SUMMARY

PRINCIPLES OF CZECHOSLOVAK DEFENCE IN 1938

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Many studies and books have been written, many explanations given, and many accusations made about the critical year 1938.

All discussion has always narrowed down to one single question. Whether Czechoslovakia should or should not have defended itself. As stereotyped as is this question so are most of the answers. Yet the key to understanding Munich lies elsewhere — in world power politics — in that combination of power and political forces in which Czechoslovakia was a chessman in a big-power game played simultaneously in Europe, in China, in the Near East and in America.

Munich was a question of power and politics and that is how it was resolved in 1938. In any serious historical analysis it must be resolved in the same way.

Yet it is quite surprising to realise how very little has been said so far about Czechoslovak policy in that period of crisis; what aim it pursued, on what it based its defence. Even after thirty years it is necessary to point out that it really did defend itself.

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Czechoslovakia's foreign political line in the twenty years between the Great Wars was marked by an unusual stability based on the fact that it was led by one political group and, in fact, by one person — Edvard Beneš. It was grounded in an attempt to take root and to secure Czechoslovakia in the frame of that Europe formed in 1918. That was why, on the basis of peace treaties, Czechoslovakia concluded a number of agreements, chiefly with its neighbours. It tried to base its existence on big-power support from France and the Soviet Union. It actively engaged in the work of the League of Nations whose principles of collective security gave it — as a small country — an opportunity to make its voice heard in open discussion. It devoted unusual attention to endeavours to re-organise Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Out of a more broadly based concept of Central European collaboration, only a grouping of three nations emerged — namely, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, which became at the time the only real possibility of uniting small, new states in this area.

Czechoslovakia was aware of the instability, the lack of preparedness and the alarming shortcomings of that Europe which was formed after the war, in 1918. But it tried to remove these shortcomings, gradually, through agreements and adjustments and by means of calming and stabilising all of Europe.

However, in the course of time, all these basic principles on which Czechoslovak foreign policy built the existence of this new state, slowly disintegrated

from within. They disintegrated much to the same extent as Europe disintegrated starting in 1918. The first big effort to shift the newly established situation onto new foundations occurred in Locarno in 1925. Four European powers — Great Britain, Germany, France and Italy — tried to attain a big-power agreement, outside the frame of the Versailles system and outside the League of Nations — as the only, the most simple and most effective means of making decisions. These decisions were intended chiefly to resolve problems of Western Europe.

The second crisis came about between 1932 and 1933, when the same big-power grouping, in the form of a suggestion to create a directorium of four, attempted to re-organise Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe and to attain a new big-power division of the world. Czechoslovakia acted vigorously against this attempt and in defense of the existing state of affairs. This was done by means of regenerating the League of Nations, based on new Franco-Soviet cooperation supported by the Little Entente and Balkan pacts. The third European crisis broke out in March, 1936. In connection with the remilitarisation of the Ruhr, a struggle was fought between Germany and France on the decisive, big-power position in Europe and in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe in particular. This crisis ended in a great victory for Germany.

Face to face with Hitlerite Germany, France refused the help offered it by the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, refused the support of the Little Entente and Balkan pacts and of Poland. It succumbed to a psychosis of fear and its own internal, political weakness. It surrendered its own defence and the defence of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe which, until this time, had been the second pillar of its big-power position in Europe. Instead, it relied on Great Britain, whose big-power strength seemed to France to be a better guarantee against Hitlerite Germany than the continental anti-German wall, linking Western, Central and Eastern Europe on the principles of the Versailles system and the League of Nations. The French attitude, encouraged by British policy, internationally led to a weakening of the new Soviet influence in the areas of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, to deflecting Soviet policy from European problems. At the same time it relinquished this area to Germany as its old hegemony.

The consequences of this French move were apparent in the political breakdown of this whole area and its transfer to Germany's big-power sphere. Following Poland, which had already taken this step in January 1934, and in the wake of Hungary, which from the beginning had supported German policy, in July, 1936, through agreement Austria embarked on this German road, and during 1937 and at the beginning of 1938 it was Yugoslavia's and Romania's turn. This movement was accompanied by internal political changes within these countries — their internal fascisation.

The only country in this region which resisted the growing German pressure was Czechoslovakia. Isolated internationally and weakened internally, losing firm ground under its feet, it was the only country that did not conclude either an economic or a political agreement with Germany, it was the only country which tenaciously and with great difficulty defended its internal democratic regime against the pressure of fascism. That was why the greatest pressure was directed by Hitlerite Germany against Czechoslovakia. After the Anschluss with Austria in March, 1938, the decisive phase of this unequal battle began.

The basic principle on which Czechoslovakia based its defence was an endeavour to revive the old allied system broken up by the Ruhr crisis. This Czechoslovak allied system was so deeply in European politics — there were so many meaningful and deliberate links with it — that any sort of regeneration would have had to result in changes in all of European policy. Any form of revival — chiefly bringing back to life the Czechoslovak-French and Czechoslovak-Soviet agreements — would have necessarily meant a change in European policy. The creation of an anti-German front was in contradiction with developments opened up by the Ruhr crisis. And in particular it was in contradiction with British policy which ever since the Ruhr crisis, and despite its agreement with France, was involved in European politics and began to interfere more openly in it.

The British position towards the changes made in 1918 in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe was known. Great Britain regarded them as absurdities of the post-war period and certainly not as a permanent solution. It never stopped regarding Germany as the natural hegemony of this region. Thus when France submitted to its leadership in March, 1936, it left Germany with an open hand

in this area. Great Britain's disinterest in this region was expressed again in November, 1937, by Lord Halifax in conversation with Hitler. British policy only tried to make sure that the revival of German hegemony came about by peaceful means, that this transfer to Germany's sphere of influence occurred without open conflict which might disturb the peace of Europe and thereby also affect Great Britain. This was the main line of the British policy of appeasement, of its policy for maintaining peace.

The Czechoslovak line of defence was completely at odds with this British concept. It tried to regenerate a system whose disintegration in March, 1936, Great Britain regarded as an essential prerequisite for the success of its political line of appeasement.

This antagonism between Czechoslovak and British policy was evident in sharp encounters throughout 1938. Czechoslovakia, endeavouring to regenerate its allied system in defence against Hitlerite aggression, came into conflict not only with Germany but also with Great Britain, supported by France.

Thus, the struggle for the existence of the Czechoslovak allied system became the cardinal question not only for Czechoslovakia but also for European development in 1938.

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The beginnings of Czechoslovak defence, based on attempts to regenerate the allied system, can be seen at the very moment when Hitlerite Germany began its power advance into Central Europe through an Anschluss with Austria. Czechoslovak foreign policy used the shock to Europe and public opinion of an Anschluss with Austria and turned to its allies — to France and the Soviet Union — with an open question: whether the governments of both nations still felt under obligation to honour their agreements vis à vis Czechoslovakia, i. e. the French agreement of 1925, and the Soviet agreement of 1935. Both governments replied at once. On March 17, 1938, People's Commissar Litvinov declared that "the Soviet Government is fully aware of its measure of responsibility as laid down by the League of Nations, the Briand-Kellog Pact and agreements on mutual aid with France and Czechoslovakia". That same day the last French Government of the People's Front, through its Prime Minister Leon Blum, declared that France would honour its obligations to Czechoslovakia and that in the event of a German attack it would offer "immediate, effective and full assistance".

Coming in the wake of a two-year period of silence and stagnation, these replies indicated a certain political revival and, at the same time, a certain public regeneration of the Czechoslovak allied system.

However, on the heels of this first, unquestionable success of Czechoslovak policy there came the hard blow of British, Chamberlain diplomacy. The British Government decided to forestall any possible consequences of a regeneration of the Czechoslovak allied system which, through France, would involve itself. It decided to steal a march on any potential possibilities inherent in a regeneration of such a system — namely, the creation of an anti-German front which contained in itself the spectre of upsetting the Ruhr policy, the spectre of war. Chamberlain was fortunate enough to obtain for this blow the support of France where highly important political changes had occurred. The Blum People's Front Government had fallen and was replaced by the right-wing government of Bonnet-Daladier, which not only did not feel itself bound by Blum's pledge of March 17, but which, on the contrary, intensively sought a means of shedding its unpleasant obligations to Czechoslovakia.

At the end of April there was an important gathering in London of representatives of the conservative governments of Great Britain and France. Out of this gathering came a condition, or demand, which deeply affected the application of the Czechoslovak-French agreement and, through it, the Czechoslovak-Soviet agreement. This condition, essentially narrowing the effectiveness of the whole Czechoslovak allied system, was based on the fact that this whole system could be set in motion only in the event that Czechoslovakia became the victim of an unprovoked aggression. Only in this case could Czechoslovakia request help from the League of Nations.

The Anglo-French condition was made in connection with this clause on an unprovoked aggression. This condition, whose full force and tragic effects we experienced and which is difficult for us to understand, had a certain logic in itself and could therefore be made. This condition was the demand that the Czechoslovak Government come to an agreement with the Henlein Sudeten German Party by fulfilling the latter's demands made on 24 April, i. e. just before the London conference, and contained in the eight

Karlovy Vary points. If the Czechoslovak Government did not fulfil these demands, it would be possible — according to the Anglo-French version — to consider Hitler's declared intention to act against Czechoslovakia as one in defence of the German minority and as one provoked by Czechoslovakia, i. e. provoked by a Czechoslovak Government unwilling to meet the demands of the German minority. In such a situation Czechoslovakia would lose the right to any international support.

This condition brought the situation to the edge of absurdity. It changed the very logic of events. It made of the small Czechoslovak state, which was defending itself against Hitler aggression through the latter's fifth column — that is through the Henlein Sudeten German Party — a violator of peace, the country preventing a peaceful solution to the "justified" demands of the German minority.

The British and French Governments, by putting this condition, knew perfectly well what it meant. They knew that its fulfilment made inevitable the profound disintegration of the Czechoslovak state. On the other hand, chiefly British policy — which recognised without question Germany's rights in Central Europe — regarded this approach as the only one capable of preserving peace. Its purpose was to localise the Czechoslovak-German problem to a deceptively insignificant, internal question and to prevent it from expanding into a world conflict.

This condition — announced on May 7, 1938, to the Czechoslovak Government by the British and French representatives in Prague in the form of a sharp note — paralysed Czechoslovakia's effort to regenerate its allied system. It paralysed the main principle of Czechoslovakia's defence and willfully and intently led it up a blind alley. In addition, the British Charge d'Affaires in Berlin informed the German Government of the results of the London conference and also informed it about the character of the note presented in Prague.

Hitler regarded the results of the London conference — and not incorrectly — as a green light for his attack against Czechoslovakia. That was why German soldiers and SS units began to move towards the Czechoslovak frontier.

At this point, in May 1938, the defence of Czechoslovakia entered its second phase. In it the Czechoslovak Government rejected the Anglo-French condition in a special memorandum issued on May 14. In the name of its duty to defend the integrity and inner strength of the country it refused to confer with Henlein on the platform of the Karlovy Vary points. In addition, it made of Hitler's secretly prepared plan of attack an international cause celebre by officially informing London, Paris and Moscow and by demanding an explanation from Berlin.

In the third place it carried out a partial mobilisation on 21 May. This was intended not only to serve in defence of its borders but was also a political step. It was a direct appeal to Czechoslovakia's allies — to France and the Soviet Union. It was intended to be a a new, concrete step to reviving the Czechoslovak allied system by means of direct defence action, by means of a fait accompli. Czechoslovakia assumed that by this extreme measure it would succeed in putting into motion the mechanism of its allied system.

Czechoslovakia's defence system, moving along several lines at once, had very complex and very contradictory results. The greatest and most positive was the fact that Hitler gave up his attempt at direct aggression. He had to withdraw. Czechoslovak defence triumphed. But apart from this unquestionable, real Czechoslovak victory, the May crisis had still another political result. It was in sharp contrast to this victory.

It resulted, in fact, in an Anglo-German-French agreement directed against Czechoslovakia. Basically, what happened was that Czechoslovakia, by its mobilisation, by its fait accompli, had not only manoeuvred France but in the end also Great Britain to the very brink of war. In such a situation and in response to this Czechoslovak approach, a report was issued by the British and French military attachés in Berlin confirming Hitler's assertion that the whole May crisis was deliberately provoked by Czechoslovakia. Since — as the report stated — in the area of the German-Czechoslovak frontier no unusual concentration of German military forces was to be observed. Czechoslovak information to this effect was declared untruthful and Czechoslovakia was branded before the whole world not only as the disseminator of venal information but as a military provocateur.

This political result of the May crisis, which meant a sharp Anglo-German-French blow against Czechoslovakia, transformed Czechoslovakia's victory into a political defeat. At the same time it was the starting point for the third phase

of the struggle of and for Czechoslovakia, in the summer of 1938.

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A marked feature of this phase was Hitler's withdrawal into the background. Nazi Germany confined itself, first, to a vicious anti-Czechoslovak Goebbels-propaganda campaign, second, to redefining and modifying its military plan, the infamous Fall Grün, and thirdly, and primarily, to the activities of the Henlein Sudeten German Party inside Czechoslovakia. The German approach maintained the necessary degree of tension, but it awaited the results of the Anglo-French pressure on Czechoslovakia which formed the main content of those summer months — June, July and August of 1938.

In this stage, British policy now very clearly took into its own hands the solution of the Czechoslovak problem. At the same time, its main goal — to break up the Czechoslovak allied system — was carried out by much stronger methods than employed in the previous phase.

At the very beginning of June there was renewed, official Anglo-French pressure on Czechoslovakia. On 3 June, the British Government handed the Prague Government another, sharp note in which it insisted that the Czechoslovak Government accept the Henlein Karlovy Vary demands. This step was supplemented on June 7 by a French note which emphasised that if these demands were not met, France would have to revise its relations to Czechoslovakia.

In this situation, the British Government stepped up pressure and concentrated it on the person of E. Beneš, who was the main figure in Czechoslovakia's defence.

In a way that can only be called a direct stab in the back, he was forced to receive the Runciman Mission on July 20. With its arrival, British pressure was brought directly to Czechoslovakia. The purpose of the Runciman Mission was to force Czechoslovakia to accept the Henlein Karlovy Vary demands.

Simultaneously, however, British policy sought another way in which to solve the Czechoslovak problem. In June it considered holding a plebiscite in the German areas. This demand — after experiences in the Saar and Austria — was equal to suggesting that the Sudeten areas be ceded to Germany. In the middle of June the British presented their French allies with a map marked with areas which should be ceded to Germany. The British Government also began to consider at this time the possibility of calling an international, big-power conference.

All of these ideas the British Government introduced into direct diplomatic discussion not only with France but also with Germany. The central problem was the so-called neutralisation of Czechoslovakia. The idea was to annul all of the Czechoslovak agreements, not only the Franco-Czechoslovak agreements and the Czechoslovak-Soviet one, but also the Czechoslovak-German arbitration agreement of 1926 in which both parties pledged to resolve contestable problems through discussion.

The purpose of this was to destroy the Czechoslovak allied system, to neutralise the country, i.e. to force it into a period of isolation, as Austria had been in March.

In such a situation, an attack on Czechoslovakia would not involve any obligations on the part of other countries. A Czechoslovak conflict with Germany would remain localised and the destruction of Czechoslovakia would incur no international consequences. No military conflict could result from this, and thus peace would be assured.

British policy of that time was working to obtain agreement on a worldwide scale with Hitlerite Germany. Agreement in which it willingly recognised Germany's demands in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe in order to obtain a delimitation of spheres of influence in those areas which were the basis of its colonial rule — in Asia and Africa.

One of the outstanding paths along which British policy was feeling its way, in view of the above-mentioned, was the Runciman Mission in Czechoslovakia. In talks at the Červený Hrádek on August 18, Runciman discussed with Henlein, without the participation of Czechoslovak representatives, about the possibility of cutting off German land from Czechoslovakia on the basis of a plebiscite. The British put the question of calling an international conference. At the same time Runciman, on orders from the British Government, requested Konrad Henlein — in the role of mediator — to inform Hitler about London's interest in Anglo-German talks on worldwide problems.

All of this was going on in a period of heightened tension and nervousness. This was brought about by German manoeuvres in which one and a half million soldiers were called up. Furthermore, preparations were under way for the Nurem-

berg Congress of the German fascist party which, as was expected, was to provide the signal for a new advance of German policy. As part of this deliberately stepped up tension, the Soviet-Japanese conflict was diverting the Soviet Union's prime interest from European events.

Thanks to this development, and chiefly the attitude of the British, Czechoslovakia was forced into critical isolation and its ability to act was paralysed in an unbelieveable manner.

Its main line of defence continued to be attempts to maintain the existence of its allied system proportionate to the way in which in the West — in Britain and in France — the lack of interest in defending Czechoslovakia and endeavours to shed obligations was being transformed into direct and rather brutal pressure for Czechoslovakia to submit to Germany's demands. For the defence of Czechoslovakia, logically, the significance of its eastern ally — the Soviet Union — began to grow.

The attitude of the Soviet Union to Czechoslovakia at this time, like that of France and Great Britain, was determined by its attitude to Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe in general. Great Britain had no interest in this region and regarded Germany as its natural hegemony. In the Ruhr crisis France had already relinquished its leading position in which this area had always formed only the second line of its European policy. The Soviet Union, in contrast, was much more directly interested in this area for the very simple reason that it bordered directly on its territory. At the same time, however, the Soviet Union did not have a greater position in this region and the Ruhr crisis had dealt a heavy blow to its influence here, which was just beginning to grow. Soviet policy from this moment maintained a reserved attitude, however it followed events in this area with increased attention. In 1938, when Czechoslovakia began its defence struggle it had the full support of the Soviet Government.

During 1938 there was a revitalisation of Soviet-Czechoslovak relations. Important contacts were strengthened through a series of economic talks and agreements, communication was built up between Prague and Moscow, there were also military and political discussions.

This means that at a time when Germany was pressuring to destroy Czechoslovakia, when Britain and France were adopting a hands-off position of no support for Czechoslovakia and when Great Britain was conducting direct negotiations with Germany against Czechoslovakia, the policy of the Soviet Union was Czechoslovakia's only political support. As 1938 progressed, Czechoslovak-Soviet relations became a more and more outspoken factor in Czechoslovakia's endeavours to maintain its allied system.

On the other hand, this fact, which was at odds with British policy and a direct German advance — provoked deep resistance among these two big powers, and was strengthened by fears among conservative circles of the spread of communism. In this way a fact which from the beginning had been in the background now came more and more to the fore. This was the power struggle between Great Britain, Germany and the Soviet Union — and in second place, France, Italy and Japan — for spheres of influence in Europe, Asia and Africa.

German-Soviet interests clashed chiefly in Central Europe but they were not without significance in Asia either, specially in the Near East. The Asian continent was full of areas of conflict between Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Not just because the Soviet Union was a big-power, but chiefly for its revolutionary influence which deeply disturbed the British position in the Near East, in India, in China and in other parts. These antagonisms, in fact, linked German and British policy against the Soviet Union. Therefore Britain was interested in an agreement with Germany, that was why it gave it a free hand in Europe, with the understanding that agreement in the Asian area, where Germany was not so obviously engaged, would be easy.

In other words, the possibility of an Anglo-German agreement threatened the Soviet position both in Europe and in Asia. At the same time, developments in Asia were of decisive and prime importance for Soviet policy — just as for British policy.

Simultaneously, an Anglo-German front for the Soviet Union represented the great danger of enormous and almost complete isolation on a worldwide scale. There existed a relatively simple possibility of extending this front to include more countries — France, Italy and Japan — which would place the Soviet Union against a large, big-power bloc and possibly, as a result, facing superior military forces.

All of this affected the Soviet approach to the degenerating Central European crisis. The Soviet Government was interested in defending this region against

Germany, which is why Czechoslovak defence had Soviet support. On the other hand, by becoming too involved in Central Europe, the Soviet Union might come into conflict with Germany — either directly or indirectly — supported by Great Britain and the other countries. This possibility determined the Soviet Union's reticence towards the growing crisis.

This meant that Czechoslovakia's defensive struggle had entered into worldwide politics, chiefly the big-power, Anglo-Soviet differences. These long-range results on the one hand supported Czechoslovak defence policy, but on the other hand it forced Czechoslovakia to become extremely and unusually circumspect.

At the same time Czechoslovakia's position was the more difficult in that it had to fight continuously for world public opinion whose support was an outstanding factor in its defence. It was up to public opinion whether Czechoslovakia would have an opportunity to gain the League of Nations' support. Therefore Czechoslovakia, defending itself from the pressure of British policy and the threat of German aggression had to act in such a way as not to lay itself open to a new charge of having provoked a military conflict or of spreading international communism.

It required enormous courage and political and diplomatic skill to find a path in this manifold antagonistic dilemna. Czechoslovak policy also moved very guardedly along unstable and rocky soil. It had to take into consideration the complications of worldwide developments and at the same time resolve a whole myriad of detailed, internal problems which, in turn, were affected by this world development.

Czechoslovakia refused to accept Henlein's Karlovy Vary demands but the government began talks with the Sudeten German Party on the basis of its own proposals, in the frame of the Czechoslovak Constitution. It tried to show the European public that the SdP's approach was directed from Berlin and therefore that all talks were only manoeuvres without any real effort to reach agreement. It therefore tried to move the talks from closed consultations to the open forum of Parliament. However, the intervention which forced it to receive the Runciman Mission made it impossible to realise this through discussion in Parliament, though the latter had been called on July 25.

The arrival of the Runciman Mission in itself made matters exceedingly difficult for the Czechoslovak line of defence since the talks were conducted under the direct control of the Mission, which had no detailed knowledge about the concrete problem, nor the inclination and patience to gain it. The Germans, for their part, further muddled such talks by presenting more and more documents, which confused the situation no end.

In the middle of August — in connection with the critical breakdown of the worldwide situation — President Beneš took over the leadership of the Czechoslovak side in these talks. He presented the German party with a proposal of far-reaching concessions and asked that the SdP express its public willingness to cooperate and pledge that during negotiations it would respect a truce and cease the campaign of villification in its press. Beneš's proposals were so timed that they immediately preceded the Henlein and Runciman talks at the Červený Hrádek, which the Czechoslovak Government rightly feared. Although it had forced the representatives of the SdP into a blind alley, it was unable to prevent an Anglo-German agreement. That same night, between 17 and 18 August, the Sudeten German representatives took a special plane to Berlin for further instructions. According to these, and on the basis of them, and despite all the efforts of the Czechoslovak Government, talks were held on 18 August at the Červený Hrádek which paved the way for the fateful Anglo-German agreement.

In this situation, face to face with an Anglo-German agreement, Edvard Beneš — aware of all the worldwide aspects of the maturing crisis — took a bold step. On the eve of the opening of the Nuremberg Nazi Party congress he fulfilled the so-called fourth plan of the Henlein Karlovy Vary demands.

By taking this step a new situation was created in many ways. At the price of extreme concessions that actually threatened the integrity of the nation, Czechoslovakia fulfilled that critical condition on which Great Britain and France had insisted in order to honour their obligations vis à vis Czechoslovakia. It led the Anglo-French efforts to break up these alliances into a blind alley, and also the policy of the Henlein party which in raising the Karlovy Vary demands had never counted on the possibility of their being fulfilled. And not only this. By this move, Czechoslovakia smashed the possibility of an Anglo-German agreement from being reached on the

basis of a solution to the Czechoslovak question.

By this measure, Czechoslovakia attained its main goal. It saved its allied system. But the results of this step were still more far-reaching. It meant a political failure for Henlein, and also for Hitler and for Germany as a great power. It affected French policy, but it mainly acted upon British policy. This step by Czechoslovakia prevented the rupture of British alliances with Central Europe and its peaceful surrender to Germany, so that in the end it prevented a possible big-power, Anglo-German agreement. This occurred at a moment when the existing opposition against Daladier and Bonnet in France began to get stronger, when the anti-Chamberlain opposition in Great Britain became more marked and was obviously concentrating around Winston Churchill, Eden, the Labour Party and the trade unions; when even in the generals' circles of the German army an opposition was created whose representative, Kleist, made contact with the Churchill group in Great Britain; when in other German circles there was growing dissatisfaction with Hitler's hazardous policy leading to the brink of war, and when in the Far East the Japanese attack against the Soviet Union failed and German-Japanese antagonisms were coming to the surface.

Czechoslovakia was undoubtedly strengthened by this development, Czechoslovak policy had also calculated on this. This Czechoslovak move, and the political victory it engendered, was not an insignificant contribution to all these currents.

Thus, although the fourth plan was the hardest sacrifice, the very fact that Czechoslovakia upheld its allied system gave it a great victory which had a positive effect on worldwide developments.

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The first few days after the fourth plan there was a profound silence throughout Czechoslovakia, a silence that was carried to the rest of the world. As it turned out shortly afterwards, it was the silence before the storm. It was the pause before the new, and fourth phase of Czechoslovakia's defensive struggle in 1938.

The front against Czechoslovakia — until this time more diplomatic than concrete — became sharper and was transformed into open attacks against the country.

Hitler's final speech at the Nuremberg congress, September 12, 1938, was the signal for a direct attack by Germany on Czechoslovakia. There was a specific attempt by the Sudeten German Party to carry out a putsch, which was intended as a prelude to a German attack.

Together with this German offensive, Chamberlain's British policy was set in motion. Like Hitler, Chamberlain also, and not incorrectly, felt that he had been outwitted and dealt a blow by Czechoslovakia's move. Therefore, like Hitler, he also decided to act directly. The night of September 13, when he sent Hitler an offer to meet personally, he took the solution of the Czechoslovak problem into his own hands.

On September 15, 1938, in Berchtesgaden, an Anglo-German agreement was reached on handing over Czechoslovakia's border areas to Germany. This happened at exactly the same time — and regardless of this — when Czechoslovakia had put down in a few hours Henlein's attempt to bring about a coup d'etat inside the country. But not only this. Through this move the Czechoslovak Government broke up the whole leadership of the Sudeten Germany Party which fled to Germany, the Party was banned and its organisational structure smashed. Thus, in this phase it liquidated the danger of a fifth column along the lines of which Hitler's attacks against Czechoslovakia had been concentrated.

But the Berchtesgaden agreement changed this truly great Czechoslovak victory — just as was the case in May, 1938 — into a big political defeat.

In this critical moment, on September 16, President Beneš turned to the French Government with a message asking for assurances that it would not join the Anglo-German front, which would inevitably affect it. He asked and begged France not to break the Franco-Czechoslovak aggreement, and thereby not just the whole Czechoslovak allied system but the main pillar of the European anti-nazi front. He wrote: "The decisive moment is approaching in the struggle between us and Berlin. The gist of the matter is not our minority. This is an old struggle for the German rule of Central Europe. We are to be mortally hit and thereby the whole of Central Europe will be hit, the whole policy of France and France itself. If we stand strong, we shall defeat Hitler. I ask that the French Government consider all the circumstances. We have remained faithful to France and will remain faithful to it even in the most difficult moments. We make this emphatic appeal to the Government of

France and believe that in the spirit of our treaty of alliance it will remain with us in this struggle whatever happens. If we stand strong, the rest of Europe will go along with us against nazi Germany."

But the French Daladier-Bonnet Government gave preference this time to its alliance with Great Britain. Quite the contrary, at the latter's side it tried to enforce the Berchtesgaden agreement, to break Czechoslovak resistance.

The struggle that took place on 19, 20 and 21 September, was cruel. All the more cruel in that it was a struggle between Czechoslovakia and its allies — Great Britain and France. These allies tried to force Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš to submit to the destruction of his own country, despite the fact that Czechoslovakia had attained a real victory in its direct struggle with Henlein and Hitler.

But President Beneš, through the Czechoslovak Ambassador in Paris, Osuský, and the Czechoslovak Ambassador in London, Jan Masaryk, was in direct contact with the democratic, anti-Bonnet and anti-Chamberlain opposition, which encouraged him in his struggle. He was in contact with the Soviet Government which stood on the principles of the Czechoslovak-Soviet agreement. And he had tremendous support inside Czechoslovakia, in the enormous unity of the people in defence of their country against fascist Germany.

In this situation, President Beneš rejected Anglo-French pressure to accept Hitler's Berchtesgaden demands. This refusal, in the first place, deeply affected the two main Berchtesgaden partners — Chamberlain and Hitler. Again it raised the spectre of an anti-German front. Again it deeply affected the self-confidence of German big-power. Once again it touched on Chamberlain's policy of appeasement and on the final goal of this policy — to reach an Anglo-German agreement. It strengthened the opposition. It threatened the personal prestige of Chamberlain and Hitler.

Therefore the reaction to this refusal was new Anglo-French pressure which grew in proportion to the approaching, new Anglo-German talks at Godesberg — to take place one night later. During that evening — between the 20 and 21 September — there was fantastic pressure on President Beneš. Pressure, in which he was told that if a war broke out of this new situation, Czechoslovakia would be responsible and France would not join such a war.

This meant that regardless of the fact that Czechoslovakia in the past had fulfilled the Anglo-French condition on which the existence of its allied system depended, there now was, in fact, a one-sided repudiation of allied obligations by France. And Czechoslovakia, and particularly its president — E. Beneš — was made personally responsible for the outbreak of a military conflict! Perhaps with the passing of time we cannot even realise the terrible burden of responsibility placed on the shoulders of a single person who was presented to the European public as a warmonger.

In the absurdity of the power struggle, all the responsibility for an armed conflict was laid at the door of Czechoslovakia. It was branded a warmonger and thus expelled from the society of peace-loving nations. And those who, despite this, were willing to help it were themselves indicted as aggressors.

In this strained and highly charged atmosphere, on September 21, Czechoslovakia accepted Hitler's Berchtesgaden demands. What Hitler had been unable to win by direct attack he gained through agreement with Chamberlain.

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But, as it turned out in the immediate hours following this, the Czechoslovak defensive struggle did not even end here, at the very moment the Berchtesgaden demands were met. It embarked upon its further modification, and thus a new, fifth phase.

In this phase, the main weight of Czechoslovak defence became internal, within the country. Inside Czechoslovakia one of the most important demands, the maintainance forbidding assembly, was withdrawn. There then arose a huge and spontaneous wave of resistance, a wave of demonstrations demanding the defence of the nation. This wave overthrew the Hodža Government and brought to power a new government, the military government of Syrový. His first act was to declare a mobilisation in defence of the nation's frontiers.

This internal struggle, through its results, was intended to influence the situation internationally. It was a new attempt to maintain Czechoslovakia's allied system at a moment when all its hopes had failed either through agreement or the possibility of support from the League of Nations. In fact, it was an

attempt to bring it back to life through a fait accompli.

This time too Czechoslovakia's move had a very great effect on the international situation. In the first place, it significantly influenced the Godesberg talks between Chamberlain and Hitler. It pointed up and deepened their own internal crises. The talks at Godesberg were marked from the outset by Anglo-German differences to which the previous move of Czechoslovak defence had undoubtedly contributed. Chamberlain thought that agreement by the Czechoslovak Government with the Berchtesgaden agreement thereby solved the whole question of Czechoslovakia. His purpose was to reach an Anglo-German agreement on worldwide questions. In contrast to this, Hitler still regarded the Czechoslovak question as the main problem of his policy. Czechoslovak resistance annoved him. The defeats which Germany had suffered at the hands of Czechoslovakia were unparalleled. The need to fully destroy Czechoslovakia became Hitler's idee fixe. Therefore, in Godesberg Hitler rejected Anglo-German talks and raised new demands on Czechoslovakia. In the first place he extended considerably the area that he insisted be joined to Germany. In contrast to the Berchtesgaden demands, in the new demands he now added that the new German annexation line should include all the main Czechoslovak fortified points. The purpose of these proposals was clear. To deprive Czechoslovakia of any possibility of defence. Apart from the areas that were first intended for German annexation, Hitler now insisted on holding a plebiscite in other areas. The most far-reaching demands were made on areas in Moravia which in places was to be reduced to a corridor of 30 to 40 kilometres separating Bohemia from Slovakia. This proposal was basically identical to the line of Fall Grün, which presupposed an attack on Czechoslovakia by a pincer move in the Moravian region. Together with these far-reaching, new German demands, Hitler informed Chamberlain of the territorial demands made by Poland and Hungary on Czechoslovakia.

Chamberlain had not foreseen all this. For him Czechoslovakia was a subordinate matter. He was working for long-term, Anglo-German agreement.

The Godesberg talks reached an impasse. The Czechoslovak question divided Hitler and Chamberlain. In this moment of stagnation in the Godesberg consultations, Czechoslovakia moved in once again, directly, and right into the heart of these talks.

At the very time when Hitler was giving Chamberlain a memorandum of his demands — that is on September 23, 1938, at 10:30 P.M. — he received the news that Czechoslovakia was mobilising. Hitler reacted to this with a sharp outburst of anger which best shows how deeply he was rankled by Czechoslovakia's defence moves. He declared that the Czechoslovak mobilisation compelled him to take military measures. Chamberlain was forced to point out that under these circumstances it was useless to continue the talks.

When the Godesberg talks failed it seemed that the policy of appeasement had reached its nadir.

Influenced by Czechoslovakia's mobilisation, France and the Soviet Union also mobilised. Great Britain was forced to take measures in the event of war, and this opened up the possibility of the fall of the unsuccessful government of Chamberlain. Czechoslovak-Polish talks were begun. And both Little Entente partners — Romania and Yugoslavia — announced that they regarded as binding their old obligations to Czechoslovakia in the event it was attacked by Hungary.

Czechoslovakia triumphantly rejected Hitler's Godesberg demands and declared its determination to stand up to him "in defence of its sovereignty". The Czechoslovak Government and army carried out all preparations to repulse a German attack which Hitler had decided would be launched at two in the afternoon on September 28, 1938.

On September 27, the Czechoslovak Government met in the evening for the last time. It declared that "if war comes, there is a reconstructed front, created by superhuman efforts, and we can look with hope to the outcome". That same night Czechoslovakia sent a note to Geneva which the Czechoslovak representative was to present to the League of Nations in the event of an attack by Hitler on Czechoslovakia. The note contained a demand for the immediate convocation of the League of Nations, indicting Hitler Germany as the aggressor. This was intended to fully open the path, both in international politics and along legal lines, for Czechoslovakia's defence against Hitler in the frame of a broader allied Czechoslovak system. The climax of these Czechoslovak preparations was the request for Soviet air aid, presented to the Soviet Government by President Beneš on September 28, in the morning.

During the week between 23 and 28 September, 1938, it seemed as though Czechoslovakia's fait accompli would bring positive results, that it would permit Czechoslovakia to defend itself against Hitlerite Germany. That it would bring to life a broad, anti-German front, similar to the one created in the middle of the 'thirties — prior to the Ruhr crisis. It seemed that the Czechoslovak struggle to regenerate the allied system would prove successful. That this allied system would become the basis not only to contain German aggression but also to create a new political grouping influencing worldwide developments.

However, at the climactic moment of this whole situation, it became apparent that the strength of Czechoslovakia, as a small state, was not proportionate to the far-reaching consequences of its defence.

Czechoslovakia's fait accompli manoeuvred the big-powers into a position which they had tried to prevent from the very beginning.

That was why they decided to put an end to this situation. The path that now seemed open and which had appeared many times in the past in diplomatic talks led through an international big-power conference. Hitler's invitation to talks at Munich was accepted with pleasure by Chamberlain, Daladier and Mussolini. The big-power coalition of Locarno and the directorium of the four, which had appeared on the horizon in European politics at the turn of 1932—1933, was revived. The last and final phase of ending Czechoslovakia's defence in 1938 had begun.

The talks at the big-power conference in Munich on 29 and 30 September, 1938, marked a victory for other and opposing principles than those on which Czechoslovakia's defence was based. The Czechoslovak defence system was, in this manner, immediately annulled. France, following Great Britain, moved from its allied agreement with Czechoslovakia to direct agreement against it, to agreement with Germany. The Soviet Union kept its distance from new developments in this crisis and did not intervene. The Munich, big-power grouping spelled a danger for it too.

Czechoslovakia found itself in a situation against which it had so tenaciously fought. In deep and complete isolation internationally.

In Munich, Czechoslovakia was dismembered by a big-power agreement between Great Britain, Germany, Italy and France. By this move the parties to the agreement, with utter finality, got rid of an upleasant factor which despite its small size and through its defence had adversely and deeply affected European and worldwide politics. To prevent this country once and for all from any further possibility of defending itself, the Munich agreement went into force — regardless of Czechoslovakia's viewpoint — simply by a decision of these big-powers.

Munich closed the defensive struggle of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1938. This defence mechanism was destroyed in its very principles. It marked a defeat and the rape of Czechoslovakia. March 15, 1939, was only the climax of this defeat.

But very soon it appeared that the liquidation of Czechoslovakia did not lead to any Anglo-German agreement limiting spheres of influence on a worldwide scale. Quite the contrary. Both these big powers came into mutual conflict shortly afterwards in the frame of a new world war. In the course of that war, slowly and with difficulty, there gradually was born a big power, anti-German front, based on a policy of an anti-nazi front. But this actually was framed only in the summer of 1941. Tactically it was that front which Czechoslovakia had tried to form in the tenacious process of its own defence in 1938.