

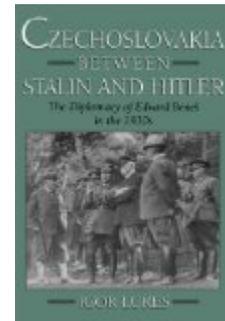
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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Igor Lukes. *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Benes in the 1930's*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 309 pp. \$68.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-510267-3; \$143.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510266-6.

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Who Won at Munich?

When at the end of the 1980s the chief of the Archives and Documentation Department of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kovalyev, gave the Archives of the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry copies of documents on Tikhachevsky and Benes, it was, in my understanding, a manifestation of perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Archives. I remember an agitated debate about the opening of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Archives for research, and my astonishment when I heard Kovalyev state that they were considering hiring some "veterans of diplomatic service" who would examine all the records page by page and would determine what pages could or could not be declassified. He said this process would of course last "a very, very long time."

Since then, many changes have occurred. The Soviet Union no longer exists, and Russia's Foreign Ministry Archives now has a large reading room full of researchers, both Russian and foreign. At the moment when we received the documents on Tikhachevsky and Benes, such changes were almost beyond our imagination.

Therefore, I used the opportunity to translate the "Tikhachevsky documents" into Czech, hoping for their publication. Selected parts of the documents, accompanied by Robert Kvacek's commentary, were published by *Mezinarodni politika* in Prague in 1991.[1] This documentary publication did not pass unnoticed and it was useful, since Lukes worked with it in his chapter on Benes's role in the Tikhachevsky affair. However, that

article represents just one entry within Lukes's impressive twenty-nine page bibliography of English, Czech, Slovak, German, Russian, French and Polish language titles. I decided to share this story with HABSBUURG readers because it signifies that "the old days" in the Soviet archives were in 1989-1990 uneasily yet inevitably approaching their end.

The topic of this book was subject to strong ideological control by the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. As this review will emphasize, Lukes's conclusions on the meaning of Soviet policy toward Czechoslovakia in the interwar period would have been utterly unacceptable for the Communists. The author is an Associate Professor of International Relations at Boston University and Fellow of the Russian Research Center at Harvard University. He wrote his work partly in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and partly in a small town in Bohemia. Lukes's list of sources indicates he thoroughly examined the archives in Prague, including the Archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the Archives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior, and the Archives of the Office of the President of the Republic. He combined the sources of Czechoslovak provenance with research in the National Archives in the U.S. Something like this would not have been possible before the Velvet Revolution. Research institutions' curricula and research projects were under party control, and contacts between Czech and foreign specialists were shadowed and risky. Lukes's book demonstrates that time is over.

Unfortunately, the Russian archives were not consulted. Lukes writes that “my main goal has been to demonstrate how the developing crisis that resulted in the Munich Agreement appeared from the perspective of Prague;” he is aware that “this approach may seem somewhat narrow, but it allows for the hitherto missing Czechoslovak perspective to be added” (p. viii). Lukes explains that he did apply for research in the Presidential Archives in Moscow, but in vain. As far as I know this particular archives continues to be closed for research, and “we have to await yet another miracle in Moscow” (p. ix). I’ve already referred to the only documents of Soviet provenance that Lukes used. Hopefully some day the conditions will allow Igor Lukes to complete his excellent work, in Moscow.

Many historians, political scientists, and political writers have examined the question of “Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler.” It is one of the most critical topics of modern Czechoslovak history, and culminates logically in “Munich.” Should Czechoslovakia have fought in 1938, or not? Was the decision not to fight an act of prudent statesmanship by Benes, or a sign of his weakness? Did the trauma of Munich affect the mentality of the Czech nation? Did it push Benes into a blind embrace of Stalin? In speaking about Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler we also lay the groundwork for answering the crucial questions of Czechoslovak, now Czech geopolitics.[2] The Communist version of “Munich” proclaimed that “Benes, being a bourgeois politician, chose to sacrifice his country to Hitler rather than turn toward the Soviet Union. Soviet Union was ready to help and just waited to be asked. The natural geopolitical orientation of Czechoslovakia is eastwards, only there can the safety of the country be guaranteed. The orientation westwards was an error that led to catastrophes. Only the Communist revolution finally turned the historically wrong path in the correct direction.”

Is it still possible to say something new on the diplomacy of Edvard Benes in the 1930s? Lukes’s study proves that the answer is yes. His deep knowledge of literature and sources, an excellent combination and interpretation of data, an interesting style which makes the book a good read, and in particular a strong and convincing thesis result in a dynamic and vivid picture of the well known story of the failure of the Western democracies when confronted with Stalin and Hitler.

The first chapter, “Czechoslovak-Soviet Contacts from the End of World War I to Adolf Hitler’s ‘Machtergreifung,’ 1918-1933,” is introduced by a portrait of Ed-

vard Benes that is one of the best. It is certainly not easy to create a complex picture of Benes. Despite abundant sources including first-hand evidence, the result is often a cliché. Lukes presents Benes’s weakness and greatness, and summarizes later in the book:

Edvard Benes was firmly and unmistakably rooted in Czech patriotic tradition. His political enemies dismissed him as a simple deal-maker, but as president of a small country caught between two countries who gave birth to Nazism and Bolshevism he needed to maneuver. Therefore he was often—although not always—ready to compromise. But he was also a man of tremendous personal and professional integrity. He was a pragmatist who applied with considerable skill the principles of Western rationalism to advance the Czechoslovakian state interests” (p. 117).

This is an excellent characterization. Here we find the reason why T.G. Masaryk said: “If not Benes, who?” (p. 58) when the question arose of the next Czechoslovak President.

One of the major strengths of the book is a new, sharp picture of Czechoslovak-Soviet relations. Lukes examines the pressure of Bolshevik Russia and the Soviet Union on the establishment of diplomatic relations with Czechoslovakia. He explains why the relationship between Czechoslovakia and Poland was poisoned, how Polish-Soviet relations played a role in it, and the German and French context. Lukes documents why Czechoslovakia was reluctant to recognize the Bolshevik regime *de jure*, and how it paid for this: the dramatic stories of the harassment of Czechoslovak diplomats in Moscow are the result of excellent work with mostly unknown sources. The paragraphs describing the unscrupulous methods applied against the Czechoslovak diplomats, as well as on the operations of the NKVD among the Russian emigration, are among the most intriguing in the book.

On a *de facto* basis, Czechoslovakia was ready to cooperate with the Bolsheviks. Lukes documents how T.G. Masaryk, an excellent specialist in Russian and Slavic questions, influenced this attitude. Lukes concludes that the policy of Masaryk and Benes toward Russia and Soviet Union in the 1920s failed: “When Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933, serious diplomatic contacts between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were almost nonexistent. The Prague government had concluded that the Soviet Union was a police regime and that it was futile to conduct normal diplomacy with it” (p. 22). “In 1933, however, Adolf Hitler’s *Machtergreifung* would serve as a reminder to Prague that a dramatic

improvement in its relations with the Soviet Union was absolutely necessary. It would have to be obtained at almost every cost” (p. 23).

Lukes provides profound insight into this game in which the security of Czechoslovakia was at stake. He pays rewarding attention to some unknown and fragmentary archival records in Prague and to what is hidden behind diplomatic language. For example, he reveals the intrigues of the Hillerson Red Cross Mission and its predominantly ideological goals, and the case of *Znamia Rossii*, a Russian emigre monthly published in Prague which helped to create the preconditions for the Tukchachevsky affair. Lukes shows that the official contacts between Czechoslovakia and Bolshevik Russia and the Soviet Union were misused, by the latter, for the spreading of Communist propaganda and the establishment of contacts with domestic Communist structures.

The second chapter, “Dangerous Relations: Benes and Stalin in Hitler’s Shadow, 1933-1935,” examines Czechoslovakia’s de jure recognition of the Soviet Union in the context of French-British-German-Polish strategy. The chapter culminates in the Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty, followed by Benes’s visit in Moscow in 1935. I find Lukes’s interpretation of the geopolitical context of Benes’s embrace of Stalin consistent and clearly written. However, I hesitate to fully agree with him when he explains the stigmatization of Czechoslovakia for the support of Bolshevism by stating Benes had a “tendency to talk too much,” (p. 55) which Lukes illustrates by quoting Benes’s overly excited newspaper interview in Pravda from May 17, 1935 and his briefing of the British Minister Joseph Addison on June 24, 1935. I agree with Lukes that Czechoslovak diplomacy failed to explain the real state of affairs.

The third chapter, “Between the Agile East and the Apathetic West: Central Europe, 1935-1937,” is particularly strong in its appealing picture of Communist strategy and tactics dictated by Moscow. Lukes explains that the Communists, who presented the preservation of the peace as their main goal, in reality looked forward to a war that would create the preconditions for a Communist revolution. This thesis is documented by examples of direct influence of the Comintern on the Czechoslovak Communist Party’s policy. The Seventh Congress of the Comintern dictated the Communist parties’ tactics in light of the strategy of keeping the war outside the territory of the Soviet Union and transforming the war against Hitler into a socialist revolution. This “end justifies the means” policy included a cynical calculation

of victims among the Communists in the upcoming war. In reading Lukes’s book one sees clearly that the Soviet Union worked toward having Czechoslovakia within its sphere of influence much earlier than is commonly alleged.

Lukes is not the first to ask who put the Tukchachevsky affair in motion: Germany or Stalin himself. This affair has been analyzed and interpreted repeatedly with a variety of results, leaving always some question marks. In the fourth chapter, “Benes and the Tukchachevsky Affairs: New Evidence from the Archives in Prague and Moscow,” [3] Lukes presents his view of the notorious affair and the role President Benes played in it. The result of Lukes’s analysis is that it was Stalin who orchestrated the intrigue to liquidate the influential marshal. Stalin’s victory turned out to be “one of the most notorious Pyrrhic victories in the history” (p. 107). The fatal disinformation on the pro-German sympathies and anti-Stalin plotting of some high-ranking Red Army officers led to a domino effect of purges and executions. It was relayed back to Stalin, not by Benes via Alexandrovsky, but by Daladier via the Soviet Ambassador in Paris, Potemkin. Lukes explains that the NKVD did try to involve Benes, but at the same time played the same game in Paris to make sure that the intrigue would not fail. Benes was indeed exposed to the forged information, but he chose not to pass it on to Moscow.

Lukes’s interpretation of the affair is, in my opinion, convincing; it results from detailed work with the sources, including the Soviet Foreign Ministry’s documents I referred to earlier. His analysis of the new documents from Moscow has substantially illuminated this dark affair. He traces the net of intrigue, including the publication of probably deceptive information on Kraskomov in *Znamia Rossii*, which finally resulted in the liquidation of the Red Army command structure. However, some questions still remain unanswered, as Lukes himself notes. For example, the path of transmission to Prague of documents fabricated in Berlin is unclear, as is the role of General Frantisek Moravec, of the Czechoslovak military intelligence service.

The author’s interpretation of scarce sources is remarkable, and I find his work precise and convincing. However, I have a question: why did Benes act as he did? Why did he react only after Tukchachevsky’s execution? Benes believed that an anti-Stalin plot was possible. He of course knew that a Soviet-German rapprochement would have been dangerous for Czechoslovakia. Benes guarded the security of Czechoslovakia un-

ceasingly. In the end of the chapter Lukes stresses that “Benes chose not to pass the documents to Moscow, and that is the most important point” (p. 106). Why then did he decide as he did?

The chapter “The Fateful Spring of 1938: Austrian Anschluss and the May Crisis” begins with a well written genre-painting of President Benes’s idyllic New Year of 1938, which could hardly have disguised the signs of an approaching tragedy. Lukes is a good writer. He has diversified his straightforward study by touching occasionally on atmosphere and sentiment, including everyday life and the historical scene. This is refreshing, brings the drama closer to the reader, and conforms to the high scholarly standards of the study. The picture of Benes’s return from Sezimovo Usti to Prague through snow-covered Bohemia introduces the drama of the Anschluss of Austria and the escalation of Henlein’s pressure on the Prague Government. The reaction in Moscow is observed continuously. In the section on the partial mobilization of the Czechoslovak Army in May 1938, Lukes reconstructs the decision making process. Though he must leave unanswered the question of the source of information that forced Prague to mobilize, he argues clearly that it must have been a professional intelligence organization. “The Czechoslovak Army had prepared for the crisis as well as it could. Czechoslovakia was possibly more ready in 1938 for an armed conflict with the Third Reich than others in Western Europe would possibly be even two years later” (p. 120).

In the chapter “Lord Runciman and Comrade Zhdanov: Western and Soviet Policies Toward Czechoslovakia from June to Early September 1938” Lukes examines British and the Soviet steps and Czechoslovak reactions and initiatives. He characterizes the roots of British appeasement policy and brings a nuanced picture of Daladier who, from the position of “*pacta sunt servanda*” through a half-hearted support of Czechoslovak government, came under Chamberlain’s influence. He also shows that British politicians and diplomats, and particularly Lord Runciman, did not act as objectively as they should have. Lukes analyzes the position of President Benes and concludes that the situation logically led Benes’s sensitiveness to the signals from Moscow.

Lukes is particularly strong in presenting the true nature of Soviet rhetoric about aid to Czechoslovakia. The statements of high ranking Soviet authorities were at the same time vague and bombastic. The Soviet Union skillfully built up its image. This image differed substantially from its strategies and the measures it took. Yet this illu-

sion, nourished by Communist propaganda, has survived for half a century. Lukes illuminates the Soviets’ behind-the-scenes policies by portraying the conspiratorial trip of Andrei Zhdanov to Prague at the end of August 1938 to instruct the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

The seventh chapter, “September 1938,” is about the “Munich days.” The climax is the reconstruction of events at the Prague Castle. All attention concentrates on the critical question: was the Soviet Union really ready to help? The chronology of events that Lukes offers is not really new, the fact that the Soviet political representative in Prague, Alexandrovsky, delayed the forwarding of Benes’s message to Kremlin is not new either. But Lukes’s interpretation of the facts is dynamic and fresh, presenting the tragedy in the complexity of its context. Alexandrovsky observed the situation very closely, and was aware that the minutes played a critical role, yet he delayed the dispatch for at least three hours. It was safe for Moscow to be critical of the Prague government’s decision to capitulate, and to state that it would have come to Czechoslovakia’s assistance under any circumstances.

As Lukes writes, it was “a carefully timed platonic expression of sympathy” (p. 256). But why did Benes not send his dispatch via the Czechoslovak diplomatic mission in Moscow? In diplomatic communications, one’s own country’s diplomatic mission abroad should be used as the first channel. Why did Benes not use both paths, the Czechoslovak legation in Moscow and the Soviet legation in Prague? And finally, why did Alexandrovsky delay the transmission of Benes’s message? Was he instructed to do this? I doubt he was just negligent. Was he overcautious? Czech historians Antonin Klimek and Eduard Kubu mention that one of the Czechoslovak Communist leaders, Vrbensky, told Benes in Moscow that Alexandrovsky was liquidated because he did not do what the Soviets wanted him to do.[4] But what was that? Unfortunately, the Klimek-Kubu study does not have notes, and the meaning of the quotation is also not very clear to me. I think that the key to answering these questions lays in Moscow. Without thorough research in Moscow, including the Presidential Archives, the Soviet steps during the Munich crisis will not be completely illuminated.

Lukes’s major question is: Who really won at Munich? He rehabilitates Benes, who was accused by many of listening naively to Soviet assurances. Lukes argues that Benes saw through the Soviet charade. For the Soviets, the Munich dictate meant not only isolation, but also a challenge. For the Czechoslovak Communists,

Moscow's willingness to assist Czechoslovakia in 1938 was an instrument of political struggle. Czechoslovak Communists used this theme for half a century. Lukes concludes (p. 259) that the only one who profited was Stalin, and all others lost. A decade after Munich, in 1948, Czechoslovakia found itself firmly in the hands of the Communists. "With the Soviet Union forever, and never another way" became an official Czechoslovak Communist Party slogan, and the people living under the omnipotent Communist structures hardly imagined that this "forever" could end. Hitler won at Munich, but this triumph marked, Lukes says, the beginning of the end of the Third Reich. (p. 259 nn.) Lukes's study of the Soviets' interests at Munich is very innovative, bringing not only new perspectives, but also many unknown, interesting details that complete the puzzle of the Bolsheviks' global strategy. The next master of Central Europe after Hitler was Stalin, and the Communist held this area until the end of 1980's.

In the perspective of the half century after Munich, we can agree with Lukes that Stalin won in 1938. But in an even larger historical perspective, it was not Stalin either. The Soviet bloc, and even the Soviet Union, are gone, and the nature of Communist tactics and strategies is being revealed more profoundly than ever.

In conclusion, I would like to add my voice to the historians who already expressed their highly positive evaluation of Lukes's study, as did Stephen Borsody, George Gibian, Antonin Klimek, Vojtech Mastny, Norman M. Naimark, Richard Pipes, Adam B. Ulam, Piotr S. Wandycz, and Thomas G. Winner. Lukes's book certainly will find considerable interest and response among English speaking historians and all who are interested in this topic. However, as a Czech historian, I see how important it would be to have a Czech translation of Lukes's book published in the Czech Republic. I would like to express, at the very end of my review, two wishes. I wish that the documents in the Presidential Archives in

Moscow would be made available for research. And I recommend that a Czech translation of Lukes's book become available to Czech historians, students, and all readers.

Notes:

[1]. Milada Polisenska and R. Kvacek. "Benes a 'pripad Tuchacevskij'," *Mezinarodni politika*. Vol. 8 (1991), 28-29.

[2]. In this context, I would like to present the theme of the meaning of Czech history with one recent study: Jaroslav Krejci, *Czechoslovakia at the Crossroads of European History* (London, New York: Taurus, 1990). See also Jan Kren, *Historicke promeny cesstvi* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, nakladatelstvi Karolinum, 1992). Another work by Kren, *Die Konfliktgemeinschaft: Tschechen und Deutsche, 1780-1918* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1996), has been reviewed on HABSURG, <http://hnet2.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=24827870870793>. As an example of the deep-rootedness of this theme, I would like to add Pavel Tigríd, *Kapesni pruvodce inteligentni zeny po vlastnim osudu* (Prague: Odeon, 1992), 4th ed.

[3]. Lukes first published the results of his research on the role of President Benes in the Tukchachevsky affair in German in *Vierteljahreshefte fuer Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 44. number 4 (Oktober 1966), 527-549. This article, "Stalin, Benesch und der Fall Tuchatschewski," laid the groundwork for the fourth chapter of his book.

[4]. Antonin Klimek and E. Kubu, *Ceskoslovenska zahranicni politika 1918-1938: Kapitoly z dejin mezinarodnich vztahu* (Prague: Institut pro stredoevropskou kulturu a politiku, 1995), 93.

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