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Czechs, Slovaks and the Jews, 1938-48: Beyond Idealisation and Condemnation. By Jan Láníček. Palgrave Macmillan. 2013. Xii + 265 pp. £55.

Czechoslovakia has long been credited with having avoided the sort of the state-sponsored anti-Semitism that became widespread across Central Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. There is no question that the Czechoslovak record looks good when compared with that of some of its neighbours, especially Nazi Germany. On the other hand, it was not quite so tolerant, humane and decent as often claimed. In his *Czechs, Slovaks and the Jews, 1938-48: Beyond Idealisation and Condemnation*, Jan Láníček turns the spotlight on the official treatment of Czechoslovakia's Jewish population, not only during the Second World War (when the country was divided into a Nazi German 'Protectorate' and an independent Slovak Fascist state) but also during the Second Czechoslovak Republic that preceded the war (1938-9) and the Third Czechoslovak Republic that followed it (1945-1948).

What Láníček's meticulous archival research has uncovered is a tangle of conflicting policies, inconsistent attitudes and mixed motives on the part of successive Czech authorities with regard to Czechoslovakia's Jewish population. (The Slovak authorities, whose independent policies under the 1939-1945 Slovak Republic were overtly anti-Semitic, unfortunately receive very little attention in this study).

What Láníček has found does not make for comfortable reading. In the deadly game of national rivalry endemic in Central Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, Czechoslovakia's Jews were commonly constructed as crypto-Germans or crypto-Hungarians whose supposed linguistic allegiance to the 'national enemy' (Germans in the Czech case and Hungarians in the Slovak) made them at best a security risk and at worst cowardly traitors and collaborators.

Láníček's findings gradually persuade the reader that the sorts of anti-Semitic attitudes and incidents that other historians attribute to Nazi pressure predated both the German occupation of Bohemia-Moravia and the establishment of the Tiso regime in Slovakia; they also lingered on well into the 1950s.

Even the Czech wartime record, it seems, cannot be blamed solely on the Nazis. The Second Protectorate government of General Alois Eliáš (April 1939-September 1941), for example, although 'frequently praised for its alleged opposition to the implementation of strict Nuremberg Laws in the Protectorate in 1939' was 'largely driven' by 'concerns that a wider definition of a Jew would transfer too much property from Czech hands to the Germans'. (p.18) Similarly, post-war Czechoslovak support for the cause of Zionism and the Brichah (helping Jews to escape from Poland to Palestine) was presented to Jewish activists as a 'natural humanitarian deed'. Closer research of the available documentation, however, 'reveals that the authorities were more afraid that some of the refugees might settle permanently in Czechoslovakia'. (p. 176). Refugees were labelled 'dangerous elements' to be kept 'under constant surveillance' and not 'allowed to mingle with the Czechoslovak population.' (p. 176)

Some of these ambiguities were present even during the First Czechoslovak Republic. T.G. Masaryk, the state's founding father and first President, who had publicly defended the Jewish Hilsner in a notorious *fin-de-siècle* blood-libel case, and Edvard Beneš, Czechoslovakia's first Foreign Minister and second President, did indeed make the public articulation of anti-Semitism in interwar Czechoslovakia for 'the most part politically unacceptable.' (p. 10) They did so after bad publicity surrounding Czech and Slovak anti-Jewish pogroms in the wake of the First World War put some foreign loans at risk. Masaryk, who frankly admitted that he 'never

overcame his anti-Semitism emotionally – only intellectually’, declared the idea of national assimilation for Jews to be “‘impossible, in fact laughable’”. (p. 4)

As progressives, Masaryk and Beneš disdained folk anti-Semitism, and their republic was a better place for Jews to live than many. They were nevertheless prone to absurd overestimations of the supposed ‘power’ of ‘world Jewry’ and especially ‘the Jewish press’ internationally. The assumptions that underlay the First Czechoslovak Republic’s public rejection of anti-Semitism, in short, were partly based on anti-Semitic beliefs about the supposed power of ‘worldwide Jewry’ to advance the cause of Czech and Slovak nationalism.

The ironies did not stop here. Because of the way ‘nationality’ was defined across the former Austro-Hungarian Empire – as dependent on language more than other indicators – Jews were especially tricky to categorise. Not only might Jews be observant or secular, orthodox, reform or liberal; they might speak Czech, Slovak, Rusyn/Ukrainian, German, Hungarian, Yiddish or other languages. Only if Jews opted in the Czechoslovak census for the new category of ‘Jewish nationality’ would they be treated officially as ‘Jews’ rather than as ‘Germans’, ‘Hungarians’, ‘Czechs’, ‘Slovaks’ or ‘Ruthenians’.

An article published by the Czech underground in 1940 considered how ‘the Jewish Question’ might be solved in Bohemia-Moravia after the war. Nazi racial policy was to be rejected and Czech-speaking Jews, the article claimed, would have nothing to fear. Yiddish and German-speaking Jews, however, should take note: ‘no Jew, who today thinks that he may – even if only at home in his family – gibber in German, should hope that – just because he is Jewish, we will treat him better than other barbarians. On the contrary: a Jew who after all the suffering inflicted by the Nazis, is still using German, has to be logically considered as an extra hard-core Germanizer and for that we will break him! We know about him, we follow him and we have him on our lists.’” (p.27) An internal *Sicherheitsdienst* report from 1943 claimed that ‘an increasing number’ of Czechs ‘appreciated’ the Germans’ ‘cleansing of the Protectorate of its Jewry and did not wish the Jews to return’. (p. 19) ‘We will not tolerate the return of Germans, including the Jews’, warned the wartime Czech underground Council of Three in 1944. (p. 31)

‘Czechoslovak radical nationalism’, as Láníček notes, ‘did not disappear with the progress of the war.’ Instead, ‘national ‘homogenisation’ became a ‘major objective’ for the exiles’ post-war order. (p. 115) This had consequences not only for Czechoslovakia’s Germans but also for its other minorities. After the war, President Beneš saw only one way to solve what he called Czechoslovakia’s ‘Jewish Problem’. Jews, if they wished to retain Jewish nationality, should emigrate to Palestine. Otherwise, if they chose to remain in Czechoslovakia, they would need to assimilate completely either to Czech or Slovak nationality. In the ruthless approach taken to ‘solving’ Czechoslovakia’s minorities ‘problem’ at the end of the Second World War, Láníček’s work reminds us, not only Germans and Hungarians, but also Jews, had to go.

Czechs, Slovaks and the Jews offers a valuable corrective to the complacent view that Czechoslovakia was somehow immune from anti-Semitism. It simultaneously highlights the extent to which Czech anti-Semitism tended to be upstaged by Czech-German rivalry. This important contribution will be of interest to students of nationalism, Czechoslovak politics and Jewish history alike.

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(1,094 words)

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