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Strategic Patience and the Division of Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia's peaceful division, at the end of 1992, into independent Czech and Slovak republics is often held up as an example of successful conflict resolution to be emulated by other aspiring states. Contrasted, at the time, with the violent breakup of Yugoslavia and disorderly collapse of the USSR, the Czechoslovak case continues to be invoked today in debates such as those surrounding the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence.

No two cases can ever be exactly alike. East-Central Europe is not the South Caucasus; and the international situation today is very different from that which prevailed in 1992. All the same, the break-up of the Czechoslovak state is worth examining since it was legal, peaceful and has proved to be durable; and also because the pre-1989 Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, which had been federated since 1969, shared some strong family resemblances, both structural and ideological, with both the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union.[1]

This paper seeks first to dispel a few common misconceptions about Czechoslovakia's 'Velvet Divorce' of 1 January 1993. Next, it points to some distinctive features of the break-up of the Czechoslovak state into separate Czech and Slovak states. Finally, it considers what lessons might be taken from the Czechoslovak case of relevance to the aims of promoting peace and regional stability in the South Caucasus (and, indeed, Ukraine).

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Czechoslovakia's peaceful division into separate states on 1 January 1993 is often stated or implied – not least in official Czech and Slovak sources – to have been due to the 'political maturity' or innately

[1] For the structure of the federated Czechoslovak Socialist Republic as it existed between 1969 and 1990, see laws 66-85, Ústavní zákon o československé federaci, *Sbírka zákonů Československé socialistické republiky*, vol. 143 (Prague, 1968) and also Law 143, 'Ústavní zákon ze dne 27. října 1968 o československé federaci' (known in Slovak as 'Ústavný zákon o česko-slovenskej federácii'), *Sbírka zákonů Československé republiky* 1968, 41 (4 November 1968), pp. 381-403.

'democratic character' of the two nationalities (peoples or ethno-linguistic groups) involved: the Czechs and the Slovaks. This line of argument draws on a long Czech tradition of presenting the Czech-speaking population of the Bohemian Crown Lands (Bohemia, Moravia and formerly Austrian Silesia) as more 'progressive' and 'democratic' than rival nationalities within the Habsburg Empire, especially the allegedly 'aggressive' and 'imperialist' German and Hungarian speakers. It also draws on older self-perceptions of the Slavs as 'dove-like' and peace-loving, again in contrast with local non-Slav populations, who are presented as militaristic or aggressive.

The message that the Czech people or 'nation', and by extension the interwar Czechoslovak state, was innately democratic, progressive and peace-loving has nineteenth-century roots but was promoted with particular vigour during the First World War as a means to clearly distinguish Czech (and, later, also Slovak) speakers within the Austro-Hungarian Empire from German and Hungarian speakers; and to convince the Allied Powers to support fledgling Slovak and Czech independence movements as part of their strategy to defeat the Central Powers.

While it is perfectly true that Czechs and Slovaks resolved their differences without violence or disorder in 1993, this tells us more about specifically Czech-Slovak relations at a specific time and in a specific context than it does about the two nations' supposed 'characters' or levels of political 'maturity'. The Czechs and Slovaks are no more (and no less) innately tolerant or nonviolent than any other European nation: alongside the peaceful 1989 Velvet Revolution and equally peaceful Velvet Divorce we should also remember the forced expulsions of 3 million German speakers, and the forced exchanges or 'reSlovakization' of hundreds of thousands of Hungarian speakers, that took place at the end of the Second World War, together with many accompanying atrocities.[2] We should also be aware that a number

[22] On the German expulsions, see especially T. Staněk, *Perzekuce 1945* (Prague: Institut pro středoevropskou kulturu a politiku, 1996); T. Staněk, *Tábory v českých zemích 1945-1948* (Ostrava: Tilia, 1996); Dušan Kováč, *Vysídlenie Nemcov zo Slovenska (1944-1953)* (Prague: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2001); M. Schvarc, 'Evakuácia nemeckého obyvateľstva z územia Slovenskej republiky v rokoch 1944-1945', *Historický zborník* 15, 1 (2005); Soňa Gabzdilová-Olejníková and Milan Olejník, *Karpatskí Nemci na Slovensku od druhej svetovej vojny do roku 1953* (Bratislava: SNM-Múzeum kultúry karpatských Nemcov, 2004; B. Frommer, *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovkia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). On the Hungarian exchanges and forcible 're-Slovakization', see Masarykův ústav AV ČR, Benešův archive, EB III, 'Slovensko 1945', 60, P60/1, 'Návrhy' (13 September 1947) and covering letter from the head of the Re-Slovakization Commission in Bratislava to V. Clementis, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Prague, ff. 1-

of racist state policies – especially the state-sponsored persecutions of Gypsies (Roma) in the Czech Lands and Jews in the wartime Slovak Republic – were independently legislated and implemented by Czech and Slovak authorities, quite apart from those better-known forms of discrimination and persecution that were demanded by rival, German authorities.[3]

In Eastern and Central Europe, the justification for cruelty to whole groups of people, together with widespread faith in the validity of collective guilt, were often based in a sense of national vulnerability, the notion that the 'life' of one's own nation would be endangered by the very existence of another, rival people. National minorities were commonly portrayed as potential or actual fifth columnists. One of the first acts of the independent Slovak state that came into being on 14 March 1939 and collapsed in April 1945 was to instruct the Slovak Ministry of Interior to set up a concentration camp, at Ilava near Trenčín, to hold prisoner those whom it had 'reason to fear' would 'create an obstacle' to the 'building of the Slovak state' (these turned out to be mainly Communists, Hungarians and Jews).[4] One of the principal ways in which the newly independent Slovak government sought to demonstrate its competence to manage its own affairs was by taking its own, distinctively Slovak approach to 'solving' the Jewish 'problem' and coming up with anti-semitic legislation which was different from, though no less vicious, than the contemporary Nazi German model.[5]

The removal of German speakers from the reunited postwar Czechoslovak state was particularly brutal. Quite apart from the so-called 'unofficial' transfer (*divoký odsun*) which was marked by the same

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8. See also Katalin Vadkerty, *Maďarská otázka v Československu 1945-1948: Trilógia o dejinách maďarskej menšiny,* tr. M. Lesná, K. Borbášová and G. Sándorová (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2002); Iris Engemann, 'Slovakizácia Bratislavy v rokoch 1918-1948' in M. Medvecký, ed., *Fenomén Bratislavy* (Bratislava: ústav pamäti národa, 2011) and Katalin Vadkerty, 'Nemci a Maďari v Bratislave v rokoch 1945-1948' in *Kapitoly z dejín Bratislavy* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2006).

[3] For English-language accounts, see Jan Láníček, *Czechs, Slovaks and the Jews, 1938-1948: Beyond Idealisation or Condemnation* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); C. Nečas, *The Holocaust of Czech Roma,* tr. Šimon Pellar (Prague: Prostor,1999); James Ward, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator: Jozef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2013) and chapters 4 and 5 'The Fascist Appeal' and 'A Republic and a Protectorate', in Mary Heimann, *Czechoslovakia: The State that Failed* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009, 2011), pp. 87-149. See also J. Gjuričová, *Na okraji: Romové jako object státní politiky* (Prague: Ministerstvo vnitra, 1999) and B. Kenety, 'The "Devouring": A Look at the Romani Holocaust', http://www.romove.cz (27 January 2005).

[4] Decree 32 'Vládne nariadenie zo dňa 24. marca 1939 o zaisťovacom uväznení nepriateľov Slovenského štátu' (Government Decree of 24 March 1939 Concerning the Detention of Enemies of the Slovak State).

[5] Law 63, 'Vládne nariadenie zo dňa 18. apríla 1939 o vymedzení pojmu žida a usmernení počtu židov v niektorých slobodných povolaniach' (20 April 1939), *Slovenský zákonník* (Bratislava, 1939), 77-79. See also laws 63, 74, 145, 147, 184, 150, 197 in *Slovenský zákonník* (Bratislava, 1939), pp. 77-9; 17 (26 April 1939), pp. 88-9; 32-44 (June-August 1939), pp. 288-301.

sorts of atrocities that took place in liberated Poland, Vichy France, and elsewhere (and which included the immediate internment and often sadistic maltreatment of German speakers in formerly SS-run prisons),[6] 'official' measures taken against the Germans and Hungarians by the postwar Czechoslovak state and/or regional and local authorities included the automatic removal of citizenship and confiscation of property (including watches and jewellery, including wedding-rings, during body searches at the border); the reduction of food rations to starvation levels; the requirement, in some districts, that German speakers wear a white armband to distinguish them from others; incarceration in mass detention and forced-labour camps; and the use of overcrowded railway cars to transport German-speaking civilians – mainly women and children -- to Germany.[7] Many did not survive the journey, let alone the camps. Although Germans who could prove that they had been 'reliable comrades and ant-Fascists' were supposed to be spared, even ethnic Germans who could meet the stringent criteria were usually deported, the only difference in their treatment being that the 88,614 'anti-Fascist Germans' that the Ministry of Interior recorded as having been expelled by 29 October 1946 were allowed to keep their property and were transported separately, in carriages carrying just 300 rather than the more usual 1,200 to 1,500 expellees at a time.[8]

Czech-Slovak rivalries and hatreds, although seemingly never as intense as those between the two nations' traditional national enemies, could nevertheless get quite nasty, as with the expulsions of 9,000 Czech-speaking public employees from autonomous Slovakia in 1938 or the so-called 'Slovak bourgeois nationalist' political show trial of 1954 in which the Czechoslovak authorities, not the Soviets, extracted

[6] See, for example, the testimony of deputy commandant Václav/Wenzel Hrneček about the routine sadism and brutality in Linzervorstadt detention camp (16, 18, 25 July 1952), RG 466/250/84/32/04 box 50, NARA, as cited and discussed in R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 130-5.

[7] See Masarykův ústav AV ČR, Benešův archive, EB III, 'Transféry obyvatelstva (odsun Němců, repatriace čs. občanů', 44, P44/2, Ministerstvo vnitra, 'Směrnice k provádění soustavného odsunu (transferu) Němců z území Československé republiky', ff. 1-2. See, for example, governmental decree 6 'Vládní nařízení o některých opatřeních v zásobování obyvatelstva potravinami' (17 May 1945), p. 11; presidential decree 5 'Dekret presidenta republiky o neplatnosti některých majetkově-právních jednání z doby nesvobody a o národ. správě majetkových hodnot Němců, Maďarů, zrádců a kolaborantů a některých organisací a ústavů' (19 May 1945), pp. 7-10; presidential decrees 16 and 18 'Dekret presidenta republiky o potrestání nacistických zločinů, zrádců a jejich pomahačů a o mimořadných lidových soudech' (19 June 1945); presidential decree 21 'Dekret presidenta republiky o konfiscaci a urychleném rozdělení zemědělského majetku Němců, Maďarů, jakož i zrádců a nepřátel českého a slovenského národa (21 June 1945). See also Tomáš Staněk, *Odsun Němců z Československa, 1945-1947* (Prague: Academia, 1991).

[8] Masarykův ústav AV ČR, Benešův archive, EB III, 'Transféry obyvatelstva (odsun Němců, repatriace čs. občanů', 44, P44/3, Nosek and Kučera to Beneš (15 November 1946), ff. 1-4; R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 191.

confessions by means of sleep deprivation and other forms of torture and imposed lengthy prison sentences after convicting their Slovak victims on trumped-up charges.[9]

So the first lesson that the Czechoslovak example teaches is not to fall into essentialist arguments about the so-called 'national character' or 'stage of development' of any particular nationality. It is not just that such stereotypes are patronizing: they are also profoundly misleading. This is an especially important lesson for those whose instinct is to divide Central and Eastern Europe into nations of heroes or villains, victims or perpetrators, and so remain blind to the more common pattern, in which the same national groups may be the victims in one case, but the perpetrators in the next.

The second common Western assumption that should be dispelled is the notion that Czech-Slovak nationalism or rivalry was somehow 'frozen' or successfully 'suppressed' under Communism – that authoritarian Communist regimes put a lid on nationalism which inevitably blew off after the Communist regime fell in 1989-1990. At its crudest, this line of argument states or implies that time stopped with the Communist takeover in 1948 only to begin ticking again with the overthrow of the Communist regime in 1989, as if nothing of any importance or note happened during the four intervening decades, apart from brief interludes tellingly referred to as 'thaws' or, in the Czechoslovak case, the Prague 'Spring'. In fact, of course, Czech-Slovak national tensions and rivalries never went away: and relations between the Czech and Slovak nations continued to be negotiated under successive Communist leaderships, which were themselves subject to change over time: Communist rule was not the same thing under Gottwald or Zápotocký as under Novotný, Dubček or Husák or, again, under Jakeš, any more than Soviet rule was the same thing under Stalin, Khrushchev or Gorbachev. Among the most grotesque, but seldom remembered, political show trials to take place in the Eastern bloc were the so-called Slovak 'bourgeois nationalist' trials that concluded on 24 April 1954 and which, unlike the notorious Slánský and related show trials, had

[9] A formal agreement for the removal of about 9,000 Czech state employees was reached on 12 December 1938 between the autonomous Slovak authorities in Bratislava and the central Czecho-Slovak government in Prague. The Slovak 'bourgeois nationalist' political show trial ('Proces s rozvratnou skupinou buržoáznych nacionalistov na Slovensku') took place 21-24 April 1954, at a time when the Soviet Union was officially seeking to turn away from Stalin's 'crimes', including political show trials. The Czechoslovak Communist Party, which had the largest statue of Stalin anywhere in the world erected in Prague in 1955, did not announce its own 'de-Stalinization' campaign until the end of 1961. The Slovak 'bourgeois nationalists' were formally cleared by the Barnabitky commission of 1963.

nothing to do with either the Soviet Union or with Stalin. One of the Prague Spring reforms associated with Alexander Dubček's presidium (politburo), and the only one not to be reversed after the Warsaw Pact intervention of August 1968, was the federalization of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic into a union of two republics: The Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic. First Secretary Alexander Dubček and his successor, Gustáv Husák, both Slovaks, had risen to power in the statewide Czechoslovak Communist Party by way of leadership of the regional Slovak Communist Party.[10]

Struggles within the Czechoslovak state over Czechoslovak centralisation versus Slovak autonomy, struggles which first came to a head in 1938-9, peaking in Slovak autonomy in October 1938 and in Slovak independence in March 1939, continued to be negotiated after the return to a unitary state in 1945 and the piecemeal erosion of Slovak autonomy between 1945 and 1948. Further constitutional adjustments were made in 1960, when Czechoslovakia became a Socialist Republic and Slovakia was divided into regions; and again in 1969, when Czechoslovakia became a Federation of two nominally equal Socialist republics, one Czech and one Slovak, under a Czechoslovak Communist structure.[11] In short, various attempts to regulate Czech-Slovak relations were tried during the Communist period as well as both before and after it. So the national question was in fact neither 'frozen' in time nor successfully 'suppressed' during the Communist period.

A third assumption, one which was especially prominent in Slovak émigré literature before the regime change in 1989 and has continued to be reflected in official Slovak documents since 1993, is the assumption that independence was the natural or final expression of the will of the Slovak people: that the Slovak nation, supposed somehow to have existed (in spirit if not on maps) survived underground in all ages and was inevitably to find expression in a Slovak state. While serious Slovak scholarship has moved on, this remains the assumption made in most works on Slovak history published in English, of which the best-known is exemplar is probably Josef Kirschbaum's *Slovakia: The Struggle For Survival* (New York: St Martin's, 1995). In such portrayals, the territory that forms today's Slovak republic but used to be

[10] See M. Heimann, 'The Scheming *Apparatchik* of the Prague Spring', *Europe-Asia Studies* 60:10 (December 2008), 1717-34.
[11]For the text of the 1960 Constitution see Constitutional Law (Ústavní zákon) 100, Ústava Československé socialistické republiky (11 July 1960), *Sbírka zákonů Československé socialistické republiky.* Prague: Knihtisk, 1960 or http://www.psp.cz/docs/texts/constitution_1960.html

known as Upper Hungary or Felvidék, is treated as if its history formed part of a 'Slovak', rather than an 'Hungarian', story from as long ago as the tenth century. This sort of Whiggish narrative, in which the 'nation' (whether Slovak, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, German, Ruthenian, Ukrainian or any other), is anachronistically presented as if it had always existed in the late-nineteenth and twentieth-century senses, even during historical periods when language or ethnicity were far less important markers of identity than, say, region or religious denomination or place in the social hierarchy -- will be familiar to anyone with even the most rudimentary experience of Central and Eastern Europe. Until very recently, and still in a great deal of contemporary Czech historiography, the historical lands of the Bohemian Crown have similarly been presented as if they had always been linguistically and ethnically Czech, rather than – as they in fact were – mixed German, Czech, Polish, Ruthenian/Ukrainian, Jewish and Gypsy. Rival histories of Central and Eastern European nations which continue to be presented to modern view remain highly contested and are often profoundly misleading.

Given these three central objections, one might well ask: if the Czechs and Slovak are not necessarily any more peaceful than any other nationality; if Czech-Slovak rivalries were not effectively suppressed under Communism; and if there was nothing inevitable or predetermined about the creation of either a Czech or Slovak state, how is one to account for the fact that Czechoslovakia did in fact split into two countries, just two years after the Czechoslovak Communist Party was ousted from power, and that the split proceeded without violence?

There seem to me to be five main reasons to account for why the break-up of the Czechoslovak state occurred at the time, and in the peaceful way, that it did. These may be briefly summarised as follows:

1. The two 'nations', i.e. Czech-speakers and Slovak-speakers, were already largely separate anyway. Czechs and Slovaks did not mix all that much, even before the Velvet Divorce. Czechs mostly lived in the Bohemian Crown Lands, while Slovakia – with the exception of its important, and contested, Hungarian and Ruthenian (Rusyn or Ukrainian) minorities – remained overwhelmingly inhabited by Slovaks.

2. The borders of the prospective territories were not in dispute. The Bohemian Crown Lands had existed as a clear and distinct administrative unit for centuries, and an independent Bohemian Kingdom had existed in the past (until the infamous Bohemian defeat at the White Mountain -- *Bílá hora* -- in 1620). Although Slovakia had not existed, even as a serious geographical concept, before the First World War, because post-Munich Slovakia was briefly autonomous between 1938 and 1939 and independent for the six years between 1939 and 1945, there was also a Slovak precedent for an independent Slovak republic.
3. Whether or not to end the Czechoslovak state was not left to the people to decide. Had a referendum been held in either 1991 or 1992, the breakup of the federal state would not have happened. Opinion polls taken in both halves of the state showed the overwhelming majority of both Czechs and Slovaks to be in favour of remaining together in a single Czechoslovak state. What led the Czech and Slovak premiers to negotiate the break-up of the state anyway, without popular mandate, was the deadlock caused by the fact that, although the Czech and Slovak leaderships both claimed to wish to retain Czechoslovakia, they seemed unable to agree on anything else. And since the race to join NATO, and the European Union -- to 'return' to Europe – was on, there was a sense of urgency, especially on the Czech side, to move forward, with or without Slovakia.
4. The structures for separate republics were already in place. Practically the only 'Prague Spring' reform not to have been overturned after the Warsaw Pact intervention of August 1968 was the federalization of the state into two socialist republics: the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic. Having nominally separate administrative structures, capital cities and political parties was arguably rather meaningless so long as the Czechoslovak Communist Party remained the real power in the land; but federalization meant that the infrastructure for separate republics already existed, at least on paper. This surely made separation easier both to contemplate and, after 1989, to implement.
5. The times were exceptional. The division of Czechoslovakia took place at a time when the impossible, the overthrow of Communist Party rule, had just been achieved. The atmosphere was

one that made radical change seem much more possible. Heightened fear of being left out in the cold, perhaps without EU or NATO protection, made Czechoslovaks eager to act, and to act quickly, to try to safeguard their future at a time of new risks and possibilities.

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Between the summer of 1990 and the elections in June 1992, summit after summit between the Czech and Slovak governments was called to try to reach a consensus on a formulation of a new kind of federalization that would be deemed acceptable by both sides and so could be passed by the Federal Assembly. At the first meeting of the leaders of the Czech, Slovak and federal governments (held at Trenčianské Teplice on 8-9 August 1990), a proposal was drawn up suggesting that decision-making power be devolved to the republics, but that defence, foreign policy, border security and police powers, together with taxation and price controls, be retained by the federal government. After the proposal was rejected by the representatives of the Slovak National Party, together with eight smaller parties, Czech Prime Minister Petr Pithart announced that the Trenčianské Teplice agreement was the only viable alternative to the disintegration of the state.[12]

At a celebration to commemorate Andrej Hlinka, the founder of the Slovak People's Party, held a couple of weeks later and attended by about fifteen thousand people, speakers called on the Slovak National Council to declare Slovak sovereignty and shouted 'Down with Czechoslovak federation!' and 'Long Live the Slovak State!' Demonstrations followed in Bratislava to demand that Slovak be made the official language in Slovakia. On 25 October 1990, the Slovak parliament adopted a new law to do just that, with the right for minorities (only in areas where they formed at least 20 per cent of the population) to use their own language in an official capacity. In a television address on 28 October 1990 to mark the seventy-second anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak state, Czechoslovak President Václav Havel pleaded with the Czechs to put aside their 'condescending attitude' towards the Slovaks and appealed to the Slovaks to avoid 'nationalist demagoguery'.

[12] See P. Pithart, *Devěta osmdesátý: Vzpomínky a přemýšlení. Krédo* (Prague, Academia, 2009) and J. Rychlík, *Češi a Slováci ve 20. století: Spolupráce a konflikty 1914-1992* (Vyšehrad: Ústav pro stadium totalitních režimů, 2012).

The Trenčianské Teplice proposal was twice returned to the negotiating table, barely amended, before being approved by republican bodies on both sides in November, and finally by the Federal Assembly on 12 December 1990. Agreement on devolution seemed finally to have been reached. The next round of difficulties arose over the need to draft three separate constitutions (federal, Czech and Slovak). As Allison Stanger explains, article 1 of the 1968 Law on Federation opens with the claim that Czechoslovakia's two constituent nations, each of which possesses sovereignty (*suverenita*), have joined together of their own will; but fails to explain how this kind of *suverenita* relates to *svrchovanost* (e.g. 'sovereignty' in international affairs).[13] This left the way open for the Slovak premier Vladimír Mečiar to argue that Slovakia had the right to negotiate its own treaties and enter independently into international negotiations with foreign powers, and for former dissident Ján Čarnogurský to maintain that the two republics must conclude a treaty (*smlouva*) to codify Czech-Slovak equality before embarking on the question of federal competencies. The Czech side, unwilling to countenance any radical break with the legal past on the grounds that this would be potentially dangerous for future constitutional developments, insisted that there was no need to clarify the meaning of 'sovereignty' and that only internationally recognised bodies could enter into treaty agreements. The Slovak side, mistrustful of Czech promises, refused to budge until its national 'sovereignty' was assured. The result was a complete impasse.

By March 1991, things were starting to get ugly. Thousands of Slovaks, whose anti-regime revolution – aimed at the federal government in Prague as well as at Communist Party rule – was still in full swing, kept up the momentum by repeatedly turning up in SNP Square in Bratislava to reject Prague and call for independence. Meanwhile, calls for a referendum on the continuation of the state were being heard from every quarter, Czech as well as Slovak. On 13 March, between five and ten thousand people turned up to a ceremony in Bratislava to consecrate a cross on the grave of the former Slovak fascist dictator (and war criminal) Jozef Tiso in honour of the fifty-second anniversary of the founding of the first, extreme nationalist, Slovak state. When President Václav Havel unexpectedly appeared at the rally, he was shouted at and even attacked. Later that day, the president made a television address to the Slovak people in which

[13] A. Stanger, 'Price of Velvet' in Kraus and Stanger, eds., *Irreconcilable Differences?Explaining Czechoslovakia's Dissolution* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p. 144.

he pleaded with them not to seek independence by unconstitutional means, but also declared that he would respect the outcome of a Slovak referendum on the question. After a parliamentary crisis in April, Mečiar was replaced as Slovak prime minister by Čarnogurský and the Slovak revolutionary organisation Public Against Violence (*Verejnosť proti násiliu* or VPN) formally split into two: a new faction, led by Mečiar and calling itself Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (*Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko* or HZDS); and the remainder, which now represented a substantially weakened rump VPN.

By September 1991, everyone was speculating openly about the division of the state and calling for a referendum on the question; petitions were being circulated and signed on both sides; a movement for Moravian autonomy also seemed to be gaining ground. On 3 November 1991, in a last-ditch attempt to avoid a split, President Havel held a meeting with the Czech and Slovak leaders at his summer house at Hrádeček at which a number of constitutional amendments were proposed. All were blocked by the Slovak nationalist side, which saw no good reason to give up its only trump card: the capacity to block any unwanted piece of Czech-sponsored Czechoslovak legislation. In the end, after two failed attempts to agree on even the terms of a dissolution of the state, on 25 November 1992 the Federal Assembly agreed that the constitution should be amended to separate the Czech and Slovak republics into completely independent states.

On 31 December 1992, Czechoslovakia ceased to exist. The next day, 1 January 1993, two new states – the Czech Republic and the Republic of Slovakia – took their place on the third 'new' map of Europe to have appeared in a century.[14] The Czech Republic, which declared in the preamble to its constitution to be 'reconstituting' an 'independent Czech state', drew its line of descent from the medieval Kingdom of Bohemia down to the twentieth-century Czechoslovak Republic without so much as mentioning the Habsburg Empire, let alone the Holy Roman Empire.[15] It naturally retained Prague as its capital city and the Castle (*Hrad*) as the official seat of state power; but also kept the old Czechoslovak flag and other national and state symbols, although explicitly forbidden to do so by law. It also kept 28 October,

[14] See Laws 460, 'Ústava *Slovenskej republiky'* (1 October 1992), *Sbírka zákonů České a Slovenské Federativní Republiky* (Prague 1992), p. 241 and 13 (6 March 1990), pp. 2659–80; 542, 'Ústavní *zákon o zániku České a Slovenské Federativní Republiky', Sbírka zákonů České a Slovenské Federativní Republiky, r.* 1992, *č.* 110 (8 December 1992), pp. 3253–4, 1, 'Ústava *České republiky', Sbírka zákonů České republiky, r.* 1993, *č.* 1 (28 December 1992), pp. 1–16.

[15] Ústava *České republiky', Sbírka zákonů České republiky, r.* 1993, *č.* 1 (28 December 1992), p. 1.

Czechoslovak Independence Day, as a state holiday whereas Slovakia, tellingly, did not. Slovakia revived the double-barred cross that had been used during the first Slovak republic; advertised itself as a 'Christian' country, and kept its Hungarian, Ruthenian, Gypsy and Jewish populations at arm's length, even in the preamble to its new constitution, by defining the Slovak people as heirs to the Great Moravian Empire of the ninth century who – together with 'members of national minorities and ethnic groups living in the Slovak Republic' – wished to 'implement democratic forms of government' and promote 'spiritual, cultural and economic prosperity'.[16]

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Czechoslovakia's peaceful separation into independent Czech and Slovak states was widely hailed in the West as an example of Czech political maturity, a Velvet Divorce to match its Velvet Revolution, in contrast with the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia and the chaos unfolding in the former republics of the USSR. Spokesmen for the Czechs made the most of the contrast, suggesting that the legality and peacefulness of the separation proved the Czechs to be mature, confident and responsible enough as a nation to let the younger, more impetuous Slovaks go. Slovaks, on the other hand, argued that the Czechs had deliberately left them in the lurch to speed up their own transition to capitalism and to curry favour with the West, leaving Slovakia with no option but to plump for independence by refusing all viable alternative forms of sovereignty. Although neither the Czech nor the Slovak populations wanted to take responsibility for ending the state, let alone stand accused of petty nationalism or ethnic chauvinism, prominent spokesmen for both nations seemed relieved to have the matter settled. The split was described, on both sides, as undesirable but 'inevitable', as if it had been predestined, a natural development in the course of the 'life' of the Czech and Slovak nations.

The flattering notion of a 'Velvet Divorce', as Abbey Innes has pointed out, underestimates the depth of the authoritarian Communist legacy, which made it possible for such a radical act to be passed, without

[16] No. 50, 'Ústavný *zákon Slovenskej národnej rady z 1. marca 1990 o názve, štátnom znaku, štátnej pečati a o štátnej hymne Slovenskej republiky'* (1 March 1990) and no. 53, 'Ústavní *zákon České národní rady ze dne 6. března 1990 o změně názvu České socialistické republiky'* (6 March 1990), *Sbírka zákonů Československé socialistické republiky* (Prague, 1990), pp. 241, 250. The English translation cited here is from the approved National Council of the Slovak Republic, *The Constitution of the Slovak Republic* (Press Agency of the Slovak Republic, Pressfoto, 1993), p. 15.

a referendum, and against the stated wishes of a majority in both republics.[17] Among the people of what was still Czechoslovakia, the decision to end the state was widely blamed on the 'arrogance' and high-handedness of the two politicians – the Slovak Vladimír Mečiar and the Czech Václav Klaus – who brokered the deal, securing their own political positions in the process. It afterwards became a matter of almost obsessive interest to scholars to seek to solve the paradox of how, as Carol Leff put it, it could have come about that a democratic state could have 'disintegrated even though a majority of its citizens favoured its continuance.'[18]

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The Czechoslovak case offers a number of variations on themes familiar to those with knowledge of Eastern and Central Europe in general and the South Caucasus in particular. It therefore seems worth seeking to establish what general lessons might be learned from the case of Czechoslovakia.

What I'd like to stress above all are the dangers of allowing history to be used (or, rather, misused) to bolster the position, or reputation, of any particular 'nation' as against another. Most, if not all, nations have their moments of heroism and martyrdom, episodes in which they appear as victims and others in which they appear as perpetrators. We should not fall into the trap of stereotyping whole peoples as if they were innately 'violent' or innately 'peaceful', innately 'Communist' or innately 'Fascist', innately 'progressive' or innately 'backward', as if these attitudes were somehow hard-wired into their DNA.

Construing one's nation as the blameless victim is endemic to the whole of the East-Central European region: this is the way that rival groups have traditionally sought to justify their right to exist as nations or as states. Countless state-funded historical institutes, school textbooks, historical monographs, documentaries, museums, memorials and tourist guides exist to support such narratives. These same nationalist narratives, consisting largely of simplified, selective and partial presentations of the past, are

[17] A. Innes, *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye* (New Haven, 2001), pp. xii, 73.
[18] C.S. Leff, *The Czech and Slovak Republic: Nation versus State* (Boulder, Co., 1997), p. 128.

generally incompatible with those being simultaneously put forward by neighbours, rivals and opponents.[19]

The teaching, writing and presentation of history has an important role to play in the quest for regional stability. Historical research can help not so much by providing ready-made models to be applied to current conflicts, but rather by uncovering a plurality of perspectives and encouraging a diversity of interpretations. School textbooks, museum exhibitions, monuments and state-sponsored documentaries, as well as historical monographs and scholarly articles, should ideally include embarrassing and shameful as well as heroic and self-justifying aspects of the nation's past, be scrupulous to avoid historical anachronisms and Whiggish assumptions, and take care to present regional and local, as well as national, perspectives. Only by recognising common experiences both of victimhood and perpetrator guilt may local populations come to empathise with and humanise their traditional enemies, and so come to see that what divides them is generally much smaller than what unites them.

Mary Heimann

Kyiv, Ukraine, 27 March 2015

[19] For a helpful regional survey, see James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).