5 Masaryk and Beneš and the Creation of Czechoslovakia: a Study in Mentalities
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I have put forward elsewhere my views on the creation of Czechoslovakia. I would not say that it was inevitable; and certainly in 1914 it did not seem so. On the other hand, there were important developments that seemed to point towards the possible separation of at least the Czech Lands from a disintegrating Austria-Hungary. As the historian Jiří Kofalka put it, by 1914 'the Czechs were a nation without a state'.

THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF INDIVIDUALS

Fundamental to this situation was the economic and population development of Bohemia and Moravia in the century and a half before the outbreak of the First World War. The interplay of demographic and social change, and agricultural and industrial growth is a separate question, but well before 1914 it had produced an increasingly prosperous Czech majority that wished to enjoy at least equality of opportunity with the now declining minority of Germans and was adamantly not prepared to be eternally subservient politically. The process might have lasted much longer, and the outcome might have been somewhat different but for the war. Equally, however, the clash of empires that began in 1914 need not have resulted specifically in Czechoslovak independence. That it did was due to many factors, some of them, like the outbreak of revolution in Russia and the American entry to the war, wholly unforeseen, and unforeseeable at the beginning. But a major factor was the role of individuals. Some of them initially, and some of them even after the act, knew little about the Czechs or the Slovaks, but were simply in positions of power in France, Britain and America; that would go for Clemenceau, Lloyd George and even Woodrow Wilson. Two who played a
crucial role, however, did know their fellow Czechs and arguably achieved more than the eventual balance of forces in the war really entitled them to. Therein lay the greatness of Masaryk and Beneš.

To say this is not to detract in any way from the contribution made by other Czechs, and Slovaks, to the winning of their independence. The wartime national movement was slow to get off the ground and indeed, even in the Czech Lands, only merited such a description towards the end of the war, a factor both Masaryk and Beneš had equally to contend with. Individuals like Lev Sychrava, the radical young lawyer who went abroad in September 1914 to inform the outside world about the Czech cause, or Antonín Švehla, the Agrarian leader who eventually brought his party into the struggle for independence, or like Czech and Slovak legionaries in Russia or Czech and Slovak émigrés in America, all played a part. But the main burden and achievement fell to Masaryk and Beneš.

**TWO INDIVIDUAL ROLES**

This, and the fact that one succeeded the other as President of the Czechoslovak Republic, does not mean to say that, in all senses of the word, they were really men of the same mind. For a start, although they knew of each other, they had rarely met before the war began. In 1914, Masaryk was already sixty-four years of age, thirty-four years older than Beneš. They had grown up in different environments, they had dissimilar personalities, and one’s experience was obviously much greater than the other’s. During the war they had vastly much more time apart than together; their purpose was the same, but their roles and their theatres of operation were not. Yet they complemented each other to the point where they were later much criticised – though wrongly so – for combining to look after their mutual interest. In effect, neither could have achieved independence without the other’s active help. Yet their dual act tended to lump their achievements, characters and personalities together though, in fact, their mentalities were different. Young and old may sometimes work together, but that does not make them identical in nature.

At the beginning of the war Masaryk was by no means the accepted leader of the Czech national movement. The sophistication of Czech society in the 1890s had produced a series of parties representing essentially sectional interests, so that there was no single national