CHAPTER 6

FROM NATIONAL CLEANSING TO COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP

The Third Czechoslovak Republic came into being on 9 May 1945, the day after VE Day. It fell three years later when the cabinet crisis known to pro-Communists as 'Victorious February' and to anti-Communists as the 'February Coup' tipped the delicate political balance in the National Front government decisively in favour of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (*Komunistická strana Československa* or *KSČ*). On 9 May 1948, three years to the day after the official liberation of Prague by the Soviet army, the Czechoslovak Republic adopted the constitution that set the seal on the country's fate as a totalitarian police state. Czechoslovakia, the last country in Europe to fall behind the Iron Curtain, was to remain under the control of the *KSČ*, itself kept under the watchful eye of the Kremlin, for the next forty-one years. But unlike other Soviet satellites of Central and Eastern Europe, the Czechoslovak People's Democracy was neither forced to go Communist nor to ally itself with the Soviet Union. It did both voluntarily, acting in what looked to the political leadership of the day to be national self-interest.

The Third Republic may have been brief, but it was understood, even at the time, to be politically significant. Beneš was not alone in believing postwar Czechoslovakia to be at a crossroads, its faith in parliamentary democracy and Western alliances too shaken to be recovered, its ethnic hatreds too deep to be overcome. 'Czech leaders', as Jeremy King has put it, 'convinced that their "nation" had barely escaped annihilation', naturally 'ranked questions of Communism or capitalism, East or West lower than the question of how to protect Czechs against a renewed German onslaught in the future'.[1] The decision to remove Czechoslovakia's principal ethnic minorities from the country and to purge the body politic of its right wing had been taken by the Czechoslovak National Council in London and the exile Communist leadership in Moscow long before it was formally announced at Košice in April 1945. It only remained for the unelected government of the National Front of Czechs and Slovaks to decide how far and how quickly – not whether – to move in the only direction that was politically possible, given its own political outlook and the current political climate: towards strong

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government, socialist economic planning and the closest possible alliance with the Soviet Union.

In May 1945, although Soviet and Czechoslovak flags were being flown side by side and portraits of Beneš and Stalin were on display everywhere,[2] it was not yet possible to guess how ruthlessly the Czechoslovak (*KSČ*) and Slovak (*KSS*) Communist parties would come to emulate the worst features of the Soviet system, nor how high the price of Soviet protection from the bogey of a resurgent Nazi Germany would turn out to be. In those first heady days following the liberation and reunification of a state that might so easily have been left divided, it was easy to be swept along by President Beneš's rhetoric about Czechoslovakia being historically determined to mediate between East and West and follow its own, evolutionary path to a utopia that was at once socialist and Czech nationalist. Some even imagined that the renewal of the state at the war's end might mean a magical return to the democratic, multinational state that had existed before the Munich Crisis. But although Czechoslovakia had recovered most of its pre-Munich territory and went back to its pre-Munich name, its ethnic composition, international alliances and political structures, to say nothing of its public mood, were not the same. The Third Republic, so often portrayed as a time of national liberation and democratic revival whose promise was only spoiled by the Communist putsch of February 1948, was in reality a brutal and brutalizing time, one whose ruthlessness was driven as much by resurgent Czech nationalism as by specifically Communist ambition.

By the time that Czechoslovakia was back on the map, most of its Jewish citizens were dead.[3] As survivors slowly made their way back across a dislocated and chaotic Central Europe, the first horror to greet them was discovering how few Jewish family members, friends and acquaintances had survived. Eva Blochová, who had got through her teenage years at Theresienstadt, Oederan and Auschwitz by telling herself that, once the war was over, she would go back to Prague and her old lifestyle, quickly discovered that 'the prewar city, with its lively Jewish community, did not exist any longer. In this respect, Hitler had succeeded: Prague was *Judenrein* [free of Jews].'[4] Shocking in a different way was to find out how many neighbours, friends and acquaintances to whom Jewish families had entrusted their belongings before being called up for deportation now denied that they had anything to return or complained at having to give them back.[5] Nor was it easy for Jews who had lived through the hell of the SS camps to listen to Czechs, who had been able to stay in their own homes, complain of having had to live in fear of the Gestapo, let alone of having been unable to send their children to university or forced to endure the names of tram stops being called out in German. Before the war, Blochová later mused, 'I hardly knew who among my girlfriends was Jewish. Now the chasm, due to our very different wartime

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experiences, seemed unbridgeable.'[6] Some Jewish survivors were as mistrustful of the new nationalism as they had been of the old; others sought refuge in the Communist Party, which claimed to despise anti-Semitism and oppose Fascism, and immediately had existing anti-Jewish legislation reversed.

Gypsies, like Jews, had been treated by the Czech and Slovak, as well as the German, authorities as a 'problem' to be 'solved' by means of forced labour, imprisonment, deportation and, ultimately, extermination. It was the German authorities who organized the systematic killing of Gypsies for which the special Gypsy Camp at Auschwitz became infamous; but it was Czech and Slovak officials who sent them there. Only a tiny fraction – estimated at between 5 and 12 per cent – of Bohemian and Moravian Gypsies, whether Czech- or Romany-speaking, survived the systematic attempt to destroy them. By contrast, the vast majority of Slovak Roma and other Gypsies survived the war, not because the Tiso regime was any more humane than that which prevailed in the Protectorate, but rather because the Slovak Ministry of the Interior came to the view that it was more efficient to keep Jews and Gypsies at home for slave labour than to continue to pay the German authorities to 'resettle' them in the east.[7]

Communists of all backgrounds, including two future *KSČ* general secretaries and presidents of the republic, had suffered in their tens of thousands as prisoners of Czech, Slovak or German authorities.[8] Out of a prewar Communist membership of about 100,000, more than half had spent the war in concentration camps, where about a quarter perished.[9] Just 28,485 prewar members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (*KSČ*) and about 12,000 from the Slovak Communist Party (*KSS*) survived the war; only because 20,000 Social Democrats were added to the *KSS* by the forced merger of September 1944 was there a postwar Slovak Communist party big enough to be worth mentioning.[10] With its postwar membership so badly depleted, the Communist Party could not afford to be choosy about who joined its ranks, and on 12 May 1945, the *KSČ* officially declared its intention to 'open the doors of the party wide' and to welcome 'workers in the factories, working peasants and the intelligentsia'.[11] Although supposed in theory to be made up 'primarily' of those who had 'already proved themselves' in the 'heroic struggle against bestial fascism', in practice neither the Czech nor the Slovak branches of the Communist Party could afford to throw away the energy of the young, the ambition of careerists or the expertise of former members of the Gestapo, Hlinka Guard and *ÚŠB*.[12]

In addition to countless numbers of 'opportunists' – including peasants and workers eager for confiscated German and Magyar property in the former Sudetenland and in southern Slovakia – the Communist Party was able to recruit from the first generation of Czechoslovak citizens to be able to vote from the age of eighteen, many of whom were already starry-eyed

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young converts to Stalinism.[13] These children of the war, who had no conscious experience of any other political system than authoritarian totalitarianism, were especially ripe for conversion and easily exploited by the more seasoned prewar Communist leadership. Zdeněk Mlynář, a Bohemian Czech who joined the Communist Party in the spring of 1946, when he was not quite sixteen, remembered his decision to become a Communist as akin to a conversion experience. With the 'leap of faith' to Communism, as he later put it,

> comes automatic knowledge. Your inner world is transformed; it takes on direction, and though in fact you still know nothing, you now feel in a position to pass judgement on everything. You know what is progressive and what is reactionary, what is good and what is bad for the future of mankind. And you also know what is and is not scientific without having to bother with any concrete scientific research.[14]

Within a year of the liberation, Communist Party membership in Czechoslovakia had risen to over a million, making it as large as all the other political parties put together, and one-sixth the size of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. By the end of 1948, membership figures had risen to almost two and a half million out of a population of roughly eleven million, meaning that every third adult was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. The Czechoslovak Communist Party, which had twice as many members as the Hungarian and almost four times as many as the Polish Communist parties, thus became, 'in proportion to the total national population', the largest Communist Party 'in the whole world and of all time'; it may, indeed, have 'reached a pinnacle', not only 'in the history of Communism', but in the history of political parties generally.[15]

Wartime policies had already done a great deal to pave the way for the rise of Communism in the Bohemian Crown Lands. By abolishing the universities, imprisoning intellectuals, deporting Czech Jews and cracking down on patriotic societies, extreme right-wing Czech and Nazi German authorities had effectively silenced the Czech middle class. The policy of favouring manual labourers with extra rations, pay bonuses, works outings and other team-building exercises had helped to foster worker solidarity and class confidence. One of the many terrible legacies of the Nazi policy of divide and rule in the Protectorate was that traditional areas of class, ethnic and national conflict had only been further exacerbated. Resentment by those who had been losers in the war towards those who appeared to have profited from it combined with new government directives, decrees and legislation to give postwar class and economic jealousies an extra edge. Heda Margolius, a Czech Jew who had managed to escape from Auschwitz but lost everything

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in the war, parodied better-off peasants and small farmers in the countryside (who were soon to be victimized as 'kulaks' and forced to collectivize) as having 'Oriental carpets' on their floors and 'original paintings' on their walls, and as eating sausages off 'silver platters' and drinking beer out of 'cut glass'.[16] 'Partisans,' she remembered with bitterness,

> who throughout the war had lived in the woods, widows of the executed who for years had slept on the floor of some basement, and ailing survivors of the concentration camps spent day after day waiting at the Housing Authority while butchers and grocers and other wartime profiteers walked in by the back door and were seen first.[17]

The wife of a Communist functionary, scrimping and saving to get by, similarly resented her cleaning lady for demanding a 'meat lunch, morning and afternoon snacks, plus 40 Crowns an hour', far more, she claimed, than her husband was earning.[18] At a time when so many had suffered, to varying degrees and in different ways, sympathy for others appears to have been in short supply.

Among the many dubious practices that the postwar Czech and Slovak authorities learned from the Nazis was how to pre-empt political dissent with the judicious use of rationing, populist slogans, wage and benefits policies, and the redistribution of confiscated property. The National Front government now put these skills to good use, launching a sweeping nationalization programme, together with a dramatic land reform one, both of which were explicitly socialist as well as pro-Slav nationalist. Between 14 May 1945, when finance minister Vavro Šrobár announced the abolition of the anti-Semitic property laws,[19] and 27 October 1945, when twenty-three presidential decrees were rushed through in a single day (in order to coincide with the first postwar meeting of the Provisional National Assembly, itself timed to coincide with the twenty-seventh anniversary of Czechoslovak independence, soon to be renamed 'Nationalization Day'),[20] ninety-one laws came directly from the office of the president, the remainder either from the cabinet Presidium or individual ministries.[21] In order to keep up with the sheer volume of new legislation, the government printing office worked flat out through the six-day working week.[22] Together, the policies put forward by the National Front of Czechs and Slovaks added up to a brutally nationalist and radically socialist revolution, not a return to either democracy or the free market as they had existed before Munich.

Liberation brought joy and relief; it also unleashed envy, resentment and hate. At the Small Fortress in Theresienstadt, where the Nazi authorities had killed more than 8,000 Czechs, revenge by former prisoners was immediate. A doctor gave 45 German prisoners – mainly SS and Gestapo – lethal injections;

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in all, about 550 out of the 3,725 German postwar prisoners kept in the Small Fortress are estimated to have died, 70 directly at the hands of former prisoners and the rest as a result of the conditions in which they were kept.[23] Nikolaus Martin, a recent inmate of the Small Fortress, whose mother was Czech and whose father was German, applauded the execution of his former SS guards, but was shocked, upon his return to Prague, to come across a group of German-speaking civilians, stripped to the waist and with swastikas painted on their backs and foreheads, being forced to replace cobblestones in the street. He was even more disturbed by the sight of three electrocuted bodies, said by the surrounding mob to belong to Gestapo agents, hanging from a lamppost in a nearby square.[24] Rosemary Kavan, the English bride of a Czech Communist, was similarly horrified to come across a group of German women, tufts of their hair having already been torn out, being forced by the surrounding crowd to lick a huge swastika painted on the pavement. Only because her husband had taught her the Czech phrase '*nejsem Němka, jsem Angličanka*' ('I'm not a German, I'm an Englishwoman') did Kavan narrowly escape the same fate.[25]

No sooner had the president of the Republic and ministers of the National Front government arrived in liberated Prague than they began inciting Czechs and Slovaks to take advantage of the historic opportunity to rid themselves, forever, of their ethnic German and Hungarian rivals. It was the 'democratic' Czechoslovak president and political leadership who led the calls to 'cleanse' the state of millions of its German- and Hungarian-speaking citizens, although Czech and Slovak Communist leaders Klement Gottwald and Gustáv Husák were quick to see the potential benefits to the 'class struggle' and only too eager to add 'economic traitors' and 'bourgeois elements' to the already impressive list of proposed victims. Above all, it was Beneš, who had been campaigning hard throughout the war for a 'radical' solution to the problem of Czechoslovakia's minorities, who could see that the Great Powers needed to be presented with an ethnic conflict appalling enough to make 'orderly' mass expulsions seem the more 'humane' and 'civilized' option. (A similar technique, it will be remembered, had been tried by the Czech leadership seven years earlier to rid the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic of its Jewish, especially its German-Jewish, population; it had also been used by the Slovak authorities to rid the region of its Czechs, Jews and Gypsies.)[26]

On 16 May 1945, in his first public speech in Prague after his return from exile, President Beneš explicitly appealed to the masses gathered in the Old Town Square to seize the moment to 'liquidate out [*vylikvidovat*]' the Germans and Magyars in 'the interest of a united national state of Czechs and Slovaks'. Minister of justice Prokop Drtina, another Czech National Socialist, similarly called on Czechs to take matters into their own hands, emphasizing: 'We must

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begin immediately, this very moment, to expel the Germans from our lands. We must use all possible means – nothing can be allowed to cause us to stop or even to hesitate.' The Czech Communist contribution to the general chorus of urgency lay in its demands – publicized in newspapers and on the radio – that local authorities not only 'immediately' begin the 'severe' punishment of Germans, but also that ordinary people spontaneously 'uncover and seize' ethnic Czech collaborators, traitors and 'lackeys', and 'chase them' to swift judgement and punishment before a 'people's revolutionary court'.[27]

Those who were lumped together – in political speeches, newspaper articles, radio addresses, presidential decrees and official statute books – as 'Germans, Hungarians, Traitors and Collaborators' were from the first subject to random acts of violence and cruelty, and to being rounded up into prisons and concentration camps, or simply dumped across the border with Germany or Austria.[28] The politically calculated orgy of violence, vigilanteism and ethnic hatred that lasted through the spring and summer (May to August) of 1945 is rather disingenuously known in Czech as the *divoký odsun* ('Wild' or illicit 'Transfer'), to distinguish it from the more 'orderly' and 'legal' official *odsun* (transfer or expulsion) of a further 2.8 million ethnic Germans from their homeland which followed over the course of 1946.

The cruelty shown to millions of ordinary German-speakers was justified through their official description as 'traitors' and 'Fascists' (with the misleading implication that the contemporary Czech and Slovak regimes had somehow not been Fascist or collaborationist). The opportunity to turn the tables on 'the Germans', regardless of whether or not German-speaking individuals had actually been Nazi, Nazi sympathizers or even German nationalists, proved impossible for many Czechs to resist, particularly when spurred on by their own national politicians. In the German-Czech city of Brno, where combined police and paramilitary forces had incarcerated some 1,600 suspected collaborators and war criminals – including about a hundred Czechs – the local authorities begged Prague urgently to set up some sort of war crimes tribunal, since, as they explained, they were being forced to use machine guns to keep Czech lynch mobs at bay.[29] At Olomouc, also in Moravia, the local Communist-controlled National Committee put up red posters (just like the ones previously used by the Protectorate authorities) to urge citizens to turn in not only Nazis and war criminals, but also 'profiteers', 'opportunists', 'open or hidden fascists' and Czechs who had 'in any way transgressed against the Czech people and their national honour'.[30] On 12 May 1945, a concerned Prime Minister Fierlinger asked his ministerial colleagues to issue a radio appeal to ask Czechs to stop attacking innocent Germans. Since the primary purpose of inciting pogroms was to drive away as many Germans and Hungarians as possible, it is depressing, but not surprising, to find that the rest of the cabinet dismissed his request as

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'unnecessary'.[31] Fierlinger, like every other prominent Czech politician of the day, in any case agreed with the principle of national cleansing; and announced, at the celebration to commemorate the 325th anniversary of the Battle of the White Mountain (*Bílá hora*), that 'the wrong inflicted upon us after White Mountain, which was again to have been repeated under the Nazi regime, will be completely rectifed . . . Czechs and Slovaks will again be the masters of their own land'.[32]

Although most of Subcarpathian Ruthenia's 725,357 inhabitants did not yet know it, they were about to be handed over to the Soviet Union, their province turned into 'Zakarpats'ka Ukrajina', the Transcarpathian *oblast'* (region) of Ukraine. In order to forestall objections that 'the people' of the region ought, as had been promised at Košice, to be consulted, Subcarpathian Ruthenia's forcible inclusion in the Soviet Union was justified on the strength of a rally held by delegates from the Communist-dominated National Committees based in the recently restored regional capital of Užhorod (*Uzhhorod*). The transfer of property was then formally agreed in a Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty signed on 29 June 1945, which was pointedly passed into Czechoslovak constitutional law on 22 November 1945, seven years to the day after the central government in Prague had been forced to grant Subcarpathian Ruthenia its extorted autonomy.[33] From the point of view of the Prague government, the change meant that a common border was created with the USSR; the central Czechoslovak government was freed from having to subsidize what had always been its poorest region; and the state was rid of a potential cause of constitutional instability, together with a large number of minorities: not only Rusyn/Ukrainians, but also a smattering of Magyars, Romanians, Gypsies and Jews.

On 15 May 1945, two months before the central government, the Slovak National Council brought out a retribution law in the shape of a decree 'Providing for the Punishment of Fascist Criminals, Foreign Oppressors, Traitors and Collaborationists, and for the Creation of a National Tribunal and of People's Courts' in the territory of Slovakia.[34] Some 26,296 prisoners, mostly Carpathian Germans, were soon being held in sixty-three forced-labour camps across Slovakia[35] (including the infamous Svätý Jur, Ústie na Orave, Krupina, Nováky and Ilava ones, where the lack of medical care made the mortality rates particularly high). In the Lands of the Bohemian Crown, where there were as yet no specific directives from the centre, anti-German measures began to escalate out of control as denunciation followed denunciation and local authorities, in the absence of any specific directives from the centre, dreamed up whatever measures they thought best. In what many people began to notice was turning into a tit-for-tat revenge, which simply inverted victim and oppressor, ration allowances for ethnic Germans were cut to the same inadequate level that had formerly been allotted to Jews.[36]

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In some places, Germans were required to wear a white armband so that they could be easily identified.[37] From June, German schools were forcibly closed. Germans were allowed to shop only at certain hours, and were forbidden to visit places of public amusement, to use public means of communication or to change their place of residence.[38] Hundreds of concentration camps and other facilities were used to hold Germans and suspected collaborators; by mid-June, roughly twenty thousand people were being detained at thirty-seven different locations in Prague alone.[39] At two of the most infamous postwar Czech camps – the Hanke internment camp for Germans near Ostrava and the Kolín camp for suspected collaborators in eastern Bohemia – the torture, rape and murder of inmates apparently became institutionalized in much the same way as in wartime camps run by the SS.[40]

Beneš could have tried to dampen the flames of ethnic hatred. Instead, he stoked them by deliberately conflating Sudeten, Carpathian and Reich Germans as if all were the same and all were equally responsible for Hitler's crimes. Speaking at Tábor in mid-June 1945, for example, he reminded his audience how, during the May Crisis of 1938, he had asked 'the Germans' for 'tolerance' and 'forgiveness'. Since 'their' answer had come in the form of 'terror, treason, concentration camps for us Czechs', he declared, it should not 'surprise anybody in the whole world when we say that we are determined to get rid of these [*sic*] Germans forever'.[41] On 21 June 1945, a presidential decree promised to speed up the confiscation and redistribution of land formerly belonging to 'Germans, Hungarians, traitors and enemies of the Czech and Slovak nation'.[42] This only added the incentives of greed and envy to an already lethal cocktail of ethnic hatred and collective guilt, a righteous fury that was kept on the boil by frequent reports of alleged German sabotage in the pages of *Rudé právo*, the Czechoslovak Communist Party's daily and the most widely read Czech newspaper of the day.[43]

The most notorious incident to result from the atmosphere that rumours of continued German sabotage and Gestapo plots engendered occurred on 31 July 1945, at Krásné Březno just outside Ústí nad Labem (*Aussig*) in the former Sudetenland, when somewhere between eighty and four hundred Germans – men, women and children – were lynched, shot or drowned in the River Labe (*Elbe*) in response to rumours that an explosion in a nearby military depot, which had killed twenty-eight people and injured more, was the work of German terrorists.[44] This horrifying incident was then used by Beneš and other leading Czech politicians as the clinching argument to justify the transfer of the maximum possible number of Germans (and Hungarians) from the Czechoslovak territories. On 20 July 1945, arrangements were made for Czechs, Slovaks and 'other Slavs' to 'resettle' the lands and property that had belonged to ethnic 'Germans, Hungarians and other enemies of the state' in the rapidly emptying border regions.[45] Jan Šejna, a Czech peasant

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who got his start in life by taking over a farm confiscated from a Sudeten German family awaiting deportation, was an enthusiastic recruit to the Communist Party in 1946. He not only did his bit to 'indoctrinate local farmers' and 'discredit the bourgeois opposition'; when the time came, he prepared lists of 'bourgeois elements' to be arrested 'without a twinge of conscience' since he considered them to be 'enemies of the revolution'.[46] He rose to become chief of staff to the Czechoslovak minister of defence before eventually fleeing the country.

It was becoming clear that a top political priority was the creation of a police network large, flexible and politically reliable enough to cope with the enormous demands being placed upon it by everything from mass trials and summary executions to forced expulsions and exchanges of whole groups of people. In the summer of 1945, in the midst of the initial, 'wild' phase of the 'transfer', prewar policemen, partisans and armed trade unionists were brought together under the umbrella of an organization calling itself the *Sbor národní bezpečnosti* (*SNB*) or 'National Security Corps'. The *SNB*, an enormous, sprawling organization, was subdivided into various specialist police agencies. These included a uniformed police corps known as the *Veřejná bezpečnost* (*VB*) or Public Security, a criminal investigation branch and so-called emergency units. Three additional police agencies that were soon to become intimately associated with the Communist regime were the *StB* (*Státní bezpečnost* or State Security, spelt *Štátná bezpečnost* in Slovak), which was originally created by the National Front government as a specialist agency to seek out collaborators, and two less prominent agencies that were set up by the Communist minister of the interior: the intelligence and espionage service known as *ZS*, and the border guards who were later to become so important in patrolling the perimeter of the Iron Curtain.[47]

From 19 June 1945, those identified by the *StB* as 'Nazi criminals; traitors; and their helpers' were dealt with by 'extraordinary people's courts' which were hurriedly set up all over the country to cope with the need for the state to be seen to be punishing the enemy within.[48] Although outwardly legal forms of trial and punishment had returned, Benjamin Frommer has found Czech retribution courts to have been so brutal as to have been almost without parallel in bloodthirsty postwar Europe. Czech people's courts not only convicted an astonishing 97 per cent of those who were brought before them, but – thanks to extraordinary provisions decreed by President Beneš which insisted that death sentences be carried out within two or three hours of a verdict and that there be no right of appeal – sent more defendants *per capita* to their deaths than anywhere else in Europe apart from Stalinist Bulgaria.[49] In all, this initial, 'wild' stage of the transfer of ethnic Germans resulted in the forced expulsion of about 660,000 German-speakers from Czechoslovakia, the killing of anywhere between 19,000 and 30,000 more, and

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the premature death of untold others. Uncounted numbers of ethnic Czechs, said by informers, people's tribunals or simply the surrounding mob to have collaborated with the 'enemy' or to have betrayed or shamed the 'nation', also perished.[50] By December 1945, complaints to the Ministry of the Interior that Czech policemen were torturing suspects and witnesses to secure convictions had become so commonplace that a young National Socialist politician pleaded explicitly with the nation to 'de-Nazify' its 'state administration' and 'security forces' and do something about its 'police jails where . . . utterly innocent people have suffered'.[51]

While the Czech authorities were expelling and interning ethnic Germans and denouncing as a traitor any Czech who showed the slightest sign of having sympathized or fraternized with or profited from ethnic Germans, Slovaks – who were not in the position of being able to blame Fascism on a rival ethnic group – proved much more reluctant to convict war criminals and collaborators, although equally quick to take advantage of the opportunity to rid their own territory of ethnic Germans and Hungarians. When, at the end of October 1945, the Allies handed over ex-president Jozef Tiso and his government, whom they had captured in Austria, to the Czechoslovak authorities, the Prague government apparently expected the Slovak population to rejoice and be grateful. Instead, even the chairman of the Democratic Party and head of the Slovak National Council, Jozef Lettrich, showed suspicion at the sight of 'Tiso and his government' being brought 'back to Slovakia in chains' by 'the State Security organs which were under the orders of a Communist Minister of the Interior'. This, he later remembered, was 'the first thing' in postwar Czechoslovakia to cause 'much bad feeling' among the Slovak population.[52] An underground leaflet campaign was immediately launched in defence of the Tiso regime, together with 'Cross Campaign', through which sympathy for Tiso was expressed by wearing a crucifix pin on one's lapel.[53] The Slovak people's courts, which by 31 December 1947 had tried 20,561 defendants, convicted only 8,059 (as compared with about 168,000 tried, and 69,000 convicted, in the equivalent Czech courts).[54] Slovaks proved at the very least ambivalent about being expected by the Czechs – widely considered in Slovakia not only to be a separate, but also an aggressively domineering, rival nation – to regard Slovak Fascists and anti-Semites, but who were also Slovak patriots and observant Catholics, as simple criminals.

On 2 August 1945, in concert with similar legislation across Central Europe (but following a precedent set by the Prague government in August 1939, when it had wanted to deprive Jews and German refugees of their Czecho-Slovak citizenship), several million ethnic Germans and Hungarians had their Czechoslovak citizenship revoked through a special constitutional law decreed by President Beneš.[55] This marked the beginning of the official

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expulsions, known collectively in Czech as the 'Removal' or 'Transfer' (*odsun*), which the Prague government justified as being in accordance with the principle of mass transfers of population agreed at the Potsdam Conference on 3 August 1945 (somewhat disingenuously, since it had done everything possible to influence the Potsdam decision).[56]

According to the letter of the law, 'reliable comrades and anti-Fascists' – in practice a euphemism for Communists – were supposed to be spared, in line with the government's insistence that the German and Hungarian populations were not being expelled as detested ethnic groups, but rather as Fascists, traitors and war criminals. Since it was Slovaks, not Hungarians, who had established the anti-Czech, anti-Communist and anti-Semitic Tiso regime in Slovakia, this logic was specious, to say the least. As it happens, unpublished correspondence between President Beneš and Minister of the Interior Nosek held in a Prague archive reveals that even the tiny minority of ethnic Germans who met the stringent 'anti-Fascist' criteria were also deported to Germany, the only difference in their treatment being that the 88,614 'anti-Fascist Germans' that the Ministry of the Interior recorded as having been expelled by 29 October 1946 were allowed to keep their property and were transported separately from the rest.[57]

According to detailed guidelines put forward by the Ministry of the Interior, which was responsible for the 'selection' and 'assembly' of German-speakers into concentration camps, their forcible expulsion – by train, motor vehicle or on foot – was considered so 'politically important' as to take precedence over any economic considerations.[58] Registers of those to be transported were prepared by district National Committees, which were also responsible for appointing the armed *SNB* (State Security) or army guards to head transports and 'confiscate' valuables, together with any 'anti-state' or 'anti-Czech' materials, during luggage and body searches.[59] Germans awaiting deportation were permitted to take up to 30 kg (about 66lbs) of personal luggage, including food, and up to 1,000 Deutschmarks [*sic*] per family, but no cameras, valuable watches or Czechoslovak currency. They were required to bring their own blanket, cutlery and bowl with them to the concentration camps, to leave their vacated homes tidy and securely locked, and to pack all forbidden articles in parcels, each to be accompanied by a detailed list of contents.[60]

Reporting for the *Daily Mail* in August 1945, Rhona Churchill described the first wave of expulsions from Brno. When the *SNB* arrived:

> They marched through the streets calling on all German citizens to be standing outside their front doors at nine o'clock with one piece of hand luggage each ready to leave the town forever. Women had ten minutes in which to wake and dress their children, bundle a few possessions into their suitcases, and come out onto the pavement. . . . Then they were marched at gun-point towards the Austrian border.[61]

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A characteristically complacent report, filed by the Czech police a year later, shows that the procedure remained unchanged and unquestioned. 'On 12 July 1946,' this particular report reads:

> 214 persons of German nationality were taken from Pardubice to the concentration camp at Ústí n[ad]. Orl[icí]. Organizational arrangements went smoothly, down to the last detail. More than 20 gold and silver objects (rings, earrings, watches, etc), some articles of clothing, 57 bank and savings books and cash to the value of 44,515.80 crowns were seized and retained after the documentation check.[62]

On 15 March 1946, the seventh anniversary of the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Karl Hermann Frank, one of the few Sudeten Germans to have held a post of any importance in the Protectorate, went on trial in Prague.[63] Since Frank, a vicious anti-Czech, shared direct responsibility for some of the worst atrocities to have taken place in the Protectorate – including the repression of Czech students in the autumn of 1939 and the terror (including the destruction of Lidice) that followed the assassination of *Reichsprotektor* Heydrich – his widely publicized trial was immensely popular from the first. It ended on 22 May 1946 with the spectacle of his public hanging, in front of thousands of spectators, in the courtyard of Pankrác prison. The trial – which was broadcast on state radio and improperly preceded by the publication of incriminating testimony taken from his interrogations – was treated in both parliament and the Czech press as the trial, not merely of a single war criminal, but rather of what Benjamin Frommer has termed the 'collective criminality of the German minority in Czechoslovakia' in order to prove 'the collective guilt of an entire nation'.[64]

The notion that Bohemian, Moravian and Silesian German-speakers, the Czech-speakers' traditional rivals in the Bohemian Crown Lands, were collectively guilty and inherently criminal helps to explain the inhumanity with which German-speakers (many of whom, ironically enough, could just as easily have opted to register as Czechs) were treated. Some Germans were deported immediately, others were rounded up, their citizenship removed, property confiscated and homes sealed, only to be left indefinitely in labour or concentration camps: those classified as 'political prisoners' could end up being kept for years or even decades. Vojna prison camp near Příbram, originally built in 1947 to hold German prisoners, was by 1949 the largest forced-labour camp for political prisoners in all Czechoslovakia. Surrounded by watchtowers, barbed wire and minefields, its resemblance to an SS concentration camp was made explicit by the temporary placement, at its main gate, of a placard that read 'Work Makes You Free', this time in Czech rather than German.[65]

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On 15 November 1946, Czechoslovak Minister of the Interior Nosek presented President Beneš with a special illuminated parchment to mark and celebrate their joint achievement: the 'victorious completion' of the Czechs' 'ancient struggle for national and political rights' and the 'culmination' of the 'liberation' of the Czechs and Slovaks which had 'begun' on 28 October 1918 but been 'consolidated' by the 'May 1945 revolution' in the shape of the complete elimination of Germans from the Bohemian Crown Lands. The certificate showed the Ministry of the Interior's sensitivity to Beneš's particular weaknesses by taking the trouble to proclaim the 'transfer' of the Germans to have been undertaken 'legally' and with the explicit 'approval of the three Great Powers'. It also made clear the scale of the *SNB/StB*'s technical achievement, boasting with characteristically bureaucratic indifference to human misery that 2,170,598 Germans had – between 24 January and 29 October 1946 – been removed permanently by means of 1,646 trains, 67,748 railway carriages, 4 hospital trains, 960 automobiles and 12 boats. A further 249,911 Germans, the document proclaimed, still remained on Czechoslovak soil; but only temporarily, since they had yet to be 'transferred' for either 'economic' or 'humanitarian' reasons.[66] (This turns out in practice to have meant that, as had been the case with the 9,000 or so Czechs who were not immediately expelled from autonomous/independent Slovakia in 1938–39, they had specialist skills that the state still required; or else, as had been the case with Jews and Gypsies temporarily left in the Slovak camps under Tiso, that their slave labour, such as at the uranium mines at Jáchymov, was still required.)

The Western powers, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm, had proved willing to go along with the principle of collective guilt in the case of 'the Germans' (even if this meant Germans who had never set foot in the Reich) since 'the Germans' were also hated at home. They were not willing to consent so easily to the wholesale transfer of Hungarian-speakers, who were not associated in the public mind with any particular atrocities and seemed to have been rather less 'collaborationist' than the majority of Czechs and Slovaks. The National Front's determination to rid Slovakia of its ethnic Hungarians (Magyars) had therefore to be handled differently. Instead of a straight expulsion – and in line with the same logic that had prevailed in Slovakia under the Tiso regime – 73,000 Slovaks were moved from Hungary to Slovakia in exchange for 74,000 Magyars, who were moved from Slovakia to Hungary. A further 44,000 ethnic Hungarians were forcibly resettled in the border regions of Bohemia and Moravia that had been vacated by expelled Germans; additional arrangements were made to 'repatriate' ethnic Slovaks living in Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria.[67] The rest were to be dealt with by a special 'Re-Slovakization Commission' (*Reslovakizačná komisia*) established in Bratislava. A series of strong measures, it informed the central government in Prague – including the removal of Hungarian-speakers from

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a whole range of jobs and the confiscation of their property – would need to be taken in order adequately to 're-Slovakize' southern Slovakia, which, as a consequence of the Vienna Arbitration Award, had been in Hungary for the past six years. The Commission stressed the vital importance of what it called the 'absolute purification' of municipal and district National Committees, tax offices, financial offices, post offices, courts and the police, together with banks and insurance companies.[68] In addition to those Hungarian-speakers who lost their jobs, property or liberty in the supposed interests of 'state security', Slovak historian Elena Mannová reports that a further 326,697 Hungarian-speakers were 're-Slovakized' (in other words, prevented from being allowed to work or vote until they agreed to declare themselves 'Slovak' rather than 'Hungarian').[69] Eugen Steiner, a Jewish member of the Slovak Communist Party, was struck by how insistent the Slovak minister of foreign affairs, Vladimír Clementis – although supposed in theory to be free, as a Communist internationalist, of national chauvinism – was 'on the Hungarian issue' and how 'vehemently' he fought 'for the annexation of three Hungarian villages on the right bank of the Danube',[70] which led to the 're-Slovakization' even of 'purely Hungarian' towns and villages. These were then given provocatively Slovak nationalist names, so that Párkány, for example, became 'Štúrovo' and Gyalla was renamed 'Hurbanovo'.[71] Steiner also noticed how Gustáv Husák, the leader of the Slovak Communist Party (*KSS*), deliberately avoided following the Czechoslovak Communist Party's example of appointing Jews to high posts on the grounds that to do so would make the Slovak branch of the party 'appear to be Jew-ridden' and therefore 'an easy target for hostile allegations, such as those which had been made earlier by Hlinka Party propaganda'.[72]

Fifty years before the term 'ethnic cleansing' was coined, semi-democratic Czechoslovakia – through a combination of border changes, legal discrimination, imprisonment, forced transfers, exterminations and expulsions – had rid itself of so many ethnic minorities that its claim to be a 'national' state of the Czechs and the Slovaks became plausible for the first time since its creation in 1918–20. In the border regions, from which some 2.5 million Sudeten Germans had been forced out, without compensation, approximately 1,460,000 persons deemed to be ethnically suitable Slavs were moved in to claim their property, houses, farms and fields.[73] German schools, shops, hotels, sawmills, glass factories, businesses and farms could be made over to look Czech relatively easily; not so the region's characteristically German cottages, churches and graveyards – battered and faded perhaps, but still with their German plaques, inscriptions and headstones, which gave the area an eerily abandoned and empty feeling.[74]

In 1921, the proportion of 'Czechoslovaks' (a category that, as discussed in Chapter 3, had then included not only Czechs and Slovaks but also a fair

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number of Jews and Rusyns/Ukrainians) had officially been put at around 64 per cent; by 1950, the figure for Czechs and Slovaks alone had risen to an astounding 94 per cent.[75] For the first time in their history, Bohemia, Moravia and Austrian Silesia – the historic Lands of the Bohemian Crown – because they were left with only a tiny minority of ethnic Germans and Poles, could claim with accuracy to be overwhelmingly 'Czech' lands. Only in Slovakia, where most Gypsies (Roma and others) had survived the war and there were still compact communities of Rusyn/Ukrainian-speakers in the Prešov region and semi-Slovakized Magyars along the border with Hungary, were there any significant minority populations left. Even so, all ethnic minorities – Poles, Hungarians, Romanians and a remnant of Germans – were thereafter kept under routine surveillance by the *StB*, whose regional officers were expected to report to Prague, every month, on their activities, political outlook and the state of their morale.

Changing the ethnic composition of the state was not only about satisfying Czech and Slovak nationalist sentiment, although this is the aspect of the postwar reorganization that has traditionally tended to be ignored or downplayed. It was also supposed to prevent the kind of destabilization that had led to Munich and associated disasters and to ensure the continued political dominance of the Left. Just as postwar Czechoslovakia's close alliance with the Soviet Union was deemed necessary to prevent a recurrence of German aggression, so the removal of its ethnic Germans, Hungarians and Rusyns/Ukrainians was supposed to make it impossible for the state's minorities ever again to be used as fifth columnists by hostile foreign powers. But there was an elephant in the room. The problem that – together with the Sudeten German problem – had led most directly to the collapse of the first Czechoslovak state, the ethnic problem that no one wanted to mention, was the Slovak problem.

The Czechoslovak Communist Party had originally calculated that the postwar swing to the political Left would be sharpest in Slovakia, where there had been a genuinely widespread and popular uprising against the Tiso regime in 1944, and where most peasants – now that the Agrarian and Slovak People's parties had been outlawed, and there was confiscated land to redistribute – might be expected to vote Communist. It was with this assumption in mind that the Communist Party appeared initially to show such concern for Slovak – as well as Czech – national feeling, insisting upon the inclusion of the Slovak National Council in the National Front government and the maintenance of a separate Slovak Communist Party (one largely boosted by the forced merger in 1944 with the Slovak Social Democratic Party), and resulting in the stress it put on the so-called 'Magna Carta of the Slovak Nation', with its commitment to re-establish Czech–Slovak relations on the basis of sincere 'brotherhood' and genuine 'equality'.

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It soon became apparent that the Slovak peasant and Catholic vote was not, as anticipated, being transferred to the Slovak Communist Party, but rather to the conglomeration of centre-right parties known as the Democratic Party. The other parties in the National Front sought to weaken the Democratic Party's support by exploiting its internal tensions and inconsistencies, while simultaneously taking advantage of the anti-German and anti-Hungarian decrees to expel as many Catholic clergy and religious as possible. As Karel Kaplan has found, the Slovak Communist leadership even tried to set up a rival, nominally Christian Democratic (Catholic) Party; but after it presented the Catholic clergy with a political programme which was a mere copy of the Communists' own, the Catholic side withdrew.[76] For its own part, the Czech Social Democratic Party attempted to revive its old Slovak branch by setting up a third Slovak political party, the Party of Labour. In the weeks leading up to the general elections set for May 1946, a block of conservatives within the Democratic Party formed a breakaway party, originally called the Christian Republican Party, but then renamed – because of objections by the National Front government to its confessional and conservative overtones – the Freedom Party.[77] This left Slovakia with four political parties.

In April 1946, just before the state-wide elections, the leadership of the Democratic Party struck a deal with the right wing of the Freedom Party, taking them into its own membership in exchange for a promise of a fixed ratio of Catholics to non-Catholics to hold office in institutions controlled by the Democratic Party, guaranteed state funding for Church schools, and other issues close to the heart of the old Slovak People's Party. The Democratic Party apparently also promised either to prevent Jozef Tiso from being put on trial, or else to ensure that, like some of the Czech Protectorate authorities, he would be given a relatively light sentence.[78] Having failed either to split or to discredit the Democratic Party in Slovakia, the *KSS* and *KSČ* were unexpectedly left to face state-wide elections without an alternative strategy for Slovakia.[79]

Czechoslovakia's first postwar general elections were held on 26 May 1946. The Soviet Union, which had announced that it would be moving troops across the country on 22 May, responded to protests that this might prejudice the election results and – with nothing much to lose, since all important aspects of its relationship with the Czechoslovak People's Democratic Republic had been decided with Beneš during the war – tactfully agreed to wait. This seemed to give weight to Stalin's assurances that the Soviet Union had no intention of interfering in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs and to President Beneš's assertions that his country's 'new and transformed democracy' would be able to live 'side by side' with 'the Soviet Socialist system' until Czechoslovakia could be turned gradually into a socialist utopia by an

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'evolutionary path, empirically and by scientific economic planning, without catastrophes and without violence, by agreement and co-operation'.[80]

The 1946 elections were genuinely free, but they can scarcely be called 'democratic', given that the two most popular prewar parties, the Czech branch of the Agrarian Party and the Slovak branch of the People's Party, were not allowed to stand and that millions of the state's former citizens – Germans, Hungarians and all others classified by the *StB* as 'traitors' and 'collaborators' – were barred from voting. On the strength of a platform that included demands for a new constitution, the launch of a two-year economic plan, a further stage of land reform and new agricultural and commercial taxes,[81] the Communists, with almost 38 per cent, won by far the largest share of the state-wide vote. The second most popular party, the National Socialists, took 18.29 per cent, the Czechoslovak People's Party 15.64 per cent, the Democrats 14.07 per cent and the Social Democrats 12.05 per cent (the votes for the Slovak Labour Party and Freedom Party were negligible).[82] Klement Gottwald, as chairman of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, the single largest party, replaced the Social Democrat Fierlinger as prime minister, receiving ovations so enthusiastic that Harry Pollitt, head of the British Communist Party, claimed never to have heard the like 'except the ovations given to Comrade Stalin in the Soviet Union'.[83]

The government interpreted the swing to the Communist Party as indicating broad support for its nationalization programme as set out at Košice, together with its 'solution' to the minorities 'problem' of expelling unwanted ethnic groups and redistributing their wealth among Czechs and Slovaks. The Communists could see that the strategy of being even more Czech nationalist than the traditionally Czech nationalist parties was working like a dream in Prague, and generally throughout Bohemia. Overall, the state-wide election results were so astonishingly good that the Communist Party decided to make 51 per cent of the vote its goal for the next elections, which were scheduled for May 1948.[84] This campaign was launched by Gottwald with the slogan 'For a majority of the nation' and repeated assurances that the Czechoslovak Communist Party would not import the Soviet system, but follow its 'own road to socialism', one that would work with the other political parties to bring about a genuinely new republic, one that would be 'truly democratic, truly national, truly ours'.

But although the *KSČ* had proved overwhelmingly popular in Bohemia, suggesting that its policies had succeeded in wooing voters who might, in the old days, have supported the Agrarians, in Moravia the vote was more or less evenly split between the Communists and the Catholics, while in Slovakia it was the Democratic Party – not the Slovak Communist Party (*KSS*) – that emerged as the clear winner, taking 62 per cent of the vote to the Communists' 30 per cent, resulting in 63 seats in the Slovak National

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Council for the Democratic Party, 31 for the Communist Party, and just 6 for the Labour and Freedom parties combined. This meant that Jozef Lettrich, chairman of the Democratic Party, became the chairman of the Slovak National Council, while the Communist Gustáv Husák became chairman of its executive body, the Board of Commissioners.[85] This regional disparity meant, as Steiner afterwards recalled:

> When the Slovak Communists wished to curb the power and influence of their stronger partner in the Slovak national organs, they had in practice to look to the central government in Prague for support and understanding. This was the case not only in important matters of economic and social policy, but even in matters which would ultimately represent an obstacle to the autonomy of Slovakia, even though it was for such autonomy that the Communists had earlier fought. In the end, the decision of the central government and Czechoslovak National Front in Prague to limit the powers of the Slovak National Council and the Board of Commissioners was accepted by the Slovak Communists.[86]

On 8 July 1946, the National Front government, now led by Prime Minister Gottwald, launched its first two-year economic plan. The Communist Party then turned its attention to solving the Slovak problem. The first step intended to bring Slovakia into line with the broadly socialist and anticlerical consensus in the National Front government was for the Communist Party to launch a smear campaign against the Democratic Party. As Jozef Lettrich remembered, Democrats were suddenly accused everywhere of 'anti-Soviet attitudes, of anti-Communist agitation, of having misused the influence of the Roman Catholic hierarchy for their own ends, and of having rehabilitated the former members of the Slovak People's Party'.[87] The climate of suspicion created by the Communist-led campaign made it easy to justify sharply curtailing Slovakia's administrative and governmental powers, which was done in the so-called Third Prague Agreement, which insisted that Slovak political and administrative institutions be subordinated to the relevant central governmental ministries and that legislation passed by Slovak representatives be approved by the central government in Prague.[88] Finally, at a joint meeting of the Presidiums of the *KSČ* and *KSS*, it was decided that there should be a severe verdict in the forthcoming trial of Jozef Tiso, together with another two members of the former Slovak National Unity, since – as Viliam Široký, a rising star in the Slovak Communist Party, put it – the trial would serve to 'liquidate the whole reactionary Slovak past'.[89]

The growing confrontation between the *KSS* and the Democratic Party in Slovakia, overlapping awkwardly with increasing tension between Slovak autonomists and Prague centralists, turned the Tiso trial into the catalyst for a dramatic resurgence of mutual Czech–Slovak mistrust. Even Lettrich, the

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chairman of the Democratic Party, although the Tiso regime had sent him to a concentration camp, appealed to Minister of Justice Drtina not to allow the former president to be condemned to death, while the Vatican requested that Tiso, as a Catholic priest, be kept in a monastery rather than a prison and that, in the interests of the peace, his trial not be held in public. In January 1946, a group of Slovak bishops sent a letter to President Beneš claiming that Tiso had sought 'the lesser evil' and begging that his case not be handled 'with ruthless harshness'.[90] On the occasion of a Czech–Slovak football match held in Bratislava less than a week after the May elections, the crowd sang the independent Slovak republic's national anthem, called for Tiso's release and shouted anti-state and anti-Czech slogans until they were restrained by units of the *SNB*.[91]

The Communists retaliated by organizing demonstrations against Tiso, inundating the president, Czechoslovak government and Slovak National Council with thousands of telegrams and resolutions, and sending deputations of partisans, former political prisoners, participants in the 1944 Uprising and workers to the chairman of the Slovak National Council, Lettrich, 'in order to exert the maximum pressure upon him against procuring clemency for Tiso'.[92] Right up to February 1948, as Steiner later recalled in wonderment, the leadership of the Slovak Communist Party 'did not directly oppose the limitation of Slovak autonomous rights even those guaranteed in the Košice Programme, and the increased influence of the central bodies in Prague' because it seemed more important to them to ensure the confiscation of German, Hungarian and collaborators' property and 'stricter punishment of leaders of the former Slovak State'.[93]

The Tiso trial lasted from 2 December 1946 until 19 March 1947 (which happened to coincide with his name day), when there were demonstrations all over Slovakia, dominated by women demanding his release and singing a mixture of Catholic hymns and patriotic Slovak songs.[94] After deliberating for a month, on 15 April 1947 the National Court sentenced Tiso to death, whereupon both it and President Beneš were besieged with telegrams and petitions either to insist that the verdict be carried out or else to appeal to the president to exercise his right to grant clemency. Despite the firm expectation throughout Slovakia that his sentence would be commuted to a long term in prison, Tiso was hanged almost immediately, on 18 April. As if to underline what looked suspiciously like a double standard in the treatment of Czech and Slovak war criminals, the trial of Rudolf Beran, the former leader of Czech National Unity and the Protectorate government, which took place in Prague at the same time as the Tiso trial in Bratislava, ended in a twenty-year jail sentence rather than an execution. Tellingly, among the crimes of which Tiso was convicted was that of dividing the republic. As Brad Abrams has pointed out, even under the heading of Tiso's 'crimes against humanity',

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maltreatment of ethnic Czechs was given precedence over the deportation of Slovak Jews.[95] This political trial was as much about the Slovaks' 'betrayal' of the Czechs as about the crimes committed by a thoroughly repellent Slovak dictatorship against its own citizens.

The next stage in the attempt to bring Slovakia into line came directly from the Communist Party, working in tandem with the security services, and especially the increasingly influential and well-organized *StB*. In May 1947, the Communist Party instructed the minister of the interior to draw up a list of all former members of the Slovak People's Party who were in influential positions, and to push for their retirement. This was followed, in June, with the presentation of a report to the National Front government, written by high-ranking officers in the *StB*, the aim of which was to persuade the central government that the security situation in Slovakia was becoming critical and the need to purge former members of the Slovak People's Party urgent. At a rally held at Devín on 6 July 1947, Prime Minister Gottwald accused the Democrats of being reactionaries and of aiding and abetting anti-state elements; the same accusations were immediately repeated by Antonín Zápotocký on his own tour of Slovakia.[96]

On 14 September 1947, the Slovak minister of the interior announced that an 'anti-state conspiracy', directed from abroad by Sidor and Ďurčanský, had been 'discovered': it was claimed that some fifty officials of the Democratic Party – including its general secretary, Fedor Hodža, the commissioner for finance, Matej Josko, and Ján Ursíny, the deputy prime minister of the National Front government – were in secret contact with Slovak émigré communities and plotting to renew an independent Slovak state and assassinate President Beneš.[97] After about seven hundred people had been arrested in connection with the 'conspiracy', the widespread atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion provided an excuse for the Slovak Congress of Trade Unions and Employees Councils, convened in Bratislava on 30 October at the request of the Communists, to call on the Board of Commissioners to resign and be replaced with men who 'enjoy the confidence of the Slovak people' and who would ensure that Slovakia would be ruled 'in the spirit of the Slovak National Uprising' and 'the reconstruction programme of the Gottwald government'.[98] Although a majority on the Board of Commissioners, who were from the Slovak Democratic Party, knew better than to do it, six members, led by their Slovak Communist chairman Gustáv Husák, did indeed resign. After protests from the Communist Party and the intervention of the Communist prime minister, Gottwald, on 20 November 1947 Slovakia's Board of Commissioners was reconfigured in such a way as to ensure that – despite the Democratic Party's clear majority in the 1946 elections – no single party had a majority.[99] Although Deputy Prime Minister Ursíny resigned in protest, the results of this Communist coup in Slovakia went unchallenged.

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As members of the non-Communist parties became increasingly critical – in cabinet, the National Assembly and the non-Communist press – of the irregularity of the methods used by the Communists, and especially of their steady infiltration into all branches of state security, more and more revelations about brutal police interrogations, improper procedures, mass intimidation campaigns and other 'Gestapo methods' were brought to light. These were immediately countered by almost hysterical-sounding resolutions, speeches, telegrams and articles from the Communists about reactionary plotters in the 'anti-state' democratic parties. In his New Year's speech on 1 January 1948, Prime Minister Gottwald assured the Czech and Slovak nations that 'the National Front, resolutely following the government program and the will of the people', would rid itself 'of the reactionary elements which are working against the program of the government, against the people, and in the interests of subversion'.[100]

From September 1947, when the purge began in Slovakia, there was a rapidly escalating sense of a Communist offensive in the Czech lands as well, as the Communist-controlled Ministry of the Interior appeared to uncover 'plots' and 'conspiracies' with increasing frequency and to resort to 'mobilizing the masses' through organized strikes, petitions, demonstrations and telegram campaigns every time one of its demands or proposals was blocked by members of the other parties in the National Front. And there were other worrying signs. Parcel bombs were sent to Petr Zenkl, Jan Masaryk and Prokop Drtina. The Czechoslovak government, having voted to accept Marshall Aid, immediately withdrew its request after it was made clear that the Soviet Union considered taking American money to be an unfriendly act. As the atmosphere of mutual hostility and suspicion afterwards known as the Cold War began to make itself felt in earnest, Communist parties all over Central and Eastern Europe were growing less tolerant of national deviations, less willing to countenance the idea that there might be a variety of different 'roads' to socialism.

From the moment they had returned to Czechoslovak soil in the spring of 1945, ministers in the National Front government had worked together – Communist and non-Communist alike – to incite mob vengeance, establish people's courts, abolish the right of appeal and carry out summary executions, often based on retrospectively defined crimes and usually with a clear presumption of guilt. They had solicited denunciations, criminalized interethnic mixing, and countenanced legal discrimination against German- and Hungarian-speakers: at first, they had even turned a blind eye to mob lynchings and police torture. Millions of their fellow citizens, including children, had been deliberately degraded, imprisoned and forcibly expelled. Only now, too late, did the non-Communist ministers appear to begin to understand that, unless they put a stop to the Communists' willingness to move seamlessly from national

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cleansing and postwar retribution to purging the politically impure and rooting out the 'class enemy', the next victims would be themselves.

On 13 February 1948, cabinet members from the National Socialist, Democratic and Czechoslovak People's parties finally sought to put a stop to further Communist infiltration of the *SNB* by asking Václav Nosek, the Communist minister of the interior, to explain the suspension of eight non-Communist police commissioners and their proposed replacement with eight Communist Party members. Instead of replying, Nosek pleaded illness and excused himself from the relevant cabinet meeting. On 17 February, the dissenting ministers announced that they would refuse to take part in further cabinet meetings until the non-Communist police were returned to their posts. The Communist Party immediately proclaimed a state of emergency for all its members, and began organizing a People's Militia.[101] The next day, National Socialists Petr Zenkl and Hubert Ripka met with Beneš, whom they – like many others – appear to have assumed would not give in to Communist pressure but would staunchly defend the 'democratic' state that he had helped to establish.[102]

On 20 February 1948, twelve ministers from the non-Communist (National Socialist, Slovak Democratic and Catholic Populist) parties forced a showdown by sensationally announcing their resignations from the cabinet. The apparent intention was to cause the government to fall, so forcing fresh elections which would reveal to all the world that the Communists had lost popular support since 1946 and so enable their influence to be curtailed. According to the constitution, half of the cabinet's twenty-six ministers would have to resign in order to bring down the cabinet. Since the Social Democrats and unaffiliated ministers – foreign minister Jan Masaryk and minister of defence Ludvík Svoboda – did not resign, the anti-Communist lobby found itself one minister short, with the Communist bloc in a majority of one. All attention now turned to Beneš, who as president could choose either to refuse or to accept the twelve resignations. As at the time of the Munich Crisis ten years earlier, Beneš, who bore a good deal of personal responsibility for this new crisis, stalled for time, unsure how to react.

While Beneš hesitated, Gustáv Husák, the Slovak Communist chair of the Board of Commissioners in Bratislava, acted. On 21 February, he dismissed the non-Communist ministers in the Slovak government on the grounds that, since their colleagues in Prague had resigned, they no longer had a mandate to govern. Husák then reconfigured membership so that ten out of fourteen seats were held either by the Communist Party, with just a token two seats left for the Democratic Party and one apiece for the Freedom Party and the Social Democrats.[103] This caused the collapse of the Democratic Party in Slovakia and gave the two socialist parties an overall majority in the Czechoslovak state. Meanwhile, the Czechoslovak Communist Party rallied its supporters with

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appeals on state radio for mass demonstrations to condemn the actions of the twelve ministers, described as reactionaries who wanted to block 'progress' and the fulfilment of the socialist promises set out in the National Front government's political programme. In addition, Gottwald appealed for 'Action Committees' to form themselves and remove 'reactionary and subversive elements' from public life. In all, the Action Committees are said to have dismissed about twenty-eight thousand state and public employees and expelled some seven thousand university students statewide.[104]

On 21 February, there was an overwhelming response to the Communist Party's appeals: gatherings and demonstrations took place throughout the country, crowned by a huge rally in Prague's Old Town Square, where Prime Minister Gottwald warned a receptive crowd that an 'anti-populist, anti-democratic, anti-socialist bloc' was threatening to push Czechoslovakia towards 'a new Munich'. At the Castle, meanwhile, Beneš was inundated with telegrams and petitions from delegations of factory workers insisting that he accept the ministerial resignations. The Communist Party continued to make use of the state airwaves to call for workers in every village, city and workplace throughout the country to form themselves into Action Committees to keep up the pressure.[105] On 22 February, out of eight thousand trade-union delegates assembled in Prague at the request of old-time Czechoslovak Communist Antonín Zápotocký, only ten were said to have withheld their support from the Communists.[106] Meanwhile, a self-styled People's Militia, consisting of around fifteen thousand men, some of whom were even armed, also took to the streets in protest. With the population seemingly split roughly 50:50 for and against the Communist Party, Beneš – even if he had wanted to – could not have risked calling on either the police – some forty thousand-strong, but thoroughly infiltrated by Communists and responsible to a Communist minister of the interior – or the army, made up of about 140,000 troops, and responsible to the same minister of defence, Ludvík Svoboda, who had failed to support the non-Communist ministers in cabinet.

The *coup de grâce* came on 24 February, when over two million citizens, roughly one-sixth of the entire country's population, took part in a general strike organized by the Communist Party and the trade unions to demonstrate support for the Communist prime minister. In the face of such a massive and well-organized show of popular feeling in favour of the Communist Party, President Beneš bowed to the pressure. On 25 February 1948, in the speech that was to become the prime symbol of the 'bloodless coup' afterwards referred to by the Communist regime as 'Victorious February' (*Vítězný únor*), Prime Minister Gottwald announced that he had 'just returned from the Castle', where the president had accepted the twelve ministers' resignations and approved the Communist-majority government. This was the moment frozen in a photograph that was afterwards painted, reproduced on posters,

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shown in museum displays and schoolbooks, and even featured on a postage stamp, which was taken to represent the very moment of the Communist victory over 'reactionary' and 'bourgeois' elements. Never mind that Czechoslovakia had already been a People's Democracy for three years; that one of Gottwald's closest comrades would soon have to be airbrushed out of the photograph; that Gottwald was obviously and audibly drunk; or that the photograph had actually been taken during a speech that had been given a few days earlier, and at a different location.[107] Political truth was already more important than the literal truth.

On 26 February 1948, the day after the Communists' victory in cabinet, the lead story in all the newspapers was the composition of the new Gottwald government. The very next story to appear on the front page of *Rudé právo*, the Czech Communist Party daily, was the beginning of proceedings against Zenkl, under the ominous headline 'The People Cleanse the Republic of Saboteurs, Traitors and Unreliable Elements'.[108] Jozef Lettrich resigned as chairman of the Slovak National Council and went into exile; his place was taken by the Slovak Communist Karol Šmidke. Eleven out of the fifteen people on the Board of Commissioners were now members of the Communist Party.[109]

President Beneš swore in the new ministers in Gottwald's National Front government on 27 February 1948, bolstering Communist claims that their rise to power had been perfectly legal. Of the twenty-three ministers in the National Front government, eleven were now Communist Party members and an additional four were Social Democrats who could be relied upon to support the Communist line. Two further ministers – Jan Masaryk and Ludvík Svoboda – although without party affiliation, had done nothing to prevent the anti-Communist ministers from being ousted. Just six ministers – too few to block any new government measures – were from the other political parties in the National Front: the Czechoslovak People's Party and National Socialist Party for the Czechs and the Democratic Party and Freedom Party for the Slovaks. Although the outward form of the political system had not changed, a single Communist Party made up of two branches – the Czechoslovak Communist Party or *KSČ*, and the Slovak Communist Party or *KSS* – could now be sure that, providing it maintained internal discipline, whatever legislation it liked would be passed by the cabinet and rubber-stamped by the National Assembly. This was the logic of the prewar 'National Unity' and the postwar 'National Front' taken to its ultimate conclusion.

Czechoslovaks abroad, unsure what was going on at home, had to decide which way to jump. One of the many Czechoslovak diplomats to choose to stay abroad was General Jan Ingr, who eventually joined Moravec's exile counter-intelligence group in the United States. At the Czechoslovak Embassy in London, Rosemary Kavan, the English wife of the Communist press secretary Pavel Kavan, remembered how eight non-Communist diplomats asked

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for asylum while 'the rest of us threw a party and sang old revolutionary favourites and new militant songs with inspiring words like "Now we've got what we wanted!" and "Hey rup! Roll up your sleeves and get down to work!" '[110] At home, where political opinion was similarly split down the middle, it was already felt to be dangerous to criticize the Communist Party or to speculate aloud about the legitimacy of 'Victorious February'. Some people left the country altogether, going on 'holidays' from which they were never to return or braved illegal border crossings to seek political asylum in Austria or Germany. Others, unable or unwilling to leave their homeland, began to complain that they had been liberated from one form of tyranny only to be cast into another, a refrain that began to be taken up by Western anti-Soviet propaganda abroad.

On 10 March 1948, just two weeks after the cabinet coup, foreign minister Jan Masaryk, son of the President-Liberator, was found dead on the pavement below his residence in the Czernin Palace, the Foreign Ministry building. Rumours, which have persisted ever since, began to circulate that he had been pushed, either by Soviet or Czechoslovak agents; but – just like Beneš – Masaryk had shown no public sign of opposing the Communists and Pavel Kavan, the last person to have seen him alive, like others who knew about his history of depression, believed in the official verdict of suicide.[111] The case was to be reopened in 1968, 1993 and 2002.[112]

Like every other public occasion of the day, Jan Masaryk's funeral was seized upon as an opportunity to parade national unity, political consensus and cross-party solidarity within the Communist-dominated National Front government. A lavish state funeral was held, with tens of thousands of mourners following the slow progress of the coffin from the Czernin Palace to the Pantheon of the National Museum, and special memorial issues of popular magazines were brought out to commemorate the event.[113] Another crowd waited just outside the manicured grounds of the presidential summer residence in the village of Lány, where Masaryk was buried alongside his father, in a simple family plot. Principal mourners included not only the surviving members of the Masaryk and Beneš families, together with Prime Minister Gottwald and his wife, Marta, but also mayors dressed in their municipal robes, uniformed Legionnaires from the First World War, soldiers, police officers and a whole variety of Communist dignitaries. The new foreign minister, Slovak Communist Vladimír Clementis, was much photographed speaking at the Masaryk family grave; but for all the sentimental associations which were made with the pre-Munich First Republic, his appointment meant that yet another important cabinet post had gone to the Communist Party.

The end of the Third Czechoslovak Republic is usually presented as a second Czechoslovak tragedy to follow the first great tragedy of Munich. According to one version, the democratic, tolerant and humane traditions of

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the First Czechoslovak Republic – almost mystically embodied in the persons of Edvard Beneš, T.G. Masaryk's spiritual son, and Jan Masaryk, his actual one – were restored to the Czechoslovak 'nation' only to be destroyed by the wiles and ruthlessness of the Communists. A second classic view suggests that Czechoslovak Communism, which would naturally have taken a moderate, evolutionary and distinctively Czech or Czechoslovak path, was instead forced to conform to an inappropriate, crude and ruthlessly Soviet pattern. The ubiquity of these two views, which seem to underpin virtually all writings on the topic, helps to explain why so much effort has been expended – sometimes in the teeth of the evidence – to portray Beneš as committed to democracy during the February Crisis and to find evidence to suggest that Communist agents – ideally Soviet ones – were responsible for Jan Masaryk's death.[114] The obvious alternative, to blame the rise of Czechoslovak Communism on the nationalist chauvinism and political opportunism of some misguided Czech political leaders, is clearly less palatable. The Third Czechoslovak Republic, together with the illusion that the state could remain both socialist and democratic, a compromise between the parliamentary democracies of the West and the people's democracies of the East, was over after February 1948. So was the chance of keeping even a limited and partial democracy. These opportunities were not lost primarily because of outside interference, but rather because a majority of politically active Czechs and Slovaks wanted something more urgently than they wanted democracy: an ethnically homogeneous nation–state under the protection of the Soviet Union.

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