

Preface to the Czech edition

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’.¹ At the same time, it was effusively welcomed by *Literární noviny*, albeit with a warning that the book held up a ‘shocking mirror’ in which Czech society might not recognise itself.² 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*).³ *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 blani*).⁴ The editor of *The Prague Post* stated 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’.⁵ The *Times Literary Supplement* welcomed the book as ‘truly a history of Czechoslovakia not just Czechs and Slovaks’ which reminded 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.⁶

Unsurprisingly, people who grew up in the former Czechoslovakia reacted strongly to the book: to love it or to hate it. For some, the book’s title was enough. The Czech philosopher Erazim Kohák attacked

¹ ‘Czech consul general condemns “anti-Czechoslovak” book’ (29 October 2009), <https://legacy.blisty.cz/art/49625.html>

² ‘Jsme to my v tom šokujícím zrcadle?’ *Literární noviny* (26 October 2009); <http://literarky.cz/civilizace/89-civilizace/1522-jsme-to-my-v-tom-okujcim-zrcadle>

³ *Respekt* (10–17 January 2010), cover.

⁴ ‘Orientace/kritika’, *Lidové noviny* (23 January 2010), p. 1.

⁵ ‘The Dark Side: A new history of Czechoslovakia casts a troubling shadow’, *The Prague Post* (24–30 March 2010).

⁶ ‘Beyond Prague’, *Times Literary Supplement* (26 March 2010).

the book at length in *Literární noviny* after frankly admitting that he had not actually read it.⁷ 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’.⁸ 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%. ‘Good for you for stirring things up!’ wrote a Balkans journalist whose editor was instructed by the Czech ambassador not to publish a favourable review of the book. ‘Are they sending you death threats?’ he asked me. *The Economist*, which featured the book on its Book and Arts page, praised the ‘archival research and attention to detail’ as ‘exemplary’ but heard the author’s tone as ‘vinegary’ or ‘spiteful’.⁹ The ‘venom of many of the reviewers’, countered 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 and letters, together with phone calls from journalists, followed. The most surprising private communications included a congratulatory letter from a former head of British intelligence; 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 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 in a kind of informal seminar. 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.

⁷ ‘Všechno je jinak’, *Literární noviny* (2 November 2009).

⁸ This was when we met in Glasgow on 9 September 2010.

⁹ ‘Czechoslovakia. A chequered history’, *The Economist* (21 November 2009), p. 100.

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 and critics could hype up or undermine a book but I had not previously realised 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 political pressure. In his little-known essay 'The Freedom of the Press', George Orwell described how 'unpopular ideas can be silenced, and inconvenient facts kept dark, without the need for any official ban'.¹⁰ The difficulties which Orwell described having in trying to get *Animal Farm* published in 1945, at a time when criticism of Britain's wartime ally Stalin was frowned upon, took exactly the same forms I experienced from 2009, when trying to bring out a Czech-language edition of *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed*. More than a dozen Czech publishers approached me, and actual contracts for publication were signed with six presses, one at a time, over the next nine years. One Czech publisher after another, having rushed to sign contracts – and in a couple of cases having even paid a cash advance and begun the translation work – dropped the project like a hot potato after being warned off. In one case, as with Orwell, I saw a copy of the actual letter which scared away the well-known university press, leaving the embarrassed editor to apologise and try to explain. Yale University Press confirmed to me that these breaches of publishing contract were illegal. It also offered to back me in taking the Czech publishers to court. Because of the inevitable stress and unpleasantness a court case would involve, I decided not to press charges and confined myself to writing a private letter to the publisher.

In 2015 Milan Pilař invited me to speak at the annual Czech journalism summer school (*Letní žurnalistická škola*) in Havlíčkův Brod. Trying to think of what I might usefully say to an audience of aspiring young journalists, I decided to talk about the importance of acknowledging the dark passages in one's own history, and to examine the sometimes subtle ways in which censorship can operate. One of the examples I drew upon involved explaining why there was still no Czech-language edition of my own *Czechoslovakia* book.¹¹ The 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

¹⁰ George Orwell, 'The Freedom of the Press', was discovered in 1972 and is now sometimes included as a preface to *Animal Farm*. See Bernard Crick 'How the essay came to be written', in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 15 September 1972. The essay can also be found at http://orwell.ru/library/novels/Animal_Farm/english/efp_go

¹¹ 'O zamlčování nepohodlných dějin' (Letní žurnalistická škola, Havlíčkův Brod, 22 August 2015), <https://www.letnizurnalistickaskola.cz/>.

thanks to his perseverance that an excellent new translator and publisher were found and that Luboš Drobík invited me to speak at the Prague Business Club in 2019.¹² After a welcoming evening of food, drink and discussion (*diskusní večere*) at their premises in Wenceslas Square, the members of the Prague Business Club decided to crowdfund the costs of translation and publication in order to bring out a Czech-language edition of the book. I am grateful to them, and to Milan Pilař and Luboš Drobík, for their efforts. I am also grateful to Cardiff University, my current employer, for both moral and financial support.

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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 and indignant responses. My motives were not, however, anti-Czech or anti-Slovak; nor was the book written out of spite or vinegar. The aim of my book was to balance the claims and counter-claims of all the peoples – Czech, Slovak, German, Hungarian, Polish, Ruthenian, Jewish, Roma – who were once citizens of a state called Czechoslovakia. 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 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.

Everyone knows about the horrors perpetrated by Nazi Germany. Less well-known is the extent to which the persecution of minorities came to be justified in the name of nationalism, and codified in legal statutes, across Central Europe, including in Czechoslovakia, over the course of the twentieth century. If we in the so-called democratic countries are to avoid repeating the cruelties which characterised Central Europe in the twentieth century, it is important that we face the dark parts of our pasts and remember the extent to which people like us were capable, through intolerance of other minority, ethnic and national groups, of bringing about precisely the sorts of injustice to which we object when practised on us by others. The fact

¹²‘Diskusní večere s americkou historičkou Mary Heimann’, <http://www.businessclub.cz/cs/udalosti/>.

that a nation, or people, or class has suffered in the past does not give it the right to inflict suffering on others in the present. It is perfectly possible for a nation to be both a victim and a perpetrator, decent and humane in some respects but vindictive, cruel or unjust in others.

The warning which I sounded in 2009 - about the limits and fragility of democracy and liberalism and the dangers of ethnic stereotyping and generalisation – may have seemed far-fetched in those far-off days before Trump, Brexit, Orbán, Erdoğan, Zeman, and all the would-be autocrats who crowd the international political stage at the moment. Sadly, in today's political climate, so reminiscent of the 1930s, in which populist xenophobia and protectionism are back, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-Roma and anti-immigrant feelings being actively exploited by political leaders, and refugees (including children) once again dehumanized in concentration camps, the example of how the Czechoslovak state – a country which prided itself on its decency and humanity - descended from liberal democracy into authoritarianism and various iterations of police state is more politically salient than ever.

The present book offers the perspective of an outsider, someone who began research without any prior knowledge or direct stake in the Czech or Slovak pasts, yet who came to love and care about the Czech Republic and to consider it a second home. Bringing out a fresh, Czech-language edition of this book a decade after the first English-language version was published carries with it certain risks. The fact that ten years of scholarship have taken place during the intervening period means that archival discoveries and perspectives which were original at the time may now seem obvious, incomplete or old hat. The wider climate of opinion, on both sides of the former Iron Curtain, has changed, in some cases almost beyond recognition. The years I spent learning Czech, reading about the Czechoslovak past, burying myself in Czech and Slovak archives, writing and re-writing my draft book manuscript, were within touching distance of the old, pre-1989 regime, a time when Communist-era attitudes – for both good and for ill - were still widespread. This already feels like a bygone age, another country.

The book's title, *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed*, was intended to signal three different things at once. First, the use of the terms 'state' and 'Czechoslovakia' 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 sounded provocative, even in English, and was enough to stop some from even opening the book. In English, however, the word ‘failed’ has a number of associations which make it difficult to translate into Czech without making the word sound either too gentle (*neúspěš*) or else too harsh (*selhal*). The Czech translator Zdeněk Hron’s choice of ‘*zklamal*’ is a good 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 74 years, roughly the span of a single human life. 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 Beneš promised, 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 Ruthenia, whose formal autonomy was not implemented – or else not felt to be honoured – as in the case of Slovakia and the minorities. The second way in which the state did not succeed was in its intended geopolitical function. Czechoslovakia’s creation at the end of the First World War, as a predominantly Slav multinational state in the midst of majority German-speaking territory, was commended to the peacemakers at Paris above all as a means of promoting stability and keeping the balance of power in Central Europe by containing Germany and preventing another European war. Instead, by favouring the interests of Czechs over other nationalities, 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,

Czechoslovakia lost the support of most of its non-Czech populations at the same time that its foreign policy was alienating its neighbours.

Czechoslovakia's failures to remain a liberal, democratic and stabilising 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; ceased to be democratic, in all but name, during the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic; and, over the course of the Second World War and the Third Czechoslovak Republic, lost most of its multinational character. After a further 41 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.

The Czechoslovak *state* may have failed, but the Czech and Slovak *nations* succeeded, and spectacularly, in creating separate, seemingly durable, largely homogenous nation-states by the end of the twentieth century. It is easy to overlook how remarkable these Czech and Slovak successes have been. That the old Bohemian Crown Lands, today's Czechia, and the old Hungarian highlands, today's Slovakia, exist as separate European Union partners and NATO members could not have been predicted even as recently as thirty years ago, when the Czechoslovak Communist regime was overthrown. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Czech (as opposed to Bohemian) and Slovak independence were unthinkable. The very successes of today's Czechia and Slovakia as independent European states make it sometimes difficult for Czechs and Slovaks to comprehend that the multinational Czechoslovak state, for all its 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, the book sharply divided opinion. Today, a century after the Czechoslovak state was brought into being, and thirty years – the first generation – since the collapse of the Communist regime, the book's arguments are not so new, unusual or threatening as they seemed to many in 2009. Czechoslovak historiography, once so

uniform in its interpretations, has become an infinitely more varied and complex field, one characterised 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 argument 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, blockbuster films, dramas, public commemorations, and much else besides. This book may therefore still serve a purpose.

If I were to be writing this book today, knowing what I know now about how much controversy the book provoked when it first came out, I would probably write with more tact, softening a word here or adding further explanation there, checking the tone for possible misreading. I am not sure this would necessarily be an improvement. There is something to be said for a book which makes its perspectives, arguments – even its moral position – clear and unambiguous. The original, English-language version of the book was written primarily for the English-speaking general reader, and therefore spends a good deal of time explaining what will seem self-evident and obvious to the Czech or Slovak reader. On the other hand, it is precisely because of its detachment from Czech and Slovak assumptions, its alternative gaze, that the book may be of use to Czechs and Slovaks in seeing their own history with a fresh eye. For all of these reasons, I have decided not to update or correct the original book manuscript – tempting though the opportunity is to improve on the original – but rather to present it, warts and all, and for the first time, to a Czech-speaking readership.

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