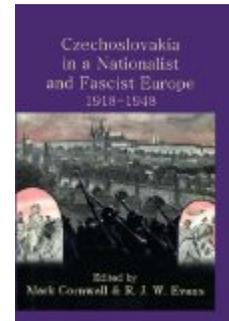


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Czechoslovakia's "Debilitating Fiction"

After the *annus mirabilis* of 1989, Czechoslovak president and former dissident Václav Havel spoke often of wanting to "return" Czechoslovakia "to Europe." Other eastern European leaders used similar phrasing. What exactly it meant depended on speaker and context, but the general implication was romantic, along the lines of Milan Kundera's "kidnapped Occident": the countries behind the Iron Curtain would return to their rightful places in a prosperous, diverse, tolerant, unified Europe.[1] The illusions have faded these last twenty years. We understand Europe's complexities, both historical and contemporary, in ways we could not then. This edited volume reflects the end of some Cold War mythologies; most of the essays here view the first thirty years of Czechoslovakia's existence evenhandedly, balancing promise and problems. The book does not quite manage to return the historical Czechoslovakia to Europe, as its title seems to promise. Most of its chapters are rooted in a careful study of Czechoslovak (as usual, meaning mainly Czech) themes, events, and peoples. Nevertheless, this volume represents some of the best new thought on Czechoslovakia and its neighbors, by younger and senior historians alike.

The book also highlights a relatively neglected era, from the end of the Great War to the early years of the Cold War. During this period, Czechoslovakia played an outsized role in European international affairs. Between the world wars, it was generally understood—by its own citizens and by foreign observers—to be the linch-

pin of the interwar peace, and thus was the foremost target for those wishing to dismantle that peace. Its industrial capacity and relatively docile population helped Nazi Germany extend its power throughout the continent. And between 1945 and 1948, Czechoslovakia was the test case for Soviet tolerance. If the Soviets allowed plurality in Czechoslovakia, Western observers hypothesized, the rest of the Eastern Bloc would get similar treatment; if the Soviets shut down Czechoslovak efforts to create a national path to socialism, then the rest of the bloc had no chance.[2]

The essays here present relatively new scholarship or summarize the state of the field. Jan Rychlík notes the conflicts punctuating Czech-Slovak relations between the two world wars. Slovak insistence on a federalized, semi-autonomous space for Slovak political and cultural development led to decades of arguments with the Czechs, who mouthed "Czechoslovakism" but seldom practiced it. In the 1930s, increasingly widespread acknowledgement of Czech and Slovak separateness meant the First Republic had a grave problem: it had to address Slovak ideas about self-determination, and made the state's continued existence contingent on Slovak goodwill and the electoral fortunes of the HSL or Lud'ak party.

Eagle Glassheim's deft essay, adapted from his 2005 monograph on the same topic, asks why Bohemian nobles were attracted to fascism, and finds the answer in the Bohemian nobility's "ambivalent, selective em-

brace of modernism” (p. 28)—an acceptance of capitalism paired with a distaste for modern cultural trends and political ideas, which left them uneasy with parliamentary democracy’s compromises and majority rule. In the 1930s, noble polemicists critiqued the modern state as all-encompassing, and contrasted it with a nostalgic image of the feudal order which had granted its estates autonomy. In order to remake what they saw as the new era’s moral and political failings, Glassheim argues, they called for an authoritarian, noble-dominated “democracy of estates” (pp. 36-38).

Melissa Feinberg’s chapter presents gender as a test of the First Republic’s dedication to the democratic values it claimed to embody. It was surprisingly easy, she reports, for Czech politicians to decide to grant women the vote. But granting women equality in other realms of life—in education, for example, or citizenship law with regard to marriage, or employment practices—proved much harder. The general constitutional support for women’s rights did not translate directly into policy; each old law had to be changed individually. Debates over these laws revealed that Czech elites still believed that “[a]t home, the Czech nation was a family, not a collection of individual citizens” (p. 56). Women’s issues were usually resolved in traditionalist ways, reinforcing the paterfamilias’s power and reifying the role of the mother as caregiver. Family was the ultimate source of Czech national identity and therefore occupied special territory outside the liberal ideals which underlay Czech democracy, Feinberg concludes. The author does not address a further, seemingly related inequality—Czech treatment of the non-“Czechoslovak” nationalities—but this perceptive piece, drawing on her 2006 book, still levels an important critique.

In his essay on the interwar writings by Czech veterans of the First World War, Robert Pynsent notes that “Czech legionary literature suffers from an excess of fat.” His “attempt at a lipid count” (p. 88) is a lively treatment of the works of Rudolf Medek and Josef Kopta, two central Legionnaire authors. (Pynsent grants Kopta grudging respect by deeming him one of the “least trivial” Legionnaire writers [p. 63]; Medek receives no such praise.) Pynsent’s incisive, observant piece mainly examines themes and myths within Legionnaire literature, particularly of the Legionnaires themselves as liberators and models for a constructive Czechoslovak morality, despite the violence of their imagery. Unsurprisingly, this literature echoes standard Czech nationalist tropes: Legionnaires were modern-day Taborites, redeeming the defeat of White Mountain in 1620; their homeland was

an “island” of civilized rationality in contrast to the Bolshevik chaos. Yet antisemitism pervaded the pages of Legionnaire literature, and, Pynsent argues, is integral to its violent representations of Czechness. Medek depicts Jews as greedy, devious, physically bizarre (grossly obese or extremely thin), nocturnal, and filthy. The Czech cultural elite did not read Medek; nonetheless he confirmed “a prejudice in a large proportion of his semi-educated readership.... The fact that Medek’s writing had little influence on the Czechoslovak elite does not make it salubrious. One must be grateful that he was such an incompetent writer” (p. 87). This reader is grateful that Pynsent is more than competent himself.

Catherine Albrecht argues that economic issues in the interwar Sudetenland did not break predictably along national lines. She describes energetically diverse opinions within Czech and German “defense associations” in the borderland, noting their varied reactions to Czechoslovak governmental policy and concerns about nationalist influence on that policy. The associations’ complaints tended to be exaggerated: “shrill” reports on borderland minority relations (p. 94). The government distrusted them, dismissing their commentary as frivolous, based on personal antagonisms and internal squabbling. Yet German citizens viewed the Czech defense associations as representing and influencing official policy. That supposed influence was interpreted as a deliberate effort to harm German interests, particularly with regard to land reform and responses to the Depression.

R. J. W. Evans explores the triangular problem of mutual perception among the Czechs, Hungarians, and Slovaks, focusing mainly on high politics, Publicistik, and to a lesser extent belles-lettres and the mass media. The relationship he describes is one of mutual use, opposition, and suspicion. The Czechs mythologized the Hungarians as feudal and retrograde, and themselves as heartfelt democrats; the Hungarians viewed the Czechs as rapacious parvenus full of democratic cant yet more than willing to deprive ethnic Magyars in Slovakia of their civil rights. Both viewed Slovaks as simpler and more primitive, though the Czechs did not go as far as the Hungarian term *tótok* (slave) and were more willing to consider ideas of Slovak particularity. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, as the reality of the Hungarian-Slovak-Czech relationships shifted, mutual perceptions lagged behind, remaining relatively static.

Mark Cornwall’s “A Leap Into Ice-Cold Water” tries to correct the previously Czech-centric historiography

on Konrad Henlein and the Sudetendeutsche Partei (SdP) by emphasizing Czechoslovak-German fears and frustrations, the First Republic's shortcomings in its nationalities' eyes, and the importance of 1918 as a radical shift in the central European ethnic hierarchy. Cornwall describes German-nationalist organizations and social groups, ranging from cultural organizations to Henlein's Kameradschaftsbund, as being isolated from or opposed to the Czechoslovak Republic, but not inevitably Nazi. Cornwall argues that "Czech tactics did much to push the SdP [and Czech-German society generally] in a fully pan-German and Nazi direction" (p. 136), and discusses the various moments when the Czechoslovak government might have achieved an understanding with Henlein. While this essay tries too hard to exonerate the SdP movement and condemn the Czechoslovak government—Cornwall himself concludes that for both the government and the SdP "compromise was almost impossible" (p. 141)—the approach outlined here is intriguing for its exploration of opportunities abandoned and roads not taken.

Vít Smetana's essay on British policy toward Czechoslovakia during the fateful years just before and after the Second World War provides a detailed chronological narrative of this important relationship. Like Keith Robbins's final essay in this volume, Smetana discusses the ambiguity of "the lessons of Munich," which can bolster both interventionist and isolationist approaches. That is, the current interpretation of Munich seems to be to never knuckle under to an aggressive tyrant, but at the time Munich illustrated the folly of extensive, unrealistic international commitments and the humiliation of not being able to follow through on them. Smetana also notes British empathy for the Czechoslovaks when the Soviets forced them to withdraw from Marshall Plan participation.

Tatjana Tönsmeier's work complicates the older notion of Slovakia as Nazi Germany's puppet state. She highlights the ways Slovaks attempted to learn as much as they could from the Germans while preventing Nazi meddling in issues considered crucial to Slovak national interests. When Nazi and Slovak concerns jibed, Slovak policy followed Nazi dictates, for example with regard to the Holocaust. But Tönsmeier's story is not one of simple Slovak obedience. She notes as well the effect of internal Slovak political disputes between Jozef Tiso and Vojtěch Tuka on Slovak-Nazi relations: Tuka advocated an integral Slovak nationalism more akin to Nazi ideology, while Tiso's more traditional Slovak nationalism held anti-Semitic views which were somewhat less

fanatical or exterminationist.

Mark Dimond's ambitious essay on Sokol and Czech nationalism begins with the implicit antagonism between Sokol's nineteenth-century founding fathers: Miroslav Tyrš's Czech nationalism, based on national conflict and competition, and Jindřich Fügner's hope that Sokol could transcend older divisions to become an inclusive, classless, all-national organization. Tyršian integral nationalism dominated Sokol's development, but was mitigated by Tomáš Masaryk, who participated in Sokol *slety* (organized public gymnastic exhibitions). Masaryk's well-known efforts to position himself as the emblem of the Czechoslovak idea and Czech nationhood were complemented by Sokol's desire to claim him as its own. Interwar Sokol espoused politically moderate, if anti-German, Czech nationalism. The war's aftermath weakened Sokol in unexpected ways: the expulsion of the country's Germans and the general fear of excessive nationalism removed the organization's traditional *raison d'être*, and the Slovak Sokol desired greater autonomy. After July 1947, when Stalin barred Czechoslovakia from participating in the Marshall Plan, the Sokol moved from a policy of "socializing democracy" to defending democratic ideals that now seemed under threat (p. 202). Sokol was effectively Stalinized by the end of 1948.

Jiří Kocian's piece on Czech-Slovak relations from 1944 to 1948 recounts political relations between the two regions' political administrations, focusing on high politics and organizational behavior rather than individual actions or decisions. Like that of Jan Rychlík, Kocian's essay summarizes scholarship on this relationship and underscores one of the book's leitmotifs: the fundamental distrust and lack of mutual understanding between the Czechs and the state's other nationalities, such as the Slovaks and Germans. At no point were the Czechs ever willing to fundamentally alter the Czechoslovak state idea, which amounted in practice to rhetorical devotion to the ideals of national equality while maintaining Czech domination.

Zdeněk Radvanovský's essay on the expulsion of the Germans from Czechoslovakia presents an old-fashioned Czech-nationalist perspective on this event, describing the Nazi invasion of March 1939 as the end of "the century-old struggle of a Czech nation to preserve its freedom" (p. 218). His essay does not problematize the Czechoslovak national idea or grant legitimacy to Sudeten German complaints about the interwar republic: rather, he concludes that "alliance with the Nazi regime ... disqualified the Sudeten Germans as potential partners