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The Threatened Republic: Treason, Disloyalty, and the Defense of Democracy in Interwar Czechoslovakia

Within the precarious nation-state order established in East Central Europe after World War I, the First Czechoslovak Republic stood out for being particularly contested. Numerous domestic and external enemies contested both the state's borders and its democratic constitution. The governments of Czechoslovakia and their supporters thus faced two interrelated challenges: how to build a nation-state in a multiethnic territory and how to build a democratic system in an authoritarian environment. As Czechoslovakia's government institutions tried to safeguard their republic against extremist movements, they occasionally employed highly repressive instruments, giving rise to the accusation that the state itself was undermining democracy. And yet, with its regular elections, functioning parliament, and fragmented multi-party system, the Czechoslovak Republic was indeed a good deal more democratic and pluralistic than most of its neighbors.

As a state using repressive instruments against political groups accused of authoritarian programs, the First Czechoslovak Republic exemplifies the dilemmas inherent in what political scientists, following Karl Loewenstein, have called militant democracy. This research project focuses on Czechoslovakia's use of its judiciary apparatus to safeguard both state integrity and the so-called "democratic-republican state form." It centers both early treason trials adjudicated under Austrian and Hungarian penal law and a number of high-profile political trials and judicial campaigns conducted under the 1923 Law for the Protection of the Republic.

Given that the precarity of Czechoslovak statehood was characterized precisely by the plurality of political threats and their mutual entanglements, the project accommodates case studies relating to five political threats: Hungarian irredentism, revolutionary communism, Slovak separatism, Czech fascism, and Sudeten German separatism and national socialism. , Each of

these threats was perceived as existential at certain times: “Bolshevik revolutionaries” as well as Hungarian nationalists and noble monarchists loomed large in the earliest years of the first republic. The potential threat of Slovak separatism was discussed most passionately during the 1929 trial against Vojtech Tuka. In the mid-1930s, the prosecution of German nationalists and national socialists took center stage. Trials against Czech fascists, meanwhile, form an important comparative case, because they make it possible to verify claims that the Czechoslovak courts were biased against the left or against national minorities.

By examining how the state sought to protect itself while negotiating the fine line between legitimate dissent and punishable disloyalty, the project will contribute to the broader history of democracy and its discontents in a time and place characterized by extreme nationalism, authoritarian politics, and territorial revisionism. Not least, of course, this interwar history is highly pertinent to our own time, when the global rise of authoritarian movements triggers new debates on such issues as the defense of institutions, party bans, or the politicization of the judiciary.

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