

## CZECH HISTORY

### LECTURE No. 12

1939 - 1945

#### GERMAN OCCUPATION

1939 - 1945 - cataclysmic war decided the future of Europe for decades.

September 1938: Munich agreement: democratic Czechoslovakia was abandoned by its allies to Hitler's Germany. The removal of border regions crippled Czechoslovakia strategically and economically. On 15th March 1939, Hitler's armies marched into Prague unopposed.

Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was incorporated into the German Reich, Slovakia gained independence, becoming a fascist state, with catholic clergy running the country.

The occupation of Czechoslovakia was the prelude to the SECOND WORLD WAR.

Very difficult times during Nazi occupation. Harsh Nazi colonial power, totally beyond the experience of any Czechs.

There was a Czech protectorate government and State President (Emil Hácha). This was subordinate to the German occupation powers, headed by the Reichsprotektor.

The Germans mastered the Czech economy, Czech industry, business and finance. The economic potential of the Czech Lands was to be fully used for the German war effort. Provisional regime for the duration of the war. After the war, the Czech territory was to have been fully germanised.

Cultural autonomy. In the first years of the occupation, intensive Czech cultural activity, patriotic, anti-occupation. Most Czech civil servants played a double game. There were few collaborators. Emil Hácha made only slow, reluctant concessions: "Czech nation, incarcerated in a room with a dangerous lunatic. Humour him, at the same time looking for help."

Internal and emigre resistance. Eventually, conflict between emigré communists in Moscow and democratic emigres in London. The Moscow line won: could use the support of the Russian army, advancing into Europe and a left wing shift in the political allegiance of the Czech and Slovak nations.

Slovakia: conflict between democratic and christian fascist forces. Less political oppression than in Bohemia.

Higher living standards in Slovakia. A considerable proportion of the population supported the regime. But even here, August 1944, democratic Slovak National Uprising.

Thousands of victims, army, intelligentsia depleted.

The experience of the second world war marked a number of generations. Traumatic experience then influenced the further behaviour of Czechs and Slovaks.

## THE END OF THE INDEPENDENT CZECHOSLOVAK STATE

The acceptance of the Munich Agreement (which benefitted Germany) and the Vienna Arbitration (which benefitted Hungary). After Munich, western Allies "guaranteed" the existence of "Czecho-Slovakia".

30th September 1938 - 15th March 1939: democratic system collapsed. The right wing gained ground. President Beneš resigned on 5th October 1939. New government of General Syrový tried to work with the Germans. Aggressiveness of Czech fascist organisations which demanded influence. Slovakia and Ruthenia wanted autonomy.

30th November, 1938: Dr. Emil Hácha was elected president. Premier Rudolf Beran, new right-wing Party of National Unity. Loyal opposition: National Party of Labour (social democrats, left wing national socialists). The Communist Party banned and its leaders went to Moscow.

New Czech Foreign Minister František Chvalkovský tried to create a pro-German foreign policy. But the Germans had decided to liquidate Czecho-Slovakia, using Slovak separatism and Germans living in Bohemia. Slovak and Nazi disturbances: Germans occupied Czecho-Slovakia.

Hitler demanded of Slovakia to become independent, otherwise he would give it to Hungary. The Slovak Parliament declared an independent Slovakia on 14th March, 1939. Hungary occupied Ruthenia.

On 15th March 1939, Germans occupied Bohemia. Some Czech soldiers fought (in Mústek, Northern Moravia, and in Ruthenia).

On 16th March, 1939, Hitler set up PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA. State president Emil Hácha, Czech judiciary, police, constabulary, government army. No executive power. The only Czech organisation Národní souručenství (National Association), a unified trade union organisation.

German occupational offices. In the long term, Germanisation of the Czech territory. Liquidation of the Czech nation. In the short term, to use the Czechs for the war effort.

Reichsprotektor Konstantin von Neurath.

Czech society: THREE SECTIONS. Vast MIDDLE SECTION: people disagreed with the occupation, but were passive. Small strata of collaborators. RESISTENCE GROUPS, including the second Czech premier General Alois Eliáš, contacts with resistance groups at home and abroad. Many resistance people in the civil service, the police, government troops. Many were imprisoned, executed. Those who survived were persecuted after the war.

JEWS were isolated in Czech society. Yellow star. less food, were not allowed to attend arts events, children were not allowed to go to school, property confiscated, aryanisation, transports to concentration camps.

Well built resistance movement, but not on the basis of political parties. The largest, at the beginning Obrana národa (The DEFENCE OF THE NATION) - General Eliáš was a founder.

Left wing Petiční výbor Věrní zůstaneme (Petition Council We Shall Remain faithful).

Communist Party worked in illegality.

SLOVAKIA was a satellite of Germany. German government advisers, but until 1944, Slovakia not occupied by German troops.

Slovak Republic - totalitarian character. State Council and President, dr. Jozef Tiso. Hlinka's Slovak Popular Party, Catholic church. Nationalism against Czechs and Hungarians. Expulsion of the Czechs. Slovakia militarily joined Germany in occupying Poland.

emigré EFFORTS TO RECREATE CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Edvard Beneš, private person in the US, sent protest letters to US president and UK premier on 15th March, protesting against the occupation of Czechoslovakia. He would actively fight for the recreation of Czechoslovakia.

Western Allies did not recognise the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Czecho-Slovak Embassies continued to operate in France, Britain. Czechs gathered around them. Continuity of the Czechoslovak state. Dr Štěpán Osuský, Czech Ambassador in Paris. Beneš: Munich Agreement must be annulled and Czechoslovakia must be recreated as it existed before 1938. France, Britain, first rejected this.

The outbreak of World War II was welcomed by the Czech emigrés. Czechoslovak army units abroad. France, Poland = retreated to Russia. Stalin sent them into labour camps. Some 10 000 Czechs ended up in Gulag and many died there. Some Czech soldiers from Poland to the Middle East and to France. Fought in France until capitulation of France, then 4000 Czech troops withdrew to Britain. Czech pilots and fighter plane pilots in France excelled themselves.

Beneš: President, State Council and government in London. British government recognised the Czechoslovak government as a provisional govt.

Some communist officers refused to obey and were interned. Czech military brigade. Czech airmen in the Battle of Britain: shot 56 German planes. Also in the Middle East in May 1941.

On the Eastern front, 1st Czechoslovak Battalion, battle of Sokolovo in March 1943.

#### Resistance in the Czech Lands

Mass demonstrations on 28th October 1939. Workman Václav Sedláček shot and Jan Opletal, student, mortally wounded. 17th November - 9 student officials executed. Czech universities were closed down and 1200 students sent into concentration camps.

Organizations Defence of the Nation, later Ústřední vedení odboje domácího (Central Headquarters of Internal Resistance). Sabotages, strikes. Czech intelligence

Until June 1941, Czechoslovak Communist Party acted separately, on the orders of the Komintern from Moscow. Was against "imperialist war", because Stalin had a non aggression pact with Hitler. Britain and France seen as the main enemies. Czech communists were not supposed to fight Nazis, but they persecuted them. Czechs were supposed to merge into a new Soviet state after the war, according to the Komintern.

#### Anti-Hitler coalition

Britain, Soviet Union and USA, which entered the war in December 1941

The main principles of Allied policies: The Atlantic Charter, Soviet Union signed in September 1941. From 1942, Czech troops in Russia under General Ludvík Svoboda. People also released from the Gulag for these units.

1941- 42 mostly Czech airmen in Britain fought.

From 1941 - resistance acts in Bohemia. After 22 June 1941, even the communists.

September 1941 - Reinhard Heydrich sent to Prague as a Reichsprotektor to pacify the situation. Carrot and

stick: good conditions for the working classes, suppression of resistance. Curfew, until January 1942 500 people executed. Mass arrests. Resistance movement broken, Premier Eliáš arrested. Group Anthropoid from Britain assassinated Heydrich on 27th May, 1942, died on 4th June. Curfew, Nazi terror, 1600 people shot, 3000 more killed in concentration camps. Terror organised by K.H. Frank, State secretary. Destruction of villages Lidice and Ležáky on 24th June 1942. Assassins discovered and committed suicide. Repression, resistance never again effective.

1941 - Slovakia sent 50 000 soldiers to fight Russia. Anti war moods. Not much resistance.

Thoughts about the new Czechoslovak Republic

London government and Czech communists in Moscow. Cooperation treaty between Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union signed on 12th Dec 1943 in Moscow by Beneš. Hoped that Russia will not interfere in Czechoslovakia, if an ally.

Decision to expell Sudeten Germans. Agreement of Americans, Stalin, the British had certain reservations. Slovakian controversy. Beneš blamed Slovaks for the destruction of Czechoslovakia. Unsolved.

Agreement that those parties who had collaborated with Nazism would be banned. Antidemocratic. The "National Front" bloc, parties from the resistance.

Successful destruction of the Czech resistance by the Gestapo. Small guerilla groups, no geography for it.

Slovakia: crisis of the regime. Sent Slovak Jews to Nazi concentration camps, although nobody has asked them. Slovak National Council - Slovak National Uprising - August 1944. Only then German armies invaded Slovakia. Uprising had to fight Germans. Banská Bystrica 1st September 1944 proclaimed the recreation of Czechoslovakia. Red army fought in the Carpathians, in order to help the Uprising, but badly prepared, many dead. Czechoslovak army took part. 21000 Russian and 1900 Czechoslovak dead. Conflict between Russian and Czechoslovak command. 27th October Germans defeated the Uprising. 60 Slovak villages were razed to the ground, 15 000 people sent to concentration camps, 4000 people, including women and children were murdered. Guerilla warfare continued, from summer 1944 also in Bohemia.

## THE LIBERATION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA

was the result of political interest of the Allies. Stalin annexed Ruthenia, Beneš agreed. Created a communist regime by rigging elections. Rigged elections that Ruthenia wanted to become part of the Soviet Union, with the help of NKVD. Many people into Russian concentration camps. Czechoslovak politicians dependent on Russia.

In Slovakia, Russians also set up pro-communist soviets, arrested people and sent them to Russian labour camps.

Czechoslovak communists into the new government. Emphasised the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army. 144 000 Russians fell, liberating Czechoslovakia. Stalin insisted that Prague must be liberated by the Red Army. Soviet command rejected Eisenhower's proposal that US army could liberate Prague.

1st May 1945 - spontaneous uprising against the Germans. Started in Přešov. On 5th May in Prague. Called for help, Americans did not move from Plzeň, some fifty miles away. Heavily armed Vlasov army helped the Czechs in Prague in dire need. 8th May, agreement about the withdrawal of German troops from Prague. 9th May, Red Army arrived from Berlin.

### Life in the Grey Zone

Young people from Bohemia were sent in large numbers to work in Germany. From October 1939, rationing. Black market. Blackouts. Football, although isolated from the outside world. Private political discussions about the fate of the nation. Young generation came to sympathise with socialism. Intensive cultural effort. Czech culture important national role. Patriotism, historicism. The re-burial of Karel Hynek Mácha. National pilgrimages. Poetry. Czech theatres. Czech film - not one pro-Nazi film was made during the war. Music. Some patriotic works by Smetana were banned, jazz - protest of the young. Painting. Major writers and artists were killed by the Nazis. Czech science and scholarship stagnated: universities were closed.