

DOI: 10.11649/a.1753

Article No.: 1753

Adeptus
nr 12/2018 r. pismo humanistów

Beata Kubok is a Slavic Studies scholar specialising in Czech studies. She holds a PhD in humanities and works at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences. Her research interests focus on language contact, multiculturalism in the Czech-Polish borderland, relations between religion and language, and Czech cultural codes. She is the author of *Dawne słownictwo gwar cieszyńskich w świetle kontaktów językowych* (The Historical Lexicon of the Local Dialects of the Cieszyn Region in the Context of Language Contact, Warszawa, 2011).
e-mail: beakubok@gmail.com

Beata Kubok

The Czech concept of betrayal as an element of the Munich myth

*The bell of treason rings of treason rings right on
Whose hands have made it swing perchance
Sweet France proud Albion
We loved them once*

(František Halas, "Song of Anguish", 1938)¹

Introduction

After the conclusion of the "fatal" agreement between the Third Reich, Italy, France and Britain on the night of 29/30 September 1938, Karel Čapek described his feelings as follows: "I am completely torn apart, as if my blood, guts, brain, everything was pouring out of me, as if a herd of stampeding bulls had trampled me over" (after Klíma, 2002, p. 236). At that stage, the writer, who died in late December of the same year, did not know that his body, particularly his lungs and kidneys, were going to fail him. It was

¹ Translated by Vera Blackwell (Blackwell, 1969, p. 16). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations have been translated by Piotr Styk. (translator's note)

The study was conducted at the authors' own expense.

No competing interests have been declared.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences & The Slavic Foundation.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL License (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited.

© The Author(s) 2018. © To English translation: Piotr Styk 2018.

as if his soul was the first to lose what was left of his will to live. His emotional state is also apparent in another remark that he made at the time: “It seems to me that I have nothing to do here anymore. I would be a pathetic figure, for my world has died. I believed in some sort of commitments, in the so-called honour, in treaties and things like that. I think I couldn’t make sense out of all this mess” (Holá & Lvová, 1969, p. 441).

The Czech actor Zdeněk Štěpánek describes his emotional state somewhat differently, but in no less dramatic terms. When the fate of the Czech nation was being decided he had flu, suffered from high temperature and felt pain in his whole body. The National Theatre, where he worked at the time, ran a play by Karel Čapek: “We perform Čapek’s *The Mother*, we are depressed, we keep thinking about the mother of us all – our homeland” (Holá & Lvová, 1969, p. 203).² On 21 September, Štěpánek was taken from his flat to the Czechoslovak News Agency (ČTK) and made to deliver a message informing the nation that the country in its present borders had ceased to exist. When reading it out, his voice failed him:

I’m terribly nervous, I sweat, it’s hard to breathe, I wish I could faint, I feel I am where I never should be. (...) I felt like I was in a tomb, far away from life and people. I started reading, slowly and with an effort; I felt great pain and sadness. The decision to surrender, to butcher our homeland, to tear off the borderlands³ (...). I suddenly remembered Chodsko,⁴ my dear mother and my childhood, and my eyes filled with tears; I felt a lump in my throat, I couldn’t read. (...) I trembled like an aspen leaf, I started crying. They led me out like a prisoner. It got dead quiet (...). (Holá & Lvová, 1969, p. 208)

The fragments quoted above display certain similarities between how the authors describe their feelings: the emotional charge and naturalistic description of their bodily suffering evokes the accounts found in the journals of soldiers fighting in the trenches of the Great War, which convey an impression that the body is dismembered, sacrificed, abandoned and betrayed (Capes, 1915; Gide, 1948; Johnston, 2007; Kessler, 2008).

² The play tells the story of a mother, the main protagonist, who strives to save her last surviving son from death in the war. Her husband and all other sons had been killed for their country (although its name is not revealed, it is most likely Spain). Talking to her dead husband, she accuses him of luring her children to otherworlds and blames him for their death. In order to protect her last son, she locks him at home. However, having received the news of children being killed, she lets him go and gives him a weapon. Recollecting the situation from 1938 three decades later, Štěpánek most likely made a mistake: the production of *The Mother* ran at the National Theatre from 12 February to 4 September, which means that the actor could not play Father on 21 September.

³ Czech: *pohraničí* (Ćwiek-Rogalska, 2017; Jeništa, 2015).

⁴ A historical region around the town of Domažlice in the Pilsen province.

In view of “the somatisation of the betrayal” – a highly emotional reaction of Čapek and Štěpánek to the breach of the French-Czechoslovak alliance⁵ – it is rather surprising to find that the comments on the frame of mind of President Edvard Beneš, the main Czech protagonist of the events, are few and far between. His memoirs (Beneš, 1954, 2007) focus on diplomatic activity and provide a detailed account of exchanged letters, delegations and protocols, as if the “brain” and “throat” mentioned in the above quotations were replaced by sheets of paper containing a set record of administrative proceedings (Beneš, 1954, 1998, 2007).

* * *

Discussions on the Munich Agreement – which have long been important not only to Czech historians, poets and literary critics, but also public opinion – have invariably attempted to answer the question whether Czechs should have fought to defend their country (Černý, 1992; Kosatík, 2003; Patočka, 1992; Tesař, 2014; Tigrid, 1990b). For a certain part of Czech society, the “treacherous” deeds of the Western allies, “sweet France” and “proud Albion”, served as an explanation why there was no such an attempt. The belief that there was no alternative was additionally supported by the fact that (according to diplomatic sources) Poland was preparing for the annexation of the area around Český Těšín (Pol. Zaolzie), and that the southern border of the country was exposed following the Anschluss of Austria in March 1938.

On the one hand, not only post-war communist and emigration historiography, but also contemporary historical studies provide no clear answer whether going to war with Germany was an option at all (Černý, 1992; Patočka, 1992; Tesař, 2014; Tigrid, 1990b) – there have been as many opinions as authors. On the other hand, the alleged political betrayal of Czechoslovakia by the two Western powers has long remained undisputed; neither has it been the subject of any social debate.

In this article, I discuss certain phenomena of Czech culture which go back to the Munich myth. In doing so, I analyse the concept of betrayal and its connotations (fate, the figure of the victim, the patterns of theatricalisation of public life), as well as its psychological impact on the formation of Czech national identity during the war and post-war period. Considering the “therapeutical” dimension of František Halas’ poetry – which immediately, in 1938, pro-

⁵ Initiated by Beneš, the French-Czechoslovak alliance, which included guarantees for Czech borders, was signed on 25 January 1924; on 16 October 1925 it was supplemented with an additional agreement on mutual military assistance.

vided an answer to the Czech collective trauma inflicted by the Munich Agreement – I devote particular attention to his poems from the period. I also focus on selected texts – essays, social commentaries and literary criticism – which provided an analysis of the historical and psychological consequences of Munich and fostered the concept of betrayal as a constitutive element of the “Czech fate”. Finally, I present Jan Tesař’s attempt to tackle the myth of “the Munich betrayal”. In his *Mnichovský komplex* (The Munich Complex), the renowned émigré historian turns attention to the theatricalisation of Czech public life – a communal, lofty and sentimental way of experiencing the turning (and often tragic) points of history. In his opinion, this phenomenon contributed to the consolidation of a sense of grievance and victimhood among Czechs.

The Munich syndrome

In this article, I draw on the analysis of the so-called Munich syndrome (*mnichovanství*) offered by the Czech philosopher Karel Kosík. In his essay “What is Central Europe?” (Kosík, 1995)⁶ he views the Munich syndrome as a tragedy involving four main actors: the aggressor, who “occupies, takes or swallows up another country”; the victim, who is unable or does not know how to defend itself; an inconsistent figure characterised by a mix of submissiveness and servility, who does not agree with the aggressor but, owing to his/her two-faced nature, tolerates and excuses his/her actions by resorting to dubious moralising (“every age demands a sacrifice”); and capitulators, who sign a treaty with the aggressor and argue that “not all hope is gone” (Kosík, 1995, p. 170). Apart from the main protagonists, the Munich syndrome tragedy also involves other actors, who play the parts of traitors, collaborators, informers and cowards (Kosík, 1995, p. 170). As viewed by Kosík, the syndrome involves a surrender to forces which want to rob Europe of her identity and break her up. Thus, in order to enjoy blissful peace, the “true”, i.e. Western, Europe tolerates and accepts a caricature version of “the other” (i.e. Central) Europe (Kosík, 1995, p. 169).

Most of the actors involved in “the Munich spectacle”, including those playing minor roles, can be identified in *Torso naděje* (The Torso of Hope), a volume of poems by František Halas, first published in 1938. Indeed, almost the entire poem entitled “Deset ran egyptských” (The Ten Plagues of Egypt) can be interpreted in terms of the figures mentioned above –

⁶ The essay is a version of Kosík’s lecture from 1969; it was published in Czech in 1992, and in English – in 1995; all references in this article are made to the English version (Kosík, 1995). (translator’s note)

the aggressor: “the moans of incorruptibles get drowned out/ by the marching of soldiers on parade grounds”; the coward: “I am a witness, I write down the plagues of Egypt/ I summon them upon all cowards a thousand times”; the figure symbolising submissiveness and servility: “Mendacious frogs of words creep out of newspapers’ throats/ (...) the slime of lies has overwhelmed the pure waters of faith”; the traitor: “a rosette of boils, that’s what you are, Europe/ You treacherous adder”; the victim: “Down men’s hands, children’s temples, women’s bosoms/ down the face of the earth trickles blood/ (...) and Christ’s wounds are torn open again/ by the crying of babies, crones in a church” (Halas, 1938).⁷

The literary critic Bedřich Fučík proposes a more unequivocal interpretation of poems by Halas and some other Czech poets from the period. In his view, in the autumn of 1938 their verses became “weapons”, for the writers who had so far cherished their own sorrows had turned overnight into “soldiers wearing knights’ helmets” (Fučík, 1994, p. 15). In his essay “Duch české poezie válečné” (The Spirit of Czech Fighting Poetry, originally published in 1946), he writes that he cannot imagine what would have happened without their poems:

Paradoxically, when guns are silent it is poems that begin their battle, one that is only seemingly bloodless. We cannot even imagine how much more horror we would have suffered if we had not been protected by those few poems, a few tiny books. No, we do not know what would have happened not only in the metaphysical but also – I daresay – practical sense if it had not been for the words of Czech poetry. It was them that bore the main burden of the fight. (Fučík, 1994, p. 15)

In this way, the critic attributes a great role to Czech poetry, which can turn inaction into action, keep up the militant spirit of the nation and, in its deepest inner struggle, save the nobility of the national soul: “Almost entire Czech poetry, safely guided by the leading authors, finds its *memory of the guardian of the essence (paměť strážce podstaty)* [emphasis original], the guardian of what continues over the centuries, what protects and what keeps alive. It examines the foundations on which the firmament of the future will stand (...), not the present lies, but the present truth, even if it is imprisoned, tortured and shouted down” (Fučík, 1994, p. 18). Czech poetry,

⁷ Original quotations from Halas’ “Deset ran egyptských” (The Ten Plagues of Egypt) in Czech: the aggressor: “z jarmarku parád ječ neprodejných stene/ do kroku žoldáků”; the coward: “Jsem svědkem Egyptské rány z Písma vypisují/ všem zbabělým je přeje tisíckrát”; the figure symbolising submissiveness and servility: “Obludné žáby slov z úst novin vylézají/ (...) rosoly lží tuň víry v moci mají”; the traitor: “rozetou z věděů Evropo jsi celá/ Ty zmije zrádliová”; the victim: “Po rukou mužů po čelech dětí po lůnech žen/ po celém světě teče krev (...) a rány Kristu znova roztrhalo/ úpění dětí stařen v kostele” (Halas, 1938). (translator’s note)

then, is unique in its nature and safeguards Czech culture, which is part of broader European culture; it calls for a revolt, it calls to fight because it is aware of its own exceptionality.

A similar idea referring to a much broader spiritual and geographical context is apparent in Milan Kundera's essay written a few decades later. In "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (1983)⁸ the writer analyses what he considers unique elements of the tragic experience of the culture of Central Europe, based on the rule of "the greatest variety within the smallest space" (Kundera, 1984, p. 33), dying in front of the eyes of the indifferent world. Kundera views this part of the continent as particularly rich in languages and different regional cultures: "The last direct personal experience of the West that Central European countries remember is the period from 1918 to 1838. (...) the Central European revolts were not nourished by the newspapers, radio, or television – that is, by the 'media'. They were prepared, shaped, realized by novels [and] poetry (...)" (Kundera, 1984, p. 37).

Like Fučík and Kundera, Kosík also applies the same construct. As viewed in his essay "The Third Munich" (1992),⁹ Central Europe – which he tends to limit to the Czech and Slovak federation – is a unique place suspended "between" and marked by exceptional experience, which includes suffering from Nazism, Bolshevism and the Munich syndrome. It is a historically formed space of extraordinarily distinctive characteristics, a space of meeting, contact and adjusting of different cultures and languages, a fertile area of creative, synthesising encounters of fundamental importance, one that protects the whole of Europe and her identity (Kosík, 1992). The views of both writers, then, display a combination of the same "morphological" elements that make up a particular narrative: tragic experience, European identity, diversity and uniqueness of Czech culture.

The weeping of the victim

An additional component of the emerging conception of the culture of a country betrayed and bitterly afflicted is a sense of victimhood. And although Fučík observes that Halas "at last wipes his Hamletian musing off his face" and – "like any citizen leaving his plough, his digger or his university chair" – takes "the guns of his verses in his hands" (Fučík, 1994, p. 15),

⁸ The essay was originally written and published in French in November 1983; its English translation appeared in print in April 1984; all references in this article are made to the English version (Kundera, 1984). (translator's note)

⁹ The essay was originally written and published in Czech in 1992; its English translation appeared in print later the same year; all references in this article are made to the English version (Kosík, 1992). (translator's note)

the sound of the weeping of the victim can often be heard in the poems from his *Torso naděje* (The Torso of Hope, 1938):

Like babies strangers to their limbs
 in the woods the dead stagger
 covered with medals of dried blood
 Now they pause they drink what do they drink
 The gall of our Calvaries
 their stiff lips twisted
 (František Halas, "All Souls' Day 1938", 1938)¹⁰

I have seen clenched fists
 and tears in women's eyes
 (...)

 Treason! Our meadows shriek
 shame on you! the forests howl
 treason! our rivers roar
 shame on you! the mountains thunder
 (František Halas, "Song of Anguish", 1938)¹¹

It can be hardly overlooked that in the "Song of Anguish" the lyrical tones of the Czech national anthem¹² – the burble of streams and the rustle of trees in mountain forests – turn into a cry of Czech nature. Writing on the phenomenon of the Munich syndrome, Kosík observes that modern aggressiveness marginalises politically those who are considered "weak" and unimportant. Following Max Scheler, he stresses that twentieth-century aggression and violence turns those who are not strong enough to defend themselves – most often women, children and, significantly, nature – into victims (Kosík, 1995, p. 170).

Victimhood is a typical element also when it comes to "the greatest variety within the smallest space", that is the small countries of Central Europe. While large nations write the history of conquerors, Central Europe is home to small nations, which "represent the wrong side of this history; they are its victims and outsiders" (Kundera, 1984, p. 36).

¹⁰ Translated by Václav Sverák, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Vol. 35 (1978), p. 11. (translator's note)

¹¹ Translated by Václav Sverák, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Vol. 35 (1978), p. 12. (translator's note)

¹² In his essay "Malý národ a povaha" (A Small Nation and its Nature), Ferdinand Peroutka, a famous journalist from the interwar period, notes: "Even the song 'Kde domov můj' [Where my home is; the first stanza of the national anthem of Czechoslovakia, 1918–1992] is entirely different from the spirit of 'Rule Britannia'. It is the lyrical symptom of a lacking manifestation of will" (Peroutka, 1991, p. 24).

Like Kundera, Kosík also applies the pattern of “Czech fate”, embodying the experience of a small nation as a victim, to the countries established in 1918 on the territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. This gives birth to the myth of Central Europe as a historical space particularly afflicted by the experience of Nazism, Bolshevism and the Munich syndrome (Kosík, 1992).

In their historiosophical conceptions, including the paradigm of the Czech fate and the figures of the traitor and the defenceless victim, Fučík, Kundera and Kosík employ rhetorical devices used by poets and artists under the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939–1945), by post-war communist historiography (cf. Soják, 1958a, 1958b), and by President Edvard Beneš himself. Indeed, Beneš argued that a small nation in the heart of Europe which is surrounded by hostile neighbours “cannot buy their friendship or at least neutrality through other means than parts of its own body” (after Hauner, 2003, p. 568). He also added that the decision to make concessions and utmost self-sacrifice had been the right one as it showed that “we did not want to foolishly provoke war” (Beneš, 2007, p. 366).

The dismembered body of the victim

Employing Lakoff and Johnson’s concept of embodied metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), it can be argued that underlying Beneš’ comment is the metaphor of a small European nation in the heartland of the continent as a victim whose body is dismembered. Used also by Halas, Čapek and Kosík, this metaphor was turned into reality by Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in January 1969 in protest against the Soviet-led intervention in the country. This “human torch”, evoking the early Christian victims of persecution, became a symbol of the dying Prague Spring and the beginning of the so-called period of normalisation (1970–1989).¹³ For Kosík, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 amounted to a political betrayal and to a second Munich: Czech politicians did not suspect they would be attacked, invaded and betrayed by their allies, just like the Czechoslovak president in 1938, who had not even dreamt that he would be betrayed by his allies (Kosík, 1992).

Is it really true that what had happened thirty years earlier, in September 1938, was an act of political betrayal? Was democratic Czechoslovakia really sacrificed in order to preserve political stability in Europe? In his broadcast to the English nation on 27 September

¹³ Apart from the self-immolation of Jan Palach, there were also a few other cases of “human torches” in the country, including Jan Zajíc (25 February 1969) and Evžen Plocek (4 April 1969).

1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain explained his position as follows: "How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing!" (after Churchill, 1948, p. 315). Other political figures summed up the situation of Czechoslovakia and her president, who was about to be "betrayed", even more bluntly. In his telephone conversation with Edward Raczynski, the Polish ambassador in London at the time, the Polish foreign minister Józef Beck is quoted to have said: "Listen, Edzio [Eddie], it's all just empty threats. Tell Cesia [Cecylia, Raczynski's wife] that I say there's no way she will have to go down to the shelter with the kids. They're going to sell Beneš for a penny and they are not going to fight" (Starzeński, 1991, p. 91).

Does it mean that the Czechoslovak president and his entire nation became a victim of betrayal? Writing about his view of the situation, Churchill phrased it as follows: "On one thing they [the British and French Cabinets] were all agreed: there should be no consultation with the Czechs. These should be confronted with the decision of their guardians. The Babes in the Wood had no worse treatment" (Churchill, 1948, pp. 301–302). Is it really true that, as assessed by Churchill, Beneš and top members of the Czechoslovak government were incapacitated and found themselves excluded from the main decision-making process?

A reconstruction of the events of September 1938

In order to answer this question, we need to have a closer look at the events of September 1938 and reconstruct the diplomatic activity of President Beneš and his collaborators kept secret from the public. On 15 September Beneš personally wrote instructions for his trusted minister, Jaromír Nečas, concerning the transfer of a part of Czechoslovak territory and its German population. Bypassing the Czech ambassador in Paris, Štefan Osuski, Beneš' proposal reached the French. The document included an outline of the plan and a map of territorial concessions, an idea of the "solicited ultimatum" (*l'ultimatum sollicité*), and a set of instructions: not to reveal the author of the proposal, to bypass ambassador Osuski, and to destroy the note (Hauner, 2007, pp. 7–29). On 20 September Czechoslovak Prime Minister Milan Hodža met the French ambassador in Prague, Victor de Lacroix, to propose that France should come forward with the "solicited ultimatum". Hodža's argument for the proposal was that the government, the president and senior

government party representatives had to conceal the idea from the Czech public. In his view, the French involvement was the only way to avoid armed conflict with Germany and save peace. On the same day Ambassador de Lacroix sent a message to the French foreign minister Georges Bonnet informing him about the Czech request for the “solicited ultimatum” (Cholínský, 2018; Hauner, 2007). On 21 September the Czechoslovak government accepted the Anglo-French proposal (which in fact it had earlier prepared) concerning the transfer of the borderland regions. As described above, the public was informed about the decision by the actor Zdeněk Štěpánek, who, in a faltering voice, read out a message to the nation on the radio. The ultimate surrender to German demands came a few days later, on 30 September.

After he had left the country and become a political exile, Beneš wrote letters to Kamil Krofta (the Czechoslovak foreign minister at the time) and Václav Klofáč (the leader of the National-Socialist Party, ČSNS), in which he explained his tactics of double betrayal. In his view, the choice faced by Czechoslovakia in late September 1938 was not to fight or to surrender: “Our alternative was to betray the country or to be betrayed” (after Hauner, 2007, p. 24). He also added that Czechs had to wait now for “*a fait accompli*, when we get back what is ours at a peace conference because we will be sitting on the right bench on the victorious side” (after Hauner, 2007, p. 24). Beneš’s choice of verbs implying passivity (“get back”, “sit”) is rather striking. While Churchill and Beck (the Polish foreign minister) called on their nations to fight and show their strength on the battlefield in the name of honour and bravery,¹⁴ Beneš pushed his own country to the role of the object rather than the subject of international political game. Indeed, he had been the initiator of Minister Nečas’ secret mission to Paris and the “solicited ultimatum”. Once a political émigré abroad, he not only tried to silence Hodža and Osuski, but also attempted to make Nečas sign a statement describing his mission as his own independent venture.¹⁵ By putting the blame on France and Britain (the latter in fact had never signed an agreement with Czechoslovakia on mutual military assistance and thus was under no obligations) he secured his alibi and his prospects for

¹⁴ For example, Churchill’s famous speech in the House of Commons on 4 June 1940, in which he declared: “we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender (...)”. (English quotation: International Churchill Society, <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/> (accessed 1 November 2018), translator’s note.)

¹⁵ Not only did Nečas refuse to do this, but he also kept the original copy of the instruction he had received and was supposed to destroy. When the document was published after the war, both Beneš and Nečas had already died (Cholínský, 2018; Hauner, 2007, p. 24). See also: Hauner, 2007, pp. 8, 10, 21–23, 45; Archiv Ústavu T. G. Masaryka, Edvard Beneš, box 248; Nečas, 1943 correspondence between Nečas and Beneš, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University; Osuský, box 47; Osuský, 1967.

future political activity (Cholínský, 2018). His aim was to convince public opinion at home and abroad that both Czechoslovakia and himself had become victims of treacherous betrayal. By portraying his nation and himself as victims, Beneš comes to embody the self-awareness of a small nation which has no influence on the course of events. Under the circumstances, the only option is to demonstrate moral superiority from the position of a victim and to justify the decision not to fight. Apart from giving his nation (and himself) a sense of moral superiority, the status of a victim also helps to win the sympathy of the world and to silence those who ask difficult questions.

The myth of “treacherous betrayal”

The myth of “treacherous betrayal” emerged shortly after the events of September 1938. It was created by poets (apart from František Halas, whose poems are analysed above, also Vladimír Holan, Stanislav Kostka Neumann and others), by communists, who stressed the people’s will to fight and Soviet readiness to provide military assistance, and also by President Beneš himself. Indeed, he soon called the French “despicable traitors from Paris who want to throw their guilt for betrayal on someone else” (after Cholínský, 2018). In his letter to Minister Ladislav Rašín (November 1938), he firmly insisted: “We shall, of course, not forget the treachery of the French and Poles. We shall never surrender our rights (..)!” (after Hauner, 2003, p. 575).

As can be seen, Beneš was rather liberal in his approach to the concept of betrayal and found it rather easy to throw accusations: it was not only the French but also Poles who were labelled as traitors.¹⁶ A similar technique was used by Czech communists in the game they played in pursuit of their strategic objectives, identified in terms of Marxist class struggle. After 1948 they saw Beneš as a representative of capitalists exploiting the working class and therefore as a traitor. They did so even despite the fact that it was him who had signed two key documents: a twenty-year treaty of friendship and cooperation between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union in 1943 (two years before the Yalta Conference, held in February 1945), which determined the place of post-war Czechoslovakia in the Soviet sphere of influence, and the Košice Programme (5 April 1945), a declaration of the post-war

¹⁶ There were no representatives of the Polish government at the talks held at Godesberg or at the Munich conference. In this context, one important document is a surviving letter of 2 September 1938 from President Beneš to Polish President Ignacy Mościcki, in which he makes an offer to transfer the area around Český Těšín to Poland.

Czechoslovak government, which de facto abolished freedom of speech by introducing censorship, and installed Soviet security services in the vanishing democratic structure of the state (Tigríd, 1990b, pp. 71–83).

In post-war reality dominated by the communists, the myth of betrayal – with its different semantic connotations: the Munich betrayal, the West's, Beneš', capitalist-rightist betrayal and so on – became the main tool of propaganda supporting the view that the security of the state could only be guaranteed by the Soviet Union. The myth also pushed Beneš, who was its co-creator, into the arms of the Soviet Big Brother, and thus eventually brought his political career to an end during the communist coup of 1948, known in Czech also as the Victorious February (*Vítězný únor*).

To sum up, the so-called "treacherous betrayal by the West" became a sort of magic spell of contemporary history and a component of Czech national historical identity in the twentieth century. The historian Jan Cholínský observes that the myth of the "Munich betrayal" was still very much alive decades later: in 2008, the sixtieth anniversary of the events of September 1938, it was thoughtlessly diffused by professional historians and political science scholars in academic literature and the media (Cholínský, 2018).

A deconstruction of the myth

An attempt at deconstruction of the myth came with Jan Tesař's *Mnichovský komplex* (The Munich Complex, 1989; first published in 2000), occasioned by the fiftieth anniversary of the events.¹⁷ In his view, the Munich betrayal complex and the question "should Czechs have defended themselves at the time" are pseudo-problems. For what really matters is not "who was betrayed by whom"¹⁸ but the "state of the spirit" of the Czech nation, its social and civil character (or, conversely, its lack), and a collective psychological portrait of Czech society. Tesař offers a detailed analysis of such factors as the military

¹⁷ The essay had a considerable impact on film director Petr Zelenka, who changed the script of his film *Lost in Munich (Ztraceni w Mnichově, 2015)* under the influence of Tesař's argument. Framed as a documentary about shooting a film, Zelenka's production is a mix of different genres, including parody and a classic narrative, and plays with different conventions. One of the protagonists is a ninety-year-old parrot that was once owned by the French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier and that keeps repeating his comments from the time of the Munich Agreement, which he signed in 1938.

¹⁸ Tesař takes Minister Nečas' mission and the myth-making aspect of Beneš activity as a matter of fact. He refers to the dialectics of "double betrayal", present in the president's diplomatic and myth-making endeavours, as a technique of "suggestion" (*suponování*), in the sense of putting a thought in one's mind, in this case – by means of diplomatic and, de facto, sociotechnical manipulation.

equipment of the Czechoslovak army in 1938, the number of troops in its combat units, and the state of the roads in the country (which made it impossible to make a coordinated retreat and set up a new centre of command if required). He exposes that the General Staff was not prepared for war, the line of fortifications along the south-western border was an unnecessary copy of the Maginot Line, and building munition factories in the Czech borderlands with Germany (*pohraničí*) was not exactly a very intelligent move. The faults of Czech democracy after Munich,¹⁹ in turn, included the rise of Czech and Slovak anti-Semitism, unwillingness to provide help and support to refugees from the areas taken over by Germany, hostility to anti-Nazi Germans who fled their homes in Sudetenland, the transfer of entire military material (without even attempting to destroy it) and technical documentation of military facilities in the lost territories to the German army, and a weak structure of underground resistance movement (Tesař, 2014, pp. 107–108). The essay portrays President Beneš as a “lone rider” who was aware of all those negative circumstances, including the (poor) state of preparation of the army for war and a threat of anarchy. In spite of a sudden surge of public emotions during the mobilisation, which the author calls “a week-long happening” of happy crowds (Tesař, 2014, p. 124), the president – as viewed by Tesař – was convinced of the low morale of Czechoslovak society and its lack of will to go to war.

Consequently, Tesař draws conclusions which are similar to those presented by the journalist Ferdinand Peroutka in his article entitled “Zavinil to jeden muž?” (Was it only one man that was guilty?), originally published in 1938 (Kosatík, 2000, p. 115). He wrote it to defend Beneš from – as he put it – absurd accusations, as well as to draw attention to the fact that it was the whole nation that should be held responsible for what had happened. The president, referred to as “an atom of national will” (*atom národní vůle*), was just as guilty as any other of his fellow citizens: “Do not let us talk, then, about the guilt of one man, but about collective guilt. (...) if he had acted differently and – as is easily concluded today – done what he should have done, he would have been removed by his own people, guided by wrong illusion” (after Kosatík, 2000, p. 115).

One interesting observation made by Tesař concerns the theatricalisation of the Munich experience. In his view, besides the “blackmailing rhymes” about “the bells of treason”,

¹⁹ Following the Munich Agreement, the state became transformed into the so-called Second Czechoslovak Republic, with General Jan Syrový as President (5 October–30 November 1938). President Beneš left the country on 22 October 1938. In June 1940 he formed the Czechoslovak government-in-exile, which resided in London.

the essential “props” included tears (Tesař, 2014, p. 85). Indeed, tears and mawkish sentiment became indispensable elements of contemporary political commentaries and memoirs of a later date. However, the main reason behind this collective weeping – “the lost towns and cottages” – was in fact quite far from the tragedy of real people, such as the fate of the Sudetenland Jews and German refugees (Tesař, 2014, p. 122). Czechs were not emotionally attached to the towns they wept for after Munich, as evidenced by the later devastation of the very same towns during the expulsion of Germans in 1945. Tesař argues that “Czech emotional experience of 1938 was not genuine: it was about ‘experiencing’ in theatrical terms. Czechs acted out their unutterable sadness” (Tesař, 2014, p. 122).

At this point one may ask why at such a critical moment – when the country had just lost a third of its territory – it was an actor, Zdeněk Štěpánek, rather than a political figure who read out a message to the nation, broadcast on the Czechoslovak radio on 21 September 1938 (later on the same day, Štěpánek also read Karel Čapek’s “Modlitba tohoto večera” (A Prayer for This Evening)). This does not seem to be a coincidence. In Tesař’s view, actors play an exceptional role in Czech society, for the modern Czech nation was not born out of a revolution or struggle for national liberation, but as a result of theatralisation of social life:

The (modern) Czech nation was born on the stage of Biedermeier popular theatre. This has left a distinct mark. It is apparent at first sight as the keystone of Czech culture. In no other culture do actors, theatre and so on have such a prominent position. In fact, Czech culture is determined by the principles of theatre, and social life is styled as theatrical performance, which means that it is not primarily authentic: the nation plays itself on stage and this is a source of different “quasis”. (Tesař, 2014, p. 123)

Tesař goes on to ask ironically whether the weapons that the protesters demanded in September 1938 were supposed to be real or merely symbolical,²⁰ as the ones that were part of Štěpánek’s Hussite outfit in the scene of the Battle of Vitkov Hill (Tesař, 2014, p. 125).²¹

²⁰ On 21 September 1938 the crowd of protesters in the streets of Prague shouted “Give us the weapons we paid for” (*Dejte nám zbraně, dali jsme si na ně*).

²¹ The Battle of Vitkov Hill (14 July 1420) brought the defeat of King Sigismund of Luxembourg and his army by Hussite forces under Jan Žižka. Today, the historical site is part of the Czech capital (Žižkov district). Tesař’s remark makes reference to Zdeněk Štěpánek’s appearance as Žižka in the second part of Otakar Vávra’s Hussite film trilogy (1954–1957); the actor also played Jan Hus in the first part.

In the context of these observations on the phenomenon of theatricalisation of Czech culture and the attendant collective performance of different “parts”, it is worth quoting a fragment of Beneš’ memoirs concerning the Munich period. The president recalls that he was relieved to approve the proposed mobilisation of the army, as the nation was ready for it in both moral and practical sense. Within three days 800,000 well-armed soldiers stood up in arms, determined to do whatever it took (Beneš, 2007, pp. 362, 366). On 26 September, towards the end of his meeting with General Silvestr Bláha, the director of his military office, Beneš told him:

This war will be terrible. (...) But we will fight to the last breath and we must go to the end, whatever happens. I will remain by the army with my guard. (...) I will retreat with the army only up to a point. When we must stop, and can give up no more of our territory and fight the enemy to the death, I as president of the republic cannot be taken prisoner. I must stay with those who fight absolutely to the last moment, and fall with them. (after Caquer, 2018)

This fragment of the president’s memoirs reveals his game: he creates a myth for his own use, which at the same time answers the general social demand for armed struggle and heroism.

Conclusion

In this article, based on the latest studies and recently released documents, I offered a reconstruction of the historical events connected with the conclusion of the Munich Agreement in 1938. In the light of historical evidence the role of President Beneš appears to be crucial. He was not only a principal actor in the centre of the events that unfolded, but also, even more importantly, a principal creator of the myth of “treacherous betrayal” by the West. In the latter capacity he was aided by poets – Vladimír Holan, Stanislav Kostka Neumann and, last but not least, František Halas, who wrote the famous verses about the treason perpetrated by “sweet France” and “proud Albion”.

The power of the myth is confirmed by much later essays by Milan Kundera (1983) and Karel Kosík (1992). Both of them write about the betrayal of Central Europe, particularly Czechoslovakia, by Western Europe, and both of them stress the uniqueness of Czech culture (including poetry), which is part of the solid foundations of Western European cul-

ture. One important feature of this myth is its theatrical composition. Although both Kosík and, later, Tesař analyse different modes of theatricalisation involved in the myth, they do it from different perspectives. For Kosík, the “Munich betrayal” is an antique tragedy, with its pathos and inevitability of fate. Tesař, in turn, offers an ironic factual analysis of the myth of “Munich betrayal”, in which he finds (as Peroutka does in the lyrics of the Czech national anthem, also originally written for a theatre play) a collective lyrical intoxication of Czech society in place of the true will to act.

Translated by Piotr Styk

Bibliography

- Blackwell, V. (1969). František Halas: The rock and the roots. *Books Abroad*, 43(1), 13–17.
- Beneš, E. (1954). *From Munich to new war and new victory* (G. Lias, Trans.). London: Allen & Unwin.
- Beneš, E. (1998). *Dopisy bratru Vojtovi: 1938–1944*. Praha: Společnost Edvarda Beneše.
- Beneš, E. (2007). *Paměti: T. 1. Mnichovské dny*. M. Hauner (Ed.). Praha: Academia.
- Capes, H. M. (1915). *Diary of a French army chaplain* (F. Klein, Trans.). London: Andrew Melrose.
- Caquer, P. E. (2018). *The bell of treason: The 1938 Munich Agreement in Czechoslovakia*. London: Profile Books.
- Cholínský, J. (2018). *Mnichovská zrada, nebo pražský krach? Nečasova mise a rozpad Československa v roce 1938*. Retrieved May 15, 2018, from <https://rcmonitor.cz/zpravy/vatikan/mnichovska-zrada-nebo-prazsky-krach-necasova-mise-a-rozpad-ceskoslovenska-v-roce-1938/3237>
- Churchill, W. (1948). *The Second World War: Vol. 1. The gathering storm*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Černý, V. (1992). *Křik koruny české: Paměti*. Brno: Atlantis.
- Ćwiek-Rogalska, K. (2017). *Zapamiętane w krajobrazie: Krajobraz czesko-niemieckiego pogranicza w czasach przemian*. Warszawa: Scholar.
- Edwards, T. (Ed.). (2010). *Cultural theory: Classical and contemporary positions*. London: Sage.
- Fučík, B. (1994). *Píseň o zemi*. Praha: Melantrich.
- Gide, A. (1948). *Journals 1914–1927* (J. O'Brien, Trans.). London: Secker & Warburg.
- Girard, R. (1986). *The scapegoat* (Y. Freccero, Trans.). London: Athlone.
- Girard, R. (2008). *Evolution and conversion: Dialogues on the origins of culture*. London: Continuum.
- Halas, F. (1938). *Torso naděje*. Praha: Melantrich.
- Hauner, M. (2007). *Mnichovské dny a Edvard Beneš*. In E. Beneš, *Paměti: Vol. 1. Mnichovské dny* (pp. 7–29). Praha: Academia.

- Hauner, M. L. (2003). Edvard Beneš' undoing of Munich: A message to a Czechoslovak politician in Prague. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38(4), 563–577.
- Holá, V., & Lvová, M. (Eds.). (1969). *Mnichov: Vzpomínková kronika*. Praha: Svoboda.
- Jeništa, J. (2015). *Pogranicze w czeskiej perspektywie oglądu*. In W. Chlebda & I. Dobrotová (Eds.), *Pograniczność i pogranicza w perspektywie nauk społecznych i humanistycznych* (pp. 19–28). Opole: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego.
- Joch, R., & Krystlík, T. (2015). *Edvard Beneš, padouch nebo hrdina? Debatní klub*. Retrieved April 20, 2018, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZY7kckaYic>
- Johnston, A. (2007). *The Great War diaries of Brigadier Alexander Johnston*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword.
- Kessler, H. G. (2008). *Das Tagebuch: Vol. 5: 1914–1916*. Stuttgart: Cotta.
- Klíma, I. (2002). *Karel Čapek: Life and work* (N. Comrada, Trans.). North Haven: Catbird Press.
- Kosatík, P. (2000). *Ferdinand Peroutka: Pozdější život (1938–1978)*. Praha: Paseka.
- Kosatík, P. (2003). *Ferdinand Peroutka: Život v novinách (1895–1938)*. Praha: Paseka.
- Kosík, K. (1992). The third Munich (M. Bednar, Trans). *Telos*, 94 (Winter), 145–154.
- Kosík, K. (1995). What is Central Europe? (J. Satterwhite, Trans.). In: K. Kosík (J. Satterwhite, Ed.), *The crisis of modernity: Essays and observations from the 1968 era* (pp. 147–179). Boston: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kundera, M. (1984). The tragedy of Central Europe (E. White, Trans.). *The New York Review of Books*, 26 April, 33–38.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.
- Masaryk, T.G. (1990). *Ideály humanitní. Problém malého národa. Demokratism v politice*. Praha: Melantrich.
- Patočka, J. (1992). *Co jsou Češi?* Praha: Panorama.
- Peroutka, F. (1991). *O věcech obecných (Výbor z politické publicistiky)* (Vol. 1). Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství.
- Peroutka, F. (1995). *Úděl svobody. Výbor z rozhlasových projevů 1951–1977*. Praha: Academia.
- Soják, V. (Ed.). (1958a). *Mnichov v dokumentech: Vol. 1. Zrada západních mocností na Československu*. Praha: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury.
- Soják, V. (Ed.). (1958b). *Mnichov v dokumentech: Vol. 2. Zrada české a slovenské buržoasie na československém lidu*. Praha: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury.
- Starzeński, P. (1991). *Trzy lata z Beckiem*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax.
- Tesař, J. (2014). *Mnichovský komplex: Jeho příčiny a důsledky* (2nd ed.). Praha: Prostor.
- Tigrid, P. (1990a). *Dnešek je váš zítřek je náš*. Praha: Vokno.
- Tigrid, P. (1990b). *Kapesní průvodce inteligentní ženy po vlastním osudu*. Praha: Odeon.
- Tigrid, P. (1990c). *Politická emigrace v atomovém věku*. Praha: Prostor.

The Czech concept of betrayal as an element of the Munich myth

This article explores the cultural significance of the “Munich myth”, focusing on the concept of “Western betrayal” and its connotations associated with the idea of destiny and sacrifice. It also examines how the myth influenced the formation of Czech national identity, especially during and shortly after the Second World War. Opening with an analysis of a poem by František Halas written in the midst of the Munich Conference, it also reviews a number of writings which increased the popularity of the ideas of betrayal and sacrifice and, as a result, have made them synonymous with the “Czech fate”: excerpts from the memoirs of Zdeněk Štěpánek and Edvard Beneš, essays by Karel Kosík and Milan Kundera, and Bedřich Fučík’s literary criticism. The article concludes with a discussion of the key findings of the book *Mnichovský komplex (The Munich Complex)* by Jan Tesař, a polemic study discrediting and deconstructing the myth of the “Munich betrayal”.

Keywords:

Munich Agreement; capitulation; national myth; complex; betrayal; victim

Czeska koncepcja zdrady jako element mitu monachijskiego

Artykuł dotyczy fenomenów kulturowych zawartych w micie monachijskim, szczególnie takich, jak koncepcja zdrady i powiązane z nią konotacje (figura ofiary, losu, teatralizacja życia społecznego). Przedstawia także proces formowania się wojennej oraz powojennej czeskiej tożsamości narodowej pod wpływem tego mitu. W artykule poddano analizie wiersze Františka Halasa z okresu wydarzeń monachijskich, a także te fragmenty wspomnień (Zdeněk Štěpánek, Edvard Beneš), eseistyki (Karel Kosík, Milan Kundera) i krytyki literackiej (Bedřich Fučík), które przyczyniły się do rozpowszechnienia koncepcji zdrady i ofiary jako czynnika konstytuującego „czeski los”. Artykuł kończy prezentacja najważniejszych tez zawartych w książce pt. *Monachijski kompleks* autorstwa Jana Tesařa o charakterze polemicznym i dekonstrukcyjnym wobec mitu „zdrady monachijskiej”.

Słowa kluczowe:

układ monachijski; kapitulacja; mit narodowy; kompleks; zdrada; ofiara

Note:

This is the translation of the original article entitled “Czeska koncepcja zdrady jako element mitu monachijskiego”, which was published in *Adeptus*, issue 12, 2018.

Citation:

Kubok, B. (2018). The Czech concept of betrayal as an element of the Munich myth. *Adeptus*, 2018(12). <https://doi.org/10.11649/a.1753>