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Gerhard L. Weinberg

MUNICH AFTER 50 YEARS

Half a century after the Munich conference, that event lives in the public memory as a series of interrelated myths. For most people, Munich represents the abandonment of a small country, Czechoslovakia, to the unjust demands of a bullying and powerful neighbor by those who would have done better to defend it. It is believed that the Allies, by the sacrifice of one country, only whetted the appetite of the bully whom they had to fight anyway, later and under more difficult circumstances. The “lesson” derived from this widely held view is that it makes far more sense to take action to stop aggression at the first opportunity.

This view, not surprisingly, is especially influential with those who personally experienced the events of the late 1930s and who thereafter found themselves and their countries involved in the costliest war in history. Many came to hold a view of the proper conduct of U.S. foreign policy, the so-called domino theory, which asserted that if drastic action were not taken to halt aggression at its earliest occurrence, the countries in the path of an encroaching power would fall like dominoes, with the fall of each only hastening that of the next. Once prominently put forward as a justification for American intervention in Vietnam, this thesis was temporarily discredited by second thoughts about U.S. policy there. More recently, however, it has been revived in connection with Nicaragua. Some believe that a Sandinista regime, once fully consolidated, will surely topple the adjacent “dominoes,” this time in Central America.

Neither scholarship nor time is likely to shake the firm hold that the symbols of Munich maintain on those who remember a time when the city’s name connoted more than good beer or bloody Olympic games. The umbrella that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain carried with him to Munich in the

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fall of 1938 came to represent not common sense in the European autumn but cowardice in the face of danger. The exclusion from the conference of Czechoslovakia, the country whose boundaries and fate were at stake, is considered by those even vaguely familiar with the history as a particularly revolting aspect of the affair. On his return to London, Chamberlain held in his hand an agreement stating that all questions concerning Anglo-German relations would be solved by consultation between the two countries, so they would never again go to war with each other. His famous comment that he, like Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli sixty years earlier, had brought back from Germany peace with honor and "peace in our time," has provided superb copy for every parody of British policy in the 1930s.

II

Three aspects of the Munich conference that developed more fully afterward, or on which we are now better informed, suggest that this traditional interpretation warrants a closer look.

In the first place, it was after all the same two Allied leaders who went to Munich, Chamberlain of Great Britain and Edouard Daladier of France, who one year later led their countries into war against Adolf Hitler's Germany, something no other leader of a major power did before his own country was attacked. The Italians, who under Benito Mussolini thought of themselves as a great power, joined with Hitler in June 1940 in what Mussolini saw as an opportunity to share the spoils of victory. Joseph Stalin was sending the Nazis essential war supplies until a few hours before the German invasion of June 1941 awoke the Kremlin from its confidence in an alignment with Hitler. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had repeatedly but vainly warned the Soviet leader of the German threat, had worked hard to rouse the American people to the dangers facing them; but until confronted by a Japanese surprise attack and by German and Italian declarations of war, he had hoped that Americans might be spared the ordeal of war.

Only Britain and France went to war with Germany out of calculations of broader national interest instead of waiting to be attacked; and it is perhaps safe to argue that without the lead from London, the French government would have backed off in 1939 and awaited a German invasion of its own territory. It is rather ungracious, especially for Americans whose country

would not take action to defend either Czechoslovakia or Poland, and which had provided by law that it would not help anyone who did, to condemn as weaklings the only leaders of major powers who mustered up the courage to confront Hitler on behalf of another country.

A second factor that prompts us to take a new look at the 1938 crisis is the view that Hitler, the man usually thought to have triumphed at Munich, is now known to have held of it. The opening of German archives and the new availability of important private papers provide a picture rather different from the one commonly held.

We now know that Hitler had never been particularly interested in helping the over three million people of German descent living inside Czechoslovakia, but only in the ways they might help him in his project to isolate Czechoslovakia from outside support, create incidents that would provide a pretext for the invasion and destruction of that country, and thereafter provide manpower for additional army divisions. The new divisions, in turn, he considered useful for the great war he planned to wage against the powers of Western Europe as the prerequisite for the quick and far easier seizure of enormous territories in Eastern Europe.

Hitler believed that German rearmament was far enough advanced by late 1937 and early 1938 to make this first little war against Czechoslovakia possible. While spreading propaganda on behalf of the ethnic Germans of Czechoslovakia, Hitler was counting on the threat of Japan's advance in East Asia and Italy's support in Europe, and the reluctance of France and England to fight another great war, to isolate Czechoslovakia from outside support. It is understandable in this context that the successful and peaceful annexation of Austria in March 1938 (which left Czechoslovakia even more vulnerable than before), followed by a dramatic reaffirmation of Germany's alignment with Italy during Hitler's visit to Rome, produced Hitler's decision in the second week of May 1938 to go to war that year. We are not ever likely to know whether his belief that he was suffering from throat cancer contributed to his haste; he was certainly a man with a mission in a hurry who would explain later in 1938 that he preferred to go to war at the age of 49 so that he could see the whole issue through to resolution!

But there proved to be inner flaws in his strategy. The prospective allies he had selected turned out to be reluctant.

The Japanese at that time wanted an alliance against the Soviet Union, not against the Western powers. Poland and Hungary both hoped to obtain pieces of Czechoslovakia but wanted them without a general European war. The Italians, furthermore, were not as enthusiastic as Hitler thought. Mussolini had given a hostage to fortune by committing large forces to the support of Francisco Franco in the Spanish Civil War, forces certain to be lost in a general war in which they would be cut off from their homeland.

III

The basic miscalculation of the German government was, however, of a different type: it was integrally related to the issue that Hitler deliberately placed at the center of public attention, the Sudeten Germans living in Czechoslovakia. The purpose of this focus was obvious. The constant attention in both publicity and diplomacy to the allegedly mistreated millions of Germans living in Czechoslovakia was designed to make it politically difficult, if not impossible, for Britain and France to come to Czechoslovakia's assistance when it was eventually attacked. How could democracies contest the principle of self-determination that they had themselves proclaimed? Would they act to turn a small war into a huge one on the unproven assumption that a big war inevitably would come anyway?

But there were aspects of this program that might, from Hitler's perspective, cause problems. One was that the continued diplomatic focus on the Sudeten Germans, which was needed to assure the isolation of Czechoslovakia, might eventually make the transition from diplomacy to war more difficult. The other was that, despite the number and significance of the Germans inside the Czechoslovak state, there were obviously far more Czechs and Slovaks. If ever the real as opposed to the pretended aim of German policy became clear, the very same concept of self-determination that worked against support of Czechoslovakia as long as its German-inhabited rim was under discussion would shift in favor of Prague once the undoubtedly non-German core came into question. It was in this regard that the crisis of the end of September 1938 came to be so dramatic and its resolution, in Hitler's eyes, so faulty.

We now know that Hitler had originally planned to stage an incident inside Czechoslovakia to provide Germany with a pretext for invading that country with the objective of destroy-

ing it all rather than merely annexing the German-inhabited fringe. He was influenced by the experience of 1914, when Austria-Hungary had taken the assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand as an excuse to attack Serbia.

In Hitler's opinion there had been two deficiencies in Austria-Hungary's behavior, and Germany would on this occasion remedy both. The first was the plainly accidental timing of the assassination. If one waited for others to act, the most appropriate moment might easily be missed: Hitler had long held that the Central Powers should have struck well before 1914. The obvious solution to the problem of timing was to arrange for the incident oneself, and at the optimal moment. Hitler originally thought of staging the assassination of the German minister to Czechoslovakia, Ernst Eisenlohr; then he shifted to the idea of having incidents staged by the German military inside Czechoslovakia. Finally he resorted to the creation of special squads of Sudeten German thugs who—since it was not thought safe to entrust them with the secret date for the scheduled invasion—were simply assigned quotas of incidents to stage each week in each sector of the borderlands. This process would continue until the time had come for Berlin to announce that the most recent example of Czechoslovak wickedness (in responding to the latest provocation) obviously merited Germany's taking the drastic action of invading the country.

The second defect of Austria's action in 1914, in Hitler's view, was that Vienna had dithered for weeks during that summer while the shock effect of the original incident wore off. This time, Hitler reasoned, it would be very different indeed.

Since the decision to invade would precede rather than follow the incident selected as a pretext, the German military would move swiftly and in accordance with carefully prepared plans. The German dictator was confident that his army would obey the order to attack, in spite of warnings of dissent from some in the military hierarchy. Early in February 1938 he had replaced the commander in chief of the army, Werner von Fritsch, a great admirer of the National Socialist state but an independent thinker, with Walther von Brauchitsch, a man without backbone or scruples who was also the recipient of special secret payments from Hitler (apparently the beginning of a huge and never fully explored program of bribing most of the highest-ranking German generals and admirals).

Hitler had also, at the same time, assumed the responsibilities formerly assigned to Minister of War Werner von Blomberg. Furthermore, he had recently replaced the chief of the general staff of the army, Ludwig Beck, a vehement critic of the war plan, with the more complaisant Franz Halder. Although there were skeptics among the military—and there are some analysts of the 1938 crisis who believe that an order to attack would have touched off an attempted coup from within the army—it seems to me that Hitler's confidence in the response of the military to his orders and those of its new commander in chief, von Brauchitsch, was fully warranted.

What, then, went wrong? Why was there no transition from propaganda and diplomacy to war?

The constant emphasis on the Sudeten Germans in Nazi propaganda brought too late a response from the government in Prague, which until August left the initiative to Berlin. And this in spite of a formal and explicit, but confidential, warning to Prague from the French government in July that under practically no circumstances would it come to the defense of its Czechoslovak ally. Keeping this message undisclosed—and it was one of the few secrets that did not leak out in the Paris of the 1930s—was of course essential to the official French pretense that it was the British who were holding them back from full support of Prague, a pretense that turned to panic when the British position hardened and could no longer provide a fig leaf for French unwillingness to act.

The centrality of the nationality issue also created a terrible dilemma for London. Canada, Australia and the Union of South Africa (as it was then known) all made it absolutely clear to the British government that they would not go to war alongside Britain over the Sudeten German question. The British chiefs of staff strongly argued against the risk of military action. If war were to come, it would have to come under circumstances that made the issues clear to the public in Britain and the dominions, and, as the British learned in September 1938, to the French.

It was under these circumstances that on September 13 Neville Chamberlain decided to fly to Germany, originally planning not even to tell Berlin that he was coming until after his plane had taken off. The Germans were startled enough even when notified in advance, and they were trapped by their own propaganda that there were nationality issues to discuss. Moreover, those who genuinely believed in the fairy tale of the

“stab in the back”—that Germany had not been beaten at the front in World War I, but had instead lost the war because of the collapse of the German home front—could not risk starting a second war unless German public opinion could be convinced that such a war, with all its costs in lives and treasure, was everybody else’s fault.

So the British prime minister had to be received at Berchtesgaden. All he could be told, of course, was the official public line that something had to be done for the poor Sudeten Germans. While Chamberlain set about getting the agreement of France and Czechoslovakia to having the German-inhabited portions of Czechoslovakia ceded to Germany, Hitler began plotting other ways to arrange for war in spite of the meddling Englishman. When at their second meeting, on September 22 at Bad Godesberg, Chamberlain offered Hitler an Allied capitulation to his ostensible demands—the French, Czechoslovak and British governments had all agreed to the transfer of the Sudeten territory—the German dictator was dumbfounded and raised new and obviously preposterous conditions for a peaceful settlement.

IV

It was at this point that the issue shifted conspicuously from the fate of the Sudeten Germans to that of the Czechs and Slovaks. Here Hitler was indeed trapped by his own strategy. He now had either to risk a war with Britain and France as well as Czechoslovakia or pull back, call off the planned invasion, and settle for what Prague, London and Paris had already agreed to.

It was not only Germany’s military and diplomatic leaders who urged caution on the Nazi dictator. Troubled by the prospect of a general war when the German people gave every sign of being unenthusiastic about it, Hitler’s closest political associates, Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels, argued for a peaceful settlement. The prospective allies of Germany in this crisis were hesitant, now that war was a real and not merely a theoretical possibility. The Poles certainly wanted a piece of Czechoslovakia, but not at the risk of breaking completely with their French ally and Great Britain. The Hungarians were watering at the mouth over the possibility of realizing their extensive territorial demands: all of the Slovak and Carpatho-Ukrainian portions of the Czechoslovak state and a few additional pieces if they could get them. The authorities in Buda-

pest, however, were very conscious of having only recently begun their own rearmament; they were also fairly certain that Britain and France would go to war over a German invasion of Czechoslovakia and that such a general war would end in a German defeat.

Hitler never forgave the Hungarians, whose resolution, in his eyes, was not commensurate with their appetite, but he was even more astonished by the defection of his most important ally, Italy. Mussolini's urging him to settle for the German-inhabited fringe of Czechoslovakia instead of attacking that country as a whole—when Hitler had expected encouragement to go forward, along with a full promise of support—appears to have played a major part in his decision to recall the orders for war, already issued, and instead agree to a settlement by conference at Munich.

Precisely because he had not tested the predictions of those who had warned against an attack on Czechoslovakia, Hitler was then and ever after angry over having pulled back. He projected his own reticence onto others, denouncing as cowards those whose advice he had followed instead of testing his own concept in action, and despising the British and French leaders before whose last-minute firmness he had himself backed down.

If the Munich agreement, which others then and since have regarded as a great triumph for Germany, appeared to Hitler then and in retrospect as the greatest setback of his career, it was because he had been unwilling or unable, or both, to make the shift from propaganda and diplomacy to war as he had always intended. He had been trapped in a diplomatic maze of his own construction and could not find the exit to the war that he sought. In the last months of his life, in 1945, as he reviewed what had gone wrong and caused the dramatic descent from Germany's earlier heights of victory, he appears to have asserted that his failure to begin the war in 1938 was his greatest error, contributing to the eventual collapse of all his hopes and prospects.

In the intervening years he was most careful not to repeat what he considered were the great errors of 1938. A massive campaign was begun to rally the German people for war. As Hitler put it on November 10, 1938, meeting with the German press, the peace propaganda designed to fool others had carried in it the risk of misleading his own people into thinking that peace, not war, was intended. Thereafter, Hitler would sometimes postpone but would never again call off an attack on

another country once ordered, and he would never again allow himself to be trapped in diplomatic negotiations.

In 1939 German ambassadors were kept away from London and Warsaw; they were in fact forbidden to return to their posts. The incident the Nazis had planned as the pretext for war against Poland—an assault on a radio station inside Germany—would be organized and managed directly from Berlin. Furthermore, as Hitler explained to his military leaders on August 22, 1939, he had things organized so well that his only worry was that at the last minute some *Schweinehund* would come along with a compromise and again cheat him of war. The allusion to Chamberlain and Munich was unmistakable. And it ought to be noted that this “lesson” of Munich remained with him. When the Soviet Union made desperate efforts in 1941 to avert war with Germany, by volunteering the most extensive concessions, by offering to join the Tripartite Pact and by soliciting diplomatic approaches from Berlin, Hitler once again claimed to be worried about only one thing: a last-minute compromise offer that would make it difficult for him to continue on the road to yet another extension of the war.

As for the remainder of Czechoslovakia, he was even more determined that it be destroyed. The German government devoted itself in the months after Munich to accomplishing that objective, never realizing that, in the face of universal relief over the avoidance of war, the violation of the agreement just signed would make any further step by Germany the occasion for war. In 1939 no one listened to Nazi tales of persecuted Germans in Poland; the Germans themselves had demonstrated to everyone that such propaganda was merely a pretext for actions with entirely different objectives. And when soundings were taken in London before the invasion of Poland, the answer was that Czechoslovakia must have its independence back first before any negotiations; similar soundings after the German conquest of Poland were answered with the demand that both Czechoslovakia and Poland be restored to independence. Since Hitler and his associates had not been interested in the fate of those who had been used as propaganda instruments, they never could understand that others had taken the issue seriously—but only once.

V

A third facet of the Munich agreement as we look back on it from the perspective of fifty years is the light shed on events

by the opening of wartime archives and the progress of research. The account of German policy presented here is in large part based on materials that became available after World War II. The British archives have also been opened and show a government hoping against hope for a peaceful settlement, but prepared to go to war if there were an invasion of Czechoslovakia in spite of all efforts at accommodating what were perceived as extreme but not entirely unreasonable demands. We now know that Chamberlain was correctly reported as willing to contemplate the territorial cession of the German-inhabited portions of Czechoslovakia in early May 1938, and that the British knew that there was no serious French military plan to assist Czechoslovakia—the only offensive operation planned by the French if war broke out was into Libya from Tunisia. It is now also known that in June 1938 Winston Churchill explained to a Czechoslovak official that it was essential for Czechoslovakia to work out an agreement with Konrad Henlein, the leader of the Sudeten Germans, and that although he, Churchill, was criticizing Chamberlain, he might well have followed the same policy if he had held the responsibilities of power.

It is also clear that there were serious doubts within the British government—which may or may have not been justified—about the ability of Britain and France to defeat Germany, and a determination that if war came and victory were attained, the German-inhabited portions of Czechoslovakia would *not* be returned to Prague's control.

The question of whether or not Britain and France would have been militarily better off had they gone to war in 1938 will remain a subject for debate for historians. Most would agree that the defenses of Czechoslovakia would have proved more formidable in 1938 than those of Poland in 1939, but then the question remains whether, since there was to be no attack by the French in the west in 1938, a somewhat longer Czechoslovak resistance would have made any significant difference. It can be argued that the Germans used the last year of peace more effectively than the British and the French, but it must also be recalled that new British fighter planes and radar defenses would not in any case have been available to meet a German onslaught in 1939 as they were for the Battle of Britain in 1940. And the excellent Czechoslovak tanks Germany acquired must be weighed against Poland's essential

1939 contribution to breaking the German Enigma-machine code.

There are other factors to be considered, including several most difficult to assess. What, for example, would have been the evolution of U.S. attitudes toward a European war in which Canada remained neutral, as it might have done had war broken out in 1938? Certainly there was in 1938 great doubt about the economic and fiscal ability of Britain to sustain a second great war within a generation, at a time when financial support from the United States was prohibited by Congress. In an age of determined American isolation, no one anticipated the lend-lease program on which Britain would later prove so dependent.

The other side of this coin is the clarity of British policy, whether one agrees with it or not, in the year after Munich. If this Munich pact were broken, it was agreed, then the next German aggression that was resisted by the victim would bring on war. It is from this perspective that the pairing in internal British government discussions of Holland and Belgium with Romania and Poland must be understood: the key issue was *any* further step, not its specific direction or victim. With this determination came a resigned recognition of the likely, perhaps unavoidable, cost of a new war for a weakened empire. In August 1939 Foreign Office official Gladwyn Jebb, years later the British representative at the United Nations, was told by an official of the German embassy in London that in a general war in which, as the Englishman predicted, all in the end fought against Germany and eventually smashed it, there would be only two victors, the Soviet Union and America. The German then asked Jebb, "How would England like to be an American dominion?" Jebb replied that "she would infinitely prefer to be an American dominion than a German *Gau*."¹

The opening of French archives has suggested to some a rather more charitable view of France's policy. Efforts to rehabilitate the French leadership of the 1930s have focused on the deficiencies of British policy, the terrible weakening of France as a result of World War I and the social and political cleavages of the postwar years. Certainly the view of most scholars on French policy in the immediate post-World War I years has changed substantially: France is now viewed as weak-

¹ Rohan Butler, ed., *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, Third Series, Vol. 7, London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1954, p. 556.

ened and frightened rather than combative and assertive, while the peace treaty of 1919 is increasingly seen as far more favorable to Germany than either German propaganda or subsequent popular views in the United States and Great Britain have pictured it.

Nevertheless, the archives demonstrate even more hesitation in French policy than was previously believed. In the terrible civil war in Spain (still raging at the time of the crisis over Czechoslovakia) it now is clear that the initiative for the policy of nonintervention came from Paris, not from London as was long believed. More immediately relevant is the revelation, previously cited, that in July 1938 the French government secretly warned Prague that French military assistance could not be expected. The publicly advanced argument that France could not commit itself in the absence of a British promise to help was a sham; but in response to a plea from the Czechoslovak government, this deception was kept secret. When the French government learned that the British were indeed serious about fighting if Germany invaded, the ensuing panic in Paris helped precipitate the decision of Chamberlain to fly to Berchtesgaden.

The new light shed on French policy in 1938 also clarifies the extraordinary evolution of French policy in World War II; first the insistence on trying to conduct the war in Scandinavia or the Caucasus, and, after the collapse of France in 1940, the Vichy French willingness to fight the English, other Frenchmen and the Americans, but under no circumstances the real enemies of France: Germany, Italy and Japan.

The archives of the Soviet Union remain closed to scholars, though lately there are signs that this might change. New light on Soviet policy has been shed, however, not only by Soviet documentary publications but also by material from the files of other powers. A new perspective on Soviet policy comes as a result of our knowledge that throughout the 1930s Stalin, who regarded Britain, not Germany, as the Soviet Union's main enemy, was trying to arrange an agreement with Hitler; the policy reversal that led to the Soviet-German Nonaggression Pact in 1939 was made by Berlin, not Moscow. Furthermore, Jiri Hochman has now demonstrated on the basis of material from the Romanian archives that Moscow deliberately rejected the option of sending land and air forces across Ro-

mania to assist Czechoslovakia in case of war in the 1938 crisis.² These factors help explain why the Soviet Union was the only major power outside the Axis that recognized the legality of the disappearance of Czechoslovakia in 1939 and urged the Western powers to follow this example.

Americans have learned from the experience in Vietnam that a democracy should only enter a major war if its people see and feel the issues as so important to themselves as to warrant a sacrifice of blood and treasure. Few, if any, in this country urged the defense of Czechoslovakia against invasion in 1968 or action against its occupation since then. Perhaps someday this thought will make it easier for people to understand the reluctance of the dominions to rush to the defense of Czechoslovakia thirty years earlier, and why they implored the London government not to do so either. There are many objectionable acts committed in international affairs that are not necessarily perceived as so threatening to the national interest of third parties as to warrant calling on many to risk their lives to stop them. If a nation is to undertake the costs of war, what is needed is a popular recognition of its necessity, not the hurling of slogans.

What about the people most immediately affected? The Germans had entrusted their fate to a leader who had promised to establish a one-party state as had been instituted in the Soviet Union and Italy and to lead them "whither they must shed their blood." He certainly kept *these* promises, and by doing so led them to ruin.

For the people of Czechoslovakia, he brought other great disasters; first the end of their independence, and then their subservience to the Soviet Union. As for the Sudeten Germans, he brought a fate that included the return to Germany they had shouted for, but in a way they had not anticipated. Here is a lesson others might ponder. If you shout for something long and loud enough, you run the risk of getting it. Having tried to settle the problem by moving the boundary, the Allies decided, after Germany had broken that arrangement, to let Czechoslovakia move the people. The Sudeten Germans are no longer ruled from Prague, but that is because they were driven from their homes into post-World War II Germany.

² *The Soviet Union and the Failure of Collective Security, 1934–1938*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984, pp. 194–201.

They have indeed come “Home into the Reich” as their slogan required. Those in other parts of the world who prefer not to live under a government they consider inappropriate for themselves might want to think about the risk of expulsion as a concomitant of the hope for new borders.

In the United States, the “lesson” of Munich may well remain that appeasing aggressors, by making concessions to them or merely verbally condemning their actions, only encourages them and makes them more willing to take greater risks. There is without doubt substance to this view, but only in a context in which the alternatives and prospects and costs are assessed soberly. As leaders contemplate the prospect of war, they would be well advised to make sure that their people, or at least a very large number of them, are prepared to make the relevant commitment and are ready to pay the price of sticking to it.

In 1938, in neither Britain nor France—to say nothing of the United States or the Soviet Union—were the masses clearly willing to run the risk of war unless Germany committed the most obvious and direct outrages. And the British dominions had made clear their determination to stay out. The following year Britain and France and the dominions acted in response to the German attack on Poland. On the first occasion in World War II in which a British army decisively defeated a German army—at El Alamein in 1942—the majority of the divisions in the British Eighth Army had come from the Commonwealth to fight alongside the soldiers of the United Kingdom. At a time when New Zealanders appear to some observers to be inclined to opt out of their alliances, their great share in that significant battle deserves to be recalled as a part of the lesson of Munich for societies in which, by whatever mechanism, the public’s preferences control the policies of the state.

Those commitments, policies and alliances that can reasonably be expected to involve a country in a great war must be clearly articulated, understood at least in general by the public and perceived as truly essential to the nation’s security. In an age of nuclear weapons that might be a useful “lesson” of the Munich conference.