

Czechoslovak Support for the Founding of Israel in the Late 1940s: the Myth of Everlasting Friendship?

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ABSTRACT	<p>The war between Israel and Hamas that began in October 2023 deeply polarized public and political opinion worldwide. In contrast to many EU countries, the Czech Republic adopted a position of unwavering support for Israel, referencing their shared values and long-standing friendship grounded in the historical ties between the Czech and Jewish peoples. This article explores this narrative by examining the commonly cited example of Czechoslovakia's support for the establishment of Israel in the late 1940s, which included providing arms supplies, military training, and diplomatic backup. However, such reflections on history often overlook important international and domestic factors of the time, including the Eastern Bloc's efforts to expand communism into the newly decolonized Third World countries and its pursuit of financial gain. As a result, Czechoslovakia's pro-Israeli position during the Cold War was short-lived, and was quickly reversed when the political circumstances changed. Ignoring these facts leads to distorted historical interpretations and even the development of some historical myths.</p>
KEYWORDS	Czech Republic, Israel, arms supplies, First Arab-Israeli War, Cold War history
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INTRODUCTION

"I want to make it very clear: the Czech Republic stands with Israel, now and ever. And like 75 years ago, you can count on our voice and support" (JNS 2023).

Petr Fiala, Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, October 2023

Since the end of the Cold War, the mutual relationship between the Czech Republic and Israel has been characterized by an extraordinary level of friendship. Some suggest that this extraordinary relationship is not merely driven by economic or geopolitical interests but is rather rooted in shared values – such as a commitment to democracy, a cultural affinity between Czechs and Jews, and, importantly, the historical connections between the two countries. The shared history between the Czech and Jewish nations is long and complex, encompassing both positive and negative elements (WEIN 2015). However, the current Czech and Israeli political leaderships as well as the countries' publics often tend to emphasize the positive aspects of this history, frequently downplaying or omitting the negative ones, which include the discrimination of Jews in the Czech lands, open antisemitism, medieval pogroms and riots, the Czech complicity in some events of the Holocaust, and, last but not least, the persecution of Jews under the communist regime during the Cold War (ČAPKOVÁ – KIEVAL 2021).

Instead, the focus is placed on more favorable narratives, particularly those related to the brief period of friendship in the late 1940s, when Czechoslovakia played an active role in supporting the establishment of the State of Israel through diplomatic backing, arms supplies, and the training of Jewish volunteers, despite existing embargoes. From the Czech perspective, this historical episode is often invoked to justify providing similar support to Israel in the times of the recent crisis. This narrative has been prominent since the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the restoration of diplomatic relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel in February 1990 (ČEJKA 2017: 24–43).

Since the outbreak of hostilities on October 7, 2023, the Czech political establishment, including both the government and most opposition parties, along with much of the public, has strongly supported Israel. Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský was the first foreign official to visit Israel after Hamas' attack – in fact, he did so just three days after it, which

prompted some Israeli figures to compare it to Czechoslovakia's early support for Israel in 1948 (ŠÍDLOVÁ 2023). Similarly, in February 2024, Czech Minister of Defense Jana Černochová made an official visit to Israel, and reaffirmed this stance by stating, *"Israel is our closest ally in the Middle East. Just as in 1948, we stand by your side now and are ready to provide assistance according to your needs"* (MINISTRY OF DEFENSE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2024). During his visit to the United States in April 2024, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala emphasized the Czech Republic's unwavering support for Israel in a speech at the Hudson Institute: *"The Czech Republic is a long-time friend of Israel – and its most important advocate in Europe. This was evident in 1948, when we provided the young Israeli state with arms for its defense. This assistance started a special Czech-Israeli relationship which is now stronger than ever"* (GOVERNMENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2024).

These three examples, among many similar instances, demonstrate that the narrative justifying the Czech Republic's unconditional support for the State of Israel and pointing to their everlasting friendship, which is rooted in the historical precedent of the late 1940s, has gained significant momentum since the onset of the Gaza conflict. The story of the support in the 1940s has apparently been chosen not only to show the historical roots of the mutual relations but also to reference an example of Czechoslovak aid to Israel during a time of significant security threats to the existence of the Jewish state. The dominant perspective among the majority of Czech political representatives, as well as within the broader public and media, has drawn upon the historical precedent of the Czech aid to Israel in 1948 as a significant argument to legitimize the current extraordinary Czech support for Israel.

However, a closer examination of the history of the bilateral relations reveals that the period of friendship between Czechoslovakia and Israel in the late 1940s was not only brief but also motivated by a complex set of factors influencing military aid, diplomatic support, and other forms of co-operation. This paper aims to thoroughly explain and evaluate this early Cold War history chapter in their mutual relations, analyzing the contemporary geopolitical context of the late 1940s, as well as the international and Czechoslovak domestic factors that were crucial for this cooperation to occur. It will then assess whether this historical cooperation truly serves as the foundation for the extraordinary friendship between the two countries that exists today.

THE CZECHOSLOVAK MOTIVES FOR SUPPORTING ISRAEL IN THE LATE 1940S

Modern Jewish nationalism, like Czech nationalism, emerged in the late 19th century, with the two movements reflecting certain parallels in their aspirations for self-determination and nationhood. In the aftermath of World War II, Zionist leaders intensified their efforts to promote the vision of an independent Jewish state. While the international community generally recognized the tragic genocide of the Jewish people during the Holocaust with considerable compassion, the Zionist objective of establishing the State of Israel in the Middle East – specifically in British Mandatory Palestine – was met with significant opposition, particularly from local Arabs and, more broadly, from countries with majority Muslim populations worldwide (SEE MORRIS 2008; MILLER 2016).

Complicating matters further, the Middle East quickly became a critical arena for the Cold War rivalry of the United States of America and the Soviet Union, and the question of creating a Jewish state in this strategic region became entangled in the broader geopolitical struggle (SIMON – TAKEYH 2016: 25–52). Rather than seeking a balanced, sensitive, and fair resolution to this uneasy situation, both superpowers often pursued their own political agendas and interests in this regard. As the Cold War escalated, the United States and the Soviet Union each sought to establish a network of regional allies in the Middle East that would align with its respective ideological and political framework (SORBY 2010: 61–80).

Under these circumstances, the Soviet Union sought to expand communism into the Middle East. However, in the late 1940s, the Soviet opportunities for expansion in this region were limited, as most of the regional countries were monarchies – a political system fundamentally opposed to the ideological principles of communism, which emphasized a classless society and equality for all (AMZV 1952: 1). In this context, the emerging Jewish state appeared to be one of the very few potential allies for the Soviet Union, as a significant portion of the Zionist movement was left-wing, with the Labor Party (Mapai) serving as the most influential political force in the emerging state at the time (RUCKER 2001: 114–119).

While the Soviet Union offered open diplomatic support for the Zionist ambitions, it refrained from direct military or material assistance. Instead, the Soviet leader Joseph V. Stalin chose to rely on intermediaries for providing military aid and other forms of support. Eventually Czechoslovakia emerged as a key intermediary in this context (Taterová 2023: 115–116). Post-war Czechoslovakia underwent a complex process of state restoration and over time, the country became politically and ideologically integrated into the Soviet bloc under the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, a process that culminated in the communist coup d'état of February 1948 (SMETANA 2007: 125–134).

In regard to the region of the Middle East, Czechoslovakia was able to revive its interwar experience with it and its contacts that it had already established there, which were only disrupted by the war. For these reasons, in the late 1940s Czechoslovakia soon became very active in the region in terms of both the political and economic agenda. Following the restoration of the Czechoslovak state in 1945, the Czechoslovak General Consulate in Jerusalem began submitting regular reports on the situation in British Mandatory Palestine, where tensions and violence were steadily escalating because of clashes and riots between Jewish and Arab communities (TATEROVÁ 2023: 116–118).

In these circumstances, Great Britain announced its plan to withdraw from Palestine by May 15, 1948, transferring the issue to the newly established United Nations (UN), which sought to find an appropriate solution for the future status of this unstable and volatile territory. In response, the UN established the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), tasking its commissioners with investigating various aspects of the situation in the disputed region. Czechoslovakia was one of the eleven countries represented in this committee, with the diplomat Karel Lisický serving as its representative (BEN-DROR 2023: 34–35). In November 1947, UNSCOP proposed the well-known *UN Partition Plan*, recommending the division of the disputed territory of British Mandatory Palestine into two sovereign states – a solution supported by both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union which, however, ultimately failed (UN 1947).

Although the USA as well as the UN had imposed an embargo on the supply of weapons and other military equipment to Palestine, local actors actively sought external sources of armament. This issue was particularly pressing for the Zionist movement, which at the time faced significant shortages in military equipment and lacked sufficient numbers of soldiers with relevant combat experience (TATEROVÁ 2022: 82–84). In response, David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Mapai Party, initiated secret negotiations with various countries. Ultimately, as a result of previously established contacts, Ehud Avriel, a special envoy of Ben-Gurion in Europe, traveled to Prague, where he met with several Czechoslovak leaders to discuss potential arms deals (AVRIEL 1975: 332–333; AMZV 1948A: 1).

Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk genuinely endorsed the vision of an independent Jewish state in the Middle East, a vision shared to some extent also by President Edvard Beneš (BIALER 1990: 174). However, other members of the Czechoslovak government held divergent views on this. Certain members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, such as Masaryk's deputy Vladimír Clementis, supported aiding the creation of Israel, but only under the condition that the newborn Jewish state would become an integral part of the Eastern bloc or at least a close ally of the East in the Middle East. Consequently, the initial plan was to offer military training only to Jewish communists, as this was presented as part of the struggle against British colonialism. (AMZV 1948B: 1–2).

For other influential Czechoslovak political figures like Bedřich Reicin, the then Deputy Minister of National Defense, and Zdeněk Toman, the then Chief of Foreign Intelligence, the situation presented primarily a financial opportunity. They viewed the transports of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe to the future State of Israel and the sale of obsolete Czechoslovak military equipment to it as lucrative ventures (HAGGAI – KLÍMA – GOLDSTEIN 2017: 131–134). Despite occasionally contradictory opinions, in 1947–1948, various contracts totaling 144,757,928 USD were signed between Czechoslovakia and Mapai to provide the new state with weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment primarily produced by Czechoslovak companies such as Zbrojovka Brno and Avia (AMZV 1954: 17).

The first shipments occurred in April 1948, and the final supplies were delivered in August 1948, some under highly dramatic circumstances. In certain cases, the goods were misdeclared as unrelated items, such as scrap iron or onions. In reality, these shipments contained infantry rifles, machine guns, pistols, mortars, howitzers, grenades, Spitfire aircraft, ammunition, and other military equipment that proved to be crucial for Haganah, the Zionist militia that later evolved into the Israeli Defense Forces (BULÍNOVÁ ET AL. 1993: 87–88). These agreements also included the provision of military training for about 1,500 Jewish volunteers in Czechoslovakia, especially pilots who were trained mostly in České Budějovice, Libavá, and Žatec (AMZV 1951).

After the State of Israel was unilaterally declared on May 14, 1948 by the provisional Israeli government in Tel Aviv, Czechoslovakia, following the Soviet Union's lead, was among the first countries to recognize the sovereignty of the new state, doing so on May 18. On July 28, 1948, the Israeli embassy in Prague was opened, with Ehud Avriel serving as the first ambassador (ZÍDEK – SIEBER 2009: 128). Eduard Goldstücker, the first Czechoslovak ambassador to Israel, arrived in Tel Aviv on January 3, 1950 (GOLDSTÜCKER 2005: 40–42). However, this period of extraordinary friendly relations was short-lived. As early as August 1948, the Czechoslovak government ordered an immediate halt to military supplies to Israel. Although the legal immigration of Czechoslovak Jews to Israel continued for a time, it was severely restricted by the communist regime already in the early 1950s (GILBERT 2002: 275; NAČR 1951: 1–2).

This tightening of policy soon even intensified, particularly after Israel's first parliamentary election in January 1949, which made it clear that Israel would not become the first communist state in the Middle East. The Israeli government, led by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, refused to invite members of the Communist Party of Israel into the government, signaling Israel's preference for alignment with the West rather than the East (KRAMMER 1974: 46–47). This shift was perceived by the Eastern bloc as an ultimate declaration that Israel had become an adversary in the context of the ongoing Cold War. As a result, the initial friendship and support from Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia, gave way to hostility toward Israel, which also manifested in the oppression of the Jewish community within Czechoslovakia, and political purges targeting not only prominent politicians of Jewish origin but also non-political members of the Jewish

community. Official activities of Zionist organizations in Czechoslovakia were halted, and state-sponsored antisemitism became an everyday reality until the collapse of communism in 1989 (KUBÁTOVÁ – LÁNÍČEK 2018: 169–237).

CONCLUSION

The Czechoslovak aid to the establishment of the State of Israel in the Middle East in 1948 was undeniably crucial. Particularly during the initial phases of the First Arab-Israeli War, Israeli aircraft, the majority of whose pilots had received training in Czechoslovakia, played a vital role. However, it is important to underscore that the motivations behind the extraordinary Czechoslovak support for the Zionist movement were multifaceted. While the tradition of mutual friendship may have been a factor, it applied only to certain segments of the Czechoslovak political leadership and society. More significant were the pragmatic interests that the Eastern bloc had in the Middle East. Czechoslovakia's diplomatic support for the establishment of the State of Israel, while influenced by the aforementioned factors, must be understood within the broader framework of Eastern bloc policy, both in the context of the Cold War and in that of the Arab-Israeli conflict specifically.

The Soviet influence over Czechoslovakia intensified after 1945 and became increasingly visible in fundamental foreign policy decisions, particularly in the summer of 1947, when Czechoslovak leaders initially agreed to participate in the European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan) only to later withdraw under Soviet pressure. A few months later, in November of 1947, secret negotiations between Czechoslovak and Zionist representatives over an arms deal began, albeit unofficially with Soviet approval. This process culminated in the Communist coup of February 1948, which cemented Czechoslovakia's subordination to Soviet foreign policy for the next 41 years. Accordingly, Czechoslovakia followed the Soviet Union's position on Israel and the Middle East during the late 1940s.

Given these historical dynamics, should the notion of the Czech-Israeli everlasting friendship in the 20th century be considered a myth? Not necessarily. Even in the late 1940s, a significant part of Czechoslovak society expressed sympathy for the Jewish people, particularly in light of the tragedy of Holocaust. Concurrently, many saw the creation of the

Jewish state as analogous to Czechoslovakia's own difficult path to independence. While no precise statistical data is available, historical sources indicate that many Czechoslovaks maintained positive attitudes toward Israel even after the brief period of official cooperation between the two states ended (WEIN 2015: 170–175).

From the early 1950s until the political regime change in 1989, the Czechoslovak government officially prioritized cooperation with Arab states and regarded Israel as a hostile entity – a policy driven not only by Cold War geopolitics but also by state-sponsored antisemitism. This shift was symbolized by the landmark Czechoslovak-Egyptian Arms Deal of 1955, through which Czechoslovakia – under Soviet patronage – began supplying weapons to Israel's opponents, setting a precedent for similar agreements with Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and others. Despite this alignment, some segments of Czech society continued to support Israel, grounded in the belief that the Jewish people have a right to their own sovereign state in the Middle East. This was particularly true of the Jewish community in Czechoslovakia, but to some extent also of those who viewed support for Israel as a form of opposition to the regime, a sentiment that grew stronger after the Six-Day War in 1967, when Czechoslovakia severed diplomatic relations with Israel in response to the conflict (POLÁČKOVÁ – VAN DUIN 2020: 861–887).

In conclusion, while Czechoslovakia's aid to the creation of the State of Israel in the late 1940s was based on a combination of various political, economic, ideological, and geostrategic reasons and its characterization as an act of pure friendship is indeed a myth or at best an oversimplification, a historical sense of friendship or at least a closeness between the two nations does appear to have existed. Even though the antisemitism during the communist era was not limited to the actions of the communist leadership, as anti-Jewish prejudice and popular antisemitism also existed in the Czechoslovak population (SOUKUPOVÁ 2020: 310–326), the pro-Israeli sentiment, which remained important for at least some parts of society, helped form the basis for the reestablishment of friendly relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel after 1989.

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