

Historical background: Czech Republic

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Czechoslovakia was founded on 28 October 1918 as one of the successor states of the Habsburg Empire. It included the Czech lands (Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia), Slovakia, and Subcarpathian Rus', with Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, German, Yiddish, Polish and Ukrainian spoken among the new population, official language being "Czechoslovak". The foundation of Czechoslovakia was, until the fall of 1920, accompanied by a wave of antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence.

The Jewish community in Czech lands was urbanized. The majority of Moravian and Silesian Jews also lived mainly in smaller cities and the urbanisation continued through the interwar period. Historically, the Jewish communities in the Czech lands were highly germanized. Varying patterns of acculturation and traditionalism in Czechoslovakia produced a wide spectrum of national identities within the Jewish population. Bohemia belonged to the more secularized regions of Europe not only in the Jewish but also in the Christian context, while Moravian Jewish population was more observant. Only a small group of Orthodox Jews lived in Bohemia, many of them immigrants from Subcarpathian Rus' and some from Galicia (Poland). The majority of Bohemian Jews visited synagogues only on the High Holidays. Uniquely, Czechoslovak Jews could claim to be Jewish by nationality even if they lacked knowledge of a Jewish language or membership in the Jewish religious community.

Following the signing of the Munich Agreement on 29 September 1938, Nazi Germany annexed the mostly German-speaking border areas of Bohemia and Moravia (Sudetenland). The Jewish population there was immediately exposed to persecution and expropriation. During Kristallnacht, which mostly took place in the region with a one-day delay (10–11 November 1938), synagogues and Jewish businesses and houses were vandalized. The rest of the republic (minus regions annexed by Poland and Hungary) was called the Second Czecho-Slovak Republic. After the Nazi occupation of 15 March 1939, the Czech lands were transformed into Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia (headed by Reichsprotector), with Slovakia becoming a semi-independent state. The exclusion of Jews from society following the German occupation of the Czech lands took place in a much shorter time frame than in Germany. Anti-Jewish orders were issued by both German and Czech authorities. Beginning on 1 September 1941, all Jews six years and older had to wear a yellow badge. At the same time, Czech authorities issued a number of orders limiting the Jews' freedom of movement and excluding Jewish children from attending non-Jewish schools. Starting on 16 October 1941, five transports of Jews were sent to the ghetto in Łódź (Poland) and one to Minsk (Belarus). Fearing further deportations to the east, the leadership of Czech Jews participated in German plans to establish a ghetto in Terezín (Theresienstadt). Between 24 November 1941 and 30 March 1945, 73,468 Jews from the Protectorate were deported to Terezín, with most arriving in 1942. More than 60,000 were later sent on to Auschwitz and other extermination camps in the East, where many did not survive.

The Jewish population of Czechoslovakia was greatly decimated during World War II. The survivors faced many difficulties, the majority had no relatives and lacked economic means. Property restitution was hindered by many obstacles and following the Communist takeover of February 1948,

restitution was impossible. In some cases, survivors faced hostility from the local population (an extreme case was the pogrom in Topoľčany, Slovakia, in September 1945).

The Communist coup on 25 February 1948 marked a new, non-democratic, period in Czechoslovak history. Thousands of Czechoslovak citizens decided to emigrate, with large numbers of the Jewish citizens opting for emigration to the newly founded Israel. At the beginning of 1950s a series of political trials took place, not only in Czechoslovakia, which was accompanied by anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist propaganda. Under the Communist government Jewish communal life was regimented and closely observed by state, party, and police organs. A brief period of liberalization that culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968 was followed by the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968. A new wave of emigration started, with roughly one-third of Czechoslovakian Jews leaving the country.

Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, which toppled the Communist regime, religious and communal life recovered slowly. In 1993, Czechoslovak leaders amicably agreed to split the country into Czech Republic and Slovakia. Both new countries saw a resurgence of Jewish life, even as the population of self-identifying Jews remained a fraction of its pre-war size.