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Gravediggers or Midwives?

Explanations of the collapse of the Habsburg state wax and wane in popularity. At times the prevailing wisdom has been that the disintegration of the Monarchy was the inevitable result of serious internal problems, especially the so-called "national question." At other times it has been more popular to argue that the dissolution of the Imperial-Royal state was the coincidental consequence of the stresses imposed by the First World War. Cautious observers, trying to find a middle ground, often prefer to blame the events of October and November 1918 on a fortuitous combination of both internal and external factors.

Of more recent vintage is a reassessment of the role of exile politicians such as Tomas Masaryk and Edvard Benes in the destruction of Austria-Hungary. For many years there was little to argue about, at least in the English language literature on Czech and Slovak independence. According to the traditional version of events, Masaryk "went abroad as the leader of a resistance endowed with the political and moral mandate of practically all the main political representatives of the nation, even though there was not complete agreement on all questions."[1] Aided by the diligent Benes and the resourceful and well-connected Slovak Milan Stefanik, Masaryk triumphed against great adversity and "liberated his nation in war."[2]

It has been difficult for historians to sort through the legends that quickly built up around these men and their wartime activities. Much of this difficulty stems from the fact that Masaryk and Benes published accounts of those years that reinforced the view of their success as being the result of plucky determination, hard work, a fair amount of good luck, and from having right on their side in the struggle for the Czech (and later Czechoslovak) nation.[3] Stefanik's death in 1919 precluded him from offering his own contribution to the legend creating process. Given his uneasy relations with his Czech colleagues, his version of events likely would have been especially interesting.

Thanks to Frank Hadler, those with an interest in the wartime activities of Czech and Slovak exile leaders now have access to the Masaryk-Benes correspondence as a starting point in their investigations. What they will find in this volume is that, like all good historical tales, the traditional version of events is based on reality, but that it is also much less of a triumphal progress than its participants and their publicists would have us believe.

The two-hundred documents included in this collection were assembled from several archives in Prague, some of them only open to researchers since November 1989. The bulk of the material comes from either the Archive of the T.G. Masaryk Institute (Archiv Ustavu T.G. Masaryka), the Military History Archive (Vojensky historicky archiv), or the Archive of the National Museum (Archiv Narodniho muzea v Praze). It should be incumbent on every editor of collections of documents to reproduce documents exactly as they exist in the archives, and Hadler has done just that. All documents are also translated from their original Czech, English, or French into German, and in each case the original misspellings and abbreviations have been preserved with clarifications placed in brackets. In this way the original flavor of the documents is made available to the reader. Although it lacks a subject index, this volume includes an index of persons with brief biographical sketches of each individual listed. These snapshots will be especially use-

ful to those approaching Czech and Slovak politics for the first time because many of those mentioned in the documents are unfamiliar even to specialists.

The entire collection is introduced by Hadler through a very useful survey of the Masaryk/Benes literature. In his introductory essay the editor points out what he describes as several peculiarities in this literature: the preponderance of material on Masaryk as compared to Benes; the fact that from 1948 to 1989 Masaryk and Benes were treated as *Unpersonen* in the official historiography of Czechoslovakia; and that because most of the Masaryk and Benes archival material in Prague was unavailable to Western researchers, the works produced in the West had to rely on the memoirs of the two men and the meager archival materials available outside of Czechoslovakia.

Now that the doors of the Prague archives have been thrown open to researchers, it is possible at last to try to come to grips with the essential puzzle about Masaryk and Benes–how two men, one with virtually no political base (Masaryk) and the other almost completely unknown before the war (Benes) managed to come out on top in the fall of 1918. As Hadler points out in his introductory essay, there is no clear answer to be found in these documents. Instead, what one finds is just how difficult and often mundane the day to day operation of the "Czechoslovak liberation struggle" actually was.

For those reared on the Masaryk legend, it will be surprising to see how unsure of themselves Masaryk and Benes were in their new roles as exile leaders. From the very start their behavior was highly reactive, conditioned first and foremost by what was possible to accomplish abroad given their scarce resources and the early indifference of the Entente to the fate of the Czechs. Also, it quickly becomes obvious that the collaboration between Masaryk and Benes was not the sort of grand partnership that it appears to be in works written immediately following the war. The surprising thing is not so much how well the two coordinated their activities, but that they were able to do so at all, given the minimal amount of time they actually spent together. Between 1915 and 1918 Masaryk and Benes met less than a dozen times, and during the most critical period of their campaign, from April 1917 until December 1918, they had no face to face contact at all. That so much was accomplished through correspondence alone makes the documents presented here that much more interesting.

Because Masaryk and Benes were almost always strapped for cash, money, and how to get it is a recurring theme in their letters. Almost as prominent, however, are the complications that other Czechs created for them. Each time it seemed as though Masaryk and Benes were making progress in their campaign to gain recognition from the Entente, other Czechs would do something to make their lives difficult. The most vexing example was the trouble that began when the Czech Agrarian politician Josef Durich went to Russia, where he soon set out to establish a pro-Russian Czechoslovak exile group under his, rather than Masaryk's, direction.

Another was the negative reaction from several Slovak leaders to the Entente declaration of January 10, 1917 which included a promise to liberate the "Czechoslovaks." Masaryk and Benes exchanged anxious notes with their colleagues and supporters worrying about the effect that the term Czechoslovak would have on their relations with Slovak leaders in Europe and North America (the original text of this declaration read "Czechs and Slovaks"). That they were almost entirely focused on events abroad and gave little heed to what was happening in Prague is shown by the fact that, during the first months after the Entente declaration, neither Masaryk nor Benes mentions the repudiation of the Entente declaration by the Czech leadership in Prague.

Readers interested in other aspects of Czech-Slovak relations during the war will find more than enough evidence of the difficult relationship between Benes and Stefanik. It is clear from his many comments to his brother Vojta that Benes wished he could have done without Stefanik, even though he admired the Slovak leader's access to important figures in the French government.

As one reaches the end of the material presented here it becomes clear that Masaryk and Benes were neither gravediggers of the Habsburg state nor midwives of Czechoslovakia. Either formulation of their role in events gives them too much credit for forethought and diminishes the efforts of the Czech and Slovak leaders in Prague and Vienna. Instead, the picture that emerges is of two men who bet on the right horse (the Entente) and then took advantage of every opportunity that presented itself to advance their cause. Depending upon one's view of the politics of the First Republic, they could be described as pragmatists or opportunists, but either way Masaryk and Benes have to be described as winners. Neither of the men one encounters in these documents seems to be a great visionary, but both come across as intensely focused and determined to achieve a different future for their people. That they turn out to be more ordinary after all perhaps makes their success that much more impressive.

Notes:

[1]. Jaroslav Opat, "On the Emergence of Czechoslovakia," in *Czechoslovakia 1918-88. Seventy Years from Independence*, H. Gordon Skilling, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 51.

[2]. William V. Wallace, *Czechoslovakia* (London: Ernest Benn, Limited, 1976), p. 102.

[3]. For example, see Thomas G. Masaryk, *Die Weltrevolution. Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen, 1914-1918* (Berlin: E. Reiss, 1925) and Edvard Benes, *Svetova valka a nase revoluce. Vzpominky a uvahy z boju svobodu naroda* (Prague: Orbis, 1927-1929), 3 vols.

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