
Eighty years since establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia / Dr. Margalit Shlain

Background

On 28 March 1918 the first Czechoslovak Republic was established (after the dissolution of the Austro Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I), which included the countries of Bohemia and Moravia (on the approximate area of the current-day Czech Republic) and the Sudetenland, Slovakia, and Carpatho-Rus, encompassing members of different nationalities – Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Germans, Jews, and others.

The rise of the Nazis to power in Germany in 1933, led by Hitler, encouraged nationalist feelings among the three million Germans who constituted most of the Sudetenland's residents. In October 1933 Konrad Heinlein founded the Sudeten German Home Front, a right-wing party of Czechoslovak Germans, which in 1935 was renamed the Sudeten German Party (SdP) and demanded autonomy for the Sudetenland.

After the annexation of Austria, Hitler moved to occupy Czechoslovakia. In March 1938 he demanded of Edvard Beneš, the president of Czechoslovakia, that the Sudetenland – with its strategic and military significance due to the fortifications, mines, and advanced industry that it contained, be annexed to Germany, claiming that it was mostly inhabited by Germans who had no equal rights. Czechoslovakia rejected his demand.

In the summer of 1938 Hitler instructed the Wehrmacht to prepare for an invasion of the Sudetenland, thus raising military tensions in the area. The prime ministers of Britain and France approached Czechoslovakia to try and resolve the conflict and demanded that the Germans living in the Sudetenland be granted wide autonomy,

and eventually gave in to all Hitler's demands. In the Munich Agreement signed on 30 September 1938 by Hitler, Chamberlain, Daladier, and Mussolini, the First Czechoslovak Republic was dissolved. It was replaced by the Second Czechoslovak Republic, where Slovakia was given autonomous status (emphasized by the hyphenated name), the Sudetenland was given to Germany, and Carpatho-Rus was annexed to Hungary. On 14 March 1938 Jozef Tiso, the prime minister of the autonomous Slovak Republic, declared the independence of Slovakia as a satellite state of Germany on the Polish border.

The protectorate

On the dawn of 15 March 1939, the army of Nazi Germany invaded Czechoslovakia after its president, Dr. Emil Hácha, was forced to sign an "official declaration" in Berlin before Hitler to "maintain the quiet, order, and peace in this part of central Europe" and to declare that "in order to serve this goal and to achieve a state of calm, the fate of the Czech people and land has been confidently placed in the hands of the leader of the Reich."

The Czechoslovak Republic no longer existed. As of 16 March 1939 Bohemia and Moravia became, by order of the Fuhrer, a protectorate of the Reich – the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. In theory, Hácha remained president and Alois Eliáš was appointed prime minister of the autonomous administration. However, in practice all authority was granted to Konstantin von Neurath, who on March 18 was appointed Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia by Hitler, and to Karl Hermann Frank, one of the leaders of the Sudeten Germans, whom Himmler appointed his deputy, with the title of State Secretary.

From the first day of the invasion, the Gestapo began a wave of arrests targeting Czech public activists, called "Operation Bars" – Aktion Gitter. The Nazi policy was

oriented towards Germanizing the protectorate and rejecting the Czech nationality and culture. Therefore, from the beginning of the occupation the Czech culture was smothered and the population was terrorized, with the purpose of eliminating the local leadership, with its potential for national and underground resistance.

On 28 October 1939, the anniversary of Czechoslovakia's independence, demonstrations broke out against the occupation, and these were forcefully suppressed. The death of a student injured in the demonstration led to student riots. The Germans brutally suppressed the civil unrest and all universities were closed. In the Albrecht I Operation thousands were arrested, and hundreds of them were sent to concentration camps.

On 24 September 1941 Hitler appointed Heydrich, chief of the Reich Main Security Office, as deputy Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia and ruler of the protectorate for all purposes. Heydrich acted vehemently to fully "Germanize" the protectorate, "against any attempt at Czech independence", by rejecting all signs of the Czech national government, thwarting possibilities of destructive activity, and its immediate cleansing of Jews. On 27 September 1941 an emergency state was declared in the protectorate, as well as military rule. President Hácha was forced to submit his resignation. Thousands of people were arrested on accusations of treachery, intentional damage, and other crimes. By the end of November 1941, 342 of them had been sentenced to death and executed, including Prime Minister Eliáš, and 1,289 had been handed over to the Gestapo. These immediate steps were intended as a warning against any destructive action and to generate absolute quiet in the protectorate, "to show the Czechs who is the master."

Heydrich recognized the need to put the Czech population in the protectorate to work for the German war effort. Special offices were established in order to

supervise the forced enlistment at jobs and factories essential for the war effort: those recruited worked in coal mines, steel and metal works, and in the weapons industry or manufacturing for the German army and people. In 1943 the civil industry was closed and 350,000 young Czechs were sent to perform forced labor in Germany. The Czech population suffered severe shortages of products, mainly food.

Following the assassination of Heydrich by two Czech partisans and his death on 4 June 1942, two Czech villages, Lidice and Ležáky, were eliminated in punishment, following the order of K.H. Frank and with Hitler's knowledge. The men were murdered, the women were sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, and approximately one hundred children were sent to Germany to the "racial enhancement" program, to transform them into Germans. A transport of 1,000 Jews from Bohemia, which left Prague on 10 June 1942 for Theresienstadt, was sent directly for extermination in the "East", some to Sobibor and some to Majdanek.

During the entire period of the protectorate, the Czech population suffered a loss of independence and democracy, vicious suppression, the mass annihilation of tens of thousands, until the Red Army entered Prague on 9 May 1945 and ended the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia.

The Jews in the protectorate

The declared German goal was a "Judenrein Reich" and therefore, on 15 March 1939, the fate of the 118,310 Jews of Bohemia and Moravia was sealed. These included 30,000 Jewish refugees: 10,000 who had fled Germany, Austria, and Romania, and 20,000 who had been deported from the Sudetenland.

On 21 June 1939 von Neurath published anti-Semitic laws similar to the Nuremberg Laws, which intensified the loathing of the fascist parties towards the Jews. On that

day Heydrich instructed that a central agency for Jewish emigration be established in Prague, in charge of taking care of the "Jewish Question" in the protectorate, in order to unite the means and actions taken against the Jews as well as to initiate the removal of the Jews from the Bohemian-Moravian region, their emigration from the Reich, and taking control of their property. On 28 July 1939 Adolf Eichmann was appointed head of this agency, and he arrived from Vienna with his team of assistants.

In September 1939, when World War II broke out, a change became evident in the atmosphere towards the Jews. Indications of sympathy for Jewish suffering were one of the manifestations of local hatred towards the German occupation. The "arianization" of Jewish factories and their transfer to German hands strengthened the German ethnic foundations of the protectorate and caused considerable damage to Czech national funds as well.

In October 1939, at Eichmann's initiative, two transports of 1,292 Jewish men left Moravská Ostrava as an exploratory force, to establish a transit camp in preparation for deportation of the approximately 5,000 Jews in the protectorate, as well as from Katowice and Vienna, to Nisko, a "Jewish reservation" planned for the Lublin region, while was in fact a one-way ticket.

On 10 October 1941 Heydrich convened the SS heads in the protectorate in Prague to discuss the necessary steps "to solve the question of the Jews in the protectorate and partially in the old Reich". He referred to the fate of the approximately 88,000 Jews living at the time in the protectorate and decided to establish the Theresienstadt Ghetto as a concentration and transit camp for the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia, until these could be sent "Eastwards". In that month, 6,000 Jews from Prague and Brno were already sent directly to Lodz and Minsk, and 73,608 Jews

from the protectorate were sent to the Theresienstadt Ghetto, which existed from 24 November 1941 until its liberation on 8 May 1945. Of these, only some 7,500 survived.