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(EDS)

EXILE IN LONDON
THE EXPERIENCE
OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA
AND THE OTHER
OCCUPIED NATIONS,
1939-1945

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Exile in London

The Experience of Czechoslovakia
and the Other Occupied Nations, 1939–1945

Vít Smetana – Kathleen Geaney (eds)

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INTRODUCTION

Three quarters of a century ago, during the Second World War, the common state of the Czechs and Slovaks existed, from the legal point of view, only in the United Kingdom, where its government-in-exile resided. For the long and arduous six war years, the same was true for Poland. The governments of four Western nations (Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), as well as those of Greece and Yugoslavia, were moved to London after their countries had been occupied by Nazi Germany in 1940–1941. The capital of Great Britain thus in a way became the capital of free Europe as well.

The individual national stories naturally differed, both in general aspects and in details. Yet, a number of interesting parallels between them can be drawn. Just to mention one example: unlike the other governments, that of Czechoslovakia was created in a revolutionary way, achieving *de jure* recognition from the host country only in July 1941. Yet, it was still undoubtedly a remarkable success for the Czechoslovak representatives to attain this status, especially when compared to the failure of the Free French to achieve similar recognition.

Intensive research conducted in the archives, especially in the last three decades, has enabled us to observe and study the story of the European exile in London from a more detached and a more historical perspective. We are thus now in a position to wage a more profound debate not only about the political and military issues, but also about the various economic and social aspects of the individual stories of the governments-in-exile as well as about everyday life in the exile in general. To avoid national self-centrism, the Czechoslovak case needs to be analyzed in the international context and particularly in comparison with the cases of other countries whose governments found refuge in London.

To stimulate and abet such a debate, the British-Czech-Slovak Historians' Forum invited leading scholars in the field to a conference that took place in the Czernin Palace, the seat of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from 6 to 7 June 2013. It was preceded by the annual Bruce Lockhart Lecture delivered by Richard Overy, on the topic of *British Political Warfare and Occupied Europe*, symbolically in the Thun Palace, the seat of the British Embassy in Prague. The conference itself was divided into five panels in which more than 20 historians from nine countries focused on various aspects of exile politics,

the importance of armies-in-exile, the preparation of the post-war solution for the issue of minorities as well as the problem of media, education and propaganda in exile.

Eighteen participants eventually delivered their chapters for this volume while the special lecture by Richard Overy is also included. Of course, the authors could profit from the vast array of relevant literature on the topic of the exile, from which at least the collective monograph *Europe in Exile*, published in 2001, must be mentioned.¹ On the other hand, the research has moved forward further in the last one-and-a-half decades since that book was published. In particular, the authors of the current volume could make use of the large quantity of newly-released documents in their efforts to answer some crucial and intriguing historical questions. Their chapters thus seek the common characteristics and differences in the origin and structure of the individual exile representations in London, the ways in which the governments-in-exile dealt with their pressing social and economic problems and, of course, several of them strive to set the measure in which the governments-in-exile were able to influence crucial allied diplomatic negotiations.

There is no doubt that the Polish, Yugoslav and later also the Czechoslovak exile leaders failed to achieve their primary war aims as the introductory chapter by Detlef Brandes clearly demonstrates and those by Anita Prażmowska, Vít Smetana and also Radosław Żurawski vel Grajewski all but underline. But were they the only “losers” or can any similarities with the fate of the Western statesmen-in-exile and their plans be observed? The chapters by Chantal Kesteloot and Albert Kersten on the Belgian and Dutch exiles respectively help to draw a more colourful picture of the alleged “winners” and the others. Victoria Vasilenko, for her part, adds an important chapter on how the story of the exile has been treated by historians. It is all the more significant in that it deals with the ways that Russian (and Soviet) historiography has treated the topics of the Polish and Czechoslovak exiles, whose fate the Soviet Union had once affected so dramatically, in the politically most turbulent last three decades – that is from the *glasnost* period in the late 1980s to the Putin era.

The book *Europe in Exile* contained several chapters focusing on the role the military forces of several countries played in the exile. Another study of the topic, called *Exile Armies*, appeared three years later.² In contrast, this volume offers a truly comparative chapter by Zdenko Maršálek that assesses the relative importance of not only armies, but also of all the strategic

1 Martin Conway – José Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile: European Exile Communities in Britain 1940–1945* (New York – Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001).

2 Matthew Bennett – Paul Latawski, eds., *Exile Armies* (Houndmills, NH – New York: Palgrave, 2004).

commodities and equipment which particular governments-in-exile were able to offer for the allied war effort. Moreover, Maršálek's chapter clearly demonstrates how some of the problems faced by the exile representations, such as the problem of achieving maximum effectiveness from small armed forces, are topical even today, within the framework of current allied forces. This comparative view is fittingly supplemented by Blaž Torkar's detailed chapter on the Yugoslav armed forces in exile and their political importance, since probably no other country represented such a divergence of changing governments-in-exile and their (as well as Allied) attitudes to the resistance structures at home. The resistance activity in the occupied countries themselves was at least equally as important for Allied warfare as the military units in exile were. Yet, to achieve real efficiency, this had to be supported by the governments-in-exile in cooperation with the pertinent British authorities who provided weapons, ammunition and logistical support. The chapter by Mark Seaman represents an interesting probe into this broad topic as it points out the various practical problems entailed in British support for clandestine operations in such a far-away country as Czechoslovakia.

One of the major war aims of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile was to prevent the internal disintegration of the state in the future. The preparation of the post-war solution for the issue of minorities is thus deservedly a topic of three chapters. Those by Jan Kuklík with Jan Němeček on the one hand and by Matěj Spurný on the other differ slightly in their conclusions, thus reflecting the fact that discussion on this sensitive topic continues. Martin Brown's chapter assesses the ways this theme has been treated by English language historiography while René Petráš's brief contribution, the only one which is not devoted to exile problems, sets the issue into the historical context of the inter-war treatment of minorities.

Four chapters (those by Richard Overy, Erica Harrison, Jan Láníček and Dušan Segeš) deal with various aspects of propaganda, thus appositely demonstrating how significant this weapon was deemed to be not only by the exiles themselves but also by the British for the overall Allied war effort. The process of preparation for the post-war orientation of the liberated country in the important fields of education and culture is then covered in Doubravka Olšáková's chapter.

Of course, not all the national stories are adequately dealt with in this book, not to mention all the important themes. Still, the authors hope that the variety of the topics that really are covered as well as the quality of their treatment will prompt further discussion on the overall exile phenomenon, perhaps not limited to the Second World War, and might thus serve as a further incentive for intensification of research in the area in the future.

I. THE EXISTENCE AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE EXILE GOVERNMENTS IN LONDON

LIMITED INFLUENCE: THE BRITISH AND THE GOVERNMENTS-IN-EXILE OF POLAND, CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND YUGOSLAVIA

DETLEF BRANDES

In this chapter, I provide a comparison of the British influence on three governments-in-exile and examine to what extent the British government used its power to promote its views.¹

THE COMPOSITION AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF THE THREE GOVERNMENTS-IN-EXILE

Though the British government had great influence on the composition and political orientation of the Polish, Czechoslovak, and Yugoslav governments-in-exile, it used its power resolutely only in the case of Poland. Together with the French it forced a change of government from the pre-wartime *Sanacja* movement to a broad coalition of the former opposition parties with some moderate politicians from the old regime included. On three occasions Britain vetoed the removal of the Polish Prime Minister, General Władysław Eugeniusz Sikorski: once in June 1940 after the loss of the greater part of the Polish army in France, again in July 1941 during negotiations with the Soviet Union on the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, and, finally, in April 1943 after the withdrawal of the Polish divisions from Soviet territory. Britain not only relied upon Sikorski's popularity within Poland itself and on his competence and efficiency in government affairs, but also on his willingness to compromise with the Soviet Union. After his death it accepted the appointment of General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, a follower of Piłsudski, as Commander-in-Chief of the Polish army, since it wanted to avoid a crisis similar to that which had occurred in the Greek and Yugoslav armies, and, on

1 The paper is based on my study *Großbritannien und seine osteuropäischen Alliierten 1939-1943. Die Regierungen Polens, der Tschechoslowakei und Jugoslawiens im Londoner Exil vom Kriegsausbruch bis zur Konferenz in Teheran* (München: Oldenbourg, 1988). It was translated into Czech under the title *Exil v Londýně 1939-1943. Velká Británie a její spojenci Československo, Polsko a Jugoslávie mezi Mnichovem a Teheránem* (Praha: Karolinum, 2003). Since this chapter is to a great extent a very short summary of my books with 607 and 566 pages respectively, I will add footnotes only when I quote other publications.

the political front, backed Stanisław Mikołajczyk, leader of the Peasant Party, whom it was expected would also make concessions to the Soviet Union.²

In the case of Czechoslovakia, Edvard Beneš asserted himself despite opposition from France and partly also from Britain because of his many supporters among the political émigrés. The Slovak Milan Hodža, who had won a reputation as a proponent of far-reaching confederation plans for Eastern Europe, was not consistently supported by the British, despite their own confederation plans. Behind the façade of the Czechoslovak government and the so-called State Council, Beneš systematically built up a dominant position. This was only challenged by the Communists following the first Soviet military victories. The British government did not champion any of his competitors and was surprised when the official institutions of the Czechoslovak exile lost their internal political balance. A belated attempt to use the Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, as a conservative counterweight to the pro-Soviet orientation of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile and State Council failed because of his weakness and indecisiveness.

The Foreign Office defended General Dušan Simović, the symbol of Yugoslav resistance and sacrifice for the Allied cause, against the attacks of the King, the queen mother, and his fellow ministers only until January 1942. Although King Peter and the Yugoslav government, shaken especially by the Ustaša terror within occupied Yugoslavia, depended totally on British support, the Foreign Office hesitated to confront the clique of ministers, diplomats, and officers with Great Serbian inclinations and did not force through a new cabinet ready for attempts at conciliation in the national conflicts and at social reforms. Instead of demanding such a new cabinet, it was content with a series of half-hearted changes in the composition of the Yugoslav exile apparatus. Annoyed by the internal dissensions among Yugoslav politicians, the British eventually in August 1943 accepted a government of civil servants whose most important members had made their career under the dictatorship of Peter's father, Alexander. The Foreign Office stuck to this solution, even though a group of younger politicians had just united against the Serbian and Croatian extremists and offered a democratic alternative. Only in July 1944, which was much too late, was a government headed by the moderate Croat, Ivan Šubašić, appointed.³

With the westward advance of the Soviet armies, British influence on the three governments-in-exile diminished. It could only achieve the temporary inclusion of some democratic ministers in the new Yugoslav and Polish governments dominated by the Communists. On the other hand,

2 Eugeniusz Duraczyński, *Rząd Polski na uchodźstwie 1939-1945. Organizacja, Personalalia, Polityka* (Warszawa: Książka a Wiedza, 1993), pp. 240-242.

3 Dragovan Šepić, *Vlada Šubašića* (Zagreb: Globus, 1983).

Beneš anticipated Soviet wishes and appointed in Košice in eastern Slovakia a new government, in which Communists occupied almost one third of the ministries.⁴

GREAT BRITAIN AND THE EXILE ARMIES

Britain expected the governments-in-exile to recruit troops abroad and to support and control the resistance movements in their occupied home countries. In both respects the Polish government maintained a big lead over the other governments-in-exile. When the war began, it could rely on a colony of Polish workers in France and on the military units which had fled to Romania and Hungary following the lost September campaign. Upon Soviet entry into the war, the Polish government could also mobilize some of those prisoners of war and civilians who had been deported to the Soviet Union following Soviet occupation of eastern Poland.

The Czechoslovak army-in-exile was significantly smaller. Up until June 1941 it suffered from the refusal of the former fighters in the Spanish Civil War to take up arms in a so-called “imperialistic war on both sides.” The British had of course no influence on the Czechoslovak units organized from 1942 on Soviet soil or on the Polish division mobilized after the departure of the Anders Army in late 1942. The Polish and Czechoslovak units in the West were engaged by the British in Africa, Italy, and Western Europe. Their pilots played an important role in the “Battle of Britain.”

As the Yugoslav government did not succeed in evacuating at least part of the Yugoslav army prior to the sudden capitulation in April 1941, its forces were extremely small. They were filled with Slovene prisoners of war who had Italian citizenship. The Yugoslav units disintegrated when their Serbian officers protested against Simović’s dismissal and when the British military authorities in Cairo supported the mutineers. The Yugoslav prisoners of war liberated by the Allies on Italian soil already expected the victory of the communist partisans and refused to submit to the discredited Yugoslav government.⁵

4 Toman Brod, *Osudný omyl Edvarda Beneše 1939–1948. Československá cesta do sovětského područí* [The Fateful Error of Edvard Beneš. Czechoslovakia’s Road to Soviet Domination] (Praha: Academia, 2002).

5 Detlef Brandes, “Slowenische Exilpolitik zwischen Jugoslawien und Mitteleuropa 1941–1945,” in *Historik na Moravě. Prof. Jiřímu Malířovi k šedesátinám* (Brno: Matice Moravská, 2009), pp. 555–572.

BRITAIN AND THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

Only the Poles succeeded in forming an “underground state” with a governmental delegation, a political representation comprising the main parties, and an underground army. The Political Warfare Executive supported the resistance movements with propaganda over the radio; the Special Operations Executive delivered radio transmitters, money, some weapons, and transported parachutists to the resistance, though the governments-in-exile all complained about the insufficient scale of British help. Poles and Czechs were able to establish independent radio links with their homeland, but the British refused to grant the Yugoslavs an uncontrolled code. As a result, the Yugoslav government could not confer confidentially with its Minister of Defence, Draža Mihailović. With British acquiescence, the three underground armies should have confined themselves to acts of sabotage and saved their valuable squads for a general uprising shortly before the withdrawal of the Axis forces, but the uprisings in Warsaw, Central Slovakia and Prague led to defeats with terrible casualties. Since the *Ustaša* regime were practising a policy of wholesale expulsions and extermination, and the communist partisans were actively fighting to liberate some regional areas, the units of the Yugoslav home army, i.e. the *Četnici*, could not wait for an Allied Balkan invasion. The British and Yugoslav governments proclaimed General Draža Mihailović leader of the rebellion in Yugoslavia and the government-in-exile appointed him War Minister. Through this policy they became dependent on one of the competing parties, and what was more, of the Serb nationalist movement. British attempts to influence Mihailović’s strategy directly and through military advisers failed. Though they quietly accepted Mihailović’s collaboration with Italy, they demanded acts of sabotage especially against German lines of communication. Only after the defeat of the *Četnici* in the Battle of the Neretva in the spring of 1943 did the SOE switch to an initially cautious but later strong support for the partisans. Its effect on the policy of the successful and self-confident Communist Tito, however, was limited.

BRITAIN AND THE POLICIES OF THE GOVERNMENTS-IN-EXILE TOWARDS THE SOVIET UNION

Following the military successes of the Soviet armies, British influence on the governments-in-exile diminished. Relations between Poland and the Soviet Union were not only burdened by centuries of conflict, but also by the Soviet policy of repression and deportation in its occupation zone during the years 1939–1941, the treatment of the deportees in the vast areas of the Soviet Union, and the quarrel over the future common borders. Under British pressure,