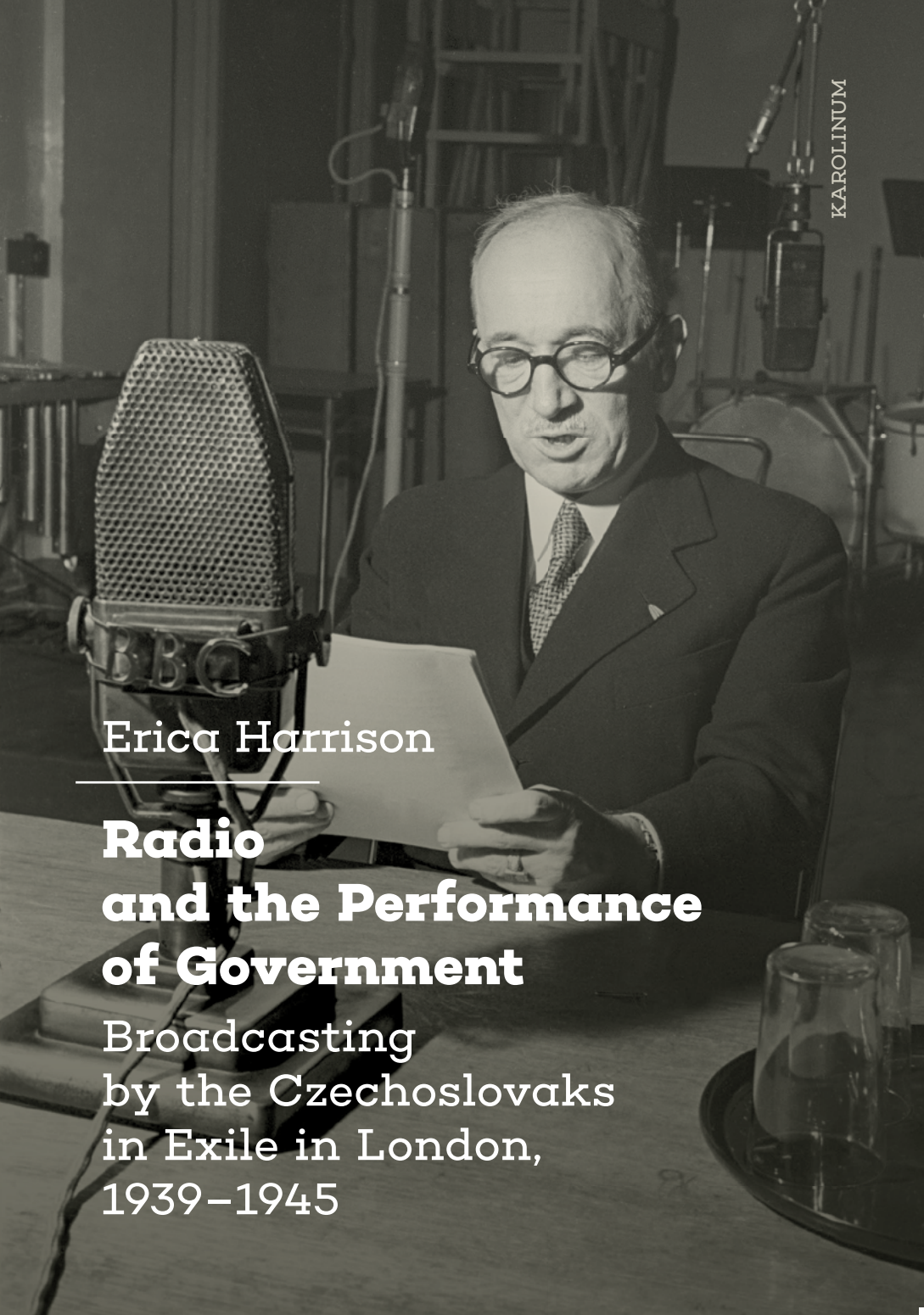

KAROLINUM

Erica Harrison

Radio and the Performance of Government

Broadcasting by the Czechoslovaks in Exile in London, 1939–1945

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This book is dedicated to my father, who never got to read it but would have been proud of it anyway.

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List of Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBC WAC	BBC Written Archives Centre
BBC WBC	BBC Wartime Broadcasts Collection
CNA	Czech National Archive, Chodov, Prague
CRA	Český rozhlas (Czech Radio) Archive, Prague
FO	Foreign Office
HSĽS	Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana (Hlinka Slovak People's Party)
LN Z	*Londýn Zpravodajství* (*London News*)
LTS	London Transcription Service
MNO	Ministerstvo národní obrany (Ministry of National Defence)
MOI	Ministry of Information
MSP	Ministerstvo sociální péče (Ministry of Social Welfare)
MZV	Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)
PKWN	Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego (Polish Committee of National Liberation)
PRS	Poradní rozhlasový sbor (Radio Advisory Committee)
PWE	Political Warfare Executive
SNR	Slovenská národná rada (Slovak National Council)
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, UK
ÚVOD	Ústřední vedení odboje domáciho (Central Leadership of the Home Resistance)

Introduction

"At one time, [radio] really was the only weapon left to us."
Prokop Drtina, *Hlas svobodné republiky,* 4 March 1945[1]

Between March 1939 and April 1945, the Czechoslovak Republic disappeared from the maps of Europe, continuing to exist only as an imagined "free republic" of the radio waves. Following the German invasion and annexation of Bohemia and Moravia, and the declaration of independence by Slovakia on 15 March 1939, the short-lived Second Czechoslovak Republic was no more, and it would take six years of war before its successor could again be declared by government representatives on state territory. From their position in exile in wartime London, former Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš and the government which formed around him were dependent on access to radio microphones in order to communicate with the public they strove to represent. The broadcasts made by government figures in London from 1939 to 1945, culminating in the government's own programme, were the most prominent public platform on which they could perform as a government, enabling a performance of authority to impress their hosts, allies, occupying enemies, and claimed constituents. An examination of the content of these broadcasts offers a new means by which to explore the exile government's understanding of the republic it worked to reinstate – both its past and

1 Prokop Drtina, *A nyní promluví Pavel Svatý…: Londýnské rozhlasové epištoly Dr. Prokopa Drtiny z let 1940–1945* (Prague: Vladimír Žikeš, 1945), 450. Unless otherwise stated, all translations in this work are the author's own.

its future. The challenge of projecting certainty at a time when even the most fundamental issues were in doubt is highlighted by contrasting the confident claims made over the radio with the heated behind-the-scenes negotiations, both within the Czechoslovak government itself and with various British authorities. Would there be a Czechoslovak state after the war? If so, where would its borders be drawn? Who would be permitted to live there and who would be excluded? Who would lead such a state, and to which allies would they pledge allegiance?

Although such questions were pivotal to Beneš and those around him, they were generally of peripheral interest to the British political and broadcasting structures who controlled access to the radio and had rather different priorities. The frequency and content of the Czechoslovak government broadcasts were determined by the particular relationship the exiles had with the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), with various branches of the British government and propaganda structure, and with other allies, such as the Soviet Union. The Czechoslovaks navigated the challenging landscape of wartime London with greater success than some contemporaries, alternately helped and hampered by their status in British eyes as a minor ally. While they had to fight against British indifference towards Czechoslovak issues, as well as occasional outright obstruction, they were also able to achieve greater latitude in their radio work by virtue of the fact that such issues were of lesser concern to Britain than, for example, French or Polish matters.

This book touches on multiple topics – the history of the former Czechoslovakia and the specific activities of the wartime Czechoslovak government-in-exile, the history of Britain, of the BBC, of European radio – and the period of the Second World War looms large in the core mythology of each of these. Since the end of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–38), following the Munich Agreement, the experience and legacy of that state has been much reflected upon, both by its erstwhile citizens and by its promoters and detractors abroad. Study of the war period – wedged in between the pre-eminent First Czechoslovak Republic and the start of the Communist era in Czechoslovakia (1948–89) – offers an opportunity to trace early assessments of the former and the roots of the latter, as the wartime exile movement featured both democratic and Communist branches (the latter largely based in Moscow). It also marks the beginning of the end of the political careers of prominent figures of the pre-Communist period, notably Edvard Beneš and Jan Masaryk, whose fate and reputations are much entangled with that of the state. The ongoing influence of the Second World War

on British culture and self-perception is readily apparent in the still frequent references to the "spirit" of both Dunkirk and the Blitz, which are invoked by politicians and the media whenever the country faces a challenge (both became early clichés of the COVID-19 pandemic). However, the transnational aspect of what has been termed the "London moment" tends to be forgotten, with the Churchillian image of Britain standing alone against Germany continuing to hold sway in the British public memory, in defiance of the reality of a multicultural and multilingual wartime capital.[2] For the BBC, which celebrated its centenary in 2022, the war remains a definitive period, in which the broadcaster acquired its international reputation for impartial, accurate news reporting, and produced landmark broadcasts, such as Chamberlain's announcement of war and Richard Dimbleby's report from Bergen Belsen, which now form part of the timeline of British radio. For the medium of radio as a whole, the war period represented a coming-of-age moment, in which its ability to cross borders and defy local censorship, and to immediately "break" important news, enabled it to outstrip the written press and dominate a media landscape as yet unthreatened by television. As the many shelves of books on the topic will proclaim, wartime radio is radio in its prime, weaponised by all sides and hosting a babble of voices, all competing with each other for their own imagined audience. This wartime "moment," then, centred on London, forms a key point in the histories of both Europe and the media, which continues to offer new avenues for study.

This is the first publication to take as its subject matter all the broadcasts made by the Czechoslovak exiles in London via the BBC, the vast majority of which are preserved in script form at Český rozhlas (Czech Radio) in Prague. As will be described in further detail later in this book, the exile government co-operated closely with the BBC from the summer of 1940 within the programme *Hovory s domovem* (*Conversations with Home*), and later took on its own "free time" programme entitled *Hlas svobodné republiky* (*Voice of the Free Republic*), with government figures also appearing in broadcasts by the BBC's own Czech(oslovak)

2 The project "The London Moment: Exile Governments, Academics and Activists in the Capital of Free Europe, 1940–1945," funded by the Volkswagen Foundation at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, examines multiple aspects of this transnational "moment" in history as representatives of many nations gathered in London. Wendy Webster has also sought to update public understandings of the diversity of wartime Britain more generally, in *Mixing It: Diversity in World War Two Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

service.[3] Approaching this corpus as a whole and contextualising the broadcasts within the political negotiations going on behind the scenes offers new insights not only into the thinking of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile, but also into the wartime working of the BBC and of the British government. Although such an examination reveals several interesting themes that will form the basis of the rest of this work, it cannot, of course, be exhaustive, and there remains much material for historians pursuing particular topics not examined in detail here.[4] A close study of the wartime broadcasts by the Czechoslovak government-in-exile therefore offers something new not only to historians of Czechoslovakia and Central-Eastern Europe, but also to those seeking to understand the war more widely, as well as historians of nationalism, of broadcasting, and of radio studies.

Before beginning analysis of the wartime performance of the Czechoslovak exiles, I should explain that my use of the term "performance" is not intended to imply insincerity or intentional deception on behalf of the performers. As I hope to show in this study, all the Allied exiles in London were forced to tread a difficult path between their wishes for their home countries and the limits of what their hosts would permit. The Czechoslovaks faced even greater challenges here than some other nationalities, as British policymakers were by no means as committed to the post-war recreation of a Czechoslovak state as they were to some other countries, and Beneš and his allies acknowledged from the start that they would not be in a position to make any binding decisions about the post-war settlement alone. With limited means by which to enact policy or deploy resources, this radio performance was one of the few means by which the London exiles could work to protect their country and try to ensure its future, and they valued it as such.

It is my contention that all government in exile is a performance of government in the absence of power, and the Czechoslovaks were one of many Allied governments that sought to establish themselves in London during the conflict, putting on a show to convince the public of their

3 BBC terminology is as inconsistent as many other British sources, using the words *Czech* and *Czechoslovak* largely interchangeably. BBC sources thus refer to the "Czech Service," "Czech Section," "Czechoslovak Service," and "Czechoslovak Section." The use of *Czech* slightly predominates – although this is possibly favoured purely for length rather than any considered reasons – and so this is the term most often used within this book. However, it should by no means be interpreted as an erasure of the contribution of Slovak staff and broadcasters.

4 See, for example, Jan Láníček, "The Czechoslovak Service of the BBC and the Jews during World War II," *Yad Vashem Studies* 38, no. 2 (2010): 123–53.

authority and legitimacy. The Czechoslovak exiles used the radio for more than this, however, as radio was the stage on which they performed not only politically but also nationally. Performance of this kind was nothing new to the Czechs as, prior to the creation of the Czechoslovak state in 1918, individuals could "perform" their Czech national identity within Austria-Hungary through small acts, such as purchasing certain newspapers and attending certain events, that demonstrated their participation in a growing Czech civil society. Historians of Czech nationalism and the Czech National Revival – a period with which the London exiles explicitly sought to link themselves – have described the performative aspects of Czech national identity on an individual scale, identifying the appropriation of this identity as a decision to openly participate in the Czech national "project."[5] In the wartime context, this performance graduated from the personal to the public, and was intended to be both demonstrative and attractive to listeners in what had been Czechoslovakia, encouraging them to follow the exile government's lead and to accept their interpretation of what Czechoslovakia was and would be after the war. The exile government's wartime broadcasting is thus best understood as an attempt to represent a nation, its state, and its government over the radio.

Isolated from its territory and unable to exercise executive or administrative authority over the population it claimed to represent, the exile government that formed around Edvard Beneš created an alternative Czechoslovak state in miniature, complete with ministries, schools, armed forces, and national celebrations. The Czechoslovak exile community in Britain during the war was one of many, and all the gathered European nations created their own clubs and organisations, seeking to continue part of the national life abroad. While Britain was not the only country to host exiles in this period (several countries also had exile movements in the USSR, with varying degrees of rivalry, as well as in the USA and elsewhere), the communities there tended to be the most structured, and many gained an "official" air as more and more governments-in-exile were established in London. These communities included a wide range of organisations, from chamber orchestras and children's choirs to air squadrons and refugee committees, all to some degree or

5 Vladimír Macura has written on the performative nature of Czech national identity in this early period; see, for example, *Masarykovy boty a jiné semi(o)fejetony* (Prague: Pražská imaginace, 1993), 11–13. Chad Bryant has done likewise; see, for example, *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4–5, 12–16.

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another representing their home country in Britain.[6] The only means by which these alternative wartime mini-states could be shared with the majority of their compatriots, however, was via the medium of radio, and the BBC's European broadcasts formed a vital connection between London and occupied Europe. For those living under occupation, the radio became more than just a source of information: reports reached London from the Nazi-controlled Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, describing how "in spite of threats of a death sentence, the English Radio is always listened to," with speeches by figures such as Beneš and Masaryk providing "the ELIXIR which keep [*sic*] us all going."[7] Listeners highly valued news they felt they could trust, with one letter from the Protectorate explaining that "the London broadcasting has another meaning for us, in that it helps us to survive the evil times in which we are living since it far surpasses everything which we are obliged to listen to and read all the time here."[8]

Although the BBC shared this commitment to accurate news, in other ways its broadcasting priorities diverged significantly from those of the Allied governments. While BBC hosts were seeking to promote a positive projection of Britain and prioritising official requirements on the British side, the various Allied governments were subject to different pressures in their on-air performances.[9] Although the show of legitimacy and leadership put on by the London exiles was partly for the benefit of Britain and the other Allied nations, who could endorse this legitimacy by formally recognising exile governments as representatives of their state, the real audience for much of this performance was the peoples of occupied Europe. Exile politics relies on belief, and politicians abroad must convince those left at home that they truly represent them, that they are

6 For studies of various aspects of these communities, see Martin Conway and Jose Gotovitch, eds., *Europe in Exile: European Exile Communities in Britain, 1940–45* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

7 Surveys of European Audiences, Enemy Occupied Countries Other than France [SEA, EOCOTF], 5 July 1941, pp. 4–5, 27/41, file 1A (April–July 1941), European Intelligence Papers [EIP] series 1c, E2/192/1, BBC Written Archives Centre [WAC], Caversham. Emphasis in original.

8 SEA, EOCOTF, 2 August 1941, pp. 3–4, 31/41, file 1B (Aug–Nov 1941), EIP series 1c, E2/192/2, BBC WAC.

9 In his history of British broadcasting, Asa Briggs described the provision of wartime news as the BBC's most important work, and many BBC memos testify to its perceived importance, in *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 3, *The War of Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11. The projection of Britain was also promoted as an important task for European broadcasts; see, for example, "British Broadcasting and Allied Governments," undated, E2/15, BBC WAC.

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