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Czechoslovakia

Remembering and Forgetting the Failures of a State

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Czechoslovakia, a state which first came into being on 28 October 1918 and ceased to exist at midnight on 31 December 1992, lasted less long than an average human lifespan. During these years, the newly imagined polity underwent a bewildering number of constitutional changes. Not only was it federalized, centralized, dissolved, reconstituted, re-centralized and re-federalized; it also went through a wide variety of political regimes, from military dictatorship to parliamentary democracy; from authoritarian democracy to Nazi colony; from people's democracy to Soviet satellite; and from Communist dictatorship and command economy to democracy and the free market.

It was because the case of Czechoslovakia offers, as it were, a compressed history of twentieth-century Europe, of many ways that the modern state has been imagined, that it first captured my interest. It is not often that one is privileged, as a historian, to see the entire history of a state, from its planned creation to its premeditated extinction. Themes familiar to those of us who grew up in the West during the Cold War – the failures of democracy and rise of authoritarianism in the 1930s, the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust in the 1940s, the spread of Stalinist terror in the 1950s, the height of Cold War anxiety in the 1960s, détente in the 1970s, the reform and eventual overthrow of Communism in the 1980s – seemed neatly pre-packaged, as if into so many teaching segments, in the compact history of this modern European state.

To live in Prague, in that first decade after the overthrow of the Communist regime was, unsurprisingly, to discover that Czechoslovak history was remembered, packaged and imagined differently there. Czech historiography, Czech documentaries, Czech museums, Czech monuments, Czech films, Czech exhibitions, Czech newspapers, in those years of what was termed post-Communist 'transition', were as striking to a Westerner for their unspoken assumptions – especially about the salience of nationality – as for what they said explicitly. There were patterns which at first seemed curious to an outsider: the 'othering' of Communists, for example, who were invariably described as 'they' despite the proportion of local Communist Party members having been proportionately larger, per head of population, than that of

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any other political party at any time anywhere in the world.[1] Or the ubiquitous characterization of Czechoslovakia as a 'small' European nation, despite being of average size in both land mass and population. And there were the absences and silences: the repurposed synagogues and formerly Jewish quarters in provincial towns; the abandoned German businesses and neglected cemeteries in the Bohemian and Moravian borderlands; the invisibility of Roma and Vietnamese in official narratives; the way that the suffering of some groups was downplayed or ignored, while that of others was heightened. As throughout the rest of Central Europe, both official and popular memory emphasized the antiquity of the dominant 'nation' and its repeated martyrdoms, betrayals and victimhood at the hands of foreigners. Whereas, in the West, nations competed as to which was supposed to be the greatest, in Central Europe the competition seemed to turn on which had suffered the most.

My aim in researching and writing a new history of Czechoslovakia was to try to understand, in as objective a way as possible, how a state which ceased to exist in 1993 had been imagined, created and reimagined as it went through a succession of political incarnations before finally being dissolved. I wanted to provide what it seemed impossible at the time to find in libraries and bookshops: a clear, accessible account of the whole history of the state which did not present the story from the perspective of one nationality at the expense of all the rest, which did not ignore alternative readings and counter-narratives, and which looked at people as having agency and individual responsibility. The first step to enable me to try to do this – learning Czech – took three years of formal university study followed by two years of immersion. The second step was to use the grant which I won from the Leverhulme Trust to travel throughout the whole of the former Czechoslovak state and to read as wide a range of primary source materials (both published and manuscript) as time would permit. Since it is not possible to do everything, I tried to focus particular attention on under-researched times and places: to sample security files from the years which fell between the landmark years 1918 (independence), 1938 (Munich Crisis), 1968 (Prague Spring) and 1989 (Velvet Revolution), for example; or to look closely at the experiences of a city like Užgorod (Uzhhorod, Ungvár, Ужгород), to see how things might look from that lesser-known perspective.

The fact that Czechoslovakia was a multinational state whose history could be examined right from birth to death, so to speak, made it a fascinating object of study to me. I had no previous association with Czechoslovakia, no Czechoslovak ancestry, no skin in the game. When I began researching the topic, I had no idea what the overall thesis of the book would turn out to be. I went where the evidence took me. My work included extensive research, over a period of eight months, in the Czechoslovak Ministry of Interior (StB/ŠtB, the state security or secret police)

[1] Gordon Wightman and Archibald H. Brown 'Changes in the Levels of Membership and Social Composition of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 1945–73' (1975) 27 *Soviet Studies* 396.

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archives; several months spent in the Czech National Library, where I read the entire *Sbírka zákonů* (Collection of Laws and Ordinances) from 1918 to 1992; months looking at materials from the German-controlled Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia and the Communist Central Archives; further weeks in the collections of Czechoslovak presidents Beneš and Masaryk's private papers; and time spent in the Slovak National Library, as well as a number of regional archives. I tried, wherever possible, to favour primary sources over secondary works. Apart from the manuscript sources to be found in the archives, I also read through hundreds of published primary sources, published mainly in Czech, Slovak, English and French. Sometimes, as with Ukrainian and Hungarian sources, I needed to rely on the help of professional translators.

The themes which began to emerge from my developing understanding of Czechoslovak history were not those which I had been led to expect from such heroic characterizations as the 'land of an unconquerable ideal'[2] which had been publicised from the 1920s, but with particular vigour after the Munich Crisis in 1938 and again after Czechoslovakia was invaded by Soviet-led Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. The state which was so often characterized, especially in the English-language literature, as humane and tolerant, and whose propaganda made much of it being a naturally democratic island set in an authoritarian sea, turned out (unsurprisingly) to be much more like its Central European neighbours than its Western Allies in its ways of perceiving the world. (The Western Allies, of course, had their own distortions and self-illusions; the point is that they were different ones). Again, like its neighbours, the Czechoslovak state, too, was sometimes responsible for the persecution of ethno-linguistic, racial and religious minorities. The importance of what I was beginning to uncover about the experiences of the non-Czech minorities in the state – from the moves taken against Jews *before* the establishment of the German Protectorate (1939–1945) and Tiso's fascistic Slovak Republic (1939–1945) to the fine detail of the post-war treatment of Germans and forcible 'Slovakization' of Hungarians; and from the treatment of Czech Roma during the post-Munich, pre-War Second Czecho-Slovak Republic (1938–1939) to the workings of the Tiso regime in Slovakia, both when it was autonomous (1938–1939) and independent (1939–1944), for example, made me feel that it was important to write the book for as wide a potential readership as would be consistent with intellectual and scholarly integrity. It seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, that we ignore the ugly, xenophobic side of nationalism in Europe at our peril: that Europe will be a safer, more humane and tolerant place only after its nations and states recognize their own part as sometimes perpetrators, as well as sometimes victims, of extreme intolerance. I wanted, in short, to write for the General Reader.

[2] The phrase is taken from the title of a characteristic introduction to the new Czechoslovak state from the mid-1920s. This was Jessie Mothersole, *Czechoslovakia: The Land of an Unconquerable Ideal* (John Lane, 1926).

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The risk was always that the resulting book would fall between two stools: too populist for academics and too scholarly for non-specialists.

The book, which was originally to be called *The Czechoslovak Experiment* (a title which turned out to have been used before), was first published with Yale University Press in 2009 as *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed*. The title, which followed the cadence of a well-known short story by Saki,[3] and whose inclusion of the word 'failed' was provocative, was intended to signal three different things at once. First, the use of the terms 'Czechoslovakia' and 'state' was supposed to make clear that the book's subject matter was a state, a polity, rather than a people or peoples: what was being offered was a history of Czechoslovakia, not the Czech and Slovak nations. Second, the subtitle 'The State that Failed' signalled that the book was not going to be structured as a simple chronology of selected political events but had an overarching argument or thesis. Finally, the use of the term 'failed' warned the reader that the book's interpretation of the Czechoslovak state was not going to be the Czech-centred narrative of Czechoslovak exceptionalism with which the world was already familiar, but instead a sharply revisionist critique of that consensus.

The inclusion of the word 'failed' in the book's title was risky. In English, the word 'failed' has a number of associations which make it difficult to translate into Czech without making the word sound either too gentle (*neúspěl*) or too harsh (*selhal*). The eminent Czech translator Zdeněk Hron's choice of '*zklamal*' in the Czech version of the book which was eventually brought out by Petrkov publishers in 2020, is probably the best compromise: but inevitably, as is the case with any translation, some associations are lost. In a very obvious and literal way, the Czechoslovak state 'failed', did not succeed, in that it ceased to exist (*propadl*), not just once, but twice, in the space of just 74 years. The primary sense in which I meant to suggest that the state 'failed', however, was in the sense of a scientific experiment which does not result in the intended or expected outcome. Czechoslovakia was a 'failed experiment' (*neúspěšný experiment*) in this fundamental sense: the Czechoslovak state was explicitly set up to be a multinational, liberal and democratic state, 'a sort of Switzerland', as Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš promised at Versailles, in which Germans and other minorities would benefit from something like the Swiss canton system; Slovaks would be treated as equals; and Subcarpathian Ruthenia would be fully autonomous. These promises were either broken – as in the case of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, whose formal autonomy was not implemented but eventually seized in 1938, following the Munich disaster – or else not felt to be honoured, as in the case of both Slovakia and the German, Hungarian and Polish minorities.

The second way in which the state did not succeed was in its intended geopolitical function. Czechoslovakia's creation at the end of WWI, as a predominantly Slav

[3] Hector Hugh Munro, 'Filboid Studge, The Story of a Mouse that Helped', in *Saki: The Complete Short Stories* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2011).

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multinational state in the midst of majority German-speaking territory, was commended to the peacemakers at Paris, and to all who dreamed of a 'New Europe', as a means of promoting stability and keeping the balance of power in Central Europe by containing Germany, protecting France, and preventing the possibility of another European war to follow the Great War. Although it was of course Germany which was most responsible for destabilizing Europe, and then launching the unspeakably brutal WWII, Czechoslovak foreign and domestic policy in the 1920s and early 1930s did itself few favours. By promoting the interests of Czechs over other nationalities within the state, speaking on behalf of peoples it had little or no mandate to represent, running roughshod over the sensibilities of most of the state's minorities and treating its easternmost province like a virtual colony, by the mid-1930s Czechoslovakia had lost the support of most of its domestic non-Czech populations at the same time that its foreign policy was alienating nearly all of its neighbours. This put the state in an exceptionally vulnerable position, especially once it became apparent that the largest threat to its liberty came from Germany, by then under Nazi control, rather than – as had been expected initially – from a revanchist Hungary or Austria. None of this is to downplay the aggressive nationalism and intolerance towards minorities which was shown by Czechoslovakia's neighbours – above all, Germany – but rather to suggest that Czechoslovakia was not, as is usually claimed, an exception which fit better into a Western than a Central European model. Rather, Czechoslovakia offered variations on common contemporary themes of nationalist, ethnic, religious and racial intolerance which were at the time a striking part of the European, and especially Central European, *zeitgeist*.

Czechoslovakia's failures to remain a liberal, democratic and stabilizing force in Central Europe came about because of a complex series of interactions between external pressures, which are well known, and internal decisions, which are not. The ultimate results, as the book details, were that Czechoslovakia ceased to be liberal, with regard to its non-Czech citizens, during the First Czechoslovak Republic of 1918–1938; ceased to be democratic, in all but name, during the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic of 1938–1939; and, over the course of WWII (1939–1945) and the Third Czechoslovak Republic (1945–1948), lost most of its claim to be either multinational or tolerant of minorities. After a further forty-one years of Communist Party rule, followed by three years of rapid reorientation towards democracy and the free market, Czechoslovakia divided into Czech and Slovak halves, ceasing to be a unitary Czechoslovak state at all. None of this made the Czechoslovak state out to be worse than any other: but it returned the notion of agency and individual responsibility to a country which was too often presented as a passive victim, the plaything of Great Powers, a stalwart nation which had the misfortune to be stuck between Russia and Germany, and to whom political misfortunes fell like so many natural disasters.

The Czechoslovak state may have failed, but the Czech and Slovak nations succeeded, and spectacularly, in creating separate, seemingly durable, largely

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homogenous nation-states by the end of the twentieth century. It is easy to overlook how remarkable these Czech and Slovak successes were. That the old Bohemian Crown Lands, today's Czech Republic or Czechia, and the old Hungarian highlands, today's Slovak Republic or Slovakia, exist as separate European Union partners and NATO members could not have been confidently predicted even as recently as a generation ago. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Czech (as opposed to Bohemian) and Slovak independence were equally unthinkable. The very scale and improbability of this success makes it sometimes difficult for Czechs and Slovaks to comprehend that the multinational Czechoslovak state, for all its initial support from France, Britain and the United States, and for all its subsequent economic, industrial, literary, cultural, artistic and other successes, contained within itself the seeds of its own failure.

In making these arguments, a number of which had not been heard before, and comprehensively challenging the narrative that had dominated both Czechoslovak exile and Western Cold War propaganda, back in 2009 the book sharply divided opinion. Today, over a century after the Czechoslovak state was brought into being, thirty years since the collapse of the Communist regime and after a generation of further scholarship, the book's arguments are no longer new, and no longer threatening, in the way that they seemed to many at the time. Czechoslovak historiography, once so uniform in its interpretations, has become an infinitely more varied and complex field, one characterized by orthodoxies, reinterpretations and properly historical debates. Old nationalist and state-serving narratives die hard, however, and one can still see the familiar lines of the old Czech-centred view implicit in what is included, and what is left out, of *Kroniky*, *Dějiny v datech*, museum guidebooks, tour guide examinations, school textbooks, government websites, plaques, memorials, television programmes, radio documentaries, block-buster films, public commemorations and much else besides. The book may, therefore, still serve a purpose in offering a corrective, or at least an alternative, to what remains the popular version of Czech, and by extension Czechoslovak, history in these and other places.

While it was clear to my generation of American and British historians that the story we had grown up with about Central Europe was ripe for revision, the newly independent Czech and Slovak republics were naturally more sensitive about their public image. When, on 28 October 2009, *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed* was first published, in English, by Yale University Press, the book was immediately denounced in a public speech by the Czech Consul-General in Los Angeles, as a 'step away' from a 'crime against humanity'.[4] At the same time, the book was effusively welcomed by *Literární noviny*, albeit with a warning that it held up a

[4] 'Czech Consul General Condemns "Anti-Czechoslovak" Book' (29 October 2009) https://legacy.blisty.cz/art/49625.html.

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'shocking mirror' in which Czech society might not recognize itself.[5] The current affairs magazine *Respekt* included on its glossy front cover the news item: 'female historian from the USA provokes the Czechs' (*Historička z USA provokuje Čechy*).[6] *Lidové noviny*'s Saturday Arts supplement took a more humorous angle, reproducing the image of David Černý's St Wenceslas riding an upside-down horse with the caption: 'Mary Heimann turns twentieth-century Czech history on its head' (*Mary Heimannová staví české dějiny 20. století na hlavu*).[7] The editor of *The Prague Post* reported that 'Central European history did a somersault' with the release of a book that 'upended almost every conventional view of the country' and 'shattered the traditional perception of Czechoslovakia as a victim'.[8] The *Times Literary Supplement* welcomed the book as 'truly a history of Czechoslovakia not just Czechs and Slovaks' which did well to remind readers that 'this vanished country was home to Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenes, Roma and Poles, to Lutherans, Uniates and Jews as well as Roman Catholics and atheists'. The book, it judged, was 'astonishing not so much for revealing new facts' although it had 'done its share of archival sleuthing', but for 'bringing into relief a narrative that was hiding in plain sight during the Cold War', one of 'Czech ruthlessness' with regard to minorities and non-Czech nationalities in the now defunct Czechoslovak state.[9]

People who grew up in the former Czechoslovakia reacted strongly to the book: they loved it or hated it. For some, the book's title was enough. The Czech philosopher Erazim Kohák attacked the book at length in *Literární noviny* while at the same time frankly admitting that he had not actually read it.[10] Madeleine Albright, who was known as the daughter of Czechoslovak diplomat, politician and historian Josef Korbel long before she became US Secretary of State, told me that her advisor had warned her not to read the book because she 'wouldn't like it'. A retired civil servant, intrigued by the debate, began collecting press cuttings from around the world, marking with an asterisk those reviews in which the reviewer acknowledged that he or she had not actually read the book. This turned out to be 50 per cent. 'Good for you for stirring things up!' wrote a Balkans journalist who told me that his editor had been angrily instructed by the Czech ambassador not to publish a favourable review of the book. 'Are they sending you death threats?' he asked. *The Economist*, which featured the book on its Books and Arts (Culture) page, praised the 'archival research and attention to detail' as 'exemplary' but considered its tone 'vinegary' and 'spiteful'.[11] The 'venom of many of the reviewers', countered

[5] 'Jsme to my v tom šokujícím zrcadle?', *Literární noviny* 26 October 2009; http://literarky.cz/civilizace/89-civilizace/1522-jsme-to-my-v-tom-okujicim-zrcadle.

[6] *Respekt* (10–17 January 2010), cover.

[7] 'Orientace/kritika', *Lidové noviny* (23 January 2010), 1.

[8] 'The Dark Side: A New History of Czechoslovakia Casts a Troubling Shadow', *The Prague Post* (24–30 March 2010).

[9] 'Beyond Prague', *Times Literary Supplement* (26 March 2010).

[10] 'Všechno je jinak', *Literární noviny* (2 November 2009).

[11] 'Czechoslovakia: A Chequered History', *The Economist* (21 November 2009), 100.

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an elderly Austrian scholar who spoke Czech, Slovak, German, Hungarian, French and English, 'just confirms your thesis about Czech *nesnášenlivost* and *šovinismus*' (intolerance and chauvinism).

Emails, letters and phone calls from journalists followed. The most surprising private communications included a congratulatory letter from a former head of a Western intelligence service who had served in Prague during the Cold War; purportedly leaked documents from the Czech Foreign Ministry; and a request for help from a displaced Bohemian princess seeking restitution of her family's property. Some correspondents were hurt or angry, stung by what they saw as attacks on their national identity. Others were grateful to have their own sense of injustice or hurt acknowledged. Perhaps the most humbling letter I received was from a circle of Czech engineers in Prague who explained that, because they had grown up under Communism and knew only the official version of Czechoslovak history, they had been meeting, week by week, to discuss each chapter of the book through a series of informal seminars. Further surprises – including being asked to take part in a debate with the former Czech Prime Minister Petr Pithart in the Czech Senate as part of the Prague Writers' Festival in 2013, to make policy recommendations to a NATO Partnership for Peace workshop held in Kyiv in 2015 and to spend an evening discussing the book with members of the Prague Business Club in 2019 – followed.

Apart from the controversy that took place in public, in full view, there was also another story which went on in the background. This was in itself an education. I knew that journalists, critics and reviewers could hype up or undermine a book; but I had not previously realized that academic publishers, in a free country, would go so far as to break legally binding contracts – in effect to censor themselves – in response to real or imagined political pressure. In 1945, the English writer George Orwell wrote an essay, intended to serve as a preface to his forthcoming novel *Animal Farm*, entitled 'The Freedom of the Press'. In this little-known piece, which was not published during his lifetime, Orwell set out the difficulty he had had in finding a publisher for the book for which, along with the dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he was ultimately to be best remembered. When publisher after publisher refused to bring out *Animal Farm*, Orwell slowly came to realize that he was being censored: not overtly, since post-war Britain was, after all, a free country; but unofficially, indirectly and voluntarily.

The publishers who rejected Orwell's manuscript did not do so because they found his political allegory poorly written, dull to read or unlikely to sell well: on the contrary, the new manuscript's clarity and popular appeal were immediately apparent. The problem with Orwell's short allegorical novel was not that it was a bad book but that it implicitly criticized Stalin and the Soviet Union; and this at a time when the Soviet Union was Britain's ally, Socialism seemed to many to represent the future and Stalin's achievements were widely admired, including in British literary, governmental and intellectual circles. Only one of the publishers who rejected Orwell's *Animal Farm* did so for overtly party-political reasons. The others had no

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clear political stance and one publisher, as Orwell tells us, 'actually started by accepting the book', even 'making preliminary arrangements to bring it out' only to change his mind after consulting the Ministry of Information who 'warned him, or at any rate strongly advised him, against publishing it'. As the editor of the publishing house explained to Orwell in a letter, the 'reaction' he had had 'from an important official in the Ministry of Information' led him to see that Orwell's political fable 'might be regarded as something which it was highly ill-advised to publish at the present time', given that it 'so completely [followed] the progress of the Russian Soviets and their two dictators' and especially given the offensive 'choice of pigs as the ruling caste' since this would 'no doubt give offence to many people, and particularly to anyone who is a bit touchy, as undoubtedly the Russians are'.

Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in short, was repeatedly refused publication, not because it was thought to be substandard; or unlikely to sell; or even libellous; but rather because it was critical of the contemporary Soviet system in general, and of Stalin in particular, at a time when influential people did not wish Stalin or the Soviet Union to be criticized. What disturbed Orwell most about the widespread ignoring or downplaying of inconvenient facts about the Soviet Union under Stalin was that the conspiracy of silence was largely self-imposed and voluntary. 'Unpopular ideas', as Orwell pointed out, 'can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban'. At any given moment, Orwell went on,

> there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas, which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question. It is not exactly forbidden to say this, that or the other, but it is 'not done' to say it … Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness. A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in the highbrow periodicals.

Although George Orwell was describing the situation that existed in post-war Great Britain, not the Czech Republic in the first decades after Communism, the phenomenon of the voluntary censorship that he described soon became all-too recognizable to me. In those days in the Czech Republic, of course, it was not Stalin's atrocities that were ignored or downplayed (quite the reverse) but rather such sensitive topics as the post-war treatment of ethnic Germans, the degree of Czech collaboration in the Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia, the degree of local responsibility for Fascist and Communist authoritarian regimes, the place of the Roma in Czech society and the extent to which Slovak and Rusyn nationalism were suppressed. Other topics were not so much ignored as genuinely forgotten: the role of the Prague government in bringing about the March 1939 crisis which led to Slovak independence and to the establishment of the Protectorate, for example; the initial welcome being prepared for the Warsaw Pact armies by both *Rudé právo* and the Slovak branch of the Communist Party in the first, confused hours on 21 August 1968; the extent to which authoritarianism, fascism and antisemitism

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characterized all parts of the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic of 1938–1939; the extent to which the Czechoslovak Communist Party was involved in what turned into the 1989 anti-regime revolution, and other such episodes which suggest a more complex picture than the traditional division into villains and heroes, victims and perpetrators, and which have since been scrutinized in more depth by Jan Tesář, Michal Pullmann, Muriel Blaive, David Green and various other scholars.

Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed, which evidently transgressed against the unwritten rules as to how it was permissible to evaluate the Czechoslovak state's political record, went through precisely the same kind of voluntary censorship that Orwell described in his essay on the freedom of the press (an essay which itself remained unpublished until after his death).[12] Within weeks of the book first appearing in English, five separate Czech publishers approached me with offers to bring out a Czech translation. I decided to go with the most prestigious of the academic publishers which had approached me; the book underwent the usual anonymous peer-review process and a contract was signed for an initial print run of 1,500–3,000 copies, publication within 18 months, and 8 per cent of the retail price, which the publisher estimated at 350 kč, suggesting that the book was expected to sell. The book was contracted, the translator chosen, my university informed and the information that the book was to be published included on some public websites.

All continued as normal, with the usual number of emails back and forth, until suddenly everything went mysteriously quiet from the publisher's end, when an innocuous query about some aspect or other of the book went unanswered; and remained unanswered after a first reminder; then a second; then a third. After several weeks of this unexplained silence, which came at the height of a negative campaign in the Czech press, I eventually emailed to ask directly whether everything was still all right with the contract or whether there was some problem. Floods of reassurances followed: yes, of course, everything was fine; there were no problems, everything was still working to schedule and the translated version of the book would be ready and published on time. Then, just days after receiving these reassurances, came an agonised email from my editor, attaching a copy of an anonymous letter from someone – not a peer reviewer and not, judging by the tone and wording of the letter, an academic – asserting his or her view that the book ought not to be published. It seemed clear from the wording of the letter that the motives were political: my guess is that it came from whichever Ministry is the modern Czech equivalent of George Orwell's Ministry for Propaganda. Whoever wrote it must have had a good deal of clout, because even a university publisher with standing was evidently so anxious to please, or so afraid to offend, that it was willing to break its own rules – indeed, to break the law – and go back on its own decision and contractual obligation to publish.

[12] www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-freedom-of-the-press/.

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Unsure what to do, I phoned Yale University Press to ask for their assessment of what had just happened. My editor at Yale, after discussion with the press's lawyer, explained that the Czech academic publisher was in clear breach of contract; that I would be within my rights to sue them; and that Yale would 'back me all the way' if I decided to take this route. The notion of *forcing* a publisher to honour its contractual agreement seemed a very distasteful proposition to me: presuming that the court case won, which Yale seemed to feel confident that it would, what would it be like to work with a publisher against its will?

I did not go public with what had happened at the time, partly because I did not want to put my editor, who was already stressed, under yet more pressure; and partly because I was finding the whole affair exhausting. I confined myself to writing a private letter to the head of the university press. It was only when, a couple of years later, I was invited to speak at the twenty-third Prague Writers' Festival and the organizers wanted to get hold of the Czech version of my book, that I had to explain why my book had not yet appeared in Czech. To my surprise, the organizer of the Prague Writers' Festival went public with the news by mentioning it in his introduction to a live discussion about the book that took place in the Czech Senate, on 18 April 2013, between myself, former Prime Minister Petr Pithart and the Czech historian Jan Rychlík. Towards the end of the discussion, which was filmed and livestreamed, Petr Pithart mentioned his hope that the book, which he judged important and necessary, though painful, would appear in Czech soon.[13]

Within a few days of the Prague Writers' Festival on 'The Birth of Nations' at which there was a panel presentation about my book in the Czech Senate, another reputable publisher, this time a private one, expressed their wish to publish a Czech translation of the book. 'We would be very honoured to have the opportunity to be your Czech publisher', wrote the editor. 'The book would suit our publishing profile very well and we would dedicate all our resources to promote it.[14] This second contract with a Czech publisher, and third publishing contract for the book, was agreed and signed by both parties and dated 15 April 2013 though not in fact sent until June 2013. The publisher paid an advance, agreed to a relatively large initial print run of 2,000 copies, and, after some discussion, to 8 per cent royalties. At my request, my previous experience having made me a little cautious, it was required by the terms of the publishing contract that the book be published within 18 months, by the end of the year 2014, or else the rights would revert to the author.

Once again, everything seemed to be proceeding normally at first: terms were agreed, two copies of the contract signed. A translator was selected and, at least according to what I was told by the publishers, got to work on the manuscript straightaway. It was only when, nearly a year after signing the contract, and the translator still had no questions for me, that I began to wonder. When I asked my

[13] www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10000000101-festival-spisovatelu-praha-2013/.
[14] Email to Mary Heimann (11 May 2015).

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editor, the same editor who had been answering emails immediately, whether everything was still OK with the contract – exactly as had happened before with the academic publisher – there was a sudden, inexplicable silence. When I pressed, I got the same flood of reassurances: of course there was no problem, my dear Mrs Heimann; the translator was very busy working on the manuscript and it would be ready by April 2014 at the earliest. As for the translator's email address, should I wish to contact him directly? Unfortunately, I was told, the translator does not use email, the only way to contact him would be via the publishers, via the editor himself. I felt a sickening sense of recognition when the junior editor I had been dealing with, and who had always been so straightforward and helpful, suddenly began to show the same signs of stress the junior editor at the first academic publisher had shown. This time, presumably because this particular junior editor was too honest to play along with a charade, I received an email to explain that the junior editor 'frankly, no longer knew what was happening' with my book, and suggested that I speak directly to the director of the publishing house.

Just as the deadline of 18 months was coming up, and under pressure to answer, the director of the publishing company emailed me to state baldly that he had decided not to publish the book. No explanation, not even the pretence that there was a legitimate reason to suddenly pull the plug, just as we were coming to the end of the 18-month period specified in the contract and despite having sent me a cash advance. Either this commercial publisher had, like the university publisher, begun with honest intentions and been suddenly warned by someone influential not to proceed to publish; or perhaps the cash advance had, all along, been intended not as an advance on sales but rather as the price for preventing the book from being made accessible to Czech readers for at least a further few years. Either way, it did not seem a very good sign for freedom of the press.

At the same time that Czech publishers were apparently being pressured not to bring out a Czech edition of my book, there were other indications of interference in the normal reviewing process for a new book. From the very first there had been some signs to suggest that the book was not going to be treated simply as a routine work of revisionist history. On the day of publication, as already mentioned, the book was denounced by a Czech diplomat in a public speech.[15] On 17 March 2010, a Senate committee of the Czech Parliament was apparently alerted to the displeasure felt by some émigrés about the book. After a 'lively discussion', according to the report, the Senators agreed to 'deal with' the book through the committee for Education and Culture. It was further noted that Czech world service (*Český rozhlas*) would make a programme about the book, which would also be discussed at a conference to take place in Tábor between 27 June and 3 July 2010.[16]

[15] 'Czech Consul in Los Angeles Criticizes "Anti-Czechoslovak" Book', http://w1.blisty.cz/art/49625.html.

[16] M. Krupička, 'Zasedala krajanská komise Senátu' (17 March 2010) *Krajene.net* (krajene.radio.cz). See also www.svu2000.org.

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Meanwhile, in February 2010, a journalist who had just published a positive review of my book, and who I had never met, emailed to let me know that the Czech ambassador in his country had demanded a face-to-face meeting with his editor-in-chief at which he 'tried to extract some kind of apology'. 'He didn't get it', reported the journalist, 'but he did write to me, sending me a stack of hostile reviews of your book and suggesting I read them'.[17]

In September 2010, during the 'Ties that Bind' conference held at the Czech and Slovak embassies in London, to which I was invited by the then Czech Ambassador, and at which former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright took a prominent part, a good five minutes were spent denouncing passages from my book, which were read aloud, before the ambassador moved on to denounce the work of historian Muriel Blaive, who was also in attendance and who was clearly shaken by the experience. Next came phone calls from journalists working for the Czech state, most of whom were especially interested in one thing: was I of Sudeten German ancestry? It was lucky for me that I wasn't. Otherwise the book – even though it had been researched and written by a professional historian, drawing on evidence – presumably would have been dismissed out of hand. The book sold, and was widely reviewed, but was still only available in English.

In 2015, I received an invitation to speak at the annual Czech journalism summer school run by Milan Pilař in Havlíčkův Brod. Trying to think of what, as an historian, I might usefully find to say to an audience of aspiring journalists, I decided to talk about the importance of acknowledging the dark passages in one's own national history and to examine the sometimes subtle ways in which censorship can operate. One of the examples I drew on, together with George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, involved explaining, since this was the case I knew best, why there was still no Czech-language edition of my own *Czechoslovakia* book.[18] The Czech journalism students at the Summer School gave my talk a sympathetic hearing, and Milan Pilař afterwards took up the cause of bringing out a Czech edition of the book as a matter of honour. It was thanks to his perseverance that an excellent new translator and publisher were found. Interested to know more, Luboš Drobík invited me to speak at the Prague Business Club in 2019.[19] After a welcoming evening of food, drink and discussion in Wenceslas Square, a majority of members of the Prague Business Club, themselves divided between those who hated and those who loved the book, decided to crowdfund the costs of translation and publication in order to bring out a Czech-language edition. Zdeněk Hron, the translator, and Petrkov, the publisher, took on the task and the book was translated, copy-edited and printed. The final version included generous

[17] Private email to Mary Heimann (16 February 2010).
[18] 'O zamlčování nepohodlných dějin', Letní žurnalistická škola, Havlíčkův Brod (22 August 2015), www.letnizurnalistickaskola.cz/.
[19] 'Diskusní večeře s americkou historičkou Mary Heimann', www.businessclub.cz/cs/udalosti/.

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endorsements by the former dissident, and later Czech Prime Minister, Petr Pithart, who wrote both an introduction and a jacket blurb; by the former dissident and Charter 77 spokesman Jan Urban; and by the famous Slovak actress, diplomat and politician Magdaléna Vášáryová, whose career included being the first post-Communist Czechoslovak Ambassador to Austria; Slovak ambassador to Poland; and Secretary of State for Slovakia. The book launch, with speeches by Petr Pithart and Jan Urban and with HE the British Ambassador Nick Archer and other dignitaries in attendance, was again hosted by the Prague Business Club. I was lucky: within a few weeks, COVID-19 restrictions were imposed and travel between the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic would no longer have been possible.

The story, once might say, ended well in that it is now possible for Czech readers, should they so wish, to read a book which presents Czechoslovak history in a very different light from the version which has long been officially favoured and promoted. The fact that it took ten years for this to happen and that it was evidently deemed necessary by some to seek to prevent, delay or discredit a book which was critical of Czech and Slovak nationalism, should nevertheless cause us to reflect a little on the role of history and its troubled relationship with nationalism, not just in the former Czechoslovakia but throughout Europe, including the United Kingdom. It is not difficult to understand why a book which is sharply critical of the dangers inherent in nationalism, in this case principally Czech and Slovak nationalism, should have received some hurt, angry or indignant responses. My motives were not, however, anti-Czech or anti-Slovak; nor was the book written out of spite or vinegar. My purpose in showing the darker side of nationalism was not to single out Czechoslovakia as better or worse than other states, still less to discredit Czechs, among whom I count many friends and (through marriage) family, as a people. Rather, it was to illustrate for the general reader – of whatever ethnic, linguistic, national or religious background – the inherent danger in perpetuating nationalist myths in which one's own side is presented as the righteous victim and the injury done to others ignored or downplayed.

It is one thing to disapprove of or dislike a book and quite another to seek to prevent others from being able to read it. I can only assume from the actions of those who sought to prevent the book from being read, from being reviewed impartially or from being translated into Czech, that those who sought to silence it knew themselves that the content of the book is true. This is not to say that there are no mistakes in the book (of course there are, as with any published book: some 14 errors were brought to my attention for correction in the second edition; as it happens, this is an unusually low number of typos and other minor errors for a 400-page book). But, just to state the obvious for a moment: if the book were fundamentally unsound, laughable, riddled with mistakes and based on poor research, as a concerted effort by internet trolls sought to persuade the world, it would hardly have been contracted even by one serious university press, let alone two. It would not have passed the scrutiny of six expert peer-reviewers (two apiece for each of the academic presses,

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including Yale University Press, which sent the unpublished manuscript out for anonymous assessment, and two for the commercial press). Nor would it have been viewed as worth silencing. As Orwell pointed out: one does not feel the need to prevent the publication of a bad book.

My generation grew up steeped in knowledge about the horrors perpetrated by Nazi Germany. Far less well known was the extent to which the persecution of minorities came to be justified in the name of nationalism and codified in legal statutes, right across Central Europe. It seemed to me especially important, a decade after the 'end' of the Cold War, to advertise the fact that this could happen *even* in a democratic country, *even* in one which held up France, Britain and the United States as political models, *even* in one which suffered at the hands of Nazi Germany, *even* in a state which was widely described as humane, tolerant and progressive. If we in the so-called democratic West were to avoid repeating the injustices and cruelties which characterized Central Europe in the twentieth century, it seemed to me that we needed to face the dark parts of that past squarely. Everyone already knew about the evil of Hitler's Germany. The lesson of the Czechoslovak state's seventy-four-year history, as I saw it, was the extent to which people like *us* were culpable, through intolerance of other minority, ethnic and national groups, of bringing about precisely the sorts of injustices to which we object when practised by others. It is perfectly possible for a nation to be both a victim and a perpetrator. To divide the world mentally into 'good' and 'bad' nations is not only misleading; it is also potentially dangerous.

The warning which I sounded in 2009 – about the limits and fragility of democracy and liberalism and the dangers of ethnic stereotyping and generalization – may have seemed far-fetched in those far-off days before Orbán, Trump, Johnson, Brexit, Erdoğan, Zeman and the many promoters of hate and scapegoating who have been crowding the international political stage more recently. In today's political climate across Europe, so reminiscent of the 1930s, in which populist xenophobia and protectionism are back, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and other forms of racial hatred actively exploited by political leaders, a war which may well prove to be a Third World War being waged by Russia against Ukraine and refugees (including children) once again dehumanized, locked up, turned away or threatened with forcible relocation to Africa, the example of how the Czechoslovak state – a country which prided itself on its decency – descended from liberal democracy into authoritarianism and various iterations of police state is more politically salient than ever. Today, it is Britain's increasingly questionable attitude to human rights which worry me far more than those of the Czech or Slovak Republics. But this could change again: the point is precisely that no country, no people, is immune from such dangers.

As historians, it is our job to struggle as best we can against the assumptions and prejudices of our times, our outlook, our century, our nationality: to swim against the current, to refuse to accept the fashionable view of the moment. It is most emphatically not, in my opinion, the historian's job to begin with any established,

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fixed set of beliefs – whether that Communism was evil or the Germans warmongers or the Czechs innately democratic – and then 'select' those facts that seem to support that belief (or prejudice). And here I think that the Central European *penchant* for the *Kronika* – selected events to promote particular political outlooks and/or to support any particular regime – needs to be questioned.

History can challenge our own assumptions and prejudices and teach us to empathize with others and to understand the complexity – moral and otherwise – of the real world. One reviewer claimed that my *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed* 'changed forever' the historiography of Czechoslovak history. Another, writing for the Communist Party's *The Morning Star*, predicted (no doubt accurately) that Julius Fučík's *Notes from the Gallows* will 'remain evergreen long after this book is consigned to the university bookshops' bargain bins'. My hope was, and remains, that presenting the history of Czechoslovakia from a fresh, non-nationalist, perspective will encourage some – whether Czech, Slovak, British, American, Hungarian, whatever – to consider the arbitrariness of nationality, the often unconscious chauvinism to which groups of human beings are prone and the degree to which each of us contributes, for good or for ill, to the regimes under which we live.

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