



Compte-rendu : Antoine Marès, Edvard Beneš. Un drame entre Hitler et Staline

Aliaksandr Piahanaŭ

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Edvard Beneš: Un drame entre Hitler et Staline. By Antoine Marès. Paris: Perrin, 2015. 502 pp.

Edvard Beneš (1884–1948) was undoubtedly a key player on the Czech and European political stage between the end of World War I and the outbreak of the Cold War. Beneš became Czechoslovakia's foreign minister in 1918 and then president in 1935, and thus it is hardly surprising that his name is linked to crucial events in Central European politics, including the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, interwar diplomacy, the Munich conference of 1938, the expulsions after World War II, and the establishment of communist regimes in Central Europe. In 2015, the Paris-based publisher Perrin released the first academic biography of Edvard Beneš in French. The author, Antoine Marès, is professor at Paris 1 University (Sorbonne), and he is one of the most respected specialists on contemporary Czech and Central European history. The biography is the culmination of three decades of research on Beneš' personality, life, and career.

The book is essentially a political biography that privileges the description and analysis of struggles for power, negotiations, networks, and political concepts. This approach is fitting, since Beneš' life was dominated by politics. His World War II secretary Jaromír Smutný went so far as to describe his boss as a “machine for working and thinking, without human feelings” (p.420). In his narrative, Marès links Beneš' professional activities and the international position of the Czechoslovak Republic. In his depiction, Beneš appears as the incarnation of Czechoslovak diplomacy and as a “seismograph” of the political upheavals in Europe. By emphasizing the larger political context, Marès seeks to pass historical judgment on Beneš' masterpiece: the Czechoslovak Republic. Thus, Marès' work is part of the ongoing debate over the nature of the Masaryk-Beneš “democratic” regime (pp.432–34).

The book is divided into three chronological parts. Part 1 (“History of an Ascent”) describes the early years of Beneš, including his exile during World War I (pp.21–118). Part 2 (“Architect of the Foreign Policy of Prague”) covers his 17-year-long tenure at the head of the Foreign Ministry (pp.121–227). Part 3 (“Times of trials”) covers Beneš' presidential years between 1935 and 1948. This final part, which examines the most tragic years of Beneš' life, makes up nearly half of the book (pp.231–412).

Although Beneš remained in the governmental sphere for nearly three decades, Marès builds his narrative on the concept of ruptures. He associates

the most important moments of Beneš' life with changes in social, political, and strategic contexts. Beneš, born to a middle-class family, suddenly found himself at the top of the social pyramid in 1918–19 thanks to the outcome of World War I. According to Marès, Beneš, who was initially a monarchist, became a republican during World War I and finished his political career as a promoter of the Soviet model. His vision for the architecture of the region evolved in parallel: after supporting ideas of Habsburg federalism at the beginning of the century, he then believed in the radical independence of Czechoslovakia in the interwar years, and, finally, he supported a strong orientation towards the Soviet Union in the 1940s. In this cocktail of constant transformations, Marès identifies two key phases: the “glorious” period before the Munich “trauma” (1938) and the subsequent “catastrophic” period (pp.413–15).

Beneš was and remains a controversial figure. He is both a symbol to be admired and the target of sharp criticism. Marès places himself in close relation to the works of the Prague-based “Society of Edvard Beneš,” which he describes as a “besieged fortress” which is “attached to the values of parliamentary democracy and nationalist convictions” (pp.428–29). Despite the declared authorial intention not to descend to hagiography (p.413), Marès offers grandiose characterizations of the second Czechoslovak president, describing him for instance as “the embodiment of the Czechoslovak democratic model” (p.433) and even “the cornerstone of Europe’s defense of democracy” (p.422).

Marès admits that Beneš himself believed his destiny was to act as the leader of the Czechoslovak Republic. The Czech politician, according to Marès, had a deep inner conviction in his own infallibility (p.277) and showed “extreme optimism” (p.253). This vision of himself as a Messiah of sorts pushed him to adopt controversial political methods. As Marès claims, during the presidential election campaign of 1935, for example, Beneš bribed some MPs in order to secure their votes (p.235). However, Marès concludes that Beneš was guided not by a thirst for power or money (pp.117, 243), but by “wider national interests” (p.184). At the same time, Marès suggests that these personal qualities contributed to the failures Beneš began to face beginning in 1938. According to Marès, Beneš misjudged the intentions of the leading geopolitical players in Central Europe, such as Berlin, Paris, and Moscow. Until 1938, he remained convinced that Nazi Germany was not interested in attaining the Sudetenland, but would rather attack Austria and Poland. He believed that Berlin would prefer to rule over the whole of Czechoslovakia or, if that proved impossible, to leave the Sudeten Germans inside the republic as an instrument of pressure from

within (p.230, 250). Beneš also overestimated the French security guarantees for Czechoslovakia, formalized in the 1924 treaty (p.278). His third fatal mistake lay in his “naïve” expectation that Moscow, which became the military hegemon in Central Europe in 1944–1945, would refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia. This illusion may have been dispelled, according to Marès, after the Soviet takeover of Carpathian Rus (p.355).

Marès traces in detail the changes in Beneš’ views on national issues in Czechoslovakia. He is depicted as a supporter of the “czechoslovakist” ideology, which provided privileges for the Czechs and Slovaks, but marginalized the remaining third of the population of the country (p.158). According to Marès, Beneš favored the union of the Czech and Slovak lands mainly for geopolitical and demographic reasons. He was allegedly not averse to the idea of assimilating the Slovaks (p.265). Referring to the Sudeten Germans, who outnumbered the Slovaks in the Czechoslovak Republic, Beneš, according to Marès, ceased to recognize them as compatriots on the eve of the Munich conference. He secretly proposed to his Western associates to hand over around 2 million of them, together with some of their territories, to Germany (pp.280–83). Beneš’ determination to put an end to the Sudeten question grew during the war; however, until December 1943, Beneš adhered to the idea of combining human transfers with territorial transfers (p.344). As of 1944, Beneš sought international support only for the expulsion of the Germans and the Magyars (pp.350–51). When Czechoslovak sovereignty was restored, the deportations targeted close to 3 million Germans, and Marès characterizes them as a paradoxical triumph of Hitler’s ideas of ethnic cleansing. Nevertheless, Marès seems inclined to justify the postwar treatment of the Sudeten Germans as “the lesser evil,” which supposedly allowed the maintenance of “civil peace” in Czechoslovakia (pp.369–72).

Built on Czech and French archival sources, the book *Edvard Beneš: A tragedy between Hitler and Stalin* synthesizes Marès’ original findings and the conclusions of other Beneš biographers. Marès does not ignore Beneš’ critics, but he ends up producing a rather distorted, apologetic portrait. Also, the book dwells on the “heroic-tragic” episodes of Beneš’ life (his struggles in World War I and World War II), but does not cover his interwar activities in similar detail. Marès portrays a rather stereotypical image of Beneš’ undertakings as Foreign Minister in the 1920s and 1930s as the protagonist of the triad consisting of the Little Entente, France, and the League of Nations. Last but not least, the book contains a few small factual errors, typos, and some confusion in the references.

Despite these limitations, the book certainly deserves the attention of historians of international relations and of Central Europe. Marès achieves the aim of writing a biography which continuously mirrors the most complex political and social upheavals in Central Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, Marès' insights into Beneš' life, including his childhood, his relationship with his wife Hana, and his health issues, provide a more human image of this historical figure than the typical literature on diplomatic history. Finally, the book contributes to a better understanding of the many factors that shaped interwar decision-making in Prague through the prism of Czechoslovak-French political relations. Marès thus enriches our current understanding not only of Edvard Beneš' life and career, but also of crucial social and political stakes during the "European civil war."

Aliaksandr Piahana
Toulouse University