

Bořek Lizec: Having suffered under the Russian boot, Czechs stand with Ukraine

The wave of support among Czech Canadians has been impressive

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Demonstrators mark the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in Prague, Czech Republic, on Feb. 25, 2023. PHOTO BY MICHAL CIZEK / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

For a Czech, it is particularly emotional to watch the war in Ukraine. Our historical experience of the 20th century urges us to think how much we have learnt from the past. Under the Munich Agreement of September 1938, Hitler and Mussolini, as well as our allies Chamberlain and Daladier, demanded that Czechoslovakia cede its border regions to Nazi Germany. This was supposed to be Hitler's last territorial demand in Europe. Peace in Europe was to be saved. Half a year later, in March 1939, Germany invaded the rest of the Czech lands, defenceless after giving up its fortifications along with the surrendered territory. The world just watched. Hitler gained the strong Czechoslovak war production capacity (Czechoslovakia with its major industrial base ranked among the world's 10 most developed countries) and grew in strength.

As the West, we neglected to respond to the "Munich moment" when Russia annexed Crimea. However, we did act on the "March 1939 moment" by intervening when the ruthless aggressor, with a total disregard for human life, grasped for the whole

country. As we learned in 1938, appeasement does not lead to a lasting peace. It is such a relief for the Czech to see this historical lesson reflected in the actions of the united West.

Czechs also experienced a Russian invasion when they tried to break away from the Soviet empire of evil in 1968. We could not be helped. The risk of nuclear confrontation must have seemed too great for the West to intervene. We had to stay behind the Iron Curtain. The devastating Russian occupation lasted more than 20 years. The videos of Ukrainians waving their flags, shouting at the occupants to go home, are very familiar to me. I know them from films of 1968 Prague. With my experience of growing up behind the Iron Curtain, it is wonderful to see the shared determination of the West to help Ukraine liberate its whole territory and get those taken to Russia back home, starting with children. No Ukrainian must be left behind the new Russian Iron Curtain.

We will never forget that Canada stood by us when we faced the Nazi and Soviet occupations. During the Second World War, Canada, among other things, supported the Czechoslovak government in exile, trained our RAF pilots and even helped us succeed in one of the most important acts of Nazi resistance on occupied territories during the war — the assassination of a principal architect of the Holocaust, Reinhard Heydrich. During the Cold War, Canada admitted more than 36,000 Czechs and Slovak emigrants. Today, Canada stands firmly with us again. You were helping Europe face the Russian threat well before the invasion. You have led the NATO mission deterring Russia from attacking Latvia. The training you have provided to more than 35,000 Ukrainian soldiers has been an important factor in the war.

It has been an honour for the Czech Republic to be one of Ukraine's strongest partners in its fight for freedom and humanism. The Czech government has provided more than \$600,000 in military aid, and the Czech defence industry has added \$1.8 million. These supplies have included 89 tanks, 226 combat and armoured vehicles, 1.5 million pieces of ammunition, including 60,000 rockets, four combat helicopters, 38 howitzers, six anti-aircraft defence systems, and 900 metres of bridge structures. I shall add that our allies have been supporting us in these efforts by granting us compensation for the donated equipment. The U.S. has provided us with Viper and Venom helicopters, and Germany has supplied Leopard tanks. I am proud of Czech citizens and the support they have extended to the brave people of Ukraine. Czechs have accommodated in their homes a high share of the 460,000 refugees who have applied for temporary protection status in our country (Czechia has received the

highest number of refugees per capita of all countries), raised more than \$245 million, and even bought a tank nicknamed “Thomas the Tank.”

The wave of support among Czech Canadians, from descendants of the first Czech cowboys in the Prairies to those who have arrived recently, has impressed me as well. Some of the efforts have been quite creative. The New Moon tattoo studio in Ottawa offered special motifs of a Molotov cocktail or a tank pulled by a tractor for a donation of \$100 for Ukraine. This is how Milena Fusco wanted to commemorate the fate of her mother, who fled Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Many of those who have had a family experience with the Soviets seizing control of my country have been making sure throughout their lives that the communist crimes are not forgotten. Among them, long-term community leader Robert Tmej has supported the creation of the Victims of Communism monument in Ottawa. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Russia found a peculiar way to “reward” him for his efforts. Together with the highest representatives of Canada, Moscow put him onto its sanction list. This step illustrates how strongly Vladimir Putin’s Russia positions itself in the role of the Soviet Union’s direct successor. It does not distance itself even from the horrors committed by communist regimes.

Determined to recreate the Soviet Empire, Putin has demanded the clock be rolled back to 1997. The Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary joined NATO in 1999. At this point, we should believe that he will attempt to do what he says, no matter how crazy and overambitious such plans may sound. It was a mistake for the world not to believe Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” in 1938. Putin seems to have followed his long-term plans. Last year’s invasion seems to explain why Russian agents blew up the Vrbětice depots in the Czech Republic, a unique source of Soviet-type artillery ammunition that was destined for Ukraine, back in 2014.

Ukraine is fighting for democracy, humanism, rules-based order, and the survival of countries at least in its vicinity, including the Czech Republic. We shall never forget the sacrifices made by the Ukrainian people, unimaginable for our generations who grew up in peace. Our transatlantic friend, Canada, deserves our gratitude for its lasting support as well.

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