SMETANA, Vít: *Ani vojna, ani mír. Velmoci, Československo a střední Evropa v sedmi dramatech na prahu druhé světové a studené války* **/Neither War Nor Peace. The Great Powers, Czechoslovakia and Central Europe in Seven Dramas on the Verge of World War II and the Cold War/ Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Prague 2016, 663 pages**

Among the most interesting and inspiring books to have appeared on Czech bookshelves that I've had the opportunity to read in recent years, I would like to include this extensive study by Vít Smetana. I admit that at first I was slightly sceptical of the prospect of "new insights and interpretations", but having read the book, I can confirm that truly it does not disappoint in this regard. The stories told by the author force the reader to think about the position of Czechoslovak history within modern history in the context of Central Europe.

Vít Smetana graduated from Charles University with a degree in International Relations and Modern History. Since 1998, he has been working at the Institute for Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, and lectures externally at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University. He studied at universities in London, Oxford, Washington and Stanford, California. In 2007 he received the Otto Wichterle Prize for outstanding young scientists from the Czech Academy of Sciences. He is the author or co-author of a number of publications.[1]

The storyline of this book covers the period from Munich 1938 to February 1948. The text is divided into seven more or less interrelated chapters. Smetana gradually guides us through seven dramas – a drama of disinformation, a drama of damned commitments, a financial drama, a geopolitical drama, an allied drama, an observer's drama and a Cold War drama.[2] He does not impose his view on the reader. His

1 One can mention here: SMETANA, Vít: *In the Shadow of Munich. British policy towards Czechoslovakia from the endorsement to the renunciation of the Munich agreement (1938–1942)*. Karolinum, Prague 2014; HRBEK, Jaroslav – SMETANA, Vít et al.: *Draze zaplacená svoboda. Osvobození Československa 1944–1945* /A Heavy Price for Freedom. The Liberation of Czechoslovakia 1944–1945/. Paseka, Prague 2009; KRAMER, Mark – SMETANA, Vít: *Imposing, Maintaining and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain. The Cold War and East-Central Europe, 1945–1989*. Lexington Books, Lanham – Boulder – New York – Toronto – Plymouth 2014; KOCIAN, Jiří – SMETANA, Vít et al.: *Květnové volby 1946 – volby osudové? Československo před bouří* /The Elections of May 1946 – A Fateful Election? Czechoslovakia Before the Storm/. Euroslavica for the Endowment fund of engaged non-party members, Prague 2014; SMETANA, Vít – HÁJKOVÁ, Dagmar – KUČERA, Jaroslav – SUK, Jiří – ŠRÁMEK, Pavel – TŮMA, Oldřich: *Historie na rozcestí. Jak mohly dopadnout osudové chvíle Československa* /History at A Crossroads. How Could the Fateful Moments of Czechoslovakia Turn Out Differently?/. Barrister & Principal, Brno 2016; SMETANA, Vít – GEANEY, Kathleen (eds.): *Exile in London. The experience of Czechoslovakia and the other occupied nations, 1939–1945*. Karolinum, Prague 2017.

2 Names of individual chapters of the book (only in translation): 1) What Will the Others Do? Czechoslovakia, the Western Powers and the Soviet Union on the Road to Munich (A Drama of Disinformation); 2) Political Debts to be Written Off. The British, the French and the Guarantee of the Borders of Czechoslovakia (A Drama of Damned Commitments); 3) A Last Bribe For Hitler? Britain and the Czechoslovak Gold in Spring 1939 (A Financial Drama); 4) The Road to an Orwellian world. The Nazi-Soviet, the Western Powers and the Fate of Central Europe (A Geopolitical Drama); 5) In the Lines of the Great Powers. The Big Three, Central and Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia and Spheres of Influence during the War (An Allied Drama); 6) The First Glimpses of the Iron Curtain (A Drama

interpretations are not mere statements. The author substantiates his claims in a concrete fashion and supports them credibly. This is greatly supported by the fact that Vít Smetana is familiar with a number of important documents thanks to his meticulous research of primary sources.

Now, please allow me a brief mention of several matters and ideas that caught my attention in Smetana's monograph and which I personally consider important.

The 1938 Munich crisis represents one of the most remarkable watersheds in modern Czechoslovak statehood. But did this really come as such an enormous shock, as historians claim, given the course of international relations up until that point? Was the betrayal by the Western democracies as primordial as people judge it to be today? Obviously, the Western states were still influenced by their experiences of the First World War and the developments directly following the end of hostilities in the autumn of 1918.[3] Since the early 1930s, they had also been dealing with pressing internal economic and social problems. Add to this the aggressive, revisionist and revanchist Nazi and fascist policies, and there was not much available in the way of appropriate and acceptable solutions. And what about Czechoslovak foreign policy? Was it unified in the second half of the 1930s? In addition to professional diplomats such as Štefan Osuský[4], there were also personalities such as Czechoslovak ambassador to the UK Jan Masaryk and Czechoslovak ambassador to the USSR Zdeněk Fierlinger. Did Masaryk and Fierlinger always inform Prague's Czernin Palace and the Presidential Office accurately and objectively about the attitudes and opinions of their potential allies? Didn't President Edvard Beneš himself suggest a willingness to make concessions to the German minority in Czechoslovakia? We must also realise that Czechoslovakia's treaty of alliance was with France and under certain, precisely stated conditions, the USSR. Smetana draws attention to the fact that there are various interpretations of the meetings held between Czechoslovak representatives and Soviet diplomats before and during the Munich crisis. Finally, the assessment of Moscow's role in the dramatic autumn of 1938 remains contradictory – on the one hand, the theory of a Soviet "betrayal" appeared soon after Munich, while on the other, the same people who believed this theory later held conciliatory views of the USSR during the Second World War and never returned to the betrayal theory. It was, however, evident that the USSR would not have entered into an isolated conflict, but would later join the European war.

On the basis of the second chapter of the book, it can be concluded that the demise of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 served as a catalyst for change in British foreign policy. On the basis of this experience with the violation of German promises made after Munich over what remained of Czechoslovakia, London decided to

of Observation); 7) From Indicator to Catalyst. The Americans, The British, and the Collapse of the Third Czechoslovak Republic (A Cold War Drama).

3 For an explanation of these circumstances see for example the great work by ELLINGER, Jiří: *Neville Chamberlain. Od usmiřování k válce – britská zahraniční politika 1937–1940* /Neville Chamberlain. From Conciliation to War – British Foreign Policy 1937–1940/. Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Prague 2009.

4 Štefan Osuský (1899–1973), Czechoslovak Ambassador to France between 1921 and 1940 and simultaneously the Czechoslovak representative in the League of Nations.

offer guarantees to Poland, Romania, Greece and Turkey. It is of course debatable as to whether the newly defined Czechoslovakia was still viable at all after September 1938, including whether it would even be theoretically possible to defend militarily (taking into account the abandonment of the border fortifications and a situation where the newly-established borders would be easy to breach). France seemed to have withdrawn entirely from Central Europe in the autumn of 1938, whilst Great Britain appeared keenly aware of the risks of the newly-defined Czechoslovak Republic, yet acted as if she were her chief ally, without a written treaty of course. On 15 March 1939, however, any theoretical considerations about Czechoslovakia as a potential Central European Switzerland ended. The Slovak State became a vassal state of Hitler's Germany, whilst Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia became a Nazi protectorate, unfortunately also with a corresponding status.

In the third chapter, the author presents an episode that is virtually unknown to the wider public; the scandalous transfer of some 23 tonnes of Czechoslovak gold held in the Bank of England into the account of the Reichsbank. Everything happened in the period after the demise of the Czechoslovak Republic. This was apparently part of an economic and political dispute over the continuation and validity of the mandate of the National Bank of Czechoslovakia after 15 March, 1939. It was of course possible to dispose of the country's gold reserves abroad. France did not want to allow the transfer of gold to Nazi Germany. The transfer of gold worth £6 million triggered a major political scandal in the United Kingdom. London thus helped its future rival on the battlefields of World War II (who, among other things, had ambitions to destroy the British Empire).

In the next chapter, Smetana devotes himself to the circumstances of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939. The Soviets abandoned the concept of collective security and replaced it with an alliance of existing competitors, personified by the personalities of the two dictators Hitler and Stalin.[5] It was as if the Bolsheviks suddenly lost their objections to Nazi encroachments against the Soviets' territorial integrity and political system (to say nothing, of course, of their racist policies). The secret amendments to the Pact were intended to free up the hands of both parties in further territorial expansion and to assist in the acquisition (or provision) of strategic raw materials. Did Hitler really believe that the policy of appeasement would continue even in the case of German aggression towards Poland? Or perhaps he believed that the alliance with the USSR would deter Western democracies from meeting their allied commitments and declaring war against him, which would then necessarily change from an isolated conflict to a world war (the second war of such scale and character within twenty years)?

5 The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact has been covered in detail by more detailed histories of World War II or Central Europe. See for example TUCKER, Robert C.: *Stalin. Revoluce shora 1928–1941* /Stalin. Revolution from Above 1928–1941/. Dialog, Litvínov 1995, pp. 471–498; BULLOCK, Alan: *Hitler a Stalin. Paralelní životopisy* /Hitler and Stalin. Parallel Lives/. Mustang, Plzeň 1995, pp. 551–676; MOORHOUSE, Roger: *Diablovi spojenci. Hitlerov pakt so Stalinom 1939–1941* /The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939–1941/. Premedia, Bratislava 2015; DURMAN, Karel: *Popely ještě žhavé. Velká politika 1938–1991. Díl I. Světová válka a nukleární mír 1938–1964* /The Ashes are Still Hot. Great Power Politics. Part I. World War and Nuclear Peace 1938–1964/. Karolinum, Prague 2004, pp. 39–54.

In the fifth chapter, the author tries to refute the so-called Yalta myth of the division of Europe. Between the Allies (i.e. the U.S., Great Britain and the USSR), there were already some disputes during the war, stemming from the different political concepts, projects and visions that the various international actors intended to introduce. The zones of influence were not a product of the West; Moscow had long been pushing for them as it did not want a repeat of its interwar experience of international isolation. There were certainly a whole range of more or less serious disputes. Undoubtedly, there were also those that were essential to the future of Central and South-eastern Europe (the future Soviet sphere of influence). These included the debate about the future Polish state and its government. Soviet-Polish relations were marked not only by a shared historical experience dating back to the end of the 18th century (the division of the Polish state by Russia, Prussia and Austria), but mainly by the recent past – that is, the war of 1920, the USSR's contribution to the end of interwar Polish statehood, the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn and the effort to snub the Polish government in exile in London and create their own future Polish leadership – The Lublin Representation. Vít Smetana also describes in the historiography the widely discussed debate on the opening of a second front, the division of spheres of influence during Churchill's visit to Moscow in October 1944, and the discussion of the future of Germany after its defeat (how many German states would there be, how many zones of occupation?). Soviet influence in Europe was to be ensured during the war through Soviet-controlled guerrilla groups, but in the future it was to be guaranteed by the subordination and supervision of Communist parties in the individual states and the presence of Soviet troops (if not directly in the country concerned, then at least close by). In the long run, the Soviet strategy also resulted in the conclusion of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of December 1943. Soviet or rather Communist influence on the restoration of Czechoslovakia is clear and indisputable. It can be seen, for example, in the loss of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia[6] (i.e. Czechoslovakia was not to be renewed to its pre-Munich borders), but also the fact that the manifesto of the new Czechoslovak government (the so-called Košice Government Programme of April 1945) included 95 % of the proposals pushed through by the Communist Party, including the acceptance without question that the country's foreign policy would be orientated towards the USSR, partly thanks to a certain inflexibility shown by the democratic parties in what was the then National Front.

When Winston Churchill, as the leader of the British opposition, appeared in Fulton in March 1946 with a speech in which he aptly described the post-war world, including the existence of an "Iron Curtain", he was merely (and unfortunately) describing reality. He reiterated his warning of Soviet hegemony and imperialism (he had already issued this warning once, in May 1945). In particular, he drew attention to the non-compliance with contractual obligations that the USSR had already accepted, whether during his talks with Stalin in Moscow in October 1944 or at the conferences in Yalta and Potsdam. The British politician was concerned about the

6 Indeed, the USSR also did not want to restore the pre-war state (i.e. the state as it existed on 1 September 1939), but insisted on the recognition of its territorial gains and borders as of 22 June 1941.

Soviet approach and internal political developments in post-war Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, but mainly in Poland. At the same time, he was aware that London was not able to act as a guarantor for countries facing the imminent threat of Communist takeover, such as Greece or Turkey. These commitments had to be taken over by the U.S., which gradually became aware of the reality of Soviet expansion as a direct threat after President Harry Truman entered the White House. For the western powers (according to Smetana), Czechoslovakia at the end of the war represented little more than a "litmus test" for the USSR's approach. Indeed, the specific test was the very end of the war in the Czech Lands and the question of whether it would be possible for Western armies to come to the aid of Prague, still fighting its oppressors. This did not happen, and the experience of the Czechs and Slovaks with the Soviet liberators did not always correspond to the "brotherly embrace" as it was later depicted. Red Army soldiers committed a number of violent crimes. But for the sake of the alliance, these excesses were not spoken of out loud. Indeed, a certain schizophrenia was also evident in the speech of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Masaryk, who on one hand promised full support for Soviet proposals on the international scene (which, moreover, was granted, to the astonishment of the West), whilst on the other complained to Western politicians how fed up he was with voting with the Soviets, who always framed it as a question of "comradeship".

In the seventh chapter, the author analyses the strategy of American and British diplomacy in Czechoslovakia between 1945 and 1948. Personally, I consider this to be one of the highlights of the whole book. According to Smetana, the U.S. was not adversely influenced by the outcome of the May 1946 elections in Czechoslovakia. They believed in the possibility that Soviet economic influence would be counterbalanced by relevant U.S. aid. So they must have been highly disappointed when Gottwald's government first accepted an invitation to participate in the Marshall Plan for the post-war reconstruction of Europe, only to reject it a few days after so-called "consultations" in Moscow. The Americans had a number of discussions with democratic politicians during the pre-February period, including whether Communist influence in society had grown, or vice versa. However, they registered several phenomena that were harbingers of what was to come: the relatively frequent Czechoslovak support for Soviet proposals in international forums, repeated anti-American campaigns in some Czechoslovak publications and disagreements over compensation for American-owned property in Czechoslovakia that had been nationalised. This is also why the United States was restrained against Prague. The United Kingdom, like the United States, believed that economic aid to Prague could be very important in the country's further political development. The man who defended this strategy of intense economic and cultural cooperation was the British Ambassador Philip Nichols. The British did not idolise Gottwald and the Communists in any way. They also rejected the possibility of concluding a Czechoslovak-British treaty. The same step was then discussed by the French government. At the time of the February crisis, Beneš – they believed – supported efforts to maintain democracy in Czechoslovakia. However, the new British ambassador, Pierson Dixon, who arrived at the Embassy in January 1948, rightly pointed out that Beneš was in poor health, and the presi-

dent alone could not serve as a firm barrier against Communism. After the February coup, the British government was disappointed (or more accurately appalled) when both President Beneš and Minister Masaryk remained in their positions. The Prague coup undoubtedly contributed to Western European and transatlantic integration. In March 1948, the Western States signed the Brussels Pact, and in April 1949 the North Atlantic Alliance was created.

The high quality of Smetana's book is also helped by its clear structure. In addition, important aspects are highlighted in the partial conclusions at the end of each section. The footnote structure illustrates the relevance of the arguments raised by the author. The name index also contributes to the clarity of this extensive publication. One more important thing to emphasise is the fact that it is a wonderfully written and formulated. Thanks to this, the book is both comprehensible and readable.

In conclusion, one can only appreciate the overall extraordinarily high quality of Smetana's monograph. I congratulate the author and I recommend his book to anyone who wants to learn something new about the tragic Czechoslovak decade of 1938–1948 and at the same time is ready and determined to think about the lessons learned not only from contemporary Czech and Slovak history.

◆ **Jan Kalous**