

## American Policy towards Czechoslovakia, 1918–1945

Written by Artem Zorin

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# American Policy towards Czechoslovakia, 1918–1945

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ARTEM ZORIN, MAR 13 2019

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Throughout the 19th century, demographic growth and poverty in the Habsburg Empire forced its Czech, Slovak and Ruthenian populations to migrate – particularly to the United States. By the beginning of the 20th century, approximately one and a half million Czechs and Slovaks lived in the United States. Despite the spread of *Czechoslovakism* (theory of united Czechoslovak nation), they were divided on political, ethnic and religious grounds. The Czech national movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fought for federalization of the Dual Monarchy and for Bohemia's historic state rights, equal with Austria and Hungary.[1] The slogan of creating their own state was not popular before World War I. National independence was widely popularized from 1915 by a group of political emigrants, headed by the Czech politician and philosopher Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. He argued for the need to dissolve Austria-Hungary in order to create a new national state of Czechs and Slovaks. This group established the National Council of the Czech Lands in Paris in order to look for the assistance of the Entente powers and to obtain the support of national communities abroad.[2]

Apart from the obvious importance of the US, Masaryk also connected his hopes with America because of personal reasons. He was married to an American citizen, Charlotte Garrigue, visited the US a few times before the war, and had lectured at the University of Chicago.[3] He also had close ties with wealthy Chicago businessman Charles Crane, a major sponsor of the Wilson's presidential election campaign, a philanthropist and patron of the University of Chicago's Slavic Program. Later, he became father-in-law of Tomáš Masaryk's son Jan. Crane's older son Richard later became the first US Minister to Prague, and another son, John became Masaryk's secretary.[4]

In 1915, Masaryk's supporters in America created the Bohemian National Alliance and in 1917 they founded the Czech-Slav Press Bureau in Washington to streamline propaganda for Czecho-Slovak independence. In June 1917, another leader of the Czecho-Slovak National Council, a Slovak named Milan Rastislav Štefanik, visited the US to meet its politicians and recruit volunteers to fight in Europe. As Masaryk's agents noted, public opinion in America was not well informed about Czecho-Slovak movement for independence, but had traditional sympathies for oppressed nations. Until 1918, the US government did not show much interest in the Czechoslovak issue. First, because of its limited interest in that region; second, because of lack of specialists and information; third, because of its unwillingness to intervene in territorial disputes and conflicts between European nations. President Wilson (1913–21) and his Secretary of State Robert Lansing (1915–20) expressed no desire to support Czechs, fearing the creation of a precedent for other nations (like Poles, Yugoslavs, Irish, etc.). However, Štefanik prompted discussion of the Czechoslovak problem in the American press.[5]

Despite the US declaration of war on Germany in April 1917, and on Austria-Hungary in December 1917, Washington had no particular plans for the post-war settlement in Central Europe and its territorial structure. The State Department had no separate division to deal with this region either. A special research group, the Inquiry, was established under Wilson's friend and adviser Colonel Edward M. House only in September 1917. Consisting mostly of academic experts, it had to make recommendations to the President and the Secretary of State regarding the post-war settlement.[6]

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Refusing to enter the Entente, the US was never in favour of secret agreements on territorial questions. Known as a supporter of national self-determination, President Wilson announced that the United States had no intentions for territorial annexation and fought for peace and justice in international relations. But, in practice, Wilson, the State Department and the Inquiry experts were cautious regarding this issue. In the 'Fourteen points,' the president declared in January 1918 that 'The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity to autonomous development,' but not to independence. The president, as well as his Entente allies did not want to destroy the empire, believing that it was needed for the maintenance of peace as well as economic and political stability in Central Europe, especially after the revolutionary explosion in Russia.[7] The main goal was to withdraw Vienna from the war. In 1917, the Entente powers began secret negotiations with representatives of new Austro-Hungarian Emperor Charles (1916–18), trying to force him to conclude a separate peace. Only in April 1918, when his unwillingness to break with Germany became evident, allies turned towards the policy of the empire's internal destabilization through the support of national movements.

By that time, the Czecho-Slovak Council created an important base for strengthening its influence. In 1917, the Russian Provisional government concluded an agreement with Masaryk about the organization of an autonomous Czechoslovak army of volunteers, POWs and deserters which was established for fighting the Central Powers. Two other legions were created in Italy and France.[8] But after the Russian October Revolution of 1917, and the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty between the Bolshevik government and the Central Powers in March 1918, using Czecho-Slovak troops against Germany on the Eastern Front became impossible. The French suggested transporting the Legion to the Western Front through Siberia and America. Stretching from Europe to the Far East along the Trans-Siberian Railway, Czechoslovak Legionaries were embroiled in the Russian civil war. They had become the main organized military force in this conflict and a trump card in the policy of the Czechoslovak National Council. These events became prerequisites for a gradual change in US policy towards Czechoslovak movement.[9]

Masaryk, after staying in Russia in 1917 for negotiations over the Legion, decided to go to the US the next spring. He intended to achieve three main objectives: to establish closer financial and political cooperation with Czech and Slovak organizations in America to get support for the transportation of Legionaries from Siberia to Europe; to persuade the Wilson administration, American politicians, and the American public to recognize and support the cause of Czechoslovak independence. During his six month visit (from May to November 1918), Masaryk achieved rapid success in his first goal. On 31 May 1918, in Pittsburgh, Czech and Slovak organizations in America signed, under the presidency of Masaryk, an agreement regarding the creation of a Czecho-Slovak state on an equal basis for both nations.[10] While Masaryk had no recognition for acting in the name of Czechs and Slovaks, this agreement played an important role in legitimating the Czechoslovak movement and himself as its leader. At this time, the State Department decided to change its position on the Czechoslovak question and support the Czech and Slovak movement with two main purposes: to destabilise the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the inside so as to shorten the war using the Czechoslovak Legion in Russia to weaken the Bolshevik's positions along the Trans-Siberian railroad, and to destabilise Japanese influence on the Russian Far East. Secretary of State Robert Lansing in a declaration on May 1918 stated that the 'nationalistic aspirations of Czechoslovaks and Yugo-Slavs for freedom' had the 'earnest sympathy' of the US government. Five days later, on June 3, the French, British and Italian prime ministers noted the American declaration 'with pleasure' and hastened to 'associate themselves' with it.[11] In June 1918, Czechoslovak Legionaries arrived in Vladivostok. By Masaryk's request for assistance, on 6 July, Wilson approved sending American US troops 'to help the Checho-Slovaks consolidate their forces and get into successful cooperation with their Slavic kinsmen and to steady any efforts at self-government or self-defence in which the Russians themselves may be willing to accept assistance.' [12]

Later, in summer 1918 when the Czechoslovak National Council was recognized by the French and British governments, Lansing put the question of the Czechoslovaks to the president. After searching for the most suitable wording, on 3 September 1918, the State Department declared that the United States recognized 'the Czecho-Slovak National Council as a de facto belligerent government clothed with proper authority to direct the military and political affairs of the Czecho-Slovaks.' [13] This decision primarily allowed for the provision of financial aid to the Council for the Legion's activities. But nothing was mentioned about Czechoslovakia as a state. However, in October 1918, the US refused the Austro-Hungarian proposal to start peace negotiations on the basis of the 'Fourteen points.'

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Washington added that the program was not in line with the recognition of the Czechoslovaks's right to self-determination.[14]

Soon after that, on 18 October 1918, Masaryk published in Washington the Declaration of Czechoslovak Independence, and personally handed it to Wilson.[15] On 28 October the Czechoslovak National Committee in Prague proclaimed the independence of Czechoslovakia, and established its power in Bohemia and Moravia. Masaryk was elected in absentia as the first president of the state. In November 1918, he left the US for Europe.[16] The main goals of his visit had been achieved. The third one – the return of the Czechoslovak Legion from Russia was performed partially. The US promised to promote its transportation across the Pacific Ocean. The Czechs's propaganda managed to attract the sympathy of Americans and created a positive image of Czechoslovaks, which could be used at the upcoming peace conference. But although France, Britain and Italy accorded *de jure* recognition to Czechoslovakia in October, the United States did not take such a step.[17]

### American diplomacy and the Czechoslovak question at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919

In 1919, the delegations of the victor countries gathered in Paris to discuss and sign peace treaties and create a new territorial and political order. Leaders of the three main allied powers played the principal roles at the meetings: David Lloyd George of Great Britain, George Clemenceau of France and Woodrow Wilson of the United States. It was the first American experience in such a global forum as an equal Great Power. Wilson became the first acting US president to go abroad to personally lead the American delegation.

The Allies had a common goal – to prevent aggressions and a new war, but they saw different ways of achieving it. Entente leaders intended to radically change the balance of power in Europe and to weaken their former enemies' geographic and economic positions. President Wilson aspired to change the whole international relations system. He proposed to use the principle of national self-determination to create new interstate borders based on ethnic boundaries and the people's free opinions in every disputed territory. Wilson supposed that while his plan could present new conflicts between nations, it would also provide conditions for economic recovery and development in Central Europe, and it would allow new states to protect themselves from external and internal threats.

The Czechoslovak delegation in Paris, led by Masaryk's close companion in the fight for independence, Edvard Beneš, presented its territorial demands in February 1919. He proposed to draw the Czechoslovak borders according to historical, economic, military and strategic considerations. Beneš and his colleagues wanted to create a strong state, and demanded the inclusion of vast areas with German populations in Bohemia and Moravia (Sudetenland), Hungarians in Southern Slovakia, Poles in a small but important industrial area of Teschen in Czech Silesia, and Ruthenians in the East. The Czech army occupied Sudeten areas before the Conference began. The same happened with Slovakia in 1919. But in Teschen, they met strong resistance from Poland. Beneš also mentioned Lusatia (Slavic area in Germany) and Burgenland (the corridor along the new border between Austria and Hungary to Yugoslav state). Thus, Czechoslovakia was supposed to become a little multinational empire like the defunct Austria-Hungary, but with the dominance of the Czechs. Beneš explained that all these areas were needed for the existence of the State.[18]

French delegates were the main supporters of Czech demands. They wanted to create a strong counterweight to Germany and its former allies in Central Europe, as well as a *cordon sanitaire* against the spread of Bolshevism from Russia. For the same reasons, the British agreed. A member of the Inquiry and the American delegation, Charles Seymour, wrote in his memoirs that the French and the British wanted to create Czechoslovakia with defendable borders and a solid economic foundation.[19]

Inquiry experts suggested using primarily language lines, but took into account historical, administrative and economic factors. Their preliminary report favoured an independent Czechoslovakia, including historically Czech lands, Slovak territories of Hungary and Ruthenia. The main reason was the desire of their population to live in one state. But the position of Austrian, German and Hungarian borderlands, inhabited by non-Slavic citizens was subject for further research and discussion.[20] Investigating the situation and real wishes of the population, American experts visited different areas of the former Austria-Hungary. Some of them were in opposition with Czech demands

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for very vast territories.

The main decisions were made by the Czech Committee of the Peace Conference, and the Counsel of Ten, which included representatives of the main powers. American delegates had to move away from the original Wilsonian position. Most of Beneš's demands were granted, excluding Lusatia and Burgenland. The question of Teschen was handed over for special discussion between Prague and Warsaw. Later, the president wrote to his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing that 'ethnic lines cannot be drawn without the greatest injustice and injury' in Bohemia.[21] However, the Czechs's excessive territorial claims were reduced and Prague had to guarantee the rights of national minorities. But contrary to the Pittsburgh agreement, the republic was created as a unitary state (Czechoslovakia, not Czecho-Slovakia). Ruthenians, Germans, Hungarians and Poles did not receive broad autonomy.

The behaviour of European allies as well as the growing nationalism of the small nations caused disappointment in American society. The Congress refused to ratify the Paris Peace Treaties. In the 1920 elections, the Republican Party defeated the Democrats. The new administration declared the return to isolationism as a traditional course of American foreign policy. As a result, in the 1920s, the US withdrew from direct involvement in European international politics.

### **The United States and Czechoslovakia, 1920–1930s: from politics to economy**

The years of the Paris Peace Conference marked the beginning of political and economic relations between the United States and Czechoslovakia. In June 1919, the first American minister, Richard Crane, son of Charles Crane arrived in Prague. His brother-in-law and son of Tomáš Masaryk became the first Czechoslovak chargé d'affaires to the US in December 1919.[22] These appointments stressed close personal ties between the two countries.

Even before establishing official political relations, Washington started giving financial help to the Czechoslovaks. In 1918, the Czecho-Slovak Council received the first US loan for Legion operations in Russia.[23] In February 1919, the American Relief Administration (ARA), under the direction of Herbert Hoover, began its mission in Prague.[24] Its activities in Central Europe were directed at rebuilding commercial links so as to start reconstruction and prevent hunger, poverty and political radicalism. The ARA was engaged in providing food supplies to the war-torn republic; American experts worked on the restoration of Bohemian industry and trade relations in the region. Soon, the Czechoslovak government succeeded in getting a US loan to purchase raw cotton for the textile industry.[25] All of this laid a good foundation for further cooperation. It also gave American experts better understanding of the region's economic and political features and made a base for further cooperation.

The Republicans, who replaced the Democrats in power in 1921, sought to change the Wilsonian course of active intervention in European political affairs to isolationism. But after the war, the United States were strongly connected with European countries in financial and economic areas.[26] The growing American economy was looking for new markets and one of them could be Central Europe. Reducing political relations, the Americans did not want to abandon financial, economic and trade cooperation. But further development and deepening of these ties required the settlement of a number of contradictions.

There were two major problems which dominated Washington's decision-makers regarding its contact with the government in Prague. The first problem, inherited from Wilson's Administration, was connected to the huge war debts of former American allies in Europe, including Czechoslovakia. During the war and the settlement period, the US provided loans for military and food supplies and the restoration of the economy. Their pay was delayed due to difficulties in the economic recovery. In 1922, the US Congress established the World War Foreign Debts Commission to determine the exact amounts of debts which could be used by the State Department to conclude repayment agreements with all debtors. France, Britain and Italy were the main American debtors, Czechoslovakia had the seventh position in the list.[27] The official Czechoslovak debt to the US in the early 1920s was \$110 million. It included different loans for the ARA's relief supplies, repatriation of the Legionaries from Russia, purchases of military materials and accrued interest.[28] The government in Prague recognized most of the Czechoslovak war debts, but tried to obtain more favourable conditions for their payment. Negotiations lasted for a few years and finished in 1925 when the State Department blocked negotiations between Czech and American financial

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representatives over new loans and credits. As a result, Czechoslovakia was forced to sign the debt agreement which provided a 62 year term of payment and the total final amount of \$312 million.[29] This opened the way for further American investment in the Czechoslovak economy.

However, the economic crisis of 1929 resulted in a sharp fall in international trade and a reduction in foreign exchange. In 1931, US President Herbert Hoover suggested a one-year moratorium on all inter-state debts and reparations to support the European economy. The following year, the Lausanne Conference suspended World War I reparations. After that, the main US debtors – France and Great Britain – raised the question of suspending payments to the United States. The new administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, which came to power in 1933, tried to work out new agreements.[30] Nevertheless, all debtors stopped payments in 1934. By that year, Czechoslovakia had paid about \$ 20 million.

The White House raised the debt question again in December 1937 when the Czechoslovak government showed interested in new loans from the United States. Also, Prague, which had been in difficult international conditions and facing a potential conflict with Germany, looked for political support in Washington. The Czechs notified the US about their readiness to start new discussions on a debt agreement.[31] However, the occupation of Czech lands by Germany in March 1939 put an end to these intentions. The US Congress proposed to shift the Czechoslovak debts to Germany, but the hope of resolving this problem was very small.[32]

The second main concern among American politicians regarding Czechoslovakia in the 1920s and 1930s was related to the regulation of trade and the protection of American business interests. World War I had destroyed the united Austro-Hungarian market. During the Paris Peace Conference, ARA experts were unsuccessful in trying to rebuild economic ties between successor states, which were necessary for political stability and strength.[33] But in the 1920s, American diplomats and politicians left this idea and highlighted another task – the promotion and defending of American business interests.

In post-war conditions, the highly developed and export-oriented Czech economy looked attractive for foreign investment. On the other hand, Czechoslovak industry needed new sources of raw materials and export markets. But there were some obstacles to the development of trade relations – protectionist trade barriers and import licensing.[34] The State Department's attempts to overcome this system were a part of its common policy pursuing the liberalization of international trade. In 1923, the State Department initiated the most favourable national trade agreement with Prague. But because of Prague's unwillingness to abandon its import licensing system protecting Czech industry, the treaty was concluded with mutual concessions in import quotas and duties as a temporary *modus vivendi* for only two years. In 1924, it was declared termless and continued to operate for the next 10 years.[35]

On the basis of the most favourable nation, US diplomats tried to lobby American business interests, ensuring additional import license provisions from Prague. But Czechoslovak manufacturers often blocked the growing demands of their competitors. Complaining about discrimination, the American Minister in Prague and the State Department attempted to apply pressure on the government in Prague by threatening retaliatory measures against Czechoslovak products.[36] However, these actions were not too active because the trade was not very large.

During the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover's administration tried to return to ARA's policy of support for economic rapprochement with Central European countries and their speedy recovery. In 1931–1932 American diplomats took part in discussions about establishment of the Danubian Confederation and the creation of a customs union in the region, which would also include Czechoslovakia. The State Department agreed to maintain Czechoslovakia as the most favoured nation of the union states, if they would not provide special trade privileges to other countries. But Washington refused direct financial support, and because of this political controversy, negotiations stalled and the project was never realised.[37]

Economic crises caused the rise of protectionist tariffs and duties in all countries. Along with the revival, the US began a new program of international trade liberalization. Since 1934 the Department of State had negotiated bilateral agreements with the main trading partners on the basis of unconditional most favoured nation treatment,

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intending to spread this regime gradually to the whole international trade.[38] In 1935, the State Department studied conditions of mutual trade with Czechoslovakia in response to the Czech request. But American experts found that the Czechoslovak government discriminated against some American goods, while giving additional trade privileges to neighbouring countries of the Danubian area. As a temporary measure in 1935, Washington and Prague signed a new *modus vivendi*, stipulating the application of all trade benefits given to other countries to mutual American-Czechoslovak commercial relations.[39]

After that, the Department of State suggested to the Czechoslovak government to negotiate trade agreement conditions corresponding more to American interests. The process was complicated by the Czechs's wishes to have a special regime for Danubian trade and for some kinds of American products. Notwithstanding, in the context of rising conflict with Germany and a reduction of external commercial relations, the Czechoslovak economy was extremely interested in the trade agreement with the United States.[40] Negotiations lasted for about a year; then in early 1938, the Americans declared to the Czechs that the US was ready to refuse the new trade agreement if their proposals were not accepted and on 7 March 1938 the agreement was signed.[41]

The deal was criticized on both sides. The State Department's concessions to Czechoslovakia were attacked in the Congress by representatives and senators who were afraid of rising competition for American shoes manufacturers.[42] The agreement with Czechoslovakia was in place for less than a year. On the next day after the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, the Congress requested the abolishment of all trade preferences for Czechoslovakian goods, and to increase duties on the basis of trade conditions with Germany. The State Department approved this decision on 17 March 1939.[43]

### The American reaction to the Czechoslovak-German conflict of 1938–1939

In the second half of the 1930s, Czechoslovakia faced not only trade and economic recovery, but also a serious of political changes. In 1935, President Tomáš Masaryk resigned at the age of 85 because of health problems, and was succeeded by his close friend and associate, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Edvard Beneš. But more important for Czechoslovak's future was the change of political regime in neighbouring Germany, which was governed by the National Socialist Party beginning in 1933. Focusing on the injustice of Versailles Peace Treaty, the new Nazi Chancellor Adolf Hitler raised the question of discrimination against Germans in neighbouring states, including Czechoslovakia. The Hungarian and Polish authorities expressed similar claims to Prague.[44]

In such circumstances, Prague tried to reinforce old alliances with new guarantees and allies. In 1934, the Czechoslovak government established diplomatic relations with the USSR (a year after the US). In 1935, Moscow and Prague signed a treaty of mutual assistance providing military support to Czechoslovakia that was regarded by Hitler as a new threat to German security. Afterwards, he directly supported the Sudeten-German nationalist movement in Czechoslovakia. Thus, Berlin aimed to destabilize the republic.[45]

From the American point of view, the Czechoslovak crisis appeared in the background of other international tensions in Europe and Asia. Holding its isolationist policy, the US was mostly interested in the Far East situation. But Roosevelt's administration, as well as the Congress and the public were strongly concerned with the crisis in Central Europe, fearing a new great war that the Americans did not want to be drawn into. Condemning the aggressive actions in Europe, Roosevelt and the State Department were only outside observers, not wanting to be drawn into the Czechoslovak-German conflict. In April 1937, the Czechoslovak *chargé d'affaires* in Washington, Otakar Kabeláč reported to Prague that the US desired 'to beware of any military conflict.' He noted a lack of awareness and interest of the American public in the development of the Czechoslovak situation.[46]

The Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles was the first to allow the possibility of a US intervention. Welles, who visited Europe in the fall of 1937, proposed an international conference in Washington to review the conditions of the Versailles Treaty. But both the President and Secretary of State (Cordell Hull) were opposed to direct involvement in Europe.[47] An important debate over the different perspectives on the 'Czechoslovak crisis' was launched between the American representatives in Europe. The Ambassador to the UK, Joseph Kennedy, taking a pro-British position, supported Neville Chamberlain's appeasement policy. Thus, Kennedy stated the need for Czechoslovak

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concessions to Germany and the federalization of Czechoslovakia.[48] The Ambassador to France, William Bullitt, insisted on concessions too, seeing them as the only way to avoid war. He laid some part of responsibility on Beneš, and even made accusations against him in an effort to provoke a Franco-British clash with Germany. In May 1938, Bullitt proposed to Franklin D. Roosevelt to initiate an international conference which could force Prague to make concessions or, in case of failure to do so – to free France from its allied obligations to Czechoslovakia. Later, he repeated this sentence several times. Actually, that was an offer to sacrifice Czechoslovakia for the sake of peace. The main supporter of Prague was American Minister to Prague Wilbour Carr, who believed that the United States, as one of the co-creators of Czechoslovakia and all European post-war settlements, was responsible for the fate of the republic and had to support it.[49]

In May 1938, the Czechoslovak Minister in Washington, Vladimir Hurban, reported to Prague that the threat from Germany significantly increased American attention towards and sympathy for Czechoslovakia.[50] By the fall of 1938, correspondents of leading American newspapers and radio stations were sent to Prague and Berlin to report directly on the development of the crisis.[51] At its peak, after the German ultimatum to Prague on 23 September 1938 to transfer the Sudeten German regions before 1 October 1938 under threat of war, Czechoslovakia was on the front pages of American newspapers and major radio stations released updates regularly.[52] The Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, pointed out in his diary that, in those days, the government's attention was completely focused on the situation in Europe, which was in danger of a general war.[53]

This pushed President Roosevelt to make his first appeal. On 26 September 1938, he asked Germany, Czechoslovakia, Great Britain and France not to interrupt the negotiations. On 27 September, in the second appeal, Roosevelt called on all concerned states to resolve the conflict in a conference. American participation in this meeting was not mentioned. Moreover, President Roosevelt asked Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini to persuade Hitler to continue negotiations. By Washington's request, the appeal was supported by Latin American states.[54] It had to demonstrate Roosevelt's concern and desire for preventing war while holding with isolationism policy.

On 28 September, Mussolini appealed to the German chancellor with a proposal to hold a conference on the Sudeten problem but with a narrow list of participants – France, Britain, Germany and Italy, excluding Czechoslovak representatives. That was a serious distortion of the American plan. The Munich agreement, signed on 30 September 1938, approved Hitler's demands for the Sudetenland. As Prague found itself one-on-one against Berlin, it was forced to accept the Munich agreement. Soon Hungary and Poland, using the weakening of Czechoslovakia, had also obtained some territories of Czechoslovakia.

The first reaction on the peaceful end of the Czechoslovak crisis in the United States was a relief. The State Department concluded that the crisis was overcome and Secretary of State Hull said that the achieved results caused a 'general sense of relief.' But the US refused to give their official approval.[55] A large part of the US population sympathized with the Czechs. According to one poll, 70% felt that the Munich agreement and the German attachment of the Sudetenland were unfair. At the same time, the majority supported British and French actions for preventing a new war.[56] According to the Czechoslovak Legation in Washington, the American press felt mistrust towards the agreement, believing that peace rested on very insecure and shaky grounds.[57]

President Beneš, under pressure of Berlin, was forced to resign and left to the UK. In February 1939, he went to the United States for lectures. In America, Beneš received a very warm welcome. He was grateful to Roosevelt for his appeal before Munich, but was quite unhappy with the attitudes of the US ambassadors to Britain, France and Germany, as well as the support for appeasement among some US politicians.[58]

The next German step – the invasion of Czecho-Slovakia (after Munich, the republic was reorganized into a federation) on 15 March 1939 – met a strong US opposition. After the republic was divided into three pieces – the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (attached to Germany), Slovakia (nominally independent) and Ruthenia (annexed by Hungary). On 17 March, Welles officially condemned the German acts of 'wanton lawlessness and of arbitrary force' against Czechoslovakia, 'which have resulted in the temporary extinguishment of the liberties of a free and independent people with whom, from the day when the Republic of Czechoslovakia attained its independence, the people of the United States have maintained specially close and friendly relations.' At a press conference on 24

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March, Secretary Hull called German actions an international lawlessness. The State Department announced that the US had not recognized the new status of Bohemia and Moravia.[59] It also rejected the recognition of the independent Slovakia and Hungary's annexation of Ruthenia. However, the German occupation of Czechia was recognized as *de facto*. American Legation in Prague was closed (while maintaining the consulate) and the Minister was recalled to the United States. At the same time, the Czechoslovak diplomatic mission in Washington, headed by Vladimír Hruban (who was assigned by Beneš and refused to resign at Berlin's request), continued its existence as an official representation of the temporarily occupied republic.

### The United States and the restoration of Czechoslovakia during World War Two

The Munich agreement and occupation initiated a new wave of emigration and exile from Czechoslovakia to the West. The US, as 25 years before, became one of the main centers of the Czech national movement. But the majority of American Slovaks supported the creation of the First Slovak Republic. In 1939, American Czechs established a new Czechoslovak National Council, and elected Beneš as the head of the national liberation movement. Since March 1939, he returned to politics and actively promoted the idea of liberation and restoration of pre-Munich Czechoslovakia.[60] While in the US, he tried to meet Roosevelt for support, but the president instructed the State Department to tell Beneš 'not come to Washington at this time nor ask for an appointment with him.'[61]

However, for his 55<sup>th</sup> birthday, on 28 May 1939, Beneš was invited to Roosevelt's residence at Hyde Park for a private unofficial and confidential meeting. Beneš put forward to the president the idea of organizing a provisional government and military forces. But Roosevelt's answer was just sympathy for Czechs and disapproval of German actions against Czechoslovakia.[62] He did not want to give direct and public support for anti-German struggle in the US, believing that Washington's decision of non-recognition of Munich and saving Czechoslovak Legation were enough. Beneš was satisfied by this policy and the president's comment to recognize the Czechoslovak government in exile when the time came.[63] Roosevelt acted accordingly with public mood – Americans had no desire to intervene in European conflicts, keeping a distance and speaking only about the moral deprecation of military aggression.

The beginning of World War 2, on 1 September, had not brought any important changes in the American position on Czechoslovakia. For three years, Beneš and the Czechoslovak National Committee, established in Paris from political refugees (later moved to London and transformed into the government-in-exile of the Czechoslovak Republic), was trying to achieve official recognition from the US. The State Department had consistently rejected Czech requests explaining that there was a lack of continuity between the Czechoslovak and Beneš governments.[64] But the real reason was probably its reluctance to get involved in a conflict with Germans, Hungarians and Poles because of Czechs.

The first changes in the American position came in the middle of 1941. In July 1941, after the German invasion of the USSR, London and Moscow gave full *de jure* recognition to Beneš as a president-in-exile.[65] On 30 July, Roosevelt in a personal message to Beneš, informed him of the US decision to establish a permanent relationship with Beneš as a 'president of the provisional Czechoslovak government' through ambassador Anthony J. D. Biddle, who performed a similar function for other governments in exile in London.[66] But the official *de jure* recognition of Beneš as a president of Czechoslovakia followed only in October 1942 after the US entry into the war.[67]

Despite the establishment of official ties with the Beneš government, Americans demonstrated little interest in the Protectorate and Slovakia. There were only occasional mentions related to Beneš or Nazi crimes and terror in diplomatic correspondences or in the press. Often the question of Czechoslovakia was closely intertwined with Poland and other countries of Central Europe. In discussions and interviews Beneš was perceived by American diplomats and journalists mostly not as a president, but as an expert in European and international relations and Soviet foreign policy.

In 1943, when the first signs of German weakness and the possibility of victory came, Beneš decided to improve his position by direct negotiations with two new main allied powers – the US and the USSR. In the US, he wanted to strengthen his position in the American Czech community and to establish cooperation with Slovak organizations.



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They supported the United States in the war not only against Germany, but also against the Slovak Republic, which as a German ally declared war on the US in December 1941. Beneš also sought American support before his visit to the USSR in December 1943. In Moscow, the Czechoslovak president intended to sign a treaty of friendship with the Soviet government. In this regard, Beneš wanted to use the United States as a counterweight to Soviet influence in accordance with his post-war foreign policy program – reliance on new allies against Germany (instead of France and the UK, responsible for the Munich borders) and equal orientation to the West and the East.[68]

The visit to the United States lasted from 8 May to 9 June 1943. Americans met the Czechoslovak President with official honours, Beneš made a speech at the Congress, and he held meetings with the Secretary of State, politicians, public figures, and Czech and Slovak community leaders. Touching upon the problems of post-war Europe, Beneš argued the need to develop close cooperation with the Soviet Union, owing to its growing power in Europe.[69] American diplomats and experts accepted this argument, as long as Czechoslovakia turned to the USSR not as a forced but as a natural step. According to Beneš, Roosevelt had supported demands for pre-Munich boundaries, agreed with the transfer of a number of Germans from Czechoslovakia, and expressed satisfaction with Czechoslovak-Soviet relations, but he did not express a desire to sign a similar agreement.[70] The participation of American troops in the liberation of Czechoslovakia was not discussed.

By 1945, Americans did not show much interest in the Czechoslovak issue. The State Department was not active in establishing closer cooperation with Beneš' government.[71] The situation in the Protectorate and Slovakia was observed mostly as relevant for the war operations planning and anti-German propaganda activities. It was obvious that liberation of Czechoslovakia would come from the Red Army, and the Soviet Union would have the main impact in the region. Beneš, as he stated in 1943 in Washington, thought it was inevitable and was trying to build close relations with Moscow.

The State Department's Division of Central European Affairs in its memorandum of 11 January 1945 stated that 'the Czechoslovak government's relations with the British and Soviet governments are excellent, and present no problems. Czechoslovak-American relations remain excellent, as they have been in the past.' The Division recommended to restore Czechoslovak republic in pre-Munich borders and to maintain relations with it, contributing in democratic changes and elections.[72]

By the beginning of 1945, the Red Army had begun liberating the eastern part of Slovakia and continued to go west. US troops, moving from France and Italy, were approaching Bohemia. Soviet influence was growing but there were no strong desires from Roosevelt to dispute Moscow's intention to forge closer relations with Prague, supported by Czechs. In Yalta and other meetings, the American and Soviet sides agreed that Czechoslovakia would be liberated by both armies and two occupation zones would be created. Both approved restoration of pre-Munich borders, the creation of a democratic multiparty government and deportations of German and Hungarian minorities. The future of post-war Czechoslovakia had to be decided in upcoming democratic elections.

In March 1945, Beneš visited Moscow again and reached new agreements about the government structure and post-war political orientation of Czechoslovakia. Some important positions in the coalition People's front government were given to communists, and others belonged to the democratic parties. Gathered in the Slovak city, Košice, the Czechoslovak government announced its program of post-war development on 5 April 1945, which presupposed socialist reforms and closer relations with the USSR.[73] Without disputing the results of the Moscow talks, the State Department protested only twice: when Moscow refused to allow American diplomats to Košice, and after Soviet annexation of Ruthenia, agreed upon by Beneš. In April 1945, American troops entered Bohemia and came close to Prague. Having real opportunities to liberate the Czechoslovak capital in May before the Red Army (that was the desire of the British, supported by some State Department officials), they stopped on Dwight D. Eisenhower's order at the agreed borderline of the Soviet and American zones. The general did not want to dispute Moscow's positions in the region and sacrifice American soldiers in vain.[74] After the end of war, US troops were located in Western Bohemia through the end of 1945, when they were simultaneously withdrawn simultaneously with the Red Army by agreement between Truman and Stalin.[75]

American diplomatic representation in Prague was re-established in late May 1945. The following months, the Red

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Army and US troops were trying to implement allied agreements in their zones. But unlike the Soviet Union, America was not interested in strengthening its military presence or deepening relations with the Czechoslovak government, and refused to enter into any additional civil agreement. Despite their dissatisfaction with Soviet and Communist actions, and calls for support from Czechoslovak democratic forces, the United States showed no intentions of increasing its influence in the republic or playing an active role in the life of the republic. Apparently, American diplomats had hoped for the performance of Soviet promises not to interfere in Czechoslovak internal affairs, and waited for the impending democratic elections, which were to strengthen democratic pro-Western forces. However, over the next three years, the Communists were able to gradually increase their influence, and in 1948, Czechoslovakia entered the Soviet zone of influence for the next 40 years.

In conclusion, it can be noted that the US manifested a little interest towards Czechoslovakia, except during the crisis years. The most active American involvement in Czechoslovakia was observed in 1918–1919, during the founding of the state. During World War I, the US was concerned with the possible destabilization of Central Europe in the case of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and thus it delayed recognition of the national movement of the Czechs and Slovaks. After the war, American experts and diplomats tried to work out a new territorial arrangement to create stable borders and restore economic ties in Central Europe in order to avoid new conflicts and wars. But Wilson's desire to use new principles in international relations encountered difficulties. After his demission in 1921, the US turned back to isolationism and relations with Czechoslovakia shifted to economic and financial areas. Although the US policy towards Czechoslovakia was positive and friendly in nature, the State Department never demonstrated great interest in deepening political or economic relations. The impulse came primarily from the Czechoslovak side, who considered the United States an important potential force for Central Europe, capable of becoming an additional guarantor of Czechoslovak freedom and independence, as well as a profitable trading partner. But both the Americans and the Czechs were able to defend their own interests, especially in economic relations.

In the 1930s, a new international crisis caused new public interest in Czechoslovakia in the US. The main aspiration of American leaders was the prevention of war, even at the expense of concessions to Germany. Roosevelt did not want to intervene directly in the conflict, and only at its peak took the initiative to resolve it. But direct aggression by Germany in March 1939, which led to the destruction of Czechoslovakia and the redrawing of borders in Central Europe, was strongly condemned as a violation of international law.

During World War II, the US refused to recognize the disappearance of Czechoslovakia, and it was neither in a hurry to support President Beneš' activities for liberation, nor wanting to get involved in international disputes between Central European nations. By the end of the war, Washington adopted Beneš' plan of stabilization, based on the restoration of former borders and transfers of national minorities. In fact, it was a return to the idea of ethnic lines. Roosevelt also agreed with growing Soviet influence and its priority interests in Czechoslovakia, but hoped for the maintenance of democratic traditions and cooperation between different political forces. But, unlike the Soviet Union, the US did not have a program for the development of relations with Czechoslovakia. Finally, Moscow offered Prague more favourable conditions for cooperation, which led to a gradual strengthening of Moscow's influence and Czechoslovakia's change to communism.

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