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THE LEGACIES OF HISTORY: FROM THE FOUNDATION TO THE VELVET REVOLUTION AND THE VELVET DIVORCE

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In September 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain expediently proclaimed Czechoslovakia to be a faraway country of which people knew nothing. Nevertheless, the history of Czechoslovakia is now well-travelled. Its history is very much the history of Europe, and, similarly, is replete with ambiguity and controversy. This chapter seeks to offer an outline of Czechoslovak and Czech history while also acknowledging the varying interpretations of that history and inviting the reader to further judgement.

CREATING CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The birth of Czechoslovakia in 1918 resulted from the skilful statesmanship of Czech and Slovak intellectuals, the mobilization of émigré communities in North America and the coincidence of their aims with that of the victorious Allies. This product, however, was less of a concert between Czech and Slovak populations themselves. Under the aegis of Tomáš G. Masaryk, an intellectual born in the southern Moravian town of Hodonín, the 30 May 1918 Pittsburgh Agreement called for the union of the Czechs and Slovaks in their own independent state. The Agreement intimated that the Slovaks would enjoy autonomy in the new state. The justifications for the creation of Czechoslovakia were ambiguous, and that ambiguity was a harbinger for the viability and durability of the country, particularly as it replicated the multiethnic nature of the Austro-Hungarian empire from which it had extricated itself.

Czechoslovakia moved towards reality when, on 28 October 1918, the National Committee that had campaigned for independence during the war announced the separation from Austria-Hungary of the Czech and Slovak lands. Key figures in the Czechoslovak independence movement, including Masaryk, Eduard Beneš and Milan Štefánik, were not even present in Prague when the pronouncement was made. A 'bloodless revolution' followed, in which Habsburg officials willingly ceded administrative control. The most audacious act of this peaceful revolution was the removal of public signs bearing the double-eagle emblem of the Habsburg empire.¹ The formal Proclamation of the Republic of Czechoslovakia was made on 11 November. The creation of Czechoslovakia was foremost underwritten by pragmatism. For the Western Allies, the principle of national self-determination also justified the creation of a series of independent states forming a *cordon sanitaire* between defeated Germany and emasculated but revolutionary Russia. In addition,

the proposed Czechoslovakia had what were considered natural frontiers, particularly a series of low mountains surrounding Bohemia and Moravia. Such topographical features added to the perceived defencibility of the country, which in turn increased the logic of Czechoslovakia as a country.

A nationality had to be created in order to fulfil the principle of national self-determination. The Czechs constituted barely half of the population while Germans constituted the second largest ethnic group, outnumbering the Slovaks. An ethnic fusion of the Czechs and Slovaks would generate an indisputable majority nation, thereby confirming its right to national self-determination. The higher Slovak birthrate was also expected over time to help reinforce the Slavic preponderance in the new country.

Linguistic and cultural reasons might have suggested that the Czechs and Slovaks were fraternal nations and their fusion was natural. But they had disparate historical experiences; the Czechs rose to cultural importance in Europe when Charles IV ascended the throne of the Holy Roman Empire. The Czechs lost their independence to the Austrians following the Battle of White Mountain of 1620 during which its nobility was destroyed, contributing to a national belief thereafter that the Czechs were an egalitarian people. By contrast, the Slovaks were under Hungarian tutelage for nearly a millennium. So absorbed into the Hungarian realm was Slovakia that St Martin's Cathedral in Bratislava was the site of the enthronement of Hungarian kings. The development of a possible Slovak elite was pre-empted by intensive Magyarization and cooption. Religion also differentiated the Czechs and Slovaks. While Protestantism was important in Slovak culture and political life it was much more dominated by Catholicism than in the Czech Lands where the religious ethos was contoured by the Hussite-secular protest tradition. What similar heritage the two peoples shared did not make for a natural fusion. Rather, like many peoples around them, the Slovaks had undergone a national revival in the mid- and late-nineteenth century; and in 1918 they were asked to cede an identity that, while not fully enshrined as a popular ethos, was still strong enough to present an obstacle to the installation of a successor.

The fusion, then, was expedient, and expedience became an enduring feature of Czechoslovakia. As one commentator observed, the 'full meaning of the political union of Slovaks and Czechs in 1918 was nebulous and difficult for the Czechs to grapple with or even understand. Prior to 1917 such a union had been given hardly any real consideration'.² As another writer notes, 'Czechoslovak unity was still a vessel to be filled with content and purpose in 1918'.³

Several features of the new country suggested that it would be strong and successful: its economic prowess, democratic credentials and accommodation of ethnic diversity. The country inherited a great economic legacy: Bohemia had been the industrial powerhouse of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The new Czechoslovakia constituted only a fifth of the territory of the defunct empire but held over half its industrial capacity, nearly half of its industrial workers and alone was responsible for

70 percent of its industrial production.⁴ Even with agrarian Slovakia, Czechoslovakia ranked as one of the world's ten most industrialized countries.⁵

This industrial base was complemented by Czechoslovakia's extensive arable land and forests. Agriculture was therefore an important economic sector and although its farming was not as technologically advanced as in Western Europe, productivity in many crops exceeded the European average. By Austrian calculations, per capita income in the Czech Lands between 1911 and 1913 exceeded that of Austria by 21 percent.⁶ Economically viable, the country also provided wide-ranging social insurance. While this was not thoroughly organized in the Republic's initial years, it represented a general principle of Czechoslovak social life. The new republic introduced economic measures to ensure Czechoslovak control over the economy and also to insulate it from Austria's post-war economic problems. Steps taken by the first half of 1919 included the launch of a separate Czechoslovak currency and the establishment of Czechoslovak banks and the Prague Stock Exchange. While its neighbours went through economic crisis and even socialist coups, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a relatively prompt economic recovery from the Great War. These successes inspired Czechoslovakia's post-communist economic architects, and Václav Klaus and Tomáš Ježek referred in 1989 to the post-World War I era as part of a Czech liberal economic tradition.⁷

It was not only for its economic success but also for its multiethnic composition that Czechoslovakia earned the nickname of the Switzerland of the east. According to the first official census, conducted in 1921, 66 percent of the total Czechoslovak population was Czech and Slovak; 23.4 percent was German and a further 5.6 percent Hungarian, while the smaller minorities of East Slavs, Russians, Ukrainians and especially Ruthenians totalled 3.5 percent.

The laws of the fledgling country made provision for its ethnic diversity, with extensive legal and political provisions for its minorities, which were particularly enshrined in the Bill of Rights. In addition, a Supreme Administrative Court was established to hear cases of infringements of political rights. The education system was strong and also made provision for minority language education. Czech teachers were despatched to Slovakia to expand its education system. By 1930, 96 percent of Slovaks, as well as 97 percent of Germans and 93 percent of Hungarians, were receiving schooling in their native tongues.⁸ Major cities had parallel Czech and German universities or technical schools. The 1920 Constitution also entrenched equality among the country's diverse ethnic groups and offered minority rights, including the use of minority languages in conducting government business in areas where they comprised at least a fifth of the population.

Both the Germans and Slovaks found grounds for dissatisfaction with the new country. The German minority, which had resided on the territory that had become Czechoslovakia for centuries, believed that its rights were curtailed and its interests underrepresented. The proposals of the Pittsburgh Agreement, including a Slovak assembly, were stalled after 1918 and then superseded by the Constitution of 1920,

which created a highly centralized, unitary state.

Masaryk believed that as much as fifty years and certainly at least a generation was required for the Czechs and Slovaks to merge into a common nation.⁹ In the interim the young Czechoslovak state sought to strengthen the roots of Slovak identity and therein strengthened the Slovak sense of distinctiveness. Negligible industrial development was undertaken in Slovakia during the interwar period, save for modest military projects in the 1930s. What industry had been developed under the Austro-Hungarian empire (and it was the most industrial part of Hungary's domain) was forced to compete, and generally unsuccessfully, against its Czech counterparts after 1918. At least the comprehensive education system in Slovakia, often run by Czechs sent to redress the region's dearth of teachers, erased the effects of Magyarization. But the linguistic and cultural reinstatement of Slovak identity also had political consequences. Soon into the life of the young republic Slovaks began to believe that they were deprived of autonomy in the centralized state, particularly as they saw the central government, as well as their own local offices, overwhelmingly staffed by Czechs. Politically conscious Slovaks were divided between those who supported the idea of Czechoslovakia and those who classed themselves as Czecho-Slovaks, the latter most notably represented by the Slovak People's Party of Andrej Hlinka. The Czecho-Slovaks approached the electoral strength of their competitors in Slovakia in only one of the four elections held in the First Republic.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the interwar parliamentary system was intended to include all ethnic and political interests. Proportional representation gave rise to a broadly based multiparty system that covered the political spectrum and the ethnic composition of society. A striking indication of the liberal, tolerant ethos of Czechoslovak politics was that, unlike elsewhere in the region, the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ) was legally established in 1921 and allowed to operate openly throughout the interwar period. Party politics was a prevalent feature of political life. This was a result of the Constitution, which mandated proportional representation. Fifty parties ran in the interwar elections, with fifteen generally represented. Securing just eight percent of the popular vote allowed a party the possibility of entering a governing coalition. Because of the fragmentation of votes, at least five parties were needed to form a coalition,¹¹ and this grouping became known as the *Pětka* (The Five). As would be the case in post-communist Czechoslovakia and then in the Czech Republic, parties operated on the basis of a list of candidates, and those candidates sat in parliament.

The centrality of political parties to Czechoslovak politics was highlighted by the relative impotence of the President, who possessed limited power and was elected by Parliament. But Masaryk enhanced the powers of his post through his moral and intellectual prestige, as Havel would do seven decades later. Known as *Tatiček*, or Daddy, the scholarly Masaryk contrasted with other interwar Central European leaders, who tended to be military figures and inclined to centralized rule, such as Poland's Marshall Pilsudski or Hungary's Admiral Horthy, or the autocratic monarchs of southeastern Europe.

International circumstances would not favour interwar Czechoslovakia. The Depression of the late 1920s affected Czechoslovakia particularly badly. As a trading nation, protectionism crippled its exports. The economic downturn exacerbated ethnic relations. The Slovak economy, which trailed European standards of growth throughout the interwar period by forty years, suffered significantly and charges were levelled against Czech financial circles for manipulating the Slovak economy.

The efforts to accommodate Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia decreased as the Depression worsened. Invitations to the Sudeten Germans to participate in the government and the provision of education, and in the German language, that was superior to that received by their co-ethnics in Germany,¹² failed to alleviate the effects of the economic crisis. The economic welfare of Czechoslovak Germans was already dented by the economic redistribution programmes of the post-1918 Czechoslovak government. But because of the extensive industry in the Sudetenland and its disproportionate employment of the Czechoslovak Germans, the fall in industrial production and exports affected their livelihoods especially profoundly. These circumstances offered fertile ground for the pro-Nazi National Front Party led by Konrad Heinlein. In May 1935 his party won almost two-thirds of the Sudeten German vote and he began advocating the federalization of Czechoslovakia. Thereafter, with backing from Hitler, he made increasing demands on Prague for German rights which ultimately meant secession and which were therefore incompatible with the integrity of the Czechoslovak state. The National Front Party also became increasingly totalitarian, seeking to mimic its successful fraternal party in Germany by commanding the full loyalty of its members, and that of all Sudeten Germans. Consequently it pressured, even with violence, moderate Czechoslovak-German political parties into joining with it. By 1938 it was effectively the only voice for Germans in Czechoslovakia.

Unlike its neighbours, democratic rule in Czechoslovakia was subverted not by developments from within but forces from without. While the Sudeten Germans carry some responsibility for the destruction of Czechoslovakia, they acted in an environment fashioned by Hitler, and Hitler had claims on Czechoslovakia. At his trial in 1924 Hitler inverted the concept of self-determination and proclaimed that the Germans were disenfranchised from regrouping their co-nationals and enjoying the right of self-government: 'Self-determination, but self-determination for every negro tribe, and Germany does not count as a negro tribe'.¹³

As the international turbulence of the 1930s increased Czechoslovakia vigorously sought to secure itself through a combination of what can be called 'good international citizenship' and through recourse to standard measures of self-defence. Czechoslovakia was a strong advocate of international law, the League of Nations and international legal control over the use of force. Indeed, throughout his career as Czechoslovakia's Foreign Minister and, after 1935, as President, Eduard Beneš was known and respected as a key figure in the League system. Detractors of Czechoslovakia would simply argue that, as a beneficiary of the Versailles order, it

was upholding a self-serving status quo. It was against the revisionist powers of Germany and Hungary that Czechoslovakia also undertook to defend itself through more than moral persuasion. By May 1935 Prague secured two separate, but reinforcing, Treaties of Mutual Assistance with France and the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia also participated in the 'Little Entente' with two other states that risked revisionist claims against them: Romania and Yugoslavia. In addition to these international agreements, Czechoslovakia used its advanced military industries to increase stockpiles of arms and to construct internal defences. Foremost in this planning was a Czechoslovak version of the French Maginot line along its borders with Germany, although only one-quarter of the intended installations were completed, and many of those would never be armed. So committed was Prague to the security of the country that defence spending climbed from 17 percent of government expenditure to 44.5 percent in 1938.¹⁴

Despite these efforts, Czechoslovakia was defeated and dismantled without the exchange of either shots or rhetoric. After the Munich Conference of September 1938, attended by Britain, France, Germany and Italy but not by the country in question, the four powers agreed to cede the Sudetenland to Germany. Given no option, Prague consented on 30 September. The incorporation into Germany of this wide band of territory, extending around three sides of the Czech lands, ensured that the remainder of Czechoslovakia was undefendable. In addition, with the surrender of the Sudetenland, Germany gained 1,213 aircraft, 2,253 pieces of artillery, 501 anti-aircraft guns and 1,966 anti-tank guns; 810 tanks; nearly two million pieces of small arms; more than one billion rounds of small arms ammunition and three million artillery shells. Ironically, 'Czechoslovak equipment exacted a heavy toll from the Allies' in the course of the coming war.¹⁵

While the justification for the transfer of the Sudetenland was the lofty principle of national self-determination, in this case, as Alfred Cobban observed, 'national self-determination gives way to national self-determination'. Thus Munich also fuelled the territorial aspirations of Czechoslovakia's other neighbours. Poland reasserted its claim to Těšín, seized by Czechoslovakia in 1920 during the Polish-Soviet war, while revisionist Hungary demanded southern Slovakia and Carpathia.

While the territorial changes permitted by Munich were justified by the principle of national self-determination, the result was at least as ambiguous as before. Now Czechs became minorities in Germany and Poland. In addition, German-Italian arbitration in November 1938 awarded Hungary southern Slovakia and Carpathia, only half the population of which was Hungarian.¹⁶

The remainder of Czechoslovakia was reconstituted as the 'Second Republic' and referred to as Czecho-Slovakia, the historical significance of which would reappear in the post-communist debate on renaming the country. Slovakia and Carpathia gained a margin of autonomy. By October, however, the nationalist Slovak People's Party, first led by Hlinka and, after his death in 1938, by Father Josef Tiso,¹⁷ had secured power in Slovakia and articulated demands for autonomy. Meanwhile, revisionist Hungary

fulfilled its aims of reabsorbing the remainder of Carpathia.

Unsatisfied with possession of only the Sudetenland and encouraged by Anglo-French appeasement, Hitler clamoured for more of Czechoslovakia. Accusing rump Czechoslovakia of being a 'dagger' which stabbed at the heart of Germany, he threatened Czechoslovakia's new Prime Minister, Emil Hacha, with German air raids on Prague. Hacha capitulated and on 15 March 1939 the Czech lands were militarily occupied and annexed into the German Reich as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Not only was Czechoslovakia dead, but its remains were also gnarled. Polish forces occupied the Těšín area while Hungary seized southern Slovakia.

As he increased pressure on Prague, Hitler proposed to Tiso that he would support a Slovak bid for independence. But, Hitler threatened, if Slovakia did not accept this path immediately, Germany would leave Slovakia to fend for itself. This was hardly an enticing situation for an independent Slovakia because it was clear that Hungary wanted Slovak territory. Thus, one day before the German occupation of the Czech lands, Slovakia declared full independence on 14 March, and became closely allied to the Axis powers. Czechoslovakia came to an end.

The Czech Lands and Slovakia had separate experiences during the war, and these would shape post-war attitudes and perceptions of each nation towards the other. Bohemia and Moravia were annexed into the Reich as a Protectorate while Slovakia became an independent but servile vassal state. Both populations were used as a workforce. Estimates of those taken to Germany as forced labour range between 200,000 and 1,000,000, with the Slovaks supplying twice as many workers as the Czechs. At home Czech industry and its workforce were mobilized for the German war effort. Bohemia and Moravia alone produced between 9-12 percent of Germany's total wartime industrial output, proportionately higher than any other part of the German empire.¹⁸

A qualitative distinction arose from the type of survival each nation undertook during the war. The German Reich had definite plans to reshape the Czech population by 'extinguishing all vestiges of Czech culture and political values'.¹⁹ Czechs interpreted Slovak assistance to Germany as 'treason' while Slovaks viewed Czech work for the Reich as slavery.²⁰ Their resistance to Fascism also differentiated the two nations, particularly in historical and political discourse after the war. The Czechs, while occupied, were often viewed as indifferent to the occupation, leading frugal and frightened but otherwise normal lives; the novels of Josef Škvorecký set during the period, depicting jazz and romance, tend to lend at least literary credence to that view. But acts of Czech resistance, notably the 27 May 1942 assassination of the German responsible for the Protectorate, Reinhard Heydrich, received disproportionate retribution. The Bohemian town of Lidice was razed two weeks later; the male inhabitants were summarily executed, the women despatched to concentration camps, and the children either gassed or seized and Germanized. The 365,000 Jews of both the Protectorate and Slovakia were marked for extermination. Only a single-digit percentage of the prewar Czechoslovakia's Jewish population

returned from German concentration and death camps. Albeit under Nazi tutelage, the Slovak National Council nevertheless voted for the deportation of Slovak Jews. This act encouraged the view among at least some Czechs that the Slovaks were not only undemocratic but even fascist.

While Czech national resistance during the Second World War has been called a 'failure' even by sympathetic historians,²¹ Slovak efforts at resistance became part of their national identity. The Slovak National Council led an uprising of combined communist and non-communist forces in August 1944 to liberate Czechoslovakia. Its aims, however, extended further, to the construction of a federal country. This aspiration was pursued to some degree by the post-war government, such as with the establishment of individual National Committees for the Czechs and Slovaks, but the prospect of self-rule was ended with the communist takeover in 1948. The experience of wartime independent Slovakia remained in memory, with its leaders controversially commemorated by some post-communist Slovak politicians after 1989, despite associations with the deportation of Slovak Jews.

Czechoslovakia's foreign policy between 1945 and 1948 was conditioned by the experience of Munich. Beneš' government distrusted Britain and France for their betrayal of Czechoslovakia and his government was much more sympathetic to the Soviet Union than other governments-in-exile from the region. While, for example, relations between the Polish government-in-exile and the Soviet Union ruptured entirely, Beneš' exiled government signed the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty in 1943. Since the Munich *Diktat* Czechoslovak political leaders, including Beneš, had pronounced that the Soviet Union was in fact prepared to assist the country. To what extent this is true remains debatable; but Czechoslovak Communist leader Gottwald 'was most determined to turn the alleged willingness of Moscow to assist Czechoslovakia in 1938 into a tool of political struggle'.²² Throughout the war the Beneš' government-in-exile engaged in diplomacy to achieve a favourable post-war outcome for Czechoslovakia. This included overtures to Stalin, and Beneš' may have given Carpathia to the USSR on 29 June 1945 in order to secure his favour.

Prague was reassured of Soviet intentions as the Red Army withdrew from Czechoslovakia (as did the US Army from Western Bohemia) in late 1945, in contrast to another allied country, Poland, where Soviet forces remained indefinitely. Certainly good relations with the USSR translated into Soviet support for the expulsion of the three million Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia, an act sanctioned in principle by Winston Churchill even before the war ended.

As the British Prime Minister explained to the House of Commons on 15 December 1944: 'expulsion is the method which, so far as we have been able to see, will be the most satisfactory and lasting. There will be no mixture of populations to cause endless trouble.... A clean sweep will be made. I am not alarmed by these large transfers, which are more possible in modern conditions than they ever were before'.²³

Despite Churchill's expectation of a tidy transfer of minorities, the expulsion of

the Germans from Czechoslovakia provoked great difficulties which plagued Czech-German relations to the present. Each party disagrees on what happened and the language that should be used to describe those events. Sudeten Germans tend towards *Vertreibung*, denoting an aggressive and unjust act, whereas Czechs refer to *odsun*, or transfer, a more tidy and legal process. Expulsions of the half-million Hungarian minority from southern Slovakia were planned, and some expelled, but the process was stopped by Czechoslovak-Hungarian negotiation.

The expulsions had demographic implications within Czechoslovakia. Some two and a half million people were rehoused, many of them Gypsies, or Romanies, brought from rural Slovakia to live in properties vacated by the Sudeten Germans. The Sudeten German expulsion also elevated the Slovak proportion of the population from under one-fifth to over a quarter of the total Czechoslovak population.

In politics, initially the post-war period was one of relative consensus, although the number of political parties was limited and right-wing parties were disallowed, having been blamed for the country's pre-war demise. Nevertheless, the distribution of power within parliament closely resembled that of the First Republic. Interwar democrats returned from the London-based government-in-exile; Beneš resumed the office of Prime Minister while Tomáš Masaryk's son Jan became Foreign Minister.

A general agreement was struck between Beneš' non-communists and the Czechoslovak Communists. This took the form of the Kosice Programme, launched on 5 April 1945. Politically, the Kosice Programme dictated that all political parties participate in a coalition government; but, initially, the KSCĀ cooperated with other parties of its own accord. And in addition to stipulating the confiscation of property belonging to wartime collaborators, the Programme articulated a wide-ranging policy of nationalization.

A coalition government was established in October 1945, with the communists holding eight Cabinet posts, including the sensitive Ministries of Information and the Interior. The government enacted nationalization, the first law of which was scheduled to coincide with the 27th anniversary of the foundation of the Republic. Major industries and financial services were affected, and over half the country's industrial workforce was transferred from the private to the nationalized economy. By early 1947, nationalized enterprises accounted for 80 percent of employment and two-thirds of production.²⁴ The government introduced other measures to equalize wealth, including high progressive taxes, the confiscation of large personal savings, and caps on higher salaries. Most significantly, the National Front government introduced its 'Two-Year Plan for the Renewal and Reconstruction of the Czechoslovak Economy'. Not only was this significant for following the Soviet model, but it was also the first to be enacted outside the USSR and the first by a democratic market economy.

Unlike in neighbouring countries, where Soviet occupation forces impeded the efforts of non-communist parties,²⁵ the KSCĀ enjoyed what is generally considered to be genuine support among the population. The KSCĀ won 38 percent of the vote in

the May 1946 elections, the highest of any party.²⁶ This success gave it predominant influence in the coalition government, and a ninth cabinet post. KSCĀ leader Klement Gottwald became premier.

The KSCĀ was well organized, having developed organizations throughout society, including trade unions and some student movements. It also undertook measures to secure authentic support and gained advantage by having its members hold economically important Cabinet posts, including Agriculture and Education, as well as others that secured levels of public control, namely the Ministry of Interior. But even though the KSCĀ enjoyed much popular support, it did not refrain from using tactics typical of communist parties throughout East Europe after the war. Quite simply, the KSCĀ began a march to power, combining legal and astute measures with subversive ones, throughout benefitting from Soviet assistance.

Quite apart from indigenous Czechoslovak communist designs on power, Stalin was intent on thorough control of Eastern Europe and, accordingly, began to demand tighter communist control of Czechoslovakia. This included his unwillingness to have Czechoslovakia (as well as Poland) participate in the Marshall Plan and his objections to Czechoslovak membership of nascent post-war international institutions, of which Czechoslovakia was a founding member. When Masaryk returned from meeting Stalin in 1947 he proclaimed that he went to Moscow as the foreign minister of a sovereign state but returned as a stooge of Stalin.

The presence of Soviet forces throughout Eastern Europe, the subversion of pro-Western indigenous governments by Moscow-backed communists, and the liquidation of non-communist political movements ensured Stalin's control of the region by 1948. Czechoslovak democratic parties were neither prepared for communist tactics nor sufficiently responsive and events pushed the communist and non-communist representatives to confrontation, particularly as the KSCĀ sought even more extensive nationalization and financial penalties against the wealthy.

Communists proceeded to use their government positions to parachute party loyalists into posts, particularly in the police. Democratic cabinet ministers responded to such communist subversion by resigning, believing that a moral act would force a proper outcome. Instead, the Communists took advantage of the democratic withdrawal. They also organized massive public demonstrations, particularly through their trade and youth movements, of popular support for their governance. Even though Beneš had accepted the resignations he became intent on resisting the communists. On 23 February 1948 he proclaimed: 'I will act as I did in September 1938. I shall not give up, be sure of that'. Two days later, however, he accepted a KSCĀ demand for the appointment of still more Communists and Communist sympathizers to the Cabinet. Beneš' concession may have been due to poor health; foremost, however, the outcome was predetermined by the preponderance of Communist power in Czechoslovakia and of Soviet power in Central Europe.

The Communist ascent to power had been variously called a 'coup', a 'subversion' or a 'passive revolution'.²⁷ Regardless of the interpretation of February 1948, the

Czechoslovak Communists gained pre-eminent power and went about consolidating their hold on the country. While many Czechs and Slovaks genuinely welcomed the advent of communist rule, their idealism would soon clash with the realities of their rule. On the wintery day of 28 February 1948, Gottwald proclaimed socialism from a balcony over Wenceslas. His Communist colleague Vladimir Clementis put his own hat on Gottwald's bare head. Later, Clementis would be denounced as an enemy of the people and airbrushed from the photo of the proclamation every Czechoslovak would come to possess. Only his hat remained.²⁸

NOTES

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5. Leff, *National Conflict*, p. 12.
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17. Yeshayahu Jelinek, *The Parish Republic: Hlinka's Slovak People's Party* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1976).
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