The new state that “came into being” on October 28, 1918, brought with it many legacies from Austria-Hungary, not all negative. The Czechs registered impressive cultural, economic, and political achievements while part of the Habsburg monarchy. They gained valuable experience in representative, multiparty politics, local self-government, and bureaucratic administration. On the other hand, their political parties had more experience in parliamentary obstruction than in responsible government; the self-governing bodies exchanged Vienna-based for Prague-based centralism; and the bureaucracy, though basically honest, was slow moving and patronizing. Other aspects of Czechoslovakia’s inheritance were equally mixed. Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia added new tensions to the existing Czech-German rivalry. Czechoslovakia inherited the lion’s share of Austro-Hungarian industry, but that made the loss of the monarchy’s internal market all the more severe. The Austrian and Hungarian parts of the country reflected different levels of economic development. Finally, Austria-Hungary’s collapse raised security issues for those who had been submerged, but also protected, within the larger state. Coping with this historical inheritance demanded time. Masaryk remarked in the early 1930s: “Thirty more years of peaceful, rational, efficient progress and the country will be secure.” Instead, Czechoslovakia’s time ran out before the end of its second decade.
SHAPING A NEW STATE

“Where is my homeland?” asks the song that now became part of the official Czechoslovak national anthem. Working out an internationally recognized answer to that question headed the provisional government’s agenda after October 1918. The new state also required political institutions and a constitutional structure. Resolving the territorial issues depended on the decisions of the Paris Peace Conference from January 1919 to June 1920, though the Czechoslovaks also shaped their frontiers by their own actions. Writing a constitution fell to the Revolutionary National Assembly between November 14, 1918, and February 29, 1920.

Drawing Czechoslovakia’s Frontiers

Czech political tactics for decades had stressed Bohemia’s historic state right. To ensure that it controlled the territory and to maintain its claim to Bohemia’s historic frontiers the National Council decided, after failed negotiations with German Bohemian leaders, to occupy four “Austrian” provinces created in German-inhabited districts between October and December 1918 by the Bohemian and Moravian Germans.3 Lacking mutual communications and dependent economically on the Czech interior, these regions could only survive if Austria’s call for union to Germany were accepted in Paris.4 The occupation succeeded in spite of local skirmishes, and all Austria could do was appeal to self-determination and await the peace conference’s decision.5

Count Mihály Károlyi’s liberal Hungarian republic used historical rights arguments against Czechoslovakia’s claim to Slovakia (Upper Hungary), so at Paris Beneš added strategic, geographic, and economic considerations.6 The Czechoslovak National Council appointed a commission to administer Slovakia, and Czechoslovak troops began to occupy the territory in November 1918 but withdrew in the face of Hungarian counterattacks. Meanwhile, Masaryk had returned to Prague on December 20 with the Czechoslovak Italian legion under Italian command. New forces moved east against a freshly proclaimed “independent” Slovak state in Košice. On December 30 they occupied Košice while other Czechoslovak troops occupied Prešpurk, soon to be renamed Bratislava, between January 1 and 2, 1919.7 The situation
changed again on March 21, 1919, when Béla Kun established a Hungarian Soviet republic.\textsuperscript{8} The newly reorganized Hungarian Red Army attacked in Slovakia on May 1, 1919, and rapidly overran two-thirds of Slovak territory. On June 16, a Slovak Soviet Republic was proclaimed in Prešov, but the peace conference had already established the frontier with Hungary, and an Allied ultimatum forced Kun’s army to withdraw. The Czechoslovaks occupied all of Slovakia after the Slovak Soviet Republic collapsed on July 7, 1919.\textsuperscript{9}

The peace conference gave Czechoslovakia another formerly Hungarian region, Subcarpathian Ruthenia.\textsuperscript{10} This heterogeneous territory strategically divided Bolshevik Russia from Hungary and provided Czechoslovakia with a frontier with Romania. In November 1918, a Ruthenian congress in Scranton, Pennsylvania, endorsed a proposal for autonomy within Czechoslovakia, confirmed by a plebiscite held in December by the emigrant organizations and church parishes. In Ruthenia itself the major political movements put aside their rivalries long enough to call for union with Czechoslovakia in May 1919. During the war with Soviet Hungary, Ruthenia was occupied by the Romanian army, and when it withdrew in August 1919 Czechoslovak troops under a French general replaced it.\textsuperscript{11}

A frontier controversy over the duchy of Těšín, one of the three remnants of Austrian Silesia, embroiled Czechoslovakia with Poland. Těšín contained crucial coal fields and one of the few railway connections between the Bohemian crownlands and Slovakia. In January 1919, against Masaryk’s misgivings, Czechoslovakia occupied the territory it claimed. The Poles withdrew but appealed to the peace conference. On February 1, the Council of Ten imposed a temporary demarcation line. Finally, on July 28, 1920, the Council of Ambassadors arbitrated the dispute, leaving Czechoslovakia the coal basin and the railway line. Neither side was satisfied, and the division of Těšín symbolized continuing discord between the two new states.

International recognition of Czechoslovakia’s frontiers came at the Paris Peace Conference.\textsuperscript{12} The council’s Commission of Czechoslovak Affairs upheld Beneš’s claims for Bohemia’s historic frontiers, a southern border for Slovakia justified on economic and strategic grounds, and the addition of Ruthenia. In early April, the Commission’s recommendations were approved. The Treaty of Versailles with Germany (June 28, 1919) added a salient of German Silesia with a majority Czech-speaking population, Hlučínsko (Hultschin). The Treaty of Saint-Germain with
Austria (September 10, 1919) added two minor rectifications in Czech favor. Czechoslovakia also signed the Minorities Treaty, which established League of Nations protections for the ethnic minorities, and a treaty settling its financial obligations to the allies.

The Treaty of Trianon with Hungary was not signed until June 4, 1920, after the fall of Kun’s regime and the installation of a right-wing government under Regent Admiral Miklós Horthy. Hungary ceded Slovakia, including the plains north of the Danube (with a sizable Magyar population) and Ruthenia. With the signing of the Treaty of Trianon and the resolution of the Těšín controversy, the physical shape of the new Czechoslovak state was settled. In almost every case the settlement confirmed a situation that the Czechoslovaks had influenced— with the acquiescence of the Western powers—by their own actions.

**The Czechoslovak Constitution of 1920**

The Revolutionary National Assembly created internal institutions within these frontiers. The assembly was created by enlarging the National Committee on November 13, 1918, using the 1911 election results among the Czech parties, and adding forty (later fifty-four) coopted Slovak representatives, largely selected by Šrobár. This step ensured that some Slovak voices would be heard, but no minority representatives participated in drafting the constitution. The Germans refused to recognize the National Assembly, hoping to vote for the Austrian Republic’s parliament in 1919. On March 4, the day the Austrian assembly convened, nervous Czech gendarmes fired on demonstrating German protestors in several places, killing a total of fifty-two people and wounding dozens, notably at Kadaň (Kaaden) and Šternberk (Sternberg).

The assembly’s legitimacy was in fact revolutionary—from a revolution in the name of the Czech and Slovak (or Czechoslovak) nations, with all that implied for Germans, Hungarians, or other minorities. This assembly had to work out a new constitution to replace the provisional charter adopted on November 13. The permanent constitution, submitted in February 1920, asserted that Czechoslovakia was the work of the “Czechoslovak nation,” a nation-state for the Czechs and Slovaks. The constitution established a republic with a president elected by a bicameral parliament with a 300-seat lower house and a senate of 150. Seats in parliament were divided by proportional representation using fixed party lists and universal (male and female), equal, direct, and secret suf-
Czechoslovakia in the Twentieth Century, circa 1920 - 1993

Internal Boundaries

Outer extent represents Czechoslovakia from ca. 1920 - 1938.

Shaded and hatched areas are lost as a result of Munich and regained after World War II.

Hatched area is lost permanently after World War II.

Map 5
frage. The constitution confirmed basic civil and political rights for all citizens equally, and the provisions for minority protection followed the international obligations accepted when the Treaty of Saint-Germain was signed.15

Five basic laws submitted together with the draft defined “Czecho-
slovak” as the official state language, effectively making Czech and Slo-
vak equal. Minorities were guaranteed freedom to use their language in daily life and schools, and in official contacts with the state where they made up 20 percent of the local population. Slovak autonomy was not included in the constitution, and the Slovak populists accepted the law on state administration only with reservations. It established self-
governing prefectures to harmonize the Hungarian and Austrian sys-
tems, but the system was not applied in Bohemia and Moravia because at least two of the new prefectures would have German majorities. On February 29, 1920, the National Assembly unanimously adopted the new constitution.

DEVELOPMENT OF CZECHOSLOVAK POLITICS

Proportional representation ensured that Czechoslovakia would be governed by multi-party coalitions. Most political parties in interwar Czechoslovakia had a pedigree that stretched back to the Habs-
b urg monarchy, though some new parties emerged between the wars. There were never fewer than fourteen parties in parliament, and many more failed to win enough votes to gain a seat. Major parties were organ-
ized on social or ideological bases, though in Slovakia personalities also played a strong role, as did nationality everywhere. The prolifera-
tion of parties did not mean, however, that Czechoslovak politics was totally fragmented. The fundamental division was between parties that accepted and those that rejected the republic, with a group in the middle whose attitude was neither unconditional acceptance nor rejection. Nearly all the Czech and Slovak parties supported the state, and thus in spite of the large numbers of parties and the frequent cabinet reshuffles, interwar politics had an underlying stability.

Political Forces in Interwar Czechoslovakia

The Agrarian Party, still led by Švehla, was the backbone of that stability, participating in every coalition government between the wars.16
In 1922 the Slovak agrarians under Šrobár and Milan Hodža merged with it. The Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party emerged from the war with the strongest voter support, but the split with the radical left wing caused a temporary decline. The Czechoslovak (National) Socialist Party, still led by Klofáč, normally strongly supported Masaryk and Beneš (the latter joined it in 1923). The right of center included the People’s Party, formed in 1919 when various Catholic-oriented movements merged and led from 1922 by the veteran priest Jan Šránek. Kramář’s National Democratic Party, heir to the Young Czechs, shared the center-right with the populists. Kramář’s interwar authority rested on the aura of martyrdom he and Rašín earned for their wartime death sentences, and he served as the first Czechoslovak prime minister, but that marked the National Democrats’ high-water mark.17 The centrist Tradesmen’s Party also supported the state.

Slovak voters could choose between parties with a Czechoslovak (centralist) orientation, or the Slovak populists. The centralists merged or cooperated with their Czech counterparts, but (with the exception of the communists) no party established a countrywide base. The Slovak populists, like the Czech People’s Party, had a Catholic orientation and were led by a priest, Andrej Hlinka. Hlinka’s career began under Hungary, first within the Hungarian clerical movement, and then in a separate Slovak People’s party, named Hlinka’s Slovak People’s Party (HSL’S) in his honor in 1925.

The German parties in Czechoslovakia also had roots in Austria-Hungary. The strongest German party immediately after the war was the German Social-Democratic Workers’ Party, followed by the German Christian-Social People’s Party, and the German Agrarian League. The German National Socialist Workers’ Party (DNSAP) and the German National Party (DNP) represented radical right-wing nationalism. In the mid-1920s the mainstream parties moved toward “activism,” working within the state for German interests. The German Agrarians led the way, followed by the Christian Socialists and later joined by the German Social Democrats.

The other national minorities had their own parties, forced by the threshold for entering parliament to contest elections in a bloc or electoral coalition. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) had a peculiar position: it was never outlawed and functioned legally, but for much of the period had to deny the legitimacy of the Czechoslovak state. It was the only Czechoslovak party to represent all the minorities. The
establishment of a truly “Bolshevik” leadership had to wait until 1929, when Klement Gottwald aligned the party with Moscow.\textsuperscript{18}

President Masaryk represented another important political force. Instead of remaining “above the clouds,” Masaryk used his personal political and moral stature to try to shape Czechoslovakia’s policies.\textsuperscript{19} From his office an informal group of politicians and intellectuals influenced public issues, especially foreign affairs. Known as the Castle, this group had the support of the Social Democrats and National Socialists, the Sokol, and the legion veterans’ organizations. Kramář, who disputed Masaryk’s view of the exiles’ role in achieving independence, was its leading critic. Other right-wing elements later attacked the Castle for cosmopolitan, unpatriotic, or even pro-German policies. The German negativist parties and the communists joined the anti-Castle chorus.\textsuperscript{20} The Castle derived its significance from Masaryk’s personal position: revered as the President-Liberator, his influence exceeded his formal constitutional prerogatives. The public’s regard for Masaryk resembled the semi-affectionate respect once accorded the aging Francis Joseph. As one scholar notes, “Masaryk’s countrymen were accustomed to an emperor, and he exploited their monarchical tendencies in an effort to establish the new republic on firm foundations of authority.”\textsuperscript{21}

**Postwar Stabilization**

After October 28, 1918, the National Committee rapidly gained control of essential services and law and order, decreed that existing Austro-Hungarian laws would remain in effect, and kept most administrative and police officials in their places. The creation of the Revolutionary National Assembly and Kramář’s government clarified and stabilized authority. Kramář’s “all-national” coalition dealt with food shortages, inflation and the black market, and the need to revive economic life and the transportation system. After Kramář left for Paris and the peace conference, Švehla, minister of the interior, headed the government in his absence.

In the first municipal elections in Bohemia and Moravia in June 1919 (because of the turmoil in Slovakia and Ruthenia there were no elections there), the Social Democrats won nearly 30 percent of the vote, the Agrarians had more than 21 percent, the National Socialists–Progressive bloc took almost 16 percent, and even the Populists did better than Kramář’s National Democrats. In July the All-National coali-
tion resigned, and was replaced by a coalition of Socialists, Agrarians, and National Socialists led by the Socialist Vlastimil Tusar. The “Red-Green” Coalition carried out full elections in May 1920. These elections confirmed the socialists’ popularity and the coalition continued to govern. Internal turmoil in the Social Democratic Party forced Tusar’s second government to resign on September 14, 1920, and the next day Masaryk appointed a nonparty government of experts.

Since the cabinet was nonparty, the five largest Czechoslovak parties established an unofficial coordinating committee to steer its program through parliament. Quickly dubbed the “Pětka” (pět, five), this committee became a stable, if unconstitutional and unforeseen, element of the Czechoslovak political scene. Švehla and the agrarians became the core of the system. The Pětka’s decisions were binding on its members in parliament and in the government. The Pětka (enlarged according to the participants in further coalitions to as many as eight) provided much needed stability during the frequent cabinet changes of the interwar years.

Kramář’s and Tusar’s governments weathered the initial storm of postwar stabilization. Rašín’s currency reforms of February 1919 ended the threat of hyperinflation, caused by the old Austro-Hungarian crown (still being printed freely in Vienna and Budapest). Czechoslovak banknotes were overprinted to separate them from the other successor states’ currency, and 50 percent of cash holdings and savings were held as a forced loan to the state. Another measure, the nostrification law (December 1919), decreed that foreign companies in Czechoslovakia had to have their directorates on Czechoslovak territory. Nostrification increased the ownership share of Czech capital and Czech financial institutions in enterprises in Czechoslovakia.

Three major land reform laws between April 1919 and April 1920 also transformed property relations in Czechoslovakia. The state gained the right to confiscate agricultural properties larger than 150 hectares or any other estates larger than 250 hectares. Such estates, many of them in the hands of German or Hungarian nobles, or the church, made up practically 22 percent of the agricultural land in the country, while over two-thirds of all landowners farmed only 7 percent of the agricultural land. The Agrarian Party, which controlled the State Land Office created in June 1919, used the reform to strengthen its position. The Land Office could keep “residual estates” intact on economic grounds, and Agrarian party supporters benefited. Expropriated landowners were compensated
by the state. Throughout the 1920s, land reform affected about 28 percent of all land, more than half of it agricultural. The state kept most of the remaining 1.7 million hectares, largely forest. Middle-sized Czech and Slovak farmers benefited the most. Hungarians and Germans claimed that the reform was aimed at them, though German farmers also received some land, contributing to the activist trend in the German agrarian party. Most of the land distributed to landless peasants or smallholders quickly changed hands again, further strengthening the middle elements.24

Land reform addressed one pressing social issue, but the economic difficulty and political radicalization caused by the war led to demonstrations, protests, and strikes throughout 1919. In response, the government enacted the eight-hour day, unemployment support, sickness and accident insurance, and even a law authorizing the establishment of workers’ councils in factories. Though politicians debated widespread “socialization” (nationalization) of heavy industries like coal and steel, the socialists failed to push the idea through.

Tensions between the radical left and the moderate leadership of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party culminated in 1920. Before the September party congress, a radical meeting in Prague on September 5 called on the party to accept Lenin’s twenty-one conditions and join the Comintern. The moderate-controlled executive committee postponed the congress until December, and demanded that delegates reject the Comintern in writing. The defiant radicals held the congress as planned, claiming that two-thirds of the delegates attended, and elected a new executive committee under Bohumír Smeral. They took over the party’s headquarters, the People’s House, and began issuing their own party newspaper, Rude právo (Red Right). The moderates took the dispute to the courts, who decided in their favor, and the police forced the radicals out of the People’s House on December 9.25

A general strike called in protest for December 10 lacked mass support, though there were factory seizures and protests in industrial centers. Coming after the summer’s tension and the outbreak of nationalist rioting in Prague and the German-Czech borderlands in the autumn, the strike raised fears of revolution.26 The government responded with vigorous police action, and the strike collapsed by December 15. The failure of the general strike hastened the split in the Social Democratic Party. Already in January 1920 radicals in Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia had organized Communist parties, and the German Social
Democrats expelled their radicals early in 1921. In May 1921 the Czech radicals formally established the Czech Communist Party, and after criticism from the Comintern, all the communist sections joined together into the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia at a congress in October 1921.27

Slovak autonomy emerged as the major demand of the Slovak People’s Party during the first years of the new republic. In the summer of 1919, Hlinka learned of the Pittsburgh Agreement and in August secretly traveled to Paris to submit a memorandum to the peace conference demanding Slovak autonomy. Denounced by the other Slovaks in Prague and suspected of treason, Hlinka was arrested on his return and interned in Moravia. Tusar’s government was forced to admit that Hlinka had only violated the passport regulations, and after the new constitution was adopted, he was released without charges. The whole affair only damaged the government in Slovakia while solidifying Hlinka’s reputation as a courageous spokesman for his people.28

Politics in the Twenties

The nonparty cabinet remained in power until September 1921, while the parties tried to agree on a new government. Švehla finally established a renewed All-National coalition in October 1922. With the Social Democrats weakened, the agrarians were now the strongest party, and Švehla headed every Czechoslovak cabinet until 1929. The coalition’s base in the Pětka and acceptance by the German parties (then moving toward activism) helped as it struggled with renewed economic turmoil. Between 1921 and 1923, Czechoslovakia was hit by a general European postwar economic depression. Industrial production stagnated and unemployment rose. Many enterprises located in Slovakia could not survive the increased competition, adding an ethnic element to a social problem. At the height of the depression in 1922, unemployment rose to 440,000 workers, or about 22 percent of the labor force.29 The government responded with deflationary policies, especially under Švehla’s first cabinet, in which Rašín served as minister of finance. Rašín insisted on a strong currency as a matter of prestige, in spite of its effects on the balance of trade. Made the scapegoat for economic difficulties by the left-wing press, Rašín was shot by a mentally disturbed youth on January 5, 1923, and died a month later.30

With the return of European prosperity in 1924, the tensions within
the coalition became harder to contain. The agrarians pushed for flexible tariff legislation to protect the farmers, while the Social Democrats feared that high food prices would hurt the working class and called for social legislation to win back its support. After tough negotiations, the coalition accepted the Social Insurance Law, which linked old age, sickness, and health insurance into a single system. When the agrarians attempted to pass their protective tariff, the socialists opposed it, but in June 1925 the agrarians pushed it through anyway. The controversy over making July 6 (the anniversary of Hus’s martyrdom) a state holiday also strained the coalition by offending the populists. When President Masaryk and most of the cabinet attended the 1925 celebrations, the papal nuncio demonstratively left Prague. The government retaliated by breaking off diplomatic relations with the Vatican, offending Czech and Slovak Catholics. With the populists convinced that the public mood favored them, new elections were scheduled for November 1925.

The 1925 parliamentary elections confirmed the decline of the socialists, the strength of the agrarians, and the gains of the populists. Emboldened by the outcome, the Czechoslovak agrarians (supported by their German counterparts) demanded fixed agricultural tariffs, and the Czech People’s Party proposed government salaries for the clergy. The socialists rejected both proposals, and on March 18, 1926, Švehla, pleading ill health, resigned. President Masaryk appointed a second non-party ministry, which remained in office until October 1926. Meanwhile, efforts to form a stable political coalition continued, led by Hodža while Švehla recuperated.

With the great compromiser Švehla ill, the Pětka’s discipline temporarily relaxed and political conflicts emerged with greater clarity. Even Masaryk was not spared: some National Democrats and right-wing Agrarians accused him of undermining parliamentary government through nonparty cabinets. Beneš came in for attack, both on his own account and as a stand-in for Masaryk, whose popularity deterred some politicians from naming him directly. The anti-Castle faction in Beneš’s own Czechoslovak Socialist Party, led by Stříbrný, sought to unseat him in June. Beneš left the party instead, while Klofáč organized the pro-Castle wing to expel Stříbrný at the party congress in September, when the party officially resumed the title Czechoslovak National Socialist Party. Beneš reentered the party, and Stříbrný began his slow drift toward the extreme right, continuing to attack the Castle, Masaryk, and Beneš on the way.
Švehla returned to politics in September 1926, and crafted a center-right coalition, including the two German middle-class parties, the agrarians, the Czech populists, and the tradesmen’s party. The Czechoslovak and German socialists went into loyal opposition. This “Gentlemen’s Coalition” remained in power until 1929. Among its accomplishments was Masaryk’s reelection in May 1927. Fixed agricultural tariffs were enacted in 1926, as were the clergy salaries, a decision that ensured Czech populist support, and could be used to woo the Slovaks. The modus vivendi with the Vatican in 1928 was also popular with Czech and Slovak Catholics. It settled the quarrel over the Jan Hus holiday, redrew diocesan boundaries to match Slovakia’s frontier, and freed Slovak bishops from the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Esztergom in Hungary.31

In 1928 the prefectures were replaced by a provincial system, in
which Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia, Slovakia, and Ruthenia each had an assembly presided over by a provincial president. The assemblies’ powers were limited, and the provincial president and one-third of the assembly’s members were government appointees. Nevertheless, the new system created an assembly of sorts for Slovakia, and helped bring the HSL’S into the “Gentlemen’s Coalition” at the end of 1927. Merging Silesia and Moravia again avoided creating an administrative unit controlled by Germans, but did not help the German activist parties among their constituents.

The HSL’S membership in the coalition became an issue after New Year’s Day, 1928, when Vojtech Tuka, editor of the party organ, Slovák, published an article asserting that the Martin agreement of 1918 had a secret clause limiting it to ten years. After that, a legal vacuum would exist and Slovakia could renegotiate its relationship to the state. HSL’S opponents (including Slovak centralists) demanded that Tuka’s parliamentary immunity be lifted so that he could be tried for treason. The government reacted slowly, since the HSL’S was a coalition partner, but after provincial elections in December 1928 suggested the populists were losing support, Tuka was arrested in January 1929. His trial began in May and lasted until October 5, 1929 (just before early parliamentary elections). He was found guilty of espionage and treason and sentenced to fifteen years in prison.\footnote{32}

Hlinka supported Tuka steadfastly throughout the affair, even expelling old associates who accepted Tuka’s guilt. After the verdict he took the HSL’S out of the coalition. The results of the election, however, suggested that in the short term the Tuka affair had cost the populists. Otherwise, the 1929 election reflected continuing agrarian strength, the recovery of the social democrats, a strong showing by the national socialists, and a decline of the Czech populists and nationalists. A new right-center-left government, the “Broad Coalition,” including the socialists (Czechoslovak and German) and the Czech populists as well as the agrarians, but without the Slovak populists or the German Christian Socialists, assumed office in December 1929.

Beneš served as foreign minister without interruption throughout the 1920s. He was Masaryk’s personal choice, but though a close associate and protégé, Beneš was unlike him in character and personality. He had risen through education, effort, and relentless self-discipline, training himself to apply his intellect and reason to problems, not his feelings. He considered foreign policy a science to be pursued in a rational, scien-
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A critical way, and was sure that he could recognize historical trends and adjust his country’s policies accordingly. Czechoslovakia was a committed status quo state, opposed to any revision of the Treaty of Versailles. When hopes of a permanent Franco-British agreement faded, Beneš signed a treaty of alliance with France in 1924 (revised and strengthened in 1925). Beneš was also a strong supporter of the League of Nations and of collective security. He excelled on the stage of Geneva, serving six times as chairman of the League Council and once of the Assembly. In anchoring Czechoslovakia’s foreign policy in democracy, collective security, and the post-Versailles status quo, Beneš followed a very Czech pattern of linking national interests with universal values.

Beneš pursued what were initially called “correct” relations with Weimar Germany. Czechoslovakia also sought good-neighborly relations with Austria, though it opposed Austrian Anschluss with Germany. Beneš treated Italy with caution insofar as it clashed with France in international affairs. He did not share the anti-communism of the National Democrats, but their opposition to closer ties with Moscow prevented Czechoslovakia from going beyond the commercial agreement signed in 1922 until the international situation changed dramatically in the 1930s. Relations with Poland were difficult, because Beneš considered Poland likely to cause conflict with either Russia or Germany, if not both. Poland was also a French ally (February 1921), but Beneš did not pursue an alliance. Apart from anything else, Warsaw was on good terms with Budapest, and toward Hungary Beneš remained reserved to the point of hostility.

Hungary was the catalyst for Beneš’s major foreign policy success of the 1920s, the Little Entente. Born out of the efforts of Charles of Habsburg to claim the Hungarian throne in 1921, it linked Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania in a defensive alliance. All three were part of the French alliance system in the East, solidified during the 1920s by treaties signed between France and Czechoslovakia (1924–25), Romania (1926), and Yugoslavia (1927). France’s allies did not form an integrated security system capable of defending the region against an outside great power. The Little Entente’s primary aim was to check the threat of Hungarian revisionism, and on that the three members could agree. In other respects their interests were not easily harmonized. Romania sought good relations with Poland, while fearing the USSR; Yugoslavia saw Italy as a strategic threat, but also sought agreements with
it; and neither partner shared Czechoslovakia’s concerns about Germany.38

International developments also contributed to the Little Entente’s difficulties, as France’s German policy shifted from confrontation to seeking accommodation. The Locarno Treaties, signed in October 1925, symbolized that shift. They guaranteed the German frontiers with France and Belgium, while pointedly ignoring the eastern frontiers. Germany and France signed arbitration treaties with Poland and Czechoslovakia, but these treaties were not part of the multilateral international agreement. Following Locarno, Germany entered the League of Nations in 1926, raising hopes that it could be brought into the system of collective security. “Friendly relations” replaced “correct relations” in Czechoslovakia’s German policy.

WORLD ECONOMIC CRISIS
AND GROWING EXTERNAL THREAT

The Great Depression hit Czechoslovakia with full force in 1930, and it took years for the country to recover. By the time it did, the depression’s impact on Europe and the rest of the world had changed the international situation beyond recognition, contributing to an increasing internal threat to the state from its national minorities, especially the Germans. No country escaped the effects of the Great Depression, but the specific shape it took in Czechoslovakia depended on structural and regional characteristics of the Czechoslovak economy, many of them inherited from the Habsburg monarchy.

*The Czechoslovak Economy and the Great Depression*

Comprising only some 21 percent of Austro-Hungarian territory, Czechoslovakia inherited between 60 and 70 percent of its industrial capacity, mostly concentrated in Bohemia and Moravia-Silesia. The end of the Austro-Hungarian customs union hurt industries dependent on the old internal market, while protectionism and the autarkic policies followed throughout postwar Central Europe affected international trade. Capacity in sugar production, glassmaking, and textiles far exceeded domestic demand, so Czechoslovakia had to reorient its trade to West European and world markets. Especially after Germany’s economy
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stabilized in 1924, Czechoslovakia faced stiff competition. Her reliance on France in foreign policy paid no economic dividends, while the domestic policies of the Little Entente members prevented them from developing effective and complementary economic ties among themselves.39

Thus the world economic crisis had a dramatic economic, social, and political impact on Czechoslovakia. International markets for sugar declined drastically by 1928, and other agricultural prices fell during 1929. By 1930, the Great Depression had begun to affect industry as well. Light consumer industries, overwhelmingly concentrated in the German-inhabited border regions, were affected first and most heavily, adding a political and national dimension to the economic crisis. By 1933 overall production in industry had sunk by at least 40 percent compared with 1929, and levels of foreign trade had declined by one third. Unemployment, which had reached a postwar low in 1929, increased rapidly. At its height in 1933, official unemployment figures were over 900,000; estimates of the actual number go as high as 1,300,000.40 Proportionally, the crisis hit Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia most harshly.

The agrarian-led governments of the Broad Coalition responded slowly to the challenge. Following orthodox economic policies, the government tried to keep the exchange rate stable and wage and price levels adjusted to avoid inflation. In June 1933 parliament accepted a special powers law, extended until 1937, that allowed the government to decree economic policy. It introduced a state grain monopoly in 1934, stabilizing prices and thus protecting middle and well-to-do farmers. Livestock producers and consumers, on the other hand, faced higher prices for feed, meat, and grain products. Other measures to help credit and investment postponed the execution of farm bankruptcies and attempted to lower interest rates and stimulate exports. Over conservative resistance, the crown was devalued by some 16.66 percent. Compared with devaluations of 30 to 40 percent already carried out in the sterling trade area, this drop was too small to affect Czechoslovakia’s exports. Increases in domestic investment, especially armaments after 1935–36, were more significant in pulling production out of the slump.41

The Depression and Czechoslovak Politics

The terrible economic conditions increased social and political tension within Czechoslovakia. Jobless workers joined protest marches,
demonstrations, and mass strikes, while intellectuals and cultural figures supported them. Frequently the authorities responded with force. Between 1930 and 1933, 29 people were killed and 101 injured in clashes between protesters and the police or gendarmerie. Both on the right and the left, political extremism benefited from the willingness of suffering people to listen to social demagoguery. Political polarization and increasing radicalism hit the government parties too, especially the agrarians. The tension between their right wing, led by Beran, who was elected party chairman in 1935, and the pro-Castle faction threatened at times to splinter the party itself. Hodža’s position improved, since his Slovak agrarians usually held the balance between right and left.

Slovak populist demands for autonomy intensified during the depression, reflecting the economic hardship, and also a generational change within the HSL’S. Party members active before 1918, some expelled during the Tuka affair and others retiring, were replaced by younger men to whom Hlinka gave a fair degree of freedom. Karol Sidor, pro-Polish and something of a hothead, succeeded Tuka as editor of Slovák. Jozef Tiso became the chief political planner, and an even younger group, called Nástupists after their journal, Nástup (Step Forward), waited in the wings. In Slovakia autonomy began to attract support among Slovak Protestants. In a meeting at Zvolen in 1932, Hlinka and Martin Razus, leader of the mainly Lutheran National Party, agreed to cooperate. In December 1932, Hlinka expressed an ominous shift in his attitude toward the state, when he swore to protect his nation even “at the cost of the republic.”

While minister of education, Ivan Déder, a consistent if tactless Slovak centralist, promoted a Slovak language reform that brought it closer to Czech. These actions led to a revolt within the Slovak cultural foundation Matica slovenská, and in May 1932 HSL’S supporters took over the Matica. Official commemorations of the 1,100th anniversary of the consecration of Pribina’s church at Nitra, originally planned as a religious ceremony, became a political contest, which Hlinka turned into an antigovernment demonstration. Centralists argued that autonomy would not work because Slovakia could not pay its own way, citing the gap between disbursements in Slovakia and tax receipts. Autonomists countered that most firms doing business in Slovakia had their main offices in Prague and paid taxes there, and that industry in Slovakia suffered from transportation costs and a lack of government support.

The Germans also claimed they were discriminated against for eth-
nic reasons. The Great Depression created higher unemployment in the German regions than in the Czech interior, and German radicals blamed the government. Though social support payments from the Ministry of Social Welfare, directed by the German Social-Democrat Ludwig Czech, were also proportionally higher in German regions, they did nothing to change German attitudes. Membership more than doubled in the DNSAP. Finally, the government cracked down in the 1932 trial of seven leaders of the DNSAP youth organization. Hitler’s rise to power in Germany increased the political tension between Prague and the German radical parties, who finally dissolved themselves in September 1933. The banner bearer for German radical nationalism now became Konrad Henlein’s newly founded Sudeten German Homeland Front. Henlein’s movement, transformed into the Sudeten German Party (SdP) shortly before the 1935 elections, took over many members of the banned DNSAP and the NDP, and with them their Nazi ideas.

The Great Depression also cast its pall over Czechoslovakia’s foreign policy. As the Little Entente’s economic problems worsened, the need for markets for agricultural products opened up the Yugoslav and Romanian economies to German penetration. Czechoslovak-German relations were ruffled by proposals for an Austro-German customs union in 1931, which Prague saw as a step toward the forbidden Anschluss. The failure of the disarmament conference (at which Beneš was secretary-general, 1932–34), Germany’s departure from the League, the collapse of the Tardieu plan for economic recovery in Central Europe, and the signing of the Rome Protocols, linking fascist Italy with Austria and Hungary, were ominous storm signals.

Both Beneš and Masaryk believed that the Soviet Union should be brought into the European international system, and these setbacks reinforced the idea. After the Polish-German nonaggression treaty of 1934, French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou came forward with the idea of an Eastern pact, which Beneš enthusiastically supported. The Soviet Union also put aside its suspicions of the West, and entered the League of Nations in 1934. Soviet foreign policy stressed collective security, which suited Beneš’s longstanding beliefs. His hopes of a collective treaty, however, died along with Barthou, an unintended victim of the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in Marseilles in 1934. In 1935, spurred on by the Saar plebiscite and German rearmament, the discussions between Paris, Prague, and Moscow ended in bilateral Franco-Soviet and Czechoslovak-Soviet treaties of mutual assistance.
The treaty between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, preceded by formal diplomatic recognition in 1934 and signed on May 16, 1935, linked the Soviet commitment to France’s fulfillment of her 1925 treaty with Czechoslovakia. This was as close as Beneš could get to his preferred tripartite treaty, and it helped Czechoslovakia avoid tying itself solely to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the treaty quickly became a target of Nazi propaganda, as well as of right-wing attacks at home.48

Against this backdrop of increasing tension, Masaryk suffered a stroke shortly before his presidential term expired. He decided to seek reelection only because he was unsure that parliament would accept Beneš as his successor. Over Communist opposition, Masaryk was elected for the fourth time on May 24, 1934. The last interwar parliamentary elections took place the next year. Besides the SdP, a new National Union formed by merging Kramár’s National Democrats with Stříbrný’s National League and another right-wing organization, the National Front. The Slovak populists joined in an Autonomist Bloc with the Silesian Polish Party and a small Ruthenian Agrarian Party, while the Hungarian parties also formed an electoral alliance. The Communist Party adapted to the Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty and the Comintern’s new “Popular Front” policy by dropping its hostility to the state and becoming centralist.

The election results showed all the government parties slipping slightly. The Czech right-wing National Union did no better than its member organizations had done in 1929, though the fascists won 6 seats. The Communists retained roughly the same level of support, but now from Czechs and Slovaks, not minorities. The Autonomist bloc in Slovakia gained 30 percent of the vote and 22 seats, of which the HSL’s kept 19, allowing its associates one each. The genuine electoral bombshell was that Henlein’s SdP eclipsed its activist opponents, winning over 15 percent of the total vote, and gaining 44 seats, only one fewer than the Czechoslovak agrarians. The German socialists lost half their seats, the German Christian socialists more than half, and the German agrarians fully two-thirds. The SdP won two-thirds of the German vote.

The coalition parties readmitted the Tradesmen’s Party, but otherwise, neither policy nor personnel changed until Masaryk appointed Hodža prime minister on November 5, and then on November 21 announced his own resignation, pleading advancing age (he was eighty-five) and ill health. He again called for Beneš to succeed him. Though
the right-wing parties put up an opposing candidate, eventually the support of Hodža’s Slovak agrarians and the HSL’S swung the tide in favor of Beneš. He was duly elected Czechoslovakia’s second president on December 18, 1935.49

The Last Years of the Republic

Beneš’s presidency before Munich was overshadowed by the sense that Czechoslovakia was in peril, internally from Henlein’s SdP and externally from Nazi Germany.50 Beneš continued to influence Czechoslovakia’s foreign policy when his own candidate, the historian Kamil Krofta, replaced Hodža as foreign minister in February 1936. Attempts to deal with the national minorities were largely led by Hodža, a Slovak, who could negotiate with German politicians free of Czech emotional baggage. At the beginning of July 1936 these talks bore fruit when the German Christian Socialists reentered the government, taking a ministry without portfolio. Reeling from their losses to the SdP, a younger generation of German activists promoted German interests more vigorously. In late January 1937, they demanded more public-sector jobs for Germans, public works contracts for local contractors and labor in the border regions, and linguistic concessions in local administration. Hodža’s government accepted on February 18, and in March 1938 committed itself to proportional minority representation in the civil service.

These concessions could not resolve Czechoslovakia’s German question, because the SdP now represented the majority of the Germans. Whether Henlein and the SdP ever accepted Czechoslovakia is not clear—Henlein’s role in weakening and destroying both democracy and the republic gives the lie to his protestations of loyalty. Apologies that blame the stiff-necked Czechs for driving Henlein into the Nazi embrace are clearly specious. To see the SdP as Hitler’s fifth column and Henlein as the Führer’s stooge right from 1933, however, oversimplifies both the German and the SdP situations.51 Ties between Henlein and the Reich offices for Germans abroad existed from the start, and his 1935 election campaign was largely funded from the Reich. The SdP became only a tool of Hitler’s foreign policy because of complicated political conflict in the Reich and within the SdP. In the Reich the old-fashioned “traditionalists” were outmaneuvered by radical Nazis, in particular Himmler’s SS and the SD under Reinhard Heydrich. Within the SdP Henlein’s inability to control internal quarrels forced him to seek support abroad,
initially from “traditionalist” organizations in the Reich. After their defeat, and with radical dissent threatening to destroy his own party, he turned directly to Hitler in November 1937, placing his movement and his own political fate in the Führer’s hands.

On New Year’s Day, 1938, Beran published an article hinting that the SdP and the HSL’S should join the coalition, and urging a direct agreement with Germany. The German activists, and the Czech social democrats and national socialists, felt betrayed. Their mood darkened further when Hitler spoke on February 20 of protecting the ten million Germans living next to the Reich. The Austrian Anschluss of March 11 precipitated the collapse of the German agrarians and Christian socialists and their merger with the SdP. The German Social Democratic minister, Czech, resigned, but the party refused to dissolve and supported the state. The National Democrats, without Kramář who had died in 1937, rejoined the government on March 19.

On March 28 Henlein met with Hitler, who confirmed Henlein’s leadership of the SdP (calling him “my viceroy”), and advised making impossible demands on Prague. Henlein repeated, “We must therefore always demand so much that we cannot be satisfied,” and the Führer agreed. Henlein now had to appear to negotiate without destroying his party’s support or letting his own radicals provoke a Czechoslovak crackdown, while avoiding a final agreement. In a speech in Karlovy Vary (Karlobad) on April 24 Henlein spelled out a program demanding recognition of the Sudeten Germans as a collective legal personality equal to the Czechs, demarcation of the German areas and the establishment of German-controlled local government there, and most ominously the full freedom to profess membership in the German race and the German world view—a thinly veiled statement of adherence to Nazi ideology.

The HSL’S lost its leader on August 16, 1938. The party confirmed Tiso as chairman on August 31, 1938, and on September 8 he took part in a meeting organized by the SdP. He probably only intended to force Beneš to meet with him again (previous discussions had ended without results early in 1938). Beneš did summon him for discussions, and the Slovak populists and the government maintained their dialogue through the tense days of September.

The Czechoslovak government faced these challenges feeling isolated. In theory it should have been secure: it had treaties with France and the Soviet Union, and behind France stood Great Britain. Reality
was less promising than theory. The British were pursuing appeasement, attempting to contain Hitler by meeting his legitimate demands. To avoid another war, blundered into through treaty obligations and misunderstandings, the British would accept peaceful changes in Central Europe—a view communicated to Hitler by Lord Halifax in November 1937. Henlein’s propaganda had convinced many British that Prague’s “intransigence” was the source of any tension. The Soviet alliance did not endear Czechoslovakia to London, either. The British government was willing to pressure the French to choose between Czechoslovakia and continued British support. As if these developments were not ominous enough, by 1937 Soviet purges in the Red Army raised doubts about its effectiveness.

Tomáš G. Masaryk died on September 14, 1937, leaving his hand-picked successor to steer the Czechoslovak ship of state through the dangerous waters of its anniversary year. German assurances that the Austrian Anschluss in March 1938 was a “family affair” could not lessen the Czechoslovak conviction that they would be next. Hitler’s plans for a military operation against Czechoslovakia took shape in the autumn of 1937. They remained flexible and relatively vague, as Hitler let the international tension rise while the SdP and Henlein (seconded by the British, with reluctant French backing) kept up the pressure on Beneš and Hodža.

In this atmosphere of tension, intelligence reports about suspicious German troop movements led the Czechoslovak government to declare “exceptional military measures” on May 20, 1938. This partial mobilization demonstrated Czechoslovakia’s determination and ability to defend itself. It now appears, however, that Germany was not in fact preparing for action at that moment. Instead, the May Crisis increased British determination to push France and Czechoslovakia into a position where the threat of war would not arise again. Hitler was also furious, and revised his plans, establishing October 1 as the deadline for final military preparations.

Britain and France forced Beneš to request an impartial mediator between government and SdP, the British shipping magnate Sir Walter Runciman. Runciman, who had few qualifications for his task, arrived in Czechoslovakia on August 3, and departed without success on September 16. In August Beneš personally joined negotiations with the SdP, presenting the so-called Third Plan, and then, on September 7, the Fourth Plan, which effectively accepted the Karlsbad Program’s de-
mands. The startled SdP leaders broke off contacts until after Hitler’s speech at the Nuremburg Nazi rally on September 12, 1938. In his speech, Hitler thundered, “the Germans in Czechoslovakia are neither defenseless nor are they deserted.” After disturbances in Czechoslovakia’s German regions, suppressed by firm government action, Henlein fled to Germany. Meanwhile, on September 13, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain proposed a personal meeting with Hitler, and on September 15 the two met at Berchtesgaden. In May Hitler had warned his military leaders that a “particularly favorable opportunity” arising unexpectedly might cause him to act precipitately towards Czechoslovakia. That opportunity was about to be handed to him by Czechoslovakia’s allies.

AN ISLAND OF DEMOCRACY?

Among the authoritarian regimes and royal dictatorships in its immediate neighborhood, Czechoslovakia seemed like an island of democracy, at least until the tsunami of 1938. The state preserved parliamentary institutions, regular, free elections, and civic freedoms relatively well. Yet in doing so it evolved some features such as the Pětka that undermined genuine parliamentary politics. Elections became a means for distributing power within the ruling coalition, instead of an alternation between government and opposition. The parties carved out fiefdoms in the bureaucracy and institutions, and as their leadership aged, they failed to bring younger figures to the forefront. Masaryk’s ideal of humanitarian democracy was tempered by his concern for authority and expertise, and he used every ounce of his formal and informal authority to pursue his goals. Indeed, it has been suggested that one reason Czechoslovakia did not succumb to the local fashion for authoritarian regimes was that, thanks to Masaryk, it was already authoritarian enough to survive.

Evaluating Czechoslovakia’s democratic achievement during the interwar years cannot be separated from the question of national minorities. From the start, Masaryk and Beneš were aware that the new state would include minorities. Beneš promised the Paris Peace Conference that Czechoslovakia would become “a sort of Switzerland,” taking into account the “special conditions of Bohemia.” The minorities committee noted that “the prospects and perhaps almost the existence of the new
An Island of Democracy?

State” would depend on how it treated its minorities, especially the Germans.62 After initial rejection, all German parties except the radical nationalists and communists accepted the state, and between 1926 and 1938 every Czechoslovak government included at least one German minister. Without the Great Depression and Hitler, it is argued, Czech-German cooperation in Czechoslovakia was not doomed. Would Czechoslovak Germans have abandoned the activist parties so dramatically, though, if activism had anything to show beyond mere participation in government? It took two years after the 1935 election’s warning for the government to promise action on German grievances, and proportional representation in the civil service as a commitment came only in 1938, just in time to be one of the casualties of Munich.

To an outsider, the Germans in Czechoslovakia did not seem particularly oppressed. They had their own state school system, including schools in Slovakia that had never existed in the old Hungarian kingdom, crowned by the German university in Prague, and a network of voluntary cultural and other associations.63 Unfortunately, perception is often more important than reality in minority affairs. Czechoslovakia’s leaders insisted that it was a product of “Czechoslovak” national self-determination, and had a Czechoslovak identity. For the Germans, used to being the “state-bearing” nation in Austria-Hungary and Bohemia, this was a particularly bitter pill. Many Czechs relished the opportunity to assert the Czechoslovak nature of the new state in various ways. Whatever the official attitude of the leading representatives, individuals in local situations contributed—often detrimentally—to the perception of minority relations.

In 1918, Masaryk referred to Czechoslovakia’s Germans as “emigrants and colonists.”64 He chose his words more carefully thereafter, and on the republic’s tenth anniversary emphasized that Czechoslovakia was “an ethnically and linguistically mixed state,” in which “representation of the minorities is a necessity.” Still, the majority “must imprint its own characteristics on society.”65 Defining the lands of the Bohemian crown as a Czech national state made Czechoslovakia’s Germans aliens in their own home. Once German Bohemians or Moravians, they now called themselves Sudeten Germans, reflecting a psychological distancing from their ancestors’ homelands, as well as the new state they resented.66 A perfect minority policy would not have prevented Hitler from destroying Czechoslovakia, and in the end many Germans stood ready to defend the republic. There might have been more if Czechs
and Slovaks had found more sensitivity, understanding, and will to take political risks on minority issues.

Czechoslovakia’s Jews represented both a national and a religious minority. The Czechoslovak census accepted Jewish as a nationality, and in 1921, 180,855 people (1.35 percent) registered their nationality as Jewish. Since 354,342 people (2.42 percent) identified themselves as Jews by religion, over half of Czechoslovakia’s Jews considered their identity a national as well as a religious one. Recognition of a separate Jewish nationality reduced the numbers of Germans and Hungarians, but it also obscured the fact that interwar Czechoslovakia had three distinct Jewish communities, each reflecting unique historical experiences.67

In Bohemia and Moravia the Jews (just over one percent of the population in 1930) had acculturated and assimilated in the nineteenth century, with full civic equality after 1867. The growth of strong anti-liberal and anti-Semitic attitudes among German nationalists led more Jews to identify as Czechs, but anti-Semitism was also a feature of Czech politics, both before and after independence. The Jews of Slovakia (4.1 percent of the population in 1930) initially adopted German, but later Magyar speech and culture. Jewish identification with Hungary and commercial and professional roles generated Slovak resentment and anti-Semitism. The Jewish community in Ruthenia, mostly Yiddish-speaking and Orthodox with strong Hasidic influence, was the largest (102,542 or 14.12 percent in 1930). Weaker Jewish identification with the Hungarians, and the Ruthenian peasantry’s lower level of social and national consciousness, made anti-Semitism in Ruthenia weaker than in Slovakia.

No Czechoslovak government tolerated anti-Semitism, which may help explain the weakness of Zionism in Czechoslovakia. Jews sent their children to Czech or Slovak schools, and they pursued their studies through the university level and into the professions, frequently assimilating into the national culture. The interwar years also saw an erosion of the cultural differences between the Jews of the Czech lands and those of Slovakia and Ruthenia. Overwhelmingly, the Jews accepted and supported the Czechoslovak state, and the alliance between the Jews and the “state-bearing” forces in Czechoslovakia brought positive results.

Czech-Slovak relations provide another measure of interwar Czechoslovakia’s success. Slovaks were part of the “state-bearing” Czechoslovak nation, but the term raised the question, were Czechs and
Slovaks two nations or one? Centralists argued that given the level of development in Slovakia, centralism was the only way to protect Slovakia from Hungarian revisionism. They also feared that autonomy for Slovakia would encourage the Germans, threatening the existence of the state. Slovak autonomists saw centralism as the root of all Slovakia’s problems, autonomy as the solution, and Slovak centralists as practically national apostates. Religious questions also created friction. The images of Hus, the White Mountain, and the Counter-Reformation provided the myths of Czech national consciousness and became part of the official rhetoric of the new Czechoslovakia. Catholic priests or Lutheran pastors often provided the only nationally conscious intelligentsia in Slovak villages, and society still deferred to them. The anti-clerical strain in Czech nationalism, as well as issues like separation of church and state, parochial schools, and relations with the Vatican, fueled tensions. Slovak Catholics and Slovak Lutherans (traditionally more likely to be “Czechoslovak”) were also often at odds.

Slovak industry suffered when it left Hungary and joined more industrialized Bohemia and Moravia. Combined with the depression from 1920 to 1923, this caused a drastic decline in Slovak industrial production, which nationalist rhetoric blamed on Prague’s “colonial” policies. Recovery between 1924 and 1929 did not quite reach 1913 levels before the Great Depression hit. Gradual improvement set in only after 1933, partly fueled by the strategic siting of armaments factories in Slovakia, and by 1937, Slovak industrial output had not only exceeded 1929 levels, but finally surpassed 1913.

The school system was a crucial cultural factor in Slovak integration into Czechoslovakia. The schools trained a new Slovak intelligentsia, but ironically in the process students became nationally conscious Slovaks. Nationalist rhetoric complained that they were victims of systematic Czech discrimination, but the problem was more one of perception than reality. Traditionally, education in Hungary had guaranteed state employment and higher social status. Many Slovak graduates thus sought jobs only in the state bureaucracy. The civil service was open to all on merit, however, and the government did not ensure that Slovaks as Slovaks received access to positions of prestige or influence in state institutions. The result was a case of rising expectations exceeding the system’s ability to meet them.

In the end, Czechoslovakia did not fulfill the two goals the Slovak nationalists had pursued since the mid-nineteenth century: national rec-
ognition and genuine autonomy. Nevertheless, the decision to cast the Slovaks’ lot in with the Czechs in 1918 brought them significant gains. They had a distinct territory with its own frontiers, capital, and institutions, and in spite of the state’s official ideology, Slovaks “did not sink into the ‘Czecho-Slovak nation,’ just as they had previously rejected the enticements of the ‘Hungarian political nation.’ They were Slovaks even before 1918, but afterwards everyone knew it.”

When he resigned as president in 1935, Masaryk asked parliament and all Czechoslovakia’s citizens to remember “that states maintain themselves by the ideas from which they were born.” How far Czechoslovakia lived and died by Masaryk’s ideas may be debated, but their influence on modern Czechoslovak history is undeniably profound. Masaryk’s precepts and example helped Czechoslovakia preserve parliamentary institutions, civic freedoms, and a high degree of personal liberty for all its citizens. Under the impact of Munich, Masaryk’s ideals were abandoned with unseemly haste by the so-called Second Republic. Vilified by the Nazis, Masaryk quickly became persona non grata under the Communists, too. Nevertheless, his ideas resurfaced in the aftermath of war, revolution, and communist dictatorship, when many Czechs and Slovaks returned to study and debate their significance to their hopes for a better future.