

INTERWAR CZECHOSLOVAKIA: LESSONS FOR HISTORY



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Abstract: *During the First World War the Principle of Nationalities (each nation to have its national state), a prinsiple supported also by the USA, was crystallized and accomplished. On the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia proclaimed itself independent, its borders being set up by the treaties system from Versailles. During the years of the First Republic, Czechoslovakia has imposed itself as a state with a stable economic development, with an authentic multiparty democracy. At the same time, being supported by nazi Germany, the ethnic Germans from the Sudet region of Czechoslovakia ultimately requested the accession of this region to Germany. Otherwise, A. Hitler threatened to start a war in support of the Germans from Sudet. The Great Powers got involved. Hitler’s claims were met at the Munchen Conference. This fact led to the disappearance of Czechoslovakia from Europe’s political arena.*

Key-words: *First Czecho-Slovak Republic (1918-1938), Munchen agreement (cahoots), the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic (1938-1939).*

In November 2018, 100 years have passed since the end of the World War I, a war which was different from the wars in the past, a war which created some unknown until then phenomena.

In many respects, for the historiography of ex-communist states, World War I remains one with many unknowns. There are, however, two very current themes for knowing the European past, namely: dehumanizing large categories of people due to the horrors of that war and the expansion of the horrors of war in totalitarian regimes (Soviet, nazi, fascist); the second theme is called generically – the principle of nationalities. Multinational empires were involved in World War I, some peoples being divided and ruled by empires, being at war one against another. It was not by chance that in the years of the war the idea of national states appeared and was developed, an initiative also supported by the United States of America. Thus, in the well-known “14 points” the USA president Woodrow Wilson was mentioning in „point 10”: „readjustment of borders of Austro-Hungary according to the principle of nationalities’ selfdetermination „¹, a position that enabled the formation of national states of Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and future Iugoslavia.

A special role in the constitution of the future Czecho-Slovak State played Tomáš Masaryk (1850-1937), sociologist, associate professor at University from Vienna, since 1882 had taught at University from Prague. In 1915 Tomáš Masaryk has settled in France, supported Antanta Powers, set up the Czech Committee for Action, which subsequently turned into the National Czechoslovak Committee (Mai, 1916). At his initiative, in France, Italy, and other states Czecho-Slovak legions were set up that fought to obtain national independence.

In 1917, France, Great Britain, and Japan acknowledged the National Czechoslovak Committee as a „basis for the future Czechoslovak government”. On 14 October 1918 this Committee settled in Prague, proclaimed state independence of Czechoslovakia, took power in its hands and proclaimed itself Temporary

¹ *The 14 points of president Wilson*. In: https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cele_14_puncte_ale_președintelui_Wilson. [accesat la 12 septembrie 2018]

Government headed by Tomáš Masaryk. On 13 November 1918 the National Czechoslovak Committee endorsed a temporary Constitution, which proclaimed the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic. The National Czechoslovak Committee expanded its membership to 256 members becoming the National Assembly (Parliament). On 14 November 1918, in Prague, unanimously the National Assembly elected Tomáš Masaryk president of the Republic and Karel Kramář was appointed Prime minister².

Czechoslovakia's borders were set up in the treaties from Versailles, Saint-Germain and Trianon. The border of Czechoslovakia with Germany was drawn on the old border between Austro-Hungary and German Empire as it occurred on August 13 1914.

By signing and ratifying the Treaty of Versailles, "Germany recognized the independence of Czechoslovakia."³

In 1921 there were 13,6 ml people in Czechoslovakia, from whom 7 ml were of Czech origin (59,26 %), 2 ml were Slovaks (14,52 %), Germans were 3 ml (23,64 %), Hungarians – 700 000 (5,6 %), Ukrainians - 460 000 (3,51 %) etc.⁴ Czechoslovakia inherited from the Austro-Hungarian Empire 70% of its industrial potential having engaged in industry 43% of employees.

In 1919 in Czechoslovakia the agrarian reform was carried out, the number of medium and small owners rising to 95%. Shortly after the proclamation of state independence, Czechoslovakia ranked 12th in the world in terms of volume of industrial production per capita and 17th in the world as regards the volume of national income⁵.

² Lilia Zabolotnaia. *Europa Centrală și de Sud-est. Epoca contemporană (curs universitar)*, Chișinău, Editura Cartdidact, 2006, p. 34.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁴ Există și alte date: cehi – 46 %, slovaci – 13 %, germani – 28 %, unguri – 8 %, restul 5 % - ucraineni, polonezi, evrei. Vezi: *Мюнхенское соглашение*. În: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Мюнхенское_соглашение [accesat 12 septembrie 2018]

⁵ Alte realizări în economie, dar și problemele existente vezi: Lilia Zabolotnaia. *Europa Centrală și de Sud-est...*, p. 48.

On 26 February 1920 the National Assembly of Czechoslovakia adopted the Constitution of the Czechoslovak Republic which proclaimed Czechoslovakia a parliamentary democratic republic. The highest legislative body was the National Assembly (Parliament) composed of two houses – the House of Representatives (300 members) and the Senate (150 members); the representatives were elected on 6-year constituencies. The Head of the State- the President – was elected at the joint meeting of both houses for a 7-year term. The executive body – the Government, was appointed by the President and it was accountable to Parliament (National Assembly). The first President of Czechoslovakia, according to the new Constitution, was elected Tomáš Masaryk, replaced in 1935 by Edvard Beneš.

The constitution of Czechoslovakia, unchanged for the period between the two world wars, secured broad citizens' rights and freedoms to the people of the country. The law on languages used in the Czech Republic proclaimed Czech on the territory of the Czech Republic and Slovak on the territory of Slovakia as official languages, and for the populated territories with 29% of representatives of other ethnic groups, the use of their native language was allowed in the courts and in the administration. Tomáš Masaryk promoted the ideology of czechoslovism seeking to demonstrate that Czechs and Slovaks, peoples of Slavik origin, can create together the social foundation of the country. During the First republic Czechoslovakia demonstrated an authentic democracy, based on multiparty system, and a political stability (e.g. Edvard Beneš was the minister of Czechoslovakia's foreign affairs for the longest period of time, occupying this position from 1918 until 1935).

The world economic crisis (1929-1933), the arrival of the Nazis in power in Germany (1933), nationalist propaganda and the outside support of ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia caused the breakup of this country and its occupation by neighboring states.

The German ethnics in Czechoslovakia lived tightly in the Sudet Region. They enjoyed a number of privileges, compared to even the state-holding nations. No matter this situation, the German ethnics from the Sudet Region conside-

red that they were under the domination of Slavik nations – Czechs and Slovaks. In 1935, in this region, there appeared the German Party from Sudet headed by Konrad Henlein who promoted a policy of sepaation of the region and accessi-on to the Third Reich. The leadership of Czechoslovakia has taken measures to ensure wider German representatives in the National Assembly, expanded local self-rule, opened several schools with teaching in Geman, etc. but the tension was not liquidated.

In February 1938, Hitler addressed the Reichstag members with the call to draw attention to “the horrible living conditions of their brothers in Czechoslo-vakia.”

In May 1938, Konrad Henlein asked for autonomy for the Sudet Region, and then called for a referendum on the accession of the Sudet Region to Germany. Thus, in Czechoslovakia the first Sudet crisis started: the government made a partial mobilization and introduced the military forces into the Sudet Region. The cause of Czechoslovakia’s national integrity was supported by France, USSR and the allied to Germany - Italy.

In September 1938, following the military clashes between the Germans in the Sudet Region and the forces of order and central militancy, the second Sudet crisis began. France has mobilized its reservists. On September 11, France and the United Kingdom declared that if Germany intervenes with troops in Cze-choslovakia, then they would vote on the side of Czechoslovakia if, on the other hand, Hitler would not trigger war, then he would be able to get everything he wanted. In his turn, Hitler declared that he wanted to live in peace with France, the United Kingdom and Poland, but he would have to support the Germans in the Sudet Region if the “pressure” on them would not stop. On September 13, 1938, the Germans in the Sudet Region triggered an anti-government coup; the Czechoslovak government had to introduce the state of emergency (war) in the gi-ven region. Konrad Henlein called for the cancellation of the state of emergency, the withdrawal of the military troops from the region, and assign the leadership to the German region. Some ambassadors have concluded that if the ultimatum

advanced by Konrad Henlein would not be satisfied, then the war would break up. In such conditions the meeting between British Prime Minister Arthur Neville Chamberlain and German führer Adolf Hitler (September 15, 1938) took place. In the discussion, A. Hitler invoked the right of peoples to self-determination, demanded the transmission of the Sudet Region to Germany, thus, Hitler declared, the war would be avoided.

Various political consultations began. France and Great Britain agreed that the territories with a population more than 50% of ethnic Germans should pass to Germany, and the two countries will secure the new borders of Czechoslovakia in the future. The USSR declared that it would support Czechoslovakia in the case of a war with Germany, even if France would not honour the Treaty of mutual assistance, signed with Prague, and even Poland and Romania would refuse officially to allow the passage of Soviet troops on the territory of these countries (to reach Czechoslovakia). However, the Soviets conditioned the granting of aid through presenting a request from Czechoslovakia to intervene and with the condition of opposing resistance of the Czechoslovak army against the German invader.

At A. Hitler's initiative, on September 29 1938, in Munchen, a meeting of the Prime Minister of Great Britain Arthur Neville Chamberlain, of the Prime Minister of France Édouard Daladier, of the leader (duke) of Italy Benito Mussolini, and of the fuhrer Adolf Hitler took place.

In the absence of representatives of Czechoslovakia, those present at the conference signed the text of an Agreement by which Czechoslovakia would give Germany the Sudet Region between October 1 and 10, 1938; the Czechoslovak government was responsible for good territorial transmission, etc.⁶. After signing of the Agreement the Czechoslovak representatives were accepted in the room where the document was signed.

⁶ Textul acordului vezi: *Соглашение между Германией, Великобританией, Францией и Италией* [Acord între Germania, Marea Britanie, Franța și Italia]. În: *Год кризиса. 1938-1939, том 1, 29 сентября 1938 г. – 31 мая 1939 г. Документы и материалы* [Anul de criză. 1938-1939, vol. 1, 29 septembrie 1938-31 mai 1939. Documente și materiale], Moscova, 1990, p. 27-29.

At the insistence of French and English officials, representatives of Czechoslovakia were forced to transmit the Sudet Region to Germany. Under German pressure, on October 5, 1938, President E. Beneš had to resign. Thus, the First Republic of Czechoslovakia ceased to exist

The annexation of the Sudet Region triggered the break-up of Czechoslovakia: in full crisis, linked to German claims, Poland submitted an ultimatum to Czechoslovakia requesting (and obtaining) the Teșin region. Under German pressure, on October 7, the government of Czechoslovakia takes Slovakia's autonomy. On November 2, Hungary obtains the southern regions of Czechoslovakia, including those populated by Ukrainians.

On March 14, 1939, Slovakia declared its withdrawal from the Czechoslovakia and the formation of the Slovak Republic, and on the night of March 14 to March 15, 1939, being in Berlin and being humiliated by Hitler, Czechoslovakia's President (the Second Republic of Czechoslovakia) Emil Hácha was forced to accept the military occupation of the Czech Republic by the Germans.

In Soviet historiography, the Munich Conference has been qualified as a hindrance (a meeting with condemning purposes) between Western democracies and Nazi totalitarianism. The USSR was presented as the savior of Czechoslovakia, but this was not what Westerners and Czechoslovaks wanted. Thus, Vilnis Sipols remarked: "... In Munich, Chamberlain and Daladier got in cahoots with the aggressors, surrendering before them, betraying Czechoslovakia shamefully and giving aid to the fascist aggressors in its dismantling"⁷.

What could be commented on? After the ending of the Peace Conference in Paris, France and the United Kingdom declared themselves guarantors of the Versailles treaties system.

In this hypostasis, they were obliged to defend the borders of Czechoslovakia.

⁷ V. Ia. Sipols. *Дипломатическая борьба накануне Второй Мировой Войны* [*Lupta diplomatică în ajunul celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial*], Moscova, Editura „Mejdunarodnîe otnoșenia”, 1989, p. 207.

But they have succumbed to Hitler's dictate, considering mistakenly that they "save the peace."

To note: for territorial expansion Hitler used the ethnic factor: he asked for the unification of the territories, populated with the Germans in Czechoslovakia, to the Reich.

The USSR's position must be nuanced: Stalin called on France and the United Kingdom to persuade Poland and Romania to allow Soviet troops to move to Czechoslovakia. At the same time, Stalin said that "once entered, the Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia, through Poland, will no longer leave those countries, remaining there to defend them from possible German aggression."⁸ Of course, Poland (and Romania) could not accept such an "offer".

Thus, the yielding made by Western democracies in the face of aggression led not only to the disappearance of Czechoslovakia as an independent state, but also to the outbreak of the Second World War.

It seems that the history repeats itself. The USSR, and then its successor, Russian Federation signed three international treaties, by which they promised to respect the borders existing in Europe after the World War II, after the disappearance of the USSR and after the transfer of nuclear weapons by Ukraine to the Russian Federation.

Under the pretext of the change of central power in Kiev, in 2014 in Crimea, a "referendum" was held assisted by militaries with camouflaged uniforms of the Russian Federation. As a result of this "referendum", unattended and unrecognized by anyone, despite the commitments made, the Russian Federation annexed the Crimea, announcing it as a part of the Russian Federation. Among the reasons invoked was the so-called "historical law": "Kırım - iskonno-rusaskaia zemlea" ("Crimea - the ancient land of Russia")

We emphasize: "the historical right" is not acknowledged by anyone in the civilized world.

⁸ Pavel Moraru. *Relațiile internaționale în anii 1914-1947*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura RISOPRINT, 2013, p. 138.

Another “argument” of the Kremlin officials - the need to protect the Russian community in Crimea, as if the Russians in Crimea were somehow bothered by the Ukrainians. The reason is similar to that of Hitler, who in 1938 demanded from France and the United Kingdom to accept the passage of the Sudet Region of Czechoslovakia into Germany, based on the fact that around three million ethnic Germans lived in the region. We know that the comparison is not liked by many, but it is correct from all points of view.

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