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Arnold Suppan, Elisabeth Vyslonzil. *Edvard Beneš und die tschechoslowakische Außenpolitik 1918-1948.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002. 196 S. EUR 35,30 (paper), ISBN 978-3-631-50532-8.

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In a recent biography Edvard Benes has been described as a "lonely and tragic figure" with an inflated ego at odds with an unimposing personality.[1] His character traits, observed to include vanity, self-righteousness, deep-seated mistrust of others, and "thrift amounting to meanness,"[2] may be distasteful even to the most sympathetic researcher of Czech history. As to the political achievements of the co-founder of Czechoslovakia, these have lost much of their gloss today. In the words of Richard Crampton, the main accomplishments of Benes have all "turned to dust."[3] Ten years on from the "velvet divorce," the much-celebrated creation of the Czechoslovak state after the First World War, and its reconstitution after the second, appear to be–at best–pyrrhic victories. Moreover, the upholding of the fiction of Czechoslovak national unity and the stubborn denial of Slovak separateness are difficult to assess today as anything other than sheer folly. The gullibility that led Benes into some hapless, not to say disastrous, dealings with Stalin and the Czechoslovak communists has earned him even more notoriety. And yet, paradoxically, this flawed and highly unprepossessing historical figure has not ceased to attract scholarly attention.

In spite of the customary Benes-bashing in Anglo-Saxon historiography, foreign and native scholars of Central Europe continue to be enthralled by the disproportionate impact that this uncharismatic man has had on the region's history. Outside the Czech Republic the prevailing verdict on Benes's role as the first foreign secretary and the second president of Czechoslovakia is far from favourable; even so, Benes is generally regarded as one of the most influential representatives of any small nation in European diplomacy between 1918 and 1948. Indeed, one can hardly find a more controversial and multifaceted leader in Central European history. Although Benes might aptly be described as one of Istvan Bibo's so-called "false realists,"[4] the Czech president remains a highly enigmatic character. His career appears to have been so varied and shifting as to defy generalization.

After all, should the historian judge Benes as Masaryk's trusty ally in the propaganda war against the Austro-Hungarian monarchy or as a Czech national leader in his own right? Should he be credited as a triumphant negotiator at the Paris Peace Conference or as the villain of the failed peace? In his capacity as foreign minister, how did he earn two such wildly differing epithets as "little fox" in Paris[5] and "blind little bat" in London?[6] What happened to his credibility as champion of Locarno and chief protagonist of the League of Nations?

More to the point, was he the chief architect of the

Little Entente and of Central European security, or the wrecker of any rapprochement in the Danubian region? How consistent were his efforts to frustrate the German-Austrian Customs Union plan and promote his idea of an "Eastern Switzerland"? How far did his rigid foreign policy and intolerance towards the German and Hungarian minorities contribute to the increasing revisionism of Czechoslovakia's neighbours? Should he be seen as a prime mover of the anti-fascist alliance after 1935 or as the formulator of foreign policies that drove Poland and Hungary into the arms of Germany? Finally, how is the historian to define the postwar legacy of Benes? To what extent did his activities in London and Moscow frustrate British plans for Central Europe? What kind of democracy and political values did he believe in after his return to Czechoslovakia in 1945?

The book reviewed here touches upon virtually all of these intriguing questions.[7] However, most of the ten conference papers collected in this volume have another common focus, namely to approach Benes and his foreign policy from the German and Austrian point of view. The initiative of the Czech Ambassador to Austria, Jiri Grusa, to organize an international symposium on Benes, and publish the proceedings in this volume, was admittedly motivated by the ongoing and highly inflammatory political discussion about the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans and the "notorious Benes decrees" (p. 7). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that most of the contributors have addressed some aspects of Czechoslovakia's so-called German problem.

Although Manfred Alexander's short paper is the only one specifically devoted to Czechoslovakia and the German Reich, Alice Teichova's paper covers the German war economy in the Protectorate, and all the other chapters contain some observations on the troublesome national aspects of Czechoslovak history which still plague the relations of the Czechs with their German and Austrian neighbours. After all, as President Masaryk saw it, the Czechoslovak state from its inception had at least three German problems: its relations with Austria, with Germany, and with "our Germans," the Sudeten minority (pp. 15-6). These three separate strands came together in 1938, only to merge more fully in the Czech consciousness as a result of the wartime experience of Nazi oppression, and the ensuing expropriation and expulsion of Czechoslovakia's German population.

The editors of this volume promise more than just another discussion of the complex personality of Edvard Benes and the intricacies of thirty years of Czechoslovak foreign policy. The book purports to cover a significant period of Central Europe's twentieth-century history, including the relations of Czechoslovakia with Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Poland. This grand promise is only partially fulfilled. The reader will find little material here that is directly concerned with Poland or Hungary.

In addition, the published papers are hugely varied in length, depth, and originality. Some of the chapters, notably that written by Arnold Suppan on Czechoslovak foreign policy from a Viennese view, contain not only some original observations, but a lengthy analysis based on archival research. By sharp contrast, the final article by Karl Peter Schwarz is a clever but somewhat journalistic polemic against the Czechs' inbuilt resistance to a reconsideration of the Benes decrees.

A couple of the other contributions may strike the informed reader as little more than short summaries of, or appendices to, earlier publications by the same authors. Probably the most interesting of these shorter articles, written by Detlef Brandes, is clearly based on his earlier monograph on the governments-in-exile in London[8] but contains an excellent overview of the exiled Benes's hardening attitude on the issue of the postwar expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia. Zbynek Zeman's contribution on the "declining years" of the president also makes stimulating reading, and vigorously restates the argument of his book that Benes unwittingly allowed Stalin to break the U.S. monopoly in nuclear arms. The article is the only one in the volume written in English.

Despite the uneven nature of the book, which is certainly not uncharacteristic of such edited volumes, it is a useful source for researchers of Czechoslovak foreign policy and represents a bold attempt to put some of the ongoing Czech-German controversies in a proper historical context. Overall, this collection is a welcome addition to the rapidly growing literature on Benes.

Notes

[1]. Zbynek Zeman and Antonin Klimek, *The Life of Edvard Benes, 1884-1948: Czechoslovakia in Peace and War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 2.

[2]. Ibid., p. 6.

[3]. See the review of Zeman and Klimek, *The Life of Edvard Benes*, by Richard Crampton in the *Central European Review*, 18 November 1999.

[4]. Istvan Bibo, *Die Misere der osteurop=ischen Kleinstaaterei* trans. from Hungarian (Frankfurt am Main:

Verlag Neue Kritik, 1992); see also Istvan Bibo, *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination: Selected Writings* (East European Monographs 317; Atlantic Studies on Society in Change 69; Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Monographs, 1991).

[5]. Zeman and Klimek, *The Life of Edvard Benes*, p. 45.

[6]. Gabor Batonyi, *Britain and Central Europe, 1918-1933* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 219.

[7]. Basis for this review is the first edition. The book is now available in a second, revised edition.

[8]. Detlef Brandes, *Gro=britannien und seine osteurop=ischen Alliierten 1939-1943: Die Regierungen Polens, der Tschechoslowakei und Jugoslawiens im Londoner Exil vom Kriegsausbruch bis zur Konferenz von Teheran* (Ver=ffentlichungen des Collegium Carolinum 59, M=nchen: Oldenbourg, 1988).

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