

CZECHOSLOVAKIA AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST?

Between freedom and dictatorship after the end of the war

by Stefan Lehr

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Photo credit: Photo collage, May 1945: Joseph Stalin (left), Edvard Beneš (right), Soviet tanks (left) and Red Army soldiers with Soviet flags, soldiers of the Czechoslovak army in exile with Czechoslovak flags, and insurgents and barricades (right). Inv.-Nr. 221529 / Herder-Institut für historische Ostmitteleuropaforschung, [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

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After Czechoslovakia was liberated from Nazi occupation, the country's Communist Party (KSČ) and the Soviet Union enjoyed a period of popularity in Czech society. But did this also pave the way for state socialism?

The Prague Uprising and the liberation of the city

The arrival of the Red Army in Prague on the morning of May 9, 1945 marked the end of six years of occupation by the German National Socialist regime. For the Czech population, it had been a harrowing period, characterized by painful and humiliating experiences. The joy at regaining their freedom was correspondingly great, as were their hopes for a better future. The Soviet troops marched into a largely liberated city. Four days earlier, on May 5, 1945, the Prague Uprising against the German occupiers had already begun.



One of the many barricades erected by the Prague insurgents after May 5. The inscription reads: "Over our dead bodies". Květnové povstání 1945 (Maiaufstand/May Uprising 1945), Sign. NAD 1330; 08-2-19 / Národní archiv Praha (Nationalarchiv Prag / National Archives Prague), [Free access - no reuse](#)

In the short term, the Czech insurgents, who were poorly equipped militarily, received support from the [Russian Liberation Army](#)

Russian Liberation Army

also: Russian Army of Liberation, Russian Liberation Movement, Vlasov army

The Russian liberation Army was a military unit formed at the end of 1944, which consisted of Russian prisoners of war, forced laborers, defectors, emigrants and opponents of the Soviet communist regime and fought alongside Nazi Germany. It is also known by the name of its first commander Andrej Vlasov (1901-1946) as the Vlasov Army. The only infantry division still in existence at the end of the war under General Sergei Bunyachenko (1902–1946) was located near Prague and switched sides in the face of the imminent defeat of the “Third Reich” and supported the Prague insurgents against German troops. Later, the members of the ROA were handed over to the Soviet Union by the Americans and were subjected to repressive measures there. During the communist period (1948-1989), the role of the ROA in the liberation of Prague was concealed in Czechoslovakia; the act of liberating the city was attributed to the Red Army.

. The German troops on the ground capitulated on the basis of an agreement with the [Czech National Council](#)

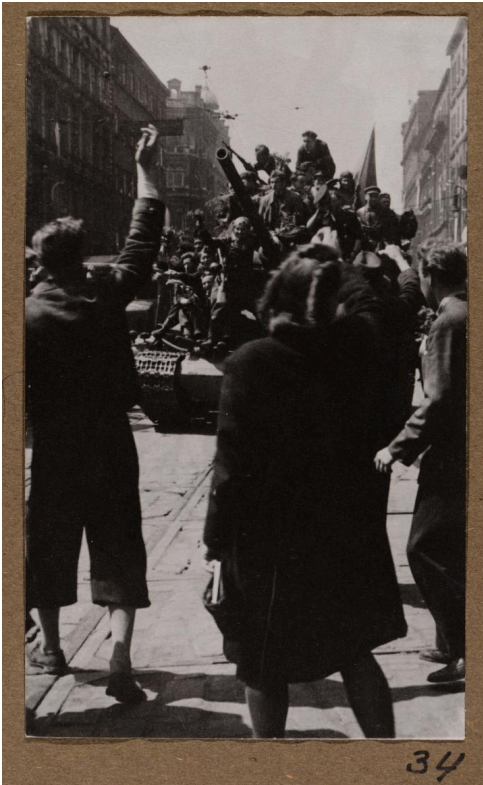
Czech National Council

The Czech national Council was an organ of the Czechoslovak resistance at the end of the Second World War in the “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia”. It was an association of bourgeois, socialist and communist resistance groups. On May 5, 1945, it issued a declaration on the takeover of power. With the arrival of the “Government of the National Front”, its activities came to an end on May 11, 1945.

on the afternoon of May 8 and began to withdraw immediately. A day later, the people of Prague welcomed the Red Army troops with cheers of joy. Jaroslav Vacata, a retired civil servant from Prague, describes the arrival of the Red Army on May 9 in his diary:



12.00 noon: commotion in the streets. Tanks and armored vehicles of the glorious Red Army drive through. The boys are dusty. Great enthusiasm in the streets. There are shouts of “Glory on high!” and hundreds of hands raised and waving.¹



The people of Prague joyfully welcome a Red Army tank on May 9, 1945. Květnové povstání 1945 (Maiaufstand/May Uprising 1945), Sign. NAD 1330, 08-11-34 / Národní archiv Praha (Nationalarchiv Prag / National Archives Prague),
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Only in the west had American troops advanced as far as the Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad), Plzeň (Pilsen) and České Budějovice (Böhmisch Budweis) line. Otherwise, the Soviet troops had liberated most of the country. Both the Soviet Union and the USA withdrew their soldiers from Czechoslovakia as early as November 1945.

The “Third Republic”

The period between the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the German occupiers in May 1945 and the communist takeover in February 1948 is known today as the “Third Republic”

“Third Republic”

The term stands for Czechoslovakia in the period from May 1945 to February 1948 and follows on from the designations for the “First Republic” from 1918 to 1938 and the “Second Republic” from September 1938 (Munich Agreement) to March 1939 (establishment of the “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia”).

. It is regarded as a transitional period² To this day, the question of the character of the

political system of the “Third Republic” attracts a great deal of attention. Current historical research speaks of a “limited democracy”.³ One question that is heavily disputed is whether the path to the dictatorship of the Communist Party in February 1948 was inevitable. In the period immediately following the war, there were promising signs that Czechoslovakia would head in the direction of liberal development. In March 1945, the Czechoslovak government in exile in London, led by President [Edvard Beneš](#)

Edvard Beneš

Edvard Beneš (1884–1948) was a Czechoslovak politician and statesman, and a close ally of the nation's founding father, Tomáš G. Masaryk. He first served as Foreign Minister from 1918 to 1935, and later held the office of President of Czechoslovakia from 1935 to 1938, and again after the Second World War until 1948. During the war, Beneš lived as president in exile in London, from where he led the resistance against the Nazi regime and worked tirelessly for the restoration of Czechoslovakia. Following the end of the war, he returned to his homeland.

, agreed with the Czechoslovak communists in exile in Moscow on a coalition government, the “Government of the National Front of Czechs and Slovaks”. It included representatives of six political parties – including four democratic ones.

In the months following liberation, fundamental social, political and economic changes took place. The negative experiences of the Great Depression in the 1930s had led large sections of the population to speak out against liberal capitalism, in favor of the nationalization of large companies and key industries, land reform, and a comprehensive state social policy.



Manifestation with the participation of the government and the President on the nationalization of industry on Wenceslas Square in Prague on 28 October 1945. Sbíрка Klement Gottwald (Sammlung/Collection K. Gottwald), Sign. NAD 1327, 02/65644/43 / Národní archiv Praha (Nationalarchiv Prag / National Archives Prague), [Free access - no reuse](#)

The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ)

Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ)

The Czechoslovak Communists had established themselves as a separate party in 1921 by splitting from the Social Democrats. From 1929, the party was dominated by a pro-Moscow orientation, winning around 10 percent of the vote in the 1929 and 1935 elections. The party existed under the name of KSČ until 1990 and functioned as a Marxist-Leninist unity party from 1948 to 1989.

was the driving force behind this. After the war, the Communists emerged as a national, state-supporting party. They were the best organized of all the parties, had the most members (one million in spring 1946) and spoke of a Czechoslovak path to socialism that could differ from that of the Soviet Union.⁴ The KSČ deliberately demanded and implemented popular measures. For example, it advocated the allocation of the land of expropriated Germans to Czech farmers and refrained, during this period, from demanding the collectivization of agriculture, which was widely unpopular. The trade unions, with almost two million members, were under the Party's influence. There were also many supporters in the cultural milieu.



A reception in honor of the Soviet marshals (from left: Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin, Edvard Beneš, Marshal Ivan Konev, Klement Gottwald) at Prague Castle on June 6, 1945. Sběrka Klement Gottwald (Sammlung/Collection K. Gottwald), Sign. NAD 1327, 02/64487/7 / Národní archiv Praha (Nationalarchiv Prag / National Archives Prague), [Free access - no reuse](#)

The President and the abolition of the Munich Agreement

Edvard Beneš, who had held the office of Foreign Minister in the interwar period until his election as President in 1935, fought for the re-establishment of Czechoslovakia from exile in London during the Second World War.⁵ His return to a liberated homeland, where he was greeted enthusiastically by the Czech population, was a triumph for him.

The Munich Agreement of fall 1938 had not only meant the cession of the predominantly German-speaking territories to the German Reich. The fact that the agreement had called into question the state's previous foreign and security policy concept also had a traumatic effect on the Czechs and Beneš. They felt they had been betrayed by their Western allies France and Great Britain to Nazi Germany. After the end of the war, a close alliance with the Soviet Union was to provide a new level of security and protection from Germany.

However, Beneš overestimated the future threat posed by Germany on the one hand and failed to recognize the hegemonic threat posed by the Soviet Union on the other. Beneš had already concluded an alliance treaty with the Soviet Union in December 1943. He was open to socio-political changes and the simplification of the political party system. He also assumed that the cooperation of the anti-Hitler coalition between the Soviet Union and the Western democracies would continue after the war and that the two social systems would continue to converge – but the opposite happened. He ascribed Czechoslovakia the role of a bridge between East and West.⁶

Negotiations in Moscow in March 1945

In March 1945, the representatives of the London government-in-exile ([Social Democrats](#)

Social Democrats

The Czechoslovak Social Democratic Workers' Party was founded in 1878 under the name "Social Democratic Czechoslavonic Party in Austria." During the interwar years, it initially wielded significant political influence, but was weakened in 1921 by the secession of the Communist faction. After the Munich Agreement of 1938, the party dissolved, though some of its members continued their political efforts within the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London. After the Second World War, the party resumed its activities as part of the government. However, internal disputes over its political direction undermined its strength. In the end, the faction advocating close cooperation with the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia prevailed. Following the subsequent merger with the Communists, many members left the party, and a number of Czechoslovak Social Democrats chose to go into exile.

, [Czech National Socialist Party](#)

Czech National Socialist Party

A democratic Czech party founded in 1897 as a split from the Czech Social Democrats and the national-liberal "Young Czechs". It was part of government coalitions from 1918 to 1926 and 1929 to 1938. The party was close to Beneš, who was a member until his election as president in 1935.

and [People's Party](#)

Czechoslovak People's Party

A democratically oriented Catholic party founded in 1918/19 through the merger of three Christian social parties. It has been represented in all coalition governments in Czechoslovakia since 1921.

) flew to Moscow with President Beneš to discuss the modalities of a future government with representatives of the KSČ and the executive committee of the [Slovak National Council](#)

Slovak National Council

The Slovak National Council was the main organ of the Slovak resistance during the Second World War. It was founded in September 1943 and included both communists and democrats. The Slovak National Council took part in the planning and implementation of the Slovak National Uprising (end of August – end of October 1944) against the Tiso regime, which was allied with the "Third Reich", and the National Socialists. At the end of the war, the SNR assumed de facto legislative and executive power as the governing body in the Slovakian part of Czechoslovakia.

([Communist Party of Slovakia](#)

Communist Party of Slovakia

The Communist Party of Slovakia was founded in May 1939 by splitting from the previously banned Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. It operated illegally during the existence of the Slovakian state in the Second World War.

and [Democratic Party](#)

Democratic Party

The Democratic Party was a Slovakian political party in Czechoslovakia in the years 1944 to 1948. It was formed in September 1944 during the Slovak National Uprising from several democratic groups of the resistance.

).

The Communists were the only ones to present a draft government program and the composition of a future government, which the other participants largely accepted. Only one of the fourteen points of the program caused major controversy, namely the one dealing with the position of Slovakia in the future state. Beneš and the Czech National Socialist Party, which was close to him, still found it difficult to recognize the Slovaks as an independent nation with equal rights. They feared that making concessions would encourage alleged Slovak separatist tendencies, but were unable to push through their ideas. There was consensus on many other points, such as the expulsion of the Germans.⁷

An agreement was also reached on a largely equal distribution formula for the ministries. The Communists were privileged in that they were represented in the government both as the KSČ and as the Communist Party of Slovakia. They were given key ministries, including the Ministry of the Interior, which was responsible for the police and security services, and the newly created Ministry of Information, which they were able to use skillfully to expand their power. They also took over the management of the Ministry of Agriculture, which played an important role in the allocation of the land of the expropriated and expelled Germans to Czechs. In the areas formerly populated by Germans, the so-called borderland, the Communists achieved particularly good election results in the May 1946 elections, partly due to this fact: in the Ústí nad Labem (Aussig) region, for example, they gained 56 percent of the vote.

Democracy without opposition: the government of the National Front

Based on the negotiations in Moscow, the "Government of the National Front of Czechs and Slovaks" was formed on April 4, 1945 in Košice (Kashov) in the already liberated eastern part of Slovakia. It consisted of representatives of all six authorized parties, with the Socialists forming the largest group. However, two non-socialist parties, the Slovakian Democratic Party and the Czech Catholic People's Party, also belonged to the National Front. The strongest party of the "First Republic", the conservative, middle-class [Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants](#)

Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants

The Republican Party of Agricultural and Small Farmers (Republikánská strana zemedelského a malorolníckého lidu) was a conservative bourgeois party.

, as well as [Andrej Hlinka's Slovak People's Party](#)

Andrej Hlinka's Slovak People's Party

Hlinka's Slovak People's Party was a Slovakian Catholic party. It was founded by the Catholic priest Andrej Hlinka (1864–1938). In the interwar period, it opposed centralism in Prague and demanded autonomy for Slovakia. From 1925, it was the party with the most votes in the Slovakian part of the country. In the second half of the 1930s, it radicalized into a clerical-fascist party. Hlinka's successor as party leader was the Catholic priest Jozef Tiso (1887–1947). He held the office of President of Slovakia (1939–1945) in the Nazi-protected state.

, which was influential in Slovakia, had been banned at the suggestion of the Communists due to accusations of collaboration with the National Socialists. The political spectrum had therefore shifted to the left. Parliamentary opposition was no longer permitted. Cooperation between the parties of the “National Front” initially worked relatively well. The idea that democrats and communists always opposed each other in discussions is wrong. Often – especially on social and economic issues – they engaged in healthy debate with a shared aim to reach decisions.⁸

The Košice government program

On April 5, 1945, the “Košice Program” was announced in Košice, the contents of which – as well as the composition of the government appointed the day before – had been determined during the negotiations in Moscow.⁹ The Košice Program, which announced fundamental changes, was a key document of the “Third Republic”. The changes were implemented in the following months by so-called presidential decrees (“ [Beneš Decrees](#)

Beneš Decrees

The term “Beneš Decrees” refers to 143 decrees issued by the President of the Czechoslovak Republic and co-signed by Beneš, which were drafted by the Czechoslovak government in exile and later post-war government between 1940 and 1945.

”). In foreign policy, a plea was made for “the closest-possible alliance” with the Soviet Union, which was to become the “indispensable guideline” for future policy. In the military sphere, the Red Army served as a model for the development of a new Czechoslovak army. In domestic policy, the equality of Slovaks and Czechs was proclaimed. In reality, however, the Czech parties were to subordinate the Slovak National Council and the Slovak regional

bodies to the central government in Prague just one year later.¹⁰ The administration was reorganized in so-called national committees in the municipalities, districts and counties. Banks, insurance companies, mines and key industries were nationalized. War criminals and “traitors” were to be swiftly brought to justice and punished in national courts. As a reaction to the experience of the Munich Agreement and the humiliating National Socialist occupation policy in the “ [Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia](#)

Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia

The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was a territory occupied by the Nazi regime that existed between March 1939 and May 1945. Comprised of the territory within Czechoslovakia that remained after the forced cession of the predominantly Sudeten German border areas within the western part of Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1938 (Munich Agreement) and after the secession of Slovakia in March 1939, it was mainly inhabited by Czechs.

”, the Germans were met with general hatred, which was primarily directed against the Sudeten Germans. At the end of the 1930s, the [Sudeten German Party](#)

Sudeten German Party

The Sudeten German Party was initially founded in October 1933 as the Sudetendeutsche Heimatfront (Sudeten German Home Front) by Konrad Henlein (1898–1945), it was renamed the Sudeten German Party in 1935. The party saw itself as a collective movement of all Germans in Czechoslovakia. It was characterized by two anti-democratic currents. In the early years, supporters of the “Kameradschaftsbund” (Comradeship League) dominated, who were inspired by Othmar Spann (1878-1950) and his ideas of an authoritative corporative state. The second current, which asserted itself after 1935, identified with the National Socialists. The party thus underwent a process of (self-)Nazification. By November 1937, Henlein was acting on Hitler's instructions.

had actively participated in the destruction of democratic Czechoslovakia and openly declared its support for National Socialism. In 1945, all Czechoslovak parties spoke out in favor of a nation state without a German and Hungarian minority. With a few exceptions, members of the German and Hungarian minorities were stripped of their citizenship.¹¹ A land reform provided for the redistribution of their confiscated property. Within two years – between 1945 and 1946 – the majority of the approximately three million Sudeten Germans were expelled from Czechoslovakia.

The elections in May 1946

Parliamentary elections were finally held in May 1946, which the non-communist parties hoped to win. In the Czech part of the country, the so-called Bohemian lands, however, the opposite happened. The Communists won 40 percent of the vote there and 38 percent in Czechoslovakia as a whole. The Czechoslovak National Socialist Party won only 18 percent, the Catholic People's Party 16 percent and the Social Democrats 13 percent. In Slovakia, on

the other hand, the Democratic Party achieved an absolute majority with 62 percent of the vote, while the Communist Party of Slovakia won 30 percent. As a result of the KSČ's election victory, its party leader, **Klement Gottwald**

Klement Gottwald

Klement Gottwald (1896–1953) was one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. A native Czech, in 1929, he was elected General Secretary of the 5th KSC Party Congress and pushed through a Moscow-loyal course for the party. From 1929, he represented the KSC in the Czechoslovak parliament. Living in exile from 1939 to 1945 in the Soviet Union. In the Košice government (1945–1946), he held the office of deputy prime minister. Later heading the government from 1946 to 1948 after which he became president of Czechoslovakia (1948–1953) following Beneš's resignation.

, became the new head of government.



Prime Minister and KSČ Chairman Gottwald (1st row, 3rd from left) with the new government and President Beneš (4th from left) at Prague Castle on July 3, 1946. Sign. NAD 1327, 02/67953/1 / Národní archiv Praha, Sběrka Klement Gottwald, [Free access - no reuse](#)

Although the elections are not considered fully democratic today, particularly due to the limited number of parties permitted and the lack of opposition, they were considered largely free and were accepted by the parties that took part. The fact remains, however, that although the KSČ emerged from the elections as the strongest force, it never achieved an absolute majority. In the years that followed, it nevertheless transformed Czechoslovakia into a communist dictatorship.

The road to dictatorship: the government crisis of February 1948

During the increasingly clear East-West divide that developed in 1947,¹² the Czechoslovak Communists took an increasingly deliberate confrontational course in the second half of the year on Soviet instructions.

After the Communist Minister of the Interior failed to reverse the unilateral appointments of KSCĚ party members to positions in the security organs under his authority despite requests that he do so, twelve of a total of 26 ministers from the democratic parties submitted their resignations on February 20, 1948, in the hope of new elections.¹³

On February 25, 1948, President Beneš, who was in poor health, gave in to communist pressure and appointed a new government under Gottwald. The KSCĚ thus took over sole power in the state relatively easily.¹⁴ The Communists had already recruited followers in the other parties. At the same time, they mobilized their supporters and made a show of their strength through large demonstrations. They cleverly used their control of the security forces and the influential trade unions by threatening to stage a general strike. While the Communists were very active and mobilized the masses, the parties of the resigned ministers remained passive.

In February, the Communists reorganized the National Front system in such a way that they no longer had to take the other democratic parties into consideration. This was followed within a very short space of time by a wave of arrests and persecution of political opponents. The media was brought into line, elections used single lists of candidates, and a new constitution was adopted.¹⁵ Beneš's hopes for Czechoslovakia as a "bridge between East and West" had proved to be an illusion.

English translation: [William Connor ↗](#)

Footnotes

1. Kokoška, Stanislav: Prag im Mai 1945. Die Geschichte eines Aufstandes. Göttingen 2009, pp. 297–298. [↑](#)
2. Cf. the pivotal literature on this topic: Pehr, Michal: Zápasy o nové Československo 1939–1946. Válečné představy a poválečná realita [The struggle for the new Czechoslovakia 1939–1946. Wartime visions and post-war reality]. Praha 2011; Brenner, Christiane: "Zwischen Ost und West". Tschechische politische Diskurse 1945–1948. München 2009; Felak, James Ramon: After Hitler, Before Stalin: Catholics, Communists, and Democrats in Slovakia, 1945–1948. Pittsburgh 2009; Abrams, Bradley: The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation. Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism. Lanham et al. 2004. [↑](#)
3. Rychlík, Jan: Československo v období socialismu 1945–1989 [The ČSR in the era of socialism 1945–1989]. Praha 2020, p. 37. [↑](#)
4. Dobeš, Jan: Socialismus v politické teorii a praxi let 1945–1948 [Socialism in political theory and practice in the years 1945–1948]. In: Kocian, Jiří et al. (eds.): Československo na rozhraní dvou epoch nesvobody. Praha 2005, pp. 276–286, here p. 281. [↑](#)
5. Marès, Antoine: Edvard Beneš, de la gloire à l'abîme. Un drame entre Hitler et Staline. Paris 2015; Zeman, Zbyněk: The Life of Edvard Beneš: 1884–1948. Czechoslovakia in Peace and War. Oxford et al. 1997. [↑](#)
6. Beneš, Edvard: Demokracie dnes a zítra. Praha 1946. [↑](#)

7. Brandes, Detlef: Der Weg zur Vertreibung 1938–1945. Pläne und Entscheidungen zum „Transfer“ der Deutschen aus der Tschechoslowakei und Polen. München 2001, pp. 312–313. [↑](#)
8. Kaplan, Karel: Der kurze Marsch. Kommunistische Machtübernahme in der Tschechoslowakei. 1945 bis 1948. München et al. 1981, pp. 33–35, 45–63, 155–159. [↑](#)
9. Košice Program, in: Herder Institute (ed.): Dokumente und Materialien zur ostmitteleuropäischen Geschichte. Thematic module “Slovakia in the Second World War”, edited by Stanislava Kolková. Internet address: <https://www.herder-institut.de//digitale-angebote/dokumente-und-materialien/themenmodule/quelle/1926/details.html> (last accessed 2024-09-07). [↑](#)
10. The Communists were prepared to do this in cooperation with the Czech National Socialists after the victory of the Slovak Democratic Party in the elections in May 1946. Karel Kaplan: Der kurze Marsch, pp. 33–35, 45–63, 155–159. [↑](#)
11. Internet Address: https://www.1000dokumente.de/Dokumente/Die_Beneš-Dekrete (last accessed 2024-09-07). [↑](#)
12. This included the resignation of the Communists from the governments in Italy and France, the refusal of the ČSR to participate in Marshall Plan aid from the USA and the founding of the Communist Information Office (Kominform). Naimark. Norman/Gibienskij, Leonid (eds.): The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944–1949. Boulder/Col. 1997, pp. 101–110, 250–251. [↑](#)
13. Kaplan, Der kurze Marsch, pp. 207–215, 219–224. [↑](#)
14. Cf. Brenner: “Zwischen Ost und West”, pp. 446–452; Kaplan, Das verhängnisvolle Bündnis, pp. 147–158; Abrams, The Struggle, pp. 275–284. [↑](#)
15. Kaplan, Karel: Die politischen Prozesse in der Tschechoslowakei 1948–1954. München 1986. [↑](#)