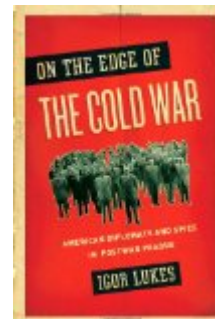


Igor Lukes. *On the Edge of the Cold War: American Diplomats and Spies in Postwar Prague.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. XII, 279 S. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-516679-8.



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Published on H-Diplo (May, 2013)

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This is a surprisingly good book. It is surprising because it could have been a narrowly focused dry scholarly diplomatic history about three years in Prague at the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. Instead, *On the Edge of the Cold War* provides a brisk narrative that includes lively portraits of American diplomats and spies and raises the question of whether America could have saved Czechoslovakia from Communist takeover in 1948. In his well-organized story, Igor Lukes, a Czech who teaches at Boston University, chronicles the experience of American diplomats and spies in Prague as they encounter, and react to, the changing and escalating political crisis of liberation from Nazi rule in 1945 to the Communist coup in 1948. Although Lukes tells the reader in his introduction that the “greatest share of responsibility for the loss of Czechoslovakia’s democratic identity rests with the Czechs” (p. 15), the bulk of his narrative chronicles America’s missed opportunity in Prague, its lazy and absent ambassador, and its inept and amateur spies. Not only that, the Ameri-

can entourage failed to follow Washington’s instructions “to be assertive and steadfast” (p. 4). Therefore, Lukes really places the bulk of the blame on the United States for losing Czechoslovakia. In fact, the motor of his fast-paced narrative is an underlying outrage about Ambassador Lawrence A. Steinhardt’s irresponsible and selfish absence at critical political times along with the ineptitude of America’s spies.

At the outset of the book, Lukes outlines two positions taken by American leaders about the fall of Prague to the Communists. George C. Marshall and George Kennan, both geographic determinists, thought Czechoslovakia’s location near the Soviet Union made the postwar crisis and the Prague coup inevitable. Indeed, the Office of Strategic Service (OSS) saw its geographic location as the “master key to Europe” (p. 10). On the other side is the position of Eugene V. Rostow and Allen Dulles. They both thought the Communists were able to take over Czechoslovakia because of “incompetent American diplomatic and intelligence personnel in Prague.” They maintained that “firm

diplomatic action” could have prevented the coup, and Rostow even believed it could have “prevented the Cold War itself” (pp. 4-5). Lukes’s narrative illustrates the latter point of view quite well even though he claims he does not endorse either position.

Unlike some of the other East and Central European countries bordering or near the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia never aligned itself with either of the emerging blocs in the early postwar period, according to Lukes. Nor was its position in the reorganization of postwar Europe discussed at the Tehran Conference in 1943 or the Yalta Conference in February 1945 among Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Josef Stalin. But Lukes does not mention the Potsdam Conference in July/August 1945. By that time, the Soviet Union had occupied Central and Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia, and the divvying up of Germany was the US, UK, and Soviet leaders’ main concern. Certainly part of the reason for losing Czechoslovakia might have been the leaders’ focus on divided Germany.

Steinhardt was a lawyer who had a firm in New York City. Lukes blames his lackluster performance in Prague on his previous experience as an ambassador in Moscow and the fact that he was not selected to take part in the Yalta delegation. Not only did Steinhardt arrive to his post in Prague late, but he was also absent for a total of two hundred days before the February 1948 coup. According to Lukes, he said that the Communists would never be able to take over because democracy was too firmly rooted in Czechoslovakia. This was just one example of the rosy reporting that he sent back to Washington, DC.

American spies fair no better in Lukes’s narrative. By the time they arrived, Czech state security was fully in force and they proved to be ruthless adversaries always ready with a new ruse. For example, by 1948 they would lure Czechs to the border claiming that they were American refugee rescue organizations. They even nabbed

Czechs who never wanted to leave. They would then take them back to Prague, arrest them, and confiscate their belongings.

It is clearly beyond the scope of Lukes’s study to explain how and why Czech state security was so firmly in place by 1945 before the Communist takeover. They seemed to have been attached to the Czech Communist Party and had the full support of Soviet state security. In any case, by including spies in his story, Lukes incorporates an aspect of the story usually absent in traditional diplomatic histories; though they are not the ones that lost Czechoslovakia, they lost the spy wars.

Along with the vivid portraits, Lukes provides some nice descriptions of where the action took place. Even though Czechoslovakia was a small country, the United States possessed an enormous embassy housed at the one hundred-room Schönborn Palace in Prague. By the time the first team of Americans arrived to open the shuttered palace, Red Army troops had occupied the city and terrorized its population. They raped women, girls, and grandmothers, and drank anything that had alcohol in it and were often drunk when they interacted with the growing American presence.

Czech and Soviet spies also targeted the Schönborn Palace. By the time the OSS had morphed into the Central Intelligence Group, they sent Spencer Taggart, an OSS veteran, to lead the American effort and to protect the palace against state security. He failed miserably. Czech state security had a floor plan of the entire palace and routinely stole crucial documents.

Americans were immensely more popular than Soviet army personnel. A Russian princess noted that “every encounter” was like dealing with a “wild bear” (p. 84). In contrast, Czechs found the gum chewing Americans open and friendly and liked American culture. As Americans bounced around in their signature Jeeps, they brought exotic liquor and American food along with jazz records and nylon stockings to Prague. As a result, if there had been a free elec-

tion, the population would likely have chosen the American way of life and politics over the Soviet. This would not be. On February 1948, the Communists seized power and sealed the Cold War fate of Czechoslovakia.

Lukes's brisk narrative is persuasive, but it also raises a number of other questions. It would have helped the reader if he had contextualized the Czech case in the broader context of the Eastern Bloc. How did the shock of the Czech coup lead to more assertive action during the Berlin Airlift of 1948? Unlike the Eastern Zone of Germany, Czech state security seemed to be firmly in place by the early postwar period. Why was this? Although Lukes refers to the OSS report on Czechoslovakia as the "master key to Europe" as well as to Marshall's and Kennan's emphasis on its geographic proximity, he includes little on this subject (p. 10). Also, since geography was important in the history, it would have been helpful to have a map to consult in the book. These questions do not detract from Lukes's fine book, but rather demonstrate that it is a thought-provoking study.

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Citation: Kristie Macrakis. Review of Lukes, Igor. *On the Edge of the Cold War: American Diplomats and Spies in Postwar Prague*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

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