ŠVEHLA, BENEŠ AND MASARYK

By Antonín Paleček

We have chosen a different order of these three leaders of the First Czechoslovak Republic than the current one. To this day it is widely held that the first place in the history of that country belongs to Masaryk, the uncrowned king of the state, the second to his lieutenant and heir-apparent, Beneš, while Švehla, if at all, is mentioned on the third place as the perennial, dexterous prime minister during the first decade of the new state.

Our order departs from this tradition. The criterion we have used is the active role each of these men took in actually determining the character of internal and external policy. According to the well-considered view of the leading authority on the first decade of that country, Ferdinand Peroutka, a protégé of Masaryk and the spokesman of the moderate wing of the Castle group, it is Švehla, rather than Masaryk, the father of the country, who should be regarded as the builder of the state and architect of Czechoslovak democracy. Five years after Švehla’s death, in December 1938, the author of the *Budování státu* (Building of the State)¹, in an article entitled „Švehla’s Tradition“, published in his weekly, *Přítomnost*, wrote: „The title of the architect of the state belongs in this country to him rather than to anybody else. Others made themselves famous by liberating the country, and forged ahead in popular imagination. In fact, however, once the state stood on its feet, Švehla’s magnetic will slowly made itself felt. Let us not be mistaken. The character of our political life was determined more by the will of Švehla than by that of Masaryk. It was our luck that he had a genius in devising methods of constructive statesmanship.“² To similar conclusion came a British authority on Czechoslovak politics, writing in his obituary on Švehla:

¹ Peroutka, Ferdinand: *Budování státu; československá politika v letech popřevratových* [Building of the State; Czechoslovak Politics in the First Postwar Years]. 5 vols. in 6. Prague 1934—36. This work could have been called history of our times or birth of a democracy. Its author is not a professional historian, but a leading Czech journalist. In well over 200 chapters or essays and on nearly 3000 pages he tells a vivid story of the first three years of the republic. Based as it is, particularly regarding Masaryk and Švehla on information given to the author by Masaryk’s confidential friend, Rudolf Bedřich, it is an unique source of information about the relationship of these two men. An intimate knowledge of all important people and of countless events and developments of the first years of the country enabled the author to lay definite foundations of the first steps of the new state. The author belonged to the moderate wing of the Castle group, and is therefore mildly biased in favor of Masaryk and Beneš. Yet we owe to him more than to anybody else most of our information regarding Masaryk’s antipode, Švehla. For some reason the book has no index, and unless the reader is willing to make one for himself, he cannot make full use of it.

² Švehlova tradice [Švehla’s Tradition]. *Přítomnost*, December 14, 1938.
“For the first ten years the real master of Czech politics was the late Antonín Švehla, the leader of the powerful agrarian or peasant party... His share in bringing the Czechoslovak state into being was at least as great as that of his more widely known compatriots, professor Masaryk and dr. Beneš.”

Peroutka did not discover Švehla only five years after his and one year after Masaryk’s death. He came out with the same story, presenting for the first time to his people a sympathetic portrait of their little known, by that time accomplished statesman, in an article entitled “A Taciturn Statesman”, published in Přítomnost in 1926. In that article he had summarized Švehla’s main achievements from the first years of the country, produced a profile of this more or less mysterious person, who unlike all other leaders was stubbornly shunning publicity, spoke about his philosophy and concluded that “nobody’s role in building the state is equal to Švehla’s. He is the man in power and he prudently leads the country from one goal to another. He planned things years ahead, and was able to fulfill his plans.”

Peroutka was not alone to recognize Švehla’s genius. His role in the Czech camp during the turbulent war years was described by František Soukup, a social democrat, in his work, October 28, 1918.

“The name of Antonín Švehla evokes in our mind the history of this country in the most frightful years of the World War, in the most responsible days of the national revolution, and as the young state was rising to a new life. Antonín Švehla was always the great concentric power of the nation. All the forces of the national resistance and then of national revolution grouped around him. And this astonishing concentric power was active in the republic as well as in the revolution. The chief of the revolutionary general staff became the chief of coalition governments of the republic.”

There is an interesting testimony about the relationship between Švehla and Masaryk. We owe it to the well-known confidential friend of Masaryk, the social-democratic member of the Committee of Five, Rudolf Bechyně:

“Antonín Švehla was doing his work not under Masaryk, but side by side with him. He has taught us the art of government. Where did he learn himself that art? He had learnt it in the same way as a bird learns to fly or a tree to bloom. If we attempt to simplify important historical events in a sentence, we would say that to Thomas G. Masaryk we owe our existence as an independent state, while Antonín Švehla under the aegis of the moral authority of the Liberator laid down the foundations of a political order, of an orderly government and of a living political tradition.”

Similar view was expressed by Jaroslav Stránský, a national socialist, who according to Bechyně used to criticize Švehla most often and most emphatically, but during his exile years came to a different conclusion:

“But for Švehla, the austrophile opportunists of the social democracy and

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3 A Czech of the Czechs. Times, December 14, 1933.
4 Soukup, František: 28. říjen 1918 [October 28, 1918].
5 Listopad a prosinec 1935 v našem politickém životě [November and December in our Political Life]. Přítomnost, January 22, 1936.
their leader Šmeral, who later became a communist, would have found among the agrarians their friends rather than opponents ... Brisk, tenacious, energetic and patient, sensitive and witty, with his peasant background folksy, prudent, educated self-made man. If political liberation of the Czechs and Slovaks after the first World War was the work of Masaryk and Beneš, the resounding success in internal politics of the new state, generally recognized, was first of all the work of Švehla 6.

There was no other political personality in the First Republic about which the leaders of all parties, his political and ideological rivals, had such a high opinion as Švehla. In the end even a communist spokesman recognized his greatness when in 1968 he wrote: „We can describe him as a man with clean hands, unsullied by the filth of political affairs and of corruption 7.”

In spite of these testimonies by leading personalities of different political camps, Švehla is normally in Czech and much more so in foreign historiography to this day overlooked and pushed into the background. The question is to what extent this is due to the natural bias of exiles, who in 1945 agreed or did not protest when the party which he had built and on whose support he depended, was banned, or merely to a conventional treatment of Czechoslovak history. That is the feeling one must have, for example, on reading the closing chapter of Mamatey and Lužans’s History of Czechoslovak Republic 1918—1948, which presents on 13 pages a brief survey of Czechoslovak politics during the First Republic, mentioning a number of prominent people, but omitting Švehla’s name. This, however, might be merely a serious oversight, for Švehla is highly praised in the other chapters, though no attempt is made to point out some of his most important achievements.

There is no room to supplement this outline of the role of this man by describing his work beginning with his determining the strength each of the parties should have in parliament and in the cabinet before the first election in April 1920 took place, and ending with the tribute made to him by the National Assembly when serious illness forced him to become an invalid, who nominally in the tenth year of the country’s existence remained in power. It is enough to say that he had an unique talent to bring together, in an era torn by a social revolution, people of radically different opinions until in the end he succeeded to eradicate from Czechoslovak political life the slogan: either ... or, common to both nationalists and their enemies socialists, and supplant it by his own: this ... as well as that. The successful symbiosis of overweening Czech sozialism, both in its anti-communist, but still Marxist garb of social democracy, and in its national socialistic, non-Marxist form, with the moderate Czech nationalism, spearheaded by Švehla’s peasant party in the first seven years of the republic, had no parallel in any European country. Supplemented with an equally successful symbiosis of moderate Czech and German nationalism, again under agrarian leadership, it had made Czechoslovak history a unique case.

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slovakia an island of democracy in central Europe. The credit for these achievements should be given first of all to Švehla and his friends, who first appeared in an embryonic stage as „the men of October 28“, then as the Red-Green coalition, which, after the communist secession in 1920, was transformed first into the Committee of Five, to become in the end the committee of political ministers of the cabinets in power. This is what Masaryk may have in mind when in 1928 he said that in his opinion Švehla was one of the greatest European statesmen ⁸. By his taciturnity, patience and caution, resourcefulness and tenacity, willingness to compromise and diplomatic skill, this man reminds somehow of William the Silent, the founder of the Dutch republic, described by G. M. Trevelyan as „the wisest, gentlest and bravest man that ever led a nation“.

In the face of this unchanging picture of Švehla we are today at a loss in drawing a political profile of the two other leading Czechoslovak statesmen. There were times during the First Republic when both their names were pronounced by the same breath, and when any critical remark about either of them was regarded as an insult of the other, as well. Those days both in the exile and in the old country belong today to the past. Subconsciously rather than on purpose distinction is made between the two, often only by ceasing to praise on various occasions both of them. It was impossible to overlook the fact that Masaryk had died a year before „Munich“, and it is by no means certain that he would have allowed Beneš to lead the nation into the fatal isolation had he been alive. Much less can we imagine Masaryk in the exile throwing overboard his faith in the West, and joining the fate of his country with that of Soviet Russia, whose anchoring in the West he would regard as the best safeguard of European peace. Neither did he ever dream of the birth of a people’s democracy, spearheaded by Czechoslovakia and then transplanted to the other central European countries as well as to the West. Masaryk indeed gave his support to Beneš whenever he could, but we may doubt that even he was initiated into Beneš’s far-reaching plans.

To obtain a clear picture of the Czechoslovak permanent foreign minister it is necessary to carefully analyze his prewar policy. We would then find that there were two kinds of Beneš. The first was a realist, a sober, sensible statesman of a small nation, who took place at the Paris Peace Conference, and thanks to his soberness — but also to the fact that by that time his country alone in central Europe appeared to preserve order and progress — reached there most of his objectives. He then remained for a number of years a realist in directing his country’s foreign policy, keeping well in mind the advice given to him by western friends to focus first of all on establishing friendly relations with his small and big neighbors, and doing all he could to help even his former enemies in their desperate economic situation. He had some success in this respect, which had raised his reputation abroad. He was looked upon as a liberal statesman who was strong enough to disregard the criticism of Czech nationalists, as blind as were their counterparts abroad. Unfortunately he very soon became tired of this

⁸ Čapek, Karel: President Masaryk o různých věcech [President Masaryk about various things]. Lidové noviny, April 8, 1928.
game, the chief reason being that since the mid-twenties the leading statesman of
al-Czech neighbors looked askance at his political theories in which his understand-
ing of the necessity to look for salvation in his own form of socialism played
an important role.

This predisposition, which had characterized him already before the war soon
after the war led him to look forward to a positive, more friendly attitude to
Soviet Russia than that which was prevalent in western Europe. He sympathized
with that country during the Russo-Polish war of 1920, agreed with the resistance
of Czech communist railroad workers to transport munition across the country
to help the Poles, and brought Masaryk, otherwise distrustful of Soviet Russia, to
share his faith in the victory of the Russian arms. Two years later, after the
Germans and Russians had signed their Rapallo treaty, he sailed at full sails into
the Soviet waters. He signed with them a preliminary treaty "by which Czecho-
slovakia recognized de facto the Soviet government, and became in this way the
first state which established official contacts with that government." He then
by and by became more or less a silent partner of Moscow in its European politics,
and later, when the Soviets joined the League of Nations, played the role of
Stalin's impresario. This friendship was then in 1935 sealed by the Czechoslo-
vak Soviet treaty. Here we have already to deal with the second Beneš, in many
ways the reverse of the cautious, sober statesman as he appeared in the first post-
war years. Tired by the on the whole meager results of the conciliatory policy
toward his country's neighbors, the ambitious short man started to play a role in
the League of Nations, and slowly steered his country towards what he believed
to be its European mission, namely to become a bridge between Soviet Russia
and the West. It should be understood that it was not hunger for power which

9 "Masaryk not only did consider the capture of Warsaw by the Bolshevik army a mat-
ter of certainty but he warned against organizing any military assistance to the Poles
on the ground: It was certain to be completely ineffective in a military sense, and it
was liable to destroy the authority of the Western Powers in the subsequent negotiations
for peace." Lord d' Abernon: The Diary of an Ambassador. London 1929,
pp. 112—113.

Prague 1969, p. 434.

11 "We entered into diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1922 at the Con-
ference of Genoa and right up to 1938 we continually did our utmost to maintain a
policy of friendly cooperation, in spite of the strong opposition of our right wing

12 "The outstanding characteristic of Czechoslovakia's policy towards Moscow was the
desire to act as intermediary between Russia and other states. As early as 1920 when
Lenin sent Krasin to Copenhagen, Beneš dispatched a telegram to Krasin offering to
serve as middle man between the East and the West. Thereafter, in every possible
circumstance Beneš pursued the same tactics. He has on various occasions tried to
mediate between Roumania or Poland or France on the one hand, and Russia on the
other. He attempted it at the Genoa Conference, when Lloyd George said to Chicherin,
"Who is Mr. Beneš?" This was the Welshman's method of dissociating himself in a
given instance from persons he knew quite well..." Fischer, Louis: The Soviets
drove him, but his sincere desire to point to western Europe the way to a brighter future.

As he understood it, the world war by eliminating the European autocrats went only half of the way towards the solution of the European problem. There still remained the unsolved social problem. It seemed to him that the depression years of the thirties created a situation when this problem could be effectively tackled. He called the goal which he had in mind „the rule of the fourth estate“. He talked about this subject in Paris in 1932 on the occasion of one hundredth anniversary of the Academy of Moral and Social Sciences, suggesting to France to take a lead in this direction:

„The bourgeoisie triumphed under the old regime. Between 1830 and 1890 it dominated Europe. From 1848 on, however, she became confronted by the fourth estate, the influence of which is felt all over Europe ... The fourth estate, modern mankind, puts to us and France, to all of us, the cardinal question: what is our goal today and what will bring tomorrow?“

That he regarded the solution of this problem as his own life-task may be judged from the fact that he did not hesitate to impute it — unjustly — to Masaryk when, in a speech over Masaryk’s coffin, he said that Masaryk came to the conclusion that „the fourth estate will rise in every nation claiming more power and improvement of conditions“. He devoted to this subject his lectures at the University of Chicago in 1939, which were subsequently published under the title, Democracy Today and Tomorrow and new national ideals and goals in this sense were the subject of every of his annual messages to the Council of State of the Czechoslovak exiles in London as well as of his broadcasts to his own people.

His cardinal mistake was that while he was preaching his gospel he was at the same time meddling with the policy of the big powers. He wanted to exercise influence on European problems, a task traditionally reserved to the great powers. On its first step into the European history Karel Havlíček, a prominent Czech journalist, in 1848 warned his country from getting itself involved in dealings with a great power by coining a doggerel known by every Czech child: „Jack, don’t go skating with the gentlemen. It often happens that a gentleman makes a slip, and the poor man breaks his leg. „Had he in the thirties followed the advice of his western friends to reach an agreement with the rebellious German minority rather than setting snares on Hitler, with the presumed collaboration of Stalin, he might not have fallen in the end in the pit himself. An agreement with the German minority could however be made only by means of a bourgeois coalition in which Czechs, including Czech, but not German social democrats, would have a comfortable majority. Asking Beneš, who was elected president by the Czech popular front, to give his consent to the formation of a bourgeois coalition, would have been like asking Churchill to give his consent to the dismemberment of the British empire. The years of the first bourgeois coalition in 1926—1929 were the years when his political existence was at stake, the years of his shame. He was perhaps prepared to face a mild Munich rather than installing a bourgeois coalition, which would have sullied his escutchen.

In September 1938 there were three leading statesmen in Europe east of the
Rhine who were willing to wage a war. Each of them, of course, a different kind of war. Hitler was anxious to settle his affair with Czechoslovakia. He was sure that France and England would not move, and he was also sure that Russia would not help her small ally. He was gut of his humor in Munich, by no means pleased with his bloodless victory, bore a grudge against the two western powers, who did not allow him to wage his war, and a month after Munich gave his order for the annihilation of the mutilated Czechoslovakia.

The war Stalin had in mind was different. As a good Marxist he was convinced that contradictions inside the capitalistic states regularly produce wars. He was looking forward to such a war, from which the Soviets would naturally in their own way profit, and was anxious to bring it about. He therefore welcomed Czechoslovakia’s entanglement in European affairs involving France. At the same time he was aware of the physical and moral unpreparedness of both western powers to help that country in case of a German aggression. Yet, like Beneš, who was sure of Russian assistance, he did not discount the possibility that in the end the western powers would stand by the small protégé of France. His obligation to help being only secondary, he took no steps to prepare his country for this eventuality. Once the war started, he probably would have waited for its development before involving his country one way or another. In each case he could plead the unwillingness of Poland and Roumania to allow Russian troops to come to help Czechoslovakia. In the end like Hitler, he too came off badly that time.

The third disappointed person was dr. Beneš. By his policy, based on his faith that the western world was steadily moving towards the rule of the fourth estate, and on his conviction that his policy must follow his country’s “European” mission, he brought his country into fatal isolation losing all its friends and supporters of yesterday. In the end he saw the only solution in bringing about a war in which not only his own country, but also France and England would face Germany, and soon after that also Russia. He foresaw some such development for years, and during his visit in Russia at the time of the signature of his treaty in 1935, brought Stalin or rather thought he had brought him to share his view. From the moment Hitler came to power in Germany he more or less assumed the role of the general secretary of an anti-fascist front. Such a front was indeed highly desirable, but he came with his idea too soon. He took the liberty to meddle with the business of big powers and believed that he can do so without Hitler’s notice. He would have been shocked had somebody then told him that his front would become a reality only on the day when Hitler invades Beneš’s presumed and his own real, true friend and admirer, Stalin.

Regarding Stalin’s relation to Hitler we have an interesting testimony by his daughter Svetlana. She writes: “Even after the war was over he was in the habit of repeating: ‘Eh, together with the Germans we would have been invincible’.” That a man, a leader of the Soviet Russia, holding a similar view of Hitler even after the war, would have been inclined and willing to go against him before the

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S v e t l a n a, Alliluyeva: Only One Year. New York 1969, p. 392.
war for the sake of a small, distant, non-communist country is more than improbable. Only a fool would believe this. After the testimony of his daughter, Stalin's false pretenses to help Czechoslovakia at the time of Munich should be regarded as an example of a brilliant diplomatic hoax in modern history. Dr. Beneš knew Stalin very badly when he based his whole policy on the faith in his word and on his own understanding of the objectives of his policy. His partial excuse is that he was not alone among western politicians who regarded Stalin's behavior during the Munich crisis as blameless, and saw him at that time a knight *sans peur et sans reproche*. Many scholars in the West still regard him in that light. But he was the only European statesmen, who on account of Stalin's presumed loyalty in an evil hour become his vassal and joined the interests of his own country with the interests and aims of Russia. He was therefore destined to enter into the European history as a gratuitous red Quisling, the only one of his kind, as well as the father of popular, or rather vulgar, democracy, which was meant as a bridge between the East and West, but became instead everywhere only a communist anti-chambre. Franz Borkenau, one of the leading kremilinologs, wrote about him: „Beneš, the Czech president, in sympathy with Russia owing to his pronounced Pan-Slav leanings, and probably the least insuspicious and least informed in the matter of communism of all Western leaders ...“ He passed a judgment over himself at the end of his life in a letter to his war-time secretary, Eduard Táborský, saying: „My greatest mistake was that I refused to believe to the very last that even Stalin lied to me cynically both in 1935 and later, and that his assurances to me and to Masaryk were an intentional deceit.“ Such was the end of his twenty five years of unrequited love of the Soviets.

There were also two Masaryks, but, unlike his successor, they were both made of the same stuff. First let us take up Masaryk, the president.

Robert W. Seton-Watson wrote about a close and harmonious partnership between Masaryk and Beneš and compared it to the relation between the emperor Francis and Metternich. Most Czechs, indeed, little as they had to base their judgment on, would have agreed with the view that Beneš was carrying on his policy under the philosophical, moral and political aegis of Masaryk. After what happened after the death of Masaryk, we may be allowed to have our doubts. Beneš never lost the confidence of the president, but in their relationship it was he who was the active agent and set the pace. Jaromír Smutný, head of the president's office in exile, author of *Dokumenty k historii československé zahraniční politiky 1939—1943* (Documents on the History of Czechoslovak Foreign Policy 1939—1943), a sort of president's Boswell, broke the ice by writing that

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15 Tábořský, Eduard: Beneš and Stalin — Moscow 1943 and 1945. JCEA (July 1953).
17 There is little evidence to support the view of Piotr S. Wandycz that until the early 1930's Beneš's foreign policy was formed largely under Masaryk's guidance. Matějov, Víctor S. / Luža, Radomír (eds.): A history of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918—1948. Princeton 1973, p. 216 (note).
The movement abroad during the first World War was in fact led by Beneš, Masaryk being only the spiritual head — which is the main thing…18.

Masaryk indeed was not what is called a born politician. His great love always were books, study of man and society, contemplation of eternal truths, and the solution of great cultural tasks of our time. He had a low opinion of day to day politics of which he had some experience in the early nineties 19, and the great days of his influence before the war took place when he stood alone against the dominant moods of his people. Had he been a politician before the war, with his intelligence and energy he would have created something more imposing than a party which, at its best, was able to send only two men to the Austrian Reichsrat. The disappearance of that party in 1917, at the moment when the nation was learning about his work abroad, proves that his followers had lost faith in the attractiveness of his prewar slogans, and were looking for something which would be more popular.

He did not renew his party after the war. Even if he were inclined to do so — which may be doubted — his presidential duties were foremost in his mind. Now and then he intervened into the day to day politics, most often probably prompted by Beneš and his Castle group, but as a rule he was cautious in the selection of words. In his talks with Karel Capek he said more than once he was wrong before the war in his political views. He was wrong now and then also after the war, but with the exception of his incomprehensible steady support of Beneš, none of his mistakes should be regarded as cardinal. For, unlike Beneš, he was not devoid of self-criticism. He was often obstinate, but he also knew how to listen to reason. Unlike Beneš, in whose eyes Švehla was a mountebank (Dokumenty, No. 117), he admired Švehla and personally liked him, though it may be doubted whether he understood his genius. Had that been the case, he would have certainly told his people more about his achievements and his way of doing things than he did. Political skill of the men in power had less fascination for him than the ideas that were moving the world. He wanted his country to lead a sensible and fair policy, warned against excessive nationalism and pleaded for justice to the urban poor and to the Germans. So little that is noteworthy is known about his activities as president that Elizabeth Whiskemann in her biographical story of him in the Encyclopedia Britannica chose — wrongly we believe — to end her story with his election to the presidency in 1918, adding simply that he was reelected in 1937 and 1934.

Masaryk was an uncrowned head of the state. His presidential function was... 

19 “Almost all theoreticians and politicians seek to eliminate evil from modern society by economic and moral reforms. I have often found the problems of our politicians and economists rather silly. Securing a new privilege here and there, or getting more money will not do away with the feeling of alienation. Who has redeemed humanity? Not a politician, economist, socialist or demagog...” Masaryk, T. G.: Selbstmord als soziale Massenerscheinung der Gegenwart. Vienna 1881.
primarily the work of Švehla and himself. Writing his *New Europe* in 1917 and 1918 he was in favor of a strong president after the American fashion. As in all the other successor states so also in Czechoslovakia nothing was further from the people's mind in 1918 than to put great power into the hands of the president or any other person. The power which was inherent in the people was vested in their representatives forming a national assembly, which in turn elected a committee, called the government of the country. It was therefore no disrespect of Masaryk when the provisional constitution of November 1918 gave him only honorary rights. From the first days of the new country, however, this kind of treatment of the "liberator" appeared incongruous to many, and so, as early as in May 1919 the provisional constitution was amended giving the president greater powers. He was empowered to nominate the ministers, consult them and preside at their meetings without having the right to vote (He made use only twice of the last named prerogative during his turn of office) 20. He apparently wanted still other powers, first of all he was in favor of popular election of the president, giving him the right to appoint a number of senators 21, and reducing the age of the presidential candidate to 35 years in order to ensure in that way election of Beneš in case of his own death. Of these new rights only the last one was approved by the constitutional committee. It looks hat a year in Prague was enough for him to realize who was who in Czechoslovak politics and made him change his mind. We are told that prior to the adoption of the constitution „Masaryk regarded the building up the authority of the government as the most important task. Before the consideration of the presidential chapter in the constitution Švehla [the *spírity movens* of the constitutional committee, ed. note] paid a visit to the president. Masaryk was not anxious that the Constitution give the president great powers. He was not in favor of a strong president. He saw his model in the French president ... 22. „Švehla and all Czech politicians would have preferred to see the president govern, not to rule, to become a symbol of unity in a distracted, unorganized country. Above all they wanted him to stand above the parties. Švehla was afraid of the inborn propensity of Czech people to anarchy. He thought his people to be eccentric „every coach in a tramcar appearing like a hornet's nest, rather then a casual meeting of different people“ 23. As one of the principal roles of the National Committee, which he formed in the turbulent months of May and June 1918 when Prague was on the verge of a premature revolution, was to become „a banner, visible to everybody, signifying to every soldier that he has a general staff, and that the nation has a head of its own“ 24.

After the war Švehla transferred this role to the president. Kramář, the Czech

22 Peroutka 1498-1500.
23 Hájšman, Jan: Maffie v rozmachu [Mafia at its Height]. Prague 1933, p. 348.
24 Ibidem 349.
leader in the Vienna Reichsrat, fully shared his fears as well as his conception of the role Masaryk was to play. For reasons of their own the social democrats, whose days were coming, betted on Masaryk, too.

Masaryk was ambitious, but not power-hungry. To play the role of an English king, however, was not his meat. He was not able to suppress in himself his in-born, professional or professorial tendency to assign tasks, to criticize and to make himself heard now and then. His first encounter with the government took place as early as in the summer of 1919 when, on appointing the ministers of the first Tusar cabinet he added to each letter a shorter or longer advice what should be done, as he used to give advice to students in writing their dissertation. Some ministers having raised objections to this procedure, Švehla saw Masaryk and dissuaded him from repeating the performance. Subsequently the nomination of a minister always consisted of a single sentence. A similar encounter of a slightly different kind took place in the early twenties. Unable to express himself publicly on political and even on other questions Masaryk took refuge to anonymity. He used to publish in Přítomnost, whose publication in 1923 he ensured by a substantial subsidy, as well as in other leftist papers. About a dozen of these articles were published after his death in the legionaires' periodical, Naše revoluce (Our Revolution). According to Peroutka, "the prime minister's clear sight for Masaryk's style uncovered the anonymity and led to another intervention."

These facts were known in the country by the knowledgable people. Salda and Nejedlý more than once wondered whether "the presidential office did not disarm the old warrior, and put on him shackles even harsher than were those of the Habsburgs." Masaryk naturally was not a little aggravated by this limitation of his freedom. In one of his messages to the National Assembly he said: "With the help of the minister Švehla it has been possible to specialize the presidential

25 "We thank God for having you. but I implore you to remain above the clouds, for whoever in this country immerses himself into politics is likely to have mud thrown at him, and loses authority, which is so much needed." Kramář's words in welcoming Masaryk in Prague.

26 Until his death the social democrats regarded Masaryk as a non card-carrying member of their party, and Masaryk never said nor did anything to dissuade them. In 1919 he pleaded for socialization and did not stop when the socialist wave subsided. In his memoirs, published in 1925, he wrote: "I am in favor socialization of railroads, means of communication, water power, coal, etc." (Masaryk, T.G.: Světová revoluce. Prague 1925, p. 539.) His social creed was expressed in three sentences: 1. Always in favor of the working people, 2. Very often hand in hand with the socialists, 3. Only rarely with the Marxists. Would he have approved of Beneš's and Gottwald's master stroke, their coup d'Etat of May 1945, installing a people's democratic regime in their country? He foresaw that eventuality in March 1920 when he said: "It is a great mistake to think that a socialistic revolution can be effected by subjugating the bourgeoisie. Violence even in such a case will not help. It would only create a class of slaves, and slaves never work with pleasure and effectively."


28 Ibidem.

function. Yet it is not clear enough, as may be seen from the current debate about
the constitutionality of this political statement 30.

Much less was known about the muzzling of the president in the field of foreign
relations, probably because of his readiness to defer to Beneš more than to any­
body else. It should strike everybody that Masaryk, by his book, The Spirit of
Russia, one of the first Kremlinologs, who after the war often vehemently criticiz­
ed Lenin and the communists, after 1922, i.e. after the Genoa Conference, be­
came silent on this subject. The fact that the Czechs have never heard Masaryk’s
view of Stalin may be safely put to the debit of Beneš.

Today prewar Masaryk, the last “awakener” of his people, becomes even more
important than president Masaryk. During the national subjection reminding of
the present one, he had the courage to teach his people positive thinking. He was
not afraid to go up the stream and to urge his people to enter through the strait
gate. He had the courage to publicly reject the cherished historical forgeries, which
the nation for fifty years took for true, taught his people self-criticism, speak less
about their wounds, and blame others for their failures, remain calm and sober.
This was his realism.

Should free Czechs decide to go in Masaryk’s footsteps today, they would say
with him that “greater moral courage is needed to recognize an error than to
hold an error, cherished by the whole nation”. They would then discover their
modern historical forgeries in the traditional version of the events of the Beneš
era, beginning in 1935 and ending in 1948, en era of Beneš’s so-called “political“
thruths 31 with which he had for years treated his people, embellishing in this way
after 1922 his questionable, and during the war nefarious domestic and external
policies. Other nations, too, small as well as great powers, had at times ill-advised
periods in their history. Czech people had given a good account of themselves in
the twenties, when their kind of response to the social and minority problems
was rightly appreciated by the whole western world, and their country became
known as an “island of democracy in central Europe”. Their ill-advised historical
era is indissolubly linked up to the person and policy of their second president,
who between 1935 and 1945 more effectively controlled the course of national
policy and exercised greater power then his great predecessor. His words and
deeds, especially his blind orientation of the country on Soviet Russia and his

30 Národní shromáždění republiky československé v prvním desíti letech [The National
Assembly of the Czechoslovak Republic in the First Decade]. Prague 1928.
31 About Beneš’s distinction between political and absolute truths see Herben, Ivan:
Beneš About His Visit to Roosevelt and About Munich. — Feierabend, L.K.:
Beneš mezi Washingtonem a Moskvou [Beneš Between Washington and Moscow].
Washington 1966, p. 134. An example of his double-talk is the statement he made to
the Czech communists during his Moscow visit in December 1943: „About the premier
štěmek Beneš said that he made him prime minister in order to assuage the British
and the western world, saying: I am for them red cloth, and therefore I have put for­
ward (Msgr.) Šrámek as black cloth.” Šrámek in London played the same role that
later Fierlinger played in Czechoslovakia. Klimeš, Miloš (ed.): Cesta ke Květnu
[Road to May]. Prague 1965, p. 48.
trust in the Czech communists both before and during the war, leading to two catastrophic dénouements, make him appear like a double-crossed and humiliated Czech Lenin, whom he had resembled both by his messianism and perfidy. They would then have to unite in publicly condemning his policy before and during the war, repudiate his messianism, shared after the war by a considerable part of the Czech intelligentsia, and having done this penance, return to the traditions of the liquidated First Republic, to its coalition cabinets, led by Švehla with Masaryk, its standard-bearer. This might eventually become a good starting point of a new life when their country one day will regain its freedom, and in the meanwhile a fitting memorial of a fine piece of work, auspiciously begun by a group of humble and modest men, whose name and achievements are poorly known, and then wantonly destroyed by ill-advised decisions of a presumptuous political and intellectual adventurer, their successor.

ŠVEHLA, BENEŠ UND MASARYK

Der Verfasser befaßt sich mit der Führung der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen Republik und im Gegensatz zur allgemeinen Auffassung betrachtet er Švehla, mehr als Masaryk, als den führenden Kopf der tschechischen Politik vor der Ära Benešs und als Urheber der tschechoslowakischen Demokratie.


Bereits 1922 jedoch hatte er die Vorstellung, daß Rußland an Europa herangebracht werden sollte, und daß westeuropäische Mächte das, was er die Herrschaft des vierten Standes nannte, begünstigen sollten. Von diesem Zeitpunkt an versuchte er sich bei Rußland beliebt zu machen und die Rolle des Vermittlers zu

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32 Beneš says that he always made propaganda for the Soviet Union. He also had a clearer view of the communists than for example the coalition. But he could not carry out a policy of ten percent of the country’s communistic population.” Klímeš § 52.

33 Dr. Beneš regarded all his former colleagues, ministers of a respectable, democratic country either as traitors or persons unworthy to hold office in his liberated country. The chief weakness of the First Republic, indeed, was that its political leaders in deference to Masaryk’s wishes permitted dr. Beneš — a cuckoo’s egg in their own nest, an outsider in Czech politics, who held in contempt their way of doing things — to hold permanently a very important office until he became irremovable, and later as president played a dominant role in determining both the foreign and internal policy of the country. Unlike Lenin’s, however, his own revolution soon became half-hearted, as may be gathered from the fears and premonitions he had expressed when talking to Ivan Herben in August 1945. But he was too late to recognize his mistake, and in the end not strong enough to bring to a halt the pernicious forces, which he himself more than anybody else had set in motion years before.