

# BATTLE *for the* CASTLE

**The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe,  
1914-1948**



**ANDREA ORZOFF**

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Andrea Orzoff

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Printed in the United States of America  
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Para Iñigo, Samuel, y Mateo, de mi corazón.  
*Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto . . .*

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History is mere history. Myths are what matter: they determine the type of history a country is bound to create and repeat.

—Jorge Luis Borges

A myth is at the same time imperfectible and unquestionable; time or knowledge will not make it better or worse.

—Roland Barthes

... the French fuss so much about the nation because it is a living problem, became one when they set the nation up as an ideal, remained one because they found they could not realize the ideal. ... When one gets down to facts, things become awkward.

—Eugen Weber



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## Contents

	Introduction: The Golden Republic	3
1	Myth and Wartime	23
2	The Castle	57
3	Battles of the Legend Makers	95
4	Difficulties Abroad	136
5	A Time of Iron and Fire	174
	Epilogue	215
	Abbreviations and Definitions	221
	Notes	223
	Index	279

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## Battle for the Castle



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# INTRODUCTION

## The Golden Republic

*The truth will prevail.*

—Jan Hus, fifteenth-century Bohemian  
religious reformer

*It was my belief that the truth would prevail, but I did not  
expect it to prevail unaided.*

—Edvard Beneš, Czechoslovak foreign  
minister and president

Vinohradská třída is a long, busy thoroughfare connecting Prague's leafy eastern suburbs to its bustling historical center. The street rings with tram bells and car horns; Czechs, not tourists, fill the sidewalks. Grime coats fanciful fin de siècle wedding-cake apartment buildings and stern socialist realist hulks. Near the corner of Budečská ulice, quite close to Prague's first Western-style luxury shopping mall, sits a four-story office building. At street level, its façade is unremarkable concrete. From across the street, though, the passerby can see an elegant mansard roof, the sweeping lines of interwar Prague modernist style, and between the second and third floors, in large letters, the word ORBIS. The passerby might assume the reference to the globe has something to do with the building's current tenant, an agency promoting travel to the Czech Republic.

In fact, Orbis existed in another world and another time. Between the First and Second World Wars, the building on Vinohradská was home to the publishing house of the First Czechoslovak Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dominated by President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and longtime foreign minister (later President) Edvard Beneš. Those who founded Orbis,

staffed its offices and newspapers, wrote its books, and consulted with its leaders understood their everyday task to be nothing less than the survival of their state. Their work was intended to persuade the world—especially the West—of the moral and strategic necessity of Czechoslovakia's continued existence, and to heighten Western commitment to the young republic. To support this idea, the writers and editors of *Orbis* borrowed liberally from the society around them: events, personalities, relationships, statistics, places. And myths. In large part, *Orbis* was a propaganda agency, producing and selling myth to defend the Czechoslovak state.

Although recent historical writing on interwar Czechoslovakia has taught us much about political practice in that highly idealized democracy, we still know relatively little about the centrality of myth creation, leader cults, public relations, propaganda, and the mass media to First Republic political culture. The relationship between Czechoslovak democracy and mythmaking was profound, not just because rhetoric about democracy constituted a crucial element of Czechoslovak political mythology. Czechoslovak political myth, and the propaganda that disseminated that myth, had wide-ranging international implications. Many observers, Czech and otherwise, understood Czechoslovakia to be the linchpin of the Versailles order: if Czechoslovakia fell, so too would fall Europe's increasingly rickety postwar peace. Thus even the most picayune domestic squabbles in this small country could potentially echo across the entire continent, and the success or failure of its propaganda efforts might have much wider repercussions.

Czechoslovak propaganda drew on a long history of European persuasion, ranging from the election appeals on the walls of Pompeii to the Catholic Church's seventeenth-century Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide, intended to combat the Reformation. French revolutionary propaganda after 1792 spread the inflammatory ideas of Diderot and Voltaire throughout the continent; when the revolution's foes demonized its ideology as well as its armies, propaganda began to acquire its scurrilous reputation.<sup>1</sup> During the nineteenth century, propaganda and cultural relations were one of many venues in which Europe's states vied for supremacy. Napoleon pioneered the leader cult, founding his own newspapers to celebrate military campaigns and commissioning medals, coins, and paintings presenting the emperor in noble Roman dress.<sup>2</sup> The long-standing French preoccupation with French literacy and loyalty in its colonies abroad led to the creation of the Alliance française, while Wilhelmine Germany built schools and ran cultural programs for Germans outside the Reich.<sup>3</sup>

The First World War is often credited with the creation of modern propaganda. Belligerents on both sides intensified their use of word and image—including, for the first time, film—to persuade the home front to hold on, the military to fight on, neutral states to join in, and enemy civilians

and soldiers to give up.<sup>4</sup> At the war's outset, the British cable ship *Telconia* cut direct subterranean cables linking Germany and the United States. Meanwhile, the Foreign Office created a secret war propaganda office. Once the carefully crafted news items came over the British-controlled wires, editors at American papers chose what they thought would most interest their readers, unaware of any censorship. The British also tried to convince prominent Americans to advocate entering the war. Unofficial British sources echoed similar ideas: theater, radio, cinema, museum exhibitions, schoolbooks, and children's literature, among other venues, espoused themes comparable to those emerging from Wellington House.<sup>5</sup> (German propaganda in the United States emerged from private German-American friendship societies or "bunds": the suspicious consistency of sources and message, followed by the German invasion of neutral Belgium, rendered the German message less plausible.)<sup>6</sup>

From within the multinational Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires, East-Central European peoples waged their own propaganda battles, often at cross-purposes.<sup>7</sup> Great Power propaganda was directed at armies and populations; East-Central European propaganda and cultural diplomacy focused wholly on West European and American elites, and to a lesser extent on ethnic "colonies" abroad, such as American Czechs and Slovaks. Czechs, Serbs, Romanians, Greeks, Poles, and Croats and Slovenes calling themselves Yugoslavs, among others, traveled widely in the United States, rallying the support of émigré groups, promising them and their ethnic kin prominent roles in the states they hoped to create at war's end.<sup>8</sup> Representatives of the Austrian nationalities crowded the hallways of diplomatic offices in Washington, Paris, and London; gradually developed friendships with influential government figures and journalists; and hosted elegant dinners, where they regaled Great Power literati and political leaders with stories of glorious national pasts and dedication to the ideals of the democratic West. The great Polish pianist Paderewski's 1916 concert and speech at the White House moved President Wilson profoundly, even, according to Paderewski's supporters, influencing Wilson's inclusion of Poland in the Fourteen Points.<sup>9</sup>

They also participated in symbolic assemblies hoping to persuade the West that they would be good citizens of the postwar international community. They had help from unexpected sources, such as George Creel's Committee of Public Information, the American counterpart to Wellington House, which organized a meeting of the Oppressed Nationalities of Central Europe in September 1918 at Carnegie Hall. The event's motto was "The Will of the People of Austria-Hungary." University professor Masaryk, self-appointed spokesman for an independent Czechoslovakia, and Paderewski, speaking on the Poles' behalf, made fulsome declarations of their mutual

admiration; they read a resolution thanking the United States and its allies for their support and reaffirming the importance of creating “a united and independent democratic Poland” as well as freeing the Habsburg subject peoples from the burdensome yoke of Austria-Hungary. These speeches were greeted with enthusiastic applause. Creel helped Masaryk to bring the group’s resolution to President Wilson, who responded with support for Austria’s dissolution. The “oppressed peoples” then decided to form an organization, the Mid-European Democratic Union, which embarked on its own propaganda crusade during the final weeks of the war.<sup>10</sup>

At the Paris peace talks, this kind of unofficial diplomacy or personal propaganda was widespread. Charles Seymour, Yale University history professor and consultant with the American delegation, wrote to his wife during the winter of 1918–1919, “I am beginning my work as social laborer again . . . dinner with [Romanian leader Ion] Bratianu tomorrow, lunch with Italian liberals on Saturday, dinner with the Serbs in the evening, and dinner with Czechoslovaks—Kramarz [sic] and Beneš—on Monday.” During this same period, the Polish delegation hosted a luncheon for the Americans that lasted until dusk; the Americans were treated to a long line of experts extolling Poland’s virtues and defending the territorial claims it had presented to the conference. Queen Marie of Romania was among the most notorious East European personalities at the conference, who came to Paris to aid Romania’s cause (and, most likely, to shop). She was certain her flirtatious importuning of the conference leaders would strengthen Romania’s position: “I had pleaded, explained . . . I had given my country a living face.”<sup>11</sup>

The attendees of the Paris peace talks left firmly convinced of the significance of propaganda, for good or ill. Certainly Czechoslovak and Polish political control of their states on the ground during the last months of 1918 and much of 1919 helped establish the case for independent statehood and to set state boundaries; certainly Pitsudski’s Polish Legions, the Czechoslovak Legions, and their respective victories over the Bolsheviks in eastern Poland and Siberia helped the Great Powers realize the potential strength of these new would-be allies. But the Great Powers’ decisions to support East-Central European independence had already been made by then.<sup>12</sup> Historian Zbyněk Zeman’s comment about the Czechs can stand for other East-Central European peoples as well:

Instead of manning barricades and settling their accounts with the authorities on the home ground, . . . they gradually penetrated the editorial offices of newspapers, the chanceries of the Allied foreign ministries, and the higher reaches of the Allied leadership. . . . It was an enterprise in which publicity and propaganda, as well as personal contacts and the persuasiveness of the revolutionaries, initially played

a more important role than the actual military clout of the Czechoslovak leaders on the Allied side. H.A.L. Fisher, the historian and politician, remarked that “. . . Czechoslovakia is the child of propaganda.”<sup>13</sup>

After the cataclysmic upheaval of the Great War, which ended three empires, brought Bolshevism to power in Russia, and threatened Bolshevik-style revolutions across much of the rest of the continent, Europe's concern with propaganda endured into the interwar period. Propaganda constituted part of Europe's attempt to create a new interwar order. Propaganda's integral relationship to nationalism allowed cultural elites to transcribe symbolic or moral values into political discourse; propaganda was a means of recontextualizing shared experience, reestablishing the boundaries of the national community, and renovating public concepts of good, evil, redemption, and sacrifice in the face of seeming threat. The French, for example, continued their outreach to Francophones abroad in the face of perceived German competition. A French foreign ministry official explained this approach in nationalistic terms: only French culture could be “this treasure of new ideas, of liberal aspirations, and of refined traditions . . . [foreign elites are] desirous also of acquiring that elegance of expression and that flower of humanism which our literature, our art and our science represent.”<sup>14</sup> Weimar Germany, in turn, in 1920 created a Directorate for Germanism Abroad, aimed at maintaining the national sentiment of thousands of ethnic Germans living outside the newly reduced German borders.<sup>15</sup> Foreign minister Gustav Stresemann, in 1925, asked the Reichstag for more money for the *Auslandsdeutschen*, claiming that they were “engaged in a battle for the preservation of their nationality.”<sup>16</sup> The Soviet Union poured energy into propaganda, mobilizing agitprop at home to win over a reluctant population, while also enthusiastically creating various Friends of the Soviet Union societies (in some twenty countries by 1927) and carefully fostering cultural and intellectual contact between Soviet and foreign intellectuals, among other attempts at cultural diplomacy and propaganda.<sup>17</sup>

Ironically, the British—the Great War's propaganda experts—were so embarrassed by postwar revelations of their wartime information control and exaggeration that their cultural diplomacy arm, the British Council, was not established until 1934.<sup>18</sup> Postwar British and American cultural elites railed against propaganda, finding it omnipresent and uniquely dangerous to good governance. The Great War had brought about a sea change in propagandistic techniques, and in the cooptation of the mass media and cultural industries by state governments. Strict control of information and censorship, doctored photographs and carefully crafted films, and the involvement of mass-circulation newspapers all seemed to represent a qualitative change

from previous attempts to win hearts and minds. Lord Ponsonby's inquiry into wartime atrocity propaganda, which found little or no evidence to verify any of the horrific stories emerging from the war, reinforced the increasing dread in the popular mind about the putative power of propaganda: "The injection of the poison of hatred into men's minds by means of falsehood is a greater evil in wartime than the actual loss of life. The defilement of the human soul is worse than the destruction of the human body." Similarly, the U.S. Senate initiated hearings to investigate the American entry into the First World War, publicizing the British wartime propaganda campaign—to general shock—and concluding that the United States had been inveigled into the war effort.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, the vulnerable states of postimperial East-Central Europe viewed propaganda as a necessary, fundamental tool of statesmanship, and a crucial conduit to the Great Powers. Their foreign ministries devoted entire divisions to propaganda. Each state—and often leaders of national minorities within states—used cultural diplomacy and recruited prominent allies abroad to espouse its virtues. By the mid-1920s, each Habsburg successor state paid journalists or newspapers in London, Paris, and Geneva to write positive articles or promote desired policies. Friendly authors and academics were subsidized; admiring works of history were kept in print; concerts of music by national composers were given; sophisticated dinners and social occasions were carefully arranged, both in Great Power and East-Central European capitals. The propagandistic stakes were high; the very existence of these states seemed predicated on it. Although the Great Power leaders had brought the postwar states into being, many inhabitants of Great Britain and France only dimly understood where these states were and who inhabited them, much less why it was worthwhile to support them. It would thus be important for all East-Central European peoples to try to educate the West about themselves, to make an impression on electorates as well as leadership, and if possible to exert wide-ranging cultural influence. At the same time, they would need to teach themselves about the West, about Europe more generally, and about participation in the democratic process.

The Czechs—specifically, the leaders of their wartime émigré nationalist movement and postwar state, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš—can stand as exemplars. Even before the First World War ended, Masaryk and Beneš had decided that international and domestic propaganda would have to be intense complementary efforts for the postwar Czechoslovak state. The world, particularly the Great Powers, had to be taught about this new parliamentary democracy at Europe's heart. At home, the need for a form of enlightened political instruction seemed just as pressing. Neither Masaryk nor Beneš trusted the abilities of most "Czechoslovaks" to adjust

to the new post-Versailles Europe, nor did they trust Czech political parties or parliamentary leaders to teach them. Thus Masaryk and Beneš created what historians and contemporaries dubbed the *Hrad* (Castle), named after Prague Castle, where Masaryk resided when in Prague. An informal but extremely powerful nexus of institutions and allies, the Castle would help Masaryk and Beneš affect the political process from outside the halls of Parliament. Its members included a coterie of literary intellectuals, who led the country's propaganda effort along with Masaryk and Beneš, and who also viewed propaganda as a beneficial, elite-driven, civic education. These intellectuals, along with Masaryk and Beneš, helped craft the national myth later to become enshrined in—or confused with—the history of the First Republic.

East-Central European interwar campaigns of cultural diplomacy rested on a discourse of Europe and Europeaness. Each state cited its adherence to European cultural norms as proof of its moral worthiness, and thus its defense by the Great Powers. Of course, each state defined Europeaness differently, according to its unique mix of historical circumstance and preferred practices. The “Czechoslovaks” had succeeded in persuading the American and French leadership, and some British diplomats, of their European qualities—their rationalism, tolerance, efficiency, and adherence to democratic norms—by the time the Paris peace talks began in 1919:

Everyone in Paris knew how Beneš and Masaryk had devoted their lives to freeing their people from the Austrian Empire. . . . Almost everyone in Paris liked and admired the Czechs and their leaders. The Poles were dashing and brave, but quite unreasonable; the Rumanians charming and clever, but sadly devious; the Yugoslavs, well, rather Balkan. The Czechs were refreshingly Western. . . . Beneš and Masaryk were unfailingly cooperative, reasonable and persuasive as they stressed the Czechs' deep-seated democratic traditions and their aversion to militarism, oligarchy, high finance, indeed all that the old Germany and Austria-Hungary had stood for.<sup>20</sup>

But conservative and revanchist states could also mine the discourse of Europe. The Hungarians, for example, insisted that the new Czechoslovakia was as awkward a political conglomeration as its neologism of a name, and tried to remind West European audiences of Hungarian worthiness, based on centuries of acting as Europe's Christian bastion against the invading infidel Turks.<sup>21</sup> They and other revisionist states argued that Wilson and the Paris peacemakers had dismembered the ancient Habsburg monarchy, unseating one of Europe's oldest dynasties, and created instead weak, artificial, Balkanized states, which by implication did not deserve Western support.<sup>22</sup>



One of the most important weapons in the interwar European propaganda war was the adoption of West European habits of sociability. It became clear to the East-Central Europeans relatively early on that luxurious hospitality (with a tacit political agenda) was more than a nicety of etiquette. This kind of sociability played an urgent part in interwar East-Central European cultural diplomacy, particularly in winning over conservative sectors of Great Power opinion. East-Central European elites participated wholeheartedly in international organizations based on sociability, such as the International P.E.N. Club, a literary association affiliated with the League of Nations. East-Central European P.E.N. chapters were generally sponsored, and their expenses paid, by their country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which also tended to view P.E.N. involvement as a means of garnering prestige for their state. These states also built their own Western-style elegant gentlemen's clubs for the purpose of winning over visiting foreigners.

But the foreigners—particularly the British—were difficult to woo. Their resistance came from long habit: Western attitudes toward the Slavs placed them at best between East and West, decidedly not *of* the West. Internal European prejudices, described by one historian as “nesting orientalisms,” dismissed the eastern part of the continent as barbaric, as opposed to the West's putative “cleanliness, order, self-control, strength of character, sense of law, justice, efficient administration” and presumed ethnic and linguistic homogeneity.<sup>23</sup> Popular British culture continued to traffic in stereotypes after the Great War, as in Agatha Christie's 1925 *The Secret of Chimneys*, which presented an imaginary Balkan state, Herzoslovakia. Its inhabitants were a “most uncivilized people. A race of brigands. . . . [National h]obby, assassinating kings and having revolutions.”<sup>24</sup> Christie located her “uncivilized,” unstable state in the Balkans, but its name linked this “race of brigands” unmistakably to Czechoslovakia. The First Republic's putative Westernness was undone by this connection to Hercegovina, tinderbox of the First World War, putative source of assassins and terrorists.

This kind of cultural imagery had a political counterpart. The powers at the Paris Peace Conference, most importantly the British, already distrusted many of the East-Central Europeans—including the Czechs—in 1919, and their suspicion grew over the interwar years.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, after the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the Versailles treaty with Germany in 1919, American isolationists repeatedly reminded the public of European deviousness, especially via propaganda, and the danger of involvement in European affairs.<sup>26</sup> Thus the task of Czechoslovak—and Yugoslav and Polish—propagandists was Sisyphean. The Czechs did not neglect defenses beyond propagandistic appeals. Beneš worked hard to create and maintain the Little Entente, a mutual defense pact among Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania, with talk of also involving the Poles.<sup>27</sup> By the late 1930s, the Czechoslovak border

with Austria and Germany was highly fortified, and the country's military was generally considered one of the strongest in the region. Still, the Castle leaders were under no misconceptions about their ability to withstand a concerted German attack alone. The West had brought them into being: surely it would want to keep alive the states it had created. Propaganda's chances of success were uncertain at best, yet the idea of abandoning the West, Czechoslovakia's patron and defender, was unthinkable. Masaryk and Beneš were not persuaded by the increasingly negative connotations attributed to propaganda; it was too crucial a tool of statecraft to abandon.

### *The Czechoslovak National Myth*

At the heart of Czechoslovakia's propaganda effort lay the "Czechoslovak" modern national myth, crafted by many, but disseminated above all by Masaryk, Beneš, and the Castle. It is, in fact, a Czech myth, as many observers then and now have noted.<sup>28</sup> The story goes like this: under Habsburg rule, the innately democratic, peace-loving, tolerant Czechs were viciously repressed by bellicose, authoritarian, reactionary Austrians, under whose regime the Czech language and national consciousness almost died out. Czech identity was rescued by a heroic, devoted group of intellectuals, dubbed the Awakeners, who brought the dormant nation back to life by recrafting literary Czech, retelling Czech history, and making political claims on behalf of a "Czech nation." Jan Hus, the one-eyed Hussite general Jan Žižka, the Union of the Czech Brethren, the Battle of White Mountain: these fifteenth- and sixteenth-century historical figures and events were emotionally resonant signs within a coherent narrative of moral rectitude, victimization by aggressive Germans (or the Catholic Church, embodied in the Habsburgs), and persistent attachment to presumed Czech national values, particularly that lodestar, the Czech language.

After 1918, the myth continued, Czechoslovakia made itself an island of democratic values, rationalism, and fair mindedness amid a Europe falling quickly into the thrall of authoritarianism and fascism. The Czechs, now the leading nationality within the multiethnic Czechoslovak state, continued to be depicted as a tolerant, prosperous, cosmopolitan people at the heart of Europe, embodying Europe's proudest ideals, the quintessential liberal inhabitants of an ideal civic sphere. They were also innately centrist, moderate, pragmatic realists—a "myth of mythlessness," of being too rational a people to need such fables.<sup>29</sup> The mythic Czechoslovakia extended effortless tolerance to its many nationalities and religions: Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenes (Ukrainians), Poles, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and Uniates were unproblematically absorbed into the new state and transformed

into “Czechoslovaks.” (Although this book does not entirely reproduce that supposition, it does reflect the preponderance of Czechs among those who created the Castle myth, and the relative absence of other Czechoslovak state peoples within the myth.) The myth of the Czechoslovak state accompanied a presidential leader cult for Tomáš Masaryk, a dignified septuagenarian with a neat white mustache and an international reputation. Masaryk’s personal myth cast him as a benevolent, disinterested father of the people, a moral example and philosopher-king, far from the hurly-burly of political deal making. A similar, far less successful myth was crafted for Foreign Minister (later President) Edvard Beneš, highlighting his diplomatic talent and the esteem in which he was held in Western capitals.

The Castle leaders did not construct and dictate a unitary narrative, used faithfully by all Castle supporters. Rather, the process was haphazard and creative. Different mythic elements appealed to, and were emphasized by, different groups of Castle allies. Non-Castle figures adopted the myth’s terms for their own purposes. Beyond this internal multivalence, the Castle myth has always had external critics, from the interwar era to the present day. Historians and journalists have pointed out Masaryk’s flaws as well as his virtues. They have also noted the state’s weaknesses and the characteristics it shared with the rest of interwar Europe, including an aging, static political elite, an ambivalence toward democratic legal structure and practice, and a political culture as prone to corruption and secrecy as that of any other European state. In their many attempts to deny the Castle legitimacy, right-wing politicians (most prominently Karel Kramář and Jiří Stříbrný) contested Masaryk’s and Beneš’s claim to have been the most important figures in founding Czechoslovakia, and their continued leadership of the state. The twin challenges of Communism and right-wing authoritarianism threatened democracy in Czechoslovakia as elsewhere; Czechoslovakia’s multiethnic character translated in fact to Czech predominance over Slovaks, Germans, Ruthenians, and Hungarians. There were strong elements of continuity between the democratic First Republic (1918–1938) and the authoritarian Second Republic (1938–1939) as well as the Czech collaboration with Nazi occupiers.<sup>30</sup> However, the myth’s influence remains strong. If, as anthropologist Benedict Anderson has written, the nation requires a “narrative of ‘identity,’” the identity of the modern-day Czech Republic and its predecessor are above all constituted by references to this noble, democratic mythic narrative.<sup>31</sup>

The myth’s lasting influence and tremendous emotive, if not explanatory, power came from its final element: the intermingling of the myth with European realpolitik. After 1938, the myth shifted to depict Czechs (now less frequently “Czechoslovaks”) as victims—of geography, the perfidy of the West, and internal fifth columns. The first betrayal, at Munich in 1938, was

by Czechoslovakia's Western allies and creators France and Great Britain, who essentially handed the country to the Nazis. In this portrayal, the First Republic's Slovaks, Hungarians, and Germans—the last group understood, mythically, as aliens since time immemorial—celebrated its demise. The second betrayal followed in 1948 at the hands of the Soviet Union, now portrayed as another barbarian aggressor, and a handful of ruthless, Stalinized Czechoslovak Communists and fellow travelers.<sup>32</sup> Czechoslovakia then disappeared behind the Iron Curtain, forgotten by the West, save when Czechoslovak attempts to reform Communism failed in 1968 and Soviet-bloc tanks rolled into Prague.

For some observers, the myth seemed close enough to fact to be mistaken for it. Émigré author Milan Kundera adapted it for Cold War readers in his much-reprinted essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” which argued that the world had forgotten the essential Europeanness of those countries trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Kundera's particular twist made the Czechs part of a nostalgic, Catholic, romanticized Central Europe rather than the Soviet Eastern Europe.<sup>33</sup> This reading anachronistically and simply identified the interwar era with Westernness. Kundera ignored the First Republic's anti-German (whether Habsburg, Reich, or Sudeten) tendencies, as well as Castle concern about a Habsburg restoration. Meanwhile, Western-language academic historiography and political analysis, much of it written by Czech émigrés or their students, reiterated and elaborated themes from this set of myths. The myth was recast for a scholarly context as Czechoslovak exceptionalism, which taught that the Czechs were more urbane and worldly, and less prone to religious superstition, than the rest of Eastern Europe; they embraced Western models, economically, culturally, and politically; and, perhaps as important, they were the victims of capricious fortune, granted on the one hand wise leaders such as Masaryk and Beneš, and on the other the West's shameful neglect.

After the Velvet Revolution and the fall of the Soviet Empire, the myth was reinvigorated by a new philosopher-president. Václav Havel attempted to secure the West's support for Czechoslovakia in part by reminding the world of the Czechs' democratic heritage and twinning his image with Masaryk's. When the Czechs entered NATO, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright—herself of Czech heritage, the daughter of a historian who had worked with Beneš—invoked the myth, saying of Masaryk, “He inspired an entire generation of Czechoslovaks by his life, his beliefs and his works. There was a time people thought he should be president of the world, as it was known in the '30s. He was the philosopher president.”<sup>34</sup> And before the United States attacked Iraq in 2003, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld described the energetic, democratic, courageous, freedom-loving “New Europe”—the new NATO members of East-Central Europe,

including the Czechs—as opposed to the jaded, blind Old Europe—France and Germany, resolutely opposed to the war. This language and symbolic division of Europe directly recalls the First World War, echoing that of Slavophile historian Robert Seton-Watson, though Rumsfeld’s use invoked a different set of allies and enemies.<sup>35</sup>

This book attempts to historicize the myth, the circumstances of its creation and elaboration, and its many uses at home and abroad. Masaryk and Beneš drew on earlier strains of romantic and triumphalist historiography to craft this mythic narrative, initially for Great War exile propaganda. They and their Castle colleagues then adapted and wielded the myth for propagandistic use within the competitive context of interwar European international relations, where propaganda was one among many means of drawing closer to the European Great Power states. At home, Masaryk and Beneš employed tactics similar to those they used abroad—relying on their relationships with the mass media and cultural elites—to further their political goals. At home, too, they used the mythic narrative to claim moral high ground and legitimate their own power. Both domestically and internationally, the mythic narrative provided the content, propaganda the means of dissemination.

### *Coming to Terms*

Classical Athenian philosophers and rhetoricians differentiated between *mythos* and *logos*, discursive strategies for presenting the fabulous, poetic, or absurd as opposed to the factual and reasonable.<sup>36</sup> I hope to avoid too much entanglement in that long-standing dichotomy. My use of the term “myth” to describe the Czechoslovak national narrative is not intended to be pejorative, although at points in this book I do note the work of the myth in obscuring certain political actions or tendencies. Rather, the term “myth” helps highlight the essentialist, fabulistic narrative underscoring political and academic discourse on the “natively democratic” Czechs and Czechoslovakia since 1918, and orients discussion of the narrative’s genealogy and later adaptations.

All states emplot and employ myths as a means of imbuing the national past and future with order and intelligibility. Some of the most powerful European national myths emerged during the nineteenth century, such as the French claim to represent Europe itself, to be the bearers of *civilisation* and Enlightenment, and the Polish self-presentation as the “Christ of Nations,” emphasizing the *antemurale* myth so common in Central and Eastern Europe, where “martyred nations” claim to have bled for Europe.<sup>37</sup> Myths can provide a sense of origins, permanent values, authority, and moral

wisdom. Their truth or falsehood is relatively insignificant.<sup>38</sup> I use “myth” and “mythology” to denote a worldview based on identifiably ideological narratives or images claiming to be universally valid, yet only accepted as true by certain audiences at certain times. The mythic story, the teller, the audience, and the circumstances of the telling can vary considerably: although the main mythic narrative usually remains recognizable, its elements can be rearranged. However it is presented, effective myth is both historical and predictive: it interprets the group’s glorious past, using it as a guide or an essential pattern for the future. Leader cults, frequently associated with political myths, are similarly complex.<sup>39</sup>

Many important interpreters of myth, such as Georges Sorel and Ernst Cassirer, have emphasized its irrational or mystical nature, relating this quality to its ability to motivate its believers, but believers are often able to analyze elements of myths quite rationally, accepting some while rejecting others.<sup>40</sup> This book emphasizes myth as a relatively orderly system of symbols, possessing its own internal logic, transformed into narrative.<sup>41</sup> My focus is on the use of myth, its political and cultural function in legitimating power, the “moral universe of meaning” it invokes, its definition of peoplehood, and its evolution and (surprisingly long) life.<sup>42</sup>

The term propaganda, like myth, is frequently used as a disparaging epithet. Yet to understand it that way in this case would be singularly anachronistic. In the eyes of the Castle leaders and many observers, propaganda had materially contributed to Austria’s downfall and had brought about the Czech national “revolution.”<sup>43</sup> Rather than seeing propaganda as a danger to independent civic thought, Masaryk and Beneš viewed it as a useful form of civic education and an essential tool of statecraft. They boasted of their wartime propaganda skill in their memoirs, carefully planned the new state’s propaganda organizations, and kept them under their personal control, trusting only their closest intimates. Masaryk and Beneš understood propaganda to be a crucial means of communicating with the masses and besting their political foes; cultural diplomacy was a parallel effort to reach elites abroad.

The propaganda efforts analyzed in *Battle for the Castle* illustrate some larger questions in European history and the history of nationalism. The struggles over myth discussed here provide a detailed depiction of the gradual, complex, and conflictive process of nation building and mythmaking. Interwar Czechoslovakia makes clear both the importance and the limitation of state power in shaping and influencing nationalist discourses. Outside the Castle, other leaders and groups drew on, recombined, and reinvented local nationalist traditions. The Agrarian Party’s slogan “Venkov jedna rodina” (the countryside is one family), as well as the Czech Fascists’ “Nic než národ” (nothing [other] than the nation), were voiced by authoritative political

leaders and articulated by intellectuals and writers who lent legitimacy to their ideas. It is important to note the simultaneous invention of multiple traditions, and to look at the processes by which some myths are enshrined while others, at least temporarily, disappear.

Czechoslovakia and the other post-Habsburg states of East-Central Europe shared the central dilemma presented in this book: their interwar nation building was dual, simultaneously domestic and international. East-Central European governments had to knit together new polities, often fractious and multiethnic, while also effectively presenting abroad the image of a unified, successful nation. Most of them, like Czechoslovakia, failed in this task. The complaints of minority nationalities did not escape the West's attention but, more important, as Hitler's power grew, Great Power elite opinion increasingly retreated to the kind of cynical realism represented by appeasement. The West's overwhelming concern was the maintenance of empire abroad and the avoidance of war. *Battle for the Castle* illustrates both the domestic and international sides of the Czechoslovak attempt to craft a unified nation.

East-Central European nation-building efforts abroad rested on futile, competitive discourses of Europe. But such arguments have rarely worked: East-Central Europe, including Czechoslovakia, has long been defined as other than the West.<sup>44</sup> This book makes clear that after 1918, the successor states of the nineteenth-century empires continued to constitute an Eastern Europe. The term connoted a complex admixture of attitudes toward the Great Power states: a combination of dependence on them, defensiveness toward them, fear of absorption by them, and attempts to portray their own states as similar to them. Interwar Western Europe became both the guarantor of security and the arbiter of cultural and political progressiveness for the rest of the continent. East-Central European interwar propaganda and Great Power reception demonstrate that an Eastern Europe of *mentalités* existed decades before a physical Iron Curtain.<sup>45</sup> But this book joins a "new diplomatic history" in focusing on the contributions of the mass media, public opinion, and individual citizen initiative to international affairs.<sup>46</sup>

My decision to focus on the Castle, the mass media, and popular culture, rather than on votes and arguments on the floor of Parliament, stems from the consensus among political historians of the First Republic that Parliament's significance was relatively limited. Many scholars have argued that the heart of political conflicts in interwar Czechoslovakia lay in the battles between the Castle and the Pětka (the Five), the unofficial coalition of the most important Czech political party leaders.<sup>47</sup> The Pětka's control of parliamentary issues, aimed at ensuring passage of important legislation and protecting each party's control over particular ministries or resources, meant