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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And my loving memories go to my parents who, sadly and tragically, died too young to see much of not only my academic progress.

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.

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.

Various players dominated British policy towards Czechoslovakia during those 5 years, thus influencing and sometimes even changing the whole course of policy. It was, naturally, the Cabinet that adopted fundamental decisions on foreign policy. But its course was influenced by various governmental bodies, amongst which the Foreign Office (with the key position of its Central Department dealing with the Czechoslovak agenda – apart from eleven other countries including Poland and Germany) played the prominent role. Its officials were running everyday policy *vis-à-vis* Czechoslovakia at the time when no governmental directives were available or were already getting out of date and ministerial attention was focused elsewhere. These officials prepared materials for the Foreign Secretary and Cabinet, thus having crucial upward influence on governmental decisions. It is therefore essential to find out what drove officials to adopt the decisions they did, against what background, tendencies, experience or even prejudices these people operated. Was there not anything like a bureaucratic changelessness that influenced the process and quality of their decision-making? On the other hand, Foreign Office officials often proved to be much more circumspect in their foreign policy expectations than the 'foreign policy executive'[5] or other Cabinet ministers. But their ability to imprint their ideas in actual policy varied. From all this is clear that an insight into the Foreign Office workshop was inevitable. Likewise, I asses the influence of the other relevant governmental departments.

My specific focus is set into a broader framework. The most obvious one is the general context of British foreign policy during the period of change from appeasement to participation in the anti-Hitler coalition. I am trying to find out whether there were any threads of continuity in the conduct of British foreign policy during this period. The 'uneasy relationship between expediency and morality' in the case of the Baltic States and British policy towards the Soviet Union has already been identified.[6] Nonetheless, of all relations with the other Great Powers the policy towards the Soviet Union was naturally important with respect to the minor allies in Central and Eastern Europe and it deserves to be treated as such. As I have indicated, a comparison with British policy towards these countries (Poland above all) is indispensable. These as-

5) Foreign policy executive compounds of the Prime Minister and his Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. See Hill, *Cabinet Decisions on Foreign Policy*, p. XVIII.
6) See Child, Victoria, *British Policy towards the Soviet Union 1939–42 with special reference to the Baltic States*, unpublished D.Phil Thesis, Oxford, Trinity Term 1994, p. 3.

pects are at least in some cases compared with the U.S. policy, the other important determinant of British foreign policy.

All this is necessarily described against two main settings. One is the Czechoslovak history of the period, especially the history of the exile representation in London and its activities. Firstly, the British themselves conditioned recognition of the Czechoslovak government in exile by settling internal disputes among various groups, by incorporating Slovak representatives, the Sudeten German ones, etc. Secondly, as time went by, the British merely responded to Beneš's initiatives and demands. The origins of and reasons for these initiatives form a part of this narrative. The interactive approach to the topic has been inevitable, and this is also true for my archival research. The second main setting consists of Czechoslovak relations with other countries, especially with Poland and the Soviet Union. Such a framework provided me with an opportunity to describe the role played by the British in the origins and beginnings of the gradual Czechoslovak drift into the Soviet orbit.

Many Czech historians still approach these topics with preconceptions and prejudices, often finding their 'guilty men'. Indeed, though many decades have passed, it is difficult to look at Munich and the ensuing events entirely neutrally, despite all rationalisations. It has been, of course, my intention to avoid any recriminations, to resist condemning those 'responsible' for the fatal failures of the period, unless such arguments are fully supported by documentary evidence. The principal aim of the book is to reconstruct events as well as it is feasible according to the available sources, and to describe the modalities and causes of their actors' deeds as objectively as possible.

Bibliographical essay

Secondary sources

To start with western historiography, the interest of British and most other historians in Czechoslovak matters usually ends with the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia on 15 March 1939.[7] From mid-1930s up to

7) Some leading historians are not even very much certain about the date. While Donald Cameron Watt writes about 'March 13, 1939', Anita Prażmowska points out 'the German occupation of Prague on 14 March and the creation of the German protectorate in Slovakia a few days later', which is a remarkable accumulation of mistakes in one single sentence. Cf. Watt, Donald Cameron, *How War Came*, p. 141; Prażmowska, Anita J., *Britain and Poland 1939–1943. The Betrayed Ally*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1995, p. 31.

that date Czechoslovakia enters European history. Then the Czechoslovak story vanishes from books about the Great Powers' diplomacy, usually re-emerging just as an example of the communist perfidy and shrewdness in February 1948. This situation is completely different from that of Poland that represented one of major problems of wartime relations among the Big Three.[8]

There are only a few relevant secondary sources concerning this particular topic. The only scholarly attempt to cover the whole period from Munich to February 1948, written by Mark Cornwall, is just 21 pages long and starts the story of a 'special relationship' as early as in 1930. However, it is a well-thought-out essay contending that by 1939 Czechoslovakia secured 'a unique and sensitive place in evolution of British appeasement' while during the war the British link resumed a special significance for the Czechs and Slovaks. The author concludes that the 'special relationship' between Britain and Czechoslovakia was something of a 'brief encounter', conditioned by the international situation and geographical position of Czechoslovakia.[9]

Another historical work that has so far attempted to cover British policy towards Czechoslovakia is a book written by Martin David Brown.[10] His text is highly readable and comprehensive, but it also suffers from several liabilities. He sets the story of British dealings with the Czechoslovak democrats into the context of western historiography. Yet, I cannot agree with his labeling of many titles as 'Cold War' literature. By the same token, he did not get acquainted with a greater part of relevant Czech literature on the topic (although he included a number of largely irrelevant titles dealing with older periods into his bibliography). The very fact that as archival sources he used merely British documentation (mostly deposited in the Public Record Office – The National Archives) necessarily narrows his perspective. When reading his book at some points I regretted that he did not apply the same

8) See e.g. the otherwise brilliant post-revisionist book by John Lewis Gaddis about the U.S. road to the Cold War where Czechoslovakia is mentioned just twice, in both cases in connection with the February coup, while Poland represents one of the key issues: Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*.

9) Cornwall, Mark, The Rise and Fall of a 'Special Relationship'?: Britain and Czechoslovakia, 1930–1948, In: *What difference Did the War Make?*, eds. B. Brivati – H. Jones, Leicester, Leicester University Press 1993, pp. 130–150.

10) Brown, Martin David, *Dealing with Democrats. The British Foreign Office and the Czechoslovak Émigrés in Great Britain, 1939 to 1945*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang 2006.

critical approach to the Czech (published) sources and literature as he did in the case of British sources and historiography. This applies especially to the memoirs by Edvard Beneš. At the same time Brown either ignored or dismissed Czech and Russian sources that shed a peculiar light especially upon Beneš's policy towards the Soviet Union. All this resulted in the author's maximum tolerance and understanding when he writes about Czechoslovak foreign policy and its protagonists, quite in the contrast with some of his overcritical judgments on British foreign policy and the Foreign Office in particular. The relationship between its officials on the one hand and Eden with Churchill on the other hand was more complex and complicated than his often used term 'short-circuiting' seems to suggest. There are numerous factual mistakes in the text and, last but not least, some of Brown's footnotes are 'blind' or in fact do not match with the meaning or location of the actual sources.[11] In spite of all this, however, Brown really deserves a tribute for his attempt to cover this difficult and wide-ranging topic, as well as his important contribution to some subtopics, such as the military co-operation and the special operations to Czechoslovakia.

The remarkable book by Detlef Brandes covers British policy towards Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in 1939–1943.[12] It tackles only very briefly the period between Munich and the outbreak of war, although the subtitle of its Czech edition states something else.[13] However, as I have pointed out elsewhere,[14] the book slightly suffers from being overburdened with facts which are not always relevant to its central theme and sometimes appear at the expense of the author's analysis. Brandes has used enormous quantity of archival documents as well as published sources when working on his book. In comparison with the possibilities that Detlef Brandes had in the mid-1980s, we now have access to other important sets of documents, whether it is the SOE files in London, wide spectrum of Russian sources and, of course, archival

11) For further details see my book review in *Soudobé dějiny* [Contemporary history] – forthcoming.
12) Brandes, Detlef, *Großbritannien und seine osteuropäischen Allierten 1939–1943. Die Regierungen Polens, der Tschechoslowakei und Jugoslawiens im Londoner Exil vom Kriegsausbruch bis zur Konferenz von Teheran*, München, R. Oldenbourg Verlag 1988.
13) *Exil v Londýně 1939–1943. Velká Británie a její spojenci Československo, Polsko a Jugoslávie mezi Mnichovem* [sic!] *a Teheránem*, Praha, Karolinum 2003.
14) Smetana, Vít, Kniha, o které se hovoří [A book which is being discussed], *Dějiny a současnost* [History and present], Vol. 26, 2004, No. 2, p. 57.

sources in Prague. Polish historian Radosław Żurawski vel Grajewski has also recently addressed certain stages of the British policy towards Czechoslovakia during World War II.[15] However, he chose a peculiar method of analysing this policy purely from Czech archival sources and ignored the British ones altogether. I really wonder about the reasons for such an approach, more than a decade after the fall of the communist regimes in East-Central Europe and with wide possibilities for doing research in British archives. It goes without saying that the absence of relevant sources only results in an unbalanced perspective of his articles.

Hana Velecká has dealt with the topic of British assistance to refugees from Czechoslovakia in 1939, as well as with British policy towards Czechoslovakia between March 15 and the outbreak of war.[16] David Blaazer, an Australian researcher, has also written an article about the transfer of the Czechoslovak gold to Germany in 1939.[17] However, the text distinguishes itself by its complete disregard for other than English-written historiography (no matter whether or not English summaries are available on the internet). Thus he has not added anything new to the discussion and his article is in itself an essay in discovering of what has already been discovered.

We can find the account of the slow recognition of the Czechoslovak

15) Żurawski vel Grajewski, Radosław, Starania dyplomacji czechosłowackiej o cofnięcie uznania rządu brytyjskiego dla umowy monachijskiej (sierpień 1941 – sierpień 1942 r.) [Efforts of the Czechoslovak diplomacy to undo the British consent with the Munich Agreement (August 1941 – August 1942)], In: *Czechosłowacja w stosunkach międzynarodowych w pierwszej połowie XX wieku* [Czechoslovakia in international relations in the first half of the 20th century], A. M. Brzeziński (ed.), Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Naukowe 2003, pp. 69–128. Żurawski vel Grajewski, Radosław, Z historii stosunków brytyjsko-czechoslowackich w okrsie II wojny światowej (lipiec 1940 – lipiec 1941) [From the history of British-Czechoslovak relations in the course of World War II (July 1940 – July 1941), In: *Z polityki zagranicznej Wielkiej Brytanii w I połowie XX wieku* [From British foreign policy in the first half of the 20th century], A. M. Brzeziński (ed.), Łódź, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego 2002, pp. 102–127.

16) Velecká, Hana, Britská pomoc uprchlíkům z Československa od okupace do vypuknutí války v roce 1939 [British assistance to Czechoslovak refugees, from the German occupation till the outbreak of war in 1939], *Soudobé dějiny* [Contemporary history], Prague, Vol. 8, 2001, No. 4, pp. 659–691; Idem, Agónie appeasementu. Britská politika a rozbití Československa 15. 3.–31. 8. 1939 [The agony of appeasement. British policy and the break-up of Czechoslovakia 15. 3.–31. 8. 1939], *Český časopis historický* [Czech historical journal], Prague, Vol. 99, 2001, No. 4, pp. 788–822.

17) Blaazer, David, Finance and the End of Appeasement: The Bank of England, the National Government and the Czech Gold, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 40, 2005, No. 1, pp. 25–39.