A HISTORY OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA BETWEEN THE WARS

FROM VERSAILLES TO HITLER'S INVASION

PATRICK CROWHURST

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To Helen, Miroslav and Libuše

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INTRODUCTION

This is the first history of Czechoslovakia to give equal weight to the Sudeten Germans and Czechs. Until the Sudeten Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia, they were the second largest ethnic group in the First Czechoslovak Republic. But apart from the details of the crisis in the Sudetenland that began in 1936 and led to World War II, the Sudeten German aspect of this period has been largely ignored. When the study of Czechoslovak history began in 1945 after the war, it was Czech historians who wrote it. After the Communist seizure of power in 1948 most went into exile. Books and articles were also written by Sudeten Germans but these were mostly concerned with the harsh treatment that had preceded their expulsion in 1946. Earlier books by Sudeten Germans, written in the 1930s, had described the unfair treatment they received during the economic crisis. These have been ignored by Czech historians.

In their struggle with the Sudeten Germans, the Czechs were the victors and they have written the history of Czechoslovakia. This is not necessarily biased and unbalanced. They have brought a unique insight into the history of the Czech people, which began with the Great Moravian Empire in the ninth century. It continued with the Přemyslid Empire in the fourteenth century and ended with the defeat of the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620. Czech kings and aristocrats were replaced by Germans and these dominated the traditional Czech lands until the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918. Slovak history, on the other hand, has been largely ignored. The disadvantage for Czechs is that their history is the story of a relatively small Slav group in Central Europe

whose country is far removed from important world events, apart from the crisis that led to World War II. But Czechoslovakia deserves closer attention. In the period between the world wars it had a very successful economy and one of the highest living standards in the world. From the Czech point of view, and that of Western historians in general, the German influence is largely negative, repressing legitimate Czech aspirations between 1620 and 1918. From the Czech point of view, it was only when the Czechs could dominate the new state of Czechoslovakia after 1918 that they could claim their legitimate recognition and have an authentic Czech history again. That they exerted great influence in the new state after 1918, exploited their political control and tried to minimise the significance of the German element is, under the circumstances, hardly surprising.

This denial of Sudeten German importance is understandable, but creates bad history. The Sudeten German view, often expressed in strident form by Sudeten Germans, tends to be regarded as completely biased. Until now it has not formed a legitimate part of the history of Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1939. One recent historian, Mary Heimann, has even gone so far as to ignore the Sudeten Germans completely. Her book, *Czechoslovakia; the state that failed*, published in 2009, contains no references to German sources, primary or secondary. She even ignores the extensive German diplomatic papers that were translated into English and published after World War II. Instead, she lays great stress on the Czech domination of the state during the First Republic and emphasises the negative side of Czech control of Czechoslovakia. As a result her book attempts to revise Czechoslovak history by claiming that the Czechs were arrogant and were responsible for their own downfall. The reality is more complex. The history of Central Europe is like a skein of wool that is difficult to untangle. Population maps prior to World War I reveal a very large number of different ethnic groups, each with their own cultural identity, and often living in close proximity of each other. Some had barely moved in hundreds of years. Others, mostly German, had been encouraged to travel to parts of Eastern Europe and settle to fill gaps left by earlier massacres or to exploit mineral resources. Still more, notably Poles, moved in search of work following industrialisation in Bohemia and Northern Moravia or to escape foreign attack, such as the Turkish invasion of Hungary. The groups were also of different sizes and of

unequal importance and, because they often spoke more than one language (Hungarian and their own in Hungary, German and their own in Austria), there are questions about their true nationality. Czechoslovakia fits this confused pattern. The First Czechoslovak Republic contained three major racial groups (Czechs, Germans and Slovaks) and three minor (Poles, Hungarians and Ruthenes-Ukrainians). A historian studying Czechoslovak history needs to be aware of this racial mixture and of the expectations that each had during the First Czechoslovak Republic. But to do this takes historians into uncharted waters.

Historians, like the statesmen whose work they study and seek to analyse, tend to see history in abstract terms. The emotions, aspirations and fears of the people about whom they write tend to be ignored. Expressing emotion about a group of people can be seen as 'unhistorical' and consideration of this aspect of history can lack the calm analysis that is the hallmark of good history. In studies of the creation of Czechoslovakia, however, this has been a considerable disadvantage. To appreciate the part played in Czechoslovak history by Sudeten Germans, the historian needs to understand the Sudeten German point of view as well as that of the Czechs and Slovaks and those of the other races.

Eric Pasold's autobiography provides this. His book, *Ladybird, Ladybird; the Story of a Private Venture,* published in Manchester in 1977, describes his life in the Sudeten German town where he grew up. His book gives a rational and unemotional picture of Czechoslovakia between the two world wars that is far removed from the writings of exiled Sudeten Germans or of Czechs. Born Erich Päsold, he was the elder son of a textile manufacturer in the West Bohemian town of Fliessen. He studied English as a young man because English was an important language for commerce, though before 1918 the firm's business was largely with Viennese companies and visiting merchants, many of whom were Jewish. He also met, and was impressed by, Tomáš Bat'a, the famous Czech entrepreneur and most important boot and shoe manufacturer in Europe. After World War I the Päsold family firm developed trade with England by chance rather than design. One of the firm's regular customers had fled to England during the war. When he reappeared after 1918, his initial post war order was taken on trust: initially he could not pay in full for his order. From that point the trade

with London grew and was handled by Erich, the elder son and heir to the business. In the early 1930s he went to England to establish a factory and develop the English market. He was successful, became the British citizen Eric Pasold, and after World War II his company became a major manufacturer of children's clothing. Later, in the 1970s writing his autobiography, he could look back on his life in the Habsburg Empire, Czechoslovakia and England from a neutral and realistic point of view, free of cultural bias.

Pasold's view of Czechoslovak history is therefore unique because, though born a Sudeten German, he was writing as a British citizen. By the time he wrote his autobiography he had lived in England for a long time and could look back on his past life in Czechoslovakia without the strong patriotic feelings displayed by most Sudeten Germans, especially following their expulsion after World War II. What Pasold reveals is the deep emotion that Sudeten Germans, who were originally Austrian citizens, felt when Czechoslovakia was established. What made the matter worse from the Sudeten German point of view was that they had lost their identity. They were no longer Austrian citizens, subjects of the Austro–Hungarian Empire. Their right, in their eyes, to the self-determination promised by Wilson in his Fourteen Points, had been denied but had been given to people whom they regarded as less important. What made it worse was that the new state of Czechoslovakia had initially been created by a group of Czech nationalists. They had seized power in Prague when the Austro–Hungarian garrison had left. Masaryk's arrival had confirmed, in Czech eyes, the existence of the new state. It was only later, at Versailles, that the state was officially recognised and its frontiers established.

In the negotiations that had led to this, representatives of the defeated states (Germany, Austria and Hungary) were all ignored. Instead the Allied statesmen, and their accompanying experts, held discussions with the Czechs and Slovaks. Their leader, Masaryk, proved an excellent advocate for the creation of an easily defended and economically sustainable Czechoslovak state. It was also fully justified in Czech eyes as the successor to earlier Czech empires, to which were added Slovaks (with American support) and a small group of Ruthenes, who were related culturally to Ukrainians. Masaryk was a capable politician – he had been a member of parliament in Vienna before World War I – and he had the experience as a philosophy professor of presenting a

complex argument simply and clearly. He had the support of France and Czech and Slovak groups in America. He also had the confidence of Štefánik, a Slovak who was also a general in the French army and who represented the Slovak people. From the French point of view, Masaryk not only represented Czech and Slovak interests, but also spoke for the Czech émigré group that had been active in Paris in World War I. Masaryk could also point to the Czech soldiers who had fought with distinction on the Allied side during World War I and who proved that the new state of Czechoslovakia would be based on Western democratic values.

A further, and very important strategic argument in French eyes, was that the new state of Czechoslovakia would include the major armaments manufacturer, Škoda. This kept the company, one of the most important industrial firms in Europe, out of hostile Austrian control. It also strengthened Czechoslovakia in any future dispute or war with Austria, Germany or Hungary. These points all contributed to Masaryk's success at Versailles, and ensured that Czechoslovakia was given frontiers that it would be able to defend, and a balanced industrial economy. The inclusion of Austrians and Hungarians, as well as small groups of Poles and Ruthenes (Ukrainians) was a small price to pay. To try and pacify them, they were given the right to their own schools and social organisations and could leave Czechoslovakia if they wished. All this did, however, was create separate ethnic groups within Czechoslovakia, which continued their own cultural activities (including education) and had little contact with other groups. In consequence anyone born into a German-speaking family would attend German schools, join German cultural organisations, work in a German company and never learn Czech, the national language. Sudeten Germans were also able to work in Germany and Austria, since they continued to share a common German system of education. This preserved their sense of cultural identity and superiority and made cultural assimilation with Czechs and a sense of common Czechoslovak identity impossible. On the other hand, Czechs who wanted to enter the world of industry and commerce learnt German, which remained the major international language. The greater part of Czechoslovak trade was also with Germany, which further strengthened the position of the German language, though it never became an official Czechoslovak state language.

The creation of Czechoslovakia had a profound influence on the Sudeten German population. This has been ignored by historians, but is one of the key features in Pasold's account. There was great sadness when the picture of the Austrian Emperor was replaced in schools and public buildings by that of the, to them, unknown Czech Masaryk. The realisation that Austrians would no longer control their own destinies in the new state led many to take the drastic step of trying to unite the German-speaking areas with Germany or Austria, whichever was the bordering state. The latent German–Czech antagonism also came to the surface. The German caricature of the Czechs as wily peasants and the Czech belief that all Germans were arrogant was only surpassed by the German caricature of Slovaks as being even less important. These feelings played a major part in the initial stage of Czechoslovak history after 1918 but have been ignored by historians. The desperate attempt by some Sudeten Germans to take matters into their own hands and leave the new state was bound to fail. Czechs who were former soldiers in the Allied armies were sent to restore order and ensure that the boundaries established by the Versailles treaty were maintained. This had tragic results. Some of those protesting were killed and were regarded later as martyrs, others fled to Germany and Austria and joined paramilitary groups such as the Freikorps. The exiled Sudeten German groups in Vienna and elsewhere kept the memory of their homeland alive through concerts. The Czech-dominated Government knew that Czechoslovakia could not exist in the long-term without these Sudeten areas. Nor could it be defended by a small Czechoslovak army without the frontiers that the Allies created. Most of the new frontier ran through hilly, thickly wooded land that could not be penetrated by large armies. The Czechs also knew that, to be economically viable, Czechoslovakia needed the Sudeten German industries, most of which produced consumer goods. However, in the long run they proved economically weak, which had the important political consequences of unemployment and social unrest.

Before 1918 Sudeten German companies in Bohemia and northern Moravia, had been very successful. In the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire, companies had their head offices in Vienna. In the east the Slovak economy was based in Budapest. These companies tended to have factories in different part of the Habsburg Empire and also draw their resources from a wide area. Their market within the Habsburg Empire

was vast. It stretched in the north from Galicia (which became part of southern Poland) to northern Italy and the Adriatic Sea in the south, and from Germany in the west to Romania and Bulgaria in the east. In fact, their market was even wider, since Eastern Europe – Bulgaria and Romania – was largely agricultural and had to import manufactured goods. In the west, especially in the spa towns of Marianbad and Karlsbad, crowned heads of state, aristocrats and the wealthy from all over Europe provided a market for the high quality porcelain and other goods produced in West Bohemia. Habsburg industries were also successful at international trade exhibitions and enjoyed success in foreign markets, especially Germany. But after 1918 these Sudeten German industries, chiefly porcelain, glass, textiles and musical industries, faced great difficulties. Companies in Czechoslovakia were no longer based in Vienna. Under nostrification (changing ownership from Austrian or Hungarian to Czechoslovak) they had to be Czechoslovak. The head offices had to be in Prague and they had to be nominally controlled, financed and run by Czechs. People who lived in the new Czechoslovakia could become Czechoslovak citizens. From this point of view, former Austrian citizens could remain in control, but their loyalty had to be to the new state. There were also considerable practical difficulties that were more difficult to overcome. Textile firms often had weaving mills in Bohemia, spinning in Austria and finishing in Vienna. Iron and steel works in Austria depended on Czech coal. What made matters worse, from the Sudeten German point of view, was that their former markets had disappeared behind new tariff barriers.

The Successor States – the enlarged Romania and Yugoslavia and the smaller Austria and Hungary – established tariff barriers to try and protect their new industries. A number were established using machinery moved from factories in Czechoslovakia to where labour was cheaper. A further problem was that Bohemia and Moravia had contained the largest part of the Habsburg industry and needed a larger market than the Czechoslovak to be economic. The result for many Sudeten Germans was that their industry declined. There were exceptions: the Päsold textile firm was more fortunate because its new British market compensated for losses elsewhere. The general result was a growing sense among Sudeten Germans that they were being penalised by the Czech-dominated Government, which favoured Czech companies. This only became worse when the Depression began to hit

Czechoslovakia. Austrian and German aristocrats with estates in Czechoslovakia were also likely to be disloyal to the new state. When in 1936 construction of the defensive system – the Czech Maginot Line – was begun, only Czech firms were given contracts. The land for the forts was Sudeten German.

Another problem was that to incorporate large numbers of people into a 'foreign' state against their will in 1918 ran counter to one of Wilson's promised Fourteen Points, which had formed the prelude to the armistice and the Treaty of Versailles. Germans, Austrians and the large German-speaking groups elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the Ukraine were denied this right of self-determination. Masaryk recognised the problem this would cause and spoke soothingly that in time Czechoslovakia would achieve racial harmony like Switzerland. But there were crucial differences between the two countries, which he ignored. From the beginning, Switzerland had been a confederation of states, the Eidgenossenschaft: the cooperation of equals bound together by oath. From its origins in 1291, the Swiss Confederation gradually expanded as it was joined by free imperial cities. Throughout its history it had remained a confederation of equal cantons. It is this equality, and the success of the state in maintaining its economy and independence, apart from invasion by Napoleon, that overcame the inherited problems of four languages: German, French, Italian and Romanche. Czechoslovakia was, and remained, a forced alliance of three major (Czech, German and Slovak) and three minor (Polish, Hungarian and Ruthenian-Ukrainian) language and cultural groups. Any hope of union depended on the aspirations of all being met within an economically successful state. This never happened.

The first problem was that the attempt by Sudeten Germans to break away had resulted in loss of life (creation of martyrs) as the attempted succession was repressed by force. Afterwards Czechs continued to distrust the Sudeten Germans, believing them to be disloyal to the new state. As a result, Sudeten Germans were never given the status of equality with Czechs and Slovaks. In the 1920s, elected Sudeten German members of the Czechoslovak parliament initially refused to take their seats. They were only encouraged to participate in government when the threat of the Depression showed that if they were to gain any concessions for the areas they represented, they had to take part in government. One German historian, Kurt Rabel, has even claimed that Sudeten Germans

were loyal to the concept of the state but not to the Czech interpretation of it.[1] But even he ignores the position of the smaller German community in Slovakia. It has only been possible for Czechs to reconsider the motives of Sudeten German political parties in the 1990s after the fall of Communism.[2] From the Czech point of view, it was crucial that all citizens of the state should be loyal to the democratic ideal. Also, in spite of its Slav origin, Czechoslovakia was oriented towards Western liberalism. None of this matched the Sudeten German view, which considered German culture and economic achievements to be superior and who looked increasingly to strong leadership as the answer to economic depression.

Another problem facing historians of Czechoslovak history is the question of the relationship between Sudeten Germans and the Nazi party. Information on this is revealed by German diplomatic correspondence that was published after World War II. In an effort to understand the causes of the war, a group of historians assessed and translated captured German diplomatic correspondence. Most was then published. The same was done in less detail for British and French diplomatic correspondence, no doubt to support the view that these countries were not responsible for causing the war. What these German documents reveal is the gradual development of two German policies. In the late 1920s, when the Nazi party was causing trouble in Austria and later in Czechoslovakia, German diplomats in Prague took no active part. They only sympathised with the families of Sudeten Germans who had been arrested by the Czech police. These professional diplomats had no sympathy for the extreme right wing rabble rousers. They were forced to change their policy when Hitler was appointed chancellor. Hitler, looking for an opportunity to undermine Czechoslovakia from within, insisted that financial help should be given to families of Sudeten Germans who had been arrested. As an Austrian, he probably had great sympathy for them. German diplomats were initially reluctant to have anything to do with this, since not only did they not sympathise with Sudeten German Nazis, but they did not want their diplomatic position to be compromised. They were overruled. The German Legation in Prague became the channel for the considerable sums of money that were sent to help families of those arrested as well as for Henlein, when he establish his Sudeten Deutsche Partei (SdP). This information in the diplomatic correspondence is

particularly important because it shows the range of activities that Berlin supported and the way that the German Government was held to ransom by the Sudeten Germans. In one case, money had been taken from Sudeten German union funds to pay for the legal defence of a leading official. This was illegal. Sudeten Germans argued that Berlin had to supply money to pay back into union funds because there was a risk that the Czech authorities would find out what had happened. If they did, the union would be compromised as a Nazi organisation and the actions of its member would become criminal rather than political. Berlin gave in and the money was transferred. Large sums were also sent to support Henlein, Nazi newspapers and other right wing political activity. It is a sign of the importance of Sudeten German activity that it was sent even though Germany was short of foreign currency. Moreover, since the Czech Government had made any activity linked to the Nazi party illegal, the money had to be sent to firms as payment for goods allegedly sent to Germany. It was carried secretly by trusted individuals and no receipts were ever given. If they had fallen into the hands of the Czech police, those who had received the money could have been prosecuted for importing it illegally. In short, the more that Hitler supported Henlein and the SdP the greater the risk of being discovered, the money seized and of the diplomats as well as SdP activists being branded as criminals.

This raises another problem that historians have not tackled: the extent to which there was a single German policy over the Sudetenland. The answer, as the diplomatic papers reveal, is that there were two policies, Hitler's and that of the German Foreign Office. Hitler, working secretly through Henlein, aimed at destroying Czechoslovakia from within. The German Foreign Office on the other hand, unaware of Hitler's plans, tried to undermine the Franco–Czech alliance and make Czechoslovakia dependent on Germany. This had the unexpected result that senior Nazis in the SdP such as Frank, when summoned to Prague by German diplomats and asked to account for their actions did not know what to say. The diplomats wanted to maintain cordial relations with the Czechoslovak Government. They tried, without success, to get the Foreign Office in Berlin to bring Frank and other SdP Nazis under the control of the Auslands Organisation, an independent body responsible for Germans living abroad. They were unsuccessful. Actions by leading members of the SdP caused

considerable confusion among diplomats in Prague, who were trying to understand what was happening.

A further problem about Czechoslovak history is why Henlein was so successful in persuading the British Government that the Sudetenland was on the verge of civil war. Henlein made two visits to London and his most important meetings were with Vansittart, a senior Foreign Office official and advisor to the British Government. It is clear from the German diplomatic correspondence that Henlein was careful to give accurate information about economic distress whenever this could be checked. But he built on this a picture of such extreme hardship and anti-Czech anger that Vansittart, who was anti-German, was persuaded he spoke the truth. Henlein was in any case a man who appeared open and trustworthy. He was also supported by other Germans with excellent British connections, including Prince Max von Hohenlohe-Langenberg, a Reich German who owned an estate in North Bohemia. There were many in England who were in any case sympathetic to Germany and had regretted that Czechoslovakia had been created. Collectively they supported the views presented by Henlein and Hitler.

The German military archives have also shed considerable light on a neglected aspect of the final Sudeten crisis. Records show that Hitler planned to invade Czechoslovakia and conquer the country in such a short time that France would not be able to offer any support. Details of the invasion plan (route to the followed, the areas of the main and diversionary attacks and the units to be used) were drawn up, only for the attack to be postponed. The German military archives make it clear that although Hitler wanted to have a brief, victorious military campaign, he was aware of the diplomatic hazards. He was unaware of the strength of Czech defences, in spite of information supplied by Sudeten Germans who lived in the area. Although the series of Maginot style blockhouses on the northern frontier near Ostrava had been built by the summer of 1938, not all had been equipped with the full range of artillery and machine guns. Nevertheless, Hitler realised after gaining the Sudetenland and being able to inspect the Czech defences, that German casualties would have been high and the invasion of Czechoslovakia would have taken longer than planned, with serious political results.

Arising from this is the question of whether British diplomats in Prague could have done more to discover the reality of the situation in the Sudetenland and foil Hitler's plans. They faced considerable

difficulties. One was the problem of language: few if any are known to have spoken Czech and Newton, who was sent to Prague as the Sudeten crisis developed, came from Berlin and seems to have been pro-German. Sudeten German newspapers, subsidised by Berlin, presented Nazi views and printed lies. Sometimes it seemed possible to check on the accuracy of reports. When the British Embassy in Berlin learnt that German troops had been seen close to the Czechoslovak–German frontier, it asked the German Foreign Office for details. The latter said this was a false rumour. The British Embassy sent two British officers to investigate and told the Germans where they were going. By the time the officers had arrived on the frontier there was no sign of the troops and the German Foreign Office claimed that it had been a false rumour. However, in view of the planned invasion of Czechoslovakia, it is very likely that there had been preliminary manoeuvres and the troops, having been warned by Berlin, returned to their barracks in Dresden. But the episode does reveal the difficulty in getting accurate information to prove or disprove Hitler's increasingly violent claims.

These German diplomatic and military papers reveal the way in which Sudeten German genuine grievances were exaggerated and exploited before and during the Sudeten crisis that marks the end of Czechoslovakia as a unified state.

Equally important is information in Czech archives about what happened after the transfer of the Sudetenland to Germany. Details of this and how it was organised exclusively by the German Foreign Office are revealed. Equally important is the description of events by Eric Pasold, which shows that not all Sudeten Germans welcomed the arrival of German troops. Not all wanted to become German citizens and they rejected the claim that Germany was their spiritual home – the aim of the slogan *Heim ins Reich*. The loss of the Sudetenland deprived Czechoslovakia of its defences and the loss of its industries brought economic disaster to Czechoslovakia. It also caused a flood of refugees, mostly Czech but also including many German left wing politicians who had earlier fled from Nazi rule. The nature of the new Nazi administration is shown by the reports in Czech archives by those who had fled, fearing arrest or persecution, as well as those who now lived on the German side of the new frontier and feared they would be unable to continue to cross the frontier and continue to work in Czech factories. It is impossible to know the scale of this disaster, since no accurate records exist of the numbers of

refugees from the Sudetenland. In England, as the result of the Munich Conference became clear in terms of this human tragedy, the Lord Mayor of London launched an appeal for funds to relieve the human distress. The British and French Governments also offered loans to allow potential Nazi victims (Jews and left wing Germans) to escape. Few had managed to do so before German forces occupied the Czech lands in March 1939 and created the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

The other example of what has come to be called ‘ethnic cleansing’ took place in north Moravia. Poland and Czechoslovakia had disputed the area north of the coal and steel city of Ostrava at the end of World War I, which had a mixed Czech, German and Polish population. Poland claimed that the majority of the miners were Polish but the Czechoslovak Government could not allow it to become part of Poland, since it supplied coal to the Vítkovice steelworks in Ostrava and the main railway line to the east passed through it. Because of this, Czech forces had occupied the area and held it as Poland fought Russia to establish her eastern frontier. After the Munich conference Poland, sensing Czech weakness, demanded the area and occupied it soon afterwards. The result was a flood of mainly Czech refugees. Details survive of who these were. The Red Cross assisted them with temporary accommodation and helped them find work.

Large-scale research in British archives was largely unnecessary because so many scholars have studied this period from a British point of view. One source that was useful were the Eden papers, which gave the views of important British politicians at the time of the Sudeten crisis. It is clear from letters in these papers that there was little support for Czechoslovakia. Instead, the letters reveal a desire that the dispute should be settled diplomatically, and not under pressure by Hitler. Czechoslovakia could be sacrificed easily provided the matter was done in a formal and legally binding manner. A group of Slovaks who favoured an independent Slovak state expressed their anti-Czech views forcefully in a booklet claiming that Czechoslovakia was not worth fighting for. Voices raised in support of Czechs were a small minority. Public opinion in Britain shared Chamberlain’s fear of war, destruction of cities by bombing and heavy loss of life and the relief at his claim to have achieved ‘peace in our time’ was widespread.

There remains one problem that this research had to tackle: the search for relevant documentary and secondary material. It became clear

that the key to understanding the period lay in German archives and records. In this respect, the two most important sources of information were the German diplomatic correspondence and the records of the German high command in the German military archives in Freiburg. The German diplomatic correspondence covered communications between the German legation at Prague and the German Foreign Office in Berlin. The correspondence provided detailed information on the progress of the Sudeten German Nazi party through its rise in the late 1920s, the Czech reaction, the creation of Henlein's Sudeten Deutsch Partei and the growing support given by Hitler to Henlein. The reports on meetings between Czech ministers and German diplomats cast considerable light on the relations between the two sides. It also became clear why Henlein was able to persuade so many people that he was telling the truth when he described conditions in the Sudetenland. Details of who he met on visits to London, who arranged the invitations for his visits, the politicians he met in London and their reactions were all described. The dilemma of the German diplomats in Prague also became clear as they were forced to act as illegal paymasters to Henlein and his party.

Complementing the published correspondence, which had never been fully explored, were the details of German military preparations ordered by Hitler. It became clear that, in spite of his dramatic gestures and fiery speeches, his actual policy towards Czechoslovakia was more cautious. He decided that he would either be able to undermine the state from within by using Henlein or risk a dramatic and rapid invasion. Either might work, but both carried risks. Any attack had to be completed in days rather than weeks, since he feared an attack by France on his western frontier. He tried to strengthen the western defences to counter this, but the risk remained. He seriously underestimated the strength of the Czechoslovak defences in northern Moravia, where he intended the main attack to take place. He was also hesitant about attacking and postponed it on at least one occasion. Hitler planned a dramatic gesture – a Blitzkrieg – that would minimise the risks, but he failed to listen to advice from the Sudeten Germans who lived in the area and knew the strength and weakness of the defensive system. His plan of using Henlein to undermine the state from within was very expensive, and it is a symptom of his lack of economic sense that he has prepared to spend very large sums on this when the country was short of foreign exchange.

There was also a serious risk that the Czech police would discover what was happening, give it maximum publicity and gain widespread international support. When used together in this way, the two sources revealed events in Czechoslovakia in a way that reveals German policy towards Czechoslovakia in a new light.

The other aspect of Sudeten German history was how to complete the study of its society beyond Pasold's personal recollections and the reports of German diplomats. Fortunately, the Czech national library has collected a wide range of literature on this subject. It therefore possible to find accounts that showed the deep sadness of exiled Sudeten Germans as well as the anger that was felt by so many others. There was also a crucial report of a major trade union meeting in Prague in 1929 that showed the economic situation through Sudeten German eyes. Whether or not the figures for relative unemployment of Czechs and Sudeten Germans were accurate, they showed what the trade union leaders thought was happening. It confirmed what Pasold also described, though in his case his firm was able to find enough work for his employees to avoid much unemployment. The trade union figures of 1929 showed a society in deep distress and were probably the same as those used later by Henlein in his discussions with Vansittart and others in London. Given the problems of unemployment in south Wales and the north of England at the same time, they sounded authentic even if they were not completely accurate. Vansittart could easily be persuaded that this social and economic distress could become extremely dangerous in Czechoslovakia because of the long-standing ethnic rivalry.

The final problem was to find information to show the Czech side of this period. Fortunately, there are some excellent books that cover the major aspects, and what was needed was the detail to show the impact of these events on society. But there is no history of research in the Czech Republic that allows scholars to easily find out what collections of documents exist and to provide easy access. Czechoslovak archives were originally created as state repositories to hold documents. These are held in a number of depots as well as the main archives. In the case of the regional archives in Plzeň, the list of documents in the search room did not state where they were stored. Only the staff computer held this information. Since documents kept in these depots were difficult to obtain, it was only with the help of sympathetic staff that documents could be specially obtained and research completed. One useful feature of

the archives was that for many collections there was a short guide and list of documents. However, this was by no means complete, although the documents had been in the archives for a long time, many since the Communist seizure of power in 1948.

After World War II, when historical research began in the West, there was no comparable scholarly work in the countries under Soviet control. Part of the problem was ideological: Communism offered what it claimed was a new, scientific and accurate version of how the past should be interpreted. It also demanded total obedience to this view and punished any who deviated from it. In the 1930s Stalin had shown what could happen to anyone who fell foul of the system by his purges. These began in Czechoslovakia in the early 1950s when the state became bankrupt following the very large investment in heavy industry demanded by Stalin. Slánský, an important member of the government, was made the scapegoat. He was tried on charges that were obviously false – spying for the West – convicted and executed. Historical research that might reveal an alternative to the state's version of history was impossible under these circumstances. All that historians could safely do was study the history of the Communist party, stress its significance in Marxist terms and examine pre-industrial history: small firms that no longer existed.

The fall of Communism in 1989 released a flood of personal reminiscences, including accounts of wartime experience by men who had fought in the Royal Air Force and the British army – subjects forbidden in the past. There were also company histories and descriptions of past events. Another valuable contribution was the excellent three-volume survey of events in the First Republic by the very experienced historian Zdeněk Kárník, *České země v éře první republiky* (Prague, 2002–3). The only weakness was the occasional failure to show reference points when quoting rising or falling percentages. This no doubt stems from the Communist period when statistics were quoted without any attempt at analysis. Other books that appeared after 1989 covered the German occupation of the Czech lands in March 1939, the creation of the Protectorate and the war, including accounts by men who had served in the German and Soviet armed forces. The impact of Nazi control was revealed in books on the arianisation of Jewish business and property: Drahomír Jančík and Eduard Kubů, '*Arizace*'*a arizátoři drobný a střední židovský majetek v úvěrech Kreditanstalt der Deutschen (1939–45)*

(Prague, 2005). This showed the part played by the German Kreditanstalt Bank and who were the beneficiaries. The transfer of the Sudetenland, the refugee crisis and the war was the subject of Peter Glotz, *Vyhnání; České země jako poučný případ* (Prague, 2006). There were also more general books on the period, such as Eva Hahnová and Hans Henning Hahn, *Sudetoněmecká vzpomínání* (Prague, 2002). Among the company histories for this period, the most important is the history of Škoda by a group of historians led by Vladimír Karlický, *Svět okřídleného šipu; Koncern Škoda Plzeň* (Plzeň, 1999). The development of the legal system from the First Republic through the period of German occupation is the subject of Ján Gronský, *Komentované dokumenty k ústavním dějimám československa, I, 1914–1945* (Prague, 2005). These, and others covering similar topics, were all essential for an understanding of the period. Where the writers used statistics from sources such as bank records, they were accurate and needed no interpretation. The only problem for the historian was that, because of the small Czech population, relatively few copies of books were printed and they were seldom on sale for very long. Those that were not sold were remaindered and were only available in the Levné Knihy chain of bookshops.

The history of the First and Second Czechoslovak Republics is the story of a relatively small Slav population who achieved their ambition of independence from Austro–German control for a relatively short period. The odds against them succeeding in creating a harmonious, multi-ethnic state were considerable. The forced addition of Austrians, Hungarians and Poles into a state apparently based on self-determination caused deep and lasting resentment. If economic conditions had been more favourable and all the groups had prospered, the chances of creating a sort of Switzerland would have been higher. But it needed Hitler to provide the funds and the motivation for the Sudeten Germans to make, and continue to make, demands that ultimately led to the fear of war and the Munich conference. But it needed a clear appreciation of German as well as Czech sources to be able to understand the complexities of this story.

CHAPTER 1

CZECHS *vs* GERMANS; ROLES REVERSED

Many Germans, especially if they were from the Sudetenland, would argue that the mistreatment of the Sudeten Germans after World War I was the major cause of World War II. They would point to the enmity between Czechs and Sudeten Germans and the Czech refusal to grant them equal status in the First Czechoslovak Republic. They would also argue that Sudeten German industry was not given equal status in the new state, though contributing to its economic success. This caused dangerous tension and was bound to lead to trouble. They might even argue that Hitler, far from fomenting trouble after 1935, was merely recognising the dangers of this enmity and seeking to resolve it. Any counter argument, that Germany had treated Russia worse in the Treaty of Brest Litovsk the previous year, could be dismissed as referring to a different set of conditions in another country. The German argument would of course be false, relying on prejudice, wrong information and looking back from 1939 rather than forward from 1918. But in so far that it represented the anger at the reversal of roles in the new state, it would be accurate. Sudeten Germans, who had previously dominated the Habsburg Empire, were now dominated by Czechs, whom they considered inferior. Sudeten German industry, which played an important part in creating an advanced, prosperous and industrially advanced state, was controlled by the Czech Government. This anger was very different to the situation described by Tomáš Masaryk, the Czechoslovak President. Masaryk had confidently predicted in 1918 that