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THE CONTRIBUTION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO CREATION OF THE INDEPENDENT STATE OF ISRAEL¹

Eva Taterová*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and the Zionist movement during the late 1940s in regard to Czechoslovakia's contribution to the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948. The support provided by Czechoslovakia, both diplomatically and militarily, played a pivotal role in the formation of an independent Jewish state. Notably, this assistance continued even after Czechoslovakia underwent a political regime change following the communist coup d'état in February 1948. The article aims to unravel the reasons behind this exceptional cooperation between two seemingly distant actors, both geographically and ideologically. Drawing upon recently disclosed archival collections from the relevant Czech archives and providing the insight to the foreign policy of a Soviet satellite, this research aligns with the historiographic paradigm known as the *New Cold War History*. By focusing on the contributions of satellite states to Cold War history, it sheds light on Czechoslovakia's significant role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East in late 1940s. Even though it might have been a somewhat marginalized story in the later decades of the Cold War due to the affiliation of the two countries with opposite ideological blocs, the history of Czechoslovakia's contribution to the creation of the State of Israel is now recognized as one of the significant narratives in the mutual relations between the two states, demonstrating the importance of past-present linkages.

Key words: Israel, Czechoslovakia, Cold War, Diplomacy, Middle East, Zionism

Introduction

After the end of World War II, the international community was confronted with a number of political challenges. In addition to ultimate objectives, such as establishing a new international order based on international law, denazification,

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post-conflict reconstruction of the regions that had been devastated by the long war, and building a more peaceful and harmonic world, several long-standing unresolved issues began to resurface with renewed intensity. One such issue was the situation in colonies and dependent territories mostly in Asia and Africa whose populations no longer identified with the leading role of European colonial empires. Structural economic crises arising from the aftermath of the war, coupled with the persistent lack of legitimacy in the colonies, led to a gradual decline of both Great Britain and France in global politics. This power vacuum was promptly filled by the United States and the Soviet Union, who emerged as the two poles of power in the bipolar world during the onset of the Cold War (see Leffler and Painter, 2005).

One territory with a complicated political status that frequently made international headlines after 1945 was Mandatory Palestine. The League of Nations granted Great Britain a mandate to administer Palestine in 1920, as part of the territorial redistribution of the former Ottoman Empire. However, British rule proved to be a disappointment for both the local Arabs and the Jewish immigrants who had been returning to their biblical homeland since the end of the 19th century. Both groups aspired to build an independent state of their own, a goal that was a source of conflict between them, and contradictory to British colonial policy. Although this tension was temporarily suppressed during the Second World War, it immediately escalated again in 1945 (see Miller, 2016; Segev, 2013).

The Jewish national struggle for an independent state after the Second World War occurred in the shadow of the tragic events of the Holocaust. The extermination of over six million mostly European Jews was an immense loss for the Jewish community. However, this tragedy also fuelled the arguments of many Zionists who believed that a Jewish state was absolutely necessary to ensure security and prevent similar repressions of the Jews in the future. This viewpoint received significant support, especially from some European countries who felt a moral obligation to the Jews due to centuries of anti-Semitic history that ultimately had paved a way to the Jewish genocide orchestrated by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, the vision of establishing the State of Israel in Mandatory Palestine was a complex and polarizing contemporary issue, with opposition from Arab states and some other members of the international community. Besides obtaining the approval of the two superpowers USA and USSR, the Zionist movement aimed to gain all possible political, diplomatic, economic, and military support from other members of the international

community to create an independent Jewish state (Morris, 2001, p. 180-189).

For these reasons, the Zionist leadership initiated communication with all members of the newly established United Nations Organization (UN), regardless of their affiliation with the East or West in ongoing Cold War. In this specific context, ideology played only a partial part in the decision-making process regarding whether to support the Zionist project or not. Equally important were moral, religious, and in many cases, pragmatic reasons that divided the international community over what was known as the 'Jewish question' (see Bialer, 1990). In this regard, Czechoslovakia played an important diplomatic and military role in this story. Although geographically distant and with only a small Jewish community remaining from the pre-Holocaust period, Czechoslovakia – gradually more deeply integrating to the Soviet bloc in the postwar years – eventually became a leading East European country involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict in late 1940s.

This paper aims to investigate the diplomacy of Czechoslovakia to the Yishuv/Israel in late 1940s. Additionally, it will explore the Czechoslovak contribution to creation of the State of Israel in May 1948. The diplomatic and military support provided by Czechoslovakia to the Zionist movement in 1947-1948 played a pivotal role in the formation of the independent State of Israel. It is noteworthy that this assistance remained uninterrupted even after the political regime change in Czechoslovakia following the communist coup d'état in February 1948. The following text will explain the reasons for such extraordinary cooperation of two rather far away – both geographically and ideologically – actors.

After presenting an overview of the current state of research in the field, this study will examine the political situation in British Mandate Palestine prior to 1948 in order to provide the necessary background to the local problems and the history of mutual relations and friendship between Czechoslovakia and Israel. This chapter will also discuss the initial stages of Czechoslovak diplomatic support towards the establishment of Israel and favourable approach of Czechoslovak authorities to the emigration of Czechoslovak Jews to the Mandatory Palestine/Israel. Subsequently, the following chapter will focus on the military aid that Czechoslovakia provided to the Yishuv/Israel in 1948 by supplying weapons and providing military assistance. Finally, the concluding chapter will examine the subsequent Czechoslovak diplomatic support for Israel, which was soon overshadowed by the growing estrangement of mutual relations at the turn of 1940s and 1950s.

The study is founded upon the recently disclosed archival collections from the Archive of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMZV), and National Archives of the Czech Republic (NAČR) employing historical inquiry methods. In the context of the military collaboration, the perspective of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defence would be important to include. Regrettably, the archival collections on Czechoslovak-Israeli military relations in late 1940s were damaged by the floods in Prague in 2002 and thus are not available (Vojenský ústřední archiv, 2022). This limitation is effectively mitigated by engaging with secondary sources and the edition of the documents *Czechoslovakia and Israel 1945-1956: Documents* by **Marie Bulínová, Jiří Dufek, Karel Kaplan** and **Vladimír Šlosar** (1993), who had the opportunity to examine these sources before their destruction. The study of Czech archival resources regarding Czechoslovak-Israeli diplomatic relations in the late 1940s, which have not been extensively examined yet, may provide a valuable and overlooked perspective on the Czechoslovak involvement in the establishment of an independent State of Israel.

Still, there are some challenges when working with the archival sources on Czechoslovak foreign policy in late 1940s. These archival collections encompass a substantial volume of documents, comprising thousands of pages that have not been adequately exploited or explored. They provide unique insights into the viewpoints held by Czechoslovak authorities, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Czechoslovak diplomatic missions in Cairo, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv, the Presidential Office, the Politburo of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and the other state institutions. These insights include internal reports, analytical documents, records of meetings convened to deliberate on the matter at hand, copies of diplomatic correspondences, and various other materials.

In terms of the content of these documents, it is necessary to reflect on the question of internal narrative of the studied sources. This particularly applies to the first half of the 1950s when, due to ongoing political processes in Czechoslovakia, state institutions were manipulating facts, and in some cases, even deliberate lies were disseminated. Somewhat less explicit but still apparent upon closer examination are manipulations with facts in contemporary documents issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Czechoslovakia. This primarily concerns reports summarizing the development of relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel from the later periods, where certain pivotal events were portrayed in a completely different light than described in contemporary documents. In cases where such informational discrepancies in the documents arise, explicit attention will be drawn to them in the relevant passages.

1. Current State of Research

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and its related issues have been extensively studied from the perspectives of various disciplines and paradigms. However, there has been a limited number of studies on this topic from the perspective of East European countries. Traditionally, the role of the Soviet satellites has been downplayed in the literature on the political interactions between the Eastern Bloc and Israel. However, the situation has started to change due to the new historiographic approach known as *New Cold War History* (Westad, 2000, p. 5-6; Hopkins, 2007, p. 913-914). This approach emphasizes the importance of the non-superpower states and non-state actors in the Cold War dynamics. Concurrently, it highlights the information coming from the recently opened archives of some post-communist countries that may not only provide the alternative perspective on some events due to the so far unpublished information but in some cases also to challenge the current understanding of the dynamics of the Cold War history. As a result, there has been a growing interest in the role of the Soviet satellites, including Czechoslovakia.

Existing publications examining the political interactions between the Eastern Bloc and Israel primarily focus on the Soviet Union, due to the traditional interpretations of the Cold War as an exclusive game played only by the superpowers (Govrin, 1998; Laqueur, 2017; Wiesel, 2011). A significant exception is the recently published book by **Lorena de Vita** (2020), *Israelpolitik: German-Israeli Relations 1949-1969*, which provides a comprehensive analysis of the attitudes of both East and West Germany towards the Jewish state in the first two decades of the Cold War. Other authors have focused on partial topics related to the mutual relations between Israel and some Eastern bloc countries, as seen in works by **Kata Bohus** (2015) *Not a Jewish Question? The Holocaust in Hungary in the Press and Propaganda of the Kádár Regime during the Trial of Adolf Eichmann*; **Monica Rice** (2017) *What! Still Alive?! Jewish Survivors in Poland and Israel Remember Homecoming*; and **Cezar Stanciu** (2014) *Romania and the Six Day War*. The attitudes of Czechoslovakia towards either the Israel or the Arab-Israeli conflict are in these publications enlisted only briefly or not covered at all.

There is a limited amount of literature in English on Czechoslovakia's foreign policy towards Israel in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with most publications concentrating on some important moments in the history of Czechoslovak-Israeli relations. One of them is Czechoslovak military aid to the Zionist movement to

establish the State of Israel in the late 1940s. This topic was examined by the US historian **Arnold Krammer** (1974) in his book *The Forgotten Friendship: Israel and the Soviet Bloc 1947-53*, and by **Haggai Frank, Zdeněk Klíma, and Yossi Goldstein** (2017) in their article *The First Israeli Weapons Procurement Behind the Iron Curtain: The Decisive Impact on the War of Independence*. **Eva Taterová** (2023) briefly introduced the historical background of the political relations between the two countries during the early decades of the Cold War in her article *Czechoslovak Diplomatic Dilemmas regarding the Adolf Eichmann Trial*, however, the main focus of the study is on the period of the 1960s.

A valuable source of information are the memoirs of **Ehud Avriel**² (1975), Ben-Gurion's special emissary in Europe and later the first Israeli ambassador in Prague, *Open the Gates! The Dramatic Personal Story of 'Illegal Immigration' to Israel*. The extensive mutual philosophical and cultural interactions of Czech and Jewish nations were examined by **Martin Wein** (2019) in his book *A History of Czechs and Jews: A Slavic Jerusalem* – even though Wein provides many remarkable insights into the historical relations of both nations, his main research interests do not lie in the Cold War. In 1997, **Moshe Yegar**, the former ambassador of Israel to the Czech Republic, authored a book titled *Czechoslovakia, Zionism, Israel: A History of Mutual Relations*, which was published in Hebrew and translated into Czech. While the book incorporated certain archival sources, subsequent to its publication, numerous new collections on this subject have become accessible in Czech archives in last two decades.

Czech academia has explored topics related to the Jewish community in the late 1940s focused especially on the context of antisemitism and reflections on the Holocaust, as seen in books such as *The Jew in Czech and Slovak Imagination, 1938–89: Antisemitism, the Holocaust, and Zionism* by **Hana Kubátová and Jan Láníček** (2018); *Vanished History: The Holocaust in Czech and Slovak Historical Culture* by **Tomáš Sniegoň** (2014); and a chapter by **Michal Frankl** (2013) on *The Sheep of Lidice: The Holocaust and the Construction of Czech National History*. These publications, however, mainly focus on the internal situation in Czechoslovakia and do not cover Czechoslovak-Israeli diplomatic relations extensively.

² Originally known as Georg Überall, he subsequently adopted the name Ehud Avriel in order to imbue his identity with a distinctively Hebrew resonance which was a common practice among many Jewish individual of the time.

2. Czechoslovak Attitude towards the Political Situation in British Mandate Palestine before 1948

In the postwar years, the political leadership of restored Czechoslovakia held a favourable attitude towards the Zionist movement. President Edvard Beneš and, in particular, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Masaryk, were known as longstanding supporters of the Zionist vision to create an independent Jewish state in the territory of British Mandatory Palestine (Bialer, 1990, p. 174). Jan Masaryk's commitment to this cause was not only inspired by the legacy of his father, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia and a renowned fighter against antisemitism as shown especially in time of so called Hilsner Affair³ (see Pojar 2016), but he also played a personal role in facilitating the transfer of Jews from Eastern Europe to the Middle East through Czechoslovakia (Frank, Klíma, and Goldstein 2017, p. 133-134).

During that time, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia also expressed support for the Zionist movement, albeit with the condition that their support would primarily be given to the Jewish communists represented by the organization Hashomer Hatzair and the members of Communist Party of Palestine⁴ (Dufek, Kaplan and Šlosar 1993, p. 20). At that time, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia still gladly accepted members of Jewish origin, some of whom, like Rudolf Slánský, Bedřich Reicin, and Artur London, held high positions in the government, police, and media. Apart from the bilateral relations between the Czechoslovak government and the Yishuv, there were also local Zionist organizations such as the Central Zionist Union for Czechoslovakia, Agudat Yisrael, The Zionist Revisionist Movement, and the Stern Gang who attempted to establish their own contacts with the Czechoslovak government in the postwar years (Ibid 1993, p. 20).

From 1945 to 1948, it is estimated that around 20,000 Czechoslovak Jews left their home country with the intention of immigrating to Mandatory Palestine/Israel. During this period, the Czechoslovak authorities did not impose any significant restrictions on Jewish emigration, and many were able to leave using group departure visas (NAČR 1951: 1-2). This stands in contrast to the situation during most of the Cold War, when emigration was strictly controlled by

³ Hilsner Affair (1899-1900) was a series of antisemitic trials following an accusation of blood libel against Leopold Hilsner, a Jewish individual living in Bohemia, who was blamed for a murder of a Christian girl (see Kovtun, 1994).

⁴ In 1948, the Communist Party of Palestine was replaced with Communist Party of Israel.

the Ministry of Interior and the State Security (StB), resulting in very few authorizations for necessary departure permissions (AMZV, 1954a). According to a report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued in May 1954, which examined the emigration of Jews from Czechoslovakia to Israel between 1948 and 1954, there existed a brief period after the communist coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 during which thousands of Jews were still able to legally leave the country (Ibid, 1954a).

Between May 1948 and May 1949, approximately 18,000 individuals of Jewish descent departed from Czechoslovakia to Israel (AMZV, 1954b, p. 1-3), with their combined assets valued at over 6 billion CSK (AMZV, 1954a, p. 18). It should be noted that the extent to which these numbers were verified remains uncertain, as acknowledged by the report's author Alois Bartůšek, an officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMZV, 1954b, p. 1-3). Some of these emigrants chose to settle in one of the four kibbutzim that had a significant representation of members originating from Czechoslovakia, namely Kfar Masaryk, Catoon, Narbata-Maanith, and Haogen (AMZV, 1947, p. 1). These facts confirm the positive attitude of Czechoslovakia towards the Zionist movement in late 1940s. The reasons behind the significant support extended by Czechoslovakia towards the establishment of the State of Israel were numerous.

Firstly, there was a longstanding tradition among certain segments of Czechoslovak elites who sympathized with Jewish nationalism, a sentiment that also resonated positively with the general public, many of whom still vividly remembered the challenging efforts of Czechoslovak nationalists striving for the establishment of an independent state. Additionally, the support of Czechoslovak society towards Jews was intensified by recent historical events. The tragedy of the Holocaust, which evoked deep compassion among many Czechs and Slovaks, along with the shared experiences of two small nations surrounded by larger empires, fighting relentlessly for their own sovereignty and independence, contributed to a heightened supportive attitude. Furthermore, Czechoslovakia's support for Israel also extended to the international level. During the postwar years, Czechoslovakia was gradually integrating into the Soviet bloc. Even prior to the communist coup d'état in February 1948, Czechoslovak foreign policy heavily relied on the Soviet Union (Smetana, 2007, p. 125-134).

In the late 1940s, the Soviet leader Joseph V. Stalin viewed the future Jewish state as a potential ally for the Eastern bloc in the Middle East, or even as a communist state fully integrated into the Soviet bloc. This vision appeared more achievable compared to potential cooperation with Arab states, most of which

were monarchies with traditionally hostile attitudes towards communist ideology (AMZV, 1952a). In contrast, the majority of the Zionist movement was known for embracing secular leftist ideologies that seemed to be aligned with the official ideological stance of the Soviet Union. The kibbutz movement, in particular, served as a notable example of implementing pure communist ideals such as a classless society and communal ownership as manifested in their day-to-day existence (Dannreuther, 1998, p. 16-19).

In addition to providing unilateral support, Czechoslovak diplomacy also backed the Zionist program internationally. This effort reached its peak in the second half of 1947, when Great Britain announced its plan to withdraw from Mandatory Palestine the following year. The United Nations responded by establishing the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to investigate the political, demographic, ethnic, and religious situation in the region and make recommendations for its future resolution over this disputed territory. The UNSCOP was made up of representatives from 11 countries, including the Czechoslovak diplomat Karel Lisický (Jewish Virtual Library, 2020).

The committee's report supported the termination of the British Mandate over Palestine and proposed dividing the disputed territory into two separate states, one Arab and one Jewish, which became known as the *UN Partition Plan*. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly held a vote on the plan (later classified as Resolution no. 181). Thirty-three countries voted in favour, thirteen were opposed, ten abstained, and Thailand was absent. Notably, Czechoslovakia was among the countries that supported the partition leading to the establishment of an independent Israel (Rabinovich and Reinhartz, 2008, p. 61-63). The Zionist leadership promptly accepted the *UN Partition Plan*, but the Arab leaders opposed the creation of a Jewish state in any part of the Holy Land territory. They not only rejected the proposal put forward by the UNSCOP, but also condemned the partition of the territory suggested by the UN. Even after this rejection, the UN, represented by Swedish aristocrat Earl Folke Bernadotte, attempted to resolve the tense situation diplomatically, but ultimately failed to achieve peace between the Arabs and the Yishuv (Gilbert, 2014, p. 190).

3. Czechoslovak Military Aid to Israel in 1948

Due to the failure of the United Nations to broker a peace deal between the Yishuv and Arabs in late 1940s, the security situation in Mandatory Palestine escalated, leading to violent clashes and riots. Some authors even refer to the

period between November 1947 and May 1948 as an unofficial civil war (Kamrava, 2005, p. 81-83). In anticipation of future conflict with the coalition of Arab states, the Zionist leaders had been preparing for war. During the interwar period, Haganah, the Zionist militia affiliated with the Labour Party was established, as well as Irgun, the military organization associated with revisionist Zionism, and some smaller paramilitary units such as the Stern gang. However, all these groups faced two elementary problems: a shortage of military equipment and a lack of professionally trained combatants. According to Yitzhak Rabin, the former Israeli leading politician, who in the late 1940s served as the deputy commander of Palmach, Haganah's army equipment in 1947 was as follows: "[...] 10,073 rifles, 1,900 sub-machine-guns, 186 machine-guns and 444 light machine-guns. Heavy equipment consisted of 672 two-inch mortars and 96 three-inch mortars" (Gilbert, 2014, p. 179).

The aviation and naval forces, which the Zionists could have potentially relied upon during anticipated conflict, were essentially non-existent. The availability of ground transportation was also severely limited. Additionally, the dearth of firearms, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry, and other essential equipment was apparent. Although the armaments had been augmented to 17,600 rifles, 2,700 submachine guns, and roughly 1,000 machine guns by the end of 1947, these figures remained inadequate in comparison to the presumed stockpiles of neighbouring Arab nations (Johnson, 1995, p. 508). In order to achieve success in the anticipated conflict with the Arabs, it was crucial to address the gaps in the armaments of the Zionist troops.

In order to obtain the necessary armaments for the Jewish combatants, it was deemed necessary to explore potential international suppliers. Consequently, the Zionist leadership made the decision to initiate negotiations with foreign partners. However, this endeavour was significantly complicated by the international restrictions. The British government, which was still in control of the Mandatory Palestine territory at the time, strongly opposed the notion of providing armaments to the Zionist militias. The already challenging task of supplying weapons to Palestine was further complicated by the implementation of the United States arms embargo in December 1947 (Slonim, 1979, p. 495-514), followed by the imposition of a United Nations embargo in April 1948 (UN 1948: S/RES/46). This embargo prohibited the importation, acquisition, assistance, or encouragement of importing or acquiring weapons and war materials. Among the very few nations that displayed a favourable disposition towards providing military assistance to the Zionist movement despite of these restrictions, Czechoslovakia

was one such country (AMZV, 1948a).

In the latter half of 1947, the Jewish Agency, alongside the unofficial mediator Robert Adam, engaged in secret communication with some Czechoslovakian political leaders (AMZV, 1949a). During the autumn of 1947, Robert Adam arranged a meeting in Paris with Ehud Avriel, who at that time served as David Ben-Gurion's special emissary in Europe. At this meeting, Adam suggested that Avriel embark on a trip to Prague to meet with prominent Czechoslovakian politicians, particularly Jan Masaryk (Avriel, 1975, p. 332-333). Another key intermediary was Mordechai Oren, a member of the Mapam political party. In 1947, Oren discussed the potential for military cooperation with Vladimír Clementis, who was both a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and a leading figure in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In November, Avriel travelled to Prague and met with both Jan Masaryk and Vladimír Clementis. According to Avriel, during their meeting, Masaryk stated: "For me, it is enough that you defend yourself against your enemies. But Clementis will be happy to know that by fighting for your life you undermine British imperialism in the Middle East" (Avriel, 1975, p. 335).

According to internal documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued during the period of antisemitic purges in the 1950s, the decision to provide support to Israel was seen as a decision made by a small group of government elites of Jewish origin: "This action was carried out, as it was discovered after the exposure and removal of the treacherous clique Clementis-London-Hajdu, without the consent of the Czechoslovak government" (AMZV, 1954b, p. 1). In reality, reaching such an important and politically sensitive decision required a broader consensus, involving not only a small group of government elites including the Prime minister Klement Gottwald, but the majority of the government itself, as well as other relevant institutions such as the Czechoslovak Army and the State Bank of Czechoslovakia (AMZV, 1948b, p. 1-2). It is important to note that prominent politicians of Jewish descent, like Rudolf Slánský and Bedřich Reicin, willingly decided to distance themselves from the decision-making process in order to avoid accusations of favouring Zionism. On contrary, Zdeněk Toman, a head of Czechoslovak intelligence service, who was also of a Jewish origin actively worked to make the arms deal possible (Frank, Klíma, and Goldstein, 2017, p. 131-134). Concurrently, the important role of certain Zionists of Czechoslovak origin such as diplomats Viktor Fischl⁵ and Zeev Shek, who

⁵ Later known under name Avigdor Dagan.

served as a personal secretary to the future first Israeli foreign minister Moshe Sharett, should be acknowledged (see Yegar, 1997).

Czechoslovak supplies of weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment to the Zionist movement is traditionally viewed as a significant contribution to the victory of the State of Israel in the First Arab-Israeli war of 1948 (Taterová, 2023, p. 5). It is, however, important to stress that despite the assumed ideological affinity, the agreement was a highly pragmatic one. Czechoslovakia did not regard the provision of arms supplies as an act of selfless charity, but rather as a business transaction combined with a vision of a potential export of communism to the Jewish state. In a speech before the Kneset in May 1950, Ben Gurion commented on the agreement with Czechoslovakia, stating, "[...] obviously no one gives weapons as a gift; [the Czechoslovaks] asked for money, not in rubles, but in dollars; they requested millions of dollars... On the other hand, Clementis also gave his weapons to Egypt. We know that because we impounded some of these rifles" (AMZV, 1954a, p. 17).

The Ministry of National Defence was responsible for organizing the transfer of military supplies from Czechoslovakia to the future territory of Israel, in accordance with the contracts that were signed in 1947-1948. The total cost of these contracts amounted to 144,757,928 USD though not all of them were entirely fulfilled (Dufek, Kaplan, and Šlosar, 1993, p. 51). The exact quantities of materials exported to Israel are difficult to determine due to the absence of relevant documentation, but estimates suggest that the value of the supplies was indeed in the millions of dollars. The two primary Czechoslovak companies involved in this trade were Zbrojovka Brno and Avia (Ibid, 1993, p. 16).

Drawing from the negotiations held between representatives of the Zionists and leaders of Czechoslovakia, the initial shipment of arms was dispatched via air from Czechoslovakia to Mandatory Palestine on the night of April 1 to April 2, 1948, notwithstanding the prevailing United Nations and US embargos (Gilbert, 2014, p. 208). In terms of specific quantities, a total of 200 rifles, 40 machine guns, and 150,000 rounds of ammunition were delivered. Furthermore, on April 3rd, a vessel flying the Yugoslav flag transported an additional 500 rifles, 200 machine guns, and in excess of 5,000,000 rounds of ammunition. Further consignments of military equipment were subsequently dispatched. The requested weaponry was shipped to Mandatory Palestine in a dismantled state, either via Hungary or Yugoslavia, where it was declared as scrap iron. In actuality, the consignments consisted of infantry rifles, machine guns, pistols, mortars, howitzers, grenades, Spitfire aircrafts, ammunition, and other military equipment

(Bulínová, Dufek, Kaplan, Šlosar, 1993, p. 87-88).

In addition to the aforementioned military supplies, recruitment of Jewish volunteers was organized in Czechoslovakia. Some of the new recruiters then participated in military training with the aim of later joining military operations against the Arabs. This primarily involved training of pilots, which took place at airports in Žatec and České Budějovice. The military airport in Žatec also served as a base for transporting supplies by air, albeit with necessary stopovers in Corsica (Avriel, 1975, p. 345). After information regarding the true purpose of the use of the Žatec airport came to light in August 1948, these operations were moved to Kunovice military airport (Dufek, Kaplan, and Šlosar, 1993, p. 52-53).

At the suggestion Shmuel Mikunis, the leader of the Communist Party of Israel, the original plan from May 1948 was to provide military training to selected Jewish communists under the leadership of Major Antonín Sochor (Bulínová, Dufek, Kaplan, Šlosar, 1993, p. 133-134). However, after many discussions, this proposal was reconsidered, and in practice, party affiliation did not play a significant role whether to participate in this training or not (NAČR, 1952, p. 1). Estimates suggest that over 200 members of the Haganah underwent military training in Czechoslovakia, with over 1,200 individuals of Czechoslovak and other nationalities undergoing some form of training in total. The majority of trainings took place at the Libavá military centre, but, for example, the parachutes were trained in Stráž pod Ralskem, and tank crews were educated in Dědice u Vyškova (Zidek and Sieber, 2009, p. 129). Some of the Jewish emigrants preparing for their departure to Israel also went through some basic military training while being in the transition camps (AMZV, 1951).

Simultaneously with the events described above, there were some reports in the Israeli media suggesting the plan of delivery of twenty Sokol aircrafts from Czechoslovakia to Egypt. Given the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, such reports were perceived extremely negatively by Israeli politicians and the public (Taterová, 2022, p. 326). Ehud Avriel, at that time already serving as Israel Ambassador in Prague, discussed the matter with representatives of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs on January 6, 1949. The Czechoslovak representatives clarified to Avriel that these aircrafts were designated solely for civilian purposes, with no intended military usage (AMZV, 1949c). Eventually the request of Egyptian government to deliver these aircrafts were rejected by Czechoslovak authorities (AMZV, 1948c). Furthermore, the Czechoslovak side emphasized that the Arab states had frequently expressed substantial interest in possible supplies of weapons and other military equipment, but Czechoslovakia

did not respond positively to these requests. This incident can thus be interpreted as further validation of the above-average level of mutual relations between the two countries during this period (AMZV, 1949b).

4. The Recognition of the Independent State of Israel and the Surprising Shift of Czechoslovak Approach

After the declaration of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, US President Harry Truman promptly sent a telegram recognizing Israeli statehood to David Ben Gurion, the head of the provisional government of the new state. On May 17, Israel was de jure recognized by the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Nicaragua, and Poland followed the USSR's lead and recognized Israel on May 18 (Bulínová, Dufek, Kaplan, Šlosar, 1993, p. 102) leading to the open disapproval by Egypt and other Muslim countries (AMZV, 1948d). During Israel's first days of existence, four additional countries - Guatemala and Uruguay on May 19, and Hungary and South Africa on May 24 - also recognized the new state. All other countries delayed making a decision on whether to recognize Israel or not. This list of countries confirms that, at the early stage, international support for the newly-formed State of Israel was not particularly strong. From this perspective, Czechoslovakia's recognition of the Jewish state was a significant diplomatic act of public support, unlike the secret arms supplies (Zbořil, 2010, p. 278).

Concurrently, the State of Israel sought to establish official diplomatic relations worldwide, hoping to achieve at least partial global support. Israeli leaders attempted to join the United Nations from its early days, which took some time. Israel eventually became a UN member state on May 11, 1949 (Embassy of Israel in London, 2023). The two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, played the most important role in this context. On September 2, 1948, Golda Meir became the first Israeli ambassador to the Soviet Union, while Eliahu Elath became the Israeli ambassador to the United States of America. On July 28, 1948, the Israeli embassy in Prague was opened, with Ehud Avriel serving as the first ambassador (Zidek and Sieber, 2009, p. 128).

Eduard Goldstücker, the first Czechoslovak ambassador in Israel, arrived in Tel Aviv on January 3, 1950 (Goldstücker, 2005, p. 40-42). Two years after the official opening of the Czechoslovak embassy in Tel Aviv, the general consulate in Jerusalem was still functioning, providing consular, business, administrative, and other services. Besides providing consular services primarily to (former) Czechoslovak citizens, contemporary Czechoslovak diplomacy still considered

the possibility of international recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. In such a case, Czechoslovakia would have had the necessary facilities to move the embassy from Tel Aviv (AMZV, 1952b, p. 1).

Although weapons continued to flow into the country from Czechoslovakia, the position of the Czechoslovak government towards Israel began to gradually change in summer 1948. On August 12, 1948, the Czechoslovak government suddenly ordered all military deliveries to be completely stopped within 48 hours. At the time, it was not yet interpreted as the act of hostility but rather as a result of the international pressure on Czechoslovak government. Obviously, it was necessary for Israel to find a replacement for Czechoslovak deliveries - countries that were willing to sell weapons to Israel at that time included Italy, Switzerland, and Mexico (Gilbert, 2014, p. 275). During the months following the termination of military supplies from Czechoslovakia, the Israeli diplomacy, however, still had hopes for the renewal of this cooperation.

On January 17, 1949, Otto Felix⁶, the secretary of the newly established Israeli embassy in Prague, expressed an interest in further developing military relations by offering the collaboration of military experts in the field of research and development of technologies. Representatives of the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised to discuss this proposal with the relevant authorities, but the resulting response was negative (AMZV, 1949c, p. 16). Israeli diplomats repeatedly attempted to revive previous business transactions, but due to the changed internal political situation, Czechoslovakia did not agree to any further deliveries of weapons and military supplies to Israel. The last such attempt was made in August 1951 through Ehud Avriel, former ambassador to Czechoslovakia at the time being the head of Israeli embassy in Romania, but this proposal remained unanswered (Dufek, Kaplan, and Šlosar, 1993, p. 43-44).

In the early 1950s, the previously friendly and supportive bilateral relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel began to deteriorate. This decline reflected the disappointment of the Eastern Bloc, as the Communist Party of Israel not only lost in the first Israeli parliamentary elections with only four seats out of 120 in the Knesset, but also David Ben Gurion, the leader of the victorious political party Mapai, refused to invite the communists to join the government. Over time, it became clear that Israel was gradually aligning itself with the West rather than the Eastern Bloc. Despite Israel's diplomatic efforts to maintain a reasonable level of friendly relations and protect Jewish communities in Eastern Bloc countries,

⁶ Later known under name Uriel Doron.

the alienation between the two nations eventually intensified which became the everyday reality for the next four Cold War decades (Taterova, 2022, p. 55).

Conclusion

The Czechoslovak contribution to the establishment of the State of Israel had long been overlooked in the Cold War history. The communist government of Czechoslovakia (1948-1989) deliberately marginalized their previous friendship with the Jewish state due to Israel's increasing alignment with the Western bloc, particularly the United States of America. This marginalization was particularly evident during the political purges of the early 1950s and the subsequent political trials involving Rudolf Slánský, the former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and the group of his coworkers. Antisemitism played a significant role in these trials, which were also widely propagated through state-controlled media. When the Czechoslovak contribution to the establishment of Israel eventually came to light, it was portrayed as yet another example of the Jewish people's alleged greed and treachery.

The narrative suggested that Jews would seize any opportunity to corrupt local elites and, even worse, undermine the socialist state system in Czechoslovakia by collaborating with Western intelligence services. Consequently, it was believed that Jews could not be trusted under any circumstances. Any communication with Israel, considered a capitalist agent in the Middle East and an enemy in the ongoing Cold War, was believed to involve espionage and treason (see Kubátová, Lániček, 2018). However, the internal documents on Czechoslovak foreign policy from late 1940s present quite a different story. They reveal that the active role of Czechoslovakia in advocating for the establishment of an independent State of Israel was rooted in a longer tradition of friendly approaches by certain Czechoslovak elites and segments of society towards the Jewish people, as well as the prevailing political circumstances of the early Cold War.

The decision to support the creation of Israel was driven not only by a moral obligation to protect a people who had endured centuries of struggle, culminating in the tragedy of Holocaust, but also by motives linked to Czechoslovakia's increasing integration into the Eastern bloc. The long-term priorities of communist Czechoslovakia included exporting socialism by supporting allied political actors worldwide, combating imperialism, and last but not least advancing the economic interests of the country devastated by Second World War. It is crucial to emphasize

that, although Israel was generally regarded as a capitalist country by the Eastern Bloc throughout most of the Cold War, there were hopes in the late 1940s that the Jewish state might be governed by a coalition of left-wing political parties. This hope eventually gave way to disillusionment when the first regular Israeli government in 1949 was formed by David Ben-Gurion, the leader of Labor Party, excluding the Communist Party of Israel from the coalition.

Nonetheless, the Czechoslovak contribution to the creation of the State of Israel is a remarkable case study, highlighting the prominent role of Czechoslovakia in the Middle East. It is evident that in the postwar years, particularly after the communist coup d'état in February 1948, Czechoslovakia did not possess the freedom to pursue an independent foreign policy, as all significant decisions had to comply with the foreign policy priorities of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, providing political, diplomatic, and military aid to Israel emerged as one of the contemporary priorities within the Eastern Bloc, albeit for a relatively brief period. Within this unique constellation, the Czechoslovak involvement in the establishment of the State of Israel was both crucial and irreplaceable.

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