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MUNICH

A Retrospect

by
Pavel Eisler

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INTRODUCTION

"Why should we dwell reproachfully upon the past except in the interest of the present?"
Thucydides

1.

Twenty years ago, on September 29, 1938, the heads of Government of Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy signed a short document, known as the Agreement of Munich. This act gave the name of the town a special meaning which it is likely to retain for many decades to come. It has become the synonym for a specific historic event and for a particular line of policy which brought it about. *Munichois* has come to denote the men who pursued this policy, and who by doing so became leading dramatis personae in the prelude to the Second World War. Ever since the fateful September night at the Führerhaus, when Hitler, Chamberlain, Daladier and Mussolini signed that Agreement, Munich has become a basic concept of political science and historiography.

The essence of the Agreement was desperately simple. It is contained in the preamble, which states that the signatory Powers, "taking into consideration the agreement which has already been reached in principle for the cession to Germany of the Sudeten German territory, have agreed on the following terms and conditions governing the said cession and the measures consequent thereon . . ." [1] In plain words this meant that Czechoslovakia, a country not represented at Munich, was to be dismembered. This, as was recognized at the time and proved within six months, was tantamount to the destruction of the Czechoslovak Republic as an independent state. On March 15, 1939, Hitler's troops marched into Czechoslovakia. The Munich Agreement was consummated.

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[1] *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919—1939,* Third Series, Vol. II, page 627, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1949.

But it was not only Czechoslovakia which was thus doomed. The Agreement also destroyed the last chance of saving the peace of Europe and, indeed, of the world. For the only chance of averting world war was rooted in an alliance between the Western Powers and the Soviet Union. The makings of such an alliance existed by virtue of the fact that Czechoslovakia, France and the U.S.S.R. were linked together by treaties of mutual assistance. The destruction of Czechoslovakia with the acquiescence and even active co-operation of Great Britain and France inevitably drove a wedge between them and the Soviet Union. This is what made Munich a major disaster not only for the immediate victim, but for all the nations which were to be drawn into the holocaust of the Second World War. Although by no means an isolated event, it was without doubt the decisive turning point on the road which led to that war.

2.

Seen as a specific event in the history of Czechoslovakia, Munich appears now as something that happened a long time ago and will never happen again. The Czechoslovak Republic has re-emerged as an independent, sovereign state with its ancient, historic frontiers fully restored. A new social order is being built, and already at this stage the peoples of Czechoslovakia have attained a degree of prosperity and well-being never experienced before. The new Czechoslovakia is infinitely more stable and united than the state that was dismembered in 1938. And therein lies one of the main guarantees that the unhappy chain of events which led to the loss of Czechoslovak independence will never be repeated.

Nor is Czechoslovakia today any longer surrounded by hostile states. Poland and Hungary, twenty years ago greedy claimants to a share of the Nazi booty, are to-day People's Democracies closely allied to Czechoslovakia. The German Democratic Republic, bordering to the North of Bohemia, has given ample proof that Czechs and Germans can live in peace and friendship, and that the strife and conflicts of the

past were not caused by any inherent hostility between the two nations. Austria to the South is once more a sovereign state, whose neutrality and independence has been guaranteed by the Great Powers. Most important of all, Czechoslovakia's safety and peaceful development are ensured by a firm alliance and bonds of friendship with the Soviet Union, with whom she also has a common frontier.

From this vantage point of a newly gained sense of security, we can appraise the history of Munich with a calm and sober understanding that could not easily be attained before. Brute force, deceit and treachery, it is true, played such a part in those events that even from a distance their ugliness remains apparent. This retrospect, however, is not meant to revive bitter feelings about the past. Even when dealing with what happened twenty years ago, our prime concern is the present.

3.

It is obvious that events as disastrous as Munich and the subsequent World War should have left scars which have not disappeared to this day. But the past also clings to the present in the more immediate and more disturbing sense, that many elements of Munich policy are again very much in evidence to-day. Once again the *status quo* of Europe is being challenged. Once again that challenge springs from a Power bloc, of which an aggressive, imperialist Germany threatens to become the spearhead. Once again military force is being deployed for the purpose of "negotiating from strength".

All this bears the hallmark of Munich. Yet those who pursue this policy to-day frequently claim that they do so in order to avoid another Munich. Their argument is based on the assumption that the essence of what happened in 1938 must be sought in the comparative military unpreparedness of the Western Powers at that time. This too is in the tradition of the *Munichois,* whose defence of their disastrous policy proceeded from the same faulty premise. For the essence of Munich was not weakness. It lay rather in a com-

bination of military and political force, exerted by the Fascist States and the Western Powers, not necessarily for the same reasons but nevertheless in the same direction: towards a change in the European *status quo*. To justify the renewed combination of the same forces for the same purpose, by invoking Munich as something that must not happen again, is to use the logic of the looking-glass world—the same logic by which two decades ago Munich was represented as appeasement and its opponents as *bellicistes*.

It is the kind of logic employed by those who plunged the world into a frightful war, "the unnecessary war," as Churchill once called it. With an eye to the terrible dangers with which the present is fraught, this should be kept in mind when reading this brief retrospect.

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I

THE CRUDE DESIGN OF NAZI AGGRESSION

1.

The destruction of Czechoslovakia was an integral part of the Nazi design, a brutally simple combination of power politics and territorial conquest, in which aggressive war was the dominating element. In this, Nazi policy did not, at first sight, differ from similar policies past or present. But whereas modern power politics had, as a rule, come to rely upon war as an implicit possibility, as a contingency in the last resort, Nazi policy accorded it the place of an explicit goal, an ever ready means to be employed on any opportune occasion. This was made quite plain by Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the official pronouncements of German Fascism throughout its existence. It was also formally recognized by the judgment at the Nuremberg trial which declared that the war against Poland—the beginning of the Second World War—and the seizure of Austria and Czechoslovakia had been "premeditated and carefully planned", and that "the aggressive designs of the Nazi Government were a deliberate and essential part of Nazi foreign policy."[1]

The destruction of Czechoslovakia was only one link in the long chain of aggressive acts perpetrated by German Fascism. Yet, quite apart from the unique manner in which it was brought about, the seizure of Czechoslovakia occupied a very special place in the Nazi design. Previous actions, such as Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations in October 1933, her subsequent rearmament and the reintroduction of conscription, and her violation of the Treaty of Versailles and

[1] Cf. R. W. Cooper, *The Nuremberg Trial,* page 294, Penguin Books, 1947.

the Treaty of Locarno by the remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936, all these were essentially in the nature of preliminaries to her final bid for power. The Nazi leaders could carry out every single one of these measures with almost absolute certainty that none of them would precipitate a major war ahead of schedule. Even the occupation of Austria in March 1938, in spite of being an act of open aggression, carried with it but minor risks, and in that sense ranked with the preceding events as a preliminary to all-out war.

The Nazi plan for the destruction of Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, was not and could not be conceived merely as a preparatory measure. Here was a country of considerable military strength, with great natural advantages for defending herself against attack, and linked by treaties of mutual assistance to France and the Soviet Union, two of the most formidable military Powers on the Continent. An attack under such circumstances would have exposed German Fascism to risks which it had not faced in any of its earlier ventures. This is what set the Nazi plan against Czechoslovakia apart from earlier moves on the road to war, and what gave Munich its terrible historic significance.

2.

The plan for a military attack against Czechoslovakia, as part of the wider Nazi design, took definite shape by the end of 1937. At a secret meeting of his principal military and political advisers on November 5, Hitler presented a detailed blueprint of German long-term policy. The minutes of that meeting, recorded by Hitler's adjutant, Col. Hossbach, and consequently known as the Hossbach Memorandum, provide a revealing background to the events which culminated in Munich.[2]

The tenor of Hitler's lengthy introductory exposition was

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[2] See *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918—1945*, Series D, Vol. I., pages 29—39. United States Government Printing Office, 1949.

that "Germany's problem could only be solved by means of force", and that "it was his unalterable resolve to solve Germany's problem of space at the latest by 1943—45". In relation to Munich the significant part of the Hossbach Memorandum is the detailed considerations of the "when" and "how" of the ultimate Nazi thrust. Here Hitler enumerated three cases, "Case 2" and "Case 3" being circumstances in which "the necessity for action before 1943—45 would arise." In both contingencies, military attack against Czechoslovakia was a prominent feature. "For the improvement of our politico-military position our first objective, in the event of our being embroiled in war, must be to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria simultaneously in order to remove the threat to our flank in any possible operation against the West."

Just as the Führer's remarks underlined the strategic significance of the planned attack against Czechoslovakia, the comments of his top-ranking military advisers concentrated on the difficulties of such a venture, Field Marshal von Blomberg, the War Minister, drawing "particular attention to the strength of the Czech fortifications, which had acquired by now a structure like a Maginot Line and which would gravely hamper our attack."

The Hossbach Memorandum is significant not only for what it contains, but also, as far as Czechoslovakia is concerned; for its most striking omission. No reference whatever was made to any possibility of achieving the destruction of Czechoslovakia as an independent state by political and diplomatic action. Less than one year before Munich, it seems, the leaders of Fascist Germany thought of Czechoslovakia solely as a military target, to be attacked possibly only six to eight years later. This is what adds so much to the poignancy of the subsequent developments in 1938.

Yet even in the crude military approach which was characteristic of the secret conference of the Nazi leaders there was an ominous reference to what was to become the decisive element of Munich. Discussing "Case 1", the launching of all-out war at the "latest possible period 1943—45", Hitler started off by expressing his belief "that almost certainly

Britain, and probably France as well, had already tacitly written off the Czechs and were reconciled to the fact that this question would in due course be cleared up by Germany." Within a fortnight that belief was to receive such striking and far-reaching confirmation, as to open an entirely new vista for "removing the threat to Germany's flanks in any possible operation against the West."

3.

The fact that the destruction of Czechoslovakia figured in the original Nazi design as a military operation, does not mean that political action in support of such an operation was not envisaged. On the contrary, subversive political activity by the German-speaking population was conceived as an integral part of the plan of attack. This in turn involved the creation of a suitable instrument for organizing subversion and effective support for an attacking Nazi army. This role was filled by the so-called Sudetendeutsche Partei (SdP), a party which had won a decisive influence on Czechoslovakia's German-speaking population. Overtly the SdP was merely concerned with upholding the rights of the German-speaking population of Czechoslovakia and the party's leader, Konrad Henlein, lost no opportunity of professing his loyalty to the Czechoslovak State and its Constitution. In point of fact, however, the Henlein Party acted as a tool of German Fascism.

In November 1937, shortly after the conference recorded in the Hossbach Memorandum, Henlein visited Berlin and submitted a secret "Report for the Führer and Reich Chancellor dealing with questions of immediate interest to German policy in the Czechoslovak Republic." [3] This document, a statement of the ultimate aims and immediate tactics of the German "fifth column" in Czechoslovakia, was marked by the same brutal simplicity as was typical of the larger Nazi design. As to the final aim, Henlein expressed the ardent

[3] *Ibid,* Vol. II, pages 55—62.

desire for "the incorporation of Sudeten German territory, nay of the whole Bohemian, Moravian and Silesian area, within the Reich." As to the immediate tactics, he emphasized the need for duplicity. "Outwardly," he wrote, "the party must stand for the preservation of Czechoslovakia and for the integrity of its frontiers and must try to display some apparently genuine aim in the sphere of internal politics to justify its political struggle."

A few months later, in March 1938, this line was elaborated at a detailed briefing in Berlin. In the course of a three-hour meeting with Hitler, Henlein was told that the Nazi leader "intended to settle the Sudeten German problem in the not-too-distant future." Hitler's general tactical directive to the SdP was "that demands should be made . . . which are unacceptable to the Czechoslovak Government,"[4] and the actual demands were discussed and "approved in principle" at a subsequent meeting with Ribbentrop and leading Nazi diplomatic officials at the German Foreign Office.

4.

Seen from the distance of two decades, the Nazi design for aggression and war assumes a degree of clarity which it obviously did not have at the beginning of the "Crisis over Czechoslovakia," in the spring of 1938. The documents quoted above were top secrets, known only to a very small number of men at the apex of the Nazi hierarchy. Moreover, after Hitler's rise to power in 1933 a certain element of caution marks the public pronouncements of the Nazi leaders, where questions of foreign policy are concerned. Yet, for all such attempts to gain at least a semblance of respectability, the very crudity of the Nazi design made effective concealment of its aggressive character impossible.

The acute danger could not fail to be perceived. The most instant grasp of the threat of ascendant Nazism was shown by the international labour movement, representative of that

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[4] *Ibid,* pages 197—202.

force which, being the main target and victim of aggressive war, is also its most resolute and effective foe. But the awareness of and opposition to the Nazi design was, of course, not confined to Labour nor, indeed, to the "Left". It was shared by a vast array of groups and individuals, writers and journalists, artists and scientists, churchmen and politicians, holding the most divergent political, philosophical and religious beliefs.

Most significant of all, however, in relation to Munich, was the fact that any number of leading diplomats and statesmen also saw the Nazi design in its stark brutality long before access could be had to such secret documents as those quoted above. As early as September 1933, M. François-Poncet, the French Ambassador in Berlin "insisted that war is almost certain to come." [5] His British colleague, Sir Eric Phipps, is quoted by U.S. Ambassador William E. Dodd as saying in April 1934: "No war in a year or two, but war is the purpose here." [6] And the American Ambassador himself put it even more succinctly: "One thing is certain: Hitler aims at war. When he will strike depends on preparations and a proper incident." [7]

Leading diplomats, even in those early years of the Nazi régime, were thus fully cognizant of the Nazi design for war. That awareness, increasing with each new venture of German Fascism, extended also to such specific parts of the general design as the plan for the destruction of Czechoslovakia. Here, too, *Ambassador Dodd's Diary* provides evidence. An entry towards the end of September 1934 records the Minister of a West European country as saying that "war is the first object of the present régime, war not upon France and Belgium, but upon Austria and Czechoslovakia. That is the Hitler objective . . ." [8] The Polish Ambassador predicted that "Germany intends to re-annex Alsace-Lorraine and large

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[5] *Ambassador Dodd's Diary*, page 34, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1941.

[6] Ibid, page 231.

[7] Ibid, page 228.

[8] Ibid, page 168.

parts of Poland as well as Austria and Czechoslovakia. Then she will control the Balkan Zone and all the Baltic Sea. Europe will be a German realm if she succeeds." [9] And in the very first year of the Nazi régime, towards the end of 1933, Edvard Beneš, then Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, left no doubt about it that "the Germans are determined on annexing a part if not all of his country." [10]

Thus, long before 1938, and all the more with the swift approach of the final crisis, the Nazi plan for aggression and war was, even without access to secret information, no secret at all. This is an essential point, part of the basic background to an understanding and evaluation of Munich.

[9] Ibid, page 198.
[10] Ibid, page 61.

II

THE COMPLEX PATTERN OF WESTERN POLICY

1.

When Hitler expressed his belief that "Britain, and probably France as well, had already tacitly written off the Czechs," he did not merely rely on his much-vaunted intuition. His belief was rather based on the solid evidence that Fascist aggression in the preceding years had encountered practically no resistance whatsoever from the Western Powers. Japan's attack on China, Italy's war against Abyssinia and the Fascist offensive against the Spanish Republic had been carried out under conditions of "non-intervention" by Britain and France, and even such measures as the re-establishment of conscription in Germany and the remilitarization of the Rhineland—direct threats to the security of the Western Powers—provoked no counter-measures.

British foreign policy had obviously moved away from its traditional objective of maintaining the balance of power on the European Continent. It had veered round to a new position of recognizing Germany as the predominant Power in Europe and of seeking some agreement with the Nazi régime on that basis. The change in French policy was less radical, by virtue of the fact that the threat of ascendant Nazism was felt there more acutely. Yet even so, partly as a result of the change in British policy, partly for other reasons, shown below, important sections of the French ruling class clearly retreated from the traditional line of policy of a Clemenceau or a Poincaré. Evidence to that effect is contained *inter alia* in a report by Papen, German Ambassador in Austria, of conversations with leading French politicians at the close of 1937. Recording a conversation with M. Chautemps, who was then French Premier and who had gone out of his way

to seek a meeting with him—"in complete privacy at his private apartments"—Papen "was amazed to note that, like M. Bonnet, the Premier considered a reorientation of French policy in Central Europe as entirely open to discussion . . ." [1]

The Nazi leader's assessment of the probable attitude of Great Britain and France in case of an attack on Czechoslovakia was thus based on the emergence of a definite pattern of Western policy. It was a complex affair, very different from the crude design of Nazi policy. Not like the latter directed towards one single, major goal, but rather shaped by the pursuit of many, frequently divergent and even contradictory objectives. Because of this complexity, the very existence of a pattern of Western policy tended to get blurred, so that both at the time of Munich and later, the actions of Great Britain and France could easily appear or be made to appear as *ad hoc* measures dictated by the needs of the moment. But in point of fact, the events which took place in the course of 1938 fall into shape only in relation to a definite long-term policy.

2.

From the advent to power of the Nazi régime the whole internal organization of Germany was openly geared to the preparation of war. The menace of Fascist aggression to the interests of France and Britain was clearly recognized. Why then, it may be asked, did the Western Powers not combine their considerable economic, political and military forces in order to check the drive to war? Why, indeed, did they assist in the financing of German rearmament and in the territorial expansion of Nazi Germany? The main answer to these questions must be sought in the overriding hostility of the capitalist countries towards the Soviet Union, the first Socialist country in the world. For all its complexity and intricacies, Western policy in this respect was strikingly simple and consistent. The attempt to create a united front

[1] *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918—1945,* Series D, Vol. I, page 44.

against the U.S.S.R. was, as it were, the constant element in the changing policies pursued by Downing Street and the Quai d'Orsay during the inter-war period. In the period leading to Munich it became the dominant element.

The line of thought implicit in Western policy was expressed somewhat crudely, but nonetheless accurately, by Lord Rothermere in the very year of Hitler's rise to power. "The sturdy young Nazis of Germany are Europe's guardians against the communist danger . . . Germany must have elbow room . . . Once Germany has acquired the additional territory she needs in Western Russia, the problem of the Polish Corridor could be settled without difficulty . . . The diversion of Germany's reserves of energies and organising ability into Bolshevik Russia would help restore the Russian people to a civilized existence, and perhaps turn the tide of world trade once more towards prosperity. By the same process Germany's need for expansion would be satisfied, and that growing menace which at present darkens the horizon would be removed forever." [2] The same ideas were expressed on a more authoritative level by Lord Lothian, who was appointed British Ambassador to the United States shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. Writing to U.S. Ambassador Dodd, "he indicated clearly that he favours a coalition of the democracies to block any German move in their direction and to turn Germany's course eastwards. That this might lead to a war between Russia and Germany," Dodd commented, "does not seem to disturb him seriously. In fact he seems to feel that this would be a good solution of the difficulties imposed on Germany by the Versailles Treaty." [3]

In France, too, leading politicians openly put forward the idea of a deal between the Western Powers and Germany, which would give the latter a "free hand" in Central and Eastern Europe. Thus an American paper of considerable standing could write that "Premier Laval, who is also Foreign Minister, is a strong partisan of an agreement between the

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[2] *Daily Mail*, November 28, 1933.

[3] Dodd, op. cit., page 241.

French Third Republic and the Nazi Third Reich, and is reported to be willing to scrap the Franco-Soviet Pact . . . for an agreement whereby the Hitler régime would guarantee France's eastern frontier in exchange for complete freedom of action in the Memel region and in the Ukraine." [4]

In pursuing a policy along those lines, the ruling circles in France were also motivated by their obsessional fears and hatred of the French working-class movement. And the fact that the last years before the Second World War were marked by the growing power of that movement, tended to be matched by a growing determination on the part of the most reactionary elements to make common cause with German Fascism.

Support of the Nazi régime with a view to a possible clash with the Soviet Union was also very much in evidence in the United States. Thus William C. Bullitt, American Ambassador to Moscow and Paris, lost no opportunity of declaring his hostility towards the U.S.S.R., and tried to induce the French Government to abandon their treaty with the Soviet Union in favour of an alliance with Germany.[5] While it is true that Bullitt's views were not altogether representative of the official views of the U.S. Government, they reflected the current line of thought of some of the most powerful groups of American big business.

Western policy in the period of the crisis over Czechoslovakia appears thus not as a set of measures arising from a sudden emergency, but rather as the logical outcome of policies initiated long before 1938. This is also borne out by the fact that the Nazi drive towards the East was closely linked with Germany's economic penetration of Central and Eastern Europe which was to no small extent contingent on agreements among international cartels and monopolistic combines. That such agreements were a decisive factor in international affairs was clearly stated by one of the leading American authorities on international cartels. Thurman

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[4] *New York Herald Tribune*, November 11, 1935.
[5] Cf. Dodd, op. cit., pages 371—372.

Arnold, during the Second World War Assistant Attorney-General in charge of the Anti-trust Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, recorded that "the soft and opulent business organizations of England and America . . . saw in German cartels an ally," and concluded bluntly: "To such international cartels we owe the peace of Munich." [6]

In this connection it is significant that already from 1936 onward British and French firms began to withdraw their considerable investments in Czechoslovakia. This withdrawal coincided with a marked expansion of Germany's foreign investments. In some cases majority stock holdings of British and French investors were sold directly to German banks and industrial concerns. The most notable case was probably the sale of the controlling share of the French armaments industry in the famous *Skoda Works.* Contrary to the widespread belief that this took place only after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, there is some evidence that the deal between *L'Union Européenne Industrielle et Financière,* the holding company of *Schneider et Cie (Le Creusot),* and the German armament trust *Hermann Göring Werke* had already been concluded before the Munich Agreement.[7] The Munich of the diplomats and statesmen was thus adumbrated by the international monopolies.

3.

The pattern of Western policy emerged gradually over a period of several years. By the spring of 1937 it had assumed definite shape, particularly as far as British policy was concerned. At that time Chamberlain succeeded Baldwin as Prime Minister and, shortly after, a new British Ambassador, Sir Nevile Henderson, was sent to Berlin. Within a month of his arrival "he is reported to have informed the German Government that England would make no objection

[6] J. Borkin, Ch. A. Welsh, *Germany's Master Plan* (Introduction), John Long, London.

[7] Robert R. Brady, *Business as a System of Power,* page 148, Columbia University Press, New York, 1943.

if Hitler seized Austria and Czechoslovakia." [8] And in a subsequent conversation with the American Ambassador he confirmed the truthfulness of this report by stating bluntly that "Germany under Hitler is renewing the Bismarck policy of annexing all European peoples of German descent, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and other countries . . . Germany must dominate the Danube-Balkan zone, which means that she is to dominate Europe. England and her Empire is to dominate the seas along with the United States. England and Germany must come into close relations, economic and political, and control the world." [9]

Plain talk such as this, repeated on more than one occasion, could not but strengthen the Nazi leader's conviction that a German attack on Austria and Czechoslovakia would not meet with any resistance on the part of Great Britain.

To Ambassador Dodd, a man of genuine progressive views, who, in the words of the American Secretary of State was "somewhat insane" on the subject of world peace[10], Henderson's statement seemed to be outrageous and scarcely credible. "I wonder," he wrote in his diary, "if Ambassador Henderson really represents his Government? What would happen to Britain if Germany annexed all the peoples all the way to the Black Sea?" As was shown by subsequent events, Ambassador Dodd clearly perceived the dangerous folly of the policy put forward by his British colleague. But his doubts as to whether this policy really was that of the British Government were soon to be proved unjustified.

On November 19, 1937, Lord Halifax, one of the most important members of the British Cabinet, visited Hitler at Berchtesgaden, "in order to bring about a better understanding between England and Germany, by means of a personal conversation with the Chancellor." [11] He spoke, it is true,

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[8] Dodd, op. cit. page 413.

[9] Ibid, page 421.

[10] *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918—1945,* Series D, vol. I, page 627.

[11] Cf. *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918—1945,* Series D, Vol. I, pages 55—67.

with somewhat greater circumspection than had been exercised by his Government's diplomatic representative. But the policy which he outlined to the Nazi leader was essentially the same as that expounded by Henderson.

In accordance with the basic postulates of Western policy, Lord Halifax made "anti-Bolshevism" the point of departure of his statement, and "recognized that the Chancellor had not only performed great services in Germany but also, as he would no doubt feel, had been able, by preventing the entry of Communism into his own country, to bar its passage further West."

From this it was easy to steer to the central issue of the conversation, to the question of the European *status quo*. In previous years, its maintenance had been the rallying point of a broad international effort. Weak and full of inconsistencies, that effort had not succeeded in preventing aggression, but it had at least acted as some kind of brake. Now, at the very moment when the final crisis was approaching, Lord Halifax proclaimed that this effort would be abandoned altogether. "On the English side," he said, "it was not necessarily thought that the *status quo* must be maintained under all circumstances. It was recognized that one might have to contemplate an adjustment to new conditions, a correction of former mistakes and the recognition of changed circumstances when such need arose." Even in this general formulation Lord Halifax's statement marked the real beginning of the road to Munich. But he went further and referred specifically to the questions that "fell into the category of possible alterations in the European order which might be destined to come about with the passage of time. Amongst these questions," he said, "were Danzig, Austria, and Czechoslovakia."

In addition to this fateful *placet* to "possible alterations in the European order," Lord Halifax also implied that his Government would play a part in securing the co-operation of France. By insisting that an agreement between Great Britain and Germany should only prepare the ground for a wider agreement into which they would bring their

respective friends—France and Italy—he offered in effect to pursue an aim, which was at that moment a major objective of German diplomacy. Hardly anything could be of greater immediate importance; for the prospects of changing the *status quo* in Europe were still largely determined by France, who was committed to its maintenance by a system of treaties and alliances.

KEMENTERIAN PENERANGAN
P. RAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER

Before we turn to the actual crisis which culminated in Munich, one more point remains to be considered. Throughout his talk with the Nazi leader, Lord Halifax emphasized that any changes in the *status quo* were to be brought about peacefully, and, to use his own words, "should take place upon the basis of reasonable agreements reasonably reached." This stipulation, repeated many times during the following months, apparently introduces an element of righteousness into an otherwise odious policy. But it only seems to do so.

For one thing, the stipulation was made without the slightest chance of being heeded, being directed at a régime which by that time had conclusively demonstrated its utter disregard for law, agreements and reason. More important, however, the phrase "reasonable agreement," applied as it was to the prospective destruction of the independence and statehood of entire nations, was at best verbal jugglery. For such was the nature of the envisaged changes that nothing short of force or the most deadly threat of force could ever have induced the countries concerned to accept it. The use of the adjective was thus as specious as that of the noun, the possibility of an agreement in the real sense of the word being ruled out beforehand by the very impossibility of ever making it a reasonable one.

III

COERCION AND CAPITULATION

1.

By the beginning of 1938 the Nazi leaders could feel certain that the action planned against Austria and Czechoslovakia had even better chances of success and involved even smaller risks than they had originally assumed. Previously they had counted on the Western Governments' consent, now there was evidence that a certain measure of active support might be forthcoming. This was probably the main reason why Nazi aggression in Central Europe commenced so much ahead of the time-table implicit in the Hossbach Memorandum.[1] On March 12, 1938, Germany annexed Austria, and immediately afterwards the crisis over Czechoslovakia flared up.

From the outset it was clear that the nominal issue of the crisis, the question of the rights of the German-speaking population of Czechoslovakia, was to serve merely as a pretext for the destruction of the Republic. The demands of the Henlein party, presented one month after the *Anschluss,* were framed in such a way as to be unacceptable, and Western diplomats in Czechoslovakia were left in no doubt that the party's real aim was not concessions but incorporation of the so-called Sudeten territory of Czechoslovakia into Hitler's Reich.

The German occupation of Austria had coincided with a change of Government in France, and its new Foreign Minister, Paul-Boncour, hastened to reaffirm publicly that France was standing by her obligation to come to the aid of Czechoslovakia in case of an attack. Moreover he made

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[1] Cf. pages 12—13 above.

a vigorous effort to induce the British Government to state publicly that "if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia and France went to the latter's assistance, Great Britain would stand by France." [2] But one month later, at an Anglo-French Conference convened in London, the Western Governments agreed on a very different course of action.

The British argument at this Conference ran roughly as follows: "If Germany did decide to destroy Czechoslovakia," declared Chamberlain, "he did not see how this could be prevented." [3] This being so, it was essential—both in the interest of peace and of Czechoslovakia—that the Czechoslovak Government should reach a settlement of the problem of the German-speaking minority, and Great Britain and France should use all their influence to further this. The argument was as specious as the Halifax formula of "reasonable agreements reasonably reached," being founded on two major assumptions neither of which was warranted. The combined military strength of Great Britain and France, and of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia was certainly sufficient to deter German aggression, and the threat of such aggression did not arise from the minority problem.

Yet it was on the basis of this argument that Lord Halifax proposed the policy which was pursued by the Western Governments throughout the crisis. The nature of that policy was indicated by an ominous phrase used by the British Foreign Secretary, who "hoped that the French Government would agree on the desirability of bringing pressure to bear on the Czechoslovak Government to continue their efforts to reach a comprehensive settlement with the Sudeten Germans, probably on a much broader basis than they had hitherto envisaged . . ." [4]

The British policy proposals encountered a certain degree of opposition from M. Daladier, who had become Premier of a new French Government shortly before the Anglo-French

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[2] *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919—1939.* Third Series, Vol. I, page 50.

[3] Ibid, page 222.

[4] Ibid, page 216.

talks were held. He stated that "war could only be avoided if Great Britain and France made their determination quite clear to maintain the peace of Europe by respecting the liberties and rights of independent peoples." Speaking of the treaty with Czechoslovakia, he said that "France regarded this treaty as vital, and considered that it must be respected and executed." And in reply to Lord Halifax, the French Premier made the observation "that it was really not at Prague that it was necessary to bring pressure to bear." [5] In the end, though, this opposition was not maintained, for the French Government was in fact most anxious to find a respectable way of steering clear of their treaty obligations towards Czechoslovakia.[6]

In this connection it is also significant that in May, Bullitt, the American Ambassador in Paris, suggested to the President of the United States that "we should attempt to find some way which will let the French out of their moral commitment." He proposed that "if and when a German march across the border of Czechoslovakia seems imminent," a conference should be called which "would probably have to recommend that a plebiscite be held in Czechoslovakia to determine the will of the different peoples of that country. If the Czechs should refuse to hold such a plebiscite, the French would have an escape from their desperate moral dilemma . . ." [7] The conference, like the one eventually held at Munich, was only to be attended by Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy, possibly with the participation of the United States, but excluding Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union.

As a result of the Anglo-French meeting in April 1938, Czechoslovakia was to find herself during the following months between the Scylla and Charybdis of the German military threat and Western political pressure. The ultimate

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[5] Ibid, page 217.

[6] Cf. *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918—1945,* Series D, Vol. II, pages 252—253 and 257—258.

[7] Cf. *Foreign Relations of the United States,* 1938, Vol. I., page 541, Government Printing Office, 1955.

outcome was forecast by the British Prime Minister in the form of a disclaimer. "We would not," said Chamberlain in the course of the Anglo-French discussions, "in our representations at Prague, press Dr. Beneš to accept terms which, in effect, meant the destruction of his country." [8] Yet this is precisely what did happen.

2.

In the face of the all-round pressure brought to bear upon them, the Czechoslovak Government at first maintained a certain degree of resistance. Much of it, it is true, was half-hearted and inconsistent and hovered dangerously close to the point of capitulation. But even the waverers and defeatists refused for a time to be coerced. The Western Powers, in the words of one of their diplomatic representatives at Prague, were "forcing some very unpalatable medicine down the throats of the Czechoslovak Government," [9] and the latter, as might have been expected, hesitated to swallow the dose.

But that reluctance arose not only, and not even mainly, from the obvious reasons. It was rather dictated by the mounting determination of the people of Czechoslovakia to defend the independence and integrity of their country. The Government's lack of firmness in its dealings with the Western Powers had evoked widespread criticism throughout the country, and with every new step towards surrender the Government also moved closer to the point where popular opposition would bring about its fall.

It was this growing demand for a determined stand which played a major role in the Crisis of May 21. Against a background of heightened tension, the news of German troop movements on the Czechoslovak border made it appear that the country was threatened with imminent danger. Reluctantly and after a long debate, the Czechoslovak Government

[8] *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919—1939,* Third Series. Vol. I, page 220.
[9] Ibid, page 284.

decreed a partial mobilization of reservists, a step which the Foreign Minister explained to the British diplomatic representative as being "necessary to reassure public opinion at home and to ensure the maintenance of the authority of the state in the frontier areas." [10]

Although the fear of an immediate German attack on Czechoslovakia subsided soon afterwards, for a while the May Crisis stiffened the Government's resistance to making further concessions. The Western Governments, in their turn, increased their pressure. By the middle of July the British Government thought that the moment had come for a new move. "I honestly believe," wrote Sir Nevile Henderson to the Foreign Secretary on July 18, "that the moment has come for Prague to get a real twist of the screw . . . It is the French job, but if they won't face it I believe that we shall have to." [11] A decision to that effect had actually been taken the very same day.

It consisted in a proposal that the Czechoslovak Government should agree to the appointment of an "impartial person of standing," Lord Runciman, who would act as mediator between them and the Henlein party. That proposal, put in no uncertain terms to Edvard Beneš, the President of the Republic, constituted such a flagrant infringement of Czechoslovak sovereignty, that he intimated at first that it might entail the resignation of the Government and possibly his own as well.

The British Government, and the French who supported them, were, of course, aware that this was a proposal which no self-respecting Government could or should accept. For this reason Lord Halifax suggested, as a face-saving measure, that "if the Czechoslovak Government were to bring themselves to request our help in this matter, this would undoubtedly produce a favourable effect on public opinion here . . . while I should have thought that Dr. Beneš himself would have found it easier to take the initiative than to yield

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[10] Ibid, page 329.
[11] Ibid, page 590.

to insistence from outside." [12] Within three days of the British Minister's proposal to the President of the Republic the Czechoslovak Government complied with that suggestion.

The mediator thus appointed stayed in Czechoslovakia from the beginning of August to the middle of September. His mission achieved what had seemed impossible but a few weeks previously; the Czechoslovak Government was induced to put forward a plan of its own which virtually conceded all the demands raised by Henlein in his "Carlsbad Programme." As those demands, according to Hitler's instructions, were meant to be unacceptable, Lord Runciman had actually upset the Nazi apple-cart. But by that time the crisis was entering its final stage and Hitler and his Sudeten henchmen were ready to abandon tactical manœuvres.

The Nazis now openly called for the annexation of large areas of Czechoslovakia. The British Government hastened to endorse this claim, using Lord Runciman's recommendations as a convenient justification for a policy which it found hard to defend before the world and its own people. "It has become self-evident to me," wrote Lord Runciman, "that those frontier districts between Czechoslovakia and Germany, where the Sudeten population is an important majority, should be given full right of self-determination at once. If some cession is inevitable, as I believe it to be, it is as well that it should be done promptly and without procrastination... I consider, therefore, that those frontier districts should at once be transferred from Czechoslovakia to Germany..." [13]

3.

Developments in the diplomatic sphere exerted a profound influence on the original Nazi plan for the destruction of Czechoslovakia. That plan, as has been shown above, was conceived in terms of an armed attack, and as such required a level of military strength which Germany had not attained by 1938. The policy of the Western Powers presented the

[12] Ibid, page 583.
[13] Ibid, page 678.

Nazi leaders with an opportunity of carrying their plan into effect ahead of schedule, i.e. at a time when the build-up of armed force had not yet advanced far enough.

The first steps in that direction were taken within five weeks after the annexation of Austria, when the principles of "Operation Green"—the code-name for the attack against Czechoslovakia—were agreed upon between Hitler and General Keitel, the Supreme Commander of the Nazi *Wehrmacht*. A month later, at the end of May, a specific directive signed by Hitler opens with the categoric statement: "It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future." [14]

To what extent that decision was prompted by political considerations was indicated in the following sentence of the opening paragraph: "An unavoidable development of events within Czechoslovakia, or other political events in Europe providing a suddenly favourable opportunity which may never recur, may cause me to take early action." And a supplementary directive, dated June 18, defines that favourable opportunity quite explicitly: "I will decide to take action against Czechoslovakia only if I am firmly convinced, as in the case of the demilitarized zone and the entry into Austria, that France will not march and therefore England will not intervene." [15]

By that time the actual date for the attack on Czechoslovakia had been set for the beginning of October, and the final preparations for "Operation Green" were virtually completed by the end of August. Thus, right up to Munich, the Nazi leaders adhered to their original plan of destroying Czechoslovakia through military action—provided this did not precipitate a wider conflict.

Western policy, on the other hand, though not designed to frustrate the realization of Germany's objective, was opposed to the means by which she meant to achieve it. For, as Lord Halifax had put it on an earlier occasion, "the

[14] *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918—1945,* Vol II, page 357.

[15] Ibid, page 473.

pressure of facts was sometimes more powerful than the wills of men; and if once war should start in Central Europe, it was quite impossible to say where it might not end or who might not become involved." [16] On this question, then, there was a real clash of opinion between the British and French Governments on the one hand and the Nazi Government on the other. As a consequence, the final phase of the crisis over Czechoslovakia, the actual "Munich Crisis" in the second half of September 1938, appeared to revolve almost entirely around the question of manners in international aggression.

The real issue of the final crisis, however, was a very different one. At the Anglo-French talks in April, Chamberlain had given an assurance that Czechoslovakia would not be pressed to accept terms which would mean her destruction.[17] Five months later, on September 15, when the British Premier went to see Hitler at Berchtesgaden, he in effect committed himself to exert pressure on those very lines. The final crisis hinged therefore upon two major questions: whether the French Government would agree to participate in the ultimate coercion of her ally, and whether Czechoslovakia would or would not submit to it.

Both questions were decided within less than a week. Following a series of Anglo-French meetings, the two Governments addressed a joint message to the President of the Czechoslovak Republic on September 19, in which they proposed that Czechoslovakia should transfer areas with more than fifty per cent of German-speaking inhabitants to the German Reich.

The Czechoslovak Government rejected the Anglo-French Proposals, pointing out that they had been drawn up without their participation and that their acceptance "would be equivalent to acquiescence in complete mutilation of State in every respect." [18] The Western Governments, however,

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[16] Ibid, Vol. I, page 259.

[17] See above, page 29.

[18] *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919—1939,* Third Series, Vol. II, page 432.

insisted that their Proposals be accepted. Their ambassadors, de Lacroix and Newton, called on President Beneš at 2 a.m. on September 21 and made it clear that if the Czechoslovak Government "did not unconditionally and at once accept the Anglo-French plan, it will stand before the world as solely responsible for the ensuing war. By refusing, Czechoslovakia will also be guilty of destroying Anglo-French solidarity, since, in that event, Britain will under no circumstances march, even if France went to the aid of Czechoslovakia. If the refusal should provoke a war, France gives official notice that she will not fulfil her treaty obligation." (Viscount Cecil of Chelwood in the House of Lords debate, October 1938.) The audience with President Beneš terminated at 3.45 a.m. Three hours later the British Minister was asked to convey to Lord Halifax the preliminary information that the Czechoslovak Government had accepted the proposals.

This was the beginning of "Munich week." What happened during the subsequent eight days was no longer of principal significance. The second meeting between Chamberlain and Hitler at Godesberg, the new increased demands put forward by the Nazi leader, including territorial claims by Hungary and Poland, and the temporary break-down of Anglo-German negotiations over the exact form and extent of Czechoslovakia's dismemberment—all these were but the aftermath to the coercion which culminated in the surrender in the early hours of September 21, 1938. The Munich Agreement itself merely laid down the specific terms and conditions that were to govern the cession of Czechoslovak territory to Germany. Its point of departure, as clearly stated in the preamble, was "the agreement which has already been reached in principle for the cession to Germany of the Sudeten German territory . . ."

There is a revealing summary of the policy which thus led to the destruction of Czechoslovakia. It is contained in a telegram from the British Foreign Secretary, written on 27 September, two days before the Munich meeting. Referring to the proposed dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, Lord Halifax wrote: "His Majesty's Government wish to impress

on Herr Hitler that he is dealing with them and with the French Government in this matter and not with the Czechoslovak Government."[19] This terse, blunt statement fully corroborates the striking epitaph on the Western policy of coercion, pronounced by Churchill soon after Munich: "All is over. Silent, mournful, abandoned, broken, Czechoslovakia recedes into the darkness. She has suffered in every respect by her association with the Western democracies and with the League of Nations, of which she has always been an obedient servant. She has suffered in particular from her association with France, under whose guidance and policy she has been actuated for so long."[20]

4.

One other, and, in a way, the most crucial aspect of Munich remains to be considered at this stage: the role played by the President and Government of the Czechoslovak Republic in those fateful events twenty years ago. That they were subjected to tremendous pressures is evident from all that has been said so far. Yet, in the end, responsibility for making ultimate decisions lay with them. And the fact that they chose capitulation—the acceptance of the Anglo-French Proposals and the Munich Agreement—rather than the defence of the Republic's independence and territorial integrity, must be judged as severely as the actions and policies of those that threatened and coerced them. For there is no doubt that President Beneš and the Czechoslovak Government had several opportunities for making a successfully firm stand. That they did not do so was not so much the result of weakness or indecision, as of their basic political outlook derived from their association with the Western Powers who now abandoned them.

Although they were completely subservient to France and Great Britain, Beneš and some of the other leading politicians

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[19] Ibid, page 572.
[20] *Parliamentary Debates*, Fifth Series, Vol. 339, Col. 364.

of Czechoslovakia had been aware for a considerable time that the Western Powers might strike a bargain with German Fascism at the expense of the Republic. And being quite unaccustomed to pursuing an independent Czechoslovak policy of their own, they prepared for such an eventuality in terms of capitulation. "I learned," wrote Ambassador Dodd on April 4, 1935, "of a confidential interview with Beneš, about the end of March, in which the Czech Foreign Minister said his country would fight for its independence if their allies came to their aid; otherwise there was nothing to do but capitulate to Germany's terms of friendship." [21] And Count Sforza, the former Foreign Minister of Italy, has recorded a conversation with Beneš in Paris in September 1936, in the course of which the latter told him: "If only they" (the French Government) "would tell me frankly that they are not sure to keep the engagements of their alliance with us! I would then turn to Berlin and accept any compromise in order to save what I could of the independence of my country." [22] A few months later Beneš is reported to have said to Sforza's former secretary at the Italian Foreign Office: "If we are left without support against a German menace, we shall astonish the world with our boundless possibilities of humility towards Berlin." [23] This propensity to capitulate, showing itself as early as 1935 and 1936, throws a significant light on the actual capitulation at the time of Munich.

While it is obvious that Beneš and many other leading politicians viewed such a course of action as a hateful but unavoidable necessity, there were others—notably a number of powerful industrialists and the top leaders of the Agrarian Party—who saw it as a thoroughly desirable objective. This, of course, had a profound influence on the policy pursued by the Czechoslovak Government up to September 1938.

The decisive element, however, in Czechoslovakia's capit-

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[21] Dodd, op. cit., page 230.

[22] Count Carlo Sforza, *The Totalitarian War and After*, University of Chicago Press, 1941, pages 32—33.

[23] Ibid, page 35.

ulation was the refusal by her responsible statesmen to defend the Republic, if need arose, with the aid of the Red Army alone. Both before and during the closing stages of the Munich crisis, the Soviet Government made it clear that it would stand by Czechoslovakia, even if France did not fulfil her treaty obligations. But the proffered aid was not accepted. Even at the moment of supreme danger, the Czechoslovak Government maintained the fatal policy which President Beneš had outlined a few months previously to the British Minister in Prague. "Czechoslovakia's relations with Russia," he said, "had always been and would remain a secondary consideration, dependent on the attitude of France and Great Britain. Czechoslovakia's present connexion with Russia was purely contingent on the Franco-Russian treaty, but if Western Europe disinterested herself in Russia, Czechoslovakia would also be disinterested. His country, he repeated, would always follow and be bound to Western Europe and never to Eastern Europe. Any connexion with Russia would only be through Western Europe . . ." [24] To pursue such a policy at a time when Great Britain and France were abandoning Czechoslovakia, meant depriving the country of the last chance of maintaining its independence and territorial integrity.

The men entrusted with the prime responsibility for the defence of the Republic—the President, the Government and the army chiefs—were thus themselves a vital part of the combination of divers foes and forces that brought about the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

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[24] *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919—1939,* Third Series, Vol. I, page 314.

IV

THE FORCES AGAINST MUNICH

1.

The forces that threatened and ultimately destroyed Czechoslovakia were, indeed, far-flung and formidable. Yet at no time during those tense months before Munich, not even at the height of the crisis, could it truly be held that the final outcome was a foregone conclusion. There is no doubt, in fact, that in the spring of 1938, and even later, there also existed a powerful alignment of forces in support of Czechoslovakia's independence, which had considerable chances of frustrating the Nazi design.

The strength of this alignment was derived above all from its international character, from the fact that in most countries of Europe, and not only of Europe, there was a powerful popular movement directed against Nazi aggression and the prevailing policies of Great Britain and France. The forces against Munich were further aided by the existence of influential groups in the ruling circles of the countries of Western Europe, who foresaw that German Fascism could not and would not be diverted eastwards. They therefore opposed this policy as one that before long would spell disaster for their own countries. Finally there was the Soviet Union, the one major power that firmly opposed Fascist aggression anywhere and was actively striving to organize an effective system of collective security that would both protect threatened countries and halt the drive towards world war.

The framework for such a system was provided by the League of Nations, and Soviet endeavours to frustrate Fascist plans for territorial expansion and war were therefore largely directed towards making the League into an effective

instrument of collective security. The principle underlying this concept was that a firm combination of all countries interested in peace would represent such overwhelming force as to restrain any state from having recourse to war, or would at least bring any war, started in spite of such massive opposition, to a speedy end.

When Germany's seizure of Austria heralded the beginning of the Nazi offensive against her neighbouring countries, the Soviet Union renewed her efforts to bring the principle of collective security into operation. Within a few days of the entry of German troops into Vienna, Litvinov, the Soviet People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, stated publicly that the U.S.S.R. would intervene in the defence of Czechoslovakia if the need arose. On March 17 he stated, further, that the Soviet Government were prepared to commence immediately, together with other States in the League of Nations or outside it, the discussion of practical measures called for by the present circumstances. "Tomorrow it may be too late," the statement concluded, "but today the time has not yet passed, if all the States and especially the Great Powers will adopt a firm and unequivocal stand in regard to the problem of the collective salvation of peace." [1]

Churchill, along with many others who viewed the growing threat of Fascist Germany with alarm, was quick to welcome the Soviet initiative as "the only hope of checking the Nazi onrush." But the official British reaction, contained in a note by Lord Halifax to the Soviet Ambassador, was altogether negative. "A conference only attended by some of the European Powers," he wrote, "and designed less to secure the settlement of outstanding problems than to organize concerted action against aggression, would not necessarily, in the view of His Majesty's Government, have... a favourable effect upon the prospects of European peace." [2]

Litvinov's statement of March 17, 1938, was only the first of many other pronoucements made in the course of the

[1] *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919—1939,* Third Series, Vol. I, page 64.

[2] Ibid, page 101.

following months by himself and other leading representatives of the Government of the U.S.S.R., the tenor of which was the Soviet Union's determination to fulfil her treaty obligation towards Czechoslovakia and France to the last letter. And in this connection it is not without significance that the Nazi plan for military attack on Czechoslovakia, as contained in the various directives for "Operation Green," assumed throughout that the only Great Power to aid Czechoslovakia would be the Soviet Union.

Towards the end of August, as the crisis was about to become acute, the Soviet Government proceeded to explore the specific possibilities of using their ground forces in case of a Nazi attack on Czechoslovakia. Action by the Red Air Force in support of the victim of aggression was not expected to encounter any real obstacles, but the use of Soviet troops posed a definite problem in view of Poland's hostility towards Czechoslovakia and her declared intention to prevent Soviet troops from crossing Polish territory for the purpose of aiding Czechoslovakia. An alternative route existed through Rumania, but her Government also showed certain reluctance when approached on the question of the possible passage of Soviet troops.

The Soviet Government thought that this reluctance was likely to be overcome if the League of Nations were to declare that Czechoslovakia had become the victim of aggression and that Germany was the aggressor. Litvinov therefore advocated that the Council of the League be summoned under Article 11 of the Covenant, on the ground that there was danger of war, and that in case of an emergency effective aid could be given without delay. This initiative, however, was also frustrated by the Western Governments. [3]

On September 20 the Government of the U.S.S.R. reiterated their attitude once more. In reply to questions put the previous day by President Beneš to the Soviet Minister in Prague, the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs repeated their earlier assurances that "the Soviet Union was

[3] Cf. Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. I, pages 229—230.

prepared to render immediate and effective aid to Czechoslovakia, if France, loyal to her obligations, will render similar assistance." An equally clear answer in the affirmative was given to the President's question whether the U.S.S.R. would fulfil her obligations as a member of the League of Nations, if Czechoslovakia were to appeal to the League in case of being attacked.[4]

Even more significant at that stage, however, was the parallel assurance that the Soviet Union was prepared to go beyond her actual treaty obligations, and would render aid to Czechoslovakia independent of assistance by France. An unequivocal statement to this effect was sent by Stalin to President Beneš through Klement Gottwald, leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and a communication on those lines was also given by the official representatives of the U.S.S.R. to the Czechoslovak Government. There was but one condition attached to this offer of assistance; "that Czechoslovakia should defend herself, and should also request Soviet aid." [5] This, however, was precisely what the Czechoslovak Government failed to do. President Beneš seems, indeed, to have considered this loyal offer of support as something reprehensible; in an implicit allusion to it he made the somewhat startling statement: "... in spite of the insistence of Moscow, I did not provoke war with Germany in 1938." [6]

A most revealing and damning pronouncement! For it shows clearly to what an extent "the spirit of Munich" had caught hold of Beneš, who had borne the major constitutional responsibility for the defence of the Czechoslovak Republic. To denote the exercise of that responsibility as a provocation of war was but to repeat the most specious and

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[4] Cf. *Documents and Materials Relating to the Eve of the Second World War*. Vol. I, document 27; Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1949.

[5] Klement Gottwald, *Selected Speeches and Articles, 1929—53*, page 215, Orbis, Prague, 1954.

[6] Letter to Professor Namier, dated April 20, 1944; L. B. Namier, *Europe in Decay*, page 234, Macmillan, London, 1950.

insidious of all the arguments employed by the *Munichois*. And in keeping with this, the Soviet Union's willingness to go to any length to save Czechoslovakia is implicitly depicted as a sinister attempt at coercion. President Beneš's statement shows clearly why the determined efforts to aid Czechoslovakia were, in the end, without avail.

2.

In Great Britain and France, the forces against Munich had their main base in the labour movement. The most vigorous and relentless opposition to the policies of the Western Governments centred, above all, round the Communist Parties, who also took the lead in organizing powerful popular front campaigns in support of Czechoslovakia. The Nazi threat and the policy of the British and French Governments likewise encountered considerable resistance from various organizations such as the *League of Nations Union* and from an important section of the press, including such papers as the *Manchester Guardian* and the *News Chronicle* in Great Britain and *L'Epoque, Ordre* and *Aube* in France. Finally there was vigorous opposition in the Parliaments of the two countries, which was not confined to members of the opposition parties but extended to a number of influential members of the ruling parties themselves.

The impact of these opposition forces on the course of events was necessarily limited, the more so as they suffered from a good deal of inconsistency and indecision. At certain important junctures of the crisis, however, they played a vital and positive role, not least of all because they tended to evoke a more resolute and uncompromising attitude on the part of the Czechoslovak Government.

This was particularly important in the closing phase of the crisis, when the Anglo-French Proposals for the cession of Czechoslovak territory to Germany were handed to the Czechoslovak Government. On the day this happened, the National Council of Labour issued a manifesto expressing "dismay at the reported proposals of the British and French

Governments for the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia under the brutal threat of armed force by Nazi Germany and without prior consultation with the Czechoslovak Government," which "is a shameful betrayal of a peaceful and democratic people and constitutes a dangerous precedent for the future." [7] Gabriel Péri in *L'Humanité* and de Kérillis in *Époque* indicted the proposals as a breach of faith, which would only hasten the outbreak of a future war.

The fact that the anti-Munich forces in Western Europe were not in the end strong enough to prevent the destruction of Czechoslovakia, does not diminish the significance of their effort. For this lies ultimately in the sense of international solidarity which was generated by that effort and which is still alive to-day, two decades after Munich.

3.

Similarly, the Czechoslovak people's endeavour to resist Fascist aggression was not only of tremendous importance at the time of the crisis but has also retained its significance throughout subsequent years. In 1938 the overwhelming majority of the people was determined to defend the independence of the Republic. Even among the German and other minorities, whose problems real and alleged had become the pretext for the Munich crisis, there were substantial groups which were prepared to take up arms and fight if their country were attacked by German Fascism.

During the spring and summer of 1938 those popular forces exerted a strong influence on the course of events, mainly by resisting and checking the unmistakable tendencies towards capitulation within the ruling circles and the Government of Czechoslovakia. That point emerges clearly from a dispatch, sent a few days before the May Crisis by the British Minister in Prague to Lord Halifax. Reporting on a manifesto signed by several hundred leading Czech intellectuals, Mr. Newton wrote: "The present manifesto

[7] Cf. R. G. D. Laffan, *The Crisis over Czechoslovakia*, page 351, Oxford University Press, 1951.

is clearly aimed at those, such as the Agrarian Party and the President of the Council himself, who are regarded as waverers and defeatists. With this powerful force of educated opinion urging the Government to stand fast it is clear that the path of concessions to Henlein is not an easy one for the Government to follow." [8]

By the time Lord Runciman's mission was sent to Czechoslovakia, popular opposition had become so powerful that drastic counter-measures had to be taken by the Czechoslovak Government. A report by the British Minister in Prague, written on the eve of Lord Runciman's arrival, points out that the resentment and bewilderment about his appointment is "not directed only against Great Britain as the author of this novel proposition; it also falls upon the leaders of the country who are thought to be responsible for having landed it in its present undignified and dangerous position. Hitherto," the Minister goes on to say, "the Government have successfully prevented all open criticism by a severe censorship of the press and by a prohibition of public meetings." [9]

Actually the British Minister's report was inaccurate; the Czechoslovak Government was far from being successful in preventing open criticism, although it certainly tried to do so. The mounting indignation of the nation found expression in countless meetings and campaigns throughout the country, the leading role in rallying the nation to the defence of the Republic being played by the powerful Communist Party.

As the crisis approached its climax, the popular demand for a firm, uncompromising stand was repeated with increasing vigour and determination. At an open-air meeting in Prague on September 9, Klement Gottwald, leader of the Communist Party, clearly expressed not only the mood of his vast responsive audience but also that of the whole country when he exclaimed: "Defend ourselves at all costs, with every means at our disposal. Defend ourselves come

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[8] *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919—1939,* Vol. I, pages 309—310.

[9] Ibid, Vol. II, page 34.

what may. Fight for every tree, for every boundary line between two fields. Fight for every cottage, for every village." And at the close of his speech he demanded that any settlement of the nationality problem should be made in Czechoslovakia's Parliament, and nowhere else. "We demand that Parliament be recalled immediately. Neither in Nuremberg nor in London shall they decide how we shall settle the problem of our nationalities. The settlement of this problem in our Republic will be decided here—in Prague." [10]

This was the keynote of the Czechoslovak people's struggle against Munich. The climax of that struggle was reached when the Government led by M. Hodža, which had accepted the Anglo-French Proposals, had to resign, following a general strike and mass demonstration in Prague on September 22. One day later, the new Government, led by General Syrový, issued the mobilization order for all classes of men up to the age of forty. The people seemed to have won, the policy of capitulation appeared to have been frustrated.

And yet a week later, the new Government accepted the *Diktat* of Munich. It did so in defiance of the Czechoslovak Constitution, which provided that any territorial changes should be decided upon solely by the National Assembly. The people of Czechoslovakia had been betrayed. As Klement Gottwald pointed out soon afterwards: "even if the Government had been retreating up to September 30, at least on September 30 it had the possibility of reversing this policy. For, indeed, the Munich ultimatum not only went beyond the Berchtesgaden plan, accepted by the Government on September 21, but even beyond the Godesberg memorandum which had originally been rejected by Chamberlain himself. In such circumstances the Government could and should have rejected the terms dictated at Munich . . ." [11]

Thus the struggle for the defence of Czechoslovakia against Fascist aggression was lost. Yet, apart from the fact that it came much closer to being successful than has often been

[10] Klement Gottwald, *Spisy*, Vol. VIII, pp. 233, 242, Prague 1953.

[11] Klement Gottwald, *Selected Speeches and Articles 1929—53*, page 95.

was this that led to the breakdown of the long drawn-out talks conducted in the summer of 1939 with the U.S.S.R., on joint action against aggression, and to the parallel, unofficial negotiations with Wohltat, Dahlerus and other secret German emissaries.[3] The policy of reaching agreement with German imperialism at the expense of other countries was thus pursued right up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

It was at this point that the policy which had led to Munich was fully revealed as an utter *débacle*; not only as a cynical and immoral violation of international commitments but also as a failure to attain any of the objectives it had set itself. Designed to divert German Fascism eastwards, it attracted a crushing military onslaught on the countries of Western Europe. Aimed at isolating the Soviet Union, it resulted in the all but fatal isolation of Great Britain. Motivated by a deep antagonism towards Communism, it did not succeed in halting the sweeping advance of the new social order. Churchill had not exaggerated when he spoke of Munich as "an awful milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged." [4]

At the time of Munich there were many ordinary people, particularly in the countries of Western Europe, who were honestly convinced that the policy of Britain and France might avert a war or at least postpone its outbreak. Also from this standpoint Munich was a failure. For we now know, from the testimony of the Nazi generals at the Nuremberg Trial, that in the autumn of 1938 the German army was not capable of waging successful war against the combined might of the Soviet Union and the Western Powers. Indeed, some of the leading generals were so convinced that such a war would bring them defeat, that they joined in a conspiracy to arrest and court-martial Hitler. They even informed the British Government of their plans.[5]

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[3] Cf. L. B. Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude 1938—1939*, Chapter V, Macmillan, London, 1948.

[4] *Parliamentary Debates*, Fifth Series, Vol. 339, Col. 373.

[5] Cf. *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919—1939*, Third Series. Vol. II, pages 683—692.

But Western Policy was set on collaboration with the Nazi régime, not on its overthrow. Chamberlain's visit to Hitler on September 15, 1938, frustrated the Generals' conspiracy. Against the hollow claim that his visit saved peace, there stands the plausible assumption that it probably saved the Nazi leader.

2.

In spite of its dismal failure, the policy which led to Munich and the Second World War has been revived in the changed circumstances of our own time. The ill-fated anti-Communist coalition of twenty years ago has emerged once again, in the guise of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, dominated and held together by the economic and military preponderance of the United States. West Germany, within the framework of this coalition, is being built up as the spearhead. Her army, in which prominent Nazi officers again hold commanding positions, is being organised for aggression. Having already acquired rocket weapons, it is now to be equipped for nuclear warfare.

The resurgence of German militarism is closely linked with a chauvinist campaign for the "return of lost territories" and territorial expansion, reminiscent of the aggressive claims voiced by the Nazi régime twenty years ago. Thus, Hans Christoph Seebohm, a member of the Government of the German Federal Republic, contends that "the German East . . . includes not only the Elbe and the Oder but also Bohemia and all areas which Germans once settled." And another West German minister, Waldemar Kraft, attacks the "stupid and ill-conceived demand that the German frontiers of 1937 should be restored," arguing that "the restoration of these frontiers would mean a renunciation of the Sudeten area, East Prussia, Danzig and the Memel area." [6]

This all bears a frightful resemblance to the past as described in the preceding pages. The dangers arising from the renewed anti-Communist coalition, the revival of

[6] Cf. *West Germany Prepares for Revenge*, pages 60 and 62, Committee for German Unity, Berlin, 1954.

aggressive German imperialism and the resulting new challenge to the European *status quo,* are, if anything, more deadly than those which confronted the world twenty years ago. But the forces ranked against those dangers are also more formidable. They are represented above all by a powerful alliance of Socialist countries whose endeavours to maintain world peace are supported by peoples all over the world. Czechoslovakia, economically and politically stronger than ever before, forms an integral part of this alliance. The independence of Czechoslovakia and any other country pursuing a genuine policy of peace and national independence can no longer be destroyed in the manner of Munich. Such is the internal strength and the international cohesion of the People's Democracies and the Soviet Union, that any design against them would founder on their determined and powerful resistance. Piecemeal conquests, such as ultimately gave Germany the strength to launch the Second World War, are thus no longer the real danger, at least as far as Eastern Europe is concerned. The real danger lies in the fact that any attempt at violating the *status quo* might start an all-out conflict which would engulf the whole world from the outset.

The threat of such an attempt, although not confined to Europe, is undoubtedly greatest there as a result of the revival of German militarism. "West Germany," wrote the *Spectator* not so long ago, "already has it in her power to lead NATO into war, if her rulers wish." Here, then, is one of the worst danger spots of the present time. To eliminate it as speedily as possible is the paramount task of the peoples of Europe. The way to do so is still essentially the same as it was twenty years ago: to create a European system of collective security open to all nations.



MUNICH — A RETROSPECT

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