrancy (passed on 2 March 1939) insisted that all unemployed men over the age of eighteen be sent to forced-labour camps set up and run by the Czecho-Slovak authorities.<sup>32</sup>

From his sick bed at Sezimovo Ústí, Beneš kept a dignified official silence over the rapid disintegration of the state that he had done so much to establish and to shape. He was not so discreet with friends and visitors, in whose company he was liable to explode with impotent rage at what he saw as the treachery of allies and neighbours alike. 'Poland will be the first to be hit,' he prophesied with malicious satisfaction; 'France will suffer terribly for having betrayed us, wait for that. . . . Chamberlain will live to see the consequences of his appeasement. . . . Hitler will attack them all.'<sup>33</sup> On 22 October 1938,



ex-President Beneš – together with his wife and a small entourage – left Czecho-Slovakia. After a brief stay with Jan Masaryk in London, the Benešes moved on to Chicago, where Edvard was welcomed as ‘Europe’s most distinguished democrat’ and given the post of professor of sociology.<sup>34</sup>

Czechoslovak Communist leaders (including Party Chairman Klement Gottwald), who could hardly have been expected to guess that a Soviet-German pact would follow within a year, left for the immediate safety of Moscow, where in November 1938 they established a Presidium in exile which included leading Czech Communists such as Rudolf Slánský, KSČ General Secretary, as well as prominent ethnic German Communists such as Rudolf Appelt and Robert Korb.<sup>35</sup> The prevailing public mood in Prague, where students at the arts faculty of Charles University overturned a statue of T.G. Masaryk, portraits of Masaryk and Beneš were being removed from schools, government buildings, post offices and other public places, and the names of both Czechoslovak presidents were being ‘execrated and dragged in the mud’, was scathing about democracy, the West and the First Republic.<sup>36</sup> Ministers and right-wing newspapers called for a public enquiry to be held into the causes of the ‘national catastrophe’.<sup>37</sup> People were especially bitter about Beneš, whose misguided foreign policy was taken to have lost the state not only large chunks of its territory and millions of its citizens, but also its security, independence and international standing.<sup>38</sup> George Kennan, who had taken up his post as US *chargé d'affaires* on the day the Munich Agreement was signed, was shocked by the atmosphere. ‘Every feature of liberalism and democracy’, he confided in early December 1938, is ‘hopelessly and irretrievably discredited.’ During weekend visits in the country,

the guests did nothing but toss down brandy after brandy in an atmosphere of total gloom and repeat countless times: ‘How was it possible that any people could allow itself to be led for twenty years by such a *Saubund* – such an international, democratic *Saubund* as Beneš? Such a people doesn’t deserve to exist. It ought to be annihilated,’ etc.

The climate, he noted, seemed ominously reminiscent of that of the Schuschnigg regime in Austria in 1935: ‘There is the same disapproval of democracy, the same distrust and alienation of the labour element, the same Catholic piety, the same moderate and decorous anti-Semitism.’<sup>39</sup>

Czech Fascist and extreme right-wing movements, although not popular enough with the electorate to form a government in their own right, proliferated, putting the semi-military caretaker government under pressure to become more radical. The most important Czech Fascist groups were Radola Gajda’s *Národní obec fašistická* (National Fascist Community) and the *Národní liga* (National League) led by Jiří Strýbrný, one of the ‘Men of 28 October’;

those closest to the contemporary Nazi model were Josef Rys-Rozsévač's *Vlajka* (The Flag) and ANO (*Akce národní obrody* or Action for National Revival), an anti-Semitic pressure group linked to the *Hnutí mladých advokátů a lékařů* (Movement of Young Lawyers and Doctors).<sup>40</sup>

Amid general agreement that government needed to become more authoritarian and the old party system radically simplified, Rudolf Beran, the leader of the Agrarian Party, capitalized on the public mood by suggesting that the Czechs form a mass 'national' party of their own to promote an 'authoritarian and disciplined democracy, free from corruption and putting the service of the State before party interests'.<sup>41</sup> On 18 November 1938, just ten days after the creation in Slovakia of the mass 'Hlinka Slovak People's Party – The Party of Slovak National Unity', the main centrist and right-wing Czech parties of Bohemia and Moravia (the National Socialist Party, Traders' Party, National Alliance Party, Czechoslovak People's Party and the National League) merged with the Agrarian Party into a single right-wing block, the Czechs' very own 'Party of National Unity' (*Národní jednota*).<sup>42</sup>

Ten days later, on 30 November 1938, a former president of the Supreme Administrative Court, Emil Hácha, was elected Czecho-Slovakia's third president. General Syrový stepped down as prime minister and interim head of state, resuming his place in the cabinet as minister of defence. Rudolf Beran, formerly head of the Agrarian Party and now leader of Czech 'National Unity', took over as prime minister while Karol Sidor, the Slovak leader of the Hlinka Guard, became deputy prime minister. At the same time, Slovakia and Ruthenia set up 'representative offices' of their respective autonomous governments in Prague – the first headed by Karol Sidor and the second by Vincent Shandor – to facilitate official business with the central government.<sup>43</sup> Beneš, who immediately telegraphed his congratulations to President Hácha, gave no hint at the time that he considered the new, far-right Czecho-Slovak government to be illegitimate; it was not until some months later that he began to argue that his own resignation as president of Czechoslovakia had been 'forced', making it as 'invalid' as the Munich *diktat* that preceded it. At the new central Czecho-Slovak government's first meeting, held on 2 December 1938, Hácha cautioned members of the Czech cabinet that they should take the Bohemian duke and saint Wenceslas – who had 'fought for German-Czech understanding, although initially he did not find understanding with his own people' – as their model.<sup>44</sup> The new president, an observant Catholic, broadcast the message more widely by kissing the saint's bones in St Vítus' Cathedral on Hradčany, a gesture simultaneously intended to signal the desirability of increased cooperation with Germany and a shift from the old anticlericalism to official approval of Catholicism.<sup>45</sup> František Chvalkovský, the new foreign minister, made it equally plain, in an article published on 16 December, that Czecho-Slovak foreign policy would

henceforward consist of ‘friendly cooperation’ with its neighbours, a euphemism that everyone understood to mean Germany.<sup>46</sup> He is remembered in Czech nationalist folklore as having behaved like a complete sycophant when he first met Ribbentrop, the German foreign minister, on 14 October, saying, ‘And in foreign policy we shall lean on you, *Herr Reichsminister* [sic], if you allow us.’<sup>47</sup>

On 15 December 1938, having already introduced pre-publication censorship, the central parliament in Prague passed a special Enabling Act, reminiscent of Hitler’s, which entitled the government to alter the constitution, amend constitutional laws and, in case of ‘emergency’, rule by decree. Because the central government needed the support of the ministers for Slovakia to get the act passed by the National Assembly, it agreed that all members of the autonomous Slovak government would automatically also become members of the state-wide Czecho-Slovak Council of Ministers; as a further concession to Slovak nationalist feeling, the text of the law appeared in Slovak rather than in Czech.<sup>48</sup> On 23 December, the central government again followed the Slovak example by outlawing the Czechoslovak Communist Party (*KSCČ*), which meant that within a few days it had also been banned in Carpatho-Ukraine (formerly Subcarpathian Ruthenia). About one thousand ethnic German Communists are estimated to have left for Britain at this point;<sup>49</sup> a month later, Czecho-Slovak and Reich police agreed to work together to provide cross-border assistance to suppress any undercover Communist activity.<sup>50</sup>

According to the constitutional amendment that had established Slovak autonomy, elections to the first Slovak diet had to be held according to the same parliamentary procedures that had prevailed in the First Czechoslovak Republic. Slovak prime minister Tiso neatly circumvented the problem by announcing forthcoming elections and inviting candidates to register in the usual way; but too late for any candidates (apart from the few his party had forewarned) to register in time to be eligible to stand.<sup>51</sup> On 18 December 1938, the farce of ‘elections’ to the autonomous Slovak *Snem* took place. Voters, instead of being able to select individuals, were presented with a single slate of candidates, chosen by the leadership of Slovak National Unity; those on the list were regarded as elected if the voter assented to ‘a free, new Slovakia’. At the polling booths, where uniformed Hlinka Guards officiated, voters were theoretically at liberty to reply that they did not want ‘a free, new Slovakia’ and to reject the entire list, but were hardly likely to do so when discouraged from pulling the curtain for privacy or asked to hand over their ballot papers directly to the officiating officer.

As a result of these simple tactics, the Hlinka Slovak People’s Party – The Party of Slovak National Unity won an overwhelming 97.5 per cent of the Slovak vote.<sup>52</sup> Although rigged, the first ‘elections’ to the autonomous Slovak diet gave the excuse for tremendous pageantry and speechifying and

created a magnificent backdrop for displays of Slovak, Nazi and papal flags, together with ranks of the Hlinka Guard whose official greeting, George Kennan noted, seemed, symbolically enough, a kind of 'halfhearted compromise between a friendly wave and a full-fledged fascist salute'.<sup>53</sup> Both the Slovak and the Ruthenian political leaders, he judged, were 'making awful fools of themselves; dressing up in magnificent fascist uniforms, flying to and fro in airplanes, drilling comic-opera S.A. units and dreaming of the future grandeur of the Slovak or Ukrainian nations'.<sup>54</sup>

The central government in Prague, which by now effectively controlled only Bohemia and Moravia, did not follow the example of the autonomous regions of Slovakia and Ruthenia in immediately instituting strict one-party rule. Instead, it decided to permit a single, tame opposition party on the political Left to exist alongside the overwhelmingly dominant 'National Unity' on the political Right. This was *Národní strana práce* (National Labour Party), a merger of the socialist parties (but excluding the recently outlawed Communist Party). Bohemia and Moravia, unlike the other regions of the country, thus retained for the time being a veneer of electoral choice. Even so, for the central Czecho-Slovak government to limit and regulate parliamentary democracy to this extent was to sail dangerously close to Fascism, particularly since Czech National Unity's own youth organization, *Mladá národní jednota* or Young National Unity, had a uniformed paramilitary force that voiced extreme anti-Semitic views akin to those of the Hlinka Guard in Slovakia and the *Sich* in Ruthenia. By late February 1939, there were increasingly insistent calls from the right-wing Czech press for the political system in Bohemia and Moravia to be further 'simplified', and the Czech Party of National Unity formally recommended the reorganization of 'public life' in accordance with the 'corporate' model.<sup>55</sup> It can only have been a matter of weeks before Bohemia-Moravia would have followed the Slovak and Ruthenian examples and gone completely Fascist.

In all parts of the federal Czecho-Slovak Republic, one of the most pressing questions on the political agenda was how to make the dominant 'nation' – whether Czech, Slovak or Ukrainian/Rusyn – attain 'national purity' (hegemony) within its claimed territory. The Czechs, albeit unwillingly, had already lost the bulk of their German population with the transfer of their borderlands to the German Reich and their Polish population with the loss of Silesia; Slovaks and Ruthenians had lost the majority of their Magyar minority as a consequence of the Vienna Arbitration. This seemed to open up the possibility of making each region of the federated Czecho-Slovak state nationally homogeneous: Czech, Slovak or Ukrainian. Over the question of the resented – but sometimes needed – qualified Czechs living in Slovakia, many of whom had already been chased out of the region, the Slovak autonomous and central Czecho-Slovak governments came to a formal

agreement, on 12 December 1938, that about nine thousand Czech state employees, from teachers to administrators, should be removed so that they could be replaced with Slovaks. This still left extreme nationalists, racists and Fascists with two unsolved 'problems': how to rid the Czecho-Slovak republic of its Jews and Gypsies.

In Prague, where fresh bouts of anti-Semitism were stimulated after each wave of Jewish and political refugees arrived from the Reich (first from Germany proper, then from post-*Anschluss* Austria, and finally from the annexed Sudetenland), from October Czecho-Slovak officials were lobbying the British to use their influence with Berlin to stop the German authorities from 'dumping these unwanted Jews' in Bohemia and Moravia,<sup>56</sup> and complaining that the British government seemed to show 'interest and practical sympathy' to 'the Jews and the German Social Democrats' at the expense of 'the Czechs and the Slovaks'.<sup>57</sup> By mid-November, Foreign Minister Chvalkovský was saying in private that, although the Germans were 'pressing' for 'action to be taken against the Jews', there must be 'no pogroms before January or February', since bad publicity might jeopardize the Czecho-Slovak government's chances of another big Anglo-French loan. In the meantime, he hinted darkly, 'all the Jews in the country' might spontaneously 'decide' to emigrate.<sup>58</sup>

Pressure was certainly being brought to bear on Jewish Czechs, although not yet too directly or obviously by the central government. It was *Sokol*, the Czech patriotic organization so beloved of T.G. Masaryk, that passed a resolution on 23 October to urge all Jews who had arrived after 1914 to 'return' to their 'original homes'; and the youth wing of National Unity that issued a pamphlet explaining that the Jews, a 'foreign' minority, would soon have their legal position 'regulated' so that they could be 'removed' from state employment and prevented from 'influencing education' and 'dominating' in other fields 'out of proportion to their numbers'. By Christmas 1938, rumours in the Czech press – presumably deliberately leaked by the government – were rife, some suggesting that Jewish university professors, civil servants and teachers would all be pensioned off on 1 January 1939, others warning that all Jewish schoolteachers would be dismissed on that day.<sup>59</sup>

In the end, Czecho-Slovak Decrees 14 and 15 were not issued by the central government until 27 January 1939; and they did not mention the word 'Jew' once. They simply announced that persons who had been naturalized as Czechoslovak citizens at any point between 1918 and 1938, unless they could be readily identified as 'Czech', 'Slovak' or 'Carpatho-Rusyn', would have their citizenship removed and be deported from Czecho-Slovakia. Although the law did not specify who would be affected, it was obvious in the general climate that – as the British minister in Prague had no difficulty in understanding – it was designed to be 'against the Jews'.<sup>60</sup> Not to be outdone, the autonomous

government in Slovakia, while welcoming the central government's move as a partial solution, promised to go further and, on 23 January 1939, set up a parliamentary subcommittee, including names as eminent as those of Sidor and Ďurčanský, to look into possible solutions to the 'Jewish Question'. Tiso, meanwhile, declared Jews in Slovakia to be entitled only to those 'rights' that were 'appropriate' to a people who held a 'disproportionate' share of the country's wealth. He further claimed it to be a mark of the Slovak nation's 'maturity' that it would take a 'legal approach' to this 'problem'.<sup>61</sup> The 'problem of Jews', the Ruthenian prime minister declared in a published interview in late January, 'is an all-state matter. Therefore, we Ukrainians embrace the same attitude as that of the Central Government.'<sup>62</sup> In Ruthenia, Vincent Shandor later claimed, Prime Minister Voloshyn revealed to him 'in confidence' that '150 [*sic*] Austrian Jews' were living in Carpatho-Ukraine 'whom we ought to transfer to a safe country [*sic*] whence they could proceed to Palestine', an action that, he added, needed to be carried out 'in utmost secrecy'. Shandor promised to help.<sup>63</sup>

It is often claimed that the Czechs, unlike the Slovaks and the Germans, had no deep-rooted tradition of anti-Semitism and therefore had to be forced by the Nazis to persecute the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia. It would be more accurate to say that Czech anti-Semitism, whose roots were as deep as those anywhere else in Europe,<sup>64</sup> initially had a different flavour from other contemporary Central European varieties in that it was primarily conceived as a matter of ethnolinguistic prejudice, a variant of anti-German feeling rather than a hatred justified on religious grounds (as in the Slovak case) or racial ones (as in the German).<sup>65</sup> Otto Grünfeld, for example, who grew up in Náchod and Ústí nad Orlicí in north-eastern Bohemia, remembered how he was simultaneously mocked by German fellow pupils for being Jewish, and by Czech schoolteachers for having a German-sounding surname.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Eric Stein, the only Jewish boy in his class in Hradec Králové, remembered taking turns with a Slovak boy to be the butt of teasing and bullying by his Czech classmates.<sup>67</sup> After Grünfeld's father was forced, in early 1939, to give up his job as head of the textile firm Henrych and Son, the family moved to Prague, where many Czech-speaking Jews continued to feel safe on the grounds that they had long been classified in censuses as being of Czech (rather than Jewish) 'nationality', were partly or wholly secularized, and felt themselves to be as much a part of Czech society as the nominally Catholic majority.

At a time when German-speaking Jews were being publicly sacked from businesses, theatres, newspapers and places of higher education throughout Bohemia and Moravia (including the German section of Charles University in Prague), Czech professional organizations, such as those that forbade Czech Jews from practising medicine or law, tried to keep pace with anti-Semitic racism of the German variety, but more discreetly, characteristically through

internally published changes of administrative practices or hiring procedures rather than – as yet – government decrees or published laws. Even the Czecho-Slovak central government's decision to rid itself of all employees whose parents were Jewish did not require a change of law, but only an internal announcement.<sup>68</sup> Increasingly placed on the defensive, the Union of Czech Jews in the Czecho-Slovak Republic (*Svaz Čechů židů v Česko-Slovenské republice*) did what it could to provide counter-intelligence to the avalanche of anti-Semitic propaganda that was coming from all sides. The Union argued that Czech Jews had no influence in the world of big business or international capital; that they formed less than 1 per cent of the population of Bohemia and Moravia (as opposed to the 11 per cent of Jews to be found in some eastern Slovak provinces and in Ruthenia); and that anti-Semitism was not a traditional part of Czech culture.<sup>69</sup> Sadly, the Nazi historian Wolfgang von Wolmar was probably closer to the mark when he lamented the inability of German and Czech National Socialists to work together – despite sharing 'so many goals, including anti-Semitism' – because of their mutual national antagonism.<sup>70</sup>

Anti-Gypsy prejudice, which attracted less interest internationally than anti-Semitism, could for the same reason be more easily translated into direct action by the central Czecho-Slovak government.<sup>71</sup> On 2 March 1939, a new law was passed to set up two forced-labour camps for so-called 'nomads': one at Lety in southern Bohemia, and another at Hodonín in central Moravia. This was the beginning of the infamous Czech Gypsy camps from which just 5 per cent of all Czech Gypsies (mainly Romany-speakers, i.e. Roma) were to return after 1945, a majority of those who survived the Czech-run camps having been transported, in 1943 and 1944, to be gassed at the German-run Gypsy Camp at Auschwitz.<sup>72</sup>

At the same time that ethnic tensions among Czechs, Jews, Gypsies, Germans and Slovaks were becoming strained almost beyond the point of endurance, relations between the central government in Prague and the autonomous regions further deteriorated. In January 1939, according to George Kennan, two incidents finally decided the central Czecho-Slovak government in Prague to try to claim back political control of Carpatho-Ukraine, which it was continuing to fund from central resources. The first was that money sent to the Khust government from Prague, which it said had been earmarked for road building, turned out to have been spent on propaganda, much of it anti-Czech. The second, and more important, incident was that irregular Ruthenian soldiers had launched an abortive attempt to recapture the city of Mukačevo from Hungary, leading to a border fracas in which there were several casualties, damage to property and a potentially harmful breach between the Prague and Budapest governments.<sup>73</sup>

On 17 January 1939, the central Czecho-Slovak government appointed Lev Prchala, a former member of the Czechoslovak Legion in Russia and general

in the Czecho-Slovak army, as minister of the interior and finance in the regional Ruthenian government. What Shandor recalled, nearly sixty years later, as ‘a gross political mistake’ on the part of those who ‘could not understand that they were no longer masters in Carpatho-Ukraine’, inevitably led to macho posturing by the *Sich* guard and to loud complaints by the Khust government that Prague was trampling on its right to run its own affairs.<sup>74</sup> The incident might easily have provided an excuse for Germany to intervene in Czecho-Slovakia’s internal affairs. Instead, the Prague government got away with it, despite provoking a fresh wave of anti-Czech demonstrations in Ruthenia; and the Voloshyn government, which was entirely financially dependent on the central Czecho-Slovak government, had to content itself with focusing on its upcoming (purely cosmetic) ‘elections’ to the autonomous Ruthenian *Soim* on 12 February 1939, at which the thirty-two candidates from the Ukrainian National Union, the only permitted political party (who again appeared on a single list) were duly ‘elected’ as deputies with 93 per cent of the vote.<sup>75</sup>

That Prague was able to intervene in Ruthenia’s political affairs without provoking a reaction from Germany emboldened the central government to try to curb Slovakia. When, in mid-February, members of the Slovak autonomous government came to Prague with requests, not only for more money, but also to arm the Hlinka Guard and to put Slovak commanders in charge of all regiments of the Czecho-Slovak army stationed on Slovak soil, they were curtly informed that if they wished to continue to receive substantial financial support from Prague they would have ‘to stop their “double-faced policy”’.<sup>76</sup> On 21 February, in a long speech to the Slovak diet to launch his new ‘policy of reconstruction’, Tiso – although he explicitly rejected rumours that Slovakia was about to go independent – nevertheless strongly implied that the day was coming. ‘The Slovak nation,’ as he put it in characteristically confusing and mystical language, ‘is building its State, creating its new State, building its own Slovak State. . . . Slovak national consciousness is working, is organizing its State services so that it can prove that it wants to live characteristically according to this principle, which today is the world motto: nationality.’<sup>77</sup> A week later, it was further noted in Prague that ministers of the autonomous Slovak government – who had drawn their own conclusions from the Ruthenian incident – had bypassed Prague and gone directly to Berlin to negotiate economic assistance.<sup>78</sup>

By early March 1939, Czech–Slovak tensions were almost at breaking point. In Bratislava, as in Khust, there were public demonstrations against both Czechs and Jews, and a jubilant sense of national ascendancy. Alexander (Šaňo) Mach, the head of Slovak propaganda and *éminence grise* of the Hlinka Guard, went on the record as saying that it would be a ‘national catastrophe’ not to ‘construct’ a ‘Slovak state’.<sup>79</sup> Travelling east from Prague, a French foreign correspondent was taken aback to find such a striking contrast between



what he saw as the gloom and tension in the state capital and the ‘atmosphere of juvenile exuberance and total jauntiness’ prevailing in Slovakia.<sup>80</sup> The Prague government, suspicious of the Slovak leadership’s intentions and faced with the prospect of having to cover Slovakia’s budget deficit, demanded that the Slovak autonomous government immediately proclaim its loyalty to the Czecho-Slovak state, dismiss Mach as chief of propaganda, and abandon attempts to build an independent Slovak army, which was how it interpreted the requests for Slovak generals and support for the Hlinka Guard.<sup>81</sup>

The autonomous Slovak administration and leadership of the Hlinka Guard, sensing the sudden change of mood in Prague, concluded that a plot to reassert Czech dominance over Slovakia was being hatched. They therefore flew to Berlin for consultations, and began to hint that they could always secede from Czecho-Slovakia altogether. This further escalated the already serious tensions, which the Slovak cabinet attempted to calm on 6 March 1939 with a formal assurance that, whatever happened, Slovakia would – as had been declared at Žilina on 6 October 1938 – remain within the framework of a Czecho-Slovak state. By this point the atmosphere of mutual mistrust had reached such a low – in part because *Slovák*, the Slovak National Unity daily newspaper, was continuing to write about building a ‘new independent home in a free Slovakia’ – that even this announcement only aroused suspicion in Prague that the Slovaks were planning to replace the central Czecho-Slovak government with a Czech diet, so that the Slovaks, Ukrainians/Ruthenians and Czechs would be represented in mathematically exact proportions.<sup>82</sup>

Rather than wait for any further diminution of its power, the Prague government decided to strike. On 6 March 1939, President Hácha dismissed the Ukrainian-oriented members of the autonomous government in Ruthenia. The Presidium of the Slovak National Unity Party, shocked that the central Czecho-Slovak government could disregard its own law on Ruthenian autonomy so blithely, concluded that the only realistic long-term option for autonomous Slovakia was full independence, but also that this would have to wait until the region had the financial backing and personnel to go it alone. Local Nazi authorities in Vienna, who were quicker than the central German government in Berlin to see the potential benefits to the Third Reich of playing off the Czechs against the Slovaks, began to urge Tiso and Sidor to follow the advice of their own radicals, cut the apron strings that tied them to Prague and take the leap to full independence. When, three days after it had sacked the Carpatho-Ukrainian government in Ruthenia, there was still no reaction from Germany, the Prague government decided to strike again, this time in Slovakia.

On 9 March 1939, President Hácha dismissed all members of the autonomous Slovak government (with the single exception of Pavol Teplanský), announced a new government led by Jozef Sivák and declared martial law.<sup>83</sup>

When Tiso protested at being deprived of his office by presidential decree, he was briefly locked up in a monastery. About 250 Slovaks from the radical wing that supported the cause of immediate Slovak independence – among them Vojtech Tuka, Alexander Mach and Matúš Černák – were arrested and sent to prison in Moravia. Deputy Prime Minister Ďurčanský and Karol Murgaš, the official head of the Hlinka Guard, fled to Vienna, where, in cooperation with local Nazis, they began to broadcast pro-independence and anti-Czech propaganda in Slovak.<sup>84</sup>

It was Sivák, away in Rome at the time, who put a spanner in the works of Prague's plans by refusing to accept the post of prime minister. In a special radio announcement on 10 March, the Slovak people were exhorted to stay calm and informed that 'anyone who tells you that the German Empire wants to separate Slovakia from the Czecho-Slovak state is a lying adventurer'.<sup>85</sup> Another Slovak government was named, this time headed by Karol Sidor and excluding Teplanský, leaving rival Slovak groups in Bratislava and Vienna to argue over the airwaves as to which of them was the real 'traitor' to the 'Slovak nation'. Behind the scenes, meanwhile, rival German groups in Berlin and Vienna debated whether or not to support the Slovak separatists. In Slovakia itself, Karmasin's Carpathian German *Deutsche Partei* urged a 'common front of Slovaks and Germans' to defend what it referred to as a 'free Slovak state'.<sup>86</sup>

The constitutional crisis that Prague provoked in March 1939 was intended to enable the central government to strengthen Czecho-Slovak unity and save Czecho-Slovak resources while Germany, which had no reason to be interested, looked the other way. Instead, by breaking its own laws, the Prague government gave the Third Reich its first pretext since Munich openly to intervene in Czecho-Slovakia's internal affairs. The British ambassador to Germany, Sir Neville Henderson, who could see that Prague was 'playing Hitler's game for him', remembered how, on 11 March 1939, it was suddenly announced in Berlin that Tiso (not Sidor, who had just been named head of the Slovak autonomous government) had appealed to the German government for protection. The German press, 'which up till then' had devoted 'little space' to the Czecho-Slovak constitutional dispute, suddenly and ominously adopted 'a violently pro-Slovak attitude'.<sup>87</sup> By the next day, 12 March, it was full of 'wild tales of Czech atrocities' and of 'Germans flying for refuge', racial incidents having been reported in Brno, Jihlava and Olomouc, where there were large German populations. In Prague, a few prescient souls began to display the swastika in their windows.<sup>88</sup>

On the same day, 12 March 1939, Hitler phoned Döme Sztójay, the Hungarian minister to Germany, to inform him that he had decided to withdraw his protection from Czecho-Slovakia and to recognize the independence of Slovakia. Out of 'friendship' to Hungary, however, he said that he would 'hold up for 24 hours the decision whether to grant similar recognition

to Ruthenia'.<sup>89</sup> Hitler then invited Jozef Tiso, who had just suffered the twin shocks of being deposed as leader of autonomous Slovakia and imprisoned, to meet him in Berlin. The leadership of Slovak National Unity gathered hurriedly in the basement of the *Slovák* offices in Bratislava to decide what to do. They agreed that Tiso should certainly go to the meeting with Hitler, but should not enter into any binding agreements without first consulting them.<sup>90</sup>

Tiso, who had just lost his position as prime minister to his rival Sidor, and who might just as easily have ended up being tried for treason in a Prague courtroom, was naturally delighted, upon his arrival in Berlin on 13 March 1939, to find that he was accorded all the honours usually reserved for a head of state. Accounts of the famous meeting between Tiso and Hitler that followed are in broad agreement about what was said, but differ, sometimes sharply, over whether the Slovak delegation was bullied or only tempted into declaring independence. Even Tiso later told two versions of the story: in one, the Führer had generously warned him that the Slovaks would have to act quickly if they wished to decide their own destiny; in the other, Slovakia would never have opted for independence had it not been for the pressure under which it had been placed by Hitler.<sup>91</sup> In a sense, both versions of the story were true. Hitler could indeed have dispensed with Slovakia as carelessly as he had just disposed of Carpatho-Ukraine (Subcarpathian Ruthenia); on the other hand, Prague had just forced Tiso to face the uncomfortable fact that, however much Slovakia might like the idea of independence, it could not yet afford to finance it. Tiso neglected, in published recollections, to mention any more personal motives; but it can hardly have escaped his notice that, in agreeing to declare Slovak independence, he was also being given the chance to displace his rival, Karol Sidor, and to rise from being merely a provincial leader to the head of an independent state. Years later, Jozef Kirschbaum, sometime commander of the university wing of the Hlinka Guard, still insisted that 'the hour of decision in regard to Slovakia's independence had arrived' and that Hitler had offered the nation 'one of the historical opportunities which numerically small, dominated people cannot bypass without paying heavy penalties'.<sup>92</sup>

According to most accounts, Hitler opened the meeting with a diatribe against the Czechs, but then surprised the Slovak delegation by informing them that Bohemia and Moravia were about to be occupied by German troops. He stressed that Slovakia's immediate choice was either to opt for independence, in which case Germany would willingly guarantee its new borders, or else to reject German assistance, in which case he would 'no longer be responsible' for events. It was immaterial which way the Slovaks chose, since German interests did not extend east of the Carpathians, but if they wanted to make a bid for independence they would need to come to a 'very rapid' (*blitzschnell*) decision. There was little reason for Tiso not to be persuaded by Hitler's characteristic bullying mixture of apparently friendly

advice, *Realpolitik* and threats. He expressed his deep gratitude to the Führer, together with assurances that ‘the Slovak nation’ would give him no reason to regret what he had done on its behalf.<sup>93</sup> The meeting had lasted thirty-five minutes. At about midnight on the same night, 13–14 March 1939, Fr Voloshyn sent a telegram to Hitler, via the German consul in Khust, to request that Carpatho-Ukraine be taken under German protection.<sup>94</sup>

From the meeting with Hitler, Tiso went to the Czecho-Slovak legation to phone Sidor, whom he asked to arrange an emergency session of the Slovak diet for the following day. Sidor passed on the request to President Hácha, who in turn consulted Prime Minister Beran. Permission was granted. Sidor then went on Bratislava radio to urge all Slovak deputies to turn up for an ‘historic’ session of the Slovak National Assembly the next day. When, on the morning of 14 March 1939, the Slovak diet went into emergency session – with Tiso in attendance – there was little doubt as to what it must mean. Sure enough, when the first bulletin appeared at lunchtime, it was to announce that the Slovak parliament – no longer a mere diet – had unanimously brought into being an independent Slovak state. Tiso was restored as prime minister, Sidor made minister of the interior and Vojtech Tuka brought in as minister without portfolio. The first Slovak parliament’s next acts were to rush through land and pension reforms and to begin to set down on paper the exact terms of its economic relationship with the German Reich.<sup>95</sup> After a decent interval of a few weeks, Sidor was sent off to be envoy to the Vatican, leaving Tiso as the unchallenged dictator of Slovakia.

Voloshyn’s autonomous Carpatho-Ukrainian government in Khust found out about Slovak independence from the one o’clock news. Since it had still received no reply to its telegram to Hitler, the Council of Ministers went into an emergency session for the rest of the afternoon. At about 6.30 p.m., a slightly reshuffled cabinet – of which Fr Voloshyn remained leader – emerged from Government House. A Proclamation of Carpatho-Ukrainian Independence was read out to the small crowd that had gathered to find out what was going on. The next morning, the blue and yellow flag was flying from Government House and *Sich* guards, just released from prison, were marching down the streets of Khust, terrifying local Jews and encouraging any remaining Czechs to pack up their things and leave at once.<sup>96</sup>

President Hácha and Foreign Minister Chvalkovský, whose country was breaking into pieces, requested and were immediately granted an audience with Hitler in Berlin. Contrary to the impression given in most accounts that the meeting was intended solely to belittle and humiliate Hácha (rather as if he had been a second Beneš, instead of an already compliant ally of Nazi Germany), the president was received with full honours. Even Hácha’s daughter, who accompanied him on the trip, was presented with a bouquet of flowers from Ribbentrop and with a box of chocolates from Hitler.<sup>97</sup>

Czecho-Slovakia's president and foreign minister nevertheless had to endure hours of suspense while Hitler and his entourage watched a film; such contradictions were, as Ian Kershaw has taught us, entirely characteristic of Hitler's unorthodox behaviour.<sup>98</sup> The Czecho-Slovak delegation was finally admitted into the Führer's presence at about midnight.

According to anecdotal accounts of the interview, Hitler – who later claimed to have been taken aback by Hácha's submissiveness – pressed his advantage, announcing that within six hours German forces would enter Czecho-Slovakia from three sides and ruthlessly crush any attempt at resistance. Göring backed up Hitler's threats, insisting that the German air force would reduce Prague to rubble if the slightest resistance were shown. Since the president looked as if he might faint, Hitler's private physician, Dr Morell, gave him an injection. Hitler later enjoyed telling his inner circle how, if Hácha had called his bluff, he would have 'irredeemably lost face' because 'at the hour mentioned fog was so thick over our airfields that none of our aircraft could have made its sortie'.<sup>99</sup> The story, which has the false ring of one of Hitler's boasts, was presumably exaggerated and oversimplified through its telling and retelling by the Führer and his many flatterers. It scarcely matters. What does matter is that Hácha signed a declaration that stated that, in order to 'achieve ultimate pacification', the president of Czecho-Slovakia 'confidently placed the fate of the Czech people and country in the hands of the Führer of the German Reich' in order to guarantee the Czechs 'autonomous development of their ethnic life as suited to their character'.<sup>100</sup> The meeting was over by 3.00 a.m., Hitler having been promised an orderly and peaceful occupation, and Hácha assured that the Czechs of Bohemia and Moravia would retain some sort of national autonomy.

News of the German occupation came over the radio in stages. At 4.30 a.m., Radio Prague announced that German troops would begin to occupy the country at 6.00 a.m. At 5.00 a.m., Berlin radio broadcast a special announcement from Goebbels, who read out Hitler's 'Proclamation to the German People', justifying the impending occupation on the grounds of Czech maltreatment of its minorities, of Slovakia's secession of the day before, and of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown having belonged to the 'Reich' for 'over a thousand years'. From 6.00 a.m., the text of Hácha's declaration was added to the broadcast in further justification.<sup>101</sup> Operation Green (as a contingency plan for the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia had been known to the German military since 1937) did not proceed completely smoothly. In Bohemia, there were embarrassing breakdowns of German army vehicles in the unusually cold and snowy weather. In Moravia, bilingual posters that German soldiers began to plaster on billboards to announce an eight o'clock evening curfew had to be replaced after it was pointed out that they had been printed in German and Romanian, rather than in German and Czech.<sup>102</sup> Despite these and other slight hiccoughs, German troops entered

Prague at about nine o'clock in the morning, just as most people were on their way to work, following their government's instructions to go about their ordinary business.

As mostly silent onlookers began to line the streets to watch the mechanized vehicles proceed through the city centre, some wept or shook their fists, while others gave the Nazi salute or simply looked on impassively. Some eyewitness reports stress the hostility of the German army's reception; others judge it to have been relatively friendly. Contemporary photographs can be found to support both versions of events. The whole of the country was occupied by the afternoon, the source of some bitterly self-deprecating Czech jokes. Ethnic German leaders organized scenes of rejoicing and thanksgiving to welcome the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia. General Radola Gajda, the leader of the Czech Fascist Community, seeing a golden opportunity to seize power, entered the parliament building in Prague to proclaim his own group – together with members of the pro-Nazi *Vlajka* and anti-Semitic *ANO* movements – as forming a new 'Czech National Committee'.

On 15 March, Hungarian troops captured Khust, putting an end to the independent republic of Carpatho-Ukraine, which had only been in existence for a day. By 27 March, the whole of Carpatho-Ukraine had been forcibly annexed to Hungary. As things were to turn out, this was almost the end of the region's association with Czecho-Slovakia/Czechoslovakia, since it was to be annexed to Ukraine, a part of the USSR, less than a month after being liberated from Hungary at the end of the Second World War and with the Prague government's formal permission.

It is often pointed out that Britain, France, Germany and Italy were bound, by the terms of the Munich Agreement, to defend Czecho-Slovakia's post-Munich borders in the event of 'unprovoked aggression'. It was not immediately clear at the time whether or not such an act had occurred. After all, Slovakia and Ruthenia had voluntarily seceded from the state, while President Hácha had requested, in writing, that Bohemia and Moravia be placed in the 'care' of the Third Reich. The Czecho-Slovak army had not been mobilized, nor had there been any spontaneous show of resistance to the German troops. British and French officials expressed sympathy for the Czecho-Slovak plight, but generally took the same line as Chamberlain, who assured the archbishop of Canterbury that 'some day' the Czechs would see 'that what we did was to save them for a happier future'.<sup>103</sup> Their consulates and legations – just like those of the United States – suddenly besieged with Jews, Social Democrats, refugees from Germany, and others with good cause to fear the Nazis – turned the terrified asylum-seekers away.<sup>104</sup>

Hitler, perhaps caught off guard by the speed and success of the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, appears at first to have had no clear notion of what to do with the new territory in his possession. To the considerable alarm

of his immediate entourage, he suddenly announced his desire to make an unscheduled visit to Prague, which he had never seen. Apparently having been duped by his own country's propaganda, he insisted upon taking elaborate security precautions to cross the frontier and seemed surprised to find that there were no victims of anti-German 'terror' for him to visit in hospital.<sup>105</sup> Arriving in Prague at about eight o'clock in the evening, just after the streets had been cleared for the curfew, Hitler, Ribbentrop and other high Nazi officials – together with Konrad Henlein, the former leader of the Sudeten German Party – slipped into the Castle so unobtrusively that Hácha and the Czecho-Slovak cabinet, who were meeting in another part of the complex, were not even aware that they were there.<sup>106</sup>

On 16 March 1939, executive power over Bohemia and Moravia passed to the commander in chief of the German army. *Lidové noviny* led with the announcement of the occupation, together with assurances that the 'Czech nation' had been guaranteed 'autonomous development' and 'national distinctiveness' (*národní svébytnost*).<sup>107</sup> General Johannes Blaskowitz was named as the military commander with responsibility for Bohemia, and General Sigmund List for Moravia. Military tribunals were set up; radios and firearms began to be collected. The territory's new status, as the 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia', was passed into Reich law and the 'Protectorate Decree' read over the radio by Ribbentrop.

The term 'protectorate', whose meaning was not quite clear but which had distinctly colonial overtones, echoed the sense of Hácha's declaration of the night before that the territories of Bohemia and Moravia were in some sense being taken into the 'care' of the Reich; but also suggested that a degree of Czech autonomy would be retained.<sup>108</sup> The understanding appeared to be that German military rule was only a temporary, stopgap measure until suitable arrangements could be made for a *Reichsprotektor* – a sort of governor or viceroy – to take over. Hitler received the mayor of Prague, President Hácha and Minister of Defence Syrový, confirming the impression that the current Czech administration was somehow to continue under the new regime. He deigned to appear at a window of the Castle to acknowledge the rapturous cheering of a group of local Germans below, and, in the Castle courtyard, to inspect a band of local Nazis who claimed to have been wounded in clashes with the Czechs. Having shown his face and allowed himself to be photographed looking in command, Hitler left Prague on 16 March, going on to Silesia (where he spent the night) and then to Brno and Olomouc, before leaving for Vienna on the 17th. Hitler's visit to Prague, which was never to be repeated, was commemorated in one of the first postage stamps to be issued in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

In the wake of the Munich disaster, Czechoslovakia had been left vulnerable to attack from all sides. The central government in Prague, finally forced

to give away long-disputed territories to Germany, Hungary and Poland and to grant Slovakia and Ruthenia autonomy, had tried to appease its neighbours, especially Germany, while simultaneously keeping control of its citizens and protecting the state from any further border revisions. After the proclamation of Slovak independence on 13–14 March, the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia on 14–15 March and the forcible Hungarian annexation of Carpatho-Ukraine (Subcarpathian Ruthenia) on 15–27 March, there no longer existed a Czecho-Slovak state to protect. Czechoslovakia/Czecho-Slovakia, which had been in existence for less than twenty years, had been destroyed by a combination of internal discontent – led by its own German, Slovak and Ruthenian autonomists – and external pressure – applied mostly by Germany, but to which Italy, Hungary, Poland, Britain and France had each contributed a share. There was no reason to suppose that the state, a failed experiment in multinationalism, would ever be restored.