

CZECHOSLOVAKIA: SPLIT INTO TWO NEW STATES

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Just thirty years ago, Czechoslovakia, born in the aftermath of the First World War, ceased to exist. On 1 January 1993, [two new states](#) came into being: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This divorce, or partition, described as a ‘velvet’ divorce—like the revolution that had taken place three years earlier—has the particularity of having been carried out almost painlessly, without clashes ... and without deaths: a rare fact in history.

Thirty years later, the debate over the necessity and relevance of this split continues to agitate historians and politicians. To understand it properly, it is important to go back a little. When Czechoslovakia was born in 1918 from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the cohabitation of Czechs and Slovaks within the same state was far from self-evident.

In Central Europe, the revival of the Slavic nations and the enhancement of their specific cultural and linguistic heritage throughout the 19th century gradually led to the emergence of a strong political feeling, pushing for the formation of nation-states, on the model of Western Europe—in a region where extreme ethnic diversity and territorial heterogeneity had always been the rule. The First World War led to the fall of a multinational state, the Habsburg monarchy, which was conceived as a reactionary anachronism by the republican drafters of the peace treaties. But the successor states, as the states that emerged in 1918-1919 and took over from the former Danube monarchy are called, were in many ways just as many multinational states.

The young Czechoslovakia, brought into being by the activism of politicians such as

Edvard Beneš and Tomáš Masaryk, brought together within its borders populations that were diverse both in history and language. The presence of a German-speaking, formerly Austrian core in the western Sudetenland region was to cause Europe a great deal of concern a few years later. As for the Czechs and Slovaks, they found themselves living together in the same state, despite having long had separate destinies.

The Czechs, mainly concentrated in the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, were under the control of Vienna during the Habsburg monarchy, while the Slovaks were under the control of Budapest. The Slovak capital, now known as Bratislava—*Pozsony* in Hungarian and *Preßburg* in German—was for a long time the capital of the part of Hungary, or Royal Hungary, that was preserved from the Ottoman occupation. The illusion of an ethnic and linguistic community between Czechs and Slovaks was maintained by 19th-century Slavic scholars, who had little regard for centuries-old geopolitical and historical realities.

Slovak sociologist Michal Vašečka, who teaches in Bratislava in Slovakia and Brno in Moravia, now a Czech province, is well aware of this complex reality: “We Slovaks and Czechs like to tell ourselves that we are culturally very close to each other, but this is not entirely true. The Czechs are much closer to the Austrians and Germans, while the Slovaks have a lot in common with the Hungarians, although we prefer not to admit it.”

At the European level, a certain bewilderment greeted the news of the separation, as musicologist Viera Polakovičová, former representative of Slovakia to UNESCO and former director of the Slovak Institute in Paris, recalls: “In diplomatic circles, the question was always the same: but why? Why partition? I was asked this question by Jacques Delors in Brussels.”

Disagreements were growing and a difference in development existed between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, pushing the leaders to consider divorce, even though the population, had it been consulted by referendum, might not have validated the birth of two separate states.

Then-Czech President Václav Havel was not personally in favour of the split, but he bowed to pressure from Slovak MPs. On 20 July 1992, three days after the Slovak Parliament adopted the declaration of independence of the Slovak nation, he resigned as president of the republic. His withdrawal made things somewhat easier. A few months of negotiations were enough to put the terms of the final separation on paper, while further south, war was already raging in former Yugoslavia.

Czechoslovakia's great fortune is therefore that it was able to avoid a Yugoslav-style scenario, as the proximity between the two peoples was sufficient to allow an amicable separation in the absence of religious problems such as those existing between Catholic Croatia, Muslim Bosnia, and Orthodox Serbia. On the evening of Monday, 2 January 2023, Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger, together with all the former Czech heads of government since 1993, attended [a major concert](#) in Prague to mark the 30th anniversary of the founding of the independent Czech Republic, proving that the good relationship between the two countries still exists.