



Eastern Europe

GOVERNMENT

Czechoslovakia: The Velvet Divorce

On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia formally divided into two nations—the Czech Republic and the Republic of Slovakia. A journalist present for the event describes how Czechs and Slovaks feel about the split.

In the chill waning hour of 1992, the winding back streets of Bratislava were dim and strangely quiet on this momentous evening. At midnight Bratislava would become the capital of Europe's newest small nation, the Slovak Republic. . . . I drifted with the gathering crowd toward Slovak National Uprising Square. . . .

Shortly before midnight the crowds parted for a platoon of goose-stepping Slovak soldiers bearing the new white-blue-and-red striped flag emblazoned with the Slovak cross. Fireworks banged and skyrockets swooshed to light the sky with bursts of color.

Then church bells and the boom of a distant cannon marked the birth of a new year—and a new country. The republic's prime minister, Vladimír Mečiar, mounted a small stage. "Skovakia is yours!" he shouted, as the jubilant crowd of some 50,000 cheered approval. . . .

Not all Czechs and Slovaks reacted so enthusiastically to the dissolution [break up] of their country, I learned during my visits there before and after the split. "We're a sovereign nation now—for better or worse," a Slovak friend said, with a shrug. "At least the parting was peaceful; that's something."

Czechs and Slovaks are products of the same central European geography and similar in language and culture. "The nation was cobbled together after World War I from provinces of the defeated Austro-Hungarian Empire," explained Martin Bútora, a Slovak sociologist who teaches in the Czech capital, Prague. "Slovakia had been occupied by Hungarians for a thousand years. The Czechs were influenced more by Austria and the West."

Recently they rejoiced in the same victory over 41 years of communist rule, a nonviolent triumph led by intellectuals from both lands: the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Barely two years later, they had sued for a "velvet divorce."

"The split is mad," an economist told me in Prague. "All of Europe is straining for unity, and we're dividing ourselves in two. Slovakia, smaller, less developed, will suffer the most."

A Bratislava psychologist disagreed. "The Czech population is ten million, twice that of Slovakia; the Czechs are richer, more industrialized—and they have always lorded this over us. It is time to step out of Prague's shadow," he insisted. "Let them go," said a Czech bookseller. "It will avoid bloodshed. Look what happened to our neighbors in Yugoslavia."

Many in both regions of Czechoslovakia prepared for the split in advance. A young Slovak I met at Charles University had already applied for her Czech passport—one of some 40,000 to do so before the separation. “Prague is where the future will happen,” she said. . . .

And what of the future? Taking the long view, some political leaders are not surprised by the split-up of Czechoslovakia; look at the once united Sweden and Norway, they say. Like them, the new republics share many common interests and a powerful ancient kinship that augers [promises] close alliance even under separate flags.

In any event, other fracturing nations can only envy the ease of the Czechs and Slovaks in coping with history’s caprice [unpredictable turns]. “Look, I was born in Austria-Hungary,” said . . . a man in his 80s. “I grew up in Czechoslovakia, suffered from Germans, spent 40 years in a colony of Russia—without ever leaving Prague. Now we’re Czechs again, like we’ve been for a thousand years. What’s so bad about that?”

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. Why is Czechoslovakia’s overthrow of communism known as the Velvet Revolution? Why was its division called the “velvet divorce”?

2. To what situation was the Czech bookseller referring in his remarks to the author?

3. What is the likelihood that the Czech Republic and Slovakia will exist as peaceful and friendly neighbors? Explain why.

Activity

Imagine that you work for a Slovak newspaper. Write an editorial or create an editorial cartoon expressing your position on dividing Czechoslovakia.