ARTICLES

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CZECH CULTURE IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST FASCISM IN WORLD WAR II

World War II was not only a conflict between mighty armies and economic systems but also one among various political doctrines and beliefs. In this ideological struggle fascism was opposed by views rooted in democratic and humanistic cultural traditions. This polarization of forces was not the starting point but rather the result of many political and military struggles during World War II. First of all, world public opinion had to become aware of what fascism was. This awareness was not quickly or easily achieved. This essay will discuss the rising consciousness among the Czech public of the fascist threat to the First Czechoslovak Republic, and especially the response and resistance of many cultural workers in Czech literature and the arts to the Nazi occupation that began in March 1939 and ended only with Germany's defeat in 1945.

The annexation of Austria to Germany (1938); the occupation of the border regions of Czechoslovakia, and later its complete destruction as an independent State (1938, 1939); the Nazi conquest of Poland, Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, and France (1939-1940); the spreading of hostilities outside Europe; the entrance into the conflict by the United States and the Soviet Union (1941); all these events changed the political, economic, and cultural climate in Europe and in the world. Fascism at that time was not fighting to gain power at home, but was primarily focusing its attention on the occupation and annexation of new territories. Military victory did not necessarily represent complete control of a particular country, as fascists witnessed in all the occupied lands. Their aggression helped to unite fragmented national forces in common acts of resistance. If the fascists
wanted to conquer and utilize fully the occupied territories, they had—in their own words—to neutralize the political life in the occupied countries. The means of achieving this purpose varied considerably according to the intentions and plans of fascists in a particular territory, the local conditions, the period of time, and many other circumstances. The fortunes of Czechoslovakia under Nazi rule, between 1939 and 1945, illustrate well how various means were used to implement the policy of occupation.

The first stage of external domination took place after the Munich Agreement was signed by Germany, Italy, France, and Great Britain, and accepted under duress by the Czechoslovak government on 30 September 1938. The Munich Agreement not only led to the loss of one-third of Czechoslovak territory but also represented a fundamental watershed in the life of the nation. A new state structure—the so-called Second Republic—differed from the pre-Munich Republic in its international direction and status, while internally, there were many changes in political organization, economic, social and ethnic structure, and cultural life.¹

The very existence of the Second Republic was extremely insecure. At Munich there were some discussions about guarantees of new Czechoslovak borders, but the implementation of this demand was postponed. First Czechoslovakia had to change its internal political arrangements to suit Nazi Germany. This point was made by both Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler and his Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop during their discussions with the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister František Chvalkovský in October 1938 and January 1939. The Nazi leaders declared that British and French guarantees would be as ineffective as the previous treaties of alliance. Therefore, as the discussions suggested, the only reliable guarantees for Czechoslovakia were the German guarantees, which were, however, conditional on a complete change of Czechoslovak policy.²
