

**Benjamin Frommer.**  
**National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia.**

Cambridge University Press, 2005. 387 pp.

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This is an account of how Czechs dealt with their history in the interval between the 1945 end of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia and the Communist takeover in February 1948. The floodgates opened for denunciations and other forms of retribution during the final months of the war. When it became clear that Germany would lose, the President-in-exile Edvard Benes encouraged Czechs to mete out punishment for both Germans in Czech territories and Czech collaborators, as the initial acts of reestablishing an independent state. The politicians spoke of “national cleansing” – a phrase we of later generations have attached to the horrors of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s.

Following an initial period of vigilante justice, a make-shift judicial system was constructed. Many of the “Citizens’ Courts” were staffed by ill-trained judges, and police and other judicial institutions were often out of their depth. This was unavoidable: many of the trained jurists and police were either killed or in exile. The courts tried over 32,000 alleged collaborators and war criminals and some 135,000 cases of “offenses against national honor.” Thousands more were arrested and incarcerated, but never charged. Before the Communist coup in 1948, nearly 700 individuals were executed. Frommer observes that this was more than the total killed during the subsequent four decades of Communist rule.

The pent-up anger of the six years of Nazi occupation bred a desire for sheer revenge, and pettiness too often bogged down the justice system. Political sympathies also played a role in the process. In Czechoslovakia, as in other parts of occupied Europe, there were plenty of quislings and collaborators during the war. There were also those who used the occupation to harm their neighbours or their relatives, currying favour with the Nazis. They turned them in for listening to foreign broadcasts or swearing against the German occupation. When what goes around came around at last, those who had gained positions, salaried jobs, or awards from the Nazis were roundly denounced by their neighbours. But so were the in-laws, the landlords, the corner grocery store owners, even their own parents or children. Easier to denounce than to divorce — denouncing became the most popular political action of the pre-communist post-war era.

Chapter after chapter of this well-written book provide the details of allegations, charges and judgments against the evil, the infidels, the dissidents, the fools, the happenstance passers-by, and the innocent in Czech courts. Author Benjamin Frommer has excavated a huge amount of detailed data. The accounts are chilling.

Leading intellectuals and many others have since called the trials “perverted justice” and “among the saddest pages of Czech history.” Czechs, who behaved with such extraordinary courage and restraint throughout the war and occupation, must surely have remorse about their meanness during the peace.

But to be fair, there were also judges and politicians who steadfastly refused to parlay minor infringements into major offences. Since there was no adequate definition of collaboration or other

crimes, each court took on its own stamp of harshness or leniency, often dependent on the sense of justice held by judges. As time passed, the proportion of those charged with crimes who were executed or incarcerated for lengthy periods declined. Perhaps the taste for revenge was finally satiated.

In the context of current debates about the utility of an International Criminal Court and truth and reconciliation commissions in the many countries that have experienced crimes against humanity committed by their own or neighbouring governments, this compendium of evidence that traces Nazi, Czech collaborationist, and finally Czech retribution forms of justice is timely if frightening.

Citizens' courts in the form of "gacaca" tribunals in Rwanda are again in fashion. There are always idealists who, unaware of such histories as this one, argue that decisions about justice should always be in the jurisdiction of "communities." This study strongly challenges that position: we cannot assume that our neighbours are fair and even-handed in the absence of unambiguous definitions and rules for the conduct of justice. Yet the problem is that the only well-developed legal alternative seems to be the heavy-handed and grindingly slow procedures of western-style justice such as occur in the tribunals for Rwanda at Arusha and for Yugoslavia at The Hague.

This book probably has more detail than a casual reader would want, but for scholars of European reconstruction in the 1940s or Czech history, and for others who are concerned with questions of justice for perpetrators of crimes against humanity, it is a sobering and thoughtful account.

Patricia Marchak, Ph.D., F.R.S.C.  
Sr. Fellow, Centre for International Relations  
Professor and Dean of Arts Emerita  
University of British Columbia  
pmarchak@interchange.ubc.ca

Recent books by Patricia Marchak include: *God's Assassins. State Terrorism in Argentina during the 1970s* (1999); *Reigns of Terror* (2003) both published by McGill-Queen's University Press and both reviewed in *CJS Online*. She has previously reviewed for *CJS Online: Searching For Life. The Grandmothers Of The Plaza De Mayo And The Disappeared Children Of Argentina*, by Rita Arditti., and *State Repression and the Labors of Memory* by Elizabeth Jelin.

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