

## BOOK REVIEW

**ERICA HARRISON, *Radio and the Performance of Government. Broadcasting by the Czechoslovaks in Exile in London, 1939–1945*, Prague: Karolinum, 2023, 273 p.**

When one's country has been invaded and occupied, how does one defend and nurture a feeling of national unity? For many Europeans during 1939–1945, a big part of the answer to that question was radio. The exile metropolis of London hosted eight recognized governments-in-exile along with a number of "free movements" of exiled Europeans without the legitimacy to call themselves a government. All of these, to various degrees, attempted to encourage, mobilize, and hold together the populations of their occupied homelands through broadcasting from exile and directly into the living rooms of their compatriots at home. Most of this took place from *Bush House*, then the magnificent headquarters of the BBC close to the north bank of the river Thames in central London. Indirectly, the efforts were not only for the benefit of the listeners but also served to legitimize the exile government in the minds of the former. Erica Harrison's book is about the broadcasts of the Czechoslovak exile government, first through the BBC European Service's "Czech Section" and later as a more independent government-program – although Harrison shows that the Czechoslovaks were already given much leeway when they broadcasted through the European Service. The book also tries to operationalize the Czechoslovak case in a more general discussion of how government and nationhood may (or may not) be "performed" by such exile communities, how internal conflicts and tensions are smoothed over, more or less successfully, and what the medium of radio adds to it all.

Harrison's book is well-written and concise in its presentation; it is thorough, making good use of original archival material, and pays conscientious attention to method and documentation. The other side of the coin is a slight overload of repetition, in particular of analytical points or summarizations. After an introduction follow four chapters which focus on different themes. The first two also each introduce a theoretical-analytical approach to the subject. Chapter 1 is concerned with legitimacy and asks how the Czechoslovak broadcasts drew on the Weberian ideal types of political legitimacy to establish the prewar Czechoslovak state as a given in the hearts and minds of listeners. Chapter 2, in Harrison's words, turns from "state" to "nation" and discusses how a Czechoslovak nationhood was narrated by drawing on myths and popular culture, primarily Czech ones. Finally, Chapters 3 and 4 leave theory in the background and study the specific Czechoslovak experience of fragmentation

into several occupied territories and new states by discussing the broadcasts aimed not at the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia but at the Slovak Republic, which was governed by a Nazi-collaborationist regime, and those toward Hungarian-occupied Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia (or: the Republic of Carpatho-Ukraine). The challenges of broadcasting to these latter regions, whose inhabitants some suspected of disloyalty to the idea of reestablishing the interwar republic, clearly baffled and annoyed the politicians in the exile government in London.

Historiographical interest in the “London of Exiles” has enjoyed a boost in recent years while studies of individual national exile communities have existed for some time. Regarding the exiled Czechoslovaks, Vít Smetana has probably been the presiding authority.<sup>1</sup> Martin Conway and José Gotovich have presented various other national cases, while recently Julia Eichenberg has delved into the exile metropolis in its own right, focusing not only on particular national communities but on London as a transnational site.<sup>2</sup> In that same vein Pavol Jakubec has compared the Czechoslovak, Norwegian and Polish exile-governments with an eye for how not only predefined legitimacy-issues relating to the political situation at home and the relation to the Allies, but also the experience of close physical proximity to other exile governments, created a hyper-diplomatic moment for the exiled politicians.<sup>3</sup> However, Harrison is not primarily interested in the constitutional and political intricacies of the exile-government or its London-based diplomacy. Her book is about the performance of governmental legitimacy by means of radio, and it thus belongs to another strand of researchers who have looked at the external communication of these exiles towards the populations of their home-countries overseen by their British hosts.<sup>4</sup> She mentions one of the most similar studies, namely that by Jeremy

- 1 VÍT SMETANA, KATHLEEN GEANEY (eds.), *Exile in London. The Experience of Czechoslovakia and the Other Occupied Nations, 1939–1945*, Prague 2018.
- 2 MARTIN CONWAY, JOSÉ GOTOVICH (eds.), *Europe in Exile. European Exile Communities in Britain, 1940–1945*, New York 2001; JULIA EICHENBERG's research project may be followed on <https://exilegov.hypotheses.org/author/juliaeichenberg> [17.02.2024].
- 3 PAVOL JAKUBEC, Together and Alone in Allied London. Czechoslovak, Norwegian and Polish Governments-in-Exile 1940–1945, *The International History Review* 3/2020, pp. 465–484.
- 4 EMIL EIBY SEIDENFADEN, Mobilized for Propaganda. Danish Journalists in British Exile, 1940–1945, in: *Nordic Media Histories of Propaganda and Persuasion*, eds. E. Stjernholm, F. Norén, C. C. Thomson, London 2022, pp. 141–158; IAIN STEWART, The French Press in War-time London, 1940–4: From the Politics of Exile to Inter Allied Relations, *Journal of Contemporary History* 1/2022, pp. 1–21.

Bennett of the Danish BBC broadcasts.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Bennet, however, Harrison does not dive deeply into what went on inside the occupied lands (in terms of contact with resistance groups or planning of the future). Instead, her focus is on the problem of laying down a coherent communication strategy (as we would say today) in London and executing it “on air.” The Czechoslovaks had to encourage their compatriots and promote the reestablishment of the prewar (first) republic without alienating their Slovak and Carpatho-Ruthenian populations, without offending the Soviet Union and also avoiding too much censorship from their British hosts. The British, by the way, spoke with several tongues when supervising exiled guests due to territorial battles between the BBC, the Foreign Office and the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), an agency which coordinated the information warfare of three different ministries. Harrison argues that the exiles succeeded well enough in appeasing the British and in producing good material for their Czech listeners but that they had less success with the Slovaks and that they performed a sort of masquerade in the case of Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, whose independence they continued to promote in their broadcasts in a subdued and unenthusiastic way long after the land had been annexed into Soviet Ukraine.

How unique was the challenge faced by Jan Masaryk, Edvard Beneš and the rest of the stranded Czechoslovaks? Although the country’s wartime predicament was a difficult one, exile governments faced, in general, a difficult task. Rephrasing a famous line from Lev Tolstoy about families, one could say that each exile-government was unhappy in its own way. The Polish boasted a strong connection to military underground forces at home but saw their legitimacy challenged when the Soviets promoted their own alternative to it. The French (not formally a government) had to deal with the torment of collaboration at home and the British were not always forgiving to its proud leader, General de Gaulle. The Belgians struggled with the legitimacy issue in their monarch not having joined them in exile. Although some enjoyed stronger legitimacy than others (Norway), exile is certain to have been a claustrophobic experience for all, and it could ruin careers and distance politicians from the suffering of their peoples.<sup>6</sup> As indicated, Harrison argues that the Czechoslovaks caught a break in one respect: they enjoyed very good relations with the British and were not constrained as much as others by

5 JEREMY BENNETT, *British Broadcasting and the Danish Resistance Movement 1940–1945*, London, 1966.

6 MARTIN CONWAY, *Legacies of Exile. The Exile Governments in London during the Second World War and the Politics of Post-war Europe*, in: *Europe in Exile*.

the PWE, which oversaw the BBC in matters of how to censor the national broadcasts. This had to do with the temperaments of some key Czechoslovak figures, with personal sympathies and finally a certain British nonchalance towards Czechoslovakia, which they considered less important than other countries, something that worked to the exile-government's favor in this regard (pp. 36–37).

The book is also about propaganda – and what would soon after be labeled “public diplomacy.” Harrison argues, and this reviewer agrees, that using the term “propaganda” should not, in a historical work like this, be understood as a value-judgment of the truthfulness, or quality of the broadcasts but simply as a contested term that was used casually by the actors themselves and is therefore taken from the sources. Propaganda during the interwar period was already a somewhat loaded term, yet it was nonetheless used much more commonly to describe any kind of politically motivated strategic communication (p. 19). Another related caveat she makes concerns the very point of it all, namely the question of the *impact* of the broadcasts in the occupied country. This is often an elephant in the room in historical work on public diplomacy and propaganda. In wartime, across borders (and during this period before the breakthrough of systematic polling) there is little data to point us to any clear conclusions about how radio propaganda actually worked, how many listened and what they thought of it. Harrison suggests however, that the Czechoslovaks were uniquely well-equipped for the task, both because of the British goodwill and leniency mentioned above, but also because Czechoslovakia was a nation “born of propaganda”. This meant that official circles in Czechoslovakia had fine-tuned propaganda skills and an unproblematic attitude toward the concept already before the outbreak of the war, because the young republic had worked hard to legitimize itself since its founding. Again, Czechoslovakia was hardly unique in this respect – other young nation-states experienced the effects of growing media markets during this particular historical period, too. However, the combination of several factors, such as a highly media-consuming population, a young state and a party-press, is striking and does seem to have helped the Czechoslovaks in London. Indeed, taken together with Harrison's observations on the specific utility of radio as a facilitator of an intimate space between broadcaster and listener, one is struck by the ingenuity of some of the material she recounts. This reviewer was entertained by imagining the sound of the eight-episode program on the soldier Švejk, the good-humored and non-ceremonious fictional soldier who the exile broadcasters reappropriated from his original Austria-Hungarian setting into a Nazi-occupied Czechoslovak one to make fun of the Germans. Harrison indicates that this humor was deemed to be too

light in the long run for the purpose of setting the Czechoslovak hearts and minds ablaze and encouraging them to resist (p. 135).

The short and neat impression of the book is at times contradicted by the array of different analytical concepts that are introduced but not always integrated throughout the book. Communications scholarship on the utility of radio, historiography of propaganda, Weberian legitimacy, Ernest Gellner and others on national identity and so on; these are all highly interesting frameworks, but when the prime subject of interest is the particular challenges of the exiled Czechoslovaks in laying down a coherent strategy for performing government (the title is well-chosen), one wonders whether some of them could have been left out.

Overall, however, Harrison's book is a fine piece of scholarship which illuminates a subject that has not been approached from this angle before. The Czechoslovak exile government has had its historian. Now, also its broadcasts and the constitutive rhetoric and ideational contents of these have theirs. The subject is given a well-deserved treatment by this author, who draws on broad knowledge and keen attention to the ever-relevant study of the nature of political legitimization.

*Emil Eiby Seidenfaden*

*The Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen*

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54681/c.2024.2.7>