

Vít Smetana

Czechoslovakia and the Western Powers on the Path to Munich. A Problem of Mutual (Mis)understanding¹

There is considerable consensus amongst historians on the outcome of the September 1938 crisis: the Munich Conference and its subsequent “elaboration” at the five-party talks in Berlin that took place over the first ten days of October transformed Czechoslovakia into a non-viable state on a long-term basis that was essentially at the mercy of Nazi Germany. From the international political perspective, meanwhile, the “conciliatory” solution to the September crisis merely delayed another pan-European war by eleven months, during which time Germany’s relative military strength increased to more than the combined military strength of Britain and France.²

Logically, the question still arises as to whether such a result was inevitable – and on the contrary, whether there was any realistic prospect of history taking a more favourable course. What did the key protagonists of the September drama know of each other’s true attitudes and intentions? The Czechoslovak leadership, headed by President Edvard Beneš, believed that to fight alone would be a hopeless and suicidal course of action. For a considerable time, however, they lived in hope that the democracies of Western Europe – and to the last moment at least the Soviet Union – would come to their aid.³ Were these realistic alternatives, or as tangible as “apples from Teschen”, which in the end disappeared as quickly as the Poles occupied the province of the same name? And how well were the Western powers informed as to the real power of Czechoslovakia and its determination to defend itself? Did this *a priori* underestimation not serve at least as a catalyst, or even as one of the causes of the resulting political decisions?

After 80 years there is perhaps scant justification in trying to contribute anything new to the long, almost endless series of narrative interpretations of the events of 1938, including its best-known moments – from the Anschluss of Austria through

1 This study is based on the relevant passages of the monograph SMETANA, Vít: *Ani vojna, ani mír. Velmocí, Československo a střední Evropa v sedmi dramatech na prahu druhé světové a studené války* /Neither War nor Peace. The Great Powers, Czechoslovakia and Central Europe in Seven Dramas on the Verge of the Second World War and the Cold War/. Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Prague 2016.

2 Here, however, it must be borne in mind that Britain’s own defences in the period from September 1938 to the summer of 1940, when the Battle of Britain began, increased significantly when at the end of this phase it had acquired newly developed and installed defences (radar, light bomb shelters and Hurricane and Spitfire fighters).

3 For more on Soviet policy and Czechoslovak-Soviet relations in 1938 see SMETANA, Vít: *Ani vojna, ani mír*, pp. 41–69.

Czechoslovakia's partial mobilisation in May, the Runciman mission to Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain's journeys to see Hitler in Berchtesgaden and Bad Godesberg, and finally the convening, course and outcome of the Munich conference. Few episodes of human history have been so thoroughly examined by historians of so many countries – all the more so since the Czechoslovak crisis was a key facet of the fatally unsuccessful policy of appeasement, a policy which at the very least failed to prevent and perhaps even hastened the humiliating defeat of France and left Great Britain facing the greatest threat in its modern history.⁴ But it is certainly worth concentrating on the problems of mutual perception and misperception in this ultimate crisis, a crisis which saw – just twenty years after the end of the horrors of the trench warfare of 1914–1918 – Europe balancing on the abyss of yet another apocalyptic world war. In view of the limited scope of this study, I will confine myself to the relationship between Czechoslovakia and the two democratic powers of the West which actively intervened in the September crisis – France and Great Britain.

The imaginary reins of Czechoslovak foreign policy at the time of the September 1938 crisis were held primarily by President Edvard Beneš. According to some testimonies, in September 1938 Foreign Minister Kamil Krofta served at best as his secretary, while Beneš's actual secretaries – Prokop Drtina and Jaromír Smutný – were often better informed about key negotiations than Krofta himself.⁵ Since Czechoslovakia was the focus of the ongoing crisis, although certainly not the cause of it, any reflection on mutual perceptions or misperceptions in the period should start with the question of what Edvard Beneš actually expected from the others. What moves by the Great Powers did he prepare for? On one hand, as events unfolded he became increasingly aware that Western support for Czechoslovakia was fading. And when the British-French plan for the surrender of the Czechoslovak borderlands was presented to him on 19 September, he must have realised that there was virtually no limit to the price the two countries believed Czechoslovakia should pay in order to find a peaceful solution. French and British military support for Czechoslovakia seemed uncertain even in the case of an unprovoked German attack. On the other hand, however, Edvard Beneš still hoped that these attitudes would radically change in the event of

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- 4 See for example ROBBINS, Keith: *Munich 1938*. Cassell, London 1969; TAYLOR, Telford: *Munich. The Price of Peace*. Hodder & Stoughton, London 1979; KEE, Robert: *Munich: The Eleventh Hour*. Hamish Hamilton, London 1988; FABER, David: *Munich: The 1938 Appeasement Crisis*. Simon & Schuster, London 2008. Of the many Czech monographs of different quality one should mention at least the translation of the original German work ČELOVSKÝ, Bořivoj: *Mnichovská dohoda 1938 /The Munich Agreement of 1938/*. Tilia, Šenov u Ostravy 1999. See also KVAČEK, Robert: *Poslední den. Mnichov – Praha, konec září 1938 /The Last Day. Munich – Prague, end of September 1938/*. Prague Publishing Company – Epoque, Prague 2011.
- 5 *Archiv vneshej politiki Rossijskoj federacii*, Moscow (hereafter referred to as AVP), f. Referentura po Čechoslovakii (0138), opis 19, papka 128, dělo 6, Report by envoy Alexandrovskij “Zametki o sobytijach v Čechoslovakii v konce sentjabrja i načale oktjabrja 1938 g.”, 26 October 1938. I am much obliged to PhDr. Emil Voráček and doc. Jan Němeček from the Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences for providing this document. My own requests to study this particular archival file were rejected by the AVP archivists in October 2013 with the laconic explanation that the file “is not available to study”.

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new governments in Paris and London.⁶ It is necessary, therefore, to look for the origins of Beneš's hope that such change was realistic.

Czechoslovak Diplomats in the West

The main cause of Beneš's persistent optimism regarding the ultimate stance that would be taken by the two Western democratic powers was the information he received on a regular basis from his envoys. This was not so much the case with the veteran Czechoslovak ambassador to Paris, Štefan Osuský, whose dispatches were sufficiently professional, relying as they did on the envoy's thorough knowledge of French politics. His information reflected the situation on the domestic political scene more or less correctly. However, Jaromír Nečas, the Social Democratic Minister of Social Welfare and by mid-September in effect Beneš's special envoy, brought back different reports from Paris. He had been tasked by President Beneš with travelling to the French and British capitals to meet the leaders of the left-wing parties and present a top-secret proposal. The Nečas plan, also known as the "fifth" plan, involved a proposal to relinquish to Germany territory encompassing 4,000–6,000 km² and between 1.5–2 million Sudeten Germans (which was a significantly larger population than the number of people actually living there). The proposal was to be presented to Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, using Socialist Party chairman and former Prime Minister Léon Blum as a middleman. According to Nečas, the Daladier government was on the verge of collapse, and it was only a matter of time before it would be replaced by a new one, to be led by the chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, Édouard Herriot. Beneš expected the new French prime minister to take a more responsible stance on French commitments towards Czechoslovakia.⁷ Ironically, Édouard Herriot was in Geneva at the time, attending a meeting of the League of Nations. There he summoned the League's permanent Czechoslovak delegate, Arnošt Heidrich, to inform him that he had received reliable reports that Edvard Beneš was labouring under the misapprehension that he – Herriot – intended to bring about the collapse of the French government and as the head of the Radical-Socialist Party (the main governing party in France) would strive to create a new government that would then declare a general mobilisation. Years later, Heidrich remembered how Herriot had *pleaded with real pathos* to put President Beneš right on this matter; Herriot insisted he had absolutely no

6 For more see LVOVÁ, Míla: *Mnichov a Edvard Beneš /Munich and Edvard Beneš/*. Svoboda, Praha 1968, p. 21ff.

7 See DEJMEK, Jindřich et al. (eds.): *Dokumenty československé zahraniční politiky. Československá zahraniční politika v roce 1938 /Documents of Czechoslovak Foreign Policy. Czechoslovak Foreign Policy in the Year 1938/* (hereafter referred to as *DČSZP - 1938*), Vol. II (1 July – 5 October 1938). Institute of International Relations – Karolinum – Institute of History, Czech Academy of Sciences (AV ČR), Prague 2001, document No. 599, instructions from President E. Beneš to the Czechoslovak Minister of Social Care J. Nečas for his negotiations in France, 15 September 1938, pp. 201–202 and appendix III, letter from former Czechoslovak Minister of Social Care J. Nečas for former Czechoslovak President E. Beneš informing him of his trips to France and Great Britain, undated (late October 1938), pp. 521–526. There is however no doubt that Nečas reported back to Beneš immediately after his return from Paris on 20 September 1938.

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intention of doing any such thing because France needed *another year or two of peace*. Unfortunately, we do not know whether Heidrich ever conveyed Herriot's warning to President Beneš. Certainly he never did so in a diplomatic cable sent to the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry.⁸ On the contrary, it seems that Beneš's hopes for a major change in the French government were fuelled by information from multiple sources. They probably also stemmed from Beneš's own knowledge of the politics of the Third Republic, in which the average life of a government was less than eight months.

Paradoxically, even more frequent reports of the impending fall of the government came from London, despite the fact that objectively speaking there was no sign of this happening at all. Czechoslovakia's envoy to Britain, Jan Masaryk, however, issued repeated predictions that Chamberlain's days were numbered and the cabinet would not last long. His reading of the British response to Czechoslovakia's partial mobilisation in May was already completely off the mark: on 23 May, *according to a totally reliable source*, he reported to Prague that *Berlin believes England has now become more decisive, which is why the Germans backed down* and withdrew most of their troops from the border.⁹ The next day, Masaryk reported that the Czechoslovak government had *scored a great moral victory*. While Osuský pointed out from Paris that calling up one year of reserves had *produced an unfavourable reaction internationally*, even though later on it was *more than balanced by the fact* that the government had succeeded in maintaining order,¹⁰ Masaryk saw things quite differently: *Calling up a year of reserves served as a powerful argument and they should be kept mobilised for some time*. He did not fail to sketch out Chamberlain's gloomy prospects: *The government here in London had rescued itself by taking a vigorous stance against the impending serious crisis, which, having begun in the air force, is latently lasting longer*. [Chamberlain's predecessor as prime minister] *Baldwin has got the knives out for Chamberlain. Yesterday he called [former Foreign Minister] Eden to talk*. When Masaryk reported that he was receiving congratulations *from all sides*¹¹ to be passed on to President Beneš, Prime Minister Hodža and Minister Krofta on the successful mobilisation and the determination of the government in Prague, it must be stated that he was certainly not receiving them from the parties of the governing coalition, and definitely not from their key figures. One day later, on 25 May 1938, the British Foreign Minister Lord Halifax informed Masaryk that the best Prague could hope to escape with in the current crisis was autonomy *according*

8 HEIDRICH, Arnošt: Zahraničně-politické příčiny Mnichova /The Foreign Policy Causes of Munich/. In: PEJSKAR, Jožka: *Poslední pocta. Památník na zemřelé československé exulanty v letech 1948–1981* /The Final Honour. In Memory of Fallen Czechoslovak Exiles in the Years 1948–1981/, part 1. Confrontation, Zurich 1982, pp. 113–123, passage quoted here from p. 120.

9 DČSZP – 1938, Vol. I (1 January – 30 June 1938). Institute of International Relations – Karolinum – Institute of History, Czech Academy of Sciences (AV ČR), Prague 2000, document No. 312, Masaryk's telegram to the Foreign Ministry, 23 May 1938, p. 312.

10 Ibid., document No. 315, Osuský's telegram to the Foreign Ministry on the reaction in the French press to developments in Czechoslovak-German relations and the situation in Czechoslovakia, 23 May 1938, p. 467.

11 Ibid., document No. 317, Masaryk's telegram for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the British stance towards the situation in the Czechoslovak Republic, 24 May 1938, p. 468.

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to the Swiss model and neutrality in matters of foreign policy.¹² These words must have come as such a shock to Masaryk that he decided not to pass them on to the Foreign Ministry in Prague! Apparently he didn't want to lose face.

The importance and choice of Masaryk's contacts is also shown by the fact that we find nothing in his reports about the trip by William Strang, Head of the Foreign Office's Central Department, to Prague and Berlin in late May 1938. He returned from the trip with precise recommendations, according to which the Sudeten regions should be given autonomy or even handed over to Germany. Strang believed the Prague government was being too lax in addressing the Sudeten German issue, and recommended the British government to step up pressure on the Czechoslovaks.¹³

In mid-July, Masaryk reported to Prague that Chamberlain's situation *had deteriorated again* and that *opposition to him was growing*. The Czechoslovak envoy claimed to have *definitive information* that former Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, still a key figure in the Conservative Party, had *ended his political friendship* with Chamberlain and continued to associate with Anthony Eden, until recently Foreign Minister whom he suggested in his political testament as his successor. Masaryk ended his missive, however, with the vague conclusion that it was too early to make political forecasts and that he *could well imagine that even this time everything would once again turn in Chamberlain's favour*.¹⁴ Masaryk's erroneous readings of British political developments were disseminated further in even more distorted versions by Czechoslovak diplomats elsewhere; including, crucially, in Moscow. On 8 August, Press Attaché and Chargé d'affaires at the time Josef Šust persuaded the Deputy People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Potemkin, that Chamberlain was losing ground and showing extreme nervousness. Baldwin was said to be maintaining *the closest contact* with Eden, *apparently in a bid to prepare him for his return to a senior government position*.¹⁵ On 29 August, Masaryk sent another of his irregular dispatches, this one containing an even more unfounded analysis of British politics: *It is now clear that, with the exception of Chamberlain – who is still seeking an agreement with Germany and Italy, the Cabinet has been thoroughly healed of all of its illusions*. He added with remarkable nonchalance, which hardly paid tribute to his diplomatic capabilities: *However, I haven't actually managed to speak to Chamberlain yet. Interestingly, Chamberlain, who is in charge of foreign policy, has not even once spoken to me on an official basis. We merely run into each other on various occa-*

12 See PARKER, Robert Alexander Clarke: *Chamberlain and Appeasement. British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War*. Palgrave Macmillan, London 1993, p. 149.

13 *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919–1939*, 3rd series, 1938–1939. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London 1949–1957 (hereafter referred to as *DBFP* with the series and volume number), Vol. I, documents No. 349 and 350, Strang's notes on his meeting with diplomats at the British Legation in Prague, 26–27 May 1938, and the British Embassy in Berlin, 28–29 May 1938, pp. 403–416.

14 *DČSZP – 1938*, Vol. II, document No. 400, Masaryk's report on the British stance towards Czechoslovakia and his conversation with the British Foreign Minister Lord Halifax, 14 July 1938, pp. 28–31.

15 *AVP*, f. Litvinov's Secretariat (05), opis 18, papka 150, dělo 170, Potemkin's notes of his conversation with Šust, 8 August 1938.

16 *DČSZP – 1938*, Vol. II, document No. 515, Masaryk's report for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 29 August 1938, pp. 201–202.

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sions.¹⁶ And on 25 September, shortly after delivering to the Foreign Office Czechoslovakia's decisive rejection of Hitler's escalating demands following his meeting with Chamberlain at Bad Godesberg, a rejection that included the memorable words that the nation of *St Wenceslas, Jan Hus, and Tomáš Masaryk would not be a nation of slaves*, Jan Masaryk wondered aloud how badly Chamberlain was informed about the situation. Again, he reiterated his hopes for a change in the British government: *It is unfortunate that this stupid and uninformed little man is the English prime minister, and I am convinced that he will not be there for long.*¹⁷

These hopes, as we know, did not come true. The prime minister's position remained unshaken at least for the next few months,¹⁸ although immediately after Munich Chamberlain did temporarily abandon his talks with the German and Italian dictators in fear of more ministers resigning – after the loss of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Duff Cooper.¹⁹ On the other hand, one thing that certainly did not make Chamberlain any more determined to defend Czechoslovak interests in his negotiations with Hitler were Masaryk's secret talks with Winston Churchill – for long one of the central figures in British politics who had fallen out of favour with the leadership of the Conservative Party almost ten years previously – on the possible end of the current government. On 1 October, Churchill urged the Czechoslovak government not to relinquish *its vital fortifications* for at least another 48 hours. According to Masaryk's report, the Conservative Party's most famous backbencher was convinced that *a great reaction to the betrayal committed against us has started here and is growing.*²⁰ Chamberlain complained about the Churchill-Masaryk conspiracy in a letter to his sister: *I had constant information of their doings and sayings which for the nth time demonstrated how completely Winston can deceive himself when he wants to and how utterly credulous a foreigner can be when he is told the thing he wants to hear. In this case the thing was that "Chamberlain's fall was imminent!"*²¹

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- 17 Ibid., document No. 712, telegraphic report from the Czechoslovak Envoy to Great Britain Jan Masaryk to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, containing the English text of a note handed to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain with the position of the Czechoslovak government towards the memorandum issued by Adolf Hitler, 25 September 1938, pp. 390–392 and document No. 715, telegraphic report from Jan Masaryk to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on his conversation with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Foreign Minister Lord Halifax, 26 September 1938, pp. 394–395.
- 18 See ELLINGER, Jiří: *Neville Chamberlain. Od usmiřování k válce: britská zahraniční politika, 1937–1940* / Neville Chamberlain – From Reconciliation to War: British Foreign Policy 1937–1940/. Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Prague 2009, p. 216ff.
- 19 *Birmingham University Library*, Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1071, Chamberlain's letter to his sister Ida, 9 October 1938. For a more detailed examination of Britain's domestic political situation immediately after Munich, see SMETANA, Vit: *In the Shadow of Munich. British Policy towards Czechoslovakia from the Endorsement to the Renunciation of the Munich Agreement (1938–1942)*. Karolinum, Prague 2008, pp. 60–64.
- 20 *DČSZP – 1938*, Vol. II, document No. 788, Masaryk's telegram to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1 October 1938, p. 471.
- 21 *Birmingham University Library*, Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1071, Chamberlain's letter to his sister Ida, 9 October 1938.

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It is worth trying to reconstruct how Chamberlain heard about these conversations. The German secret services listened in to Jan Masaryk's phone calls with Edvard Beneš during September and happily passed them on to the British.²² However, on 27 September, the Czechoslovak Legation in Berlin, tipped off by French diplomatic sources, warned the Foreign Ministry in Prague that the Germans were wiretapping Czechoslovak communications. The following day, Jan Masaryk sent Lord Halifax a declaration from the Czechoslovak government categorically rejecting the allegation that he was working with the opposition to overthrow the British government (and also denying that Edvard Beneš would refuse to fulfil the British-French plan!), accompanied with his own remarks rejecting the allegations.²³ However, the transcripts of the wiretaps themselves did not contain anything incriminating – at best, a few of Masaryk's indelicate remarks, specifically those aimed at Chamberlain's chief advisor, Horace Wilson, and the French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet. The pragmatic officials at the Foreign Office also judged that in both form and content the conversations were commensurate with the dramatic situation – stating that they could hardly object to the fact that Czechoslovak diplomats were maintaining contacts with opposition political circles and were trying to use them to influence the British government to defend Czechoslovak interests.²⁴

It is likely that in the days that followed, Chamberlain drew intelligence from other sources, more likely domestic than Czechoslovak in origin.²⁵ It seems that Winston Churchill, meanwhile, could not have imagined that his phone calls were being bugged. When, eight months after Munich, in May 1939, Jan Masaryk expressed concern in one of his telegrams from the United States that information from him had reached *one of the Munich lot*, Churchill reassured him with the following words: *Have no fear about our telegrams being under surveillance by the Government. We have not got to that yet here.*²⁶ To develop Chamberlain's thesis from the beginning of October 1938 – we can probably add one more to the “nth” number of times where Winston Churchill was deceiving himself.

22 *The National Archives of the United Kingdom*, London (hereafter referred to as TNA), FO 371/21742, C 11002/1941/18, transcripts of telephone conversations between Jan Masaryk and Edvard Beneš, and Masaryk and the Foreign Ministry in Prague, 14–26 September 1938. The wiretaps are also mentioned in HAUNER, Milan (ed.): *Edvard Beneš. Paměti I* /Edvard Beneš. Memoirs Part I/. Academia, Prague 2007, p. 22, footnote 41.

23 DČSZP – 1938, Vol. II, document No. 737, telegram from the chargé d'affaires in the Czechoslovak Legation in Germany M. Schubert to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27 September 1938, pp. 418–419 and document No. 819, telegram from Czechoslovak envoy Mastný (in Berlin) on the circumstances of the presentation of the Munich Agreement and his conversation with Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, 3 October 1938, pp. 489–493. TNA, FO 371/21742, C 11001/1941/18, Masaryk's letter to Lord Halifax, 28 September 1938.

24 TNA, FO 371/21742, C 11001/1941/18, commentary by Frank Roberts, 4 October 1938.

25 R. A. C. Parker writes that *Chamberlain was evidently receiving transcripts of intercepted telephone calls*. He gives, unfortunately, no details. PARKER, Robert Alexander Clarke: *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, p. 184.

26 GILBERT, Martin (ed.): *Winston Churchill*, Companion Vol. V, *The Coming of War, 1936–1939*. Heinemann, London 1975, pp. 1503–1504.

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French Politics in Action

France, Czechoslovakia's most important ally in the interwar period, sent out contradictory signals of its own intentions during 1938. These both reflected the chronic internal political instability of the country and were personified in the character of Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, who in April 1938 had succeeded Léon Blum when his second government collapsed after just a month. Daladier's thinking and approach to foreign policy was aptly captured by the British historian A. J. P. Taylor: *Daladier was a Radical of the old tradition, anxious to preserve the honour of France and convinced that a firm policy could alone stop Hitler. But he was at a loss how to do it. He had served in the trenches during the First World War and shrank with horror from a new holocaust. On every occasion he spoke decisively against appeasement, and then acquiesced in it.*²⁷ He chose Georges Bonnet as his Foreign Minister. Daladier might have believed that the consistent emphasis on resistance to German expansion advocated by Joseph Paul-Boncour in the previous government was "worthy of France", but the new prime minister remained unconvinced that his country was actually able to implement such a policy.

Unlike Daladier, Bonnet was absolutely consistent in his policies: he strove to ensure France would not make any commitments without British participation. While he underlined the importance of the French alliance with Czechoslovakia during the British-French talks in London at the end of April 1938, as soon as he learned that Britain felt no obligation to act, he began working – in the words of French historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle – *with every ounce of energy, veiled by an obvious flexibility, in order to disengage France.*²⁸ April's talks at Downing Street followed a typical script that was to be repeated several times in various permutations. First, Daladier proclaimed that the best way to avoid war would be to show the Germans the British-French determination to preserve peace by respecting the rights of independent states. Capitulating to the German threat would ultimately only bring about war, which should be avoided. And while Beneš should make reasonable concessions to the Sudeten Germans, if these were rejected by Hitler, then the British too should stand up for Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain refused, because he was sincerely convinced that only Czechoslovak concessions could prevent war. The tense atmosphere was finally eased by a compromise, but it was a compromise based far more on British position than the French one: both countries were to demand concessions from the Czechoslovak government, while the British would urge Hitler to be patient. If the concessions failed, then the British would warn him that France would be forced to intervene in the event of an attack on Czechoslovakia, and that *His Majesty's government could not guarantee that it would not do the same.*²⁹ This assurance, however, did not go far enough for Bonnet.

27 TAYLOR, Alan John Percivale: *The Origins of the Second World War*. Penguin Books, London 1991 (1st edition 1961), p. 197.

28 DUROSELLE, Jean-Baptiste: *France and the Nazi Threat. The Collapse of French Diplomacy 1932–1939*. Enigma Books, New York 2004 (first published in French in 1985), p. 272.

29 *DBFP*, 3rd series, Vol. I, document No. 164, notes of British-French talks at 10 Downing Street, 28–29 April 1938, pp. 198–234.

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His fears deepened in response to the May crisis: Halifax had – via the British Ambassador to Berlin Sir Nevile Henderson – warned Ribbentrop twice on 21 May that in the event of a conflict, the British could not guarantee that they would not be forced to enter it. However, in the interests of his “balanced policy”, the following day he instructed Sir Eric Phipps, U.K. Ambassador to Paris, to alert Bonnet that France could only rely on British aid in the event of an unprovoked assault against her, not in defence of Czechoslovakia.³⁰ In response to this announcement, Bonnet told not only Phipps, but also the German Ambassador Johannes von Welczeck that if Czechoslovakia were to act truly unreasonably, France could declare that it had been relieved of its obligations.³¹

On 10 July 1938, Ambassador Osuský in Paris also reported back that Bonnet had clearly indicated in a conversation with him that France was reluctant to go to war over the Sudeten German question (especially without the aid of Britain), no matter how much it might outwardly emphasise solidarity with Czechoslovakia.³² However Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, in a handwritten comment on Bonnet’s note, questioned this “French position”. First, such a policy would have to be approved by the government and, secondly, he asked how France would react to possible German aggression against Czechoslovakia.³³ This was not purely a political issue, but was mainly a question of military planning. The intelligence department of the French General Staff concluded pertaining analyses with the grim conclusion that the French military would be able to do nothing to prevent the military defeat of Czechoslovakia within a few weeks, and the Commander-in-Chief of the French armed forces, General Maurice Gustav Gamelin, predicted that in the event of a French offensive against Germany, the French army would probably experience a modern version of the Battle of the Somme.³⁴ Yet, Daladier continued to emphasise French commitments to its Central European ally, and on 8 September, he told the British Ambassador Phipps that if Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, France would come to its aid *as one man*.³⁵ The political initiative, however, was already clearly in British hands, something which was sufficiently demonstrated by the Runciman mission. And the French were not to take the initiative again. Prime Minister Daladier made a timid attempt to do so on 13 September, when he sent a letter to Chamberlain suggesting a joint meeting with Hitler. By then, however, the British prime minister no longer wanted to see any French interference in his policy and declared his own “direct action towards Berlin” – a flight to Hitler’s headquarters at Berchtesgaden.³⁶ From now on, France was to play only a secondary role.

30 See PARKER, Robert Alexander Clarke: *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, pp. 148–149.

31 *DBFP*, 3rd series, Vol. I, document No. 286, Phipps’s telegram to Halifax, 23 May 1938, p. 357. *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945. Aus dem Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes*, series D (1937–1945), Vol. 2. Imprimerie Nationale, Baden-Baden 1950, document No. 210, pp. 270–271, Welczeck’s telegram to Ribbentrop, 26 May 1938.

32 *DČSZP – 1938*, Vol. II, document No. 413, note 1, p. 50.

33 DUROSELLE, Jean-Baptiste: *France and the Nazi Threat*, p. 273.

34 See JACKSON, Peter: French Military Intelligence and Czechoslovakia, 1938. In: *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 1994, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 81–106.

35 ADAMTHWAITE, Anthony: *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939*. Frank Cass, London 1977, p. 206.

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Bonnet commanded a large group of supporters in the government. On 13 September – the day after Hitler’s incendiary anti-Czechoslovak speech in Nuremberg which signalled the start of the Sudeten German rebellion in the borderlands – a sharp dispute arose in the French government: do we mobilise, or not? Bonnet was resolutely opposed to the idea, and seven other ministers supported his opinion. The French foreign minister threatened to resign if mobilisation was agreed. But President Albert Lebrun summoned he and Prime Minister Daladier and urged them to agree a united position. He succeeded: the government did not collapse – and France did not mobilise. At least, not yet.³⁷

Nine days later, after Czechoslovakia had given in to Western pressure and accepted the British-French plan to relinquish its borderlands to Germany, those members of the cabinet who saw the abandonment of France’s commitments to Czechoslovakia as a matter of honour – Justice Minister Paul Reynaud, Minister of Colonies Georges Mandel and Pensions Minister Champetier de Ribes – threatened to resign. However, they were dissuaded from doing so by the similarly-minded chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, Édouard Herriot, and also by Winston Churchill, who was visiting Paris at the time. On the other hand, as if in retaliation, the Minister of Public Works Anatole de Monzie and Labour Minister Charles Pomaret threatened to resign if Daladier gave way to Reynaud.³⁸ Bonnet himself then urged the hesitant prime minister to continue his efforts to preserve peace. According to the testimony of the commander-in-chief of the French Armed Forces, General Maurice Gamelin, Bonnet’s letter of 24 September was accompanied by another threat of resignation.³⁹

However, with the increasing tension that followed Chamberlain’s unsuccessful second meeting with Hitler in Bad Godesberg, Bonnet clearly began to lose control of the situation: Prime Minister Daladier summoned his cabinet, ostentatiously neglecting to invite the Foreign Minister, and received overwhelming support for his statements describing Hitler’s Bad Godesberg ultimatum as unacceptable.⁴⁰ On 24 September the Foreign Minister could no longer prevent France from mobilizing several categories of reservists numbering three-quarters of a million men, and was apparently taken aback by the general Czechoslovak mobilisation announced the previous night – in response to the British-French recommendation to that effect.⁴¹ Bonnet believed this step could have *very grave consequences and cause Herr Hitler to at-*

36 DUROSELLE, Jean-Baptiste: *France and the Nazi Threat*, p. 282.

37 ADAMTHWAITE, Anthony: *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939*, p. 210.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 220; DUROSELLE, Jean-Baptiste: *France and the Nazi Threat*, p. 288.

39 ADAMTHWAITE, Anthony: *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939*, p. 221.

40 MAY, Ernest R.: *Strange Victory. Hitler’s Conquest of France*. I. B. Tauris, New York 2000, p. 166.

41 *DČSZP – 1938*, Vol. II, document No. 684, record taken by the head of the political department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, envoy I. Krno, on the démarche of the British envoy to the Czechoslovak Republic, B. Newton, 23 September 1938, p. 372; document No. 686, Krno’s record on the démarche of the French envoy to the Czechoslovak Republic, V. De Lacroix, 23 September 1938, p. 373. The French envoy, however, passed on the words of the General Secretary of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alexis Léger, that the French government *has no information that would be “particulièrement alarmantes” from a military standpoint* and that *he would rather take the necessary measures “avec autant de discrétion que possible”*.

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tack.⁴² In the hours that followed, Bonnet seemed to be losing his main allies in seeking a conciliatory solution – the British. On 26 September, shortly after returning from the bilateral British-French summit in London, he was suddenly faced with an unexpected statement issued by the British Foreign Office and approved by Foreign Minister Lord Halifax. It said that if, *in spite of all efforts made by the British Prime Minister a German attack is made upon Czechoslovakia, the immediate result must be that France will be bound to come to her assistance and Great Britain and Russia will certainly stand by France*. Bonnet worked every last one of his contacts to limit the circulation of this report in the French press, and amongst journalist circles he spread the claim that this was not the official position of the French government.⁴³

The minutes of the British-French negotiations clearly show that during 1938 French politicians repeatedly acquiesced to “conciliatory” British positions – though mostly after some hesitation and emphasis on the need to honour French commitments.⁴⁴ At a key meeting at No. 10 Downing Street on 25 and 26 September, Daladier declared that France would not accept concessions that would mean the destruction of Czechoslovakia, and *those who want to may follow us*. But then the key officials of the British government, headed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the excellent jurist Sir John Simon – who in 1931 had brought part of the Liberal Party into the “National Coalition” and later served in the key posts of Foreign Secretary (1931–1935), Home Secretary (1935–1937) and Chancellor (1937–1940) – began what amounted to an interrogation of their French colleagues, with the aim of proving that their fine words could not be matched by deeds because France was simply not ready for war.⁴⁵ Reading the official British record, the reader certainly does not gain the impression of a meeting of equals, but rather *an adequate flavour of the hectoring and patronising attitude of the British delegation*.⁴⁶

Although the outcome of the negotiations was ultimately ambiguous, the French delegation did agree to further British efforts to avoid war. Chamberlain’s closest adviser, Sir Horace Wilson, was sent to Berlin with a message warning the Germans not to attack, but at the same time containing Chamberlain’s appeal to Hitler to

42 DBFP, 3rd series, Vol. II, document No. 1,064, p. 493, Phipps’s telegram to Bad Godesberg and the Foreign Office, 23 September 1938.

43 See ADAMTHWAITE, Anthony: *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939*, pp. 151, 221. See also DUROSELLE, Jean-Baptiste: *France and the Nazi Threat*, p. 288. Duroselle, however, mistakenly dates the communiqué as 25 September and has the French ministers discussing it at 15.00 on the same day! Chamberlain was also angered that Halifax published the communiqué without his permission. See HUGHES, Michael: *British Foreign Secretaries in an Uncertain World, 1919–1939*. Routledge, New York 2006, p. 181. For the text of the communiqué see DBFP, 3rd series, Vol. II, note 1 on document No. 1,111, p. 550.

44 DBFP, 3rd series, Vol. I, document No. 164, notes of British-French talks at 10 Downing Street, 28–29 April 1938, pp. 198–234; *Ibid.*, Vol. II, No. 928, notes of British-French talks at 10 Downing Street, 18 September 1938, pp. 373–400. The French once again reaffirmed their allegiance during discussions on international guarantees for the truncated Czechoslovakia. See *Ibid.*, Vol. III, document No. 325, notes of British-French talks at the Quai d’Orsay, 24 November 1938, pp. 300–306.

45 DBFP, 3rd series, Vol. II, documents No. 1,093 and 1,096, notes of British-French talks at 10 Downing Street, 25–26 September 1938, pp. 520–541.

46 FABER, David: *Munich. The 1938 Appeasement Crisis*, p. 354.

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compromise on his Bad Godesberg demands and help him find a conciliatory solution.⁴⁷ And Bonnet, though he faced the growing opposition of most of his colleagues in the ministerial council and again considered resignation, continued his efforts to resolve the crisis peacefully at all costs. The historian Anthony Adamthwaite aptly observes: *France's readiness to go to the extreme limit of concession must have greatly influenced Hitler's decision to call a conference in Munich.*⁴⁸ The dominant signal that France broadcast in 1938 was therefore mainly one of weakness and indecision.

Between London and Prague: Mistakes and Misunderstandings

With this, of course, grew the importance of the foreign policy of Great Britain – a great power, however, that had no treaty obligations towards Czechoslovakia beyond those laid down in the Covenant of the League of Nations – i.e. the same obligations as all the League's other members. But the British perception of the “Czechoslovak question” was in several respects fundamentally distorted from the outset.

First and foremost, Britain's political leaders had somewhat inaccurate ideas about the political system in Czechoslovakia. In fact, for many British politicians and diplomats, the fact that Czechoslovakia was a democratic country did not play a very significant role in their decision-making. Some ministers considered the country a *modern and very artificial creation with no real roots in the past* (Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon)⁴⁹ or an *unstable unit in Central Europe* and they saw no reason to take any steps *to maintain such a unit in being* (Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip).⁵⁰

These attitudes merely reflected the frequent disinformation that had been sent to London by a number of British diplomatic representatives over the previous months and years. Among them, Sir Joseph Addison, British envoy to Czechoslovakia between 1930 and 1936, played an important role. His telegrams and messages sent from the Thun Palace in Prague were full of prejudicial judgments about the Czechs, whom he considered to be *inferior Slavs*, and Czechoslovakia, which he viewed as a non-viable, *artificial country*. Like many other British diplomats and politicians, he also wished to restore the European power structure and the borders that had existed until 1914.⁵¹

47 MAY, Ernest R.: *Strange Victory. Hitler's Conquest of France*, p. 166; NEVILLE, Peter: *Hitler and Appeasement. The British Attempt to Prevent the Second World War*. Hambledon Continuum, London 2006, p. 105; PARKER, Robert Alexander Clarke: *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, pp. 173–174.

48 ADAMTHWAITE, Anthony: *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939*, p. 223. He describes the various French efforts undertaken at the proverbial eleventh hour in both Rome and Berlin.

49 Quoted according to GILBERT, Martin (ed.): *Winston Churchill, Companion Vol. V, The Coming of War, 1936–1939*, pp. 948–949. This was by far not an isolated opinion in British government circles. See GOLDSTEIN, Erich: Neville Chamberlain, the British Official Mind and the Munich Crisis. In: *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 1999, Vol. 10, No. 2–3 (Special Issue on The Munich Crisis, 1938. Prelude to World War II), pp. 276–292, quoted here from p. 282.

50 Quoted according to GILBERT, Martin (ed.): *Winston Churchill, Companion Vol. V, The Coming of War, 1936–1939*, pp. 948–949.

51 CORNWALL, Mark: The Rise and Fall of a “Special Relationship”? Britain and Czechoslovakia, 1930–1948. In: BRIVATI, Brian – JONES, Harriet (eds.): *What Difference Did the War Make?* Leicester University Press, Leicester 1993, pp. 133–134.

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Also Robert Hadow, Addison's deputy, who enjoyed his boss's considerable confidence, repeatedly painted a distorted picture of the minority question in Czechoslovakia. It was mainly based on information obtained from Sudeten German leaders, who were becoming increasingly anti-Czechoslovak. Hadow concluded on numerous occasions that Czechoslovakia was no longer a democratic country.⁵² He also claimed that *Austria and Czechoslovakia had no right to separate existence* and that German hegemony in South-East Europe was not only inevitable but desirable.⁵³

The key ambassadorial post in Berlin was occupied from May 1937 until the outbreak of war by Sir Neville Henderson, a diplomat whose highly conciliatory attitude towards the Nazi leadership – in many ways even more conciliatory than that of Chamberlain himself – led to him being castigated in post-war historiography⁵⁴ and whose reports from Berlin were from time to time even accused of falsification by the Foreign Office.⁵⁵ In his diplomatic dispatches on the Sudeten German issue, he frequently emphasised the principle of self-determination as *the highest moral principle*.⁵⁶ For example, in June 1937, he let it be heard in front of the U.S. Ambassador William E. Dodd that Britain and the United States should join Germany and allow it to annex Austria and those parts of Czechoslovakia it saw fit.⁵⁷ He looked at the Czechs with obvious prejudice, labelling them as *a pig-headed race*,⁵⁸ and considered Czechoslovakia – in the apt words of the British historian Donald Cameron Watt – to be *an artificial creation dominated by a people who were collectively not worth the candle and had exaggerated notions of their international status*.⁵⁹

As a result, the approach of Neville Chamberlain and his government to the 1938 crisis was largely shaped by the fact that, according to key diplomats and many other influential British figures, the German minority in Czechoslovakia was right to pursue its struggle for “self-determination”, while the position of the government in

52 MICHIE, Lindsay W.: *Portrait of an Appeaser. Robert Hadow, First Secretary in the British Foreign Office, 1931–1939*. Praeger, London 1996, pp. 29–37.

53 These words were reproduced in a telegram sent by George S. Messersmith from the U.S. Embassy in Vienna to the Secretary of State in Washington on 4 June 1936. Quoted according to LUKES, Igor: *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler. The Diplomacy of Edvard Beneš in the 1930s*. Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford 1996, p. 56.

54 See for example GILBERT, Felix: *Two British Ambassadors: Perth and Henderson*. In: CRAIG, Gordon A. – GILBERT, Felix (eds.): *The Diplomats 1919–1939*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994 (first published 1953), pp. 537–554; STRANG, Bruce: *Two Unequal Tempers: Sir Ogilvie-Forbes, Sir Neville Henderson and British Foreign Policy, 1938–39*. In: *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 1994, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 107–137; NEVILLE, Peter: *Appeasing Hitler. The Diplomacy of Sir Neville Henderson, 1937–39*. Palgrave Macmillan, London 2000.

55 TNA, FO 371/21742, C 10879/1941/11, Speaight and Mallet's notes, 27 September 1938; *Ibid.*, FO 371/22958, C 2885/13/18, Roberts' notes, 15 March 1939.

56 CORNWALL, Mark: *The Rise and Fall of a “Special Relationship”?*, p. 132.

57 *National Archives and Record Administration*, Washington D.C., RG 59, Vol. 1218/17, 852.00/5824, Dodd's telegram to the State Department, No. 144, 24 June 1937.

58 *DBFP*, 3rd series, Vol. II, document No. 551, p. 11, letter from Sir N. Henderson to Lord Halifax, 26 July 1938.

59 WATT, Donald Cameron: *Chamberlain's Ambassadors*. In: DOCKRILL, Michael – McKERCHER, Brian (eds.): *Diplomacy and World Power. Studies in British Foreign Policy 1890–1950*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 136–170, quoted here from p. 151.

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Prague was at least morally questionable. At the same time, British politicians practically without exception misunderstood the true nature of the Sudeten German issue and, above all, the role played by Konrad Henlein and his colleagues. Indeed, the Sudeten German gym teacher had won over even the most far-sighted diplomats and politicians of the country that had traditionally a great appreciation for sportsmanship and physical fitness. Thus it was that even Sir Robert Vansittart, for eight years until January 1938 the Permanent Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office (i.e. its de facto head), and then the Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the British government, who constantly warned of the dangers of growing and unrestricted German might especially after the Nazi rise to power, yet at the same time he said that he enjoyed “very friendly relations” with Henlein and until 1938 met him during each of his three visits to London.⁶⁰ At his appearances at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Henlein successfully played the tune of anti-Communism, which was a strong feature of British society, especially in her upper class; he claimed that the 1935 Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty had turned Czechoslovakia into a Russian aircraft carrier and the Czechs had been infected with the germ of Communism.⁶¹

In mid-May 1938, Henlein visited Britain once again. Foreign Minister Lord Halifax then informed the British cabinet as follows: *Sir Robert Vansittart had formed two conclusions from his conversation, first that Dr (sic) Henlein had no instructions from Berlin, and second that Dr Beneš could get an agreement of a useful character if he would only act quickly.*⁶² In his interviews with prominent British personalities, Henlein spread the impression that he was only concerned with territorial autonomy for the Sudeten Germans and he did not wish to see the land they lived on becoming part of Germany.⁶³

Even Winston Churchill, who met Henlein in the company of Liberal leader Archibald Sinclair, was *very much pleased with the result of the talk.*⁶⁴ Both Chamberlain and Halifax thanked Churchill for his efforts. The Foreign Secretary duly informed Basil Newton, Addison’s successor in the post of British envoy to Prague, about Henlein’s *present disposition by which Vansittart was impressed*, and instructed the envoy to urge the Czechoslovak government that they *should make a sincere and thorough going offer at the earliest possible moment, since if the present opportunity is boldly seized a large offer of basis of negotiations made quickly may lay the foundation of an agreement.*⁶⁵ Naturally nothing at all came of this – primarily because Henlein had not the least bit of inter-

60 *Churchill College Archive*, Cambridge, Vansittart Papers, VNST II/17, Vansittart’s memorandum of 16 May 1938 on his lunch with Henlein. This memorandum was printed as an appendix in *DBFP*, 3rd series, Vol. I, pp. 630–633. It is remarkable that the following first sentence of the original memorandum was omitted from the published version: *I have been on very friendly terms with Herr Henlein for some years past and have seen him frequently during his visits to London.*

61 ROBERTS, Andrew: “The Holy Fox”. *The Life of Lord Halifax*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1991, pp. 104–105.

62 Quoted according to PARKER, Robert Alexander Clarke: *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, p. 147.

63 See for example NICOLSON, Nigel (ed.): *Harold Nicolson. Diaries and Letters, 1930–1939*. Collins, London 1966, pp. 340–341.

64 GILBERT, Martin (ed.): *Winston Churchill, Companion Vol. V, The Coming of War, 1936–1939*, pp. 1,024–1,025.

65 *Ibid.*

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est in looking for a *modus vivendi* with the government in Prague. Quite the contrary, he acted according to a tactic previously agreed in his correspondence with Hitler; that is, to always ask the Czechoslovak government for more than it would be willing to offer, thus turning the spiral of crisis and tension.⁶⁶

In London, however, he brilliantly played the role of moderate politician and was able to fool even the most provident of the provident. As Vansittart's biographer Norman Rose put it: *With all the vast intelligence sources at his disposal, or perhaps because of them, Van[sittart] failed to penetrate beneath the surface of Henlein's masquerading.*⁶⁷

British interpretations of Czechoslovak foreign policy were also distorted. This was true mainly of Czechoslovak-Soviet relations and went hand-in-hand with the deep-rooted (and in the context of the culminating Stalinist terror, of course, more than understandable) distaste towards the Soviet Union amongst the British political elite.⁶⁸ The following illustrative detail may serve as an example. In April 1935, Sir John Simon, then British Foreign Secretary, was informed by Hermann Göring that there was an arrangement between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union according to which Russian aircraft would be able to use Czech airfields in the event of a Soviet attack on Germany. The Foreign Secretary was so impressed by Göring's revelation that, four and a half years later, after the outbreak of war, he could not resist asking Edvard Beneš, who was already in exile in London, whether Göring's statement at that time was true. Beneš's answer, of course, was negative.⁶⁹

It should also be stressed, however, that Beneš himself – still as foreign minister – “deserved” for Czechoslovakia being labelled as Stalin's spy and a bastion of the Communist International. Even though he signed a Treaty of Alliance with the Soviet Union some three weeks after the French Prime Minister Pierre Laval, in comparison to him, Beneš could not keep a cool head: after returning from a visit to the USSR in June 1935, he spoke to Western diplomats, including the British Ambassador Addison, with such enthusiasm about the situation in the Soviet Union and its political-social system that he soon earned the label of a naïf who was prone to succumb to Stalin's temptations.⁷⁰

Last but not least, British military planners also worked with highly inaccurate or misleading information in relation to Czechoslovakia. Understandably, the potential consequences of a possible war in Central Europe were dealt with far in advance. On 21 March 1938, a committee of the British Joint Chiefs of Staff came to the conclusion that no pressure Britain could develop with possible allies *could prevent Germany from invading and over-running Bohemia and from inflicting a decisive defeat on the Czechoslovakian Army*. Britain would thus face a protracted struggle with Germany to restore Czechoslovakia's lost integrity. In such a case, both Japan and Italy would probably

66 *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945*. Series D. United States Government Printing Office, Washington 1949, Vol. II, document No. 107, unsigned report with addenda, pp. 197–198.

67 ROSE, Norman: *Vansittart. Study of a Diplomat*. Heinemann, London 1978, p. 224.

68 See for example the extensive analysis of this phenomenon in SHAW, Louise Grace: *The British Political Elite and the Soviet Union 1937–1939*. Frank Cass, London 2003.

69 *Bodleian Library*, Oxford, Simon Papers, Box 11, diary entry from 29 September 1938.

70 For more see LUKES, Igor: *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler*, pp. 52–58.

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strive to pursue their own goals, and Britain would ultimately face not only a limited European war but a second global conflict. The joint chiefs concluded their analysis by saying that Britain naturally lacked the resources to win such a war. However, it should be noted that some of the variables with which these predictions were calculated were inaccurate or doubtful. This mainly concerned the significant underestimation of the strength of the Czechoslovak army, which was based on the estimates of 1935, and also the degree of its readiness, which mainly concerned the ongoing construction of its border fortifications. Also, the international balance sheet of power in the analysis was controversial, with Russia included among those countries which would probably remain neutral in the event of a European war over Czechoslovakia.⁷¹

During the moment of the greatest crisis, on 14 September 1938, the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented an updated version of their analysis. This time they raised the numbers for the Czechoslovak armed forces, but they warned against a war simultaneously waged against Germany, Italy and Japan, which in their words *neither the present nor the projected strength of our defence forces is designed to meet, even if we were in alliance with France and Russia.*⁷² These were, of course, controversial conclusions.

Contradictory Attitudes of the Czechoslovak Leadership

However, the degree of the determination of Czechoslovaks to fight for their independence and territorial integrity was also unclear, which was at least partly the fault of Czechoslovak leaders themselves. Whilst according to some British diplomats (including not only Neville Henderson but also the military attaché in Berlin, Colonel Mason-MacFarlane, who was far more critical of Nazism and its leaders) and politicians, the May crisis had primarily been caused by Czech overreaction to ambiguous indications, when confronted with a real threat a few months later, it was as if this determination had waned, and the will to reach a compromise had grown even at the cost of territorial losses. Thanks to the French prime minister, Beneš's "fifth plan" – which on 15 September Jaromír Nečas presented to Léon Blum, who then informed Édouard Daladier – had got to in London even before the French government delegation arrived from Paris on 18 September for talks, which produced the British-French plan for Czechoslovakia to relinquish its borderlands. But this was not the only signal from the Czechoslovak side that it was ready to make concessions on territorial issues.

At the same time, Prime Minister Milan Hodža informed Basil Newton that Czechoslovakia could give up the Cheb region and other territories with a population totalling eight hundred thousand to one million inhabitants, whose integration into the new state of Czechoslovakia after the Great War "many Czechs" did not expect, and so opposition to their loss would not be insurmountable. Losing the region

71 See HAUNER, Milan: Czechoslovakia as a Military Factor in British Considerations of 1938. *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 1978, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 194–222, quoted here from pp. 196–198.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

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would not significantly threaten, but on the contrary might strengthen the Czechoslovak border.⁷³ Yet, this was not a “betrayal” by the Czechoslovak Prime Minister. President Beneš was also looking for a compromise at the expense of the territorial integrity of the Czechoslovak state. In a telegram sent on 19 September from Paris to Prague, Štefan Osuský criticized the president for a remark made in front of the French envoy Victor De Lacroix that Czechoslovakia could give up border regions inhabited by up to nine hundred thousand Germans.⁷⁴

For Daladier this was said to have been the decisive incentive to adopt the British proposal – i.e. the British-French plan. And, according to Osuský’s reports, Anatole de Monzie noted that if Beneš himself had given his consent for the relinquishing of Sudeten territory, *the rest is just a matter of quantity*.⁷⁵ Yet even from Beneš’s side this was not an isolated statement. In these crucial days – specifically on 15 September – the president said in front of the British envoy Newton that some Sudeten Germans were living in territories *which in his opinion could have been excluded from Czechoslovakia without endangering the existence of the State*. Admittedly he added to this argument that ceding these areas at that moment in time *would of course be no adequate solution and would in any case be impossible in the present circumstances*,⁷⁶ but the merit of the president’s message, what’s more transmitted precisely at the same time as the Nečas mission to Paris, was evident. And if Beneš was truly not considering ceding part of Czechoslovakia’s territory to Germany, then he should not have indulged in “hypothetical” reflections on the topic before a representative of His Majesty’s Government. It should be added that this strange way of practicing foreign policy repeatedly led Beneš – and most of all his country – into a difficult situation and narrowed his room to manoeuvre also in the years to come.

From the perspective of the Western powers, desperately seeking a peaceful way out of this crisis in a “far-away country”, the matter seemed clear. Reports of this kind, emanating from the most senior Czechoslovak officials – the country’s prime minister and president – could only serve as evidence of Czechoslovak readiness to give up at least part of its territory inhabited by majority of German-speaking people. From this moment onwards, the issue of territorial concessions at the expense of Czechoslovakia changed in the eyes of British and French politicians into a purely practical question along the lines of what would be the exact extent of the ceded territory, what kind of supervision would be offered by the international community etc. This was the

73 DBFP, 3rd series, Vol. II, document No. 902, Newton’s report for the Foreign Office, 16 September 1938, p. 358. “An important member of the General Staff” accompanied by another officer repeated practically the same thing on 17 September 1938 in an interview with the British Military Attaché. Ibid., document No. 913, Newton’s telegram to Halifax, 17 September 1938, p. 364.

74 *Documents Diplomatiques Français* (hereafter referred to as DDF followed by the series and volume number) 1932–1939, series 2 (1936–1939). Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris 1977–1982, Vol. XI, document No. 180, De Lacroix’s telegram to Bonnet, 16 September 1938, pp. 273–275.

75 DCŠZP – 1938, Vol. II, document No. 631, Osuský’s letter to Beneš, 19 September 1938, p. 328.

76 Quoted according to DEJMEK, Jindřich: *Nenaplněné naděje. Politické a diplomatické vztahy Československa a Velké Británie od zrodu První republiky po konferenci v Mnichově (1918–1938)* /Unfulfilled Hopes. Political and Diplomatic Relations Between Czechoslovakia and Great Britain from the Birth of the First Republic to the Munich Conference (1918–1938)/. Karolinum, Prague 2003, pp. 416–417, footnote 141.

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context in which the British-French plan for the gradual secession of Czechoslovak territories with a German majority was presented. However, due to the dramatic nature of the situation, the proposals went beyond what had been mooted to the British and French by Prime Minister Hodža and President Beneš. And so Czechoslovakia officially rejected the British-French plan – and produced in its place a counter-proposal calling for the dispute to be resolved through international arbitration.⁷⁷

Immediately thereafter, however, two signals were received from Prague that it was in fact willing to relinquish a significant part of its borderlands – if such a solution were presented in the form of an ultimatum. While Newton overheard it from “someone” in the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry,⁷⁸ his French counterpart De Lacroix reported that he had received this key message directly from Prime Minister Milan Hodža himself.⁷⁹ Of course, it cannot be ruled out that Bonnet had given De Lacroix telephone instructions on how to proceed with the conversation with Hodža, and also forbade him from taking any notes, as the envoy claimed in an interview with Jaromír Smutný six months later.⁸⁰ Hodža himself repeatedly denied that he had requested that pressure be wielded by the French side.⁸¹ However, there is evidence that he had resorted to such methods in similar, albeit less dramatic situations in the past. For example, according to British sources, at the end of June 1938, he recommended that the UK Foreign Office exert pressure on the Czechoslovak government via Jan Masaryk to proceed rapidly towards far-reaching concessions in relation to the Sudeten Germans.⁸² And on 2 September, when he assured the British envoy to Prague Basil Newton that he personally understood the need for far-reaching concessions to the Sudeten Germans, he went as far as saying that it would help him personally if the Foreign Office exerted pressure on Beneš over the issue.⁸³

77 *DČSZP – 1938*, Vol. II, document No. 651, Aide-mémoire from the government of the Czechoslovak Republic to the governments of France and Britain, 20 September 1938, pp. 343–345.

78 *DBFP*, 3rd series, Vol. II, document No. 979, Newton's report to the Foreign Office, 9 September 1938, p. 425.

79 *DDF*, series 2, Vol. XI, document No. 232, De Lacroix's telegram to Paris, 20 September 1938, pp. 361–362. J. Dejmek's assertion that Hodža's personal role in offering an ultimatum was based solely on Bonnet's later statement seems unsustainable. DEJMEK, Jindřich: *Edvard Beneš. Politická biografie českého demokrata. Část II. Prezident republiky a vůdce národního odboje (1935–1948)* /Edvard Beneš. A Political Biography of a Czech Democrat. Part II, President of the Republic and leader of the National Resistance (1935–1948)/. Karolinum, Prague 2008, pp. 155 and 163. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle points out the unambiguous authenticity of De Lacroix's message, which is kept not only in the political papers of Georges Bonnet but also in those of Édouard Daladier. DUROSELLE, Jean-Baptiste: *France and the Nazi Threat*, p. 469, footnote 128.

80 See KUKLÍK, Jan – NĚMEČEK, Jan: *Proti Benešovi! Česká a slovenská protibenešovská opozice v Londýně 1939–1945* /Against Beneš! Czech and Slovak Anti-Beneš Opposition in London 1939–1945/. Karolinum, Prague 2004, pp. 155–156.

81 See for example Hodža's letter to Beneš on 12 February 1941. In: KUKLÍK, Jan – NĚMEČEK, Jan: *Hodža versus Beneš. Milan Hodža a slovenská otázka v zahraničním odboji za druhé světové války* /Hodža versus Beneš. Milan Hodža and the Slovak Question in the Foreign Resistance during World War II/. Karolinum, Prague 1999, document No. 22, pp. 228–229.

82 See KUKLÍK, Jan – NĚMEČEK, Jan: *Proti Benešovi!*, p. 157, footnote 265.

83 See KUKLÍK, Jan – NĚMEČEK, Jan: *Od národního státu ke státu národnosti? Národnostní statut a snahy o řešení menšinové otázky v Československu v roce 1938* /From Nation State to a State of Nationalities? The

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In other words, this method of “ordering up” pressure from Western governments was nothing new for the Czechoslovak Prime Minister. And let us not forget that just four days before the incriminating interview with De Lacroix, Hodža mentioned in front of the British envoy Newton the possibility of giving up Czechoslovak territory that was home to one million inhabitants.⁸⁴ For years to come, Edvard Beneš had his doubts about Hodža’s role at the crucial moment immediately before the arrival of the British-French ultimatum on 21 September. The last relevant statement on the matter was provided to him in May 1943 by Alexis Léger, who served in the key role as Secretary General of the French Foreign Ministry from 1933 to 1940, during a visit to the United States. After returning to London, Beneš informed the Czechoslovak government in exile of his conversation with Léger, who had told him that De Lacroix *had received an order from Bonnet, an explicit order, to provoke Dr Hodža into making some remarks in order that the responsibility for failing to comply with the treaty could be thrown at the Czechoslovaks’ door.* The President stressed in a statesman-like fashion, this was no longer merely about Hodža, but the reputation of the Czechoslovak Republic was at stake; it was an *intolerable notion that the Czechoslovak prime minister might have betrayed and that Czechoslovakia should somehow be accused of being complicit in these unheard of criminal intrigues by Bonnet and Daladier.* Although Léger was unable to tell him exactly what had been said between De Lacroix and Hodža, Beneš had *with a hundred percent certainty found that Bonnet had planned to provoke Hodža into making remarks which he then presented to the public in the form of a telegram.*⁸⁵

It is therefore quite conceivable that Prime Minister Hodža might not have asked for a British-French ultimatum on his own initiative, but rather he was “provoked” into making the request... Regardless of where the truth lies, the French and British envoys then presented President Beneš with the ultimatum at Prague Castle in the early hours of 21 September 1938, according to which if the Czechoslovak government rejected the British-French plan, the two powers would refuse to intervene any further, regardless of the Franco-Czechoslovak Allied Treaty.⁸⁶ According to Beneš’s later recollections, De Lacroix’s tears flowed down his face, while Newton simply stared at the ground.⁸⁷

Nationality Statute and Efforts to Address the Minority Issue in Czechoslovakia in 1938/. Karolinum, Prague 2013, p. 263.

84 See note No. 73.

85 NĚMEČEK, Jan – ŠTOVÍČEK, Ivan – NOVÁČKOVÁ, Helena – KUKLÍK, Jan – BÍLEK, Jan (eds.): *Zápisy ze schůzí československé vlády v Londýně* /Notes from meetings of the Czechoslovak Government in London/, part III, section 1. Charles University Law Faculty – Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences – Masaryk Institute and Archive of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague 2012, 92nd meeting, 17 June 1943, p. 421. See also Smutný’s far briefer notes of the conversation between E. Beneš and A. Léger in NĚMEČEK, Jan – NOVÁČKOVÁ, Helena – ŠTOVÍČEK, Ivan (eds.): *Edvard Beneš v USA v roce 1943. Dokumenty* /Edvard Beneš in the USA in the year 1943. Documents/. In: *Sborník archivních prací* /Collection of Archival Works/, 1999, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 469–565, taken here from pp. 512–513. More of Smutný’s testimony is reproduced in KUKLÍK, Jan – NĚMEČEK, Jan: *Hodža versus Beneš*, pp. 180–181.

86 *DBFP*, 3rd series, Vol. II, document No. 991, Halifax’s telegram to Newton, 21 September 1938, sent at 1.20 a.m., pp. 437–438; *Ibid.*, document No. 992, Newton’s telegram to Halifax, 21 September 1938, sent at 4.45 a.m., p. 438.

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On 22 September, Hodža's government resigned and was replaced by a cabinet led by Jan Syrový. The executive was thus headed by a Czechoslovak general, until that time the General Inspector of the Czechoslovak Armed Forces, who the previous evening had delivered an improvised speech at Prague Castle in front of a crowd of many thousand people protesting against acceptance of the British-French ultimatum and demanding mobilisation. Indeed, Syrový, with one eye covered with a patch and with his legionnaire's past, truly aroused in the population the hope that the Czech nation would – as the one-eyed Žižka had done during the Hussite wars – once again heroically “punish the invaders from the Reich”. The following evening, general mobilisation was announced in response to the failure of the Chamberlain-Hitler meeting at Bad Godesberg and as recommended by the British and French.⁸⁸ But the new Czechoslovak government also confirmed in several communiqués to Paris and London the commitment made by its predecessor to relinquish those border areas with a German majority.⁸⁹ And so while reservists were rushing to sign up, mostly enthusiastic about defending the republic within its existing borders, the government in Prague was discussing the criteria for determining the 50 % demographic boundary that would be decisive in whether territory would be ceded to Germany or remain within Czechoslovakia, and which disputed territories would theoretically be possible to defend in the future.⁹⁰ (A week later, the Munich Agreement came as a true shock to the Czechoslovak government, because the ministers had not been consulted at all. The subsequent ten-day, five-party talks in Berlin, which were completely stage-managed by the Germans, decided in all disputed cases against Czechoslovakia.)

On 25 September, Jan Masaryk presented to the British government the position of the Czechoslovak government, which he himself had formulated dramatically, rejecting Hitler's Bad Godesberg demands (see above). However, the same evening, a request from the Czechoslovak government arrived at the Foreign Office to send a British plane to Prague, which would the following day deliver *an additional explanation to today's Czechoslovak government note*. In response, Masaryk telephoned Prague and urged them to confirm that the previous position was indeed the position of the Czechoslovak government, and that nothing would be heard from Prague that would weaken the current resolute Czechoslovak attitude.⁹¹ Of course, these contradictory signals questioned the very remnants of Czechoslovak determination – unfortunately, just as the attitudes of both Western democracies towards Hitler's aggression seemed to be hardening (let us recall the partial French mobilisation, the mobilisa-

87 Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton, N. J., Hamilton Fish Armstrong Papers, Box 101, memorandum on a conversation between Hamilton Fish Armstrong and Dr Edvard Beneš at the Hotel Plaza in New York, 10 February 1939.

88 *DBFP*, 3rd series, Vol. II, document No. 1,027, Halifax's telegram to Newton, 22 September 1938, p. 461.

89 See for example DEJMEK, Jindřich: *Nenaplněné naděje*, pp. 330–333.

90 See TESAR, Jan: *Mnichovský komplex. Jeho příčiny a důsledky* /The Munich Complex. Its Causes and Effects/. Prostor, Prague 2000, pp. 18–23.

91 *DČSZP* – 1938, Vol. II, document No. 716, notes of President Beneš's personal secretary P. Drtina on the telephone report from the Czechoslovak envoy to Great Britain J. Masaryk, 26 September 1938, pp. 395–396.

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tion of the British fleet and the Foreign Office press release of 26 September on the consequences of possible German aggression towards Czechoslovakia). However, in Chamberlain's point of view, the signals arriving from Prague only provided more arguments to find a "compromise" solution to the crisis. Why fight for something that had been settled in principle and approved by all parties when all that was at stake were the mere modalities of a generally agreed solution?

However, the most fundamental misunderstanding was about the Munich denouement itself. While most British politicians and diplomats believed over the next five months that with and thanks to Britain's mediation, Czechoslovakia had been saved from certain destruction and successfully preserved as a formally independent state, politicians in Prague, as well as the bulk of the population, perceived "Munich" as an act of treachery, especially by the French but also by the British. It is here, in the events of late September 1938, where you will find the roots of many misunderstandings and disappointments in the mutual Czechoslovak-British relationship in the next decade, as well as generally in the attitudes of the Czech and Slovak public towards the West over an even longer time frame.

Conclusion

The landscape of European diplomacy on the eve of Munich's "Peace for our Time" offers a number of truly remarkable images. This is true when looking closely at events in Paris, London and Prague. The French political scene is, traditionally, fractious, and its helplessness in the question of the military commitment to Czechoslovakia is already reflected in the ambivalent personality of Prime Minister Daladier himself. He occasionally gets into disputes with his foreign minister, Georges Bonnet, who makes himself quite clear: since British aid is extremely uncertain, war must be avoided at all costs. In Britain, he finds powerful allies for this political line, led by Prime Minister Chamberlain and his key ministers John Simon and Samuel Hoare. Great Britain is not bound to Czechoslovakia by anything beyond the covenant of the League of Nations (i.e. no more than any other member of the League), yet it does not intend to ignore the fate of Czechoslovakia, rather its prime minister intends to moderate an international settlement – in the tragic illusion that he would be as successful in this role as he was in his title of Chancellor of the Exchequer when he guided Britain through the Great Depression. He is seconded by his Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, who, in his struggles with Nazi Germany, tries to apply his experience of negotiating with the Indian National Congress when he served as the Viceroy of India. This is perhaps even more tragic because Hitler, unlike Gandhi, truly does not believe in non-violence.⁹² Halifax's painful revelation occurs sooner than the prime minister's, and from approximately the Bad Godesberg meeting onwards, he starts to harden British foreign policy against making further concessions. Nevertheless, throughout the crisis the British leadership relies on a rational strategic balance

92 For more on this see ROBERTS, Andrew: "The Holy Fox", p. 47, and ELLINGER, Jiří: *Neville Chamberlain*, p. 76.

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sheet, but it is working with very misleading information from both military circles and key diplomats, some of whom can truly be described as Czechophobes.

Yet, in the case of the Munich Agreement, it is difficult to speak credibly of a “betrayal” by Western powers. Certainly not in the British case, because the U.K. had no formal alliance with Czechoslovakia. In addition, it was British government agencies, specifically the Foreign Office, who warned Berlin on 26 September that if Germany swept off the table all the already ambitious and exceptionally generous agreements and launched a military attack on Czechoslovakia, it would have to face the combined military might of three European powers. And if we look at things dispassionately, the term “betrayal” does not even fit in the case of France; “betrayal” would only have been accurate if Germany had attacked Czechoslovakia and France had refused to come to its aid.⁹³ But this is not what happened.⁹⁴ On the other hand, France did certainly exert heavy pressure on its smaller ally to submit to a disadvantageous “compromise”. Let us not forget, however, that the proposed solution including territorial concessions to Germany came also from the Czechoslovak side by mid-September. Yet, even though the French and even less so the British might not have been guilty of “betrayal”, that famous Napoleonic era epithet certainly applies to the pressure exerted by the two great powers and what would enter history as the Munich Agreement: *It was worse than a crime – it was a mistake!*⁹⁵

Back in Prague meanwhile, President Edvard Beneš was experiencing probably the most difficult moments in his life. Under strong international pressure, he was literally to decide the fate of his country and his nation. At the same time, these were moments that shaped his political thinking for the rest of his political career. He had received misleading information from his envoys that he himself had chosen. And in September 1938, he too made fundamental mistakes, mistakes that a top diplomat and political strategist – as he clearly considered himself – should avoid at all costs. Edvard Beneš, however, made them over and over again throughout his career – and increasingly so in the last ten years of his life. Above all, these were hypothetical considerations of “theoretically possible” solutions to a given situation, solutions which he did not generally prefer, but nevertheless solutions he presented as options to foreign diplomats. Perhaps in some cases they might have sympathised with him, but

93 In May 1943, Alexis Léger answered Beneš’s question as to why France had repeated in August and September 1938 that it would honour the treaty even though it had already counted on the border areas being ceded to Germany: *Daladier’s intentions were honest: he wanted to mobilise and help, but he meant that in the event the German-speaking regions had been ceded and if Czechoslovakia was still threatened, France would go to war.* NĚMEČEK, Jan – ŠTOVÍČEK, Ivan – NOVÁČKOVÁ, Helena – KUKLÍK, Jan – BÍLEK, Jan (eds.): *Zápisy ze schůzí československé vlády v Londýně / Notes of the meetings of the Czechoslovak government in London*, part III, section 1, 92nd meeting, 17 June 1943, p. 422.

94 Of course, it can be argued that this is precisely what happened on 15 March 1939. However, this interpretation is weakened by the fact that (a) Czechoslovakia broke up a day earlier, with the separation of Slovakia and (b) President Hácha had signed the fateful document placing the fate of the Czech nation into the hands of Adolf Hitler.

95 It is irrelevant in this context whether the author of this statement from 1804 – allegedly in response to the execution of Louis Antoine de Bourbon, Duke of Enghien – was Joseph Fouché or Antoine Boulay de la Meurthe, or (less likely) Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord.

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naturally their priority was to defend the interests of their home countries, where, of course, the content of his – let’s say academic reflections – were presented as the contours of a solution being conceded or even offered by the president. Thus, theoretical contemplations – often in the form of far-reaching concessions – repeatedly morphed into proposed solutions. When Beneš mentioned the potential eventuality of making territorial concessions to Germany in front of Basil Newton, then he was dramatically narrowing the room for further negotiations – and this room was of course much smaller for Czechoslovakia than for any of the Great Powers. This is doubly true of Nečas’s Paris mission, with Beneš’s top-secret message to the key French politicians. As soon as the most senior representative of Czechoslovakia admitted the possibility of making territorial concessions to Germany, then clearly he had no choice but to accede to them when a week or two later the great powers put them forward as a ready-made solution.

The possibilities of a small country to influence international affairs are usually limited. However, in September 1938, Czechoslovakia’s excessive attempts to find a compromise at its own expense narrowed these possibilities even further. Unfortunately, Prague never sent a clear message along the lines of: *Only so far and no further!* The country should have drawn such a red line between the most accommodating concessions to the German minority within the existing borders of Czechoslovakia (let’s say going as far as the “fourth plan”) and the totally unacceptable territorial concessions towards Germany. In other words, the prerequisite for successful influence of great power policy was the defence of the territorial integrity of the state, a substantially more fundamental attitude than that adopted by Czechoslovak diplomats during September. And when the rough contours of something like this did begin to emerge literally at the eleventh hour, specifically on 19 September, the next day the Czechoslovak Prime Minister Milan Hodža came up with an offer that Czechoslovakia would agree with the loss of its borderlands if it was presented in the form of an ultimatum. Although, perhaps Hodža was after all “merely” provoked into making this offer by the French envoy...

Given all of the above, Czechoslovak propaganda did an admirable job during the Second World War and immediately afterwards. It managed to paint a colourful picture for several generations, creating an almost immaculate image of a country that had in September 1938 stood united and determined to defend its borders against Nazi aggression, and even successfully and enthusiastically mobilised its armed forces to defend its territorial integrity, and only when it was viciously betrayed by its allies at Munich, decided – abandoned by all – to sacrifice its borderlands and independence on the altar of an ephemeral European peace.

And there is one more noteworthy aspect to the September 1938 crisis and the role of Czechoslovak diplomats in it; the Council of the League of Nations and the procedure for its possible role as negotiator were discussed in hundreds of diplomatic dispatches during September 1938. However, even at a time of the gravest peril, the Czechoslovak government did not turn to this organisation with a request to deal with the Sudeten question and Germany’s aggressive pressure towards Czechoslovakia. At the same time, these were acts of war – or at least they were presented as such

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later on by the Czechoslovak government in exile in London, which dated the beginning of the military conflict between Czechoslovakia and Germany as the start of the Sudeten German uprising in the Czechoslovak borderlands in September 1938.

In general, it may be concluded that the mutual perceptions of the intentions and plans of the key players during the September 1938 crisis were heavily influenced by frequent misinformation, mutual misunderstanding and mistrust on the part of diplomatic representatives, military experts, and especially political leaders. This is the case in every international crisis, but it is doubly true for “Munich”. At least two counterfactual questions emerge from this: 1. Would the key decisions of individual leaders differ significantly if their information and intentions had been accurate? 2. Would a strong stance by the Western European powers (in conjunction with a less evasive Soviet policy) have been enough to stop Hitler? Obviously, offering a clear answer is not possible in either case. However, it can certainly be said that the chances of avoiding the tragedy that unfolded in Europe in the months and years that followed would have been significantly higher if the Western powers (and the Soviet Union) had taken a more principled stance and worked more closely with Czechoslovakia, determined “as one” to defend its borders. However, at the end of the 1930s, and given the different historical experiences of all the countries involved, this was indeed nothing more than a hypothetical outcome.