OTHER ASPECTS OF MODERN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

ARTICLES

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EDVARD BENEŠ, THE ANSCHULSS MOVEMENT, 1918-38, AND THE POLICY OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA

The First Czechoslovak Republic and the First Austrian Republic both arose on the ruins of the Habsburg empire. In the late 1930s both succumbed to the imperialistic drive of the Third Reich. From their origins after World War I and the Paris Peace Conference, Czechoslovakia and Austria obviously owed their very existence to the break-up of the Habsburg empire and the military catastrophe which had befallen it and Germany. The new states were to retain their independence so long as Germany's military weakness persisted, i.e., during the entire Weimar period and the early years of the Third Reich, until the latter had sufficiently rearmed and began to steer toward new adventures, not only in Central Europe but on the entire Continent.

During the interwar period Czechoslovakia retained her democratic political structure, but Austria under Chancellors Engelbert Dollfuss and Kurt von Schuschnigg became authoritarian, semi-fascist while Germany became totalitarian, militaristic. Nonetheless, relations between Czechoslovakia and Austria remained friendly, although cooling somewhat after Vienna's embrace of the Staendestaat in 1934 and its growing pro-Italian orientation. These relations rested on the perception of a common German enemy bent on destroying their sovereignty and independence. But the two succession states never became allies, primarily because Hitler intimidated them with his charge that any pooling of their defensive resources would be a "provocation" and "encirclement" of Germany. Also, Austria under Schuschnigg, while striving to preserve her independence, still maintained a strong emphasis on the German character of the Austrian state.

The thesis of this essay is that from the beginning Czechoslovakia clearly perceived the danger of the Anschluss movement in neighboring Austria and Germany, with its special implications also for the Sudeten German problem. She promptly alerted her friends and allies in France, Great Britain, the Little Entente, and in the League of Nations itself, to the growing Anschluss threat. But increasingly left unsupported, she was unable to strengthen the dams
erected to protect her from disastrous floods. It was Europe’s tragedy that the Western Powers partly were militarily and psychologically unprepared to cope with the growing menace and partly indulged in the costly illusions of the appeasement policy; that Fascist Italy had established false priorities; and that the countries of balkanized East Central and Southeastern Europe pursued their own phantasmagorias of how to survive the impending annexation of Austria and the mounting threats to Czechoslovakia. Austria was the sacrificial lamb; some of Europe’s political leaders, brushing aside their doubts, hoped that by yielding on the Anschluss issue, European peace and the liberties of the rest of European nations could miraculously be preserved.

I

From World War I to the Dissolution of the Austrian Empire.

During World War I prominent Czechoslovak as well as Polish leaders had favored the Anschluss of the German provinces of Austria with the Reich. They had worked toward the dissolution of the Habsburg empire, since they considered that to be the *sina qua non* of the liberation of its numerous nationalities. To make the break-up alluring to all nationalities of the empire, including the German Austrians, they felt the need to hold out to all of them the promise of “national liberation.” The Anschluss would be a consolation not only to the German Austrians but also to Germany herself, since it would compensate for her anticipated territorial losses at the end of the war. In a letter to one William Martin, Edvard Beneš wrote: “In regard to German Austria we believe that it would be best for everybody if Austria became German immediately; for us, because irredentism would be much less strong among our Germans versus Germany than versus Austria.” Obviously, these reasonings were dubious and represented wishful thinking.1 But until 1917 Thomas G. Masaryk, too, was rather favorably disposed toward the Anschluss. He favored the dissolution of the Habsburg empire, frequently picturing it as “a mere instrument” in the hands of Germany. While Masaryk wished to weaken Russia and Germany, he did not object to the Anschluss of the German Austrian territories. He tended to minimize the incorporation of “ten million [sic] Germans.” “Today Germany is disposing of fifty million of Austria’s population,” but after the liberation of the non-German and non-Magyar nations only ten million would be left. Yet immediately thereafter he expressed the “wish and hope” that Bohemia’s “Russian brethren will soon succeed in occupying the Bohemian and Slovak districts. This would be the