IN THE SHADOW OF MUNICH

British Policy towards Czechoslovakia from the Endorsement to the Renunciation of the Munich Agreement (1938–1942)

VÍT SMETANA

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Aims and methodology

To these days very few topics in Czech history remain as sensitive as the events of September 1938. This book focuses on the processes that ensued and were intrinsically connected with Munich. Great Britain played a significant role in them. It can be said that never has the Czech or Czechoslovak history been so much entangled with the British one as in the period between Munich and the end of the Second World War. Indeed, for five years free Czechoslovakia found refuge in Britain. At the same time very few topics in Czech *historiography* have been so systematically distorted by most of the previous writing as British policy towards Czechoslovakia during the period. Numerous myths and stereotypes about British perfidy, built on the British part in Munich and alleged Great Powers' deal on the spheres of influence (in its extreme case reached at the Yalta Conference in February 1945[1]), are so deeply rooted that they often serve as an automatic explanation of every single step that the British made and that at the same time did not meet with a complete agreement on the Czechoslovak part. 'Munich policy' and 'spheres of influence' are thus until now the two principal terms labelling British policy during World War II in by no means a negligible part of Czech historiography. Although Western historians dealing with British foreign policy or Great Power diplomacy of the late 1930s and early 1940s are usually free from this sort of prejudices, they often approach the topic with just a limited knowledge of Czechoslovak realities, which again often results in a distorted picture of the relationship between Czechoslovakia on the one hand and Great Britain on the other hand.

1) On this topic see: Smetana, Vít, Sféry vlivu a Československo: oběť, nebo spoluarchitekt? [Spheres of influence and Czechoslovakia: victim or co-architect], In: *Československo na rozhraní dvou epoch nesvobody*, eds. Z. Kokošková – J. Kocian – S. Kokoška, Praha, Národní archiv – Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR 2005, pp. 58–65.

I have been researching British primary sources, both archival and edited ones, for more than a decade. First I focused on Anglo-Soviet relations in the period of the Nazi-Soviet co-operation, later on the Anglo-Czechoslovak relationship from Munich to the Communist takeover in 1948. This research has only rarely confirmed what I read before about the period in most of the Czech books. Thus, in my historical writing I have so far striven to dispel those frequent legends and stereotyping surrounding this era and have offered alternative explanations of several contentious events and episodes, whether it was the question of the Munich guarantee in 1938–1939, the 'Czech gold scandal' in the spring of 1939, the Anglo-German financial negotiations about the Czechoslovak deposits in London in the summer of that year, the repercussions of Munich in foreign policy negotiations during the Second World War, British help for the resistance movement in Czechoslovakia at the end of the war, or, more generally, the mutual relationship between Beneš and the British officials throughout the war.[2] This book is my first attempt to out-root hitherto prevailing stereotypes and pre-conceived views entirely in a larger text that systematically covers a longer period.

Both the chronological and the thematic span, however, have certain limits. My focus is restricted to the period from Munich to its renunciation by the British government in 1942. The reason is practical: the close and in some respects intimate nature of the Anglo-Czechoslovak relationship resulted, amongst other things, in an enormous quantity of

2) Smetana, Vít, Británie a československé zlato. 'Case study' britského appeasementu? [Great Britain and the Czechoslovak gold: A case study of British appeasement?], *Soudobé dějiny* [Contemporary history], Prague, Vol. 8, 2001, No. 4, pp. 621–658; Idem, Nevyřízené účty. Problém československých aktiv v britských bankách a snahy britské administrativy o jeho řešení po 15. březnu 1939 [Accounts to be dealt with. The problem of Czechoslovak assets in British banks and British Government's attempts at its settlement after 15 March 1939], *Český časopis historický* [Czech historical journal], Prague, Vol. 102, 2004, No. 3, pp. 521–551; Idem, Ozvěny Mnichova v zahraničněpolitických jednáních za 2. světové války [The echoes of Munich in foreign policy negotiations during World War II], In: *Mnichovská dohoda. Cesta k destrukci demokracie v Evropě* [Munich agreement. The way to destruction of democracy in Europe], ed. J. Němeček, Praha, Karolinum 2004, pp. 145–163; Idem, Mise Plukovníka Perkinse v kontextu britské politiky vůči Československu a pomoci jeho odbojovému hnutí na sklonku 2. světové války [Colonel Perkins' mission in the context of British policy towards Czechoslovakia and help for its resistance movement towards the end of the Second World War], *Historie a vojenství* [History and military], Prague, Vol. 50, 2001, No. 3, pp. 692–736; Idem, Beneš a Britové za druhé světové války [Beneš and the British during the Second World War], In: *Na pozvání Masarykova ústavu* [At the invitation of The Masaryk Institute], Prague, Masarykův ústav AV ČR 2004, pp. 73–86.

documentation on various important affairs. I decided to process and analyse the relevant material carefully and cover just a shorter period of time, rather than to produce a superficial essay based on a fragmentary documentation.

There are also several limitations with respect to the chosen topic. The book centres on political, economic and strategic issues present in the Anglo-Czechoslovak relationship. I did not for example follow in detail the ups and downs of the mutual military co-operation, though it also provides an important background. The common thread of the topics to which the book pays attention can be found in the consequences, repercussions and 'undoing' of Munich.

Although my interest lies in the Anglo-Czechoslovak relationship, the main focus of the book is on British policy. The reason is connected with the chosen methodology. This is a study in *international history*. Some authors point out – and I agree – that this discipline 'has superseded the old specialisation of diplomatic history by paying far more attention to the non-governmental forces which cross boundaries and in many respects shape the crucial domestic environment of foreign policy'.[3] Indeed, as long as 35 years ago John Lewis Gaddis postulated the assumption 'that foreign policy is the product of external and internal influences, as perceived by officials responsible for its formulation.[4] To achieve this, it is necessary to examine 'traditional' sources, as well as parliamentary debates and, at least to some degree, also contemporary press. Thus the domestic dimension of foreign policy, the influence of intellectuals and of public opinion, as well as of such phenomena as psychological prejudices or feelings of guilt or injustice (such as Munich in the case of my topic), offers much fuller picture of this subject.

The reason for focusing primarily on British policy is twofold. Firstly, one of the principal points of my interest is the process of change of British foreign policy in 1939 and the way it influenced British dealings with Czechoslovakia. At that time, however, there was no partner on the Czechoslovak side as the exile representation abroad only started to

3) Hill, Christopher, *Cabinet Decisions on Foreign Policy. The British Experience. October 1938 – June 1941*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 4. More specifically his study History and International Relations, In: Steve Smith (ed.), *International Relations: British and American Perspectives*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1985.

4) Gaddis, John Lewis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941–1947*, 2nd edition (first published in 1972), New York, Columbia University Press 2000, Preface from May 1971 – p. xiv.

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emerge in late summer of 1939. Secondly, I have not had the ambition to analyse the methods whereby Czechoslovak foreign policy was being enacted in particular stages between 1938 and 1942. It would demand a separate study to cover systematically the process of this dramatic change. However, it is clear that from 1940 onwards Edvard Beneš together with a small bunch of his collaborators dominated the foreign policy field, while the government and the State Council entered it merely occasionally. Nevertheless, the Czechoslovak role is certainly not neglected. On the contrary, I pay attention especially to the resonance of British policy amongst Czechoslovak politicians in exile.

Central to this book is to find out the impact of crucial Czechoslovak events upon important British decisions. More generally: to what extent did Czechoslovakia matter in British foreign policy throughout the period? And was there any 'policy' towards this country at all? According to all the evidence that I have gathered, the answer to the last question is in the affirmative. However, this policy was certainly influenced or even determined by far more important considerations and self-reflections, as was the case in British policy towards *all* minor Allies. Besides the apparently decisive framework of the prospect of war and that of the policy towards the other Great Powers, British foreign policy of the period was generally conditioned by imperial considerations and also by respect towards the position of the Dominions, which influenced the process of British foreign policy decision-making in the specific case of Czechoslovakia to a remarkable extent.

Any historian dealing with British policy towards Central Europe during World War II sooner or later finds out that Czechoslovakia from time to time emerged as a problem for British foreign policy, and then allegedly disappeared, at least from the agenda of top decision-making bodies. It was partly caused by the fact that His Majesty's Government was reactive rather than proactive in its policy towards Czechoslovakia throughout the period. Its policy of no definitive commitments before the end of war, as far as the post-war shape of Central Europe and its frontiers were concerned, naturally clashed with the detailed plans of Czechoslovak exile representatives, with Edvard Beneš at their head. However, the quantity and nature of problems connected with Czechoslovakia differed decisively from those associated with its northern Slavonic neighbour. Therefore the 'Czechoslovak story' serves as comparison with the case of Poles and their government in exile.