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# Stalin and Beneš at the End of September 1938: New Evidence from the Prague Archives

Igor Lukes

At the height of World War II, General Władysław Sikorski visited Dr. Edvard Beneš at his London residence. The Polish prime minister warned the Czechoslovak president that if the Red Army were to occupy central Europe it would impose communist governments there. Beneš conceded that this was so but he added that there was nothing they could do about it. Sikorski continued pressing Beneš: “Why are you so friendly with the Soviets?” he demanded. He then invited the president to harmonize his foreign policy with that of the democracies. Beneš replied that he was unable to share Sikorski’s confidence in the west for the simple reason that he had experienced the horror of Munich. “What partitions of Poland mean for the Poles, that is what Munich is for us,” said Beneš forcefully.<sup>1</sup>

The Four Power Agreement signed at Munich on 29 September 1938 and its “solution” of the Czechoslovak crisis did not devastate only Beneš.<sup>2</sup> It undermined the confidence of millions of Europeans in democratic institutions and it caused some to sympathize with the stalinist Soviet Union, the one power which did not take part in the agreement with Hitler. Stalin’s absence at Munich and the scarcity of

I have profited from comments by Professors John Connelly (Harvard University), William Keylor (Boston University), Adam Ulam (Harvard University) and Piotr Wandycz (Yale University). My wife, Professor Alison McIntyre, helped me more than I could acknowledge in one simple sentence. While working on this article, I have been a Fulbright Fellow (1992) and a John M. Olin Faculty Fellow in History (1991–92). I am very grateful to the two organizations for their support. Travel and research were made possible by a grant from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the US Information Agency. In Prague, I examined documents in the following archives: the Archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (ACC CPC); the State Central Archives (SCA); the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMFA); the Military Historical Archives: the Beneš Archive (MHA-B), the Military Office of the President (MHA-MOP); the President’s Office (PO); the Archives of the National Museum: Jaromír Smutný (ANM-S), Prokop Drtina (ANM-D), Vojtěch Mastný (ANM-M), Zdeněk Fierlinger (ANM-F). Quotations appear mostly in my translation from the Czech, Russian or German originals.

1. ACC CPC, f. 100, inventory number 24, file 175, archival unit 1566. The conversation took place on 20 May 1942; the meeting was openly tense and eventually Sikorski got up and stormed out of the room. Count Edward Raczyński came the next day to iron things out.

2. MHA-B, no date, box 1a. It is clear that Beneš understood the consequences of capitulating to Hitler. In a private conversation during the crisis of 1938, he complained that Great Britain, France and Germany (sic) wanted to get him, President Beneš, to surrender several thousand democrats, socialists and Jews to Hitler. It would be “a massacre. . . [and] barbarian anti-Semitic murder. . . . This he would never do,” Beneš concluded.

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Czechoslovak and Soviet primary sources concerning the 1938 crisis led not a few researchers to paint a flattering, but unsubstantiated, picture of the Soviet leader's attitude toward his Czechoslovak ally.<sup>3</sup> Despite years of considerable political openness in Moscow, Soviet and Russian writers alike have maintained this tradition.<sup>4</sup> They tend to make broadly conceived declarations with either no support or with references to unreliable sources. Yet, some of their arguments have already found their way into the mainstream of western discussions of Soviet behavior on the eve of World War II.<sup>5</sup>

This essay reconsiders some widely held views about Soviet policy toward Czechoslovakia during the last days of September 1938 and

3. There are noble exceptions, of course. J.W. Bruegel, "Dr. Beneš on the Soviet 'Offer of Help' in 1938," *East Central Europe* 4, no. 1 (1977); Barry Mendel Cohen, "Moscow at Munich," *East European Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1978); Jonathan Haslam, "The Soviet Union and the Czechoslovakian Crisis of 1938," *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 3 (1979); Milan Hauner, "Září 1938: Kapitulovat či bojovat?" [September 1938: to fight or to surrender], *Svědectví* 49 (1975); František Lukeš, "Poznámky k čs.-sovětským stykům v září 1938" [notes on Czechoslovak-Soviet relations in September 1938], *Československý časopis historický* 16, no. 5 (1968); "Beneš a SSSR," *Sešity pro mladou literaturu* 21 (1968); Ivan Pfaff, "Jak tomu opravdu bylo se sovětskou pomocí v mnichovské krizi?" [how it really was with Soviet assistance during the Munich crisis], *Svědectví* 56 (1978) and 57 (1979); Edward Taborský, "Beneš and the Soviets," *Foreign Affairs* 27, no. 2 (1949); William V. Wallace, "New Documents on the History of Munich: A Selection from the Soviet and Czechoslovak Archives," *International Affairs* 35, no. 4 (1959); I have also dealt with this and related themes in Igor Lukes, "Did Stalin Desire War in 1938? A New Look at Soviet Behavior during the May and September Crises," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 2, no. 1 (1991).

4. Matvei Vasil'evich Zakharov, *General'nyi shtab v predvoennye gody* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1989); V.K. Volkov et al., *1939 god: uroki istorii* (Moscow: Mysl', 1990); Oleg Aleksandrovich Rzheshhevskii, *Europe 1939: Was War Inevitable?* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989); A.S. Stepanov, "Pered Miunkhenom," *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* 4-5 (1992); S.I. Prasolov, "Sovetskii soiuz i Chekhoslovakia v 1938 g.," in V.K. Volkov, ed., *Miunkhen: predduerie voiny* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988); D.A. Volkogonov, "Drama reshenii 1939 goda," *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia* 4 (1989), 3-27. The most current collection of Soviet documents is *God krizisa, 1938-1939: dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990).

5. G. Jukes, "The Red Army and the Munich crisis," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26, no. 2 (1991): 195-214. The author accepts Zakharov's account of large-scale military measures allegedly taken by the Red Army during the Czechoslovak crisis. It is possible that some measures were taken in the Kiev district in response to the tensions on the international scene in late summer 1938, yet this leaves room to doubt their extent and whether they were really meant as a prelude to a Soviet military intervention on Czechoslovakia's behalf. It has not even been established that they were related to the Munich crisis at all. The well informed German Embassy in Moscow consistently denied that the Soviets had taken military measures in support of the Beneš government: "no one in the Embassy thought the Russians would go to war over Czechoslovakia, or that they were in a position to wage an aggressive war of any sort." This view was fully shared by the German attaché, General Ernst Köstring, perhaps the best expert on the Red Army at the time. A German diplomat drove in late July 1938 from Moscow to Odessa. He got much information on the stationing of Soviet troops, "but found no indications that they were preparing to move" (Hans von Herwarth, *Against Two Evils* [New York: Rawson, Wade, 1981], 123).

about the Czechoslovak president, Dr. Edvard Beneš. Focusing primarily on the period from 28 September to 3 October 1938, I have drawn upon documents found in the archives recently opened in Prague. There is not room here for me to comment on events outside this period, on other players in the crisis, viz., Poland, Hungary, the Little Entente, Great Britain, France and Italy, or even the best known secondary literature dealing with this topic.<sup>6</sup> That Stalin was prepared in September 1938 to assist Czechoslovakia against Germany unilaterally, i.e., without France and in disregard of the League of Nations,<sup>7</sup> was, until recently, the official view both in Prague and in Moscow.<sup>8</sup> Now the time has come to test this claim against materials brought to light from various archival sources. The evidence offered below provides, I believe, a new and definitive answer to an old and centrally important historical puzzle.

In the archive of Václav Kopecký, a founding member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSC), a Comintern official and post-war chief of propaganda, one finds a copy of his speech before communist party officials on 24 September 1948. It asserts in part:

We will prove that even though the western powers completely betrayed us in September [1938], the freedom of our Republic could have been saved, for the Soviet Union was not only willing but ready to help us. One of the ways in which this was made quite clear was when comrade [Klement] Gottwald returned from Moscow early in 1938 entrusted by Stalin himself to tell President Beneš of the Soviet Union's decision to help Czechoslovakia.<sup>9</sup>

In conclusion, Kopecký promised soon to release important evidence regarding the September capitulation: "For a long time we have held back this evidence for various reasons, but now those reasons have gone and we too will write our memoirs." Unfortunately, having thus

6. For instance, Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power* (New York: Norton, 1990); Geoffrey Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–1939* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); Jiří Hochman, *The Soviet Union and the Failure of Collective Security, 1934–1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); František Lukeš, *Podivný mír* [a strange kind of peace] (Prague: Svoboda, 1968).

7. Czechoslovakia's security was provided for, inter alia, by the Franco-Czechoslovak Treaty of Mutual Assistance of 16 October 1925 and the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of 16 May 1935. The latter treaty contained the Protocol of Signature of which article II stipulated that the "undertakings to render mutual assistance will operate between [the two Parties] only in so far as the conditions laid down in the present Treaty may be fulfilled and in so far as assistance may be rendered by France to the Party victim of the aggression." Therefore, for the Soviet Union to provide unilateral assistance to Czechoslovakia would have meant going beyond its legal obligations.

8. *Dokumenty k historii mnichovského diktátu, 1937–1939* (Prague: Svoboda, 1979), 9.

9. ACC CPC, f. 100/45, vol. 2, archival unit 75.

whetted our appetites, Kopecký never returned to this topic and the heralded evidence did not materialize. It should be noted here that Klement Gottwald, the chief of the Czechoslovak communists, could not have “returned from Moscow early in 1938,” as Kopecký asserted: according to Gottwald’s passport, he was in Moscow between 17 and 19 December 1937. He then stayed in Prague until the end of February 1938.<sup>10</sup>

Gottwald dealt with the theme of Soviet unilateral assistance promptly after Czechoslovakia’s capitulation. He asserted in *Rudé Právo*, the communist daily, that the Soviet Union, alone among all world powers, had stood by Czechoslovakia throughout the crisis.<sup>11</sup> He briefly returned to this topic in a public speech on 9 September 1945 when he asserted, “We must not forget who stood by us when all others had deserted us. It was the Soviet Union and its Red Army. . . .”<sup>12</sup> Gottwald dealt with the issue in detail in December 1949 after the February 1948 communist take-over. In a speech celebrating J. V. Stalin, Gottwald stated:

In the critical year 1938 I was invited to see Stalin. In a long debate we discussed the situation in Czechoslovakia and even the question of Soviet assistance in case of Hitlerite Germany’s attack on the country. On that occasion, Stalin explicitly declared that the Soviet Union was ready to assist Czechoslovakia unilaterally even if France did not do so—Soviet assistance was tied to France—and even if [Colonel] Beck’s Poland or boyar Romania refused to allow a transfer of Soviet troops. Naturally, Stalin stressed, the Soviet Union could assist Czechoslovakia only on one condition: namely, that Czechoslovakia would defend itself and that it would request Soviet assistance. I asked comrade Stalin whether I could relay this promise to the responsible representatives of the Czechoslovak Republic. Whereupon Stalin authorized me to share the contents of our conversation with the then president Beneš. I did so.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to this final version of Gottwald’s speech, the original version can also be found in the archives. The original version of the

10. ACC CPC, f. 57, signature 16. At the end of February 1938, Gottwald returned to Moscow where he remained until 11 May 1938. It seems that such a lengthy visit had not been anticipated because Gottwald’s Soviet visa, no. 250580, had expired on 13 March before it was renewed on 3 May until 7 May. It was then again renewed until 12 May 1938. Rather than going back to Czechoslovakia directly, via Poland, Gottwald traveled through Finland, Sweden and France. He arrived in Prague only on 16 May 1938—missing much of the crucial May crisis.

11. *Rudé Právo*, 6 October 1938.

12. *Ibid.*, 11 September 1945.

13. ACC CPC, f. 100/24, vol. 26, archival unit 729. This speech also appeared in Russian as “J.V. STALIN i chekhoslovatskii narod,” in *Za prochnyi mir, za narodnuiu demokraciiu* 32, no. 59 (21 December 1949): 5. The arrangement of paragraphs is somewhat different but all the changes discussed below are reflected in this version.

quoted passage differs at the very beginning and at the very end. It has Gottwald meeting Stalin not in “the critical year 1938” but “[i]n December 1937.” At the very end, Gottwald originally wrote: “I did so in January 1938” whereas in the final version he says simply “I did so.” Thus, the original version reports on a period extending from December 1937 to January 1938 while the revised version places the interview with Stalin and the subsequent meeting with Beneš at the height of the 1938 crisis.

It was one thing to offer assurances to Czechoslovakia in late 1937 when the country was strong, united and enjoyed the unqualified support of its western allies; it would have been quite another matter if Stalin had committed himself to supporting Czechoslovakia after Hitler’s speech of 20 February 1938—after the führer declared for the first time that he would defend the interests of ten million Germans whom the “madness of Versailles” kept out of the Reich. Czech writers have typically relied on Gottwald’s rewritten speech of December 1949. They could consequently assert that Gottwald’s meeting with Stalin took place in May 1938 and that the Soviet leader was ready to support Czechoslovakia unilaterally and under any circumstances.<sup>14</sup> But the archival evidence seems to show that either the whole episode involving Stalin’s offer of unilateral assistance was a fabrication or it took place under different circumstances in December 1937, not in May 1938.

Gottwald had been in the Soviet Union for more than six months when he returned to Czechoslovakia on 10 December 1937.<sup>15</sup> However, he was immediately called back for only two days just a week later<sup>16</sup> and it is likely that the matter was urgent. The archives do not reveal why he had to return so soon after his long stay in the Soviet capital. But it should be remembered that Gottwald was a high-ranking personality in the Comintern. Therefore, he may have been recalled to Moscow for a variety of reasons dealing with, in addition to the complicated Czechoslovak agenda, the crisis in Soviet-Japanese relations or the civil war in Spain. The documents examined in Prague archives do not indicate whether he met Stalin or what instructions he was given.

However, it can be shown that even if Gottwald had received Stalin’s assurances, as he asserted after the war, he never did relay them to Beneš. He did not do so in January 1938, as the original version of

14. E.g. Jaroslav Matějka, *Gottwald* (Prague: Svoboda, 1971), 182. In May 1938, “Gottwald who was again in Moscow returned to Czechoslovakia. He had spoken at length with Stalin about the Czechoslovak questions. He brought with him an assurance from Stalin to President Beneš that if Czechoslovakia assumed a tough stand she would be supported by the Soviets under all circumstances.” This account is at variance with facts derived from archival documents.

15. ACC CPC, f. 57, archival unit 568.

16. ACC CPC, f. 57, signature 16. Gottwald was in Moscow from 17 to 19 December.

his speech claims, and he did not do so even later during the crisis, as the revised version suggests. The Book of Presidential Audiences for 1938<sup>17</sup> shows that in January 1938 President Beneš received sixty-six official visitors from Czechoslovakia and abroad. Klement Gottwald was not among them. The record keeping system did break down at the height of the crisis, in summer 1938, and somebody well known to Beneš and his staff could have been received by the president without a record in the Book of Audiences. But certainly not Gottwald, the aggressive leader of a political party that was openly hostile to Beneš personally, as well as to the democratic principles of the Republic, at least until the spring of 1938, when it was forced to change its attitude on strict instructions of the Comintern.<sup>18</sup> And certainly not in January 1938 when the record keeping worked quite smoothly.

We have evidence of only three meetings between Beneš and Gottwald during the fateful year 1938. They met on 17 September, as recorded in the Book of Audiences. When they met again on 19 September, Beneš inquired whether Gottwald could tell him anything specific regarding the Soviet Union's attitude toward the present crisis. Gottwald correctly responded that he was not authorized to speak on the Soviet Union's behalf and that Beneš should formulate his questions in writing and submit them to the Kremlin.<sup>19</sup> When Beneš and Gottwald met again, on 30 September 1938, it was 2 p.m.: Czechoslovakia had accepted the Munich diktat an hour and a half earlier and all was lost. On that occasion, Gottwald met the president with a group of seven other people.<sup>20</sup> According to the written record of the meeting,<sup>21</sup> Gottwald spoke twice: on each occasion, he eloquently reminded President Beneš that capitulation was unacceptable. However, he did not bring up the alleged offer of Stalin to defend Czechoslovakia unilaterally. In fact, he did not mention the Soviet Union at all.

While Gottwald's statement "I did so in January 1938" in the orig-

17. The Book of Presidential Audiences for 1938 is deposited at the Office of the President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, the Castle, Prague.

18. ACC CPC, f. 19/5. Gottwald was repeatedly criticized by the Comintern for his failure to accept the new line of the VIIth Congress. The young Gottwald was a man of some integrity and he found it sometimes difficult to dance to the changing tune of the Comintern. He took revolution seriously and was not happy with the tactical compromises which Moscow demanded in the thirties. Unless instructed otherwise, Gottwald tended to speak quite harshly of Beneš and the democratically elected Czechoslovak government. He concluded one speech by stating: "It'll work! We'll decapitate the bourgeoisie." See *Rudé Právo*, 11 March 1931.

19. *Dokumenty k historii mnichovského diktátu*, 233.

20. In addition to Gottwald, the group received by Beneš included: Dr. Stránský (Czechoslovak National Socialist Party), Josef David (Czechoslovak National Socialist Party), Monsignor Stašek (People's Party), Josef Tykal (Czechoslovak National Socialist Party), deputy Richter (Czechoslovak National Socialist Party), Dr. Rašín (National Unity) and Dr. Klíma (National Unity).

21. ACC CPC, f. 57, signature 329. The record was prepared by Josef David because Beneš was not taking notes on this occasion.

inal version of his speech of December 1949 is at variance with existing documents, the later version (“I did so”) is so vague as to be unverifiable. Yet, if Gottwald had met Beneš at some point in 1938 and had at that time fully explained Stalin’s readiness to provide unilateral assistance to Czechoslovakia, then why was the president still questioning Soviet intentions during their encounter on 19 September 1938? The only plausible answer is that Gottwald never communicated to Dr. Beneš Stalin’s offer of unilateral assistance to Czechoslovakia. I suspect that the communist leader invented his meeting with the president in order to increase Beneš’s responsibility for Czechoslovakia’s capitulation to the Munich diktat.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to Kopecký and Gottwald there is a third source for the assertion that the Soviet Union stood ready to render Czechoslovakia military assistance under any circumstances. Zdeněk Fierlinger, the Czechoslovak minister in Moscow,<sup>23</sup> was a close friend of Dr. Beneš: the two had met during the Great War when Fierlinger was only twenty-two. Beneš was Fierlinger’s best man<sup>24</sup> and the Beneš and Fierlinger families met frequently, having bought summer homes not far apart in Sezimovo Ústí. After the war, Beneš, then foreign minister, actively supported Fierlinger’s career,<sup>25</sup> despite signals that Fierlinger’s socialist philosophy and his pro-Soviet stance had become notorious. For instance, General Sikorski reminded the president that “friendship with Russia” did not have to mean “taking orders from Moscow.” None of this moved the Czechoslovak president to fire Fierlinger.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding Soviet unilateral assistance to Czechoslovakia, Fierlinger

22. We will have to wait for the former Soviet archives in Moscow to become available to determine whether Gottwald met with Stalin and if so then who said what.

23. ANM-F, box 4. Zdenko Jindřich Eugen Maria Fierlinger was born in Olomouc in July 1891—his birth certificate, diplomatic passport and various other documents list his date of birth as 11, 12 and 15 July. Having served with the Masaryk Legions in Russia and France, Fierlinger joined the Czechoslovak foreign service shortly after it had been formed. He quickly rose to the rank of minister and served in several prestigious posts: the Hague, Bucharest, Washington, DC, Bern, the League of Nations, Vienna. In 1936–1937, Fierlinger was chief of the Political Section of the Foreign Ministry. In 1937, he replaced Bohdan Pavlů as the Czechoslovak minister in Moscow.

24. ANM-F, box 1. Technically, Beneš was Fierlinger’s “witness.” Fierlinger’s wife, Olga Therezie Favre, was a French citizen.

25. ACC CPC, f. 100/24, file 172, archival unit 1526. On 13 December 1943, Beneš told Gottwald and other high-ranking officials of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in Moscow that when it came to Fierlinger, he supported his career “with all his might” [všemožně ho forsíroval].

26. ACC CPC, f. 100/24, file 175, archival unit 1566. Sikorski stated that, in his view, Fierlinger “was completely owned by the Soviets.” The Czechoslovak General Sergěj Ingr, one of Beneš’s chief military aides, complained in London that “Fierlinger acts primarily with an eye on Moscow and the Comintern. He pays more attention to their viewpoint than to the position of our government” (Prokop Maxa’s record of 10 September 1942, ANM-F, box 5).



reported from Moscow that the Kremlin leaders were critical of Beneš's decision to capitulate. They expressed "the opinion that our will to defend [Czechoslovakia] would have forced France to join us after all. They claim to have been willing to come to our assistance in any case."<sup>27</sup> This is, of course, important testimony. One must look at the succession of crucial events to appreciate the value of Fierlinger's message within the context of the unfolding crisis.<sup>28</sup> The evidence suggests that the Soviet assurance did not come to Beneš's attention early enough to be a factor in his deliberations:

*28 September 1938*

12:26 p.m. Fierlinger cabled from Moscow that the president's "request for immediate air support has been presented." The minister hoped that it would be dealt with favorably.<sup>29</sup> This note had been received and decoded by 4:10 p.m. The Soviets never responded.

*29 September 1938*

3 p.m. Hubert Masařík<sup>30</sup> and Vojtěch Mastný,<sup>31</sup> the Czech emissaries to the conference, flew to Munich. They arrived at 4:20 p.m. Ge-

27. AMFA, Fierlinger to Krofta, 1037/38; dispatched on 2 October at 11:35 p.m., received in Prague on 3 October at 2:00 a.m.

28. MHA-B, box 1. Unless indicated otherwise, this timetable is based primarily on the notes of Dr. Hubert Masařík, which were composed on 30 September 1938, at Munich around 4 a.m. Another source for the timetable is in box 266. This contains a manuscript by Masařík, "Hrůstka dojmů z konference mnichovské" [a few impressions from the Munich conference], broadcast on Radio Bohemia-Moravia, 29 September 1943, and the text of Dr. Vojtěch Mastný, "Vzpomínka na Mnichov" [a memory of Munich], broadcast on the same station on 26 September 1943. Further information on this is in R.G.D. Laffan, *The Crisis over Czechoslovakia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951).

29. AMFA, Fierlinger to Krofta, 980/38, 28 September 1938. Many historians have joined in the debate regarding Soviet aerial assistance to Czechoslovakia. Some even argue that Stalin had in fact delivered planes to the Czechs; for instance, Marcia Toepfer states that 300 Soviet planes flew to Czechoslovakia during the crisis of 1938 ("An Historiographical Debate," *Diplomatic History* 1, no. 4 [1977]: 357). Soviet historians do not go so far: Ivan Pop claims that Stalin had put 730 planes on alert during the Czechoslovak crisis of 1938. They never left the ground (P. Glotz and K.H. Pollak et al., eds., *München 1938—Das Ende des alten Europas* [Essen: Reimar Hobbing, 1990], 438–39). A Czech specialist points out that even if Stalin had wanted to supply Czechoslovakia with airplanes it would have been impossible. First, there were virtually no airports in Czechoslovakia which would have accommodated the modern Soviet Air Force because their runways had been designed for the obsolete Czech planes. Second, Soviet planes required a high-octane fuel whereas the Czechs flew on "Biboli," a mixture of alcohol and gasoline. Third, the Soviet Air Force used a different kind of ammunition (7.62 mm) than the Czechs (7.92 mm). Fourth, the Soviets used different bombs and communication equipment. Consequently, any attempt to strengthen Czechoslovakia's air force would have required, in addition to providing airplanes, also massive predeployment of fuel, ammunition and ordnance (Dr. Lubor Václavů, the Military Historical Institute, Prague, personal communication, 6 October 1992). Finally, it is relevant that all reports of Soviet planes flying to Czechoslovakia came

stapo agents drove them to the Regina Hotel.<sup>32</sup> The conference was in progress in the *Führerhaus*.

7:25 p.m. In Prague, Beneš, Prime Minister General Jan Syrový,<sup>33</sup> eighteen ministers and eleven representatives of various political parties met at the Castle. Deputy Rudolf Beran<sup>34</sup> of the Republican (Agrarian) Party asked General Jan Syrový whether the Czechoslovak army had an “agreement with the Russian army,” and if so, with “what force and when would it intervene.” Syrový replied that there was “no concrete agreement with Russia, we only talked about their air assistance, effective quickly. The infantry would take a long time; therefore we have always counted on swift intervention by France and England.”<sup>35</sup> The meeting ended at 9:45 p.m.

10 p.m. In Munich, Masařík and Mastný met Counselor Frank Ashton-Gwatkin of the British Foreign Office who began to explain the basic points of the agreement. When interrupted by the Czechs, Ashton-Gwatkin declared in a theatrically officious voice: “Should you reject this plan you’ll be dealing with Germany completely on your own. The French will put it to you more elegantly, but believe me, they are in complete agreement with us. They will be disinterested.”

Fierlinger wrote from Moscow that “the Soviet government hesitated and hesitates to enter the conflict without the western powers.”

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from Polish, Romanian, Hungarian or Italian sources. Yet, no one, not even Gottwald, ever claimed to have seen Soviet airplanes in Czechoslovakia.

30. Dr. Hubert Masařík, a Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry official, served as Foreign Minister Kamil Krofta’s *chef de cabinet*. He kept the job after Krofta was replaced by František Chvalkovský, formerly the Czechoslovak minister to Rome. Masařík belonged to a group of Czechoslovak politicians and soldiers who—as late as on 3 October 1938—toyed with the idea of establishing in Prague a military government rather than accepting the Munich “solution.”

31. ANM-M. Dr. Mastný (b. 1874) was a leading Czechoslovak diplomat between the wars. His appointments as Czechoslovak minister included: London (1920–1925), Rome (1925–1932) and Berlin (1932–1939). At the height of the crisis of 1938, there were rumors in the Prague Castle that Minister Mastný had become too pro-German and Foreign Minister Krofta asked him in May 1938 to start thinking about retiring. See ANM-S, 12 May 1938. However, during the war, Minister Mastný behaved with dignity and courage as he refused to play any role in German propaganda schemes. He was briefly arrested after the war and quickly released. He died shortly afterwards.

32. This episode has been described elsewhere, for instance in Telford Taylor’s *Munich: The Price of Peace* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), 46–54.

33. General Jan Syrový (b. 1888) was one of the most prominent officers of the Czechoslovak Army between the wars. He had been in the Masaryk Legion in Russia and, consequently, his army career advanced rather effortlessly. He was an honest man but uninspiring as a military leader. He was known as a “political general.” In 1938, Syrový was inspector general of the army and became the Czechoslovak prime minister at the height of the crisis.

34. SCA. Rudolf Beran was secretary general of the Republican (Agrarian) Party and prime minister from November 1938 to March 1939; see below.

35. SCA. The Protocols of the 18th Czechoslovak government, 23 September–4 October 1938.

He added that the Beneš government had never requested unilateral Soviet involvement in the Czechoslovak crisis.”<sup>36</sup>

30 September 1938

1:30 a.m. Mastný and Masařík finally met Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier. The British prime minister looked tired after some nine hours of negotiating with Hitler. He gave a copy of the agreement to Mastný and asked him to read it aloud. Chamberlain yawned without any scruples throughout the reading.

5 a.m. The German legation in Prague telephoned the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry to request a 6 a.m. interview for the chargé d'affaires of the German legation, Andor Hencke, with Minister Dr. Kamil Krofta.<sup>37</sup>

6:15 a.m. Hencke met Krofta and gave him the text of the Munich agreement; the map was to be supplied by the British legation in Prague later. Beneš invited the chiefs of the main political parties<sup>38</sup>—not including Gottwald—to meet him at the Castle at 9:30 a.m.<sup>39</sup>

9:30 a.m. Just before the meeting, Beneš called Sergei S. Aleksandrovsky, the Soviet minister in Prague, from the Castle<sup>40</sup> and asked him to inquire as quickly as possible in Moscow regarding the new situation. Should Czechoslovakia fight or should it surrender? What was the Soviet view? For the time being, Aleksandrovsky did not cable this question to Moscow and later characterized this episode as Beneš's “agonized cry.”<sup>41</sup>

9:45 a.m. The Czechoslovak government met at the Kolowrat Palace in Prague. Syrový opened the meeting by saying that the four powers had given Czechoslovakia a choice between being murdered and committing suicide.<sup>42</sup>

10 a.m. The Czechoslovak legation in Moscow telephoned Fierlinger's message to Foreign Minister Krofta: “Don't let them get us and stay the course!”<sup>43</sup>

10:30 a.m. Aleksandrovsky, having apparently done nothing for one hour, drove to the Castle to ascertain for himself what was going

36. AMFA. Fierlinger to Krofta, Secret, 29 September 1938.

37. SCA. The Protocols of the 18th Czechoslovak government.

38. Milan Hodža, Rudolf Beran, Josef Černý, Republican (Agrarian) Party; František Ježek, National Unity; Antonín Hampl, Rudolf Bechyně, Ivan Dérer, Social Democratic Party; Jan Šrámek, People's Party; Emil Franke, Czechoslovak National Socialist Party; Rudolf Mlčoch, Small Businessmen Party; František Hodač, National Democratic Party.

39. *Dokumenty k historii mnichovského diktátu*, 322–23.

40. The timing of this call is from Aleksandrovsky's memorandum of 1 October 1938 to the People's Commissariat in Moscow (*ibid.*, 328); and from his recently published memorandum of 20 October 1938 which appeared in “Miunkhen: Sviditel'stvo ochevidtstva,” *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'* 11 (1988): 128–42.

41. “Miunkhen,” 142.

42. SCA. The Protocols of the 18th Czechoslovak government.

43. AMFA. The Safe, Secret, 138.589/1938.

on. He did not meet Beneš but solicited bits of information from his staff, primarily from the chief of protocol and Beneš's chief secretary, Minister Jaromír Smutný.

11:30 a.m. The Czechoslovak government meeting ended and the participants drove to the Castle to meet with President Beneš.

11:45 a.m. President Beneš, Prime Minister Syrový, seventeen ministers (all but Petr Zenkl) and General Ludvík Krejčí met at the Castle. Beneš stated at the outset that he could not "but suggest the acceptance" of the Munich agreement.<sup>44</sup>

11:45 a.m. The Soviet legation in Prague cabled to Moscow the crucially important question Beneš had submitted to Aleksandrovsky at 9:30 a.m.; at 11:45 a.m. Aleksandrovsky was still at the Castle.<sup>45</sup>

Noon. The government meeting with Beneš ended and Aleksandrovsky learned from Smutný that it was no longer necessary for Moscow to reply to the original inquiry.

12:20 p.m. The Czechoslovak legation in Moscow telephoned that it had "nothing new to report."<sup>46</sup>

12:30 p.m. Minister Krofta formally announced to the British minister in Prague, Basil Newton, and the French minister, Victor Delacroix, that Czechoslovakia accepted the Munich diktat.<sup>47</sup>

1:40 p.m. The Soviet legation in Prague cabled to Moscow the second telegram of the day, informing the Kremlin that Beneš had accepted Munich and that a Soviet reply was no longer expected.<sup>48</sup>

5 p.m. Moscow received the first telegram with Beneš's urgent question posed at 9:30 a.m. and cabled at 11:45 a.m. The delay in transmission has never been explained.

5:45 p.m. Moscow received the second telegram.<sup>49</sup>

6 p.m. Moscow decoded the first telegram.

### 1 October 1938

Czechoslovak foreign ministry technicians had failed throughout the day to re-establish the temporary radiotelephone connection between Prague and Moscow. In fact no contact with Moscow was possible that day "since Moscow did not broadcast anything in open language." This was strange because the connection had been initially established at the request of the Soviet legation in Prague.<sup>50</sup>

44. SCA. The Protocols of the 18th Czechoslovak government.

45. *Dokumenty*, 328.

46. AMFA. The Safe, Secret, 138.589/1938.

47. The long-term failure of the Munich Agreement was best characterized by First Lord of the Admiralty Alfred Duff Cooper: "We have taken away the defences of Czechoslovakia in the same breath as we have guaranteed them, as though you were to deal a man a mortal blow and at the same time insure his life. . ." *Parliamentary Debates*, fifth series, vol. 339 (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1938), 39.

48. *Dokumenty*, 328.

49. *Ibid.*, 325.

50. AMFA. The Safe, Secret, 138.589/1938.

2 p.m. German forces moved into the first zone of the part of Czechoslovakia handed over to the Third Reich by the Munich Agreement.

Throughout the day, Nazi radio stations broadcast a message celebrating the failure of Beneš and Syrový to drag the world into war. They claimed that Czechoslovakia was governed by “a military dictatorship with a Jewish-bolshevik background.”<sup>51</sup>

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German troops continued to pour into other sections of the Sudetenland.

The first discussions as to whether the president should resign took place among Beneš's entourage. Smutný recorded that the president was at first inclined to do so immediately. “As always,” he writes, “his tendency to deliberate won over his desire to act.”<sup>52</sup> (Beneš was to resign on 5 October 1938.)

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2 a.m. The Prague foreign ministry received and decoded the Fierlinger cable that Moscow was critical of the decision to capitulate and that it would have come to Czechoslovakia's assistance “under any circumstances.” *This was exactly sixty-one and one half hours after Prague had accepted the Munich diktat.*

Thus an analysis of the period from 28 September to 3 October 1938 shows that Beneš learned of the alleged Soviet willingness to assist Czechoslovakia militarily two and one half days after he had accepted the Munich diktat and at least thirty-six hours after the Czechoslovak Army had withdrawn from fortified, defensible areas. Under these circumstances, the Kremlin's answer to Beneš's inquiry played no role in the decision-making process which had taken place before noon on 30 September 1938.

Rudolf Beran was one of the most prominent personalities in Czechoslovak politics before World War II.<sup>53</sup> Despite his humble background, Beran rose steadily through the ranks of the Republican (Agrarian) Party to become its secretary general in November 1935. After Czechoslovakia's acceptance of the Munich diktat, Beran served as prime minister from November 1938 to March 1939. He was arrested in May 1941 by the Germans and spent years in various concentration camps. While he was in custody of the Gestapo in Prague, he had to answer several written questions submitted to him by K.H. Frank, Hitler's *Staatsminister* in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Al-

51. MHA-B, box 13, the “O” Service, *odposlechová služba*, i.e., the monitoring service.

52. ANM-S, box 38.

53. SCA. The Ministry of National Security, 109-4-227. Beran was born in Prácheň on 28 December 1887.

though Beran had acquired a reputation for being shrewd and narrow-minded in politics,<sup>54</sup> his statement for Frank was balanced and, given that it was written in a Gestapo jail, even courageous.<sup>55</sup> It now provides useful insight into the workings of the Czechoslovak government during the crisis of 1938 and its relations with the Soviet Union.

Beran told Frank that the Czechoslovak political elite had felt quite secure until about the mid-1930s. However, just when Beneš realized that an understanding with the Third Reich had become impossible, French interest in central Europe started to decline dramatically. When the Republicans urged the president to develop closer relations with Poland, Beneš refused. He warned that military or even political ties with Poland could prove dangerous for Czechoslovakia. The president felt certain that the next war in Europe would involve the Polish corridor. The global picture before the Prague government in the mid-1930s, as described by Beran in his memorandum to K.H. Frank, did not offer much comfort to the team around president Beneš: Germany was hostile, France was far away and more and more disinterested, and Czechoslovakia's immediate neighbors, Poland and Hungary, seemed both unpredictable and unappeasable. Beneš recognized the need to explore other ways of strengthening the country's security. But for a new ally the president would have to turn to the east.

Beran stated that nobody in Prague political circles knew all the details concerning the Soviet Union and its relations with Czechoslovakia. This was partly because Soviet policy was amazingly secretive (*"Ihre Politik war unendlich geheimnisvoll,"* Beran told Frank) and partly because Beneš dealt with the Kremlin directly. Even his most important colleagues knew only whatever appeared in the press. When it came to Soviet affairs, Beran stressed, the president was "extremely discrete."

It is well known that the behavior of the French and British envoys in Prague toward Czechoslovak politicians during the crisis of 1938 was offensive and caused pain to the president. "The Soviets," recalled Beran, "acted differently. Their attitude [toward Prague] was cautious. It was designed in such a manner that, if possible, no one could say about them that they could not or did not wish to come to our assist-

54. Vojtěch Mastný, *The Czechs under Nazi Rule: The Failure of National Resistance, 1939–1942* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 21.

55. For instance, K.H. Frank demanded that Beran supply him with information damaging to the exiled President Beneš's reputation. Although Beran had been the president's political opponent for years, he now bravely (Czech heads rolled easily in the Gestapo headquarters at the time) refused to become a pawn in any German propaganda scheme. He survived the war but was promptly arrested for the second time, now for alleged collaboration with Germany. Ironically, he again had to respond to written questions from his prison cell; they were submitted this time by Václav Kopecný. Beran's answer to Kopecný was virtually identical with his previous answer to Frank. This statement is in ACC CPC, f. 100/45, file 10, archival unit 183. Beran was sentenced to twenty years on 21 April 1947; he did not survive his second imprisonment.

ance.” Most valuable, and surprising, is what Beran had to say specifically about how the possibility of Soviet assistance to Czechoslovakia was perceived by the Czechoslovak president at the end of September 1938. Beran testified that it had been unclear until about the 29th (sic) whether war would break out or not:

I believe that if the Soviets had then promised their assistance the war would have taken place. I am convinced that in that case Dr. Beneš would have gone to war with the consent of the socialist parties and even against the wishes of some [other political] parties.<sup>56</sup>

As it happened, no Soviet assistance materialized. When Beran and others challenged General Karel Husárek<sup>57</sup> during the fateful meeting of 30 September 1938 to tell them whether Czechoslovakia should fight, the general responded on behalf of the army: “We are soldiers and it is our duty to die for the country whenever and wherever necessary. Our lives, gentlemen, are at your disposal.” He then outlined the military consequences of the French betrayal, British noninvolvement, the Polish and Hungarian ultimatums to Czechoslovakia, and the Little Entente’s failure. And what about the Soviet Union, Beran asked. “The Soviets won’t fight, they won’t go to war for us,” Husárek replied.<sup>58</sup> This statement was received with complete seriousness. Husárek, one of the few Czechoslovak generals with good contacts in Moscow, had been received by Stalin and Molotov in late June 1938.<sup>59</sup> He knew what he was talking about.

Let us now look at the question of Moscow’s willingness to provide unilateral assistance to Czechoslovakia from the perspective of the Soviet minister in Prague, Sergei Aleksandrovsky, one of the stars of Soviet diplomacy before World War II.<sup>60</sup> His life meandered through

56. SCA. The Ministry of National Security, 109-4-227. Beran interpreted Moscow’s intentions toward Czechoslovakia with skepticism: he and his republican colleagues “developed the impression that the Soviets did not want to go to war, but that they would support Czechoslovakia in case it had broken out the way they had acted in Spain during the Civil War.” Beneš told Beran on the occasion, presumably on 29 September, that he was still negotiating with the Soviets.

57. General Husárek, deputy chief of staff of the Czechoslovak Army, served in the critical period 1935–1938 as director of the Fortification Project. In October 1938, he represented the post-Munich Czechoslovakia on the International Border Commission.

58. SCA. The Ministry of National Security, 109-4-227.

59. ANM-F, box 23, Fierlinger to Beneš and Krofta only, 586/secret/38, 29 June 1938. Husárek was received by Stalin and Molotov on 28 June 1938. The conversation lasted for three hours.

60. AMFA and SCA. There is much material on Aleksandrovsky in the Prague archives, for instance, AMFA, the Safe, II/2, and in SCA X/R/24/2. Aleksandrovsky was born in Kurysi (spelled elsewhere as “Kyrusi” and “Girushi”), Russia, in 1889. Czech sources allege that during World War I Aleksandrovsky, who had been educated at Mannheim, worked on behalf of German military intelligence and the leninist cause

the difficult terrain of Russian and Soviet politics in the twentieth century; but he always represented Soviet interests in Czechoslovakia with skill. Although his predecessor in Prague, Aleksandr Yakovlevich Arosev, and several members of the Soviet diplomatic community in Prague had disappeared during the stalinist purges of the 1930s,<sup>61</sup> Aleksandrovsky survived. He returned to Moscow after Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist in March 1939; he was fired from diplomatic service and was unable to find any work for more than two years.<sup>62</sup> After the outbreak of the war, Aleksandrovsky, then fifty-two years old, was drafted to serve in a territorial defense unit. He became a prisoner of war during the battle of Moscow but soon escaped and joined a partisan unit operating in the region. When the Red Army reconquered the area, the former Soviet diplomat was arrested by the SMERSH, the dreaded Soviet military counter-intelligence. In fall 1945, Sergei Aleksandrovsky, the diplomat who once implemented Stalin's foreign policy directives with charm and sophistication, was tried, sentenced to death for high treason and promptly executed.

Aleksandrovsky had served in Prague as the top Soviet diplomat in 1923–1924 and 1933–1939. Few men in the Kremlin were better informed about Soviet policy toward Czechoslovakia than this Soviet minister. Therefore, his recollections of the Czechoslovak crisis are vitally important.<sup>63</sup> Writing in Prague on 20 October 1938, Aleksandrovsky listed his encounters with Beneš, focusing on their meetings in September 1938.<sup>64</sup>

At their meeting on 21 September Aleksandrovsky found Beneš in a good mood. He was convinced that the French and the British would stand by him and that the Soviet Union would “fight its way through

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among Russian POWs held by Germany. As a Soviet diplomat in Germany he is said to have worked for the Soviet delegation led by Ioffe. He went on to serve in Prague (1923–1924), at the Commissariat in Moscow (1924–1925), in Kaunas and Helsinki (1925–1928), in Kharkov at the Ukrainian foreign service (1928–1931), in Germany (1931–1933) and in Prague (1933–1939).

61. AMFA, the Safe, Fierlinger's Secret to Prague of 7 March 1938. Arosev perished together with his wife Gertruda Aroseva-Freundová, a Czech citizen whom he married in Prague in April 1932. Freundová had been an official with the Prague branch of KOSTUFRA, i.e., the communist student faction. AMFA, the Second Section, box 562a. Among other victims of the stalinist purge were, for instance, the Soviet military attaché Colonel Leo Schnittmann (also Shnitman), b. 1890 in Minsk. He had served as deputy military attaché in Germany (1926–1929), Finland (1929–1930) and again in Germany (1932–1935). He was recalled from Prague to Moscow in 1938 and he never returned (MHA-MOP, 1936, Secret, 174). The Soviet deputy military attaché, Colonel Vladimir Vetrovskii (also Vietvicki), also perished (MHA-MOP, 1937, Secret, 348).

62. The following is based on the testimony of Aleksandrovsky's son in *Historické studie* 25, no. 12 (June 1989): 72; the journal was published in Prague. It was a samizdat publication.

63. “Miunkhen,” 128–42.

64. PO. Aleksandrovsky also met with Beneš on 3 September 1938 (the Book of Presidential Audiences, PO).



Poland or Romania” to help Czechoslovakia in its war against the Third Reich. Aleksandrovsky listened with polite interest but said as little as possible. When they met again on 23 September, Beneš appeared even more optimistic. Czechoslovakia was about to declare a general mobilization and the president felt that he personally had succeeded “in forming a world-wide coalition against the onslaught of fascism.” Beneš’s secretary, Prokop Drtina, recalled that Aleksandrovsky stayed with the president for an unusually long time on that occasion. Minutes after he had left, Drtina gave the president an envelope with a message from the British legation in Prague: Czechoslovakia was to mobilize!<sup>65</sup> Two days later, the Castle reminded Aleksandrovsky of a military encampment. President Beneš looked proud and cocky. With a gas-mask on his desk and determined-looking military personnel rushing around, the presidential suite looked more like military headquarters than the office of a democratically elected president. Beneš spoke with confidence of his French ally. And what about the Red Army? This time, Beneš had many “practical questions” for Aleksandrovsky: how many thousands of air-borne Soviet troops would be deployed to Czechoslovakia? With what equipment? What means of technical support would they have when they engaged the enemy? And what was Aleksandrovsky’s reaction? “I confess to having a heavy feeling because I could tell Beneš nothing, especially regarding his ‘practical questions.’”

On 26 September 1938, Aleksandrovsky met Beneš again, just after Hitler had delivered a speech in the Berlin *Sportpalast*. Beneš seemed happy to the skeptical Aleksandrovsky. It was an error, Beneš argued, for Hitler to believe that the crisis could be reduced to a confrontation between the German *fürher* and the Czechoslovak president. In reality, Beneš sought to persuade Aleksandrovsky, Hitler stood alone against a huge coalition consisting of France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia—with the United States ready to support the coalition morally and materially.<sup>66</sup> Beneš ventured to predict that Hitler was going to be forced to resign.

The following day the president no longer believed war was avoidable. He pretended to be calm but Aleksandrovsky understood that Beneš feared a German attack on Czechoslovakia at any moment. “I

65. Prokop Drtina, *Československo můj osud* [Czechoslovakia my fate] (Toronto: 68 Publishers, 1982), 1: 144–47.

66. ACC CPC, f. 100/24. It was not uncharacteristic for Beneš soon to change his mind regarding the role played by F.D. Roosevelt in the Munich crisis. In his discussion with General Sikorski in London on 20 May 1942, Beneš attempted to explain why he felt less inclined than the Poles to trust the western democracies. He now presented Roosevelt’s personal appeal to Hitler and Beneš to seek only peaceful solutions for the crisis as a stab in the back. It was “the last heavy blow” before he had to accept the diktat. After all, Roosevelt “even ordered for himself similar statements from twenty-one South American republics.” Beneš concluded that he was not prepared to lean on the democracies in the emerging rift between the east and the west: “We shall remain reserved and await the specific outcome of the war.”

sensed clearly,” wrote Aleksandrovsky, “that with much nervous tension, and with ultimate seriousness, Beneš wanted to hear from us when and how we would help.” But, again, Aleksandrovsky did not respond. Writing less than a month after these events had happened, Aleksandrovsky expressed the view that Beneš had attempted to deceive the Soviet Union. According to Aleksandrovsky, Beneš was *not* seeking to obtain circumstances under which Czechoslovakia’s capitulation would become inevitable.<sup>67</sup> On the contrary! Beneš’s intention was to drag the Soviet Union “into war against western Europe so that Czechoslovakia’s fate would not be decided by some Munich-style agreements but by a large-scale European war.” The Soviet minister reflected that Beneš was at that moment ready to provoke the Soviet Union into a “war against the whole world” in order to prevent a localized, isolated conflict between Czechoslovakia and the Third Reich.<sup>68</sup> (It must be noted here that this portrait of Beneš is dramatically at variance with later sketches of the president by Gottwald, Kopecký and scores of official historians who insisted that throughout the crisis Beneš was looking for excuses to capitulate.)

Aleksandrovsky was not alone in thinking that the west wanted “to drag” the Soviet Union into war. A few days after the Munich Agreement had been signed, Czechoslovak intelligence monitored a telephone conversation between an unidentified Soviet citizen in Prague and a station in Moscow. The caller offered the opinion that Great Britain and France had hoped to provoke the Soviet Union into war against Germany.<sup>69</sup>

On 27 September Aleksandrovsky left the Castle and he and Beneš would never see each other again, though they did speak on the telephone. On 28 and 29 September, according to Aleksandrovsky’s report, Beneš and the Soviet minister talked mainly about other participants in the Czechoslovak crisis, primarily Poland. When President Beneš called Aleksandrovsky at 9:30 a.m. on 30 September 1938 it was “an agonized cry,” wrote the Soviet minister. The president still—even at this late moment—entertained the idea of rejecting the Munich diktat. But, alas, Aleksandrovsky revealed no more.

67. There has been speculation among historians that already on 20 September 1938 Beneš had indicated to the British and French envoys in Prague his willingness to accept even a harsh solution of the Czechoslovak crisis as long as it appeared that it had been forced on him as an ultimatum. Minister Newton wrote to Viscount Halifax from Prague: “If I can deliver a kind of ultimatum to President Beneš, Wednesday, he and his Government will feel able to bow to *force majeure*” (*Documents on British Foreign Policy*, 3d series [London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1949], II: 425). I believe this was only Newton’s speculation. Beneš truly despised Newton—in his private notes he called him “a thick-headed ignoramus”—and I doubt that he would have entrusted him with such a sensitive charade (MHA-B, box 6).

68. “Miunkhen,” 140.

69. AMFA, the Safe (1938–1939), 140.146/38, 3 October 1938, 12:32 hours, Prague to Moscow.

The Soviet Minister testified that in September 1938 President Beneš hoped for the war to break out. This sheds light on an altogether new theme of his thinking during the Munich crisis and on a hitherto unknown, and undebated, dimension of his personality. For generations of Czechoslovak citizens who lived during the First Republic (1918-1938) and to many of his colleagues, Beneš was a political intellectual and humanist who worked unceasingly at the League of Nations and in Prague to stabilize the volatile European political scene. To them, Beneš was a democrat who was first weakened by Hitler and later brought down by Stalin.<sup>70</sup> Beneš's critics accept this view but add that he was also a schemer who exaggerated the importance of what were, in fact, diplomatic charades. They portray the president as a theoretician who lacked the crucial strength to fight at a time of crisis.<sup>71</sup>

Beneš's archive reveals a different personality, one that has more in common with the sketches drawn by Aleksandrovsy than with the popular view of the president as either an indecisive Hamlet or a noble humanist unable to shed blood. In politics, Beneš had no trouble accepting the world as a dangerous jungle in which only the strong-minded and clever survived.<sup>72</sup> Lev Sychrava, Beneš's most intimate collaborator in Paris during World War I, noted in 1916 in his diary

70. For such a view see, e.g. Drtina, *Československo*; Drtina offers a sympathetic, but not one-dimensional portrait of Beneš. He shows masterfully the contrast between the optimistic and self-confident Beneš prior to the Munich catastrophe and the broken, frightened man who by 1948 was unable—or unprepared—to stand by his loyal friends among Czechoslovak democrats.

71. The most notorious among such critics of Beneš was Colonel Emanuel Moravec (b. 1893). His appalling behavior during the war—Moravec became a prominent collaborator with the Third Reich—caused this complex personality to be seen by many in the simplest terms: he was a traitor and villain. Yet Moravec, a.k.a. Stanislav Yester, was also among the most talented “defense intellectuals” of pre-World War II Czechoslovakia. Shortly after “Munich,” Moravec started criticizing Beneš as an idealist with “a hare’s heart.” The Czechoslovaks, he said, had been led by “apostles without courage.” A nation which was not willing to die in combat had no right to evoke its ideals, “much like a whore has no right to boast of her honor.” Responding to an early critic of his new pro-German political line, Moravec concluded: “A segment of our nation could have died in war [with Germany]. Now the whole nation will die of fright and fear. One does not negotiate with cowards. One gives them orders!” (Colonel Moravec to Dr. Ladislav Hobza, 6 October 1938, MHA-B, Munich, box 3). To show his distaste for Beneš’s decision to accept the diktat and his own love of the military profession, Colonel Moravec requested in March 1939 a transfer to the army of El Salvador (AMFA, Second Section, box 495). The darkly logical view of “Munich” held by Emanuel Moravec can be found in his *V úloze mouřenína: československá tragedie r. 1938* [in the Moor’s role: the Czechoslovak tragedy of 1938] (Prague: Orbis, 1939).

72. This theme is explored by Antonín Klimek in his “Edvard Beneš—postava v mlhách” [E.B.: the elusive man], *Historie a vojenství* 4 (1991): 143–44. The author quotes an interesting anecdote, a poem penned by young Beneš (he was only twenty-three) to his fiancée and future wife, Anna Vlčková. Instead of the predictable sweet nothings and declarations of love, Beneš’s poem starts in medias res: “Life is a struggle and in the struggle many / die and fall.” See also Klimek’s “Beneš a Štěfánik,” *Sborník k dějinám 19. a 20. století* (Prague: Historický ústav ČSAV, 1991), 35–65.

one of Beneš's statements: "I know precisely what I can do and what I can achieve. I've never failed in my life. I go to war only when I know that I'll win. . . . I can go after my objective over dead bodies, I could even kill. . ."73

Two incidents during the Munich crisis illustrate Beneš's complex character. During the night of 30 September 1938, as he was attempting to deal with one of the greatest political crises of the century, Beneš took the time to make a statement in his firm handwriting denying the clemency appeal of Lt. Col. Alois Wünsch of the Czechoslovak Army who had been sentenced to death for military espionage. Only moments later, as the victorious Hitler was getting ready to drive into the Sudetenland, Wünsch was handed over to the executioner in a military jail not far from Beneš's Castle in Prague.<sup>74</sup> It is an unusual statesman who surrenders the whole country and its enthusiastic army to a mortal enemy without firing a shot and then executes the enemy's spy.<sup>75</sup>

Beneš had never intended to build bridges between himself and Hitler; he was, as far as the Third Reich was concerned, no appeaser. According to his secretary, Beneš "hoped for a military solution after it had become apparent that agreement [with Hitler] was unobtainable. He counted on the possibility of an armed conflict to the end and he saw in it his last hope."<sup>76</sup>

The next episode presents an equally surprising aspect of Beneš's behavior during the Munich crisis. Before one of the meetings in late September 1938 at the Castle, Rudolf Beran received information that, on President Beneš's personal orders, weapons were being distributed to the Czech proletariat from the Janeček arms factory in Prague. Beran quickly returned to the meeting and brought this issue up with Beneš. "Yes," the president responded, "it was on my order that the weapons were distributed to workers. But I have remanded it and further distribution has been canceled."<sup>77</sup> Was Beneš thinking at some point of

73. MHA-B, Personalities, box 8, file General Štefánik.

74. VHA-VKPR, Secret, 1935-1939, personnel, 263/38. Wünsch was arrested, together with his wife, on 15 September 1938 for espionage on behalf of Hungary. But it soon turned out that the couple had also worked for Germany, via Vienna, since 1928. Wünsch was interrogated by Colonel František Moravec, Major Bartík and Major Dítě. He was sentenced to death on 22 September 1938 and hanged on 30 September at 6 a.m. Mrs. Wünsch received financial compensation from the Third Reich after 15 March 1939.

75. Note that Beneš behaved similarly during World War II. Although he was unwilling to lead the nation into the "slaughterhouse" of a Czechoslovak-German war in 1938, as he repeatedly put it, the president did not hesitate to order from his exile in London the operation ANTHROPOID, i.e., the assassination of General Reinhard Heydrich in Prague. As had been predicted by the resistance, German reprisals were drastic and resulted in a near annihilation of the underground. Many have since agonized about the value of ANTHROPOID. Yet Beneš had refused to remand the order to assassinate Heydrich and he subsequently never seemed to have second thoughts about the operation.

76. Drtina, *Československo*, 203.

77. SCA, Rudolf Beran, the Ministry of National Security, 109-4-227.

a desperate, all-out fight? One can only speculate, but it is interesting that this event was never mentioned by official Czechoslovak or Soviet historians. It did not fit with their major argument, namely, that Beneš was unable to accept an offer of Soviet assistance because he consistently placed his “class interest” above Czechoslovakia’s “national interest.”<sup>78</sup>

Neither Gottwald nor Kopecký nor Fierlinger brought forth any evidence to support the assertion that the Soviet Union was prepared to assist Czechoslovakia unilaterally in September 1938. Moreover, Beran stressed that Beneš was prepared to go to war even as late as on 29 September 1938 if only he had received a signal that the Soviet military machinery would support him. Finally, Aleksandrovsky stated explicitly that on 25 September he had not responded to Beneš’s specific inquiries regarding a possible Soviet military deployment to Czechoslovakia. And two days later, the Soviet minister refused to allow Beneš to drag the Soviet Union into a war. On 29 September, Prime Minister Syrový said that there was no concrete military agreement with the Soviet Union and Beneš’s “agonized cry” of 30 September went unanswered by the Kremlin until it was too late.

On this basis I must conclude that the Soviet Union was not prepared to provide Czechoslovakia with unilateral assistance against the Third Reich. Beneš surrendered, but neither because he feared violence nor because he considered war immoral, nor because he was a prisoner of his “class interest.” In fact, according to Beneš’s secretary, the president had *hoped* for a military resolution of the crisis. But Czechoslovakia would not battle Hitler alone. For the moment, Beneš chose not to fight because he had been abandoned by his French ally and by the Soviet Union. At the same time, he was under enormous pressure from Great Britain and several other countries to accept the view that further coexistence of Germans with Czechs and Slovaks in one state had become impossible.<sup>79</sup> (And let us remember Beneš’s statement to Sychrava: “I go to war only when I know that I’ll win. . .”)

President Edvard Beneš was convinced that the Munich Agreement would not mark the end of Czechoslovakia but the beginning of a large

78. E.g. see Václav Kopecký’s speech before the communist party officials in Prague on 24 September 1948: “It has been shown perfectly clearly. . . that the capitulation of our Munichites [i.e., Beneš and his colleagues] was deliberate, that it was dictated by class interests, by the bourgeois fear of the forces of socialism. . . . it is linked with class fear and class hatred of the Soviet Union and socialism.” A copy of the speech is in ACC CPC, file 2, archival unit 75. See also Zdeněk Fierlinger, *Zrada československé buržoazie a jejich spojenců* [*the treason of Czechoslovak bourgeoisie and its allies*] (Prague: Nakladatelství Mír, 1951).

79. MHA-B, box 6, Minister Krno’s notes of 20 September 1938 on his meetings with the ministers of Belgium, Greece, Bulgaria, Italy and the United States. They expressed the view that Czechoslovakia had to accept whatever had been prepared for it by the British and the French. Only the Belgian minister conceded that the whole affair was “painful.”

conflict between Hitler and the democracies at the end of which the country would reemerge. He was certain that there was going to be another world war and that the Third Reich would be defeated by a large coalition consisting at least of Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union in which he would play a role.<sup>80</sup> Although he was haunted by his acceptance of the Munich diktat until the end of his life, Beneš believed that he had made the right decision. In fact, by 1948, he held a highly idealized view of his own performance during the crisis: when a group of democratic politicians came to see him on 23 February 1948 to seek his support in the conflict with Gottwald's Communist Party, Beneš astonished them: "I shall conduct myself as I had done in September 1938. I won't give an inch. You can rely on me!"<sup>81</sup>

And the Soviet Union? The Munich Agreement between the democracies and Hitler represented the worst possible scenario from Moscow's perspective. It was sobering that the country was not even invited to participate in the conference. A *modus vivendi* between the Franco-British bloc and the Hitler-Mussolini tandem increased the Kremlin's isolation. All could now see that if the Munich arrangement were to hold, it could dangerously channel the destructive energy of the Third Reich toward the Soviet Union. Moscow's response to this seemingly impossible situation, however, must be subject of another study.

80. ANM-D, box 4. Beneš summed up his reasons for accepting the Munich diktat in 13 points.

81. Klimek, "Edvard Beneš—postava v mlhách," 781.