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*Slavomír Michálek\***Czechoslovak Foreign Policy after World War Two.  
New Winds or Mere Dreams?*

The United States and the Soviet Union, the world's two new superpowers, became the decisive factors in post-World War Two development. Their relations influenced the polarization of Europe as a whole and were also reflected in the internal affairs of individual states. Traditional economic links had been ruptured by the war, by the German occupation of a substantial part of continental Europe, and finally by the defeat of the Axis powers. Part of Europe was liberated by the armies of the Soviet Union and part by the armies of the western Allies. External influences on the internal organizations of individual European states objectively diverged. The belief prevailed in newly liberated countries that all problems could be and must be solved in Washington or Moscow.

What were the ideas and goals of the two victorious superpowers in newly liberated Europe? The Soviet Union manoeuvred with remarkable effectiveness in postwar European politics, and yet its aims were relatively simply. The basic goal was to apply pressure on its partners in the anti-Hitler coalition to fulfil the various tenets of the Yalta and Potsdam Agreements, which the Soviet Union interpreted in its own way. This approach gradually paved the way toward the transition of Eastern European countries from a Soviet sphere of interest to a united bloc directed from the centre. This sphere of influence/bloc included the countries the Soviet army had passed through. Geographically, it was a belt of neighbouring states in central and southeast Europe.

The general strategic line of American foreign policy after World War Two emerged from a variety of factors. One of the fundamental features was its own territorial, political, and economic interests. As in the case of Soviet foreign policy, the aim was to fill the power vacuum in the world; this aim was officially justified by America's emergence as the provider of 'national security'. Consequently, the dominant feature of American foreign policy was the effort to organize postwar development according to its own ideas and to secure access to important raw materials, sources of energy, and markets for American products in developing world markets. In other words, we need not harbour any illusions about American foreign policy. Like the Soviet Union, it strived to

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satisfy its own superpower interests. It should be noted that the United States interpreted Soviet ideological expansion in Central Europe as unveiled expansion of political power and thus countered with its own strategy of containing communism within a certain set of frontiers.

What was the international position of Czechoslovakia after World War Two? What were the intentions and aims of its foreign policy and what were the real possibilities of realizing these aims? Czechoslovak and foreign historiographers have already adequately answered this and other related questions.<sup>1</sup>

On the basis of a review of the available material, I incline to the view of the majority of authors, namely that the international position of Czechoslovakia in the postwar period was the most contradictory of all Central European countries. Although the basic treaty elements of Czechoslovak foreign policy included the December 1943 treaty with the Soviet Union, it was not the only significant document that determined the international context and future of the country. To the contrary, many serious international legal questions concerning both the past and future were addressed only after the war, and, as a result of this ongoing process, Czechoslovak diplomacy began to turn toward the western powers. However, the fact also remains that because of its past experience, the Czechoslovak Republic also looked to the Soviet Union, not only as its Slavic brother and chief liberator but also as the only effective barrier against a possible future threat from Germany. Indeed, this may have been the most important consideration in Czechoslovak foreign policy in the immediate postwar years.

Let us then accept the assumption that postwar Czechoslovakia had the most contradictory international position in the Central Europe, and explore the notion that the internal and external economic, cultural and commercial interests of the country nevertheless dictated an orientation toward the West. The political aspect is more complex. I maintain that Czechoslovakia belonged to Western Europe politically, but that resentment from the recent past, postwar admiration for Soviet military strength, and recent experience with Germany tilted the country toward the East in terms of its political orientation. One must also remember that Czechoslovakia did not operate in a vacuum, and from the beginning of the postwar period it was consistently pushed to the East.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details on this problem, see: G. Lundestad: *American Non-Policy Toward Eastern Europe*. Oslo 1975; W. Diamond: *Czechoslovakia Between East and West*. London 1947; W. Ullmann: *The United States in Prague*. New York 1978; J. N. Stevens: *Czechoslovakia at the Crossroads*. New York 1985; D. Yergin: *Shattered Peace, the Origins of the Cold War and the National Security State 1945–1948*. New York 1978; J. Čierny: *Nová orientácia československej zahraničnej politiky v rokoch 1941–1948* [The New Orientation of Czechoslovak Foreign Policy in the Period 1941–1948]. Bratislava 1979; P. Petruš: *USA a studená vojna* [The USA and the Cold War]. Bratislava 1984; J. Šedivý: *KSČ a československá zahraničná politika* [The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and Czechoslovak Foreign Policy]. Praha 1961; J. Brouček: *Československá tragédie* [The Czechoslovak Tragedy]. New York 1953; K. Kaplan: *Pravda o Československu* [The Truth about Czechoslovakia]. Praha 1990.

The original ambition of Czechoslovakia in the postwar period was to situate itself somewhere in the middle, on the boundary between the two 'worlds'. This strategy was supported above all by Jan Masaryk, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and by most Czechoslovak political figures of the time. Because of its advantageous geographical position, Czechoslovakia had the opportunity to represent a European element that could use the existence of two distinct spheres to its favour. The situation appeared unavoidable: not only was the developed West an important postwar factor, but it was also necessary to consider the role of the Soviet Union in Europe. However, little time was needed to realize that this Czechoslovak middle way, 'the policy of the bridge', could only succeed if cooperation within the anti-Hitler coalition continued after the war, but there was little likelihood of that after the defeat of their common enemy.

The postwar period in Czechoslovak foreign policy became a time when a number of political factors and pressures gradually took hold and finally culminated in the events of February 1948. The brief era of pluralist democracy in the Czechoslovak Republic was followed by the establishment of single party dictatorship (the Czechoslovak Communist Party) and the gradual deterioration of economic and moral freedom, as well as living standards. Czechoslovakia became a firm part of the Soviet eastern bloc and 'the policy of the bridge' was revealed as empty illusion.

If we study the period from 1945 to February 1948, during which Czechoslovakia was slowly incorporated, politically and economically, into the Soviet bloc, we can define Czechoslovak foreign policy, its efforts and the results of these efforts, into three brief but distinct phases.

The first phase is the immediate postwar period, or the development of the Czechoslovak Republic immediately after the end of the war. In this phase, the need to repair war damage to the economy played the dominant role. The UNRRA transfer of goods known as Lend-Lease continued, questions regarding the transfer of minorities were solved, and the simultaneous departure of the Soviet and American troops from Czechoslovak territory was successfully completed. Czechoslovakia participated in the birth of the United Nations in San Francisco, nationalized its industry, and attempted to procure American credits and reconstruction loans. On the other side, the so-called 'uranium agreement' was signed with the Soviet Union in October 1945, according to which 90% of uranium extracted in Czechoslovakia was promised to the Soviet Union. In September 1946, the Czechoslovak delegate to the Paris Peace Conference applauded a speech by Andrej Vyšinský on the enslavement of European nations in the form of dollar aid, and American 'economic imperialism' that sought to secure control of the region with dirty money.<sup>2</sup> This seemingly insignificant episode might well be called 'the most expensive applause in history'. American Secretary of

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<sup>2</sup> Státní ústřední archiv (SUA) [Central State Archives], Praha, fond MZV-VA 1945–1951, č.kr. 493, *Daily News*, October 18, 1946.

State J. Byrnes reacted by stopping payment on a 50 million dollar credit to Prague for the purchase of surplus American military supplies in Europe. Czechoslovakia received only 10 million dollars and negotiation for an additional 50 million dollar reconstruction loan was effectively ended. Thus Czechoslovakia lost access to some ninety million dollars. This was obviously a political decision on the part of the American administration: namely, that the United States would not support a country with a different view on American economic aid. Another source of ongoing difficulty in Czechoslovak-American bilateral relations was the unwillingness of the Czechs to resolve the issue of compensation for confiscated or nationalized American property with a value of 149 million dollars, a not insignificant sum.

However, there were also positive developments in Czechoslovak-American relations during this phase. For example, trade between the two countries increased. The Czechoslovak-American Declaration on Commercial Policy was signed on November 8, 1946 and can be counted as a Czechoslovak success. This declaration ended the 'treatyless' state between Czechoslovakia and America in the area of trade and economic relations. The original Czechoslovak-American commercial agreement had been signed in March 1938 but was unilaterally revoked by the American side in April 1939 after the break up of the Czechoslovak Republic. The most important article of the November 1946 declaration was the reciprocal granting of most favoured nation (MFN) status.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the best, almost textbook example of the success or failure of the Czechoslovak policy of being a bridge between East and West in the period from 1945 to 1948 had to do with the European Recovery Programme (ERP) formally established in 1947, which eventually became known as the Marshall Plan.

The economic and political aspects of American interests in Europe found form in the Marshall Plan – an effort to achieve primacy in the political arena, to penetrate European markets, and to decisively influence the European future. This plan was then supplemented by strategic aspects. Washington believed that the power vacuum after the defeat of Germany and its allies, and the weakening of Great Britain and France would be filled by the Soviet Union. The only way to prevent this was to fill the vacuum with a regime of economic and political renewal substantial enough to resist Soviet and Communist influence. This was the main aim of the Marshall Plan.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Czechoslovak-American relations connected with UNRRA (Lend-Lease), American credits and compensation for nationalized American property in Czechoslovakia after World War Two: S. Michálek: *Nádeje a vytriezvenia, československo-americké hospodárske vzťahy v rokoch 1945–1951* [Hope and Disillusionment, Czechoslovak-American Economic Relations in the Period 1945–1951]. Bratislava 1995, pp. 26–82.

<sup>4</sup> P. Petruš: *Maršallov plan* [The Marshall Plan]. Bratislava 1993, pp. 8–9.

How did Moscow react to the Marshall Plan? An initially uncertain reaction was replaced in the Kremlin by the view that the United States was using the plan as a means of isolating the Soviet Union and depriving it of its share of victory in World War Two, specifically of political influence in Eastern and Central Europe. It came to be viewed as the key factor in the desire to exclude the United States from Europe. The categorical rejection of the Marshall Plan by Moscow completed the disintegration of the anti-Hitler coalition.

As far as Czechoslovakia is concerned, the Marshall Plan appeared at a time when difficulties and even signs of crises were beginning to appear in the economy. UNRRA deliveries had stopped and the country principle economic ally, the Soviet Union, was unable to provide resources sufficient to sustain economic development, either in financial or material terms. The loss of markets and qualified employees also emphasized the need for foreign economic aid. The Marshall Plan offered just such aid. It offered solutions and a route out of difficulty, and so Czechoslovakia initially accepted an offer to participate in the programme. The preparatory negotiations, the background to Czechoslovak participation, Stalin's pressure on the Czechoslovak delegation of Gottwald, Masaryk and Drtina in Moscow on July 9, 1947, the 'breaking of the front', and Czechoslovakia's sudden negative response are now notorious.

How did Lawrence Steinhardt, American Ambassador in Czechoslovakia at the time, comment on this 'reversal' of the Czechoslovak position towards the Marshall Plan? On July 15, 1947, he mentioned nearly a dozen factors, which he regarded as the most powerful instruments of Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia. They included the liberation of Czechoslovakia (except for parts of western Bohemia) by the Red Army, the leading position of the Communist Party in Czechoslovak politics (its complete control over key ministries of the interior, finance, agriculture and internal trade, foreign affairs and national defense as well as its control over the police, and significant influence over the army and national committees, the daily press and periodicals, and trade unions), Czechoslovakia's growing dependence on Soviet trade, and finally Czechoslovakia's fear of the economic revival of Germany against which the Soviet Union would be the best bulwark. According to Steinhardt, precisely, this complex of factors in combination with strong pressure from the Kremlin led to Czechoslovakia's rejection of America's economic project.<sup>5</sup>

It is certainly possible to agree with Steinhardt's conclusions. The American Ambassador more or less expected Czechoslovakia's change of position. His July 16, 1947 report to J. Riddleberger, head of the State Department's Central European division, confirms this assessment. He stated that the new position Prague announced at the Paris conference was not really a surprise. According

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<sup>5</sup> National Archives and Records (NAR), Washington DC, Records of the US Department of State relating to the Internal Affairs of Czechoslovakia 1945–1949, Rg 59, No. 860F.00/7–1547.

to him, only the rapidity of the reaction was surprising. Among other things in the report, Steinhardt promised Riddleberger that he would prepare his proposals concerning changes in American policy towards Czechoslovakia in the immediate future.<sup>6</sup> He submitted the promised proposals to the State Department on July 22, 1947, in which he suggested the immediate conclusion of a cultural agreement between the two countries and the adoption of a 'a moderate position' in the coming talks about Czechoslovak dollar payments in dollars for the transport of goods across the American occupation zone in Germany. These gestures indicated to Czechoslovakia that the United States had not abandoned it and understood that Prague's orientation towards the Soviet Union could not be avoided. He also proposed the possible revival of talks between the two countries on the question of American credits and loans. He proposed treating Czechoslovakia with greater caution, albeit with a continued show of goodwill. However, he did note that, as long as the Czechoslovak government continued to strengthen and build its economy on the basis of Soviet promises, the United States would avoid any specific action that would save the Czechoslovak economy from collapse.<sup>7</sup> Steinhardt broadly noted the rejection of the Marshall Plan by non-Communist parties in Czechoslovakia, describing the rejection as a shocking surprise and humiliation, that might indicate a certain panic. Apart from these observations on Czechoslovak non-Communist parties and the Marshall Plan, Steinhardt also expressed his views on the policies of the Communist Party. In a lecture to the National War College in Washington delivered on December 15, 1947 (though already prepared in November 1947), he said, among other things, that there had been a change in the position of the Communists in the Czechoslovak government after the rejection of the Marshall Plan. He noted that the Czechoslovak Communist Party was launching attacks on two fronts: internationally against the United States and other western countries, and domestically against the non-Communist camp, especially the Democratic Party in Slovakia.<sup>8</sup>

In order to supplement the already known facts regarding the rejection of the Marshall Plan, it is necessary to provide the views of Jan Masaryk, Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs. His original ambition to have an independent foreign policy was definitively destroyed by Soviet policy vis-à-vis European diplomacy. This was indirectly confirmed in the autumn of 1947 when he discussed various economic problems at the State Department in Washington. The main reason for Masaryk's journey was his wish to acquire financing either from the United States or the World Bank. In separate talks with Secretary of State Marshall, he spoke of the reasons that Prague had changed its original position on Czechoslovak participation in the Paris conferences for American aid.

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<sup>6</sup> W. Ullman: *The United States in Prague*. New York 1978, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> FRUS, 1947, Vol. VI., p. 224–226.

<sup>8</sup> Library of Congress, Washington DC, Steinhardt Papers, box 68.

According to the memoranda from the conversation on November 14, 1947, Masaryk explained that the reason for Czechoslovakia's position was simply that Czechoslovakia could not always adopt the position it wanted. Marshall responded with polite diplomacy to Masaryk's hopes of renewing normal economic relations between East and West, at least in terms of trade and increasing the overall exchange of goods. Marshall also called for the renewal of European confidence that had been lost in 1933, something he regarded as an important factor. He asked Masaryk about the various Soviet actions that he believed had undermined the good reputation of the Soviet Union after the end of the war. Masaryk attempted to explain the Soviet position as a result of the suspicion, and indeed obsession with the idea that the United States wanted to trigger a global collapse with the aim of liquidating the Soviet Union. The discussion between the two statesmen continued routinely, both men expecting support from the other for his government's various positions. Only in his concluding words did Masaryk reveal his personal feelings about the plan for European economic recovery and so indirectly about the United States. He told Marshall that he personally was a great admirer of the American effort to help Europe and expressed regrets over the fact that Czechoslovakia could not participate in the project.<sup>9</sup> However Masaryk expressed these personal feelings on the question of the Marshall Plan unofficially, and so they cannot be considered material.

Several questions arise in connection with the Marshall Plan. Did the United States really expect to grant economic aid to Czechoslovakia through the Marshall Plan? Could Czechoslovakia have reacted differently? Could Czechoslovak democracy have survived in such a sharply divided Europe? Was Czechoslovakia really only a test case, a method for Washington to test how Moscow would react? That is what I think.

Departing from the American declarations of the time, I believe that the widely conceived European Recovery Programme was actually intended only for Western European countries. Whatever the intention of the aid, the fact is that the Soviet Union would not have tolerated the influence of any other power in its part of divided Europe. This is confirmed by the fact that Czechoslovakia had no choice in its reaction. On the practical level, this illustrates that the country could not make independent decisions during this period, even on economic matters. It also confirms the fact, that, at least in the case of Czechoslovakia, the economic aspect of the Marshall Plan was subordinate to its political and ideological aspects. In this particular case, the ideas of Masaryk, Beneš and others regarding the so-called policy of the bridge between East and West definitively collapsed. Czechoslovakia was merely a country with which United States tested the response of the East in its Cold War competition. For two

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<sup>9</sup> NAR, No. 860F.51/11-1447, A/FLM.

years, Czechoslovakia represented an interesting synthesis of East and West, a sort of ideological mixture that some journalists called 'the great experiment'. In Czechoslovakia, the politicians knew very well that they were walking a political tightrope between two hostile camps and insisted that the new Czechoslovak orientation was the product of their realism, the only logical response considering their circumstances and traditions. This experiment in the coexistence of socialism and capitalism in economics and other areas of life was described by Dana Adams Schmidt in the book *Anatomy of Satellite* as "a theory of tolerance", whereby the two systems would not devour each but would successfully coexist.<sup>10</sup> When formulating this view, the author probably assumed an ideal world in which two superpowers with different societies and values would continue to cooperate even after the war. However, we know that this was not the case. We also know that since its liberation, Czechoslovak foreign policy was defined first and foremost by its military alliance with the Soviet Union. The Czechoslovak experiment did not fail because of Soviet pressure or because the West did not help, or even because the internal Czechoslovak non-Communist opposition was divided. It failed because communism and democracy do not mix.

In any discussion about Czechoslovak foreign policy in the period from 1945 to 1948, one must address the February coup of 1948. It decisively ended the era of pluralist parliamentary democracy and fulfilled the postwar aims of Soviet foreign policy i.e. Stalin's determination to build a belt of buffer states along the western frontier of his empire and transform it into a monolithic socialist bloc.

Soviet pressure and the decision of the United States in 1947 to leave Prague fully in the economic orbit of Moscow suggests that 'the policy of the bridge', promoted by the abovementioned representatives of Czechoslovak democracy during this period, never really had a chance of being achieved in practice.

I have two examples that prove, or at least illustrate, this opinion. These examples concern statements made by Jan Masaryk at the beginning of 1947, that is half a year before the official declaration of the Czechoslovak position on the Marshall Plan. In January 1947, he was on a brief working visit in the United States. At a press conference held at the Washington, Masaryk, tired and tragically optimistic, gave a personal response to a question that revealed how uncomfortable he really was the notion of Czechoslovakia being a 'bridge' between East and West. He said that he did not feel like a bridge and nobody was asking him to be one. Leaning on a bench in a bohemian way, smoking a cigarette, he played with words in his rejoinder: "Our political situation? Very simple. A loyal ally of Soviet Russia. We always liked Russia. We're Slavs – we are proud of being Slavs. But we see no reason at all to change our attitude to

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<sup>10</sup> D. A. Schmidt: *Anatomy of A Satellite*. Boston 1952, p. 349–354.



the West. We need your help... The Iron Curtain? I don't know anything about an Iron Curtain, simply nothing at all..."<sup>11</sup>

A second illustrative example: the liberal American monthly *Tomorrow* from February 1947 published a study by John Powers on the new Czechoslovakia. Among other things, the article printed Masaryk's response to a question by an American journalist at a press conference in Oslo. Asked once again whether Czechoslovakia could be a bridge between East and West, the Minister of Foreign Affairs answered more earthily than diplomatically: "A bridge has the unpleasant characteristic that sooner or later somebody will ride a horse across it and that horse will leave something behind."<sup>12</sup> In conclusion, Czechoslovak foreign policy developed dynamically during the period considered here. But unfortunately, Czechoslovakia never really had the possibility to express an independent view. It was forced to fill the role of a foot soldier in its geographical space. In other words: no new winds, just old dreams.

### *Povzetek*

#### *Češkoslovaška zunanja politika po drugi svetovni vojni: nov veter ali le sanje?*

Po drugi svetovni vojni so Združene države Amerike in Sovjetska zveza postale nov, odločilni pojav tako evropskega kot svetovnega razvoja. Kakšen je bil v tem obdobju mednarodni položaj Češkoslovaške, kakšni so bili nameni in cilji njene zunanje politike in kakšne so bile njene dejanske možnosti? Menim, da je bil mednarodni položaj Češkoslovaške najbolj kontradiktoren med vsemi srednje evropskimi državami. Državi so njeni notranji in zunanji gospodarski, kulturni in komercialni interesi narekovali usmerjenost k Zahodu. Politični vidik pa je bil bolj zapleten.

Prvotna ambicija Češkoslovaške v povojni Evropi je bila nekje v sredini, med dvema svetovoma (vzhodnim in zahodnim), dobro poznana tudi kot t.i. "graditev mostov" ali "politika mostov". Zagovorniki te politike so bili predvsem zunanji minister Jan Masaryk in vse nekomunistične stranke na Češkoslovaškem. Češkoslovaška bi lahko predstavljala nek evropski element, ki bi obstoj teh dveh svetov izkoristil v svoj prid.

<sup>11</sup> SUA, Praha, f. MZV-VA 1945–1951, č.kr. 493, *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, January 14, 1947.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., č.kr. 491, č.m. 1–97m.

Na žalost pa te prednosti ni izkoristila. Prevlada sovjetskih političnih dejavnikov in pritiskov je v srednji Evropi dosegla vrhunec februarja 1948. Posledice praškega komunističnega udara in diktature so bile padec svobode, morale, gospodarstva in življenjskega standarda. Češkoslovaška je postala trden del sovjetskega vzhodnega bloka, zato je vsakršna politika graditve mostov postala le iluzija in sanje.