

## **HIS135 – Marie McDowell – Creation, co-living and dissolution of Czecho-Slovakia**

There is no Czechoslovakia on today's world's map. Nevertheless, this former state existed and provided the world with the special experience of an artificial nation state that combined two different nations for almost a century before peacefully separating. Dissolution of Czechoslovakia can be considered one of the last parts of the dissolution of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire within the still continuous process of building and dissolving nation states in the world.

The culmination of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's industrial and nationalistic revolutions decorated with ideas of Romanticism was the background stage for the Czech university professor and later the first Czechoslovak president T.G. Masaryk to form a brand new Czechoslovak nation from two different Slavic groups – Czechs and Slovaks. He based his ideas on very close cultural and language similarities between otherwise Germanized industrial lands of the Czech crown (Bohemia and Moravia) and the Magyarized agricultural Slovak lands (also called upper Hungary). Masaryk created in 1918 a new state for the new nation – the Czechoslovak Republic - with the attachments of Silesia and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia - by seceding from the Austrian-Hungarian Empire after the end of World War I.

The young republic started a wide range of reforms to help consolidate unbalanced levels of development between the Czech and Slovak parts. The reforms included mainly investments in industry and a large educational reform in the Slovak lands. The inter-war period also showed the first signs of the fact that each of the major nations in Czechoslovakia (further only CSR) had different expectations from their union. A significant role was also played by minorities at the time in the CSR – Germans and Jews in both parts, Hungarians and Ruthenians in Slovakia. The Czechs, due to the historical tradition and economic strength, automatically stepped in as the leader of the new country with centralizing tendencies. Slovaks began to get frustrated from the fact that their desire for more independence and autonomy within the joined republic has almost no support on the Czech side. The nationalist tensions grew with the economic crisis in the 30's when the weakened democratic system got more opposition

from socialists, communists, fascists and nationalists extremists. At this time “...Andrej Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party, which no longer hid its opposition to the Czechoslovak state, gained ever more support” (Pokorny, *The Czech Lands*, pg. 17).

The Munich “Betrayal” in 1938 practically furthered the divided between Czechs and Slovaks. Despite the fact that both – Czechs and Slovaks – equally engaged in two mobilizations to defend Czechoslovakia, they didn’t enter the war together. The “[Munich dictat’s] acceptance by the Czechoslovak government and by President Benes politically and morally marked Czech and Slovak society for decades” (*A Concise History of Slovakia*, pg. 257). While Nazi Germany annexed the Czech Sudetenland to the Reich and occupied the rest of Bohemia and Moravia, the old Slovak nationalist frustrations were answered when Slovaks led by Hlinka, and supported by the Nazi German,y announced the creation of an independent, puppet cleric-fascistic Slovensky Stat (Slovak State). The Czech people living on the territory of the Slovak State had to leave the country. The first autonomous Slovak State was not created democratically, but it did survive the war until the liberation by the Soviet Army in 1945. The Slovaks gained a new experience: They can exist without the Czechs. On the subject of the Munich Agreement Dr. Jan Rychlik recently argued that ‘CSR wouldn’t be able to defend itself without allies, but the chance for joint “bloodshed” in protecting common country would have strengthen Czech – Slovak ties’ (Interview for CT4, Oct. 10,2012).

According to the Yalta conference, the lands of the CSR were supposed to be freed by the Soviet Army and therefore fell under the postwar control of the Soviet Union. The end of the war also brought a new geographic and demographic composition of the reunited CSR. The Carpathian Ruthenia was annexed to the Soviet Union based on results of a plebiscite conducted by the Soviet Union (!). Besides the Ruthenians, the CSR also lost practically all of its Jewish population in the Nazi Holocaust, and all the German population in an unregulated expulsion right after the war, which was later “legalized” by the Potsdam conference. It is important to note that with these several millions of lost CSR citizens also

their political parties, civic organizations, and intellectuals had disappeared from the CSR society.

Compared to the pre-war republic the postwar CSR included only Czechs, Slovaks and a small minority of Poles in northern Moravia as well as some Hungarians in southern Slovakia. The Soviet Union's postwar military control was extended by political control through a strengthened Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSC), which faced no significant opposition in the country. After the Communist coup in 1948 the Czechoslovak republic started religiously following instructions from Moscow to strictly centralize a "Soviet model" of totalitarian government. It was practically impossible to hope for any kind of independence for Slovaks in this type of regime.

While the limping communist economy and elapsing crisis slowed down developments in the Czech lands, the CSR's continuous investments in industry in Slovakia helped to equalize the standards of living in both parts of the CSR by the end of the 50's. In 1960 the new constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic (CSSR) confirmed the "leading role" of the KSC in the society and thus justified the election of the First Secretary of KSC Antonin Novotny as the president of the CSSR. The most powerful man in the country at the time - the Czech Novotny - was well known for his anti-Slovak attitudes which warmed up again the Slovak smoldering nationalism in the 60's.

Slovak desires for reforms led to the Novotny's resignation on his position of the First Secretary in January 1968. He was replaced by the Slovak reformist Alexander Dubcek – the leading person of the Prague Spring. In March 1968, the Czech General Ludvik Svoboda was elected the President of the CSSR. Dubcek started new reforms of "socialism with human face" that introduced free press and economic reforms that also included more independence for Slovaks. Unfortunately, these reforms were interrupted by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact.

Only one from the planned reforms survived: in October 1968 the CSSR became a federation. One central government was replaced by three: Czech, Slovak and Federal. However, the KSC as the leading political power in the country never became federal and controlled all three governments from

its Prague center. This pseudo-federation was the maximum of changes that Moscow allowed to calm down the Slovak nationalism. The First Secretary Husak then launched the 1969 -1989 period of “The ... normalization .... to return to ‘normal,’ that is, to the Czechoslovak version of the Soviet dictatorship” (The Concise History of Slovakia, pg. 291).

The end of the Cold War in the 1980s ended the Iron Curtain, unified Germany, and crumbled the Soviet Union. After the Velvet Revolution in the CSSR there was another – the fifth one within a century – chance to re-establish and strengthen relationships between the Czechs and the Slovaks in their new democratic federation. However, as Dr. Zemko said in his article: “the Czecho-Slovak waistcoat was buttoned the wrong way” again. The Czecho-Slovak federation peacefully dissolved at the end of 1992 and was replaced by two independent states: the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. How did it happen?

The Czechs and Slovaks equally participated on the revolutionary changes of the regime which stripped the communist party from its power and recovered democracy in Czechoslovakia. President Havel during his first days in office talked about the “deformed” communist federation. To answer Slovak demands for their official recognition the first steps was to rename the CSSR as the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic (CSFR). The Czechs were ready to accept a functional (centralized) federation. Slovaks preferred a confederation based on two strong, independent republics. At the same time, Czechoslovakia had to start important economic reforms – privatization of the big and small industry and restitutions. The Slovaks were more worried than Czechs about these changes and their impacts. This allowed new Slovak politicians like Vladimir Meciar and his party Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) to show off with a populist and nationalist campaign supported by the Slovak Nationalist Party (SNS).

When it became clear that the split of Czechoslovakia was unavoidable, the general Czechoslovak population expected some form of a plebiscite. Unfortunately, it never happened. The

results of the parliamentary elections in 1992 had shown a great support for Meciar in Slovakia and the victory of ODS led by Vaclav Klaus. This was recognized by the politicians as a legitimate expression of the people's will. When in summer 1992 Vladimir Meciar suggested to Vaclav Klaus the separation of the country, he was caught by surprise by the immediate positive response. Klaus understood the importance of economic reforms that would lead to the further inclusion of the Czech Republic into the European system. Nationalist issues with Slovakia could significantly slow down or even disable passing of the reforms in the parliament. It was also obvious that by the separation of the Czech and Slovak republics both leading politicians – Klaus and Meciar – would strengthen their political positions. At the same time the President of the CSFR Vaclav Havel, who personally opposed the separation, resigned so that he would not be blocking the separation process. The representatives of both republics met several times during the second half of 1992 to create all the documents about the split between the Czech and Slovak republics.

While Europe witnessed the dramatic dissolution of the Soviet Union and the tragic break-up of Yugoslavia the separation of the former Czechoslovakia appeared like a formal administrative step. How was that possible? Was there ever any chance to avoid the separation?

Historically there are many reasons that supported the peaceful separation: Czechs and Slovaks were never direct enemies; they never attacked or occupied each other (like in the Soviet Union). There were no significant minorities of Czechs present in Slovakia or Slovaks in the Czech lands (like in Yugoslavia). There were no religious conflicts. There was no military power interested in supporting one or the other side. However, the separation was inevitable, because there was no historical base for the Czechoslovak nation that Masaryk had artificially created. There was no real Czechoslovak language or Czechoslovak cultural ties. Czech historian Dr. Jan Rychlik argues that Masaryk made a mistake in judging the level of nationalism of Slovaks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Slovaks were ready to leave the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a nearly independent nation. For almost a century, the Czech and Slovak nations

tried to co-exist in a single state which did not stand the test of time; yet they peacefully separated and gradually found a new relationship – the best they have ever had - as equal neighbors within the EU and NATO.

### **Resources:**

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**The Czech Lands 1918-1994**, Jiri Pokorny, 1994, English version by Anna Bryson, Published by Prah – Martin Vopenka, Praha

**Boj o Hrad 1. – Hrad a Petka (1918-1926)**, Antonin Klimek, 1996, Published by Panevropa Praha, Czech version

**East Central Europe between the Two World Wars**, A History of East Central Europe Volume IX., Joseph Rothschild, 1974, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London

**Zle zapnuta cesko-slovenska vesta**, Dr. Milan Zemko, 16.6.2012; Sme, priloha Vikend pg. 13; Slovak version

**Skusenosti z delenia**, Peter Zajac, 6.10.2012; Sme, priloha Vikend pg. 13; Slovak version

**Emoce a sumy se po rozdeleni vycistily – Interview with Miroslav Lajcak**; Vladimir Plesnik, 18.10.2012; Pravo, Ze zahraniaci, pg. 12; Czech version

**Sbohem Ceskoslovensko**; TV document series by CT2, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10417026502-sbohem-ceskoslovensko/>

**Pred pulnoci - Cesi a Slovaci ve 20.stoleti**; - Interview with historian Jan Rychlik; 29.10.2012; CT4; <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/10095690193-pred-pulnoci/412231100252086/video/>

**Spolocny stat – rozdelenie – samostatnost – historicke paralely a protiklady medzi Ceskoslovenskom a Juhoslaviou** (Unified state-dissolution-independence-historical parallels and contradictions between Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia); November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012; Slovene Academy of Science; Round table discussion sponsored by the Slovak Embassy in Ljubljana; guest speakers: dr. Milan Zemko, SAV Bratislava; dr. Petr Roubal, AV CR Praha; dr. Andrej Rahten ZRC SAZU Ljubljana

[http://zpravy.idnes.cz/podle-pitharta-bylo-nejstatim-meciarovo-vitezstvi-ve-volbach-p5q-/domaci.aspx?c=A120722\\_111111\\_domaci\\_js](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/podle-pitharta-bylo-nejstatim-meciarovo-vitezstvi-ve-volbach-p5q-/domaci.aspx?c=A120722_111111_domaci_js)

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