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100 Years of Czech-US Relations

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AUTHOR:
CHRISTOPHER DOWNS

WWW.POLITIKASPOLECNOST.CZ

OFFICE@POLITICSANDSOCIETY.CZ

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Czech-American relations date back to the early years of the 20th century when the Czech nation was under Austro-Hungarian subjugation. Even though the Austro-Hungarian Empire was the predominant force in Central Europe, many prominent figures foresaw the collapse of the Empire; however, nobody could perceive such a thought. In 1918, the Old Continent witnessed a gradual shift from empires to modern liberal democracies (some stable more than others). In those times, the Czechoslovak Republic served as a prime example of a democratically functioning country. The creation of a new state unit was based mostly on the diplomatic abilities of Czechoslovak patriots, especially of the future President of the Czechoslovak Republic Thomas Garrigue Masaryk. The United States of America, where Masaryk was stationed, played a vital role in the creation of the First Republic and its political and economic growth. One has to analyze the progress of Czech-US relations to be able to comprehend its basis: mutual respect towards the desire for independence.

The Birth of Czechoslovak - American relations

Thomas G. Masaryk did not believe in the possible dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Furthermore, he maintained the idea, Europe would not enter into the war which would cause devastation because due to his understanding of the various alliances between the great powers. However, when war came, Masaryk and other patriots moved swiftly to secure the potential creation of the Czechoslovak Republic.

Masaryk played a pivotal role in the foreign arena, where he maneuvered and persuaded the western politicians to accept his vision of the inability to maintain the Empire as functioning governmental system, and also that small European nations have the right for self-determination. Most of his energy was spent on the persuasion of the US President Woodrow Wilson.

When debating the ideological background on which Czechoslovak nation was built, Masaryk and other patriots chose the West as a prime example. The future President of the young nation stated, “I devoted much time thinking to the idea that the Czechoslovak state would resemble America in that we too have no dynasty of our own and dislike foreign dynasties” (Wellek 1945: 304). Moreover, Edvard Beneš, Milan R. Štefánik, and Thomas G. Masaryk wrote the Declaration of the Independence of the Czechoslovak Republic, which was made public in 1918, and among other statements read: “We accept the ideology of a modern democracy which we shall abide. Furthermore, we accept the American principles which were put down by the US President Woodrow Wilson: principles of freedom of the population, the equality of nations and governments, all power being delegated through the will of the people. Furthermore, we uphold these values which have been put forth by the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights” (Tabery 2017: 23). This approach flattered the US President, who became more open to the idea of small nations having their country. In fact, President Wilson became the pivotal international ally in negotiating

the future of the Czechoslovak Republic. Therefore, one can observe the strength of the bond which the two countries have. Wilson, an idealist, believed “people living in Austria-Hungary should follow national self-determination” (Schnell 1954: 367) which provided Masaryk the opportunity to negotiate the borders of the future country. Moreover, it was the Czechoslovakian President’s cunning, intelligence, and diplomatic abilities that helped argue his point and promote his idea in order to establish a strong, independent and democratic republic in Central Europe.

WWII and the Cold War

Before the Second World War, regardless of Woodrow Wilson’s efforts, the United States of America undertook isolationist policies and withdrew from European politics. This move contributes to the rise of ultra-right-wing dictatorships in Germany, Italy, Spain, and others. Moreover, as stated by the Center for Transatlantic Relations, “In Central European eyes, it was America’s retreat from European politics in the 1920s that paved the way for the rise of Hitler and Stalin and eventual destruction of their independence” (Glenn et al. 2014: 3). The destruction of Czechoslovakia in 1938 was marked by the absence of the U.S. in Europe. However, on the other hand, the U.S. involvement in European battlefield played an indispensable role in the liberation of Western Europe from Nazi rule.

When the Second World War came to a close, the US armies were permitted to liberate only the Western part of Bohemia, which unfortunately conceded Czechoslovakia to the Soviet sphere of influence, “and sealed its geopolitical fate for more than four decades” (Glenn et al. 2014: 3). In 1947, the US proposed Czechoslovakia be provided the Marshall Plan, however, the notion was declined under Stalin’s influence, and the

communist coup d’etat in February 1948 halted all US – Czech relations for decades to come.

Czech-US relations after 1989

In 1989 after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the wave of democratic revolutions led to the collapse of the totalitarian rule of communist regimes all over Central and Eastern Europe which were replaced by governing systems based on the liberal ideology, the rule of law and market economies. The newly formed countries looked up to the United States because they believed that a robust Transatlantic bond between such powerful global hegemon and European countries would provide the necessary security and economic prosperity to them. Moreover, the US never had hegemonic inclinations in Europe (Glenn et al. 2014: 2).

In Czechoslovakia, later the Czech Republic, Václav Havel was elected President of the country; he was a symbol of freedom and the fight against the totalitarian domain of the Soviet Union. The primary field where President Havel was successful was foreign policy. He worked on the most crucial aspects of foreign affairs: strong ties with other nations. Moreover, Havel understood that solidifying relations only with neighboring countries is insufficient and lead the Czech Republic into NATO and the European Union, organizations which have been significant projects in the 20th century and the guarantee of safety and prosperity (Tabery 2017: 157). Havel was the first statesman from the previous Soviet block to visit NATO headquarters where he spoke about the necessity of the organization’s enlargement and its participation in protecting Central Europe.

Under the Clinton administration, the US took charge of NATO operations and enlargement, and in 1997 the Czech

Republic joined the organization, solidifying US-Czech security relations. The Czech President also hosted the EBAN Congress in Prague, stating “for the first time, you are opening your session outside of the ‘so-called Western democratic world.’ It is a great honor for our country, this capita and me to host this distinguished assembly” (Business Ethics Journal 1998: 949-950). Therefore, under Havel’s Presidency, the country witnessed the growing alliance between the US and the Czech Republic. Americans provided mostly economic support. The assistance was built on the support of Czechoslovakia entering into IMF and the World Bank. In 1991, Czechoslovakia was granted with the most-favored-nation-clause in mutual trade, the Bilateral Investment Protection Agreement (BIPA) was signed, and the Czechoslovakian-U.S. Enterprise Fund has been established (Glenn et al. 2014: 2).

Havel was an active leader in foreign affairs, due to his ability to solidify alliances among European nations. Moreover, he managed to continue in Masaryk’s legacy, to maintain good ties with the US, which was proven by President Clinton’s visit in Prague 1994. The heads of state negotiated the role of the Czech Republic in Europe and strengthening ties between the countries. Prague was chosen in 2002 to host the NATO summit which proved the Czechs to be valuable and respected allies in the organization (Tabery 2017: 160).

Generally speaking, the Czech-American relations between 1990 and 2009 enjoyed a “honeymoon period.” Starting with the famous President Havel’s speech before a joint session of the U.S. Congress in February 1990, where he received a standing ovation, Czech government officials were welcomed in the White House year by year as friends and allies. Both parties embraced a shared set of values: Americans embraced Václav Havel as a

secular saint, and Czechs embraced America as a symbol of freedom (Glenn et al. 2014: 3).

However, many experts (e.g., Petr Kolář, Alexandr Vondra, Jiří Šedivý, Petr Gandalovič and Kryštof Kozák) have agreed, today the honeymoon period is over, and the relationship is redefined. During the Clinton and Havel period, the relationship between the two nations was represented in the relationship between the two heads of state. It was based on their friendship and mutual respect. Nevertheless, in 2006, the intention of the US government to build a radar base in the Czech Republic, was not well received by the Czech public. Later it was refused in the sessions of the Czech Parliament. Thus, the reliance of Americans has been disturbed. Consequently, when the Czech government wished to negotiate visa-free travel options, the USA was hesitant to enable these negotiations to continue. These events “thrust a wedge” between the two nations and caused the honeymoon as mentioned above to end. However, the experts, as mentioned earlier, advise to not retreat. The relationship is considered as healthy, due to a continuous cultural diplomacy and the Czech Republic's military cooperation in the Middle Eastern conflicts and NATO.

Conclusion

To sum up, Czech – American relations have been forged by intellectuals and politicians in the early 20th century under the notion of creating a democratic country in Central Europe. Thomas G. Masaryk and Woodrow Wilson negotiated the establishment of the First Czechoslovak Republic which would be based on the democratic principles of the US governmental system. Thus, Czech – American relations were built on mutual recognition of the importance of freedom, liberal ideology, and respect for civic rights.

After the Cold War, the Czech state, among other countries of the Eastern Bloc, looked to the US for guidance and trade. Václav Havel proved to be a vital figure in leading his nation West: into NATO and the EU. Moreover, Havel's persona boosted the prestige of the small nation, due to the fact he was considered as a symbol of the fight versus totalitarian rule, and thus, the first President of the Czech Republic proved to be the key person in Czech-US relations. His bust, located in the US Congress, can serve as proof of the respect Americans had for him. There is no doubt that it is an honor rarely given to foreign leaders. Nevertheless, the honeymoon period of diplomatic relations between the USA and the Czech Republic seems to be over. Although the relationship became more pragmatic, both countries maintain their relation at a good level and can still be considered as a stable and reliable allies.

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