

*The Birth of Israel:*

## Prague's Crucial Role

by Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta

While the United States and the Soviet Union orchestrated the November 1947 partition resolution underpinning Israel's establishment,<sup>1</sup> Czechoslovakia provided the nascent Jewish state with vital war material for rebuffing the Arab attempt to destroy it at birth. So vital was it that David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, commented, "Without these weapons, we would have not survived."<sup>2</sup>

The Czechoslovak support tends to be seen as an adjunct of Stalin's decisions. But a close examination of untapped Czech sources reveals, amid a Shakespearean drama of intrigues, twists, and deception, including the murder of the architect of this policy, that the Czechoslovak leaders, both democrats and communists, had a major role in the support for Israel.



*Czechoslovakia's foreign minister Jan Masaryk (above) worked to help the Hagana smuggle Jews into Mandatory Palestine in defiance of the British naval blockade.*

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations General Assembly, res. 181, Nov. 29, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Clark Clifford, with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 116.

### Relentless Foe of Anti-Semitism

Few would have suspected that the Israeli miracle would depend on the foreign minister of the small country called by native son Franz Kafka, "a little anomaly within a space

of great powers.” But the support of Jan Masaryk (1886-1948) for the Jews was virtually genetic, being the son of professor Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, the defender of a poor, Bohemian, Jewish peddler, Leopold Hilsner, falsely accused of the ritual murder of a young Czech girl.

“If my father did not do in his beautiful life anything else but support for poor Hilsner,” the younger Masaryk explained, “he would have been always for me the most celebrated man in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

A determined foe of anti-Semitism, in 1918, the elder Masaryk became the founder of an imperfect Czechoslovak democracy from the remnants of the crumbling Austro-Hungarian empire. Its system partly modeled on the U.S. Constitution, during the interwar period, Czechoslovakia became an oasis of freedom for anti-fascist refugees from Nazi Germany and the site of three Zionist congresses. Czechoslovakia’s president also undertook a historical journey to Jerusalem and Cairo.

In the shadow of his famous father, Masaryk’s youth had not been promising. The son of an American mother, he had what his friend, British intelligence agent Robert Bruce Lockhart, described as “an artistic temperament.” He enjoyed wine, women, and song, and sported the nickname “the playboy of the Western world.”<sup>4</sup> Yet he rose to become Czechoslovak ambassador to the Court of St. James in 1925, apparently at the instigation of his father who was “eager to

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widen Jan’s horizon and to mature the crudeness of his spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

Although England would later provide a home for the exiled

Czechoslovak government, Masaryk’s feelings would always be tempered by the British government’s 1938 Munich betrayal: “They’ve sold me into slavery to the Germans, like they used to sell Negroes into slavery in America.”<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after Munich, Masaryk became minister of foreign affairs in President Eduard Benes’s exiled Czechoslovak government in London. There, his brilliant and witty BBC radio broadcasts, “Honza’s Talks,” to the homeland and to America made him, in Lockhart’s words, “the chief propagandist and ambassador at large for his country.”<sup>7</sup>

### Helping Holocaust Survivors

Appalled by 1945 post-liberation pogroms in Slovakia, a former fascist state once again part of Czechoslovakia, Masaryk worked with Gaynor Jacobson, the Prague representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) to aid the Hagana’s smuggling of Jews into Mandatory Palestine in defiance of the British naval blockade. By the autumn of 1945, he provided nine trains to carry Jews through Czechoslovakia to displaced persons camps in the U.S. zones in Germany and Austria, from where they were taken to boats bound for Palestine. Significantly, the trains

<sup>3</sup> Viktor Fischl, *Hovory S Janem Masarykem* (Prague: Garamond, 2017), pp. 92-3.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Bruce Lockhart, *Jan Masaryk: A Personal Memoir* (London: Putnam, 1956), pp. 9, 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Maisky, *The Maisky Diaries. Red Ambassador to the Court of St. James, 1932-42* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 143-4.

<sup>7</sup> Lockhart, *Jan Masaryk*, p. 40.

avoided Prague, where British diplomats kept a watchful eye with a view to preventing the possible move of Jews to Palestine.<sup>8</sup>

Following the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Poland, which culminated in the July 4, 1946 pogrom in the town of Kielce, thousands of Polish Jews sought to escape to Czechoslovakia, only to find themselves bottled up at the border, frequently closed to Jewish movement due to British pressure.

At that time, Czechoslovakia was ruled by a unique coalition government—its parliament almost evenly divided between communist parties and democrats. Joined by Prime Minister Klement Gottwald, who professed to be first Czech and then communist, Masaryk, a democrat, convinced his ministerial colleagues to offer all possible assistance to Jews entering their country.<sup>9</sup>

“You know what’s my *konicek* [hobby]?” Masaryk asked Zdenek Toman, the deputy interior minister in charge of military intelligence and border guards. “Jews! I beg you to close your eyes if some Polish Jews are crossing our borders.”<sup>10</sup>

Toman warned that “the British embassy could view this as a hostile act and exploit it against us in Paris [postwar negotiations],” yet he told Masaryk that the Czech



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government was providing large financial resources for the Jews and would do its utmost to comply with his wish. “We are for the liberal solution,” he said, “and as soon as it is possible, we’ll allow transit of Polish Jews across Czechoslovakia ... you can see from our orders on German and Hungarian Jews, we act in a human way.” Relieved by this reassurance, Masaryk declared that Czech money for Jewish immigration was not only a humanitarian necessity but “an excellent investment” that could help defend Prague’s national interests in Washington with the aid of prominent Jewish figures such as Bernard Baruch.<sup>11</sup>

Born Zolten Goldberger in Slovakia, Toman was actually Jewish. He was also deeply involved on his own in helping Jews. Before long, the non-Jewish Czech foreign minister, an avowed democrat, and the Jewish deputy interior minister, an idealistic communist, became major figures in the Zionist effort to rescue the Jews in Central

<sup>8</sup> Arnold Krammer, *The Forgotten Friendship. Israel and the Soviet Bloc, 1947-53* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Tad Szulc, *The Secret Alliance: The Extraordinary Story of the Rescue of the Jews since World War II* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), pp. 127, 129.

<sup>10</sup> Marie Bulinova, Jiri Dufek, Karel Kaplan, Vladimir Slosar, eds., *Ceskoslovensko a Izrael, 1945-56* (Prague: Institute for Contemporary History, 1993), doc. 11, p. 61.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Europe and help them reach their ancestral homeland.

Toman made good on his promise, instructing all border police that the words “I’m Jewish” sufficed for entry into Czechoslovakia. With the borders once again open, some 90,000 Jewish refugees flooded into Czechoslovakia from July to November 1946. The influx required not only food, lodging, and clothing for the hungry and penniless Jews but also attention to religious and dietary needs.

By now, a quiet war existed between Prague and London with the British largely backed by key figures in the U.S. State Department. As President Harry Truman was battling his bureaucrats in support of the Jews, Masaryk increasingly defied the hostile attitudes of British and U.S. diplomats and intelligence services. There was, however, a third party that unexpectedly came to the aid of the Jews—the Soviet Union.

### **Stalin’s About-face**

On May 14, 1947, during a session of the General Assembly, April 28-May 15, to discuss the creation of a U.N. Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), the young Soviet representative, Andrei Gromyko, surprised his listeners by making a spirited defense of the Jewish right to statehood. “During the last war, the Jewish people underwent exceptional sorrow and suffering,” he argued emphatically:

The total number of members of the Jewish population who perished at the hands of the Nazi executioners is estimated at approximately six million. Only about a million and a half Jews in Western Europe survived the war. ... Large numbers of the surviving Jews of Europe were deprived of

their countries, their homes and their means of existence. Hundreds of thousands of Jews are wandering about in various countries of Europe in search of means of existence and in search of shelter. A large number of them are in camps for displaced persons and are still continuing to undergo great privations. ... The fact that no Western European State has been able to ensure the defense of the elementary rights of the Jewish people, and to safeguard it against the violence of the fascist executioners, explains the aspirations of the Jews to establish their own State. It would be unjust not to take this into consideration and to deny the right of the Jewish people to realize this aspiration.<sup>12</sup>



*Stalin’s likeness adorns a truck at a Labor Day parade, Tel Aviv, May 1, 1949. By the spring of 1947, Stalin had decided to support the Jewish homeland in Palestine.*

<sup>12</sup> “Discussion of the report of the First Committee on the establishment of a special committee on Palestine,” United Nations, [Seventy-seventh Plenary Meeting](#), General Assembly Hall, Flushing Meadow, N.Y., May 14, 1947, docs. A/307 and A/307/Corr. 1.

How to explain the Soviet about-turn—from categorical rejection of Zionism to endorsement of the establishment of a Jewish state? Part of the change can be attributed to Ivan Maisky, Stalin’s astute and influential ambassador to London. In 1941, Maisky, himself Jewish, was lobbied by both Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion for a Jewish state in Palestine. Returning to Moscow through Cairo and Jerusalem two years later, the ambassador delivered a report to Stalin on the political and strategic merits of a possible Jewish homeland in Palestine.<sup>13</sup> The homeland idea was also encouraged by Polina Zhemchuzhina, the Jewish wife of Stalin’s number-two man, Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov.

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an Arab-Israeli union ... if it could have been arranged ... Otherwise we favored a separate Israeli state ... We are supporters of international freedom ... to refuse a people the right to statehood would mean oppressing them. ... Yet, we remained anti-Zionist.<sup>14</sup>

These fine words notwithstanding, underlying Stalin’s dramatic about-face lay the all too familiar age-old Russian ambitions, notably obtaining a firm foothold

**Stalin’s about-face lay in Soviet ambitions to obtain a foothold on the Mediterranean and undermine Britain’s Middle Eastern position.**

on the Mediterranean Sea and undermining Britain’s Middle Eastern position. First, Molotov pitched the British foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, on Russia’s traditional geopolitical objective: joint control of the Dardanelles with Turkey. That denied, he made other requests including building Soviet naval facilities in Libya, only to be rebuffed yet again by the British foreign secretary, leading Molotov to complain that the Western powers did not want to give Moscow “even a corner of the Mediterranean.”<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, with the unfurling of a new Cold War in Europe, Stalin’s desire for a foothold in the Middle East only grew. The end result was Gromyko’s extraordinary speech at the United Nations.

Stalin, however, pursued dual policies. While supporting the Jewish struggle in Palestine, he decried the Soviet and East European Zionists conducting this struggle as “ruthless cosmopolitans” (i.e., Jews with Western ideas or ties).<sup>16</sup>

### **Resisting Anglo-U.S.-Soviet Pressure**

Stalin’s dual policies and dislike of Zionism and Jewish immigration became evident when the Soviet ambassador to Prague, Valerian Zorin, demanded to know why Czechoslovak border guards were letting Jews into their country without travel documents. Prime Minister Gottwald

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<sup>13</sup> Maisky, *The Maisky Diaries*, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Resis, ed., *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics. Conversations with Felix Chuev* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), pp. 65-6.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 74; Geoffrey Roberts, *Molotov, Stalin’s Cold Warrior* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012), pp. 94-5.

<sup>16</sup> Pavel and Anatoli Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of a Soviet Spymaster* (New York: Little Brown and Co., 1995), p. 317.

complained to Toman that he had never been informed of this, but Toman convinced him that closing the borders would mean concessions to “imperialist” Britain, which was unacceptable.<sup>17</sup>

**The U.S. and British ambassadors demanded that Prague close its borders to Jewish immigrants.**

Toman and Masaryk also had to deal with Soviet complaints that Jews in the Czech camps had arms. Some indeed did: Toman permitted Hagana instructors to train arriving Jews with rifles and machine guns in preparation for the imminent war in Palestine.<sup>18</sup> Aware of these policies, U.S. ambassador Lawrence Steinhardt joined his British counterpart, Philip Nichols, in demanding that Prague not only close its borders to Jewish immigrants but also expel Gaynor Jacobson, Joint Distribution Committee head, and remove Toman from his post. In a confrontation with Toman, Steinhardt, himself a Jew, argued that “the Jews are always in favor of the Jews” and that the government “should have there a Christian, not a Jew.” Toman wound up shouting at Steinhardt, “I am going to send the national guard, and they will take you out of the office, and like a sack of potatoes, we shall throw you out.”<sup>19</sup>

But this was a turning point for Toman: Steinhardt and Nichols became his deadly enemies. Two Western ambassadors were now all too eager to get rid of this Czech Jewish official who dared disregard their wishes and support Jewish immigration. Unorthodox support for Jewish immigration was also noticed by the Soviets. A complaint

was lodged by a subordinate about Toman’s black market shopping in London. It was made to Communist Party general-secretary

Rudolf Slansky, bypassing Interior Minister Vaclav Nosek (himself a communist), and suggesting that another service might have been involved. In January 1948, a plan was devised to arrest Toman.

In a letter to U.S. secretary of state George Marshall on April 30, 1948, Steinhardt, reflecting on his Prague experience, would describe the Czechs as

in the chronic state of being a little people with their devious mental characteristics having caused them to ... indulge in double talk [for example the statements of Jan Masaryk during the past two years], and to place bets on both sides.<sup>20</sup>

For the leader of a small country trading with the West, but residing in the Soviet orbit, double talk was sometimes necessary. One need only consider Masaryk’s dialogue with Stalin at a July 1947 meeting in Moscow in which the dictator denied Czechoslovakia’s request to join the Marshall plan. Endlessly repeated by diplomats is Masaryk’s subsequent comment, “I went to Moscow as foreign minister of an independent sovereign state. I returned as a lackey of the Soviet government.”<sup>21</sup>

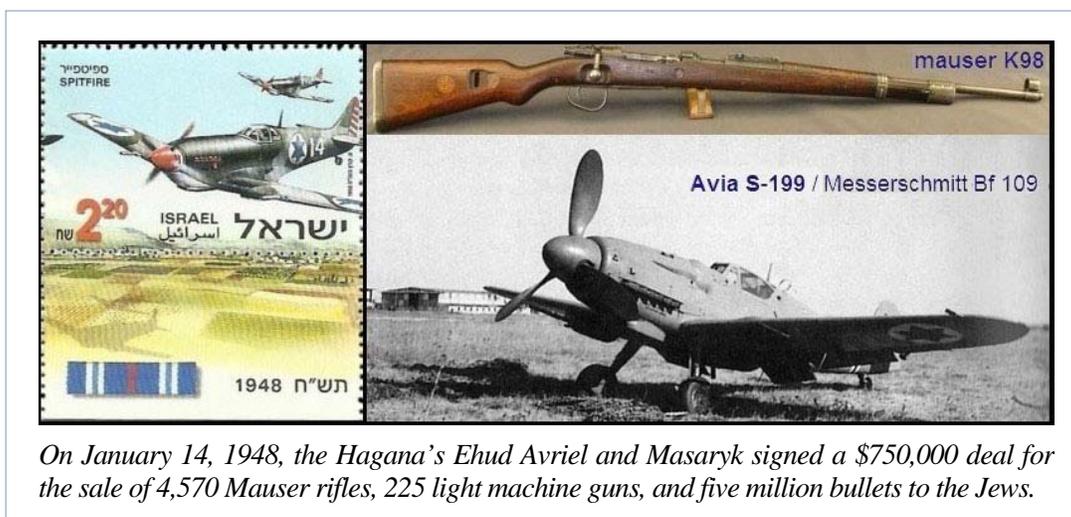
<sup>17</sup> Bulinova et al., *Ceskoslovensko a Izrael, 1945-56*, doc. 11, pp. 61-2; Szulc, *The Secret Alliance*, pp. 153-5.

<sup>18</sup> Szulc, *The Secret Alliance*, pp. 155-6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Steinhardt, “[The Ambassador in Czechoslovakia](#) (Steinhardt) to the Secretary of State,” no. 309, Prague, Apr. 30, 1948, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948 Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union*, vol. IV.

<sup>21</sup> Lockhart, *Jan Masaryk*, p. 66.



On January 14, 1948, the Hagana's Ehud Avriel and Masaryk signed a \$750,000 deal for the sale of 4,570 Mauser rifles, 225 light machine guns, and five million bullets to the Jews.

An often-overlooked transcript of the discussion shows that Masaryk, while submitting to Stalin's wishes, did not behave like a lackey. He engaged the tyrant with a polite polemic about the importance of Czechoslovak economic ties with the West. He then asked for a gesture, a sort of Band-aid from Moscow, as compensation for the loss of the Marshall plan. Stalin proffered the usual Soviet panegyric: wheat. But in early 1948, the Kremlin would find another Band-aid for the Czechs: Stalin's support for selling their weapons to the Jews in Palestine. Should things go wrong, Moscow, not directly involved, could not be blamed.

### Weapons for the "Ethiopian Friends"

In December 1947, in deference to the U.N.'s appeal to avoid inflaming the Palestine situation still further, Washington imposed an arms embargo on the Middle East. This move hurt Jewish efforts to arm while having no impact on the Arab states—Transjordan, Egypt, and Iraq—which were armed and trained by Britain. Czechoslovakia had a highly developed and sophisticated arms industry as well as overstock from former wartime production for the Germans. This

made the small country a highly coveted, potential arms supplier for the Jewish state in the making. In addition, with the traditional Czech arms markets in Argentina and Turkey shrinking, Prague found its market largely limited to the Middle East.

In these circumstances, Masaryk tried to limit arms sales to Syria and Egypt, then acting as proxies for the Palestinian Arabs. But he was bettered by both the Czechoslovak weapons industry captains and the ministers responsible for foreign trade and industry, who sought to sell to both sides for maximum profits.<sup>22</sup> Another key question for the Jews became how to evade the U.N. embargo and the efforts of London and Washington to confiscate any arms they uncovered.

On December 24, 1947, the Jewish Agency's "foreign minister" Moshe Shertok (later Sharett) sent a telegram to the Hagana representative in Prague, Ehud Avriel, stating that "the Syrians had been sent weapons" but that "Nahum" was helping the Jews. Nahum, a Biblical prophet, was the Hagana code name for Masaryk. Fortunately for the Jews,

<sup>22</sup> Bulinova et al., *Ceskoslovensko a Izrael, 1945-1956*, docs. 18, 21, pp. 65-6.

the Syrians could only pay in British sterling, a currency at that point economically and financially weak. In contrast, the Jews could pay in dollars, raised by Golda Meyerson (later Meir) in the United States, from her fund-raising tour of seventeen cities. Championed by former U.S. secretary of the treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., chairman of the United Jewish Appeal, Meyerson eventually raised some \$50 million.<sup>23</sup>

On January 14, 1948, Avriel and Masaryk signed a \$750,000 deal for the sale of 4,570 Mauser rifles, 225 light machine guns, and five million bullets to the Jews.<sup>24</sup> But according to Czech regulations, arms could only be transferred to a state, not to an organization like the Hagana. The Jewish state would not yet exist for another four months.

Avriel soon found a solution. Earlier in Paris, he had purchased three unused letterheads of the Ethiopian consulate, originally meant for transit visas.<sup>25</sup> Masaryk himself “helped Avriel to falsify cover Ethiopian documents” to show Ethiopia as the recipient of the weapons. The foreign minister’s deputy, Vladimir Clementis, a lawyer, labored over “other technical, legal and bureaucratic hurdles.” The agreement was concluded in the name of the government of Ethiopia.<sup>26</sup>

**Following the communist coup, Czechoslovakia’s continued arming of the Jews in Palestine was at stake.**

Although most of the foreign ministry’s senior officials were winking at Masaryk’s ploy regarding “our Ethiopian friends,” not

all of them were amused. The communist coup in Czechoslovakia in late February jeopardized it further. After the communist interior minister Nosek dismissed several police commissioners, twelve of the twenty-five ministers in the coalition government—all democrats—resigned in protest. At this point, Masaryk became the key to resolving the crisis. As the thirteenth democrat, if he had also resigned, it would have changed the equilibrium in the government in their favor.

As the coup developed, London, Washington, and Moscow waited anxiously. Would Masaryk resign and escape to London with many of the other democrats, or would he stay on as foreign minister in Gottwald’s communist government? Also at stake, but not publicly discussed, was the continuing Czechoslovak arming of the Jews in Palestine.

Observing the overwhelming popular support for the communists, evident in resolutions sent to President Benes and in public demonstrations, Masaryk did not resign. With Benes very ill, Masaryk, as the country’s most popular politician, was considering a run for the presidency. As he told Toman and others, he had decided to “go with the people” and remain in the government to work with Gottwald.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, Pavel Sudoplatov, then of the Soviet secret police and key Kremlin expert on assassination and blackmail of foreign leaders, arrived in Prague with four hundred troops in civilian dress to oversee

<sup>23</sup> Francine Klagsbrun, *Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 2017), pp. 306-7.

<sup>24</sup> Bulinova et al., *Ceskoslovensko a Izrael, 1945-56*, p. 123.

<sup>25</sup> Moshe Yegar, *Ceskoslovensko, Sionismus, Izrael, 1945-56* (Prague: Victoria Publishing and East Publishing, 1997), pp. 88, 90.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> Jiri Solc, *Uteky a Navraty, Bohumil Lausman a Osud ceskeho Politka* (Prague: Nase vojsko, 2008), pp. 168-9.

the artful and successful blackmail of Benes. Under multiple pressures, Benes accepted the resignations of the democratic ministers.<sup>28</sup> The coup was complete.

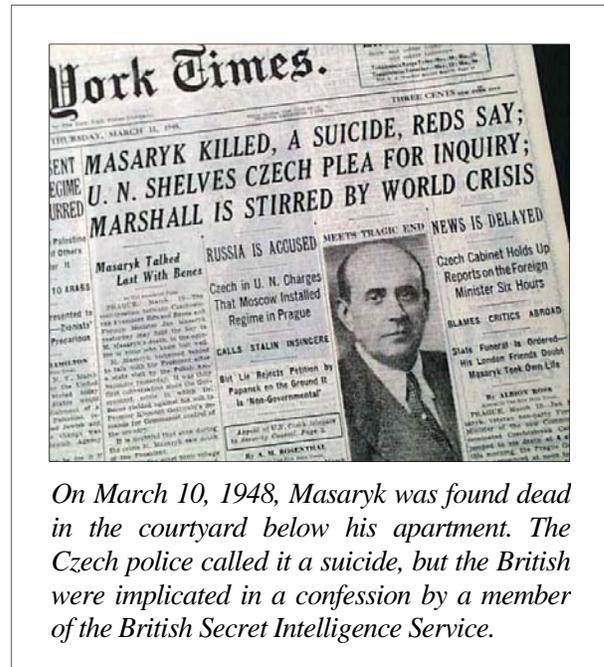
### Death in Prague

On March 10, 1948, however, all the questions about Masaryk's intentions became moot: He was found dead in the courtyard below the bathroom window of his apartment. The Czech police quickly called it a suicide.

Czechs were thunderstruck. Women openly cried; citizens gathered to console each other. For many years, the question lingered: Was Masaryk's death due to suicide or murder? In 2004, the official Czech finding was changed to murder. A leading forensic expert, Dr. Jiri Straus, concluded that Masaryk was thrown from his window.<sup>29</sup> But who committed this violent act and why?

Contrary to most assumptions, the Czech communists did not have incentives to kill the popular Masaryk, who had just indicated his readiness to remain as foreign minister in Gottwald's government. Indeed, Masaryk was preparing to appear publicly with the prime minister a day after he died.

Nor did the Soviet secret police seem to have anything to do with Masaryk's death. Sudoplatov, the man who had arranged Trotsky's murder, mentions nothing about Masaryk in his memoirs. During the coup, Ambassador Zorin rushed to Masaryk's residence for assurance he would not become the thirteenth minister to resign his cabinet post. Masaryk gave it. His response must have been viewed by the



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Kremlin as a strong indication of his intention to sustain Prague's support for Moscow's policies in Europe and the Middle East, including the arms sales to the Hagana.

On the other hand, in 1950, Jan Bydzovsky, a Czech cryptologist and member of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), who had been arrested the previous year by the Czechoslovak authorities, suddenly confessed to Masaryk's murder.<sup>30</sup> In his account, it was Ambassador Arnost Heidrich, the chief administrator of the Czech foreign ministry and the SIS's top man in Prague, who masterminded Masaryk's killing. The "SIS has a long hand," Bydzovsky said, and Heidrich threatened the SIS would harm him and his family if he refused the murder assignment.

<sup>28</sup> Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks*, pp. 233-4.

<sup>29</sup> "[Police Close Case on 1948 Death of Masaryk - Murder, not Suicide.](#)" Radio Prague, June 1, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Vaclava Jandekova, *Kauza Jan Masaryk, Novy Pohled* (Domažlice: Nakladatelství Českého lesa, 2016), pp. 304, 254, 10; "[Book sparks fresh debate](#) over suspicious death of Jan Masaryk," Radio Praha, Feb. 20, 2016.

According to Bydzovsky, on March 9, 1948, Heidrich provided him with coded messages for the minister's immediate review and pills with which he drugged Masaryk's coffee. After the foreign minister was unconscious, an accomplice—first Bydzovsky mentioned George Fryc, an intelligence officer; the second time, Heidrich's secretary, Jiri Liska—entered, and the two men threw Masaryk out of his bathroom window. Moreover, a day prior to the murder, the manager of the ministry building who lived in the apartment above, was unexpectedly asked by Heidrich to vacate it.

The likely culpability of the British SIS is also supported by their efforts to confirm the debunked suicide theory. One of these is Masaryk's alleged, and unlikely, suicide letter to Stalin of March 9. The artful tale is that a copy of the letter was delivered to the British SIS, presumably by a Soviet colonel-turned-defector Ivan Kryloff in West Berlin. He claimed to have gotten it from the office of Soviet defense minister Nikolai Bulganin.

No less indicative is the fact that within a day of Masaryk's death, Heidrich met Gottwald and Masaryk's deputy Clementis, presenting them with a self-drafted document ensuring that henceforth, foreign firms buying Czech weapons would be compelled to demonstrate "proper authorizations," i.e., be ordered by the government of the country (or its ministry of national defense, interior, air force, or navy). In other words, arms dealings with "our Ethiopian friends" were now out of the question.<sup>31</sup> It is important to note that

**Masaryk's successor not only continued but expanded Czech aid to the Jews.**

Heidrich was not in the government command structure dealing with arms deliveries.

There is also Heidrich's belated, highly questionable testimony in 1967 that Masaryk confided to him repeatedly and graphically his suicidal intentions. It ends with the gratuitous gruesome detail, "If he [Masaryk] was thrown on the street ... his body would have been so mutilated that it could not have been put together for public display."<sup>32</sup>

### **Masaryk's Arms Policy Continues Apace**

If whoever caused Masaryk's death expected a change in policy towards Palestine, he was disappointed. Vladimir Clementis, Masaryk's deputy, the communist writer-poet and former member of the Czech parliament, and a determined foe of British "imperialist" policies in Palestine, replaced him. Clementis not only continued but expanded Masaryk's aid to the Jews, in concert with Gen. Bedrich (Fritzek) Reicin, the head of Czech Defense Intelligence (the OBZ).

"The most powerful man in Czechoslovakia," was how some U.S. diplomats viewed Reicin. The son of a poor Jewish cantor and a former member of the Tkhelet Lavan, Czech Jewish youth organization, Reicin was described by his close associates, Vilem Kahan and Bedrich Kopold, as "brilliant but condescending" and "the real minister of defense."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Bulinova et al., "Subject: Export of Czechoslovak Weapons Abroad," based on parliament meeting, Mar. 11, 1948, *Ceskoslovensko a Izrael*, doc. 27, pp. 100-1.

<sup>32</sup> Arnost Heidrich: "Posledeni dny Jana Masaryka," in Karel L. Fierabend, *Politické Vzpomínky* (Brno: Atlantis, 1996), pp. 473-9.

<sup>33</sup> Authors' interviews with Vilem Kahan, Amsterdam, Oct. 22-23, 1976, and Maj. Bedrich Kopold, Prague, Aug. 15, 1999.

After the coup, Reicin was approached by Prague's two top Hagana officials, Avriel and Moravian-born Otto Felix (later Uriel Doron). Explaining how the British SIS constantly tried to "jeopardize deliveries of weapons with sabotage, impounding, delaying, and destruction," the two appealed to Reicin for help with their purchases of arms. In return, they offered all the information they had on the SIS Prague operations.<sup>34</sup> Reicin, a dedicated communist at times involved in illicit activities, was of course amenable to receiving, presumably for his department, the first 20 percent of the profit and later, 6 percent of all arms sales.<sup>35</sup> To Avriel, Reicin became "the key figure in all subsequent purchases by the Hagana."<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, on March 30, 1948, shepherded by Reicin and Clementis, the Czech weapons Masaryk had illegally obtained for "our Ethiopian friends" were flown from Prague to Palestine. Code-named Balak 1—referencing Numbers 22.2 where the Moabite King Balak was deterred from attacking the Israelites by the prophet Balaam—the successful air operation was accompanied by the transport of weapons, buried beneath a mountain of onions, on the ship Nora. The arms would soon be used in Operation Nahshon, opening the road to besieged Jerusalem. Hagana commander-in-chief Israel Galili related that "there came the rifles



*Hagana representative in Prague, Ehud Avriel, bought Czech planes to smuggle into Palestine. To do so, the planes had to be disassembled at the Czech Zatec airfield with their parts flown on smaller planes to Palestine. The pilots were foreign volunteers for the Hagana.*

and machine guns from Czechia [sic], and the boys kissed them, even before they cleaned them from the grease [*shemen hamishha*, lit. anointment oil]."<sup>37</sup>

The Balak crew was detained and investigated on its return journey by U.S. diplomats and intelligence. Reicin realized that subsequent flights had to be conducted in full secrecy from a military airport and allocated the Zatec air base to the Hagana. He also permitted it to buy and install a powerful wireless station at Avriel's office in Prague to coordinate future air and sea bridge activities related to Palestine.<sup>38</sup>

The following month, Avriel began buying Czech planes. The first ten were the Czech Avia-S-199s, a version of the Messerschmidt BF 109 G, which had been

<sup>34</sup> Frantisek Hairlike, *Baez Milo a Slovenian* (Prague: Bestrode, 2011), p. 158.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Krammer, "Letter to Arnold Krammer from Shim on Einstein," p. 84.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Rein, *A History of Czechs and Jews: A Slavic Jerusalem* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 151-2.

<sup>38</sup> Authors' interview with Orville Kahan, Amsterdam, Oct. 22-23, 1976.

produced during WWII. To smuggle the planes to Palestine, however, required that they be disassembled at Zatec, with their parts flown on smaller DC4s to Palestine

for the next twenty-nine Balak flights. The pilots chosen were foreign volunteers to the Hagana (or *Mahal* as they were known). With each plane, Reicin also sent a small team of Czech technicians and mechanics to help reassemble the planes.

On May 5, as the deadline for British Mandate for Palestine's expiration was approaching, a group of eight Israeli pilots were sent to Ceska Budejovice military airport for retraining. Among them was Ezer Weizman, a future Israeli air force commander, minister of defense, and president.<sup>39</sup>

On May 14, 1948, Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the state of Israel in accordance with the November 1947 U.N. partition resolution. President Truman recognized the new state immediately, later saying it was "the proudest moment of my life." Yet neither the United States nor the other Western nations who had voted Israel into existence responded to its urgent request for weapons. On the contrary, a new British-initiated U.N. resolution on May 29 continued to ban arms to all sides including the new State of Israel.<sup>40</sup>

On May 21, however, the first Czech Avia S 199s arrived in Israel, and more followed. The planes were reassembled and upgraded in time for the newly-trained Israeli pilots to bomb Egyptian armored columns

**Czechoslovakia trained pilots, air mechanics, paratroopers, and tank, infantry, and artillery specialists for Israel.**

some thirty miles from Tel Aviv. As Ben-Gurion and Meyerson recognized, the Czech weapons had again proved critical to Israel.

The Czechs expanded their cooperative military program for Israel into a much larger Operation DI (in Czech "Duverne [Confidential] Israel"). Selling 84 planes in the next several months, as well as heavy and light machine guns, rifles, and ammunition, Czechoslovakia now became the only country to train more than 200 volunteer pilots for Israel, along with 60 air mechanics, 43 paratroopers, and 43 tank, infantry and artillery specialists. A "Gottwald Brigade" of 1,200 Jewish volunteers was also trained, led by a Czech hero of World War II, Gen. Antonin Sochor, and administered by Reicin's aide Vilem Kahan. It included 281 women and a few Orthodox rabbis.<sup>41</sup> Militarily insignificant, it nevertheless became a symbol of the close and unique defense cooperation between the two small states.

On July 15, 1948, a group of American citizens, including both Christians and Jews, illegally flew three B-17 fortress bombers to Zatec. Loading up with Czech bombs, they staged a surprise attack on King Farouk's Cairo palace and on Gaza and El Arish. Angry U.S. and British diplomats had had enough. In coordinated actions with Egypt, they finally forced the Czechs to close Zatec. Yet, they could not stop their sales of British Spitfires to Israel from a secret military base

<sup>39</sup> Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA, New York), [Jan. 11, 1996](#).

<sup>40</sup> Rein, *A History of Czechs and Jews*, p. 150.

<sup>41</sup> Authors' interviews with colonels Peter Uruba and Milan Maly, Ceske Budejovice Airport, Czech Republic, Aug. 10, 1999; authors' interview with Polish-born Capt. Bernard Menachovsky, Prague, Aug. 7, 1999.

in Moravia Kunovice, helping the nascent Jewish state win its war for independence.

### Conclusion

It is a testament to Masaryk's political and diplomatic acumen that he managed to overcome not only Stalin's innate anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist sentiments but also the concerted opposition of the British government, which went out of its way to prevent the creation of a Jewish state, and the no less spirited efforts of U.S. diplomats, who sought to undermine President Truman's support for Jewish statehood.<sup>42</sup> No less importantly, he managed to win over his communist partners to the evenly divided coalition government—first and foremost Prime Minister Gottwald—for his exertions on behalf of the Jewish national liberation struggle. So much so that this support was sustained, and even expanded, after the communist takeover of late February 1948 and Masaryk's tragic death shortly afterwards.

Masaryk's own words are his best epitaph:

To make a Jewish state, this is one of the greatest political ideas of our times. It is such a great thing that people are missing the imagination to understand it. Even many Jews. But for me, not. I believe in it. I am a Zionist.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, pp. 11-15.

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<sup>43</sup> Fischl, *Hovory S Janem Masarykem*, p. 50.