Czechoslovakia and the Powers, September 1938

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The present article is concerned with two closely related questions: why did the Czechoslovak Government accept the terms of the Munich Agreement and to what extent was the alternative of rejecting the Agreement a feasible course of action?

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At the foundation of Czechoslovak foreign policy lay the alliance with France and the cornerstone of that alliance was Czech military power. Masaryk and Benes may have been, in their way, rather old-fashioned liberals, but they were not pacifists and they were, on the whole, unsentimental in their appreciation of world affairs. During the first World War they conceived and formed the Czech Legions to serve two ends: to embody in the most tangible way the still unrecognized nationhood of their country and at the same time, by contributing to the general effort, to lay a claim on the loyalty and recognition of the Allies. After the establishment of the Czechoslovak State much the same purposes underlay the very great effort put into the armaments industry and into the army itself. A small nation, they reasoned, surrounded by greater and lesser enemies, needs great friends. Tradition, political philosophy, the Versailles settlement, common interests and sentiment all dictated that the alliance with France be made as secure as possible. The some two score Czech divisions were conceived as a contribution that no French General Staff could ignore; nor could the Skoda plants at Brno and Pilsen; nor the possibility of all this military wealth falling into the hands of the Germans.1 Finally, there was Czechoslovakia’s geographical situation, the spearhead

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1 President Benes was prepared to remind French listeners of this result 'dans l'hypothèse inconcevable de votre défaillance'. Interview with Prof. Henri Hauser on 10 May 1938, in L'Année politique française et étrangère, 1939, p. 114.
in Germany's side or, as Hitler put it on another occasion, the 'aircraft carrier' in the heart of Europe.

While active French interest in Czech military power tended to evaporate with the general failure of French nerve in the face of resurgent Germany, this last advantage, the geographical one, attracted them to the end. Facilities for French bomber squadrons were maintained in Czechoslovakia, whence Berlin could be bombed at a distance shorter than that between Paris and the German frontier at the nearest point.2

There was no question of the Czechs refusing the French the use of these facilities and there was no question that in the event of war between France and Germany they would enter it. This was axiomatic; it was the price they had to pay for their own security. In 1933 and again in 1936 the Germans offered the Czechs a non-aggression pact. On both occasions Benes stood firm.

On the other hand, if it was the Czechs who were attacked, it was not expected that the French would rush to assist them actively. What was expected was that the French declare war on Germany. That alone would immobilize a substantial part of the German army. The Czechs, for their part, would defend themselves against the rest. The main thing was for the Germans to realize that a war with Czechoslovakia implied a general war.

It was a simple, brave theory, easily translated into an even simpler national policy: everything must be subordinated to the interests of the French alliance, which with time acquired a certain sanctity. It was rude to question it. 'How dare you say such things of your country, you a Frenchman!' said an indignant Benes to his good friend Hubert Beuve-Méry, in the spring of 1938, when the latter came to warn him that he should not put absolute reliance in France.3 The indignation was sincere. 'I know the history of France. She has never failed her word. She will not begin today.'

The nub of the matter, however, was that the Czechs founded their belief in the permanence of their alliance with the West on

2 Documents on British Foreign Policy, Third Series (henceforth DBFP), vol. ii, pp. 395–6.
3 H. Beuve-Méry's testimony before the French Parliamentary Commission inquiring into the events leading up to the second World War, in Assemblée Nationale, Rapport fait au nom de la Commission chargée d'enquêter sur les événements survenus en France de 1933 à 1945 (henceforth Les événements survenus en France), Annexes (Dépositions), vol. iii, p. 818.
the undoubted fact that both they and the French were beneficiaries of the Versailles settlement. They were among the first to recognize that Hitler was intent on the destruction of Versailles, and Benes and his colleagues made the greatest possible efforts, over a period of years, to convince all who cared to listen that the victor powers and their clients must stick together. Germany was bent on destroying Versailles and the key to the Versailles arch was Czechoslovakia. It was therefore in the interests of the British and the French to help Czechoslovakia to help itself. By doing so they would enhance their own power. It was a good case, sincerely held. It was persisted in to the end:

Even if the Czechoslovak Government were resigned to the proposed sacrifices, the question of peace would in no way be settled. To paralyse Czechoslovakia would entail a profound political change for the whole of Central and South-east Europe. The balance of forces in Central Europe and in Europe in general would be upset; and this would not fail to produce important consequences in every other state and particularly also in France. Czechoslovakia has always remained faithful to treaties and has carried out engagements arising from them. She has been and always is ready to honour treaties in all circumstances.

Thus the central argument of the initial Czechoslovak reply to the Anglo-French proposals of 19 September, rejecting the demand that the frontiers be re-drawn on a basis of self-determination. But by then, unfortunately, the foundation of the case (and of the alliance) had long since collapsed. In 1938 the maintenance of Versailles was no longer the first priority of the French, still less of the British. The two governments were now concerned with one matter above all others: the avoidance of war. And they held to this with great tenacity. In contrast, the central purpose of the Czechoslovak Government during the months leading from the Anschluss to the September crisis – and during September itself practically to the end – was to manoeuvre a return to the status quo ante. At the very least they hoped to salvage something of substance from the wreckage. To this end they agreed to a series of very substantial concessions to western pressure, the efficacy of which was vitiated from the outset by the divergent purposes and outlook of the two sides. These concessions were demanded by the

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British and French as steps towards the settlement of the Sudeten German problem and, of course, more generally as a means of appeasing Germany. The Czechs, on the other hand, saw them exclusively as concessions in the interests of preserving their relationship with the West. But in this the West had already lost much of its interest.

Nevertheless, the concessions were of the highest importance as stages by which the Czechs progressed towards a situation in which, once placed, they believed themselves compelled to capitulate. And, indeed, by 18 September, when the Anglo-French ministerial conference opened in London and the crisis was unmistakably upon them, they had added up to a great deal.

On 23 July 1938, the Czech Government agreed to the arrival of Lord Runciman as 'mediator'. On 5 September they conceded self-government to the Sudeten Germans. On 15 September Benes made a point of mentioning to the British Minister in Prague, Newton, that at the Paris Peace Conference he, Benes, had personally been in favour of excluding certain German-speaking areas from Czechoslovakia. This was duly reported to London, as it was certainly meant to be. A day later, the Prime Minister, Hodza, hinted to Newton that if some territorial cession was insisted upon it might be possible to surrender the areas Benes had had in mind. Lest there be any mistake, the British Military Attaché, Lieutenant-Colonel Stronge, was on the following day given to understand that the Army would not object to such a transfer.5 (All this was taken to concern a fairly substantial area inhabited by from 800,000 to one million people.) Thus by the time Chamberlain had returned from Berchtesgaden and was meeting the French Ministers in London on the 18 September, the assembled Ministers and their advisers were aware that step by step, under their own heavy pressure, the Czechs had made two vital concessions. They had accepted the Western Powers as their interlocutors in their conflict with Germany, rather than deal with the Germans themselves. They had accepted, too, that they must offer a territorial sacrifice. These were, of course, the two fundamental elements of the Munich Agreement.

The consequence was that when the ministerial conference

opened in London the participants had no reason to contemplate too seriously a Czech refusal of what Hitler and Chamberlain had ostensibly agreed upon at Berchtesgaden, i.e. that the solution of the problem they were, formally, considering would be based on the principle of self-determination. Nor did they.

Daladier could be even more specific. He told Chamberlain privately, before the formal conference began, that he had received a confidential intimation from Prague that the Czechs would agree to concessions. ‘So you see there is nothing we can do.’ Chamberlain replied, ‘Prague itself recognizes that.’

In the course of the London discussions it was readily conceded that the Czechs would reject the idea of holding a plebiscite in the disputed areas. It would open the flood gates to demands from other neighbours. On the other hand, a straightforward cession of territory was in a different case. ‘If friendly pressure were brought to bear on Prague, pointing out all the difficulties and stressing the necessity of giving up some portion of Sudeten territory,’ then, Daladier felt, the Czechoslovak Government might agree.

Thus by the time the crisis opened with the presentation to the Czechs of the Anglo-French proposals (to accept the Berchtesgaden formula with all its implications), the Czech position vis-à-vis the Western Powers had been thoroughly eroded. And as the crisis developed and as further démarche, manoeuvres and concessions followed, it became increasingly difficult to reverse the direction of events.

The Anglo-French proposals of 19 September, if implemented, would have meant very nearly as substantial an amputation of Czechoslovak territory, wealth and military installations as later followed at Munich. So while the Czechs had resigned themselves to ceding territory, limited, they hoped, to a palatable minimum, they now saw that they had miscalculated. Their first reaction was to temporize and to suggest a watering-down, specifically to return to what they themselves had already offered the Sudeten leaders and, at the same time, to invoke their Treaty of Arbitration with Germany. But the pressure that accompanied the proposals was so intense that in very nearly the same breath the Czechs indicated

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6 Daladier related this to the French Parliamentary Commission. He was testifying under oath, after the war. There is no apparent reason to disbelieve him. *(Les événements survenus en France, Annexes (Dépositions),* vol. i, p. 33-4.)

that this was not their final answer. Meanwhile they debated what to do—almost continuously from the early afternoon of 19 September to the afternoon of 21 September. Before them was the uncompromising demand that they give a positive answer without delay. Chamberlain was due back at Godesberg for his second meeting with Hitler on 22 September and ‘it might be disastrous if he should have to go without any answer from Prague’. 8

The special horror of the trap they had helped to prepare for themselves lay in the fact that there was now no difference, except in tempo, between what the Germans demanded and what the British and the French required. The alliance with the West had been turned inside out and upside down. Instead of easing the German pressure on Czechoslovakia, the British and the French were adding to it. And because of the historical, ideological and doctrinal aura the alliance bore in Czech eyes the western pressure was, if anything, more painful and more effective than the German.

Three courses of action were now open to the Czechoslovak Government:

(a) They could defy the Great Powers, rest on their arms and await developments in the full expectation of war with the Germans.

(b) They could appeal either to the Russians or to the League of Nations or both and meanwhile proceed as in (a).

(c) They could give in to western pressure and seek to salvage what remained of the traditional foreign policy and orientation.

To encourage the Czechs to adopt the third course the Western Powers had baited their demand with the offer of guarantees. Thus the British Minister in Prague could argue, quite plausibly, that from the point of view of the future of the country it seemed to him that the choice lay between worse than loss of everything acquired in 1918 and on the other hand the retention backed by a British guarantee of nearly everything which they had gained in so far as concerned the unity and independence of the Czechs and Slovaks themselves and the territories in which they were a majority.

This was shrewd and concise. Benes retorted that the guarantee he already possessed had now proven valueless. Yet Newton felt he could report his impression that ‘President Benes is more likely to

accept than to refuse and is very receptive to any reason which will help him justify acceptance to his people'.

It is, indeed, characteristic that even at this early stage, namely the initial presentation to Benes of the Anglo-French proposals at 2 p.m. on 19 September, Newton already had something more substantial to go on than his 'impression' that the President would probably accept them. The same morning (and therefore before the interview with the President) the British Military Attaché had visited the General Staff and had discovered that the substance of the proposals was already known. He was also told that it was not proposed to resist and that 'every officer . . . would obey the orders of the Chief of the General Staff'. It is almost inconceivable that this conversation should have taken place without authority. Furthermore, in view of the general attitude of the Army to the issue in question, there is every reason to suppose that the authority in question was the political one.

For these reasons it is hard to escape the conclusion that the first two courses were never seriously considered by the political leaders. Subsequent developments tend to bear this out, and in view of Benes' profound influence on events it is readily understandable.

By 1938 Edvard Benes had been responsible for the foreign relations of his country for nineteen years, as President in the later years no less than as Foreign Minister in the earlier period. He was a most experienced diplomat and a professional statesman of the highest order. Hard-working, intelligent, educated, possessed of a first-hand knowledge of men and events that was almost unrivalled in his time, he was regarded not without justification as a consummate negotiator. In this he was strengthened by a gift that Wickham Steed – who knew him well – thought exceptional:

Especially striking was his ability – an ability he shared with Masaryk – to put himself in the place of any foreign statesman with whom he might have to deal, and to think out his own problems in terms of that statesman’s interests or prejudices. Thus he saved many a minister or politician in Allied countries from irksome mental effort.

Such an ability has been an essential part of the equipment of the weak when dealing with the strong in all times; Wickham Steed was probably right in ascribing to it much of Benes’ success

throughout the years. Yet this kind of sophistication can be dangerous. It can lead to too great a stress being laid on diplomacy and to a tendency to believe that by diplomatic techniques the statesman can do more than bridge minor and marginal gulfs and differences between states. There is a tendency in the successful diplomat – and Benes was nothing if not that – to persist in believing that always, somehow, somewhere, there is a solution waiting to be conjured up by a sufficiently gifted operator. This is perfectly natural; the alternative is for the diplomat, like a doctor at the deathbed, to retire and call in a representative of another profession. Loyalty, professional reflexes and a sense of responsibility are usually all too strong for that.

Since the alternative to acceptance of the Anglo-French proposals was war with Germany, something must be said about the relative state of the German and Czech forces. The question of Soviet assistance will be considered separately; in any case it was conditional in the first instance on Czech resistance, quite apart from the problem arising from the formal Soviet undertaking to aid the Czechs provided the French fulfilled their obligations.

The Czechoslovaks devoted between 15 and 20 per cent of their annual state budget to defence. In the record year of 1938 planned expenditure rose to 44 per cent. These are official figures, and it is not clear whether they fully reflect acquisition of aircraft from abroad. They are nevertheless indicative of the effort made, and by the time of the crisis there was a good deal to show for all that money.

The peace-time strength of the Czechoslovak Army\(^\text{11}\) was 17 infantry divisions and 4 motorized divisions, and this could be rapidly expanded upon mobilization. When mobilization was decreed on 23 September 1938, some 35 divisions were formed;

\(^{11}\) The figures that follow are all derived from published sources. Though the details cannot be entirely accurate, the figures do suggest the orders of magnitude involved. No unreasonable discrepancies were noted in the information supplied by the principal sources which were: General Faucher, 'La Défense nationale tchécoslovaque, 1918–1938', in L'Année politique française et étrangère, 1939, p. 85-102; H. Ripka, Munich: Before and After (London, 1939), p. 134-5; S. Grant Duff, Europe and the Czechs (London, 1938), passim; Jiri Dolezal and Jan Kren, La Tchécoslovaquie en lutte (Prague, 1961), p. 131; The Times, 27, 28 September 1938, and 24 March 1939; General Armengaud in La Revue des Deux Mondes, 15 April 1938, p. 766-79; General Gamelin, Servir (Paris, 1946), vol. ii, p. 353-5; and Czechoslovakia in Maps and Statistics (London, 1944).
but even this did not represent the full strength available, as over and above the divisional formations there were some 60,000 special fortress troops, bringing the land forces up to the rough equivalent of 40 divisions. Furthermore, the September mobilization was not complete. A second line reserve equivalent to another ten divisions could have been called up, but as it is not clear whether there were sufficient arms for them, the total of 40 divisions of land troops may be taken as a measure of the effective strength immediately available. Thus:

**Land Forces:**

1,250,000 men organized in 15 army corps of 35 or 34 divisions, of which at least seven were of special troops, i.e. armoured, mountain or cavalry formations; plus fortress troops.

- 30,000 motor vehicles.
- 700 tanks.
- 16 armoured trains.
- 200,000 horses.
- over one million rifles.
- 60,000 light and heavy machine guns.
- 2200 field guns (one source gives a figure of 3200) of all calibres ranging from light field pieces to 305 mm howitzers.
- 2500 anti-tank guns.

**Air Forces:**

- 60 wings equipped with 1200 aircraft. Of these 600–700 were first-line craft.

The principal deficiencies were in anti-aircraft and heavy artillery. (The German forces will be dealt with below, but to put these figures in perspective it may be mentioned here that the German plan of attack provided for the employment of 37 divisions organized in ten corps.)

The Czechoslovak Army was a hardy, sober, and disciplined force. It was well trained and its officers were well qualified for their tasks, though some foreign observers had doubts about the professional capacity of those generals who still survived from Legion days. Its morale was high and the September mobilization demonstrated very amply both the discipline and the loyalty of the reserves. Cases of German or Magyar troops failing to answer the call or sabotaging it were extremely rare. In any case, the great
majority of the troops were Czechs and Slovaks and the officer corps overwhelmingly so. Even the non-commissioned officers were 85 per cent Czech or Slovak. No unit had non-Czechoslovak troops in a proportion higher than 15 per cent and even then minority troops did not normally serve in frontier areas.

It was generally believed that the staff work was good. The British Military Attaché in Prague reported on 3 September that the Czechoslovak General Staff undoubtedly have a capacity for organization, and I do not expect any serious hitch in the process of rapid mobilization, concentration or subsequent dispositions, except in so far as these may be occasioned by enemy action. The whole process has been the subject of careful study, and such lessons as can be learnt from recent manoeuvres, the Sokols &c., give ground for confidence in this respect.\footnote{DBFP, vol. ii, p. 258. See also General Faucher’s testimony, \textit{Les événements survenus en France}, Annexes (Dépositions), vol. v, p. 1191–1211.}

Their equipment was generally first-rate. It was produced for the most part in three large factories which were among the biggest and most efficient in the world at that time. Besides weapons and vehicles, the Czechs produced very good aero-engines. They were also equipped with a plant for the production of poison gas.

The essential military function of the Czech Army was to defend the national territory. In this task it was aided by the fact that the pre-Munich frontiers ran through difficult terrain, except in the south. To make the most of the natural advantages and to compensate where there were none, the Czechs had constructed a formidable chain of fortifications. It was an immense complex of underground blockhouses and casemates, forts, electric barriers, tank barriers and underground aerodromes. By September 1938, all this was complete with the exception of the sector facing Austria. Even there, however, the frontier was very far from being easily passable.

The German Army at this time was by no means the large and self-confident force that cut through France and the Low Countries almost two years later. In April 1938 its effective strength was no more than 27 divisions, only three of which were armoured, cavalry or mountain troops. It was then estimated that by dint of special call-ups another 18 divisions of unequal value could be formed. (In the event, the Germans did better.) In September they
planned to employ 37 active divisions on the Czechoslovak frontier, leaving five on the western front. Four reserve divisions were to back up the five active ones in the west, together with 14 Landwehr divisions. The latter did not amount to much. The three remaining active divisions were left in East Prussia. Over and above this the Germans were of course able to increase the size of the army after the fighting had begun; the French estimated that they could do so at a rate of fifteen divisions per month, but in September, the 37 divisions represented the maximum force available for the attack on Czechoslovakia in September even on the assumption that no more than a covering force was needed in the West or on the Polish border. The decision to leave the western front practically bare was a most important element of the German plan.

The quality of the German formation commanders was almost certainly higher than that of their Czech opposite numbers, but that of the German troops was not. Many were still half-trained, and there were not enough junior commanders and NCOs. German equipment, too, was in many respects inferior to that of the Czechs, particularly the fighting vehicles and heavy artillery. Six months before, on the entry into Austria, the new German armoured formations had disgraced themselves. Hitler later recounted how 'In the spring of 1938 we entered Austria. On the stretch from Linz to Vienna we saw eighty tanks immobilized by the side of the road – and yet what an easy road it was! Our men hadn’t enough experience'. On the other hand a higher proportion of the German Army was mechanized, as indeed it had to be as it was the attacking force.

Thus in roughly measured terms of order of battle, quality of commanders and troops, morale and equipment, neither side was obviously superior to the other. On the Czech side there were three strategic advantages, one of them immense. They were on the defensive, and there was no question of more than limited tactical surprise. They had the advantage of interior lines. And, above all, they had their fortifications.

The Germans took the Czech fortifications very seriously and

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considered them the major obstacle. At a fairly late stage in the operational planning, Hitler had altered the plan of battle lest, among other reasons, there be a ‘repetition of Verdun’ and a ‘bleeding to death for a task which cannot be accomplished’ by von Rundstedt’s 2nd Army. But it soon emerged that there was no way of avoiding the major fortifications entirely, for where they were weakest, opposite Austria, a ‘thrust in the 14th Army area will fail because of [lack of] means of transport’. Hitler therefore ruled that the motorized and armoured divisions be assembled in the 10th Army, based on Schwandorf and roughly opposite Pilsen, and that the major thrust be made there. Only then would the 12th Army, based on Passau and coming up from the South, strike through to the heart of Bohemia. At this time Keitel was denouncing those who doubted their ability to break through as planned. But at Nuremberg he admitted that

We were extremely glad that it had not come to a military operation because throughout the time of preparation we had always been of the opinion that our means of attack against the frontier fortifications of Czechoslovakia were inadequate. From a purely military point of view we were not strong enough to stage an attack which would involve the piercing of the frontier fortifications; we lacked the material for such an attack.  

As against this, the Germans could, in the long run, bring up vast forces to augment their effort. Taking the rough French estimate that a month after the commencement of hostilities the Germans could increase their forces at the rate of 15 divisions a month, the German force could have been more than doubled by the end of the year, provided there was no western intervention. Clearly, if the military balance of forces is considered in total isolation from the political scene, there can be little question that Germany had it in its power to defeat Czechoslovakia. Where two states are of comparable technological and social development and where one population outnumbers the other five to one (or seven to one if the

16 Documents on German Foreign Policy, Series D (henceforth DGFP), vol. ii, p. 686–7.
18 The British Military Attaché in Prague, commenting on a Czech General Staff estimate that 75 German divisions might be used against them, thought this two to one superiority ‘not excessive in view of the defence and the interior lines’. Telegram dated 27 September, DBFP, vol. ii, p. 567.

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minorities are left out of the Czech account, as perhaps they should be), there is no apparent reason why the greater nation should not defeat the smaller if it has the will to do so. And of this last factor, at any rate, there was no question. But only in the long run; whereas it was the clear purpose of the Germans to avoid an extended campaign at all costs. It was on this issue, whether in fact Czechoslovakia could be speedily beaten, that Hitler and his generals were divided.

Hitler saw from the first that the attack on Czechoslovakia had to be conducted with the speed of lightning — blitzartig schnell. This was foreseen at the now celebrated conference of 5 November 1937, and reiterated in all the operational directives. Thus, in the fully formulated ‘Directive for Operation Green’ of 30 May 1938, it was clearly stated that

If concrete successes are not achieved in the first few days by land operations, a European crisis will certainly arise. Realization of this ought to give commanders of all ranks an incentive to resolute and bold action.¹⁹

Precisely what a ‘European crisis’ implied was not noted down; but it was clearly intended to point to a catastrophe of epic proportions which did not bear thinking about in detail. The reasoning behind this insistence on speed is plain enough. First, the western front had to be left practically bare for lack of troops. Determination and 2000 anti-tank guns were expected to prevent disaster if the French moved, but clearly the Bohemian campaign had to be over and done with and the bulk of the troops back along the Siegfried Line before Berlin could breathe freely. Second, the prospect of being bogged down in a long campaign in Czechoslovakia, even if the French did not intervene, went against Hitler’s political grain. It was not merely a matter of prestige. It could have a disastrous effect on morale at home and drastically alter the picture Germany now presented to the West and to the Russians. It would invite intervention. It would change the political and psychological climate in which the Germans were now operating. The time allowed for the completion of the task was, at first, ‘a few days’, later it was extended to eight. Whether from the political or military aspect, speed was an essential element of the plan.

The Czechoslovak Army was conceived by its commanders as a body that would act in strategic co-ordination with allied forces. A

war in which Czechoslovakia would have to fight alone was never envisaged. On the other hand, it was perfectly plain to all concerned that in terms of battle, Czechoslovakia would indeed be alone, the difference being that ultimately the full weight of western military pressure would be turned against the Germans and the day be saved. It was never for a moment in doubt at the Czech General Staff, or amongst competent professional observers, that initially the full weight of the Germany Army would be thrown against them and that they should and could withstand it. Thus the immediate and crucial difference between what they had planned for and what they would be in for if their government decided for resistance was twofold: in military terms, the critical period would begin after a protracted resistance of, say, three months; in psychological terms they would be only too conscious of being alone in the ring with a powerful enemy and hostile bystanders.

The Czech generals’ essential confidence in their ability to withstand a German attack was matched by the German generals’ dislike of Operation Green. Their objections were technical and professional, not political. They did not believe the German Army was ready for war, they had no confidence in their ability to charge through the Czech fortifications, they were fearful of leaving the western front bare with a pitiful scattering of troops and a still incomplete Siegfried Line, and they did not believe that the feat could be performed in a week and the troops rushed back to the west. In their view, too, there was a distinct danger of the situation degenerating into a world war. They believed they had a good, professional case against Operation Green and they were unani-

20 See Memorandum submitted to the Supreme Defence Council by the Chief of the General Staff on 9 September, in J. Doležal, op. cit., p. 17–19. General Krejci complained of the tendency to underestimate Czech strength and overestimate the opposition. Also: views of British Military Attaché, DBFP, vol. ii, p. 258, 412, 567, 581; of General Gamelin, Servir, vol. ii, p. 353–5; of General Faucher both in the article cited and in his testimony before the French Parliamentary Commission; and almost all other authorities concerned. That it was also the considered view of the 2ème Bureau of the French General Staff may be gleaned from an article on the subject in L’Europe nouvelle, 24 September 1938. Those who thought differently were often plainly ignorant of the facts, though their influence on the formulation of policy was not impaired thereby. Thus Geoffrey Dawson, editor of The Times: ‘After all, with a great power like Germany surrounding your country on three sides, a row of fortresses in the hills cannot mean much more than the chance of holding up an invasion for a few days. It is a case of being killed on Friday instead of on Tuesday!’ (History of The Times (London, 1952), vol. iv, 2, p. 935.)
mous and not infrequently outspoken in their opposition to it, Keitel excepted. Keitel and Jodl inveighed against them, but it was indeed a good case and no professional grounds for ignoring it could be adduced. Jodl complained about their Miesmacherei and noted in his diary that the General Staff did not really believe in Hitler’s genius, and this was very close to being the crux of the matter. Hitler had no military solution to the professional problem posed by his own requirements. Presumably he hoped that it could be entirely skirted by skilful political moves; if not, what was lacking in plain military potential and capability would have to be made up with dash, daring, and inspired leadership in the field.

Two final points should be mentioned. Not only was the morale of the Czech forces high, but the Germans were almost throughout convinced that the Czechs would put up heavy resistance. Not until 21 September, i.e. upon the acceptance of the Anglo-French proposals, did the German assessment change. However, two days later they had changed their minds once again and had noted ‘the increase of the Czech will to fight’.

Second, there appeared to be the possibility that a rising among the Sudeten Germans could be instigated upon the outbreak of hostilities, or even before. A Freikorps was organized and armed Nazi formations were included in the German order of battle. A rising of sorts did take place on 12 September, but it was very firmly put down by the Czechs, thus showing what they could do when they had the will to do it.

It can thus be seen that it was the view of both the Czech and the German military commanders that the Czechoslovak Army, unaided, could put up stiff resistance and keep the Germans at bay, probably for several months, conceivably for many more. Both the evidence available at the time and what has come to light since supports this view. The defection of France did not materially alter this state of affairs. It was the political and psychological climate that changed.

22 Jodl’s diary, entry for 10 August 1938, in IMT Documents, no. 1780-PS.
24 There was a plan to retreat gradually to a redoubt in the eastern half of the country, and to that end arms factories had been established there. The French had encouraged the Czechs to do so.
It follows that had the Czechs determined to resist Anglo-French pressure and face the Germans alone it is – at the very least – unlikely that the Germans would have succeeded in destroying the Czechoslovak State, while it is very much more than likely that the 'European crisis' that Hitler feared would have occurred. On the other hand, the final outcome of such resistance could not be certain. If certainty was sought it could be found only in surrender.

Precisely what occurred during the 48 hours or so of what must have been the heart-rending and humiliating debate during which the Czech authorities discussed the Anglo-French proposals has never been made public. Authoritative Czech spokesmen have almost universally preferred to shift attention to the debate between the Czech authorities and the Western Powers. This reticence is perfectly comprehensible, but it means that any attempt to understand what transpired has to be highly conjectural.

It must be remembered that the Anglo-French proposals, severe and unpalatable though they were, did not specify a time-table for the transfer of territories to the Germans nor did they go into the modalities of such a transfer. It meant a great loss of wealth, military installations and skilled citizens. It meant too that there would be a loss of strategically advantageous borders. A weaker Czechoslovakia was implicit in the cession, but though it was offensive to national pride and extremely disturbing to those responsible for the defence of the country, it was nevertheless just conceivable that the re-fashioned state might be viable. General Syrovy was to say in his broadcast of 30 September:

Our State will not be one of the smallest in the world. There are others which are much smaller, and yet they are sound and resistant. We shall have enough territory left to give us the possibility of further cultural and economic progress. It is true that we shall live within narrower boundaries, but we shall be entirely among ourselves. Many hindrances to the good and peaceful administration of our State will be removed. Agreement with our neighbours, too, will be easier. Our Army will con-

25 Such as Hubert Ripka. Left-wing accounts (e.g. 'Pierre Buk', La Tragédie tchécoslovaque (Paris, 1939), and more recent accounts published in Prague after the war) tend to lay great stress on Agrarian Party machinations. In view of Beneš' immense authority it would seem that the net effect of such pressure could not have been great, still less decisive.
continue to have its task and will protect the nation and the State and will continue to be on guard as formerly.\textsuperscript{26}

If this was true after Munich, it was true \emph{a fortiori} nine days before. So far as national security was concerned, the loss of strategic frontiers could perhaps be offset by the fact that Britain would now formally join France in guaranteeing Czech independence. As against the implied cancellation of the Franco-Czech alliance there was an international, Anglo-French guarantee: it was a new relationship with the West, suited to the new times, deriving much of its force from the fact that it was to be proclaimed at this difficult moment. It was madness to go to war over the differences between what had already been conceded and what was now demanded and lose the life-line to the West in the bargain. A keen mind could have perceived how things would go even before the formal Note was presented. All this could be argued. And, as we have seen, the minds of those in authority were already made up on the morning of 19 September.

Benes, and presumably his close associates, believed this to be the wisest course. The soldiers had a much less certain and seemingly more cruel alternative to offer; in any case they ‘would obey’. There does not seem to have been a real debate between the civilians and the military at this stage. But it was expected that many of the political leaders would oppose it and that the population at large would hate it.

There was another problem. It was clear to the President and to most of those who had actual dealings with the western statesmen and diplomats that the Western Powers would not hesitate to use any available weapon in the political armoury. They were intent on a Czechoslovak surrender; for them it was a matter of life or death and argument could not possibly sway them. But, at the same time, Czechoslovakia had not merely a moral, but a formal and legal right to insist on western support against Germany. It was therefore not enough that the Government should sense or even know of the impending renunciation of their obligations by the West. The renunciation had to be clear and unmistakable and public. If the Western Powers – France in particular – baulked at this and fought shy of actually certifying their refusal to honour their obligations, so much the better. A considerable diplomatic

\textsuperscript{26} RIIA, \textit{Documents on International Affairs, 1938}, vol. ii, p. 328.
battle would have been won. Either way, the Government could not be charged with failing to explore all available avenues of escape.

Thus on September 20, approximately 24 hours after his interview with Benes, Newton was telegraphing that he had had it from a very good source (Hodza?) that the official reply just handed to him that evening ‘should not be regarded as final’.

A solution must however be imposed upon the Government as without such pressure many of its members are too committed to be able to accept what they realise to be necessary. If I can deliver a kind of ultimatum to President Benes, Wednesday, he and his Government will feel able to bow to force majeure. It might be to the effect that in the view of His Majesty’s Government the Czechoslovak Government must accept the proposals without reserve and without further delay, failing which His Majesty’s Government will take no further interest in the fate of the country. I understand that my French colleague is telegraphing to Paris in a similar sense.

Lacroix, the French Minister, did indeed send a telegram, one which was later the subject of much dispute since part of it was exploited by the French Foreign Minister in the public debate that followed Munich. After the war, Lacroix told the French Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry what had occurred:

M. Hodza, Président du Conseil, me convoqua par téléphone. J’interrompis aussitôt mon travail pour me rendre à son invitation. M. Hodza me demanda si j’étais certain que la France se dérobierait en cas de conflit. Je lui répondis que je n’en savais rien et je lui proposai de télégraphier immédiatement à Paris pour avoir une réponse ferme. Il m’objecta que cette démarche serait trop longue et ajouta: ‘J’admetts a priori que la France ne marchera pas et si vous pouvez cette nuit même obtenir de votre gouvernement un télégramme le confirmant, le Président de la République s’inclinera. C’est le seul moyen de sauver la paix.

29 Les événements survenus en France, Rapport, vol. ii, p. 268. The question has been raised whether Hodza had Benes’ authority for his request or not. Lacroix, at any rate, did not doubt it at the time, although he told the Commission that Benes’ capitulation surprised him. Even in retrospect he could
Lacroix received his telegram certifying the French decision to dissociate themselves from Czechoslovakia's fate and Newton got his ultimatum. The celebrated audience with Benes at just past two o'clock in the morning of 21 September ensued.

It was a long and painful interview. Benes pointed out his detailed objections to the plan and asked for clarification of a number of points, including the precise nature of the guarantee offered. Then he justified his country's foreign policy and stated that in pursuing it 'he had not been driven by the Soviet Government which he had kept to one side'. He expected internal troubles and did not know whether the Government could control them. Finally, towards the end,

M. Benes said that he took our démarche to be a kind of ultimatum and indeed only such an ultimatum could justify him and his Government in accepting the Anglo-French proposals without obtaining beforehand the sanction of Parliament as was constitutionally required. We therefore told him that our démarche had the character of an ultimatum in the sense that it represented the final advice of our Governments and in their view the last possible moment for acceptance of their advice, if this country was to be saved.30

But of course it was not an ultimatum in any accepted sense. It was a threat to cut the Czechs loose on very stormy seas, wiping the slate clean of all that had been written on it since the French, twenty years before, had first recognized the Czechoslovak National Council 'as the first basis' of the future Czechoslovak Government.

As has been noted, Benes was careful to point out that he had not been guided by the Russians, and later it was often argued on his behalf that one of the main considerations underlying his policy was the fear that his country would find itself fighting with the Russians against the Germans, with the West on the sidelines or worse, participating in a general crusade against communism. It is not clear how real this fear was. The Czechs were careful to maintain friendly contact with the Russians and explore the possibilities not quite understand it and thought that internal difficulties, i.e. Agrarian Party pressure, might have been a cause. For, said Lacroix, 'à première vue . . . le Président Benes n'avait aucune raison de capituler puisque l'armée était prête à entrer en guerre et que le Parlement était en vacance. Je me suis toujours demandé si le courage ne lui a pas manqué au dernier moment'.

of assistance, should it be decided to call for their aid. When the crisis came the Russians were duly informed. On 19 September Benes summoned the Soviet Minister, Alexandrovsky, and informed him of the Anglo-French proposals and what they implied. He also told the Minister that the Government had rejected the proposals. Benes put two questions to the Russians: Would the Soviets fulfil their undertakings if France did? And, as Czechoslovakia would appeal to the League in the event of an attack, would the Soviet Union render assistance as a member of the League under Articles 16 and 17? A tougher Benes, more critical of the West, emerges from the Soviet diplomat's despatch than is suggested by the reports of the western envoys. The Soviet Minister also reported that Clement Gottwald, the communist leader, had seen Benes on 19 September, but had not received a clear reply to his question whether the Government had decided to accept the proposals. In any event, the Soviets lost no time in giving Benes an affirmative and unequivocal answer to both questions. They also informed the French of the answer they were transmitting to the Czechs. This was on 20 September, before the final confrontation with the western representatives. On 21 September Litvinov told the Assembly of the League of Nations both of the Czech query and of the Soviet answer, and of a French query in the same vein that had preceded it. Having backed their privately transmitted replies with a public statement, the Soviet position was rendered formally impeccable. They appear to have wondered why the Czechs did not ask them outright whether they would offer unconditional aid if so requested, but did not insist. A request for, or an offer of, unilateral military aid, i.e. one which had neither the cover of a League of Nations resolution nor the cooperation of the Western Powers, would have implied a Russian invasion of Rumania or Poland under the worst possible circumstances. They were clearly reluctant to enter into a conflict with Germany with the strong possibility that much of Europe would be arrayed against them. But to be set against the Soviet reluctance to enter into such a conflict was the Czechoslovak reluctance to invite them.

31 New Documents on the History of Munich (Prague, 1958) (henceforth, New Documents), pp. 89, 90.
All this was, however, subsidiary to the main business of the relations with the Western Powers. Foreign Minister Krofta’s circular telegram of 21 September to Czech Missions abroad reviewing developments did not mention it and concluded, simply, with the following paragraph:

In view of this [Anglo-French] ultimatum, and being completely isolated, the Czechoslovak Government will evidently have to yield to irresistible pressure. An answer will be handed to the British and French Ministers in the course of to-day.33

On the day after the Czech surrender to Anglo-French pressure the Sudeten German Freikorps entered Czech territory and occupied the border towns of Asch and Eger. ‘Reichgerman’ SA and SS units joined them. Meanwhile the German Army proper continued to move towards the frontier in accordance with the Operation Green timetable, and a fully orchestrated and typically vicious propaganda campaign was loosed against Czechoslovakia. When, on the same day, Chamberlain met Hitler at Godesberg – with the Czech capitulation in his pocket – he was confronted with new demands. Briefly put, these were that the ‘German’ territories of Czechoslovakia – to be delineated by the Germans themselves – were to be transferred to German authority within eight days. After the occupation by German troops a plebiscite could be held in those areas; a plebiscite would in any case be held in other areas not immediately occupied. This meant, in plain terms, that a panic flight of Czechs, Jews, German Social-Democrats and other potential victims of the Germans would ensue, that the Czech forces would not have time to remove their stores, destroy their installations, or organize new defences before evacuation, and that, to crown it all, the entire procedure would be deliberately and unmistakably humiliating. As the Czechs rightly pointed out, the Godesberg Memorandum was ‘a de facto ultimatum of the sort usually presented to a vanquished nation and not a proposition to a sovereign state’. Chamberlain was appalled and angered and, after concluding that Hitler could not be shaken, returned to London. But before leaving Germany he had reluctantly agreed with Halifax that in view of the German troop movements ‘the French and British Governments cannot continue to take responsibility of

33 New Documents, p. 100.
advising them not to mobilize'. The Czechs, who until then had obeyed the injunction not to mobilize, promptly and joyfully did so. The mobilization was an immense organizational success. It was more than a demonstration of the efficiency of the arrangements and the loyalty of the reservists. It was convincing proof of the high state of national morale and of the popular feeling against capitulation. 'No one who was there to see', reported the Special Correspondent of The Times (26 September 1938), 'could ever forget the quietness and dignity with which the Czechoslovak nation took up their arms on Friday night.'

Thus by the time the Czech Government met to consider the Godesberg terms on 25 September the situation seemed to have changed profoundly. At home, reconstituted under General Syrovy, they were riding on a new crest of popularity. Abroad, they could well believe that the Germans had finally and irrevocably revealed how brutal, unscrupulous, and insatiably ambitious they were, and that it was in the light of this recognition of the true state of affairs that the French and British Ministers were meeting in London. The Czechs themselves had very properly been asked to send a delegation and make plain their views. The nightmare of isolation was surely over and the policy of acceding to western wishes in order to retain western friendship appeared to have justified itself. War was probably inevitable but no blame could be attached to Czechoslovakia which had done all in its power to save the peace. It was urgently necessary to secure Polish neutrality in the event of war, but for the rest Prague could await developments. Thus fortified, the Czechs felt they could reject the German terms and face the prospect of war with all the necessary courage and with a determination eloquently expressed in Jan Masaryk’s formal Note to Halifax:

My Government wish me to declare in all solemnity that Herr Hitler’s demands in their present form are absolutely and unconditionally un-acceptable to my Government. Against these new and cruel demands my Government feel bound to make their utmost resistance and we shall do so, God helping. The nation of St. Wenceslas, John Hus and Thomas Masaryk will not be a nation of slaves.

34 DBFP, vol. ii, pp. 519, 461.
35 Cf. Colonel Stronge’s indignant comment on doubts cast by his colleague in Berlin on the morale of the Czech Armed Forces, DBFP, vol. ii, p. 581-2. There is abundant evidence to support his views in all the sources, Czech, French, British, and German.
We rely upon the two great Western democracies, whose wishes we have followed much against our own judgment, to stand by us in our hour of trial.36

The illusion, if illusion there was, that the Western Powers would now support them was of brief duration. The intense fear and detestation of war among the dominant members of the British and French Governments was not diminished by the feeling that war might really be imminent. After a little while, when the immediate shock of Godesberg had worn off, the British pulled themselves together and despatched Sir Horace Wilson to Hitler: ‘. . . so long as there remained even a slender chance of peace, we must not neglect any opportunity of securing it’.37 It is characteristic of the proceedings that this was done before the Anglo-French ministerial conference had ended or even arrived at any considered judgment on the policy to proceed with. Their purpose was clear and they were correspondingly swift and uncompromising in its pursuit. What Prague thought now mattered less and less, and they ceased to address themselves seriously to the Czech Government. From this point on, Newton’s instructions, in essence, were to calm their growing fears:

You should explain to the Czechoslovak Government that the communication which is being made to the German Chancellor through Sir Horace Wilson in no way prejudices the position of the Czechoslovak Government.

This profound fear of war was one source of Czech weakness vis-à-vis the Western Powers. There was a second, less fundamental: the concessions they had already made continued to dog them. Looked at in cold blood, the difference between what they had already agreed to (i.e. the Anglo-French proposals), and did not even now denounce, and what the Germans required, could be made to appear procedural. It concerned not the principle of cession, but ‘the way in which the territory is to be handed over’. And this, in Chamberlain’s view, could be settled by agreement. No doubt, as he knew and stated in his letter to Hitler (quoting Masaryk), the Germans were demanding a procedure that was harsh in the extreme, and probably endangered Czech national security. But it was nevertheless an incremental difference, a

37 Chamberlain to the assembled Ministers, 26 September, in DBFP, vol. ii, p. 537.
marginal addition to the great concession that had already been made. Thus in the battle for the minds of the Western leaders the Czechs were bound to lose and the Germans to win. The Czechs could only point to the injustice and the cruelty that would be done them. The Germans could (and did) argue that the Czechs were intent on precipitating a general war to avoid fulfilling their undertaking to hand over the Sudeten territories. All the Germans had to do was to stand firm. And this, despite their nervousness, the mutterings of the generals, and – in many cases – their own unwillingness to go to war at this time, they did. No doubt Hitler’s iron nerve held them together. At any rate the debate was now conducted on this basis and it is hard to see how it could have had any other issue but a demand that the Czechs make one last, marginal concession.

At the Four Power Conference at Munich that followed on 29 September, the question of Czech acceptance of the emerging *diktat* hardly arose in a serious manner. When it did it was dismissed by Hitler on the grounds that if they rejected it it proved they only respected force. Towards the end the conferees did ask themselves, What was to be done about the Czechs? But this was only a procedural question, namely how the terms of the Agreement were to be transmitted to Prague. The demand to accept them, when it came, was peremptory. ‘You will appreciate that there is no time for argument,’ Chamberlain telegraphed Newton from Munich; ‘it must be plain acceptance’.

The differences between the Munich terms and those of the Godesberg Memorandum – which the Czechs had firmly rejected – were extremely small, hardly amounting to technical or even cosmetic improvements. To Chamberlain they mattered because they implied the continued reign of international order, not anarchy. To the Czechs, the only significant comparison could be with the Anglo-French proposals. Ten days before it could at least be argued that while the issue before them was one of a very severe loss of territory and wealth and defensive capacity, it was possible that the operation might be followed by renewed health. Now this could simply not be believed. At the very best, it could be hoped that somehow, some day, the nation would outlive its enemies.

The text of the Agreement was received at a quarter past six in

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the morning. The Germans did not require an answer, but notified the Czechs that their representatives on the International Commission were expected at 5 p.m. the same day at the Berlin Foreign Ministry. The party leaders began a meeting with President Benes at 9.30 a.m. and the Cabinet met elsewhere at the same time. Shortly afterwards both groups, joined by the members of Dr Hodza’s late Government and two generals representing the Army, met together under the President’s leadership. But if they believed they had until the afternoon to decide they were soon disillusioned. The British, French and Italian envoys called and demanded a reply by noon that day. And in fact at noon, barely two-and-a-half hours after the convening of the meeting, the decision to accept the terms was taken.

Just before this meeting Benes telephoned the Soviet Minister, Alexandrovsky. He informed him of the Agreement and defined the Czech dilemma as between ‘beginning war with Germany, having against her Britain and France, at any rate in the sense of the attitude of their governments which are also working on the public mind, getting it to believe that Czechoslovakia is the cause of the war, or capitulating to the aggressor’. Leaving open the question of the decision Czechoslovakia would take, the President wanted to know the attitude of the Soviet Union to these two possibilities: further struggle or capitulation. An answer was requested by 6–7 p.m. However, at noon the Soviet envoy was informed that no answer was now required. Reporting this, in turn, Alexandrovsky added:

From the words and behaviour of Smutny and General Husarek, whom I also met at the Castle, I have no doubt that Benes made no reference to the fact that he had received no answer from the USSR. Just the contrary. He and the Left group of the Government evidently acted on the assumption that the USSR would come to their assistance at the first opportunity. This is borne out by yesterday’s broadcast by Minister Vavrečka and the former Minister . . . Derer who for the first time publicly announced that the USSR was the only one who remained a loyal ally of Czechoslovakia to the end. A similar statement, but not over the radio, was made by Beran, the leader of the Agrarians. All three took part in the said meeting of Ministers.

40 Telegram dated 1 October. New Documents, pp. 130–1. Neither telegram reached Moscow until the late afternoon. However, the Czechs never denied their knowledge or belief that the Soviets were prepared to assist them. Thus,
Clearly, the question of invoking Soviet aid was never seriously discussed and the doctrine laying down that the Soviet alliance must be contingent upon an effective alliance with the West cannot have been seriously challenged. Nor was the military situation discussed, except insofar as the generals were asked questions, the answers to which could be used to support arguments advanced on other grounds.

The decisive confrontation between those who supported capitulation and those who opposed it took place after the official decision to capitulate had been made. A deputation of six senior generals called on President Benes (who was also Supreme Commander). It was composed of the Chief of the General Staff, General Krejci, three provincial commanders, the Inspector-General of the Forces, and the Prime Minister, General Syrovy.

The generals argued that the troops were already mobilized and deployed in the fortified areas and that, in consequence, this was the time to resist, if ever. They were convinced that the population would resist, even if the Government did not. 'We must go to war,' they said, 'regardless of consequences. The Western Powers will be forced to follow us. The population of the Republic is united, the Army is resolute, anxious to fight. And even if we were left alone we must not yield; the army has the duty to defend the national territory, wants to go and will go to war.'

'They begged, entreated, threatened. Some of them wept.' President Benes admired them and sympathized, but refused to reconsider. He gave three reasons. The first related to the central fact of the French de facto denunciation of their Treaty of Alliance. The second to the Polish threat to occupy Teschen, with the military and political implications of fighting two enemies. The third, quite simply, to the foreseeable slaughter.

War will come quickly (the President told them). Great Britain, France and the other nations will not help us fight now, but they will certainly

Dr Hubert Ripka in 'The Repudiation of Munich', Czechoslovak Documents and Sources, no. 6, 1943: 'Soviet policy was prepared to implement its formal treaty pledges to us.' At the time of writing, Ripka was Minister of State in the Czechoslovak Government in Exile.


42 Speech by President Benes at Chicago, 27 May 1943, quoted in B. Bilek, Fifth Column at Work (London, 1945), p. 75.
have to fight later — perhaps under worse conditions. We would not be understood by Europe and the world if we provoked the war now. The nation must endure. Do not give way, whatever happens, and wait for the right moment. Then we shall enter the struggle again, as we did in 1914. And we shall win again.

Finally,

The generals left dissatisfied, embittered, and in a desperate mood. And as for me, I pondered seriously once more the question: Have I made the right decision in this terrible crisis?43

There could have been no greater demonstration of the President’s vast authority. At five o’clock that afternoon General Syrovy himself broadcast the news of the capitulation to the Czechoslovak people.

As the President in his farewell broadcast on 5 October expressly abstained from explaining what had occurred (‘I will neither analyse these events in detail nor criticise them today’), General Syrovy’s broadcast remains the authoritative public statement. The three key points were as follows:

We had the choice between a desperate and hopeless defence . . . and the acceptance of conditions . . . unparalleled in history for ruthlessness.

. . . we were deserted, and we stood alone.

All the States of Europe, including our neighbours to the North and South, are under arms. We are in a certain sense a fortress beleaguered by forces which are more powerful than ours.

Therefore the Government

. . . came to the conclusion that if we had to choose between a reduction of our territory and the death of the nation, it was our sacred duty to preserve the life of our people, so that we might emerge from this time of terror unweakened.44

Thus it may be seen that the decision to accept the Munich terms was taken quickly and under the heaviest kind of pressure. There was none of the careful, if anguished, deliberation which characterized the lengthy discussions that preceded the full acceptance of the Anglo-French proposals. The only hint of a discussion of

43 Mnichovske dny. What was said in detail, under these headings, is unknown. Fifth Column at Work.
alternative policies is to be found in the confrontation between the President and the generals and it is characteristic that it took place on the generals’ initiative, not the Government’s.

With one exception, the arguments that appear to have been advanced by Benes and those hinted at by Syrovy were based – at best – on half truths. The defence of Czechoslovakia was far from being a desperate undertaking. It was certainly not hopeless. And to say categorically, as General Syrovy did, that resistance ‘would have meant the sacrifice not only of an entire generation of our adult men, but also of women and children’, was simply misleading. So far as the Poles were concerned, by 30 September the question had been settled in principle and the Poles informed that Teschen would be ceded. This had been done with the deliberate purpose of obtaining Polish neutrality. The case of Teschen was neither so vital to the State nor so sound (from the formal point of view) that it could not be sacrificed in the interests of avoiding a greater sacrifice. Finally, the Czechs had not been entirely deserted. They had no strong reason to believe that the Soviets would not continue to support them. It was by their own decision that they denied themselves the opportunity to invoke Soviet aid. In the face of this, discussion as to whether the Rumanians would or would not have allowed Soviet forces through their territory or airspace, or whether in fact transport facilities were or were not adequate, are rendered meaningless.

There remains the one – unanswerable – argument that resistance implied slaughter. No doubt the Czech leaders could not have foreseen what the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia would be like. Perhaps they envisaged a new version, admittedly somewhat more brutal, of Habsburg rule. Even such a regime is really not comparable in terms of the physical pain it inflicts on the population with what is suffered in war. The dread of a great disaster and a national blood-letting was understandably very strong in Prague. Yet there can be no doubt that they would have gone to war without any reservation had the Western Powers been with them, even though for many months it would have been the same fighting against very nearly the same odds. ‘Nous n’attendons pas un nouvel Austerlitz, une armée française en Moravie. Nous tiendrons le coup nous-mêmes, le temps qu’il faudra, des semaines,

45 The notes exchanged between the Czechs and the Poles, as well as an important letter from Benes to Namier, are in L.B. Namier, Europe in Decay.
Like all civilized men of his generation, Benes hated and feared war. But war in good company, in an honourable cause, was one thing. War conducted alone, with uncertain prospects, or war in the company of one barbarian state against another — that was different. For the Czechs, with their historic defeat in the seventeenth century in mind and their newly re-won and still fragile sovereign status, such a prospect was particularly terrible. The only way they themselves could act to preserve their national sovereignty — to be lost, in any case, at Munich — was by endangering it in a harsh and bloody departure from their political and moral norms.

The case of Czechoslovakia in 1938 is paradoxical. In certain respects it was an easily demonstrable model of what a small, enlightened nation could do to maximize its resources. Economically, the country was strong. Politically, it had been for many years the centre of a system of alliances which was anchored to the French, to be sure, but which owed much of its strength and inspiration to the Czechs themselves. Militarily, it was capable of producing a machine that in the moment of crisis was the match of the adversary’s. That Czechoslovakia’s strength availed it nothing in the crisis is only natural: economic potential can be significant only as the basis of extended build-up of forces or as support in a lengthy conflict. But the Czech alliances melted the moment they were tested or were left uninvoked; and the military machine played no role in the defence of the state and only barely in the calculations of the political leaders.

How this situation arose and what alternatives faced the Czech leaders even as late as September 1938, has been described. Had they been less fixed in their minds as to the policy they should pursue and more unwilling from the start to pay the price and make the concessions demanded of them, it is possible that the situation facing them on 30 September would never have arisen. It would certainly have been different in its essentials. Had they decided on war when all other possibilities were exhausted there is no reason to believe that defeat was certain; on the contrary, they had every prospect of maintaining an effective and extended

46 Henri Hauser, op. cit.
resistance and the European situation would most probably have been altered thereby, as Hitler understood from the first. Within the logic of what the Czechoslovak leaders had been trying to do for twenty years, the most that can be said is that having recognized the failure of their policy, they accepted defeat and resolved to preserve their nation physically, until, 'as in 1914 ... we shall win again'. In terms of humanity and private morality this argument is clearly unanswerable. In terms of the management of a sovereign state it borders on the absurd. For winning 'as in 1914' meant total dependence on forces beyond their control and only marginally susceptible to their influence, if at all. It was the abnegation of statehood and the abdication of sovereignty.

It is difficult to escape the impression that these considerations were discussed and understood within an extremely rigid framework of ideas. Czechoslovakia must be linked to the West; must not fight alone; must not enter into an effective relationship with the Soviet Union unaccompanied by France; must preserve its reputation, even when the behaviour of other powers belies theirs; and so on. All these principles had strong roots in history and in good sense. Employed together as a system of rules for political conduct it is not surprising that they led to disaster.

But another question arises. Was President Benes right after all in seeing or sensing that Czechoslovak sovereignty had too small a base to be more than intermittently effective, that in the long run it depended on the backing and approval of much larger, truly powerful and sovereign states? How else can his own final, public judgment on his stewardship be understood?

I only wish to make it clear that in the years 1936–38 Czechoslovak policy rightly diagnosed what was the matter with Europe. It did everything, really everything, to retrieve the situation of Czechoslovakia, of its friends and of all Europe in the face of Fascist gangsterism and pan-German Nazism and of war itself.

In that period when the European and world crisis was approaching, there was no State in Europe which could have a clearer conscience of doing its duty towards its Nation and its friends than the Czechoslovak Republic under the presidency of Masaryk and myself.47

One answer would appear to be that effective sovereignty is less a direct function of size than of a complex relationship between the

47 Memoirs, op. cit., p. 33.
state, its purposes, and the external opposition to them. Granted
unquestioned authority in the domestic sphere, full exercise of
sovereignty would seem to depend principally on two factors: the
will of its statesmen to exercise that independence and the ability
of opposing states (if any) to impede them. The outcome of any
conflict obviously depends, in the first instance, on the objective
attributes of the opponents. But equally, where the will to employ
those attributes is lacking, or where it is paralysed by an apparent
disproportion in relative strength or for any other reason, such as
the private qualities and views of the leaders, physical strength and
other objective attributes avail nothing. They are, in any case, only
a potential.

The management of a state seems to require a special firmness of
purpose and a blindness to all considerations extraneous to the
overriding consideration of political survival. The leaders of 'new
nations' – as the Czechoslovaks were at the time – because they
will have spent many years arguing their case in normative terms in
other nations' chancelleries, are not always fully aware of this.
When they are, their initial instinct is often to deny it. They remain
in awe of the Great Powers even to the extent of privately dis-
paraging their own formal equality with them. Given this frame of
mind, the full range of possibilities available to the state is unlikely
to be surveyed, still less exploited.