

DVOŘÁK, Jan, PIKNEROVÁ, Linda, ZÁHOŘÍK, Jan: *A history of Czechoslovak involvement in Africa. Studies from the colonial era through the Soviet eras*. Lewiston/NY: Mellen Press, 2014. 187 p. ISBN 978-0-7734-0087-0

In recent years Czech African Studies have furnished us with voluminous monographs dealing with the bilateral relationships of Czechoslovakia with Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Thus, today there is a detailed picture especially of post-war Czechoslovak engagement in Africa. For non-Czech speakers this topic has so far been barely accessible – a gap the authors have started to close with this monograph. It is to be hoped that this be only the first milestone of research in this direction.

The book has four chapters, each with a regional emphasis.

Chapter 2 gets us started at the end of the 19th century, when first expeditions by scientists and adventurers to Africa provided those at home with the image of an utterly exotic continent. The expansion of the shoe magnate Baťa illustrates the Czechoslovak-African economic ties during the interwar period, after which the bilateral political relationships post-1948 are described, right down to those prevailing today. At the end of the chapter a table (pp. 56 and following) lists all current bilateral treaties, illustrating in which fields the countries have been co-operating since almost immediately after decolonisation.

Chapter 3 is devoted to Ethiopia, which has always been one of the key countries in Czechoslovak-African relations. Jan Záhorský focuses on influential travellers like Adolf Parlesák, who fought in the Abyssinian War on the Ethiopian side and was one of Haile Selassie's personal confidantes (p. 82).

Chapter 4 concentrates on the 'African' year of 1960, in which within one year more than a dozen colonies achieved independence. Soviet-influenced Czechoslovakia worked hard at drawing the African fledgling states into the Communist orbit. We also find out how volatile the West African states proved in the context of the Cold War – in fact the model of 'Communists' versus 'Capitalists' was useless in West Africa.

Chapter 5 takes us to the Congo, which at the end of the 1950s was struggling for its independence from the brutal Belgian colonial regime. In the inter-war period the Congo had already been an important partner for Czechoslovakia, and now the Czechoslovak Embassy in Léopoldville bore great strategic significance not just for Czechoslovakia, but also for the entire Eastern Bloc. At the end of the book there is a map showing where Czechoslovakia maintained embassies.

In the beginning Linda Piknerová and Jan Záhorský state that Czechoslovakia had many consular missions in Africa (p. 2). In the days before internet, missions were the only way of collecting reliable intelligence. For the Soviet Union, the African ties of its Czechoslovak satellite were pivotal in its efforts to penetrate the former colonies (p. 22).

Roughly speaking, there are three distinct phases: firstly, the activities of Czechoslovakia *entre deux guerres*, when it pursued its economic interests in Africa. Secondly, Communist Czechoslovakia's African engagement in the context of the Cold War, and thirdly, the time after 1989, in which Prague made an effort to uphold its traditional ties.

During the 1920s Czechoslovak industrialists pressured their government into a diplomatic push. For one thing, Křižanovský, Křída and Baťa all hoped for new markets in Africa (p. 16), but they were also interested in Sub-Saharan African natural resources. Here again personal experiences played a crucial role, as in the case of Tomáš Baťa, who spent his honeymoon in Egypt (p. 18). Although the family went into exile in 1945, the company continued to expand, and by 1980 had 17 factories in Africa (p. 21), producing shoes mainly for mining and agriculture.

After 1948, and especially at the end of the 1950s, political-ideological ends began to outweigh economic considerations. In the mid-1950s Czechoslovakia provided African anti-colonial movements with logistical support in order to position itself alongside the USSR against the USA (p. 24). Unfortunately the extensive Czechoslovak weapons exports are barely looked into (p. 25) – this would have been a good opportunity to illuminate the genuinely Slovak contribution, as a sizeable part of the Czechoslovak munitions industry had been moved from the western border (Plzeň) to Slovakia (Dubnica).

Besides the state and the economy, emigrés were also an important factor in Czechoslovak-African ties. After politically motivated waves of emigration in 1948 and 1968 there were prominent groups of expatriate Czechs and Slovaks in North Rhodesia (Zambia) and South Africa – two traditionally anti-communist countries (p. 27). South Rhodesia made paradoxes in Czechoslovak foreign policy apparent: on the one hand, support for anti-colonial movements, on the other, economic co-operation due to the region's vast natural resources (p. 31). From the mid-1960s onwards Lusaka was an important hub for organisations from still dependent colonies, such as the Angolan Marxist MPLA (pp. 33 and following). Zambia is a prime example of Czechoslovakia functioning as a bridgehead for Moscow, as Zambia's president Kenneth Kaunda was deeply involved in the non-aligned movement and highly critical of Moscow, while maintaining warm relations with Prague. He protested openly against the military intervention during the Prague Spring in August 1968 (p. 35). The relationship with the former Portuguese colonies of Mozambique and Angola shows how Czechoslovakia

colluded with other satellites. In Angola, Czechoslovakia was absolutely crucial, while in Mozambique East Germany and Bulgaria were already established partners. Thus Prague's influence here can be seen as inferior (pp. 37 and following).

Ethiopia is a country in which Czechoslovakia has traditionally been strongly engaged. As Czechoslovakia did not come from a colonial power background (p. 72) and Ethiopia had never been colonized, there was nothing to inhibit co-operation. However, this also meant that there were no ties to build on. Jan Záhorka illustrates what a crucial role individual people played. Besides Adolf Parlesák (see above), Alois Musil is also worthy of mention. This Czech Arabist wrote much about Ethiopia and had many ties with and experience from there. The people mentioned in the paper greatly influenced subsequent Czechoslovak envoys to Ethiopia. As so often in Africa, personal relationships were a factor not to be underestimated. French-dominated West Africa proved much tougher terrain for Czechoslovak diplomats. Jan Dvořák says that Czechoslovakia cannot be seen merely as a Moscow satellite – especially in the early years there is evidence of autonomous Czechoslovak foreign policy (p. 93).

Here also the Czechoslovak network was an important vehicle for Soviet interests. Guinea was one such bridgehead in West Africa. In 1958 it declared independence, when as the only French colony it rejected the constitution of the Fifth Republic. This act the long serving Guinean president Ahmed Sékou Touré flanked with acerbic anti-French policies and by leaning towards the Eastern Bloc. Prague reacted swiftly. In 1959 the Czechoslovak foreign office drafted its 10th territorial department especially for Africa (p. 97). The Communist Party insisted that all measures be coordinated with those of the Soviet Union and other Eastern states (p. 99). In November 1961 the Soviets and the Czechoslovaks held talks to coordinate their African involvement. Worthy of note is how Czechoslovakia strove to uphold its trade interests – in the Eastern Bloc at this time, Czechoslovakia was second only to the Soviet Union as regards economic involvement in Africa (p. 102). Besides generous scholarship programmes for African students and various bilateral treaties, military co-operation was also intensified. For instance, African cadres were dispatched to the Antonín Zápotocký military academy (p. 104).

With its scholarship programme, Czechoslovakia was competing directly with the United States of America, who were also providing hundreds of university courses for African students. Technical instruction went hand in hand with ideological indoctrination. To his credit, the author draws attention to the open racism some of these students met with in the Eastern Bloc – in spite of avidly propagated 'friendship of the peoples'. In 1963 African students protested against racism on Red Square in Moscow (p. 105).

Co-operation in the health sector was also exploited for propaganda purposes. Health systems in Africa were insufficient, if indeed existent. This Czechoslovakia attributed to 'decades of colonial rule' (p. 120).

Dvořák notes correctly that economic difficulties and the political volatility of many African governments in the Cold War environment hampered co-operation (p. 132). Guinea is again a case in point. Just a few years after independence Conakry fell out with the USSR in 1961, expelled the Soviet ambassador and refused Soviet planes landing permission at Conakry airport – the same Conakry airport the Soviets had recently built (p. 118).

In the last chapter Jan Záhorka and Jan Dvořák deal with the Congo's decolonialization, as its society's makeup – a wealthy Belgian colonial class and impoverished natives – seemed auspicious for the Eastern Bloc. In addition, the Congo had vast natural resources.

During the first years of Congolese independence, Czechoslovakia was the Eastern Bloc's foot in the door, as Czechoslovakia was the only Communist country with an embassy in Léopoldville (p. 150). Inter-War Czechoslovakia had already had an embassy at Léopoldville in 1929, so Czechoslovak diplomacy knew the area. Education and health were the main focal points for cooperation, besides the export of vital commodities such as cobalt. When the Belgians left, the Congolese health system collapsed as 90% of medical staff returned to Belgium (p. 149). The same happened to the schooling system – as the Congolese had never been let into higher education, there was no-one left to sustain it.

In 1960 the province of Katanga unilaterally declared independence and caused a major crisis, in the course of which Czechoslovakia tried to follow its own, independent policies in order to protect its economic interests in the Congo (p. 151).

The authors conclude that especially in the case of the Congo 'cold war lenses dividing the world into communist vs. capitalist categories' hampered bilateral relationships (p. 165).

The authors have provided us with a highly readable analysis of Czechoslovak African policy. They rightly emphasise the importance of the inter-war period, in which Czechoslovakia opened many embassies in Africa that became the backbone of later Czechoslovak and also Soviet engagement. In the case of Africa it sometimes becomes apparent that economic interests had a high priority and that Prague sometimes put these before ideological considerations.

It would be interesting to know more about the Slovak share of the Czechoslovak foreign involvement. For instance, in 1972 the *Matador* tyre company from Púchov helped the Ethiopians to build a tyre factory which to

this day is the leading producer in Africa. It would also be interesting to have more details about weapons exports, the production of which was concentrated in Eastern Slovakia towards the end of the Cold War.

What remains unanswered is the question of what became of the many African students when they returned to their home countries. Might they be a bridgehead for de-ideologised co-operation, considering that in the African context personal relationships are so crucial?

There are only few instances in which one would disagree with the authors. In the context of Czechoslovak policies in the 1950s and 1960s it seems unfortunate to speak of 'Czech embassies' and 'Czech diplomacy', as happens often in the Congo chapter (pp. 139 and following). Also, Linda Piknerová's claim that Václav Klaus's 2006 South African state visit 'was the first visit of a Central European president to the Republic of South Africa after apartheid ended' (p. 50) has to be rejected. In May 1994 the Slovak president Michal Kováč was the only head of state from the former Eastern Bloc to witness Nelson Mandela's inauguration in Pretoria, a fact that benefits Slovak-South African relations to this day.

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