

Essay and Reflection: The Munich Crisis Revisited

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GERHARD L. WEINBERG with WILLIAM R. ROCK  
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## Essay and Reflection: The Munich Crisis Revisited

### The Munich Crisis in Historical Perspective

GERHARD L. WEINBERG

AS WE LOOK back on the events surrounding the Munich Conference of 1938 from the perspective of half a century, broader issues inform our thinking even as the old controversies continue. This essay is designed to suggest briefly three approaches to the dramatic events of those anxious September days and the developments that preceded and followed them: first, some comments on recent new information on the events themselves; second, a suggested placement of the Munich settlement into the development of the European state system; and third, a comparison of the crisis with another international crisis which at one point seemed likely to lead to a great war but was then resolved, though with a very different sequel.

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The opening of vast quantities of first German and American, then British, archives, informs the books that have appeared since the Second World War. As much as possible of this material has been taken into account in the second volume of my study of the origins of the Second World War, organized around the processes and decisions of German foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> As that work was the focus of a session at the convention of the American Historical Association in 1982, which has since been published in full,<sup>2</sup> comment here will be confined to one aspect of it, namely the French materials that have yet to influence discussion of the Munich Conference in many circles.

<sup>1</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II, 1937-1939* (Chicago, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> See the Review Article in *Journal of Modern History*, lvii (1985), 297-320.

In the book the attempt was made to show that Hitler had decided in early May, right after his return from a trip to Italy, that he would attack Czechoslovakia in 1938, with the intention from the beginning of conquering the whole country. He saw this as a necessary preliminary to the defeat of France and Great Britain in the big war that was itself the precondition for the quicker and simpler task of seizing, primarily from the Soviet Union, vast territories in Eastern Europe on which to settle German farmers while preparing for a last war, this time against the United States, by building a blue-water navy. Although the May Crisis of 1938, in which rumours of German troop movements touched off a war scare, merely led the Germans to make minor adjustments to operational plans already being developed, it may have contributed to confusion in Prague regarding the extent of the support Czechoslovakia could expect from the British. In any case, the government of Czechoslovakia left the initiative to the Germans, who utilized it to focus attention on the alleged difficulties of the Sudeten Germans, by means of a propaganda campaign designed to isolate Czechoslovakia from possible outside support when attacked by Germany. Although some in Germany had doubts about the whole project, Hitler went forward, reassured by the loyalty of the new commander-in-chief of the German army, General Walther von Brauchitsch, and his own belief that neither France nor Great Britain would fight while the United States had made it clear that it would stand aside, and the Soviet Union was in the process of demolishing its own military structure.

The most significant new evidence from the French archives for an understanding of the events of 1938 is the formal notification of Czechoslovakia by the French in July 1938 that France was simply not going to fight – and the success of the French, at Prague's request, in keeping this decision and its notification absolutely secret. The widely held view, propagated at the time and often repeated since, that France was reluctant to stand by Czechoslovakia because Great Britain was holding back, turns out to have been an artfully contrived excuse. The Prague government wanted the truth kept secret to avoid a dramatic weakening of its negotiating position; the French government was happy to oblige – and for once successful in keeping a secret – in order to keep up its own pretence. Once this point is understood, we can also understand more clearly the dynamics of the last days of the crisis. When the British position appeared to the French to be hardening, panic ensued in Paris, because now it would no longer be possible to avoid the choice between standing by Czechoslovakia – as French leaders had always publicly asserted they preferred to do – or revealing the true position. This panic played a major role in Neville Chamberlain's decision to go forward

with his last-minute trip to Germany, a decision, whether right or wrong, now more easily understood when we recall that the French had deliberately kept the British ignorant of their earlier warning to Czechoslovakia.

From the German side, we do not have a great deal that is new from the last decade in the way of either information or perspectives. The careful examination of the fatal role played by von Brauchitsch remains to be written; certainly no one has yet taken up my suggestion that Hitler's subventions to him may have been the first step in a comprehensive programme of secret gifts to German military commanders of the Second World War. Tangentially related to von Brauchitsch's role in 1938 is that of the conspiratorial whisperings inside the German military and governmental structures. The recent work of Marion Thielenhaus,<sup>3</sup> whatever its other defects, has shown beyond doubt that the advice from various groups in Germany to the British government was so contradictory that nobody in London could conceivably have paid much attention to it. Advising a foreign government that a firm warning to Hitler would be the best tactic, and simultaneously telling it that such a warning might well provoke him and should therefore *not* be given, was not likely to produce much more than confusion at the time and reduced credibility later for those who had given the advice.

On the policy, or perhaps one should say attitude, of the Soviet Union, we are also only slightly better informed than we were a decade ago. We now have from the Romanian archives the evidence utilized by Jiri Hochman, showing that the Soviet government in the critical days deliberately passed up the opportunity to send aid to Czechoslovakia across, or over, Romania.<sup>4</sup> This information provides important indirect confirmation of the warning the Czechoslovak representative in Moscow, Zdenek Fierlinger, sent to Eduard Beneš during the last days of the crisis: that in the event of a European war, the Soviet Union would probably aim to obtain a common border with Czechoslovakia, presumably by seizing parts of Poland.<sup>5</sup> Stalin was no more interested in the maintenance of the independence of Czechoslovakia in 1938 than in 1939 or 1940 (when the Soviet Union alone outside the Axis recognized the legality of the disappearance of Czechoslovakia and urged the Western powers to make peace with Germany on that basis), or in 1945

<sup>3</sup> Marion Thielenhaus, *Zwischen Anpassung und Widerstand: Deutsche Diplomaten 1938-1941* (Paderborn, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Jiri Hochman, *The Soviet Union and the Failure of Collective Security, 1934-1938* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), esp. pp. 194-201.

<sup>5</sup> Fierlinger's tel. 961, 27 Sept. 1938, is cited in Weinberg, *Foreign Policy*, p. 416, n. 170.

(when the Soviet Union annexed a portion of Czechoslovakia), or in 1948 (when a new regime was imposed on the country).

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With regard to the place of the Munich Conference in the broader perspective of European transition and settlements, surely one of the major changes in Europe, and to some extent elsewhere on the globe, has been the transition from a system of dynastic states to one based – in reality or supposedly – on the national principle. That process went forward with considerable speed and numerous complications during the nineteenth century. In some instances it involved the creation of larger new units out of smaller older ones, as in Italy and Germany; in others, the emergence of new smaller units out of older larger ones, for example Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Belgium, Romania, Luxemburg, Bulgaria, and, if one is allowed to extend the nineteenth century to 1914, Norway and Albania.

The nineteenth century was, on the other hand, certainly not a time when all such adjustments were made to everyone's satisfaction. On the contrary, from Ireland to Poland whole peoples believed that they had been deprived of independence as national units, and for too long; the Poles could even argue that they had been better off under the original Vienna settlement of 1814-15 setting up the mini-Republic of Cracow, which Austria had later swallowed. Furthermore, within several of the European states were groups such as the subject nationalities of Austria-Hungary and Russia, the non-Germans inside the German Empire, and the Italians left outside the new kingdom of Italy who argued – or it was argued for them by others – that they were still on the wrong side of the state boundaries.

The peace settlement of 1919 went a considerable way towards meeting a substantial proportion of such demands for the adjustment of state boundaries. In Europe, the number as well as the percentage of peoples living under what they perceived as alien rule was much smaller than at any time since the emergence of the modern state system in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The very fact, however, that nationalistic sentiment had spread to a wider segment of the population and could now be, and often was, mobilized by vociferous propaganda, made the remaining nationality problems more acute, even if they involved smaller numbers of people. Very few looked at the giant steps that had been taken towards matching state with nationality inside Europe and the signs of similar evolution in the European colonies.

On the Continent, one might mention the re-emergence of an independent Poland, the independence of the Baltic States and Finland, the

return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, the new settlement of the German-Danish border, the liberation of many Slavic peoples from control by the Habsburgs, alongside the maintenance of the unity of Germany, the newest of the great powers.<sup>6</sup> Outside Europe, one might mention the appearance of representatives of the British Dominions at the Paris peace conference and the development of the mandates system as signs of a newly emerging post-colonial order.

It is, however, the pinching shoe that draws attention, not the one that fits, and therefore not surprising that during the inter-war years a rise in the level of noise on the nationality issue easily overcame the tacit acceptance of new state boundaries by large segments of the population in the affected areas. Into this framework the Munich Crisis should be placed.

National Socialist Germany planned to supersede both the dynastic and the national principles of state organization by a new third principle which might be called racial imperialism. In this form of state organization, those who imagined themselves racially superior to others would claim – and in practice assert the claim – that they were entitled to take over the space inhabited by other people whom they considered inferior. The latter would be either driven out or exterminated to make additional space available for those who were entitled to it by virtue of their inherent superiority, a superiority they would demonstrate by their greater violence. As no one had proclaimed and applied such a view in Europe for centuries, the idea that such notions might be taken seriously by those who spouted them was hard to credit. This last point is ironically best – or worst – illustrated by the many Marxist historians who did not grasp at the time or even decades later that National Socialism, as the German variant of Fascism, was not primarily the tool of monopoly capitalists for the subjection of the working class in the struggle for profits, markets, and control of investments and raw materials, but rather a revolutionary ideology which proposed to fight for agricultural space on which to settle farmers.<sup>7</sup>

It was the sad fate of Czechoslovakia to provide the point at which the assault on the existing order was first launched by Germany under circumstances that seemed, and could readily be made to appear, in accord with the popular and democratic trend towards a Europe based

<sup>6</sup> On this general issue, see Gerhard L. Weinberg, 'The Defeat of Germany in 1918 and the European Balance of Power', *Central European History*, ii (1969), 248-60.

<sup>7</sup> A very stimulating, if somewhat overdrawn, recent examination is in Rainer Zitelman, *Hitler: Selbstverständnis eines Revolutionärs* (Hamburg, 1987). A very useful survey of the literature and varying interpretations is in Gerhard Schreiber, *Hitler: Interpretationen 1923-1983* (Darmstadt, 1984).

on the national principle. The victors of 1918 have sometimes been blamed for breaking up the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy, but there was no way for them to maintain it against the wishes of many of its inhabitants, except by the practically permanent stationing of large numbers of troops there. No one thought this a practical alternative in 1919, and it would be difficult to find anyone who considers it plausible now.

In theory, the new or greatly enlarged successor states were legitimized by the nationality principle and by the belief that its violation before 1914 had largely contributed to the outbreak of the Great War. In reality, however, they had attained their independence not owing to the justice of their cause or the beauty of their cities or the elegant prose of their advocates, but owing to the vast and bloody exertions of the Allies who had finally defeated the Central Powers.

Both theory and reality left Czechoslovakia vulnerable politically. If Czechs and Slovaks were not to be ruled by Germans from Vienna and Magyars from Budapest, why should Germans now be ruled from Prague? Was not one lesson of the war of 1914-18 that the suppression of nationalities, whether real or imagined, led to war? Should those whose exertions had made it possible for the Czechs and Slovaks to have their state now be called upon to fight again, most likely on an even more horrendous scale, to enable them to continue ruling over three and a half million Germans? Could a democracy go to war *against* rather than *for* the principle of self-determination?

In the case of Great Britain, this issue had two special complications. In the first place, the Dominions, whose independence in reality as well as theory had been enormously advanced by the Great War, were most assuredly not going to help Great Britain in any fight over the Sudeten territory. In spite of a steady flow of information from London to the Dominions in an effort to keep them fully informed, this had been made clear by Australia, Canada, the Irish Free State, and the Union of South Africa; only New Zealand appeared undecided. Their decision meant not only the absence of the sort of military contingents that had played such an important role in the previous British war effort, but also that the war would be a European, not a world war. What attitude would the United States assume towards a European war from which Canada had found it appropriate to abstain?

The second complication was finance. Great Britain had fought her earlier wars against Continental enemies by combining extensive subsidies to her allies with the employment of military and naval forces of her own. Even in the Great War, this pattern had been repeated; and we forget too often that the British debt to the United States after 1918

was to a very large extent the result of 'lending' her own better credit in the United States to such allies as Italy whose credit was far poorer. The British government, in effect, borrowed in the United States on behalf of British allies. The prospects for any new war were, however, extraordinarily daunting. Financial strength had been one of Great Britain's major contributions to prior alliances. It was on the wane now; and in the face of US laws barring loans to those who were not repaying their Great War loans, there was no prospect of obtaining the financial resources that would be needed. If no one in the London of 1938 foresaw the passage of the 1941 Lend-Lease law, without which Great Britain could not have maintained herself in the Second World War, it is difficult to fault them for short-sightedness.

For the French, there was still another complication. France had appeared as the great winner of 1918 with its military leader, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, directing the victorious forces and its capital, Paris, the site – as in 1856 – of the peace negotiations. But in reality France had been brought to the edge of defeat by the attrition strategy of General Erich von Falkenhayn at Verdun in 1916, and had been kept from collapse, as the mutinies of 1917 show, as much by the change in German strategy from attrition to attempted breakthrough by the Hindenburg-Ludendorff team that replaced Falkenhayn in the summer of 1916, as by the support of her allies. This gap between appearance and reality explains first, the frantic and sometimes counter-productive French diplomacy of the 1920s, the abdication in the face of Germany's revival in the 1930s, the collapse of 1940, and subsequently the willingness of Vichy France to fight the British, the Free French, and the Americans – but under *no* circumstances to fight the Germans (or the Japanese). The literature on modern France has yet to contrast the eagerness to fight the British and Free French at Dakar while allowing the Japanese into northern French Indochina in September 1940; the gritty determination with which Vichy France defended Syria against the Allies even as it agreed to the Japanese occupation of southern Indochina in the summer of 1941; the months of bitter fighting against the British on Madagascar in 1942 even as Vichy leaders were ready to welcome the Japanese on to that island; and the hundreds of US soldiers killed by French bullets in November 1942 when not one German soldier was injured in the occupation of unoccupied France. The men who commanded the French forces during the years 1940-2 had not dropped from the moon; they had been making their careers in the French army of the 1930s.

If the Germans did not recognize all of these elements in the international situation of 1938, they recognized, and very cleverly took



advantage of, most of them. Here was the most marvelous pretext for attacking Czechoslovakia; and by the time anyone recognized that it really was only a pretext, it would be too late. The onus of starting a new world war would be made to fall on the states which least wanted one, under circumstances that would make rallying their respective citizens in a lengthy and bitter war extraordinarily difficult. Those who devoutly believed in the truth of the stab-in-the-back legend not unexpectedly emphasized the crucial significance of public opinion at home to the probable policies of Great Britain and France.

From the perspective of Berlin, there was indeed good reason to assume, at least until the last stages of the crisis, that a German attack designed to destroy Czechoslovakia and annex all or most of it to Germany could be carried out as an isolated operation preparatory to the later war against the Western powers that Hitler contemplated. If attention were focused on the nationality question, it would be diverted from the new concept of racial imperialism which was expected to govern in the future.

In the event, the Germans backed down at the last moment as Hitler settled for the ostensible rather than the real aims of German policy. Instead of a war to crush Czechoslovakia and seize all of it (except for such portions as he might magnanimously allot to companions in rough proportion to their contribution to the fight), Hitler agreed to a settlement which embodied the previously agreed upon cession of the German-inhabited fringe. There was an enormous sigh of relief around the world. A second great war had appeared not just imminent but practically certain. President Roosevelt's brief telegram, 'Good man', sent to reach Chamberlain as he departed for Munich, was echoed by the French crowds who greeted Édouard Daladier on his return. What annoyed Hitler as much as having postponed the war he had decided to start that year were the obvious signs that the German people shared the general relief. As the indications that the German people were not solidly behind a new war had played a part in his decision to recall the orders for war, so the signs of relief spurred him on to make the internal preparations he thought necessary for going to war anyway. In the midst of the violent pogrom of November 1938, he explained to the representatives of the German press that a massive campaign was needed to persuade the German people of the need for war, not peace.<sup>8</sup> The risk had had to be run that his earlier public assertions of Germany's desire for peace, which had been designed to fool *foreign* governments

<sup>8</sup> See 'Rede Hitlers vor der deutschen Presse (10. Nov. 1938)', ed. Wilhelm Treue, *Vierteljahrshäfte für Zeitgeschichte*, vi (1958), 175-91.

and peoples, might also delude the *Germans*; now was the time to disabuse them.<sup>9</sup>

How the German government moved to undo the Munich settlement and the results of its efforts have been dealt with elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The moves were shaped by the 'lessons of Munich' as Berlin understood them: no respite for Czechoslovakia but rather her complete destruction; no negotiations with Poland the following summer, lest Germany once again be trapped into a peaceful settlement; no last minute negotiations with the Western powers which might lead to a settlement rather than war; and final incidents to prove the fault of the other side staged *inside* rather than outside Germany. These were all procedures designed to obviate in 1939 what Hitler believed were the errors that had trapped him into a peaceful settlement in 1938.

It is hardly surprising that the converse was also true: a willingness by the British government to go to war at the next German move if it were resisted, whether in western, eastern, or south-eastern Europe; little or no attention paid to propaganda stories about mistreated German minorities; and a glum but definite willingness to go to war now that the real aims of Germany had been revealed – and with most of the Dominions now recognizing that fundamental issues were at stake over which they could ask their citizens to risk lives and property.

When the ensuing conflict was over and the forces of racial imperialism defeated – and in contemplation even while the war was still on – a decidedly different notion of the principle of nationality would be applied. As regards Czechoslovakia, if the Germans were not prepared to live happily with an adjustment of the boundaries to the people, then the people would be adjusted to the boundaries. The Sudeten Germans would be shipped home to the Reich, as they had vociferously demanded. But unlike in 1919, the unity of the newest of Europe's great powers would no longer be considered essential to a continent organized on the national rather than the dynastic principle. On the contrary, as the safety of European nationalities and German unity had been shown to be incompatible, German unity would surrender to schemes of dismemberment, and subsequently zones of occupation.

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Perhaps the time has come to look at these events – the Munich Crisis, the relief over the avoidance of war, the world's reaction to the deliberate

<sup>9</sup> See Gerhard L. Weinberg, 'Friedenspropaganda und Kriegsvorbereitung', in *Deutschland 1933 Machtzerfall der Demokratie und Nationalsozialistische Macht ergreifung*, ed. Wolfgang Treue and Jürgen Schmäddeke (Berlin, 1984), pp. 119-35.

<sup>10</sup> Weinberg, *Foreign Policy*, chs. 12-14.

breaking of the Munich agreement, and the implementation of a third principle of state organization – in the light of an experience from the intervening years. Twenty-four years after the outbreak of the Great War, a second great war almost started. Twenty-four years after Munich it again looked as if the world were headed for war, this time on an even more frightening scale. There is no need to enter here upon the details of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 or the light shed on the events of those days by recent discussions between Soviet and US scholars and participants. The point to note is quite different. In an age of television and other means of rapid communication, the vicarious participation of vast masses of people in a world crisis of enormous danger can take place much more quickly than in 1938. The growing tension in October 1962 compressed into a few days what had taken weeks, perhaps months, in 1938. Surely it is worth considering whether the proportion of people who were alarmed about the prospect of a new war of horrendous dimensions was about as large, and their level of anxiety similar, in 1938 and 1962. And cannot the anxiety, and the sense of relief that followed when war did *not* break out, provide new insight into both experiences?

The breaking of the Munich agreement should perhaps be directly connected with the fighting through of the Second World War by the Allies to the unconditional surrender of the Axis and the massive population shifts in Europe that followed. The converse is surely the reorientation of both Soviet and US policy after the Cuban missile crisis. An excellent case can be made for arguing that the danger of a Soviet-American war was actually greater in the earlier crisis caused by Nikita Khrushchev's Berlin ultimatum on 4 November 1958 when Soviet planes fired blank rounds at American and British planes in the Berlin air corridors and pretended to dive-bomb buildings in the western sectors of Berlin. At that time, however, the risks of accidental war never reached the consciousness of the public. The relief over the avoidance of war in 1962, after what some then referred to as the smell of hydrogen, may well help us to understand the support of the nuclear test-ban treaty and *détente* among the US public, as well as the dropping of the risk-taking Khrushchev and a new look at relations with the United States among what, for lack of a better term, might be called the ruling class of the Soviet Union.

A good case can also be made that theoretically it would have been simpler to transfer the Sudeten Germans across the border in 1938, and to secure agreement on a nuclear test-ban treaty before the Cuban missile crisis. In the real world, however, both policy departures required a change in public perception before they could be effected. On

both occasions the public had been stirred up and alarmed at the prospect of war, relieved at its avoidance, and was then willing to turn to departures in policy, in the first instance because the relief proved to be unjustified, in the second, because it proved real.

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From the perspective of half a century, it may be worth looking at the Munich Crisis not only as one about which we can learn more in detail, but also as one from which to gain insight into the transformation of Europe from a continent structured on the dynastic principle to one structured on the national principle; a point surely worth considering at a time when from Northern Ireland to Nagorno-Kharabakh the puzzle of how best to accommodate the national principle continues to create turmoil. And finally, the reaction to the disappointment of relief over war avoidance in 1938 on the one hand, and the reaction to the continuation of peace after relief over war avoidance in 1962 on the other, may assist us in understanding the policies and events produced by the other.

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#### Commentary by William R. Rock

GERHARD L. WEINBERG'S verification that the reluctance of France to side with Czechoslovakia in 1938 because of British reticence was only an 'artfully contrived excuse', confirms what the British staunchly believed without knowing for certain: that the French would 'welsch' at the crucial moment. The unreliability of the French, as Neville Chamberlain perceived it, was always in his mind and was certainly a major influence over the formulation of his own policy. It has long been known that a pitiable appeal from the French, on 13 September, to the British to find 'some way' of keeping Hitler from attacking Czechoslovakia, and thus invoking the French alliance,<sup>11</sup> was important in Chamberlain's decision to undertake the daring visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden that he had had in the back of his mind for some days. This is not, of course, to exonerate Chamberlain and the British, who earlier had done nothing to strengthen French resolve and who were not above citing the reticence of the Dominions, and even the United States, as a prop for their own policy when it suited their purpose.

<sup>11</sup> *D[ocuments on] B[ritish] F[oreign] P[olicy], 1919-1939*, 3rd series, ii, no. 861, pp. 313-14. See INKP 1 (Inskip Diaries), pp. 9-10, and PHPP 1/20 (Phipps MSS) [Churchill College Archives, Cambridge].

The principle of self-determination, which Hitler poignantly reminded Chamberlain was *not* a German invention, weighed heavily in Chamberlain's thinking during the Munich Crisis. Its clear violation by the peacemakers of 1919, when they left 3½ million Germans inside Czechoslovakia, he readily accepted as constituting a *legitimate* German grievance. The removal of legitimate grievances, as a means to international harmony and peace, was the primary objective of appeasement from its inception, though the *method* by which the Sudetenland should be transferred from Czechoslovakia to Germany gave some concern. It was not, however, simply a matter of principle, for practical politics were also involved. Czechoslovakia was a hodgepodge creation that could not be maintained *even in the event of a victorious war*.<sup>12</sup> So why go to war for an objective that could not be achieved even in victory? Indeed, the government's defence of the Munich agreement in the House of Commons was not based on the merits of the settlement, not even on the grounds of military unpreparedness – of which so much was made later on – but on the grounds that Czechoslovakia was not, in Sir John Simon's words, 'a viable entity'.<sup>13</sup> Exactly how the British government came to this conclusion – and how deep were its roots in inter-war thinking – is still uncertain; certainly complaints about Czech intransigence and the explanations of Sudeten German leaders were accepted without challenge, and the possibility that Hitler might have moved against Czechoslovakia, even had not a single German lived within her borders, was blindly ignored.

The British government's indifference to the fate of Czechoslovakia implies a definite lack of perception about the requirements of balance-of-power politics in Europe. But the Chamberlain government did not think of power relationships in that way. Convinced that the division of Europe into two armed camps had been crucial to the onset of the Great War, Chamberlain was determined to avoid another such division, particularly one that smacked of building a phalanx against the dictators in Central Europe. Whether this was a reflection of his ignorance about the realities of the European state system or more a stubborn resolve to break with the ways of the past is difficult to say. It was no doubt partly both, and reflects, in any case, Chamberlain's excessive confidence in the superiority of his own judgement.

That Czechoslovakia's fate was connected with her geographical location more than with the merits of her case is suggested by the very

<sup>12</sup> This opinion appears in various places. See, for example, *DBFP*, 3rd series, i. no. 164, p. 214, and *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers*, 1938, i. 621-2.

<sup>13</sup> *Parliamentary Debates* [Commons], 5th series, cccxxxix, cols. 337-50.

different British attitude towards Poland a few months later. In many ways the German case over Danzig and the Corridor was stronger than that over the Sudetenland. Certainly to British public opinion Poland was the least attractive of the states created or re-created in 1919. Had Hitler forced a settlement with Poland first, it is doubtful whether Great Britain – or France – would have raised a finger to help her. The guarantee to Poland in March 1939 had nothing to do with the merits of the German case or sympathy for the Poles, but sprang from a sudden and inescapable recognition, forced upon the government by parliament and the press, that Hitler's ambitions exceeded the rectification of grievances, and from the imperative need to demonstrate – without knowing how – an intention of resisting Hitler now that his imperialist ambitions were so obvious. The way in which Hitler had brutally emasculated the terms of the Munich agreement, including the vague and unworkable guarantee of a rump Czechoslovakia with which the British (and French) had assuaged their consciences in October, weighed more heavily on British minds than they themselves were prepared to acknowledge.

Although the Dominions were clearly opposed to involvement in any war over the Sudetenland, the British government had made almost no effort to consult them about vital issues at stake, or to influence their thinking. Chamberlain clearly relished holding the argument about Dominion recalcitrance in reserve, for use against his British critics, whenever it served his purpose. At other times the Dominions were conveniently forgotten. Much the same was true of the United States. It is amazing, in retrospect, how little Chamberlain did to cultivate potential friends. The much-cited chiefs of staff sub-committee report of December 1937 had emphasized the importance of 'any political or international action that can be taken to reduce the numbers of our potential enemies and to gain the support of potential allies'.<sup>14</sup> Chamberlain devoted his energies almost exclusively to the first half of this injunction, to the near-complete neglect of the second half. To be sure, there were special problems in Great Britain's relations with France, the Soviet Union, and the United States which would not have been easy to surmount. But no serious effort was made, which in itself demonstrates the deficiency in the Chamberlain government's perception of *realpolitik*.

That the prospects of financing any new war were 'extraordinarily daunting' to the British is beyond dispute. They had long believed that financial stability was the nation's first line of defence, and that nothing must be permitted to disturb it. The result was extraordinary deference

<sup>14</sup> See Cabinet Minutes [Public Record Office], CAB[inet Records] 23/90, 8 Dec. 1937, pp. 265-7.

to the treasury and an unwillingness to risk destabilizing the economy by speedier and more extensive rearmament. Another equally significant economic constraint on the British, however, is often overlooked. British policy-makers in the late 1930s genuinely feared US economic expansion at the expense of Great Britain. There was much concern in London about the American image of British wealth and fear lest increasing dependence upon the United States, in circumstances wherein Washington could drive a hard bargain, should adversely affect Great Britain's world position. That Great Britain should have been so concerned with the financial threat from Washington while in such immediate danger from Hitler seems, in retrospect, absurd. But suspicion of US motives ran deep in London. Although the US leaders understood the potential leverage they wielded, economic coercion was not a key to US policy towards Great Britain in the late 1930s: it would only drive her closer to Germany – so long as the barest prospect of appeasement remained – and Washington knew it. So British suspicions were greatly exaggerated and led to a defensive posture towards the United States that was most unwise in the circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

Among the other constraints on the British, such as the long underestimated preoccupation with the threat from Japan in the Pacific,<sup>16</sup> was a conviction of their moral superiority. This sprang from the idea that Great Britain, having risen above the factious struggles of other lesser peoples, had a special role to play in soothing the life of Europe. Chamberlain thought it providential that he, the second son of the famous Joseph Chamberlain, destined for a career in business, was entrusted with Great Britain's – and Europe's – fate at this crucial moment in history, a view regularly reinforced by his sycophant maiden sisters, who fed his ego and nourished his belief both in his superior vision and his ability to save Great Britain and the world.

One point, however, needs to be made on Chamberlain's behalf. The most popular image of Munich is the picture of the prime minister proclaiming upon his return to London 'Peace for our time'. It is now reasonably certain that Chamberlain had earlier rejected the phrase, when suggested to him by an aide, as being wholly inappropriate.<sup>17</sup> But in a moment of high emotion, stirred by cheering throngs, and himself near the point of mental and physical exhaustion, he proclaimed the

<sup>15</sup> See William R. Rock, *Chamberlain and Roosevelt: British Foreign Policy and the United States, 1937-1940* (Columbus, Ohio, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> See R. John Pritchard, *Far Eastern Influence upon British Strategy towards the Great Powers, 1937-1939* (New York, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> See Alec Douglas-Home, *The Way the Wind Blows: An Autobiography* (New York, 1976), p. 67.

fateful words. A week later he appealed to the House of Commons not to read too much into words used in a moment of emotional stress at the close of an exhausting day. But the phrase stuck with him and became synonymous with Munich and appeasement. Such are the quirks of history.

Assessment of Munich, appeasement, and Chamberlain will always be mixed. For years, of course, they were excoriated as the epitome of weakness and failure. But A.J.P. Taylor pointed in 1961 in another direction, and Donald Cameron Watt suggested in 1965 that scholars would probably be less condemnatory of the Chamberlain circle once they discovered in detail the extensive problems with which they had had to deal.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, a revisionist view emerged, based mainly on the grounds that British policy-makers, given the circumstances in which they laboured, had little room for manoeuvre. Furthermore, their motives were right. The outpouring of monographic literature that followed upon the opening of official government records in 1967, which has left only a few aspects of the subject unexplored, prompted Paul Kennedy to write in 1982 that Watt's revisionist predictions had largely come true.<sup>19</sup> Maurice Cowling, for example, depicts the appeasers supporting rearmament and working to control Hitler, and adjudges Munich successful in limiting Germany to the size she ought to have been at Versailles. Kennedy himself has explained the 'traditional' place of appeasement in British thought and practice, and the first volume of David Dilks's biography of Chamberlain, although it stops at 1929, presents a much more attractive figure than the 'orthodox' Chamberlain.<sup>20</sup>

Larry Fuchser, however, in a book that has not gained sufficient recognition, sees things differently. His Chamberlain was isolated by the circumstances of youth, scarred by failures in early manhood, anxious for opportunities to prove himself, cold and calculating in human relationships. His Chamberlain is not an easy man to love, so that personality factors come to be inextricably entwined with policy appraisals.

<sup>18</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *Origins of the Second World War* (London, 1961); Donald Cameron Watt, 'Appeasement: The Rise of a Revisionist School?', *The Political Quarterly*, xxxvi (1965), 191-213.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Kennedy, 'Appeasement', *History Today*, xxxii (1982), 51-3.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy, 1933-1940* (Chicago, 1975); Paul Kennedy, 'The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy, 1865-1939', in *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870-1945* (London, 1983); David Dilks, *Neville Chamberlain: Vol. I: Pioneering and Reform, 1869-1929* (Cambridge, 1984). Dilks has commented elsewhere that the roots of appeasement were deep in the past and the forces at play both formidable and intractable. Perhaps this gives a clue to the view likely to emerge in the long-awaited second volume.



This is where the 'revisionist' viewpoint often falls short, tending to examine objective situations and forces largely apart from the human personalities involved in them. One could hardly understand Nazism in Germany without considering the driving, demonic personality of Adolf Hitler. Certainly Chamberlain was as important to appeasement in Great Britain as Hitler was to Nazism. The mentality of the man – his prejudices, motivations, thought and behaviour patterns – is vital to assessing policy formulation and execution. Fuchser grasps this well.<sup>21</sup>

In the years preceding the outbreak of war, the British faced a terrible dilemma, of which Munich was both symbol and symptom, that was never resolved: strategical overcommitment and unpreparedness for war on one hand, and the danger of having to confront three aggressive adversaries simultaneously on the other. Here was a problem fit for a magician, and the controversy engendered among the various segments of Great Britain's policy-making machinery about how the illusion of strength might be maintained on all fronts, or how critical choices should be made, was never resolved. It was up to the politicians, of course, to decide where the greatest dangers lay, and this they were loath – indeed, unable – to do. Consequently, strategy – and policy – remained hesitating and uncertain.

Herein may lie the gravest charge against the Chamberlain government: its inability to make such choices and to develop policy and strategy accordingly. The scope of Great Britain's commitments relative to her strength was frightening; and her inability to respond effectively to problems in Europe, in the Mediterranean, and in the Far East at the same time was painfully recognized. But in the absence of consensus and decision, policy tended to drift. It is amazing how strategic appreciations fluctuated throughout 1938-9 with every turn of events. And it is equally amazing how major political decisions (such as the guarantee to Poland) were taken – when, in fact, they *were* taken – in circumstances devoid of useful speculation about the strategic consequences. The British would have been well-advised to do in 1938-9 what they had done in the period preceding 1914 – to cut their commitments in other areas of the world, decisively and forthrightly, in order to meet the menace closer to home. Even had that not materially affected the outbreak of war, it would usefully have anticipated the painful adjustment to the nation's significantly diminished role in the world that followed 1945.

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<sup>21</sup> Larry W. Fuchser, *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement: A Study in the Politics of History* (New York, 1982).

## Commentary by Anna M. Cienciala

GERHARD L. WEINBERG draws attention to the warning given by the French foreign minister, Georges Bonnet, to the Czechoslovak minister at Paris, Štefan Osuský, on 20 July 1938, that France would never go to war over the Sudeten German question; adding that at Beneš's request, the French government kept the warning secret. Even the British were kept in the dark.<sup>22</sup>

The British government, however, probably knew of Bonnet's statement to Osuský. Almost three weeks earlier, on 7 July, the French ambassador at London, Charles Corbin, transmitted to Paris an expression of *regret* by the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, that Bonnet's memorandum of 9 June had not contained a specific warning that if the Czechoslovak government proved 'unreasonable' on the Sudeten question, France would reconsider her obligation as an ally. Halifax therefore expressed the hope that Bonnet would find a favourable occasion to give such a warning to Beneš. Another French note, dated 17 July, was then communicated to the Czechs, stating that the outbreak of war would have the most dire consequences for Czechoslovakia.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, just before Bonnet saw Osuský on 20 July, he and Daladier had lunch with Halifax, who told them that he had just sent Beneš a note asking the Czechoslovak government to accept the 'good offices' of Lord Runciman as mediator between it and the Sudeten German leaders. Halifax asked the French ministers to warn Beneš that the British reserved the right to make this offer public, and that if Hitler demanded a plebiscite, Great Britain would not be drawn into a war resulting from Prague's rejection of this demand, for she had to consider the Dominions. Neither India nor South Africa, he said, had any interest in the dispute.<sup>24</sup> As Bonnet made his dramatic statement to Osuský directly after this lunch, one might interpret it as the warning Halifax had asked for on 7 July. It is difficult to imagine that Halifax would not have been told at least the gist of a warning he had himself suggested.

Some French historians have suggested that Bonnet made the statement to Osuský on his own initiative. Indeed, Daladier's comments on the document seem to indicate that the warning was given without his

<sup>22</sup> See Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Hitler's Germany*, p. 398; for the text of Bonnet's declaration to Osuský of 20 July 1938, see *D[ocuments] D[iplomatiques] F[rançais]*, series 2, x (1976), no. 238.

<sup>23</sup> *DDF*, x, nos. 163, 222.

<sup>24</sup> *DDF*, x, no. 237, p. 435.

agreement or that of the French cabinet.<sup>25</sup> However, as Daladier was present at the lunch, it is unlikely that Bonnet gave the warning without the premier's assent and that it was not approved, if only after the event, by the French cabinet. The French minister at Prague, Victor de Lacroix – who had been in Paris between 15–18 July – discussed the warning with Beneš on 20 and 21 July.<sup>26</sup>

Weinberg sees French 'panic' at the likelihood of being drawn into a war as the key factor in precipitating Neville Chamberlain's decision of 13 September to fly to Germany for a meeting with Hitler. It is true that on that day Bonnet asked for the implementation of the Runciman plan, while Alexis Léger, the secretary-general at the Quai d'Orsay, proposed a four-power conference of France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. French panic, as well as Chamberlain's decision to implement 'Plan Z', may both have followed, however, from the Berlin-induced 'riots' by the Sudeten Germans which occurred the same day, when their leaders also broke off negotiations with the Czechoslovak government. As we know, the latter sent in troops and the Sudeten Nazis fled over the border to the 'Fatherland', where they were portrayed as martyrs. Chamberlain's decision to meet Hitler was the result of all these developments rather than of French panic alone.

Weinberg correctly argues that the allegedly private opinion of Zdenek Fierlinger, the Czechoslovak minister in Moscow, that if 'favourable developments' took place the Soviet Union would seek a common border with Czechoslovakia, pointed to Soviet plans to annex south-east Poland, that is, the former East Galicia.<sup>27</sup> 'Favourable developments' probably meant a German attack on Czechoslovakia, in which case the general assumption of all governments was that France would fulfil her obligations to her ally. Furthermore, the Soviet-Czechoslovak alliance of May 1935 made Soviet aid conditional upon the prior provision of aid by France. However, it seems most unlikely that even in such circumstances Stalin would have risked a war with Hitler by sending aid to Czechoslovakia. Aside from his suspicion that the Western powers would be only too glad if Hitler turned his attention to the Soviet Union, and the danger of a Soviet-Japanese war in the Far East, Stalin's proposals to Hitler of a non-aggression pact, made in May 1935 as well as at the turn of 1936–7 – which Hitler rejected as untimely – show that

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 238, and J.-B. Duroselle, *La Décadence: 1932-1939* (Paris, 1979), p. 335.

<sup>26</sup> *DDF, ibid.*, nos. 235, 242.

<sup>27</sup> There seems to be a disagreement on the date of Fierlinger's telegram: Jiri Hochman, *The Soviet Union and the Failure of Collective Security, 1934-1938* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), p. 237, fn. 109, gives 23 Sept. 1938; while Gerhard L. Weinberg gives 27 Sept.

Stalin was thinking of such an agreement for some time before Munich.<sup>28</sup> An attack by Hitler on Czechoslovakia in 1938, therefore, would probably have had the same result as in 1939: a 'phony war' in the West and a German-Soviet agreement in the East involving at least a partition of Poland.

Financial weakness and the attitude of the Dominions were probably not decisive for British policy in 1938. Great Britain had traditionally excluded Eastern Europe from what were considered to be her spheres of vital interests. The latter included France, Belgium, and possibly Holland – as their conquest by a hostile power would threaten the British Isles with invasion, or at least bombing from the air – and freedom of communications in the Mediterranean, necessary both for the defence of British interests there and in the Middle East, as well as of the colonies and Dominions in Asia and the Far East.

At the same time, Eastern Europe was traditionally seen as a natural sphere of interest of either the Germans or the Russians, a view which in the inter-war period favoured Germany. Thus, in a memorandum for the cabinet committee on Germany of 14 February 1936, the foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, recommended that the British should refuse the French demand to discuss with them the German threat to the Demilitarized Zone in the Rhineland. Instead, Eden proposed joint Anglo-French negotiations with Germany for the surrender of the DMZ on certain conditions, even though its disappearance would 'further weaken France's influence in Eastern and Central Europe, leaving a gap which may be filled by Germany or Russia'.<sup>29</sup>

British willingness to tolerate limited German expansion in Eastern Europe became more evident in 1937. Halifax confirmed it in his statement to Hitler at Berchtesgaden in November 1937, that Great Britain was not necessarily interested in maintaining the existing status of Danzig, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. Indeed, said Halifax, if reasonable agreements could be reached with the free assent and goodwill of those primarily involved, Great Britain had no desire to block them.<sup>30</sup> No

<sup>28</sup> See *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, series C, iv, no. 78, and vi, nos. 183, 195. Stalin's desire for an agreement with Hitler is also confirmed by former Soviet officials who deserted to the West, e.g. by W.G. Krivitsky and E. Gnedin; for references, see Steven Merritt Miner, *Between Churchill and Stalin: The Soviet Union, Great Britain and the Origins of the Grand Alliance* (Chapel Hill, 1988), p. 272, n. 8.

<sup>29</sup> See Foreign Office Papers, F[oreign] O[ffice Records, Public Record Office], 371/19885, C1027/G.

<sup>30</sup> For Halifax's account of his visit to Germany and conversation with Hitler, 19 Nov. 1937, see *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, 2nd series, xix, no. 336, p. 545.

wonder Hitler saw this statement as a green light to go ahead with his plans regarding Austria and Czechoslovakia.

This attitude towards German expansion in East Central Europe governed British policy towards Germany. After the Munich Conference, Halifax wrote in November 1938 to the British ambassador at Paris, Sir Eric Phipps: 'Henceforward we must count on German predominance in Central Europe. Incidentally, I have always felt myself that, once Germany recovered her normal strength, this predominance was inevitable for obvious geographical and economic reasons.'<sup>31</sup>

British and French policy towards Germany governed Poland's policy towards Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938. The German foreign ministry had already informed the Polish foreign minister, Józef Beck, in December 1937, of Halifax's statements to Hitler. Together with the statements of German aims regarding Austria and Czechoslovakia that Beck heard during a visit to Berlin in January 1938, his own observations of French dependence on Great Britain, and a conversation with Winston Churchill at Cannes, Halifax's statements led Beck to conclude that Austria was bound to be annexed to Germany.

In regard to Czechoslovakia, however, Beck believed that Poland must keep a free hand. He assumed that the Czechs would not fight themselves; that the Western powers were unprepared to fight for them; and that the Soviet Union would limit herself to mere demonstrations. However, if this hypothesis were to be disproved by events, Poland would have to change her policy within twenty-four hours, for in a European war against Germany, she must not be found at the latter's side, even indirectly. Thus Poland geared her demands on Czechoslovakia to Anglo-French policy, demanding the same concessions for the Polish minority as were granted to the Germans.

At the first news of the decisions made at the Munich Conference, Beck consulted the chief of the Polish general staff about the possibility of mobilization in case the Czechs decided to fight. Only after Beneš had officially accepted the Munich decisions at noon on 30 September, did the Polish inner cabinet decide to send an ultimatum to Czechoslovakia demanding the return of the Polish-speaking part of Teschen, which the Czechs had seized in January 1919. The note was delivered in Prague at 11 p.m. that day. Beck, who meant the ultimatum to be a protest against decisions pertaining to Poland's interests being made without consulting her, also feared that the Germans might seize part

<sup>31</sup> See *DBFP*, 3rd series, iii, no. 285, p. 252; n.b.: the term Central Europe at that time included Austria, Czechoslovakia, and sometimes Poland.

of the territory claimed by Poland. Indeed, he was informed that Bohumin was included in the German territorial demands on Czechoslovakia. The Polish government protested and Hitler withdrew his claim.<sup>32</sup>

The British guarantee to Poland of 31 March 1939 seemed to signal the abandonment of appeasement and the making of a British commitment in Eastern Europe. In fact it was intended to persuade Hitler to obtain his demands from Poland by negotiation and avert war, but at the expense of Great Britain's ally.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For Under-secretary Jan Szembek's note of 3 Dec. 1937, on Berlin information about Halifax's statement to Hitler, see *Diariusz i Teki Jana Szembeka (1935-1945)*, ed. Tytus Komarnicki (London, 1969), iii. 200; see also *Monachium 1938: Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne*, ed. Z. Landau and J. Tomaszewski (Warsaw, 1985), no. 1; for Beck's conversations in Berlin, Jan. 1938, see *ibid.*, nos. 3-6; for Beck's statement on Polish foreign policy in 1938, see Jozef Beck, *Dernier Rapport: Politique Polonaise 1926-1939* (Paris, 1951), pp. 162-3, and Polish original: Jozef Beck, *Ostatni Raport* (Warsaw, 1987), pp. 147-8. For my own account of Polish policy at that time, based on published Western sources and Polish diplomatic archives, see Anna M. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939* (London, 1968), also unpublished paper 'The Czechoslovak Crisis of 1938: The View from Warsaw', read at the Nov. 1988 convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Honolulu.

<sup>33</sup> See my forthcoming article 'Poland in British and French Policy in 1939: Determination to Fight – or Avoid War?', *Polish Review*, xxxiv (1989).