

Article REVIEW

Igor Lukes. “The Czechoslovak Special Services and Their American Adversary during the Cold War.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9.1(Winter 2007): 3-28.

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Intelligence failures often have serious consequences, as recent events show. Sixty years ago, American intelligence experienced another such failure, finding itself unprepared for the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia and its networks quickly destroyed. Examining the reversal in his article, Igor Lukes provides a valuable picture of the contest between American and Czechoslovak special services in the immediate post-war years.

Lukes shows the scale of the American failure to be far greater than previously assumed by detailing the poor quality of the Czechoslovak side. Although the Czechoslovak services finished the war with a number of successes, many of the most experienced and able veterans were removed and replaced by Soviet-trained recruits, remarkable only for their loyalty to the Party. Later purges removed even the most able of those. Defections were another problem, and the overall quality of operations, not surprisingly, was low. Yet, despite being staffed by inexperienced and unprofessional personnel, the Czechoslovak services were able to successfully counter the Americans. This is especially surprising if one considers the advantages enjoyed by the American side. In contrast to its behaviour in other East European countries, the Red Army left Czechoslovakia in 1945 without leaving behind a Communist government, and Czechoslovakia enjoyed a brief democratic interlude before the 1948 coup. Moreover, many of the Czechoslovak political and military elite at the highest levels were willing to cooperate with U.S. intelligence, hoping to aid the cause of democracy. Addressing the reversal, Lukes finds its origins in the Americans' own lack of training, noting, for example, the ignorance of basic tradecraft and reliance on informal networks rather than clandestine agents.

Lukes approaches the topic from the Czechoslovak side with a detailed examination of the four main Czechoslovak intelligence agencies. The overview he provides is especially useful to those unable to read Czech, who are getting for the first time a comprehensive, and at times colourful, look inside the intelligence services during the immediate post-war years. Until recently, English-language work on Czechoslovak intelligence consisted of memoirs or the accounts of individual episodes, many the contributions of Lukes

¹ An additional H-Diplo review of this article by Peter Bridges is available at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/Bridges-Lukes.pdf>.

himself.² Petr Blažek's and Pavel Žáček's organisational history of the StB (*Státní Bezpečnost* or State Security, which grew and later took over intelligence functions) provides considerable technical detail, but avoids examining the actual operational functioning of the service, which is where Lukes' article shines.³ Lukes has also managed to find an area neglected by Czech scholarship. Although the security services have been one of the most popular subjects, the focus has been on their domestic functioning and their role in the totalitarian system. International dimensions, beyond the role of Soviet advisors and ties with other fraternal states, have not been addressed. The article makes thorough use of recent Czech work, as well as material from the Interior Ministry, Foreign Intelligence Service, and National Archives. Lukes' ability to track down the personal papers of a number of the participants, or in some cases even the participants themselves, should also be commended.

The approach, however, results in a number of limitations. While it fully shows the extent of the American failure, it leaves the reasons for that failure insufficiently addressed. Having reviewed the sorry state of the Czechoslovak side Lukes recounts the advantages enjoyed by the Americans, concluding that the defeat becomes that much more humiliating. Why the failure occurred also becomes that much more interesting. Readers, however, are only provided with the reflection of a former consul and, earlier in the article, the observations of two Czechoslovak military counter-intelligence officers to satisfy their curiosity. Although it is difficult to take issue with the consul's explanation or those of the officers, a more systematic examination of the reasons behind the American failure would have benefited the article. A comparison with the experiences of British or French intelligence in Prague, touched upon at the end, could have been rewardingly developed and would have brought further illumination. Also welcome would have been a look inside the U.S. military mission and intelligence section of the embassy since the attention devoted to the Czechoslovak services leaves the treatment of the Americans seeming a bit rushed.

The article is most interesting in some of its implications for accounts of the 1948 takeover and understanding of the period. Intelligence services were the eyes, ears, and oftentimes teeth of the Czechoslovak state. It was not for no reason that within the coalition government the Communist Party insisted on being allocated the ministries that controlled the services. Given their importance, the poor quality and functioning of the intelligence services is striking. Recent work on the period stresses the weakness

² For instance Igor Lukes, "Changing patterns of power in Cold War politics: the mysterious case of Vladimír Komárek", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 3:3 (Winter, 2001) and Igor Lukes, "The Rudolf Slansky affair: new evidence", *Slavic Review*, 58: 1 (Spring, 1999).

³ Petr Blažek and Pavel Žáček, 'Czechoslovakia', in Krzysztof Persak and Łukasz Kamiński, eds., *A Handbook of the Communist Security Apparatus in East Central Europe*, (Warsaw: Institute of National Remembrance, 2005): 87-162.

amongst Party organisations.⁴ Rather than the ruthless, disciplined, revolutionary vanguard of Leninist lore, a picture, though still fragmentary, is emerging of a party unable to adequately organise itself in the factory or, as Lukes shows, run a competent intelligence service. Although the weakness of the Party would seem to underline the extent of the opposition's own weakness, that may not be the proper conclusion. Lukes' final comment on the failure of Western countries to grasp the threat facing them is revealing and resonates with Bradley Abrams' work on Czechoslovak political culture in the 1945-48 interlude. Abrams finds a willingness amongst the democratic opposition to accept the language and concepts of the Communist Party, resulting in a failure to articulate a meaningful alternative to the public.⁵ The root of the opposition's problems seems to have been an inability to perceive the extent of their peril. The issue may not so much be one of weakness and even greater relative weakness, as one of awareness and the failure of the non-communist side, both domestic and international, to grasp the threat it was facing.

It is unfortunate that a more developed examination of the reasons for the American failure was not offered, as it could have revealed what exactly the Americans were aware of. But that should not mar an otherwise valuable article. Not only does Lukes clearly demonstrate the extent of the American failure, he also provides a remarkably detailed look inside the operations of the Czechoslovak intelligence services.

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⁴ See for example Johann Smula, "The party and the proletariat: Škoda 1948-1953", *Cold War History*, 6: 2 (May 2006).

⁵ Bradley Abrams, *The struggle for the soul of the nation: Czech culture and the rise of communism*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004): 279-282.