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The Failures of Czech Democracy, 1918–1948

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Introduction

The collapse of Czech democracy in 1948 should command the attention of anyone interested in knowing how democracies survive. Before World War II, Czechoslovakia was a unique success story, the lone outpost of rule of, by, and for the people east of the Rhine, surrounded by the Nazi and Soviet dictatorships as well as authoritarian Hungary, Poland, and Austria. But Czechoslovakia had unusual advantages. Going back to the 1820s, the Czech national movement had portrayed the Czech nation as democratic: in order to exist and thrive, it needed self-rule. Moreover, the Czech lands possessed important prerequisites for democracy. The economy was balanced and prosperous and its population highly literate; Czechs benefited from liberalization in the Habsburg monarchy and had produced a full spectrum of political parties by the time war broke out in 1914. After World War I, thanks largely to Woodrow Wilson's patronage, the Czech political class came into possession of its own state, and a constituent assembly in Prague crafted a liberal constitution that functioned until Nazi troops occupied the country in March 1939.¹

What happened to the Czech lands after the Nazi occupiers were expelled in 1945 is therefore mysterious.² Political life quickly revived, yet democracy was hobbled. Important right-leaning parties were now banished, and the once small Czechoslovak Communist Party, which had played no role in Czech governance

¹ This essay focuses on the Czechs. According to the Czech national mythology, Slovaks, whose language Czechs understand with little need for translation, were a fraternal people destined to share statehood for the sake of mutual assistance: they were two tribes and one people. The events of the early twentieth century, culminating in the political crisis of the 1990s, revealed that mythology to be a fiction. For background, see my *From Peoples into Nations: A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

² Two exceptional studies have appeared in recent years, and I will make significant use of them in what follows: Igor Lukes, *On the Edge of the Cold War: American Diplomats and Spies in Postwar Prague* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

before 1939, now became the strongest party, claiming five important ministerial posts.³ It did so not because of any electoral victory, but because the other legal parties—Czech National Socialists, Social Democrats, and Catholics (known as the People's Party)—had agreed to restrict the political spectrum and recognize the Communists as the leading force. Supposedly the future belonged to the left, whose dynamism and high morality were embodied by the Soviet Union, whose Red Army had freed Prague in May 1945.

But the Soviet Union did not impose its system on Czechoslovakia. Just six months later, that army, along with the U.S. armed forces that had liberated western Bohemia, evacuated the country, leaving the country's politicians to their own devices. In February 1948, after these politicians had ruled the country jointly in a government of four parties, the Communists exploited a mistake of their rivals to stage a full-scale takeover. On the surface, the mistake was procedural: the "democrats," as the non-Communists were known, complaining of Communist abuses of power, submitted their resignations on February 20. They expected that President Edvard Beneš would appoint a caretaker government and announce new elections. According to polling, the democrats were predicted to win in a landslide. They would then rule without the Communists.

However, they had miscalculated. The Communists and their allies among the Social Democrats (also a Marxist party) still held a majority of government posts and simply asked Beneš to appoint new ministers to replace those who had resigned.⁴ This move was in keeping with provisions in the Constitution of 1920. They then called upon their hundreds of thousands of party members to form "action committees," which ousted their rivals from all positions of influence in state and civil society, and then began setting up a totalitarian order.

In what follows I trace how Czechoslovak democracy reached this conclusion after decades of formation and survival. The explanation is only partly about violence. As stated, there were no Soviet troops in the country, and if Czech Communists controlled the police in February 1948, they did not have complete mastery of the army. The explanation is more subtle, and extends into ideas about political legitimacy. Democracy did not simply collapse: it had been eroded in a process extending back to before the war.

In the eyes of many Czechs, the entry of Nazi troops into their capital in March 1939 had been enabled by Great Britain and France. The previous year, at the infamous Munich conference, the Western powers had presented Hitler with the fortified Czechoslovak borderlands (the Sudetenland) in exchange—they thought—for peace. Czech politicians had no say in these deliberations, but after

³ There were sixteen ministerial posts in the first postwar Czechoslovak government: agriculture, social welfare, information, interior, and education went to the Communists. The prime minister and minister of defense were fellow travelers, and the deputy prime minister was a Communist.

⁴ As explained below, these ministers were Communist fellow travelers in the democrats' parties.

German troops erased their sovereignty, they drew two lessons: Western powers thought that liberal democracy was good only for them, and if liberal democracy could not protect the Czechs' basic security, perhaps another form of government could. The Soviet Union also called itself democratic and seemed in 1945 to be a great success story, having carried the major burdens of defeating fascism. The world was tilting leftward, and Czechs had no choice but to adjust.

The Forming of Czech Democracy

Before 1918, the Czech lands seemed predestined for strong liberal democratic rule. The country's most evident advantage was social structure. Czech society was relatively egalitarian and featured relatively wealthy middle and working classes and peasantry, and a balanced economy with strengths across sectors, from farming and textiles to heavy industry and manufacturing. There was no native aristocracy or huge differences of wealth. Thanks in part to Austria, in part to the efforts of the national movement to foster Czech culture, the country boasted a complete education system and strong scientific establishment, with established professional classes, in the most developed of all Habsburg provinces. (It had provided the monarchy with its weapons.)⁵ This self-confident and increasingly modern society articulated its interests through a variety of organizations that emerged after the 1870s: chambers of commerce, a lively press, sporting societies, institutionalized religious faiths, social clubs, and a full spectrum of political parties.

By the 1890s a transition had taken place, from a rather simplistic division between liberals and conservatives to parties stretching from Social Democratic and the more nationally minded National Socials (no relation to the German Nazi Party) on the left, then to political Catholicism and agrarianism. Further to the right, a National Democratic "camp" took shape, conservative in orientation, the right wing of which later flirted with fascism. The largest of all the parties were the Social Democrats, from which the far left splintered in 1921, making the Czech Communist Party, which, because of the land's relatively high level of socioeconomic development, was comparatively moderate.

The constitutional order of the Habsburg monarchy's western half (Cisleithania) became progressively more open and "liberal," and by 1907 it featured universal, equal, and direct male suffrage by secret ballot. Yet because of the difficulty in getting German and Czech politicians to work together, the

⁵ Vaclav Benes, "Czechoslovak Democracy and Its Problems 1918–1920," in *A History of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1918–1948*, ed. Victor S. Mamatey and Radomír Luža (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 39–88.

Parliament in Vienna and the Diet in Prague could not produce governing majorities, causing the emperor to appoint prime ministers who ruled by decree, sometimes tolerated by Parliament, yet frequently blocked by obstruction. Czech elites failed to become reconciled to the Habsburg state because it never permitted them to control Bohemia in the way that the Hungarian elite controlled Hungary.⁶ If Czech politicians became experts in obstruction, as a class they also came much more closely together, from left to right, than is normally the case. The point was to defend Czech interests against the other national clubs in Vienna, above all the German.

Still, Habsburg rule integrated the broad masses of the people, including peasants, into democratic practices, much in contrast to Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Russia, and to some extent Italy, where the majorities were disenfranchised and became fodder for radical movements. One unusual feature of the “plebian” nature of Czech society and absence of a native aristocracy, however, was widespread suspicion of social differentiation, which when combined with the demoralizing experience of Nazi occupation would produce enthusiasm for radical left parties after World War II that subsisted on ostracizing and demonizing others—first ethnic, then social.⁷

These institutional developments found support in Czech nationalist mythology. From the formation of the Czech movement in the 1820s to its consolidation later in the century under the philosophy professor T. G. Masaryk, democracy, freedom, and tolerance were portrayed as essential to the Czech character, going back to the proto-Protestant Hussite movement of the fifteenth century. Masaryk even had a grand idea whereby history moved forward, from monarchical and tyrannical rule (Austria) to scientific and democratic rule (the Czech people). The Czech question was therefore more than a concern of one tiny European people; it had supposed importance for the progress of humankind as a whole.⁸ This notion worked well as long as conventional liberal democracy seemed to uphold the practical demands of the Czech movement for independence; when democracy in its liberal form ceased to guarantee the prospering of the Czech nation, however, its fate would become uncertain.

Such an explicit pro-democratic ideology was unique in Eastern Europe; indeed no other state on the continent (except France), produced a similarly strong

⁶ Czechs wanted the monarchy divided into federal units, one of which would be under Czech control; that is, they wanted the deal that the monarch had struck with the Hungarian elite in 1867, permitting them to govern their own nation-state, while maintaining a union through the monarch with Cisleithania. (The ethnically diverse Hungarian lands were called Transleithania, lands across the Leitha River.) Vít Hloušek, “The Birth of Modern Czech Politics: 1848–1918,” in *Czech Politics: From West to East and Back Again*, ed. Stanislav Balík, Vít Hloušek, Lubomír Kopeček, Jan Holzer, Pavel Pšejja, and Andrew Lawrence Roberts (Berlin: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2017), 26.

⁷ Hloušek, “The Birth of Modern Czech Politics,” 18.

⁸ Peter Bugge, “Czech Democracy 1918–1938: Paragon or Parody,” *Bohemia* 47 (2006–2007): 22–23; Jan Holzer, “Politics in Interwar Czechoslovakia,” in Balík et al., *Politics*, 35.

“nationalist republicanism.” Masaryk preached that for Czechs “progress” was a moral but also a practical mission, of making minds and bodies strong and excluding no one, no matter how poor. Only a progressive program would permit Czechs to stand among Central European nations. The watchword was unity: according to Masaryk, “the modern national movement is politically and socially democratic.”⁹ The major threat was German nationalism, which was portrayed as undemocratic, authoritarian, and aggressive, whether in Prussian or Austrian guises.

The First Republic

This first Czechoslovak Republic of 1918 has been celebrated as the lone successful democracy in the East Central Europe of its time. In the 1990s Václav Havel called it “a modern, democratic, liberal State [that] was purposefully created on the basis of the values to which the entire democratic Europe of today is committed as well, and in which it sees its future.”¹⁰ The republic was indeed a formal democracy with freedoms to speak and organize, regular fair elections, representative bodies, and tolerance of minorities, political and otherwise.

Still, this democracy suffered from limitations because it was meant to serve the national movement. It was a creation and possession of Czechs and some Slovak allies, and Czech politicians, regardless of ideological orientation, cooperated to the exclusion of everyone else: the German and Hungarian parties and the Communists.¹¹ Slovakia was treated almost as a colony, with a marginal political presence in faraway Prague, and the real work of governing fell to the Czech parties, who governed as a bloc, of and for the Czech people, though constituting a bare majority of the state’s population. (Germans were about one-fourth.)¹² What happened institutionally after 1918 was that the Czech parties learned to use “their” state for their own purposes.

The extraordinary cohesion of Czech parties meant stability. Where the Polish, German, or Yugoslav republics foundered on the inability of complex political spectrums to produce parliamentary majorities, the tight collaboration of Czech politicians guaranteed that democratic rule would survive. Throughout the

⁹ T. G. Masaryk, paraphrased in Jaroslav Střítecký, “The Czech Question, a Century Later,” *Czech Sociological Review* 3, no. 1 (1995): 67.

¹⁰ Cited in Bugge, “Czech Democracy,” 4.

¹¹ The actual doctrine of this Slavic state was “Czechoslovakism,” the effective political myth propagated by Masaryk and other Czech and Slovak nationalists of the “brotherlike” relation between the two peoples, conferring upon them the destiny of unity in a common state of their own. But in fact it was the Czech elite that ran the state (Holzer, “Politics,” 40).

¹² The exact proportion of Germans was 23.36% in 1921. Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), 89.

interwar years, the five major parties (the *Pětka*) polled over half the votes and thus after each election formed coalitions that could govern. But their behavior also created a perception that no matter how the population's desires shifted, the same parties were always in power. Critics said the system caused people to believe that politics was the job of politicians, who, to make matters worse, failed to promote new leaders and lost all vital contacts with their base by the 1930s. They simply sorted out policy questions among themselves.¹³

Equally problematic was that the opposition in Parliament—Germans, Slovaks, Communists—was essentially ignored and took recourse to shouting and other forms of obstruction reminiscent of Czech behavior under the Austrian regime. Thus, while the Czech population became nationally integrated, with basic loyalty to the state, though not politically integrated, the German population was alienated in every sense and drifted rightward, producing by the late 1930s the largest support for a fascist movement achieved in any place at any time.¹⁴

The historian Jan Holzer has noted a problem in a democracy without real choices: namely, a conviction that political parties and contestation were a nuisance, harmful to the larger cause of national unity and national independence (something the *Pětka* system protected and ensured).¹⁵ The system could prove intolerant when its survival seemed challenged. In 1933, Parliament passed a law permitting the shuttering of radical organizations, and throughout the 1930s a constitutional court, which might have challenged such extralegal acts, suffered from vacancies and never functioned properly. The absence of effective checks and balances would continue into the postwar years, when a strong and independent judiciary might have checked ministerial decrees and abuses of power leading to the February 1948 coup.

But with the background of the antidemocratic surge in Europe of this time, these appear quibbles. Despite administrative harassment, the Czechoslovak Republic featured a range of political options, and no serious infringements took place on civil liberties. Elements of the parliamentary system may have verged on the unconstitutional, for example the practice dating from 1919 that seats belonged to parties and not deputies, but what was the comparison? The French government banned a range of right-wing organizations in 1936 (which quickly reorganized), while Communists in every other state east of the Rhine could not

¹³ "People spent political energies in the microcosms of the many party organizations, while general democratic integration, i.e. participation or interest in broader political issues, was low" (Bugge, "Czech Democracy," 16).

¹⁴ Bugge, "Czech Democracy," 12, 28. In this they mirrored the attitude of their very popular president, T. G. Masaryk, of whom Roman Szporluk wrote, "The only institutional aspect of democracy which interested Masaryk was his rights as president of the new Czechoslovak republic" (cited in Bugge, "Czech Democracy," 20n64).

¹⁵ Holzer, "Politics," 45.

operate legally. In Czechoslovakia the state tolerated Communists and fascists, though they aimed to destroy it.

Moreover, the disciplined and well-organized hierarchal parties of the permanent government coalition (the *Pětka*) formed an important counterbalance to the office of the president (called *Hrad*, or Castle), itself a power center, under the tolerant but elitist-minded Masaryk, the state's founder. Both he and his successor and collaborator, Beneš, believed that democracy was above all a defense against extremes of right and left and thus required a mediating institution above the parties, acting with little concern for formal aspects of democracy and constitutionalism.¹⁶ The *Hrad* had allies and connections in civic associations and political parties; it intervened in public life when it (i.e., Masaryk) saw fit, considering itself a repository of wisdom that would ensure that democracy got proper ethical results.

Masaryk was likened to a monarch, a “democratic prince,” and a “beloved potentate.” George Bernard Shaw said he was the only man qualified as a potential president of a United States of Europe.¹⁷ But how sound was a democratic regime that depended so heavily on the charisma and stabilizing force of one human being?

Masaryk had been dead for just over a year when the European powers—Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and France—decided to award Germany Czechoslovakia's border regions, with their overwhelmingly German population, on October 1, 1938. This was a disaster for Czechoslovak statehood because that area, commonly known as the Sudetenland, was a fortified border of hills, thick forests, and a band of modern defenses. Czechoslovak diplomats took no part in this conference at Munich and were given the choice of accepting or refusing its results. In the latter case, a British diplomat informed them, they would be on their own. Beneš decided to accept the diktat of the powers, arguing that he could not lead his nation to a slaughterhouse.¹⁸ For his part, Hitler had cannily argued that including some 2.5 million Germans in Czechoslovakia against their wishes had violated the highest Wilsonian principle: national self-determination.

The effect of the capitulation on the mobilized Czechoslovak army of some one million men, and much of the citizenry, was demoralization. Neither

¹⁶ “The *Hrad* [Castle] can be defined as a flexible, but at its core stable conglomerate of politicians, civil servants, businessmen, journalists, intellectuals and other people of influence, adhering to the President, his philosophy and worldview, and his political practice.” The president intervened regularly in party politics, and also had control of some newspapers. He and his supporters also had an intelligence service (Bugge, “Czech Democracy,” 18, 27).

¹⁷ W. Preston Warren, *Masaryk's Democracy: A Philosophy of Scientific and Moral Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 1.

¹⁸ His words: “Should you reject this plan you'll be dealing with Germany completely on your own. The French will put it to you more elegantly, but believe me, they are in complete agreement with us. They will be disinterested.” For a devastating critique of Beneš for his “profound failure of psychological and political nerves,” see Rothschild, *East Central Europe*, 132.

their leadership in Prague, nor the Western powers, felt democracy was worth fighting for. After the war, German generals said that their armies could not have broken through the Czechoslovak fortifications. Even now tourists can inspect the undisturbed concrete bunkers surrounding the Sudetenland. Yes, Prague would have been bombed, but perhaps the spectacle of a small nation fighting for its life would have shamed the Western powers—under pressure from their citizenries—and caused them to abrogate their deal with Hitler.¹⁹ As it was, Germany made good use of Czech munitions when attacking France a little over a year later.

Beneš escaped to Britain, and the political system adjusted to what Czech politicians perceived as the will of the German hegemon. Soon they forbade the Communist Party and began working on racist legislation to ban Jews from professions. The press filled with chauvinist articles, and an intolerant nationalism crept into public discourse that had been unacceptable under Masaryk, with his ideology of “humanism.”²⁰ How far Czech politicians would have gone in marginalizing racial and political enemies remains unknown, because Hitler’s troops ended this experiment (known as the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic) with the invasion of the Czech lands on March 15, 1939. A German administration assumed control of what they called the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and Slovakia became nominally independent.

Czechoslovakia Becomes a People’s Democracy

After the war, Beneš seemed vindicated. Czech towns were hardly touched by the fighting, and the population had grown. But his mood, and the mood of many Czechs, had shifted leftward because of the evident failure of Western-style democracy to protect their nationhood. Nowadays people say facts depend upon one’s position in the political spectrum, but in 1945, whether one was Communist, Catholic, agrarian, or bourgeois, Czechs agreed that the “pre-Munich republic” had failed and there was no going back. Liberalism had delivered the Czechs’ state to a genocidal regime. The anti-German uprising in Prague of May 1945 lasted only three days, but people claimed it was a sign of rupture, a “national revolution.” The question was toward what.

¹⁹ On the concerns of German generals, see William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 424–425. On recent work documenting the ability of Czechoslovakia to defend itself, and the likelihood of France and Great Britain coming to its aid, see Sven Felix Kellerhof, “Fast wäre es 1938 zum Krieg gekommen,” *Die Welt*, September 18, 2018.

²⁰ Among these revisionists pointing to domestic roots of the problematic Second Republic are Peter Heumos and Jan Rataj (Bugge, “Czech Democracy,” 6–7).

The first visible sign of change was the interim government, which had been assembled among Czech exile politicians in Moscow. It was called democratic but featured conditions not seen in liberal democracies. The major Czech political actors, Beneš's National Socialists, a Catholic party (the People's Party), Social Democrats, and the Communists, agreed to ban two right-wing parties, the Agrarians and National Democrats, for supposed collaboration. After that point, these four parties ruled in a National Front government and acted to hinder the emergence of other political parties. As a critic noted at the time, this was a regime without opposition.²¹ But of course the idea that a handful of parties might control government was by no means new in Czechoslovakia, nor was the fact of no effective opposition.

Just before returning to Prague, the Czech politicians (with one Slovak party) worked out a governing program (the Košice program) that was left-wing and nationalistic at the same time, stipulating close alliance with the Soviet Union; nationalization of banks, industry, and insurance; land reform; but also punishment of traitors and the denial of citizenship to Germans and Magyars—some three million of the state's inhabitants. Until elections in May 1946, the parties governed through a provisional national assembly, by presidential decree, and by revolutionary "national councils."²² Reminiscent of the grassroots "soviets" that emerged in the Russian Revolution, these councils were selected rather than elected and supposed to tap the people's will, bypassing bureaucratic details, vaulting ahead to purges of administration of those unfit for life in the new "people's" democracy. They featured a heavy Communist representation.

Though all four parties entered government, the Communists demanded key ministries from the start: agriculture, information, education, and interior. The last controlled the police, uniformed and secret. This was far more than their share, given that they had received only 10% of the vote in prewar elections, but no one objected. Thanks to their association with the Soviet Union, Communists claimed a paramount ability to protect the nation. They also asserted the left's supposedly crucial role in wartime resistance at home. And they were visibly growing. By 1948 the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia numbered 2.5 million members; among Czechs that was about a quarter of the population.²³ Unlike

²¹ Paul Zinner, *Communist Strategy and Tactics in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1948* (New York: Pall Mall, 1963), 93. Beneš belonged to the National Socialists from 1919 to his election as president in 1935; see Otto Friedman, *The Break-up of Czech Democracy* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1950), 59.

²² The provisional assembly had six parties, four Czech and two Slovak (and thus two Communist parties, one Czech and one Slovak), and operated according to a program worked out at Košice in April 1945. Each had forty representatives. The second Slovak party was the Democratic Party.

²³ Anna Grzymala-Busse, *Redeeming the Communist Past: The Regeneration of Communist Parties in East Central Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32. The exact proportion was 25.3%.

members of the other parties, as we will see, Czech Communists were subject to party discipline and could be mobilized for party tasks.

Among the four parties, the Communists understood the tasks of building a left-leaning democracy most acutely and acted with brazen self-confidence, brooking no delay, gladly making use of the chaos of the early postwar months in order to cleanse public life of supposed wartime collaborators. They infiltrated organizations, including other political parties, but also workers' militias and factory councils.²⁴ The leading Social Democrat, Zdeněk Fierlinger, a personal friend of Beneš, accused by his critics of moral bankruptcy, was made interim prime minister, but in fact worked for the Communists, while commanding allegiance of the left wing of his party. Measures in the economy were part of this overall transformation: nationalization decrees, expulsions of Germans who legitimated property seizures. Beneš approved such measures through "decrees" which were rubber-stamped by the provisional parliament.

The leftward shift did not seem unusual and went beyond Czechoslovakia. In September 1945, Communist information minister Václav Kopecký told the National Front government, "The situation is no different in other European countries, namely in France, where one can count on a government with Thorez as premier, and the other ministers will be from the socialist and radical-socialist parties. The government in Italy will also be made up of leftist party groupings. This is leading to an unstoppable move to the left in all European countries, towards real and true democracies."²⁵ The new vocabulary was *lidovláda*, rule of the people, also described as "people's" or "real democracy"; even commentators right of center called the order *Socialist*.

Communists were of course the truest Socialists, but they insisted they were moderate; each country could go on a separate path. The Communist leader Klement Gottwald said that Czechoslovakia would go to Socialism without violence and disruption. Stalin agreed: it was possible in some cases to achieve Socialism without the dictatorship of the proletariat.²⁶ Beneš believed that given

²⁴ Maria Dowling, *Czechoslovakia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 82. Because of criticism the trade unions dissolved militias in the fall of 1946, but not entirely, and they would be quickly reactivated in February 1948. Factory councils created in 1945 were very strong; they could form management boards and carry out purges. Martin Myant, *Socialism and Democracy in Czechoslovakia 1945–1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 68.

²⁵ Cited in Karel Kaplan, *The Short March: The Communist Takeover in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1948* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), 1.

²⁶ For the views of Černý and Peroutka, as well as leading Catholics, see Igor Lukes, "The Czech Road to Communism," in *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe 1944–1949*, ed. Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 249–250; Radomír Luža, "Between Democracy and Communism," in *A History of the Czechoslovak Republic*, ed. Radomír Luža and Victor Mamatey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 389.

the strong sympathies Czechs felt for the USSR, Stalin would have no reason to impose his system upon Czechoslovakia by force.²⁷

The non-Communists were called “democrats” but shared basic understandings of history with the Communists. The USSR had miraculously advanced from agrarian empire to military-industrial superpower in a decade and was the war’s major victor. By the time Western forces finally got around to launching their assault on Europe in June 1944, the Red Army was in Poland and Romania; less than a year later its soldiers stood at Europe’s heart, in Prague, Vienna, and Berlin. As the most determined and bloodied antifascist force, Communists therefore displayed exuberant moral superiority.²⁸ They said that bourgeois democracy had proved unable to deal with challenges of economic development, and instead produced crisis and fascism and war. Similar to Polish intellectuals in Czesław Miłosz’s *The Captive Mind*, Czech Catholics and liberals adopted the Hegelian view that history proceeds in stages; bourgeois democracy and the capitalism it undergirded belonged to the past, and the age of Socialist “people’s democracy” was dawning. Communists would play the main role, but would be assisted by everyone else. Except of course traitors.

In our day no Czech intellectual better symbolizes the supposed liberal democratic option than Ferdinand Peroutka, a member of the Czech National Socialist Party who had known Masaryk (he belonged to “Castle” circles) and escaped to the West in 1948. But if we look at his argumentation, it was structurally identical to that of the Communists. He wrote in the fall of 1945 that “there is no turning back.” Those who defend capitalism, he said, fail to ask tough questions about that old system’s inability to solve the “social question.” In any case, that old order belonged to the past. Though briefly stunned by the Nazi cudgel, Czech intellectuals had now awakened in a developing Socialist state. It was “pointless to prolong the feeling of inner turmoil, which plagues people who have refused to come to terms with the time in which they live [*se smířit s dobou*]. We have decided not to contribute to that feeling. . . . [P]eople have a chance of success only when they stand firmly on the basis of realities and not fantasies. . . . [T]he old world has died [and now] . . . only socialism is possible.”²⁹

A month later, President Beneš spoke on similar lines upon receiving an honorary degree from Charles University: “We accept the idea that liberal society

²⁷ Edward Táborský, “President Edvard Beneš and the Czechoslovak Crises of 1938 and 1948,” in *Czechoslovakia: Crossroads and Crises*, ed. Norman Stone and Edward Strouhal (London and New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 132.

²⁸ For an evocation of this view, see the memoir of Heda Kovaly, a Czech Jew who survived Auschwitz: *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague* (Cambridge, MA: Plunkett Lake Press, 1986), 52–66.

²⁹ Ferdinand Peroutka, “Není návratu,” *Svobodné noviny*, November 25, 1945, emphasis added. A second leading liberal, Prokop Drtina, felt a new age was dawning: the whole world was moving leftward. Ondřej Koutek, *Prokop Drtina: Osud československého demokrata* (Prague: Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Vyšehrad, 2011), 223–224.

theoretically and in practice belongs to the past.” Commentators across the spectrum agreed that the interwar republic had been an instrument of class rule, which failed to solve the social question because only people of exalted social background had been permitted to occupy positions of authority. Real power had rested with finance capitalists, industrialists, and high-ranking civil servants, men with shady political pasts, who stood close to Czech fascists.³⁰ Even the liberals called Masaryk’s democracy the *pre-Munich republic*, by implication a reactionary class state. Given that Beneš and Peroutka had themselves help run this state, such sentiments inspired guilt as well as an urgent determination to draw a line between themselves and that past.

And so now democracy had to be practiced more sincerely and successfully: all strata of the population would share in rule, and to those who felt shame about the past, that implied admitting Communists, mainly of working-class background, into positions of authority. There was of course truth to the allegation that the old top-heavy system had discouraged participation of average citizens; this was a mistake the revolutionary new regime would not repeat.³¹

No one specified what in the institutional makeup of liberal democracy had to be abandoned. One evident casualty in retrospect was tolerance of a range of opinions. Given the supposedly unquestionable failings of “bourgeois democracy,” not to support the fledgling leftist people’s democracy—whatever its real institutional substance—was concomitant to being a fascist and, worse than that, a traitor. Communists insisted that the nation would “tolerate no return to the political conditions [of the first republic], even in disguised form.”³² “Disguised” meant that the new order could tolerate only open, ostentatious loyalty and support; any opposition to the most antifascist force—the Communists—was by definition treasonous.

The most evident enemies, for whom it became treasonous to imagine equal rights, were aliens to the “people.” The Košice program spoke of the “Slavic orientation of our cultural politics . . . in accord with the new meaning of Slavdom in international but also our Czechoslovak politics.”³³ Though otherwise an optimist, Beneš believed that the Sudeten Germans had supported the destruction of Czechoslovakia in league with Nazi Germany. Even after that state was vanquished, Germany would remain a mortal threat for at least a century. Therefore the fifth column of Germans, one-third of Bohemia’s population, including children and the aged, as well as antifascists and a handful of culturally

³⁰ Abrams, *Struggle*, 332n3; Christiane Brenner, “*Zwischen Ost und West*”: *Tschechische politische Diskurse 1945–1948* (Munich: Collegium Carolinum, 2009), 91.

³¹ Aside from some isolated Catholics, the view pervaded the political spectrum that party pluralism and “liberalism” had gone too far. Otherwise people’s tendency was to say that the interwar state was a complete failure (Brenner, “*Zwischen Ost und West*,” 84–86).

³² Brenner, “*Zwischen Ost und West*,” 90.

³³ Brenner, “*Zwischen Ost und West*,” 368.

German Jewish survivors, had to leave. Beneš believed the Western powers would oppose such a massive transfer and therefore leaned on the Soviet Union even more heavily.

Once Allied permission was secured, the expulsions proceeded rapidly: some 2,256,000 Germans were sent over the border in 1946 alone, causing Bohemia's population to drop by 20%.³⁴ Though mostly done by plan and supposedly "orderly and humane," the expelling involved seizing of property and routine violence, including rapes, to which the postwar ("Slavic") judicial system was insensitive. If democracy was not to be simply "on paper," as in the pre-Munich republic, then the "people" really had to decide by way of organs that had real authority.³⁵ The task of identifying and expelling Germans and Hungarians thus fell to revolutionary national councils through which the left invited mass participation.³⁶ There was no quibbling over fine points; the councils made use of hearsay and innuendo coming from people who felt aggrieved (or sought to cover the tracks of their own collaboration) or wanted to settle prewar political scores, and employed people with no qualifications as judges.

And law was really secondary. The measures' severity—the allowance of only forty kilograms of possessions and three days' worth of food, often preceded by humiliating detention—derived from views of collective guilt; at one point Beneš said that all Germans were responsible for the massacre at Lidice that had followed upon the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich by Czech paratroopers in 1942. A later dissident critic said that the vengeance of the early postwar months had paved the way for February 1948: security forces had "learned" to practice blatant illegality in these early postwar days, placing one group of citizens beyond the protection of the state. Now the traitor was of a different ethnicity; later he would be of a different class.³⁷

President Beneš issued decrees legitimating the transfer of property, but the Communists got the credit because they were the force most clearly identified with revolutionary justice. They were heavily represented in the national councils and controlled the Ministry of Agriculture, which distributed millions of acres of land as well as a wealth of houses and livestock to often landless Czech peasants from central Bohemia. In May 1946 Czechs rewarded them with some 40% of the votes in their half of the country, the strongest support of a Leninist organization in free elections at any time. Among the strongest supporters were young people (the voting age was dropped from twenty-one to eighteen) and peasants

³⁴ Myant, *Socialism*, 64.

³⁵ Brenner, "Zwischen Ost und West," 98–101. The Communists were the people's true "advocates."

³⁶ For an excellent account, see Benjamin Frommer, *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁷ Danubius (Jan Mlynařík), "Tézi o vysídlení československých Němcův," *Svědectví* 15, no. 57 (1978): 371–376.

anticipating even more largesse, as well as factory workers. Though Soviet troops had just left the country, the elections took place under vague threats: hints were dropped that Red Army troops in neighboring countries might cross into Czechoslovak territory.³⁸ Communist leader Gottwald now became prime minister.

The democrats felt they had no choice but to continue in government. Prokop Drtina, the National Socialist minister of justice, wrote that no single party could govern; even two parties could not rule with a solid majority. Therefore Czechs—following their basic democratic sentiments—had voted that all parties govern through a continuation of the National Front. All four parties had agreed to deep structural reforms, going beyond a cosmetic makeover, in order to make sure Munich did not recur, and the rhetoric of the National Front made unclear whether there even should be rivalry among them. Characteristically it was a centrist Social Democrat, the later dissenter Bohumil Laušman, who called for the most radical program of nationalization.³⁹ The term “nationalization” was particularly fitting in the Czech context because it meant putting property in the hands of Slavs, in a sense concluding a battle with Bohemia’s Germans for what was called *nationaler Besitzstand* that went back to the 1840s.⁴⁰

Democracy Recovers

Despite its limitations, the National Front government still guaranteed free expression, and among quiet dissenters, questions began to arise about this strange new form of governance: Why the pleonasm “people’s democracy”? Was it not enough to say “democracy” if what was meant was rule of the people? Or was the point that the “people” meant something else: those who did not contradict the Communist Party?⁴¹

By early 1947, tales of violence and brutality toward the expelled Germans began seeping through the Czech press, fueling a sense of unease among much of the public. But non-Communist politicians found it difficult to switch from their rhetoric of accommodation, in which criticism of Soviet-style practice was taboo, to honest political contestation. President Beneš, for instance, never publicly uttered a harsh word about Communist methods or practice, though he

³⁸ The threats were made in May 1946. See Dowling, *Czechoslovakia*, 82–83; Václav Veber, *Osudové únorové dny* (Prague: NLN—Lidové Noviny, 2008), 46–47.

³⁹ Kaplan, *Short March*, 9.

⁴⁰ The idea was that Czechs were merely getting back what rightfully was theirs. Pavel Sajal, *Za 300 miliard hodnot vrací se do rukou českého národa* (Prague: Čs. sociální demokracie, propagační oddělení, 1946).

⁴¹ This was a question posed by Helena Koželuhová of the People’s Party in a book of 1946 (Brenner, “*Zwischen Ost und West*,” 111–112).

had plenty to say privately. (The same was true of Masaryk's son Jan Masaryk, the foreign minister, who belonged to no party.) Debates occasionally flared in Parliament about whether to return to rule of law after the "wild" retributions were finished, yet those who favored equal protection of all citizens were accused of betraying promises made during the war to hunt down every last collaborator.⁴²

Therefore the contest pitting the values of Western versus Eastern democracy fell to a younger generation, perhaps because the trauma of Munich had not affected them personally. In 1946, non-Communist students had won majorities in student council elections in the Brno and Olomouc universities. The campaign rhetoric was a fierce blend of national and class-based innuendo, hurled from both sides. In the spring of that year, Vladimir Šoffr, a Czech army major who had spent the war years in Nazi camps like Auschwitz and Nordhausen, told students in a class on military studies at Brno that they were not "simple-minded workers, who saved up Reichsmark after Reichsmark, and voluntarily worked overtime, for whom life's essential purpose seemed to consist in black market trading. . . . [T]he intelligentsia is the center of the atom, everyone else must keep an honest distance."⁴³

He was questioning the left-wing narrative according to which wartime resistance had been entirely an affair of the left; in fact it was mostly class based: the intelligentsia had been overrepresented, most dramatically in the demonstrations of November 1939, after which some twelve hundred students were sent to concentration camps, and nine "ringleaders" executed. (In the course of the war a further thousand students were arrested for resistance activities.)⁴⁴ The result was a storm of outrage in the left-wing press, and the major's immediate dismissal from teaching. Communists asked not how Czech munitions workers had indeed behaved during occupation, nor how many students and members of the intelligentsia had lost their lives, and instead vilified Major Šoffr as a fascist because he criticized *them*.⁴⁵ In response to a student protest before the headquarters of the Brno Communist newspaper, the local Communist cell called in workers from the Zbrojovka armaments plant, a factory praised by Hitler, where workers voluntarily worked overtime during the war.⁴⁶

⁴² Koutek, *Prokop Drtina*, 268.

⁴³ *Čin* (Brno), May 23, 1946.

⁴⁴ Jan Havránek, "Czech Universities Communism," in *Universities under Dictatorship*, ed. John Connelly and Michael Grüttner (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 167–168. On the relatively privileged position of industrial workers in Nazi-occupied Czech lands, see Chad Bryant, *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 85.

⁴⁵ The mostly middle-class Sokol gymnastics club was the strongest organization in support of the small resistance movement, and lost over a thousand members executed. Detlev Brandes, *Die Tschechen unter deutschem Protektorat* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1975), 2:60–62.

⁴⁶ See the recollections of Daruše Burdová of Brno at U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum oral history project, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn87814>.

In late March 1947 the critical focus upon the Communists intensified as more became known about police excesses during the expulsion of Germans from northern Bohemia.⁴⁷ Communist disregard for “bourgeois” rule of law began alienating otherwise loyal Social Democrats, who joined the “democrats” (National Socialists and Catholics) in condemning the violence as well as “limitations on free speech represented by police assistance [i.e., presence] at public meetings. Czech students, who were the first to taste fascist methods and for whom Masaryk’s humanistic ideals are sacred, cannot bear joint responsibility for the elements of fascism which we see in contemporary Czech life, only in another color and another form.” Of the forty-one students who cast votes, twenty-nine supported the resolution, three opposed it, and nine abstained.⁴⁸ The Communists could not openly defend police violence, but they refused to support the resolution since it seemed an outright affront to “our state,” meaning the “people’s democratic” regime.

Communist students suffered more defeats in student council elections. In late November 1947, they were voted down in Prague’s faculty of commercial studies by 1,500 to 250, surprising the *New York Times* correspondent on the scene. “Careless of considerations that make older politicians hesitate,” the democrats took down portraits of Stalin and Tito in student faculty offices when the Communists removed portraits of Roosevelt and Churchill, and set up a board to investigate a Communist functionary who had referred to professors at his faculty as “fascists.” Anyone using that word had to present evidence that it really applied; it could not be a class-based tool of abuse.⁴⁹

Though there was no open disagreement between the National Socialists and Communists in the central government, a coarse rhetoric was beginning to set into national politics as well, reflecting suspicions of enemy forces bent on subversion and total power. In January 1947, Communist leader Gottwald said that to defeat the (still hidden) reactionary forces in the National Front, his party would need an absolute majority. Its policy must be “active struggle, gaining new position after new position, pushing the enemy into the defensive.”⁵⁰ Yet Communists stood little chance of achieving even a plurality. In early 1948, the opinion research institute in Communist Václav Kopecký’s Ministry of

⁴⁷ *Svobodné Slovo*, March 27, 1947. On this case and others of mistreatment of Germans by supposed partisans protected by their membership in the Communist Party, see Tomáš Staněk, *Verfolgung 1945: Die Stellung der Deutschen in Böhmen, Mähren, und Schlesien* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2002), 83–84, 129.

⁴⁸ Charles University Archive (Prague), SVS 140.

⁴⁹ The exact tally is 1,382 for National Socialists and People’s Party, 259 for the Social Democrats, and 253 for the Communists. Albion Ross, “Prague Students Fight Reds Openly: Faculty Elections Continue to Pile Humiliating Defeats on Totalitarian Elements,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1947.

⁵⁰ Josef Korbel, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 183.

Information determined that his party would get 28% of the vote in the elections scheduled for May.⁵¹ Communists could not come to power by the ballot box.

As relations worsened between West and East, the tension between the pro-West internal stance of Czech democratic politicians and their external subservience to the Soviet Union was approaching a breaking point. At the Paris Peace Conference in the summer of 1947, U.S. secretary of state James Byrnes cabled instructions to Washington to stop the extension of a credit of fifty million dollars to Prague when the Czechoslovak delegation applauded Soviet foreign minister Vyshinsky's charge that the "United States was trying to dominate the world with hand-outs."⁵² Yet to the Czechs that seemed unfair: what Byrnes had failed to note was that only the Communists (two of ten) had clapped.⁵³ Yet if the United States seemed unsympathetic to their dilemma of bridging East and West, the Soviets were making loyalty an absolute condition. In July the Czechoslovak government agreed to accept the U.S. invitation to participate in Marshall Plan aid. Yet Stalin forbade it from collecting, saying the Plan was a hostile act. President Beneš might have objected, still traumatized by Munich, but chose not to. At this time he also suffered his first stroke.⁵⁴ Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk famously lamented that he was no longer the foreign minister of an independent country, but at the time this was no more than a private gripe.

In September 1947, Stalin summoned Europe's Communist leaders to Szklarska Poręba, a mountain resort in Polish Silesia, to found the Communist Information Bureau—Cominform—that would coordinate the work of "progressive" forces. The Soviets urged the radical Yugoslav delegation to humiliate French and Italian comrades for sharing government with bourgeois forces and imagining they could seize power via the ballot box. The charges also implicated Czechoslovak Communists who likewise shared power with non-Communists and were gearing up for elections. Upon returning to Prague, Party General Secretary Rudolf Slánský informed the Politburo that Czechoslovak Communists must place their country squarely on the track to Socialism. They would have to shift the party's line: the previous year, party chief Gottwald had been speaking of a "Czechoslovak road to socialism" without the violence of the Soviet model.⁵⁵ Slánský also said the reactionaries were increasingly aggressive; what he really meant was that Czech Communists' popularity was declining.

⁵¹ That was a drop of 10% from 1946. Tad Szulc, *Czechoslovakia since World War II* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 37.

⁵² Vít Smetana, "Pod křídla Sovětů: Mohlo se Československo vyhnout 'sklouznutí' za železnou oponu?," *Soudobé dějiny* 15, no. 2 (2008): 275–277.

⁵³ The United States also opposed Czechoslovak plans to deport 100,000 Hungarians (Korbel, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 179).

⁵⁴ This is the analysis of Táborský, "President Edvard Beneš," 139. That stroke was suffered on the night of July 9 to 10, 1948.

⁵⁵ Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 33; Jiří Pernes, "Specifická cesta KSC k socialismu," *Soudobé dějiny*, nos. 1–2 (2016): 11–53.

The most specular danger sign was the Social Democrats' party congress at Brno in mid-November 1947, where by 283 to 182 the delegates replaced party chief and fellow traveler Zdeněk Fierlinger with centrist Bohumil Laušman. The vote sent Communists into alarm mode because it showed that the moderate Marxists could not be counted on to partner with them in the coming elections. Communist chances of getting a majority would be nonexistent. A Soviet official told the National Socialist Hubert Ripka that the defeat of "comrade" Fierlinger reflected anti-Soviet tendencies among Czech and Slovak "reactionaries."⁵⁶ But here too was a chance for Beneš and other non-Communists—including Masaryk—to rally forces in the name of democracy. They failed to use it, however. The *New York Times* reflected gloomily that the Soviets held all the trump cards and unless a miracle occurred, "we must stand by and watch the dark curtain descend upon Prague."⁵⁷

The reporter was observing what seemed an unstoppable momentum: the "totalitarian" left had already devastated the opposition in Romania, Poland, Hungary, and, most shocking, in Bulgaria. In June 1947, police had arrested the Bulgarian Agrarian leader Nikola Petkov in the chambers of Parliament and put him on trial for attempting to restore "fascism." (In fact he had been in the resistance.) Refused counsel and unable to summon witnesses, Petkov was sentenced to death, hanged, and denied Christian burial. The Central Committee of Bulgaria's trade unions issued a statement read over Radio Sofia: "To a dog, a dog's death!" Before Petkov's arrest numerous politicians and army officers were tortured to produce evidence against him. In the weeks that followed the Communists disbanded all remaining parties except for a branch of the Agrarians loyal to them.⁵⁸

In late 1947, Czechoslovak Communist officials openly threatened violence. Gottwald said his party would "settle accounts" with Laušman for betraying them, and he told Minister of Justice Drtina, "[Y]ou will meet a bad end."⁵⁹ Communist information minister Václav Kopecký spoke with undisguised disdain of opposition students. "You cannot work with people like [democratic student leader Emil] Ransdorf," he said, "only fight them. Agitation against the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia can be taken as an act of a fascist character." When Ransdorf questioned the legality of expropriating capitalists, Kopecký

⁵⁶ Ripka was minister of foreign trade (Korbel, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 189).

⁵⁷ "Crisis in Czechoslovakia," *New York Times*, November 18, 1947. On Beneš's silence, see Albion Ross, "Beneš Rules Out Isolation of Reds," *New York Times*, November 22, 1947.

⁵⁸ Michael Padev, *Dimitrov Wastes No Bullets. Nikola Petkov: The Test Case* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1948); Frederick B. Chary, *A History of Bulgaria* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 127; *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 25, 1947; R. J. Crampton, *Concise History of Bulgaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 186.

⁵⁹ Korbel, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 193, 201.

called for his arrest.⁶⁰ He had good reason to believe the democratic leaders in government would not object. To this point they had acceded to all measures of expropriation, as well as the far-reaching nationalizations. They even objected to allegations that they were not Socialist.⁶¹

The Communist Coup

Plans for seizing power had emerged during the war years, but only in February 1948 did the Communists follow through. The final confrontation might have been ignited by numerous disagreements, for example on agricultural policy or taxation, but it exploded suddenly over flagrant Communist infiltration of the police. Interior Minister Václav Nosek, a Communist politician judged reasonable during London emigration, had recently fired eight non-Communist commanders in the Prague force and put men in their places loyal to him. On February 13, the democratic deputies voted to censure Nosek and demanded the dismissed commanders be reinstated. Nosek and Gottwald ignored the vote, and twelve non-Communist ministers resigned on February 20, believing President Beneš would call for early elections after appointing a caretaker government. Instead, Beneš refused to diverge from the National Front model and required that all parties continue to be represented in government. He was acting from the ingrained conviction that he must mediate among the parties in the tradition of the interwar *Hrad*.

On February 19, the Soviet deputy foreign minister Valerian A. Zorin flew into Prague and told the wavering Czech Communists that this was their moment. He visited Foreign Minister Masaryk, in bed with laryngitis at his apartment in the Czernin palace, and informed him of Soviet displeasure at the activities of Czechoslovak “reactionaries.” He also called on the Social Democrat Laušman and threatened Soviet intervention if his party maintained contact with the ministers who had resigned, alleging they were in contact with “reactionary governments.”⁶² A huge team of KGB functionaries arrived in Prague, and news filtered in of Soviet forces in Hungary gathering on the Slovak border.⁶³

⁶⁰ Compiled from reports by *Národní osvobození*, December 5, 1947; *Svobodné Slovo*, December 4, 1947.

⁶¹ See the self-defense of Ferdinand Peroutka from February 1948, who argued that he and his political allies were indeed Socialists, but that did not conflict with demands for humanity and legality. He recognized that the Communist notion of Socialism demanded silence in the place of criticism. Vítězslav Houska, ed., *Polemiky Ferdinanda Peroutky* (Prague: Český spisovatel, 1995), 218–221.

⁶² Kaplan, *Short March*, 175; Szulc, *Czechoslovakia*, 38; Veber, *Osudové únorové dny*, 275. Zorin had been ambassador from 1945 to 1947.

⁶³ Karel Kaplan, *Poslední rok prezidenta* (Brno: Institute of Contemporary History of the ASCR, 1994), 36.

The Communists reactivated the revolutionary people's militias that had been disbanded in 1946, and on February 20, Deputy Commander Josef Smrkovský (later a hero of the Prague Spring) told militiamen to be ready for a "state of battle" the following day. Seven thousand of them received ammunition from the armament works in Brno. President Beneš failed to summon the army as a countermeasure, perhaps unsure of its loyalty because Communists and Soviet agents infiltrated the higher ranks. Fellow traveler and Defense Minister General Ludvík Svoboda (also later a hero of the Prague Spring) said that Czechoslovakia could maintain its freedom only under Soviet protection, a view that Beneš did not and could not oppose. For him, freedom for Czechs was national independence and not personal "liberal" freedom, and he made frequent references to the Munich debacle. Though Germany was divided into four zones, he would not renounce Soviet protection against Germany; thus, rather than a threat, he saw the Red Army as an ultimate guarantee of sovereignty.⁶⁴

The democratic ministers had counted on three Social Democratic ministers who failed them. Gottwald thus still had a majority in the cabinet and drew up a list of fellow-traveler politicians from the National Social and Catholic parties who would replace those who had resigned. Technically, he was acting within the bounds of the 1920 Constitution, but while he negotiated with Beneš, below the Castle Communist-controlled police were arresting lower-ranking democratic politicians, supposedly for attempting a seizure of power. Beneš had pledged to his secretary in June 1947, "[T]he Communists could seize power in this country only over my dead body," yet on February 25 he signed Gottwald's new cabinet list, arguing, as in 1938, that he could not bear responsibility for a mass slaughter of innocent people.⁶⁵ Gottwald had allegedly threatening violence in the streets if the president refused to comply.⁶⁶

Yet Gottwald's threats were verbal, and nothing hindered Beneš from calling his bluff. Would the Red Army have staged an armed intervention if he and Masaryk had rallied the public to their side? We know from internal correspondence that the Soviet leadership was not willing to send troops into Czechoslovakia; moreover, Stalin tended to be cautious in foreign policy.⁶⁷ By

⁶⁴ Kaplan, *Poslední rok*, 36. On February 23, he addressed a meeting of the Renewed National Front, declaring that the "army goes with the nation. . . . [W]ho disturbs the unity of the nation is a menace and must be removed." Szulc, *Czechoslovakia*, 39.

⁶⁵ Táborský, "President Edvard Beneš," 136.

⁶⁶ The report of threats is from Beneš's physician. See Szulc, *Czechoslovakia*, 40; Jon Bloomfield, *Passive Revolution: Politics and the Czechoslovak Working Class, 1945–1948* (London: Allison and Busby, 1979), 231.

⁶⁷ Táborský thinks they would have used less direct means, like economic pressure. Foreign Minister Molotov refused the request of Czech Communists to move troops in Austria or Germany closer to the Czech borders, let alone to transport them into Czechoslovakia. The

his mere name Masaryk commanded the loyalties of a majority of Czechs. In any case, these men's wavering postures were more than counterbalanced by the Communist drive for quick resolution of a festering problem, most memorably embodied in the "people's" militiamen who stormed into and occupied the headquarters of non-Communist parties (seeking "traitors").⁶⁸

Later, Beneš cursed the "treasonous" Social Democrats, including his onetime confidant Fierlinger, whom he said should be destroyed like a "snake," or better yet, hanged from the nearest tree.⁶⁹ He complained that the democratic ministers had surprised him; Masaryk called them idiots and buffoons and showed them no solidarity. For their part the democrats were upset that Beneš summoned the Communists and Social Democrats for consultations, but not them.⁷⁰ But Beneš also wondered why the non-Communists failed to organize resistance. When Central Prague was flooded with workers supporting Gottwald's coup, one could not find even two members of the Sokol (the bourgeois national gymnastics association) or Legionaries on Wenceslaus Square. The lone group to mobilize for democracy were some ten thousand students who twice marched up to the Prague Castle, but Beneš did nothing to encourage them.⁷¹

In the months that followed, the student dissidents were purged, depleting the country of a young liberal leadership stratum and consigning liberal ideas about politics to decades of oblivion. Some were sent to camps, others to uranium mines, still others to the military. Beginning on February 21, the party had summoned loyal cadres to form "action committees," which swept public life with the harsh broom of revolution, scouring all organizations of "traitors," including political parties, schools, factories, newspapers, and of course

methods used were more subtle; for example, Moscow supported the trip of Polish socialists whose task was to warn Czech Social Democrats not to align themselves with the "right," that is, the democrats. The tone of the Soviet press was of course hostile to the Czech democrats (Veber, *Osudové únorové dny*, 275–278).

⁶⁸ Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 100. For an argument that Beneš had lost his ability to reach and command the use of the army, see the recollections of his chancellor Jaromír Smutný, in Korbel, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 225. On the use of the people's militia to seize the Social Democratic headquarters on February 24, see Jan Stránský, *East Wind over Prague* (New York: Random, 1950), 201.

⁶⁹ He said this in March. Václav Černý, *Paměti 1945–1972* (Prague: Atlantis, 1992), 182.

⁷⁰ He said they had failed to coordinate their action with the president; whether the president would have supported them was a question Masaryk did not entertain. His allegiance to Moscow, which some date to 1935, did not brook doubt. Karel Kaplan, *Pět kapitol o únoru* (Brno: Doplněk, 1997), 445. For their part, the democrats believed they had acted with Beneš's approval (Lukes, *On the Edge*, 193). On their disappointment with Beneš, see Veber, *Osudové únorové dny*, 279.

⁷¹ Organizers said about twenty thousand to thirty thousand students took part; the leading student of the events, Zdeněk Pousta, places the figure around nine thousand (Veber, *Osudové únorové dny*, 300).

state administration. These acts were illegal, but when the action committees encountered resistance they threatened use of the police to enforce their will. (The police now took personal oaths of loyalty to Communist chief Gottwald.)⁷²

But resistance was rare. On February 24, action committees at the seat of government told the non-Communist ministers they were no longer welcome in their offices, and they departed without complaint. The head of the Catholic People's Party, Father Jan Šrámek, once president of the government in exile, declared his party dissolved in order to protect its good name. (In March he would be apprehended trying to flee abroad.)⁷³ After Beneš confirmed Gottwald's cabinet, the new political leadership, citing supposed dangers of subversion and treason, justified the work of the action committees retroactively. Charges emerged, *almost three years after the war*, that non-Communist student leaders were Nazi collaborators. Sometimes the action committees went further than the party leadership had thought prudent, for example by firing the rector of Charles University just before the institution was to celebrate its six hundredth anniversary. Foreign dignitaries canceled their attendance at the festivities.

The coup was not a seizure of power by a small clique, but rather an activation of the instruments that Communists—with much support among the democrats—had created in 1945–1946 to cleanse society. Then and now revolutionary committees targeted traitors to the people, in the first case understood in ethnic terms, now in class terms. The enduring principle was collective guilt, the idea that a certain group of citizens stood beyond all legal protection. Still, victors as well as victims recognized a common logic: only the Soviet Union could guarantee that Munich would not be repeated. At the height of the February crisis, two determined opponents of Communism, Vladimír Krajina and Prokop Drtina, repeated the mantra that Czechoslovakia's alliance with the Soviet Union was beyond questioning.⁷⁴

⁷² Communists and fellow travelers, supporters of Zdeněk Fierlinger's wing of Social Democracy would seize offices, have locks changed, exclude and then fire those considered unreliable. See Josef Korběl's recollection of E. Loebel, a mild-mannered, jovial Communist official in the Ministry of Foreign Trade, who in February 1948 headed an action committee in the ministry and denied his superiors the right to enter their own offices, then purged the ministry of all non-Communists. The head of the Ministry of Posts, Monsignor Hala, was told not to appear at his ministry, otherwise the action committee would "summon all the means the working class has at its disposal" (Korběl, *The Communist Subversion of Czechoslovakia*, 148–149, 227). Loebel was tortured and tried with Rudolf Slánský, rehabilitated in the 1960s, and later became a professor at Vassar College. On the oaths, see Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952), 267.

⁷³ Pavel Horák and Vilém Prečan, eds., *Únor 1948 očima porážených* (Prague: Masaryk Institute—NLN, 2018), 317–318.

⁷⁴ It did not occur to them that the Soviet Union was the force insisting that they, the democrats, must be ousted from power (Kaplan, *Pět kapitol*, 349). Krajina was among the few who tried to stop the action committee from seizing power of the National Socialist Party headquarters (Veber, *Osudové únorové dny*, 297). For a discussion of the precedent set by the postwar expulsions, and the larger motivating force of "Munich," see Karel Kaplan, *Pravda o Československu 1945–1948* (Brno: Panorama, 1990), 20–21.

In the 1946 elections, Czech Communists had achieved the greatest electoral victory ever for a Leninist party, and the 1948 coup, propelled by the action committees, tapped the greatest popular energy ever applied to the construction of a monolithic Communist regime. The phrase that comes to mind, with the Chinese and Russian cases in mind, is “cultural revolution.” The most enthusiastic purgers were young Communists who two decades later regretted their actions and formed a core of leadership for the Prague Spring, with its calls for legal protections of dissenting minorities and a return to the democratic and humanitarian ideals of T. G. Masaryk. They understood that “people’s democracy” had been a shortcut to Stalinism; within two years the Party was subjecting its own top cadre to show trials, and Rudolf Slánský, so useful in organizing the 1948 coup, was himself hanged as a traitor to the people.

Conclusions

Among the factors conditioning the collapse of Czechoslovakia’s formidable democracy, most striking was the country’s precarious international position. In both 1938 and 1948, Czechoslovakia possessed a powerful economy, high standard of living, and robust civil society, yet in both years a consensus emerged in the hegemonic neighboring state that Western-style Czechoslovak democracy, indeed Czechoslovak independence, was incompatible with its interests. And in both cases Czech democratic elites adjusted their rhetoric and practice to suit the new circumstances.

In the short-lived Czecho-Slovak Second Republic (October 1938–March 1939) they transformed the political system, still mostly within First Republic legality, to an authoritarian racial state, seeking to secure the economic and cultural well-being of the ethnically Czech people under Nazi tutelage. Beneš and other liberals who had escaped to London then adjusted their understanding of politics to anticipate the requirements of the new regional hegemon after 1945, the Soviet Union.

They unwittingly prepared the ground intellectually and institutionally for the 1948 coup, by stating that Czechoslovakia was unshakably bound to the USSR, and then in concocting various pseudo-profound theories about the need for new kinds of democracy. Beneš had written as early as 1934 about the need to synthesize individualism with collectivism in “societism,” a principle supposedly exemplified both in the USSR and in fascism. Liberalism, he claimed, was “dead.” After the war, he said that democracy had to be a “corrected democracy, newly formulated,” and he anticipated a synthesis of “democratic liberty and the necessary degree of governmental authority.”⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Antoine Mares, *Edvard Beneš: Un drame entre Hitler et Staline* (Paris: Perrin, 2015), 377. The word “pseudo-profound” is Joseph Rothschild’s. See his *East Central Europe*.

The “people’s democracy” that he and his colleagues consolidated in Prague in May 1945 tolerated limits on the right of association (for example, of new parties), on freedom of speech (an implicit ban on criticism of the USSR), on the right to own property, and on the security of the person, at first, for Germans and Magyars. Yet soon the regime was seizing possessions from Czechs as well in the name of “nationalization,” while permitting no right of appeal.⁷⁶ Beneš and other “democrats” agreed that not democracy but “Socialism” had a high public value, and thus found themselves within the Communist mindset, according to which humanity had moved beyond capitalism along with the institutions that supported it, like “bourgeois” rule of law. Socialism took on a higher value because it served the ultimate source of meaning: the Czech nation.

What happened in 1948 was thus not so much a coup as a clear statement: that people’s democracy really was different from all that preceded it, and there was no point in countering demands coming from the heart of the people’s democratic order in Moscow. If in 1948 the democrats hardly conceived of, let alone organized, resistance, that was because *they had nothing to fight and die for that they had not already surrendered*.⁷⁷ The rhetorical power of Socialism in its Leninist form was such that one Communist intellectual, Arnošt Kolman, later recalled feeling like a “matador” after battles of words with his most determined liberal and Catholic opponents.⁷⁸ What he and his comrades were propounding was more than a worldview; it was a “secular faith” that accounted for everything that had happened or would happen: the failure of the West in 1938, the temporary victory of fascism, the guaranteed future in which war and suffering became things of the past.

More than simply illiberal, this was an alternative to liberalism, far more compelling than anything authoritarians like Putin, Orban, Salazar, Franco, or Pinochet might dream up. The Socialist order did not call itself a belief: it claimed to be modern, fostering enlightenment and the good of humankind, putting all racism, profiteering, and corruption in the past. Most confounding for its Czech opponents, this “new faith” even managed to cloak itself in the colors of democracy, as a continuation of the nation’s long heritage of promoting national liberation (without which liberation of the individual was meaningless), supposedly extending back to Jan Hus. In 1950 the Socialist state would rebuild the church he preached from, and for several years it even celebrated T. G. Masaryk’s birthday

⁷⁶ Kamil Nedvědický, “Únor 1948 jako počátek nelegitimního režimu,” *Securitas imperii* 17 (2010): 65.

⁷⁷ Brenner, “*Zwischen Ost und West*,” 113.

⁷⁸ Kolman was later a victim of Stalinism. John Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 75.

(March 7) as a national holiday. Party propaganda claimed the old philosopher-king would have supported the coup.⁷⁹

In 1947 the conviction took hold in much of the younger generation that people's democracy was in fact a cover for totalitarian rule, and real political contestation shifted to student councils, where the democrats stoked outrage over injustices done to Germans in which their elders, like National Social justice minister Drtina, had been complicit. (Few of those democratic leaders would later ponder in their bile-laden memoirs whether it had been possible to limit democracy to a single class or ethnic group.) The democratic students demonstrated that faith in Western democracy had not eroded beyond repair, yet in two marches to the Castle in February 1948 they were the only group in Czech society that came out vocally against the Communist coup.

But these young democrats carried no weapons, had no police behind them and no hope. The left-wing intelligentsia would portray the seizure of power ("victorious February") as the fulfillment of progressive dreams, yet ultimately it was the new secular faith combined with threats of police and militia violence that guaranteed that the "action committees" could work without hindrance, purging Czechoslovak political life of dissent. Soon came show trials, first hitting "bourgeois" politicians (and costing Czech women's advocate Milada Horáková her life in 1949), before turning upon the Communist Party itself.

As during the Munich crisis of 1938, much hinged on Beneš. He might have said no to Stalin in July 1947 and at least made use of the limited capital he possessed to appeal to Czechoslovak citizens. After all, even Gottwald and his comrades supported the acceptance of Marshall Plan aid, and the idea of U.S.-sponsored assistance was popular. In February 1948, Beneš might have moved more rapidly and skillfully, appointing an interim cabinet of experts, ordering the army to stand by to maintain order, and appealing directly to the nation over the radio. He could have exploited levers he undoubtedly possessed.⁸⁰

But why did the health of the postwar order in Czechoslovakia depend so much on the acts of a single man? A democracy should be bolstered by the actions of free citizens operating in civil society organizations; its institutions ought to check one another. Robust courts should have declared action committees unconstitutional. Yet here one can trace problems that became fully evident in 1948 to the original construct, the short-lived democracy of T. G. Masaryk (1918–1938). Precisely because it emerged in a country where ethnic Czechs were a bare majority, this democracy had been led by a strong hand, first of President Masaryk himself, but then through an informal device that coordinated policy outside of Parliament, the *Pětka*, or committee of five, consisting of the leaders

⁷⁹ Robert Bruce Lockhart, "Report on Czechoslovakia," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1955.

⁸⁰ Táborský, "President Edvard Beneš," 139.

of ethnically Czech parties (Social Democrats, National Socialists, Catholics, Agrarians, National Democrats). Though the National Front of the postwar period was a Communist idea, it continued this tradition of politics managed by experts and unchecked by courts; in a sense the National Front was the *Pětka* with two parties removed and one added: the Communists.

Like the *Pětka*, the National Front carried on deliberations with little outside scrutiny. Thus, if public opinion failed to mobilize against Communist infiltration of the police in February 1948, that is because it was poorly informed.⁸¹ Beneath the surface, the police had been transformed from an instrument serving liberal democracy—within well-known constitutional constraints—to the phalanx of an “organizational weapon,” prepared to function as the tool of a totalitarian elite. But the weapon embodied in Communism went beyond party operatives who had been smuggled into the ranks of the police. Communist Party members were not just rank-and-file associates who paid dues and attended meetings; they were cadres imbued with faith and constrained by discipline, ready to be rapidly deployed in the extralegal councils and committees.⁸²

Where the Czech case goes beyond classic totalitarian theory is that these cadres believed they embodied the people’s will, transcending what the party leadership had explicitly told them to do, and in the process overcoming the apathy of the old managed democracy. Their frenetic activity *from below* (in the action committees) supposedly raised the Czech nation to a higher level of self-governance, achieving results that had eluded liberals constrained by rule of law. The origins of their self-righteous fury had little to do with class: the Communists and their opponents belonged to a wealthy modern society, without the gaping inequalities of other places. From the beginning of the Czech national movement, small differences in material comforts or status could generate huge dissatisfaction in Czech national politics; after the war, Marxism in its Leninist guise provided a platform for one group of bourgeois intellectuals to strike out at another.

The self-righteousness of the Communist side also drew from the humiliation of the war years. At Munich, a liberal political elite had surrendered a successful economy, a relatively equitable social system, and a superficially perfect

⁸¹ See, for example, the reminiscence of Hubert Ripka, minister of trade from the National Socialist Party: “On the following day, *Svobodne Slovo*, the official organ of the National Socialist party, published a documented article entitled: ‘We Will Not Permit a Police Regime.’ It caused tremendous excitement, for it was the first time the public had been informed of the abuses committed by the Communist officials of the interior.” That was February 20, when the coup was already under way. Hubert Ripka, *Czechoslovakia Enslaved: The Story of the Communist Coup d’état* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1950), 223. Similarly, Benes was plagued by the idea that the public did not really know what he had done and thought in early 1948 (Černý, *Paměti*, 185).

⁸² Selznick, *Organizational Weapon*, 20, 268.

democracy without a shot. Thus, the tasks of expelling Germans and taking their property compensated for six years of impotency.

Precisely because the Czech resistance had been meager, the controversies over its legacy were bitter. Against the Communist narrative of having single-handedly defeated fascism, Major Šofr said that the anti-Nazi movement was drawn largely from the intelligentsia: right, center, and left. Insinuations and counterinsinuations carried into the student council battles of 1947, when liberal students questioning revolutionary justice were made out to be traitors and fascists. February 1948 saw an intensification of the fury against enemies who had supposedly survived the first rounds of purging. Major Šofr was now put behind bars, along with thousands of other members of the “bourgeois” elite. The coup was like a reenactment of the 1938 crisis, with the same cast of characters in the Castle—Benes and his staff—but below, it was Czech against Czech. Perhaps if Benes had acted to protect democracy—of the sort he helped establish in 1918—free elections would have taken place in May 1948 and the Soviet Union would have had a difficult choice to make: to show that people’s democracy did not require tanks to survive. (That evidence would be provided in 1953 in East Berlin, 1956 in Budapest, and 1968 in Prague.)⁸³

By 1948, Czech Communists had succeeded in deepening a deeply moralistic “us-them” division among Czechs, on which the other side was made to stand for fascism. They asked not are you for or against democracy, but rather are you for or against the enslavement of the Czechoslovak people to foreign powers. Truman and Churchill were made to stand as one with Hitler. Zdeněk Mlynář, a young Stalinist student in 1948, said his generation was brought up believing in a world where they, the righteous, stood on one side, and the enemy on the other: “We were children of the war who, having not actually fought against anyone, brought our wartime mentality with us into those first postwar years, when the opportunity to fight for something presented itself *at last*.”⁸⁴

There were also banal forces behind the Communists’ victory. They did well among people opting for radical social change, similar to supporters of Labour in the United Kingdom, and when 40% of Czechs cast ballots for them in 1946 the Communists could claim major levers of power, like the Interior Ministry.⁸⁵ Czechs were not voting for Stalinism, however, but for a supposedly different Czechoslovak road to Socialism.

⁸³ Other indices: the student council elections of the fall, the fall of Fierlinger as well as the crushing victory of Ladislav Feierabend in elections to Kooperativa, the purchasing agency of the agricultural cooperatives in May 1947 (Lukes, *On the Edge*, 170).

⁸⁴ Zdenek Mlynář, *Nightfrost in Prague: The End of Humane Socialism* (New York: C. Hurst, 1980), 1–2, emphasis added: the point was, after six years of humiliating passivity.

⁸⁵ Gottwald and his comrades based their claim on Taborsky, “President Edvard Benes,” 135.

Still, there was an edge to the polemics, most strongly present in student politics, which grew razor sharp just before the coup, suggesting that Communist victory would indeed be accompanied by the uncompromising cleansing of “cultural revolution.” Supporters of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia cast their votes not just for the utopian equality of “Socialism” but because ethnic revolution led by the early national committees had permitted widespread distribution of other people’s property. Much of the clientele of the 1946 elections had been “bought.” Critics said the striking continuity through the zero hour of 1945 was such people’s self-seeking, subordinate approach to politics, a “protectorate mentality,” permitting self-enrichment at the expense of one enemy or another.⁸⁶ What the critics did not say was that this posture, of being the beneficiary of rather than contributing to liberal institutions, went back even further, to the impressive social welfare regimes rewarded to the Czechs, beginning with Austria. Perhaps Emperor Franz Joseph and then the wise “founder president” T. G. Masaryk were the ultimate guarantors of the once formidable Czech liberal democracy.

The adjective “liberal” suggests that democracy is never pure but always of a certain type. A conviction had taken hold among close to a majority of Czechs after World War II that democracy of the liberal type had outlived its usefulness for the nation—the only relevant demos—and did not require defending. In this postwar “discourse” all defense was class-based, and democracy itself became a weapon for a just cause. Millions of Czechs acting to destroy democracy claimed they were acting in its service. Subsequent experience suggests that they were operating under a convenient illusion: democracy always requires basic protections of civil rights. No class of human beings should be expropriated, expelled, or imagined as outside the demos. What is unclear is which failure was most important: the failure of the institutions, or the failure of the convictions in which such institutions must rest, or the failure of leaders, at home and in the West, who convinced themselves that institutions could be sacrificed to a higher principle, whether for the sake of “peace” or “history” or, most destructive, “the nation.”

⁸⁶ The Czech writer and psychoanalyst Bohuslav Brouk—one of the few Czech intellectuals to oppose Communism publicly after the war—wrote that “a great many people join the Communist Party and remain in it because of their defeatist, Protectorate mentality. They came to know in the occupation the sad fate of politically unorganized people in a state with only one party. . . . [S]adly the German tyranny cultivated chicken-heartedness in the souls of many of our people.” Critics pointed to a behavioral syndrome from the occupation days, when people came passively to adapt to demands of overwhelming force. Father František Hála of the People’s Party likewise said the Nazis had corroded the national spirit, especially of people willing to sell their convictions for selfish reasons. Across the political spectrum—from President Beneš and the Catholic Pavel Tigrid, to the Communist intellectual Zdeněk Nejedlý—critics agreed that Czechs had absorbed elements of fascism (“fascism in ourselves”) (Abrams, *Struggle*, 115).