

The history of the flag of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia

by Aleš Brožek

Abstract The paper deals with the national symbol used on these autonomous Nazi-administrated territories in 1939 - 1945, discusses flag proposals and brings the survey of flag-related troubles connected with the (non)usage of this symbol. The sources for the paper are archival documents, the majority of them has not been published yet.

The birth of the Czechoslovak state dates from the 28th of October, 1918 when it declared its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Prague. Its existence lasted less than 20 years because Czechoslovakia was forced to accept the terms of the Munich Pact of the 29th of September, 1938. Its border areas with the majority of the ethnic German population were incorporated into the Reich on the 10th of October, 1938 and the rest of the country gradually turned into a state with the loosely connected Czech, Slovak, and Ruthenian parts. When the Slovak Diet declared the independence of Slovakia on the 14th of March, 1939, Hitler summoned the Czechoslovak President, Emil Hácha, to Berlin and intimidated him into accepting the German occupation of the Czech rump state and into its transformation to a German protectorate. On the 15th of March, 1939, Hitler came to Prague and proclaimed the Protectorate from the Prague Castle.

Two days later, a meeting on state symbols took place in the *Předsednictvo ministerské rady*, which was an official governmental body. High rank officials from this office, as well as from two ministries, and from the presidential cabinet discussed the symbols. They decided to keep the state flag and the presidential flag adopted by Law 252 of the 30th of March 1920 but to abolish the medium arms. The reasons for keeping the previous flags were economic and historical ones. The officials hoped that Slovakia would not object to the flag with the blue wedge because Slovaks used their own flags. The traditional Bohemian lion should form the small arms and the shield of the great arms should not be quartered but had to be either party per pale or party per pall inverted for displaying symbols of the regions of the Protectorate. However, no draft for the governmental decree was prepared.

The former foreign minister in the Reich Konstantin von Neurath served as Hitler's personal representative in the Protectorate and held the post of the Reichsprotector. When he came to Prague on the 5th of April 1939, he was welcomed with German and Czechoslovak flags. Such flags were flown also on the 20th of April (Adolf Hitler's 50th birthday) and on the 1st of May (the International Workers' Day). However, some flag-related troubles were reported from České Budějovice, the capital of the South Bohemian region and from Brno, the capital of Moravia. A high official from the Nazi party demanded 4 Czechoslovak flags from the regional courts in České Budějovice



on the 17th of March. The courts and the Protectorate government complained about it to the office of the Reichsprotector. The office ordered to give back these flags but they were re-used for the Nazi flags in the meantime. A Czech family who on May 1st in Brno, flew the Czechoslovak flag and not the German one, was evicted from the house by the German house-owner. Rumours passed around in South Bohemia that the white-over-red Bohemian flags and the yellow-over-red Moravian flags should be used instead of the Czechoslovak flags on the 1st of May. Therefore, very few Czechoslovak flags were seen there.

In the beginning of May 1939, a message that Slovakia would ask to remove blue from the Czechoslovak flag started to spread in political circles. Finally, the Slovak embassy in Berlin sent only the verbal note of the 31st of May 1939 saying that the Slovak arms should be removed from the Czechoslovak arms.

The political department of the office of the Reichsprotector considered the question of colours and symbols of the Protectorate in June 1939. The officers knew that the Constitution of Czechoslovakia of 1920 and, specifically, its paragraph 5, stated that the national colours were white, red and blue. They also knew that explanatory notes for the Flag Law of 1920 mentioned that the blue wedge in the flag stood for Slovakia, as it resembled the blue three-peak hill from the Slovak arms. They were aware of the influence of the green hill in the arms of Hungary on the Slovak arms, that national colours of Czechoslovakia were pan-Slavic and also that they were the same as colours of France, Great Britain and the USA. They understood that the removal of blue would be a political act which could lead to "Flaggenstreit" and to the prohibition of such a tricolour on emblems and flags of organisations, on posters, company shields etc. It could cause unrest among the broad public.



Fig. 1

However, the political department of the office of the Reichsprotector considered the Moravian colours yellow and red to be a substitute for the Slovak blue. It pressed the point that yellow and red were used in the emblem of the National Union (Národní souručenství) (Fig. 1), the only political party that was allowed. The shield of this local Czech Fascist party contained the colours of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia with dominant Czech white and red, blue for Moravia and black for Silesia.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Members of the political department of the office of the Reichsprotector prepared a letter to Emil Hácha stating that the blue should be removed and the Moravian colours added and determining the deadline of the 5th of August 1939 for the implementation. However, the Reichsprotector decided to moderate the text of the letter and not to design the symbols by his office but to judge and approve designs submitted by the President of the Protectorate. The final text of the letter was sent on the 20th of July 1939, asking that the designs be submitted as soon as possible.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Emil Hácha asked the Prime Minister to handle the letter and the officers from the Ministry of the Interior started to prepare a draft of the governmental decree. They acted upon the conclusions of the meeting of the 17th of March 1939, i.e. not to change the state and presidential flags. Speaking of the great arms (Fig.2-5), they used the recommendation from heraldists in the Archives of the Ministry of the Interior to design three versions. The shield of the third version was party per pall inverted with an escutcheon bearing the Bohemian lion. Josef Hráský from the Archives of the Ministry of the Interior made all drawings and recommended using

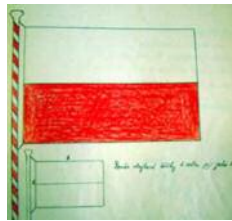


Fig. 6

the combination of white and red in the Protectorate flag because blue was missing in the small arms. Officers from the Ministry of the Interior prepared two versions of a draft of the governmental decree. The first one introduced the Protectorate flag with a blue wedge, i.e. the flag of Czechoslovakia, the other one the white over red flag (Fig. 6) and the Presidential flag with borders formed of the white and red flames. Both drafts were sent to all ministers on the 18th of August, 1939.



Fig. 7

The views of the ministers were different. The Minister of Health, Vladislav Klumpar, supported the flag with the blue wedge because blue was in the arms of Moravia and could symbolize this region. He preferred the Bohemian lion with the Moravian eagle on its breast. The Minister of Transport, Jiří Havelka, supported a shield party per pall inverted. Because not all ministers let the Prime Minister know their opinions on the symbols, he talked about the flag and arms proposals (Fig. 7 and 8) at a meeting of all ministers in the Ministry of Finance in the evening of the 29th of August, 1939. Minutes from this meeting mention the discussion on a white over red flag with a blue wedge bearing the black swastika and the recommendations to use only one type of the arms containing the Bohemian lion with the Moravian eagle on its breast. All ministers agreed to ask the Ministry of the Interior to draw both of the discussed symbols and to cooperate regarding both these symbols with representatives of the National Union.



Fig. 8

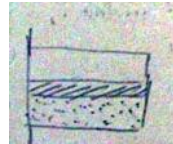


Fig. 9

A meeting with the leaders of the National Union took place on the 31st of August 1939. Fortunately, the ministers were dissuaded from accepting such a servile flag design with the swastika. They agreed to adopt the Protectorate flag consisting of three horizontal stripes white over blue over red with a different ratio. The blue stripe should be narrower than the other stripes, so as not to remind the Czechoslovak flag (Fig. 9).



Fig. 10

With regard to the swastika on the flags, not only did the ministers but Protectorate citizens as well recommended adding it to the Protectorate flag which would consist of three stripes, as can be seen from a letter of August 1939 sent to the Reichsprotektor (Fig. 10).

The officers of the Ministry of the Interior discussed the views of the ministers with specialists on heraldry and banknote printing, together with heraldists from the Archives of the Ministry of the Interior on the 2nd of September, 1939. Karel Schwarzenberg, a heraldry specialist, refused the arms version of the Bohemian lion with the Moravian eagle on its breast (Fig. 11). He expected that the Moravian eagle would not be distinguishable on stamps and recommended to adopt the lesser and greater arms. The former should be a simple shield displaying the Bohemian lion, the



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

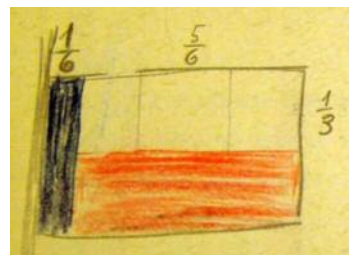


Fig. 13

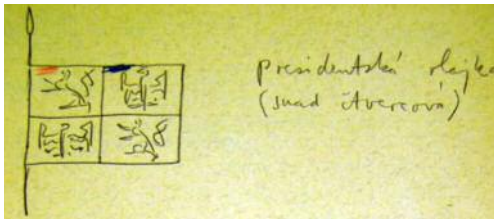


Fig. 14

latter a quartered shield with Bohemian and Moravian arms and the Bohemian lions as supporters (Fig. 12). Those present suggested adopting a white over red flag with a narrow blue stripe at the hoist as the Protectorate Flag (Fig. 13) and a square flag without borders displaying the greater arms in the centre as the Presidential Flag. Records from this meeting show that scholars discussed also a quartered flag with the same layout as the greater arms for the Presidential Flag (Fig. 14).

On the 5th of September, 1939, the officers from the Ministry of the Interior issued a draft of the governmental decree, according to the conclusions from the meeting of the 2nd of September, in two versions. Both versions described the Protectorate Flag as a white over red flag with a narrow blue stripe at the hoist, so as to break ties with the former Czechoslovakia. However, the first version contained the description of the smaller and the greater arms, while the 2nd version contained only a quartered shield with the Bohemian and Moravian arms. Both versions of the draft of the governmental decree, issued in 40 copies for the session of ministers, were delivered by an errand-boy to the *Předsednictvo ministerské rady* on the 6th of September, 1939, nearly at the same time when a letter from the Office of the Reichsprotector also came. It reminded the Prime Minister of the letter of the 12th of July, where the Reichsprotector asked to change symbols and expressed his hope that the proposals would be submitted as soon as possible.

The 17th Governmental Session took place on the 7th of September, 1939, at half past four in the afternoon and all the ministers were present. They agreed to introduce two arms but refused the Bohemian lions as supporters. Speaking of the Protectorate Flag, they refused the proposal with a narrow blue stripe at the hoist and approved of the flag of three horizontal stripes white, blue and red in a ratio of 2:1:2, i.e. of the flag they discussed at the meeting with the representatives of the National Union on the 31st of August, 1939.



Fig. 15

The text of the governmental decree, modified by ministers at the session on the 7th of September, 1939 was translated into German and sent to the Office of the Reichsprotector for approval. Karl Hermann Frank who served as the Secretary of State in the Office of the Reichsprotector, showed displeasure when he received the decree. He reminded the verbal note of the Slovak embassy and expressed surprise that the ministers agreed with a flag, which had the same colours and the same layout as the Slovak flag. The only difference was the width of the blue stripe, which was negligible. He approved the arms, the Presidential Flag and the seal but he refused to approve the Protectorate Flag (Fig. 15) in his letter of the 17th of September, 1939. He asked to submit a new flag proposal before the midday of the 20th of September, 1939. Such a close deadline was determined because he mentioned that "British and French radios benefit from the situation when the Czechoslovak flag flies in the Protectorate all the time. They invite the Czech population to be loyal to the flags of the former presidents Masaryk and Beneš and agitate against the German Reich".

The final layout of the Protectorate flag was determined the day before the deadline. A record written by G. Volckart from the Office of the Reichsprotector reports that J. Hoffmann from the Ministry of the Interior accompanied by another high rank official, met him in the early afternoon on the 19th of September, 1939 and informed him that all the ministers would act on the flag at 3 p.m. that day to comply with the deadline. The Czech officials showed him the two versions of the flag. The first one



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

consisted of the three horizontal stripes, white-over-red-over-blue and was preferred by the cabinet, the other one was the white-over-red, with a blue narrow stripe at the hoist. The officials asked for the immediate decision by the Reichsprotector, in order not to break the deadline. G. Volckart showed both flag designs to the Secretary of State and to his deputy. Both hesitated, but preferred the 1st version. G. Volckart left the office for the Prague railway station where Konstantin von Neurath was resting in a carriage prepared for a trip to Berlin. The Reichsprotector agreed with the horizontal layout because the version with a blue stripe at the hoist would recall the Czechoslovak flag.

All ministers expressed their consent to the new Protectorate flag at a meeting on the 19th of September, 1939 only "per rollam" (Fig. 16) and this act was reported in the minutes of the 21st Governmental Session, which took place on the 21st of September. The text of the governmental decree was published in The Collection of Laws and Decrees under Number 222, on the 6th of October, 1939 when the decree came into force. Because of technical problems only a plate showing the Protectorate flag (Fig. 17) appeared on the same day. The drawings of the lesser and greater arms were made by Josef Hráský in a haste on the 3rd and 4th of October, and were printed with a delay. Later on, Karel Schwarzenberg criticized them for the style of the lion and eagle. The drawing of the Presidential Flag was never published. Its actual Presidential Flag was made from cotton in two copies before the 15th of January, 1940. The first one (Fig. 18) measured 3 x 3 meters and flew in the Prague Castle, the other one of 2 x 2 meters in the Castle in Lány where Emil Hácha was resting. Journalists wrote at that time that the Presidential Flag was the largest flag in the world made by printing. Unlike the description in the governmental decree, the flag had borders formed by white, red and blue flames.

The specialists in constitutional law liked the new flag because the order of the stripes corresponded to the Constitution of Czechoslovakia of 1920, and to its paragraph 5, which stated that the national colours were white, red and blue. However, the Czech population disliked it and used it only when it was ordered. The Ministry of the Interior informed the subordinate offices about the new symbols and about the cancellation of the symbols of Czechoslovakia by an order on the 10th of October, 1939. The office of the Land President in Prague, in its circular of the 19th of October, 1939, permitted that the cloth from the Czechoslovak flag be used for the manufacture of the new flags but warned that the display of the Czechoslovak flag would be a punishable offence.

9 days later, on the 28th of October, 1939, all activities which would remind of the fact that Czechoslovakia proclaimed independence 21 years ago, were prohibited. In spite of that, a lot of Czech people wore black ties to express mourning or ribbons in national colours. From reports sent to the Ministry of the Interior and to the Office of the Reichsprotector, we know that Czechoslovak flags were displayed as the symbol of protest in at least 16 places in Bohemia and Moravia and were immediately removed by Protectorate policemen.

Flag flying was also prohibited on the 7th of March 1940, when Czechoslovakia would celebrate 90 years of the birthday of its founder, Masaryk. Governmental and other official buildings had to display Protectorate flags along with German flags on the 10th of March (a German holiday called Heroes' Day), on the 15th of March (the

Proclamation of the Protectorate) and on the 20th of April (Hitler's Birthday). The public was invited to fly the Protectorate flags in force on the 20th of April, 1940 and again on the 5th of June, 1940. Flags had to be displayed for 8 days to celebrate the victories of the German army but another order came on the 14th of June when the German army entered Paris. Flag flying lasted 3 days and 10 days more starting on the 25th of June to celebrate the end of the war campaign in the West. Protectorate authorities had to modify the draft orders for flag flying because they contained threats of penalties and imprisonment. The Office of the Reichsprotector did not agree with these texts and referred to similar orders in Germany, which only appealed to the public and their consciousness. At the same time, this office criticised the small quantity of flags displayed by Czechs during these celebrations.

There were several reasons as to why the Czech population, unlike the Germans, did not fly so many flags. There was lack of nationalism among them which can be traced back to the periods of Austria-Hungary and Czechoslovakia, when few people flew flags on flag flying days. Reports from the town of Stará Paka revealed that 21 citizens displayed flags on the 15th of June, 1940 and 170 citizens on the 25th of June, 1940 and rated these numbers as a good result because only 11 citizens flew flags before 1939. These reports explained that "the Czech population was spoiled by its upbringing in the spirit of internationalism during the last 20 years and had to be educated in disciplined nationalism when flag flying is a logical and joyful duty".

There was also lack of cloth for the manufacture of flags. The authorities in Mělník region calculated that 8,948 meter of white cloth with the width of 70 cm should be needed for house-owners in this region, but stores did not have such quantities. There was also lack of flag cloth for offices. Some of them started to remake Czechoslovak flags. An office in Prague reported that it could produce one Protectorate flag from two Czechoslovak flags which had to be cut to 8 pieces because there were problems with the remake of blue wedges into blue stripes.

Some house-owners made paper flags and decorated windows to prevent penalties. The authorities in the region of Pečky reported that some house-owners bought silk which was not as rare as cotton and used it for flag making. However, silk flags were destroyed immediately after a heavy storm. Some citizens in the region of Tábor tried to solve the lack of blue cloth by using black or dark green cloth. Nevertheless, policemen forced them quickly to remove these white over red over black or green flags from their houses.

Numerous flag thefts during these flag flying days could be explained not only as flag desecration but also by the need to get the flag for flying when it could not be bought. There were even cases when a German informed against a Czech who did not display flags. It is a shame that even some Czechs were snitches. On the 26th of June, 1940, Erna Veisová from Prague sent a letter to the Ministry of the Interior saying that the co-existence with the Germans was impossible when rich house-owners flew flags in the size of a handkerchief.

The question whether the Czech house-owners had to display Protectorate flags along with the flags of the Reich was resolved only after a regulation was issued by the Ministry of the Interior on the 20th of November, 1940. According to this official document, the Czech population was obliged to do so. No right to fly a flag was given



to the Jewish population and to families in which a husband was a Czech and her wife a Jew. These rules were not quite clear and authorities got questions whether flags could be displayed in a house owned by a Jew where two Jewish families lived on the ground floor and six families with members classified as "Aryans" lived on the first and second floors.

When the German and the Protectorate flags were flown together, they had to be of the same size. As the official proportions for the German flags were 3:5 and for the Protectorate ones 2:3, this presented a problem. When both flags were of the same length, the width of the German flag had to be shorter which was criticized by the German population. There were also attempts by the German authorities to fly only the German flags in towns where the majority of the population was German. There were less flag flying days in 1941 because the Nazi army was not successful at war that year. Flags were displayed only on the 15th of March, the 16th of March (Heroes' Day) and the 20th of April (Hitler's birthday). The problem of the lack of cloth was not still solved. A company named Ruba from Kutná Hora complained that it was not possible to clear the booking for 7,342 flags because it was short of 30,000 metre of cloth. On the other hand, the police of Prague reported that 37,348 houses were decorated with flags on the 15th and the 16th of March in Prague. Only 3,757 houses were without flags but a lot of them were houses that belonged to the Jews. The most serious flag desecration took place in Kardašova Řečice at night from the 15th to the 16th of March, 1941 when an unknown offender sprayed a flag of the German Reich with a speck of soot. He changed it to the black flag which was a symbol of mourning and therefore it was a serious act of provocation at the time when the Protectorate celebrated its 2nd anniversary. The head of the town offered a reward for finding the offender which was later increased from 10,000 crowns to 25,000 crowns, but nobody was found. The highest German rank official in České Budějovice threatened that the town council would be arrested. After Emil Hácha sent a letter to the Reichsprotector saying that the offender could not have lived in the town and the punishment would be unjust and after the chairman offered a public apology in the presence of Protectorate authorities and schools, the official accepted the sum of 30,000 crowns paid by the town and by the Jewish community for the Winterhilfe action.

Other flag flying days were the 15th of March 1942, the 20th of April 1942, the 12th of July 1942 (Emil Hácha's 70th birthday), the 21st of March 1943 (Heroes' Day) and the 20th of April 1943. The 4th anniversary of the Protectorate was not celebrated on the 15th of March 1943 and the 5th anniversary on the 15th of March, 1944 was commemorated only with flying flags from the official and public buildings. Probably the last flag flying which was ordered to the house-owners in the Protectorate was on the 20th of April 1944. A year later, there were no celebrations of Adolf Hitler's 56th birthday, as the Soviet armies were nearing the borders of the Protectorate. On the 26th of April, 1945 the Czechoslovak flag flew again in the capital of Moravia and there remained only 13 days to the end of the Protectorate's existence.



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Sources

The files of the Ministry of the Interior, of the Předsednictvo ministerské rady, and of the Office of the Reichsprotector deposited in the National Archives in Prague.



Curriculum vitae

Aleš Brožek was born in 1952. He is one of the founders of the Czech Vexillological Society, its first secretary and editor of *Vexilologie* (1972-1975, 1983 to the present), and a recipient of *Vexillon* (1997). He is the author of *Lexikon vlajek a znaků zemí světa* (1998, 2003) and numerous articles on Czechoslovak municipal flags and the compiler of annual bibliographies of flag books and charts. He is delighting in spending free time in archives looking for rare documents dealing with flags. FIAV recognized him as a Fellow of the Federation in 2009.

