

Ethnic Composition of Czechoslovak Armed Forces Abroad



Zdenko Maršálek, *Česká nebo československá armáda? Národnostní složení československých vojenských jednotek v zahraničí v letech 1939–1945*, Prague: Academia 2017, 525 pp.

The new book by Zdenko Maršálek, a historian at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, examines the ethnic composition of Czechoslovak armed forces stationed abroad during the Second World War. As the author of the book emphasises in the introduction, a notion was accepted in the Czech milieu, after the war, that the troops stationed abroad were largely composed of Czechs and Slovaks, with a tiny minority of other nationalities. Maršálek, shows however, that this composition was much more varied. To answer his questions, he employs a method that is all but forgotten now. He relies on so-called “history in figures”, referring primarily to its French and Anglo-Saxon tradition. He aims not only to reconstruct the national composition of the exile troops but also to show the informative value of this approach. It is not just a simple addition of historical data and statistics. Examining the lower echelons of the army organisation, the author tries to show how the national composition differed on the level of the companies.

To Maršálek, a nation does not represent a single category. In this he follows, *inter alia*, the thesis of Prague native Ernest Gellner. He highlights a tension between the views of the statisticians and individuals in whom the individual identities may overlap or change. He does not elaborate on these theories using period sources, and he emphasises that the motivations for identifying with a particular nationality or mother tongue could be different. Likewise, the fact that in statistics was often favoured one's mother tongue and not nationality forces the author to take the resulting statistics with a grain of salt. He consistently specifies the individual nationalities in quotation marks to emphasise how relative the categories are.

After introductory chapters setting out the methodological approach, the methods for collecting statistical data on the ethnic composition of the Bohemian Lands in history and the interwar Czechoslovak army, the book gradually focuses on the situation on the individual fronts. First it deals with the stationing of the troops in France in 1939 and the subsequent formation of the foreign army in Great Britain, then the situation in the Soviet Union, and finally the troops deployed in the Near East. The second Czechoslovak Resistance Movement seen from the point of view of two minorities — Jewish and Ruthenian — is examined (and in some cases recapitulated) in the concluding parts.

Drawing on the available sources Maršálek shows clearly how the multi-ethnic composition of the Czechoslovak exile army was. In the year 1943, up to 11 % of the ground troops in Great Britain said their mother tongue was German. Among the private soldiers, it was almost one-fourth. A significant Czechification of these units at the end of the war was caused by the recruitment of captured Wehrmacht soldiers from the Czechoslovak regions of Silesia. These soldiers, who stated their mother



tongue was Czech (although whose personal identities were often more complicated), accounted by the end of the war for up to one-third of the Western troops.

In contrast, in the east, the Czechoslovak units were largely made up of Russians, Ukrainians, and later Slovak prisoners and Volhynian Czechs. Czechs from the Bohemian Lands always belonged to a small minority in them. In the Czechoslovak units in the East and West, however, soldiers of Jewish origin (and of different native tongues and nationalities) were predominant. In the Middle East, they accounted for over 60 percent of the troops and the figures were similar on the Eastern Front by the end of 1942.

Given this very heterogeneous and changing composition of the exile troops, ethnicity and regional origins, many tensions were palpable. According to Maršálek, the Czechoslovak exile was based on mistakes made in the minority policy of inter-war Czechoslovakia, which integrated its citizens primarily on an ethnic rather than political origin. In many ways, he develops the work of Martin Zückert on the first Czechoslovak Republic army, struggling with the contradictions between the national nature of the state and the multinational composition of the troops. Developments in the inter-war army, when the first non-Slav minorities were branded as unreliable, until the end of the 1930s when the only reliable group that remained were Czechs, also influenced the events in the exile army. As the author points out, already by 1939 there was a strong resistance especially to non-Slavic soldiers.

Rank-and-file soldiers, officers and politicians, in his view, perceived the war primarily as a struggle between Czechs and Germans, not as defence of democratic values against a dictatorship even before the situation in the Protectorate came to a head. In the early years of the war, there was an apparent attempt to mobilise as many Czechoslovak citizens as possible in exile, but those speaking German and Hungarian were disadvantaged in many ways. More complicated for them was career advancement and admission to some branches, for example the Air Force. The men were trained in the spirit of pre-war Czech nationalism based on the idea of a millennial rivalry between the Czechs and the Germans. Generally speaking, antisemitism among the soldiers was fairly common, augmented by the fact that a large part of the Jewish soldiers came from the German cultural milieu. Most of the “Germans” in the Western army were of Jewish origin, yet they were treated with distrust. At the end of the war, the resistance to non-Slavic minorities was built up to the extent that the high command ordered in January 1945 that the Eastern units be ‘cleansed’ of all ethnic Hungarians and Germans.

According to Zdenko Maršálek, during the war, even the chance of uniting on a democratic basis and in direct confrontation with the evil nature of the Nazi regime of finally creating a supranational idea that could appeal to and unify the Czechoslovaks of all nationalities, origins and creeds was scuppered. He holds that the post-war ethnic cleansing of the Bohemian Lands had deeper causes than the events in the Protectorate and its realisation was not irreversible. He brings these theses up to date in the introduction and at the end of the book, pointing out that although the ethnic composition of the Czech Lands after 1989 was again heterogeneous, the image of the Czechoslovak troops during the Second World War remains relatively strongly ethnocentric. Although he does not develop these theses, he can be vindicated by

a new memorial to the Second Resistance movement in the Prague district of Klárov, devoted to the struggle of the “Czech nation for the freedom of its homeland”.

However, Zdenko Maršálek’s work offers an exhaustive and convincing statistical analysis of the ethnic composition of the Czechoslovak exile troops. Making detailed analyses, he succeeds in creating a vivid image of the composition of these units. The focus of his work, however, is on the study of their development on the Western Front. When analysing the ethnic composition of the army on the Eastern Front, he draws primarily on secondary sources, although he emphasises little-known facts. He works with statistical data sensitively and shows the advantages and disadvantages of his chosen approach. On the one hand, he illustrates with them the composition of the military units and their transformations, and on the other hand, he shows how limited the possibilities of exact statistics are if they are to capture a reality that is disproportionately more complex.

He succeeds in addressing the subject, but, as he himself stresses, his work raises more questions than can be answered. The book is a painstaking piece of research that can be followed by further studies based on qualitative sources such as personal memories or the period propaganda of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile. Their insufficient utilisation is the major limitation of this work.

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