

# MUNICH IN PERSPECTIVE

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TEN years ago, Britain's Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, came back from Munich and said to a cheering London crowd: "My good friends: this is the second time in our history that there has come from Germany to Downing Street peace with honour. I believe it is peace in our time." But the first time Disraeli really brought a peace with honour, which was to last for more than a generation. Now it was a peace with shame, and it was to last only eleven months.

Ever since, the battle has raged between the Munichites and the anti-Munichites. The former no longer consider Chamberlain "the greatest European statesman of this or any time," as they hailed him in 1938, but they still vigorously defend the betrayal of Czechoslovakia. They believe that Munich bought precious breathing-space and that a war in 1938 would have ended in disaster. The case of the anti-Munichites, already strong in 1938, has grown stronger with every post-war revelation, and they have been many. Thus the debate is as heated as ever, and there is as yet no end to it in sight. Perhaps there never will be, because, as one of the protagonists of this great European drama, the French Ambassador in Berlin, M. Francois-Poncet, said: "There is no certain means of ascertaining what would have happened if what happened had not happened."

Nevertheless we now know much more than a few years ago, and we can try to answer the two questions on which the verdict on Munich must depend. Firstly, would Hitler have gone to war had France and Britain stood firm? And secondly, had the crisis led to war, would it have been better or worse for the Western democracies to start the shooting in 1938 instead of 1939?

## II

While it would be preposterous to affirm with absolute certainty that Hitler was bluffing and that a strong stand by Britain and France would have called his bluff, the odds are that it would have been impossible for him to go to war had the democracies chosen to fight.

What are the facts? First of all let Hitler speak for himself. On 18 June, 1938, the Fuehrer issued a directive for his

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armed forces in which he said: "I shall decide to take action against Czechoslovakia only if I am firmly convinced, as in the case of the occupation of the demilitarized zone and the entry into Austria, that France will not march and, therefore, Britain will not intervene."<sup>1</sup> It might be said that these assurances were not quite sincere, but meant only to disarm the generals, who strongly opposed any war adventure at that time. Unfortunately it was easy for Hitler to give these assurances, because he had very good reasons to believe that France and Britain would not go to war in defence of Czechoslovakia. His famous intuition was not necessary on this occasion: every bit of information from Paris and London indicated that there was no fight in the Western democracies.

The least one can say is that, had Britain and France stood firm, Hitler would have hesitated. Perhaps he might have had another brainstorm and made up his mind to fight. In any case, however, the strong forces in favour of peace, which still existed in Germany, would have had a chance to restrain him.

### III

There is by now little doubt that in 1938 there was a powerful group of German officers resolutely opposed to war and determined to prevent it by every possible means. They were not inspired by love of peace—far from it—but they knew Germany's inferiority at that time and, believing that Britain and France would march, considered that Germany was bound to lose. As General Jodl put it in his diary on 30 May: "The whole contrast has once more become acute between the Fuehrer's intuition that we must do it this year and the opinion in the Army that it is not yet possible, as most certainly the Western powers will interfere and we are not yet equal to them."<sup>2</sup>

How far would the generals have gone to prevent war? Franz Halder, a former general of the German Army and a leader of the opposition, has affirmed that an attempt to overthrow Hitler by force was prevented at the last moment by Mr. Chamberlain's visit to Berchtesgaden on 15 September. On that day a group of conspirators met at Halder's flat in Berlin to make final arrangements. A Panzer division was to occupy the Reich Chancellery. The Police President of Berlin participated in the plot and intended to arrest Hitler on his

<sup>1</sup> Peter de Mendelssohn. *The Nuremberg Documents* (London, 1949), p. 66.  
<sup>2</sup> Mendelssohn, *op. cit.*, P. 60.

return from the Nuremberg Party Rally. Then they would have issued a proclamation declaring that the Fuehrer was leading Germany to a disastrous war and that it was the generals' duty to stop him. The meeting was still on when the radio flashed the news of the British Prime Minister's flight to Berchtesgaden. The whole situation was changed, both materially and morally. Materially, because Hitler was not coming to Berlin but going to Berchtesgaden instead; and psychologically, for, while it was possible to arrest a man madly aiming at war, it was very difficult indeed to do so when he was negotiating a peaceful settlement.

Of course, General Halder cannot prove his allegations, and most of the other plotters are dead. But there is no reason to dismiss his story as mere propaganda. For there was, after all, the plot of 20 July, 1944, and the men associated with and executed for it were the same who appear in Halder's story: Generals von Witzleben; Beck; Otto von Stuelpnagel; Graf Brockdorf, Commander of the Potsdam Garrison; and Graf Helldorf, Police President of Berlin.

Furthermore there is contemporary corroboration that there were at least rumours of such a plot in September, 1938; they were mentioned in the British press. Even more important is the fact that some of the German generals, including even General Keitel, subservient to Hitler as he was, appealed to London for a strong stand against Hitler, so as to restrain him from war. On 16 September, the day after Mr. Chamberlain's flight to Berchtesgaden, a member of his cabinet, Lord Lloyd, came to Paris and told the French Commander-in-Chief, General Gamelin, that General Keitel, whom he knew personally, had let him know through a reliable intermediary: Hitler has decided to attack Czechoslovakia. We, the leaders of the Reichswehr, have done everything we could to prevent it. There is only one way to avoid it: England must make a resolute stand. If he knows that England will be on France's side, it will stop him."<sup>3</sup> Gamelin had some doubts, which were justifiable as far as Keitel was concerned. But with regard to many other German generals no doubts are possible. They were convinced that Britain and France would fight, and Munich came as a big blow to them.

Munich's most tragic aspect was perhaps the fact that seemed to prove the infallibility of Hitler's intuition. All

<sup>3</sup> General M. G. Gamelin, *Servir Les Armies Francaises de 1940* (Paris, 1946) 11, 348-9.

those who said again and again that the democracies would fight were now confounded and powerless. Hitler was once more proved right. Jodl was fully entitled to note in his diary: "The Munich Pact is signed . . . The genius of the Fuehrer and his determination not to shun even a world war have again won the victory without the use of force. There remains the hope that the incredulous, the weak and the doubtful have by now been and will remain converted."<sup>4</sup>

The impact on the generals and on Hitler was tremendous. It can be said, too, that by capitulating at Munich Chamberlain and Daladier made the war inevitable in the near future. For the following year, when at last they made up their minds that they could not go on with the policy of appeasement, Hitler would not believe them until it was too late. He said to his generals in August, 1939, a few days before the attack on Poland: "Our enemies are little worms. I saw them at Munich!"

It is the supreme curse of a policy of appeasement that it is so terribly difficult to stop it. The other fellow, who by blackmail and the threat of war has again and again obtained bloodless victories, believes that he can go on. When Britain and France decided in 1939 to abandon this policy and fight Hitler next time he committed an aggression, they should at least have changed their leaders. Otherwise how could they hope to convince Hitler that they now meant business?

#### IV

But supposing that Hitler would not retreat and that there had been war in 1938, what then? Would the prospects for Germany's adversaries have been better or worse than a year later?

The Munichites would like us to believe that by abandoning Czechoslovakia the democracies were buying time. They do not pretend that this was the idea from the very beginning. At Munich Chamberlain certainly did not merely try to delay the war and gain some breathing-space; he firmly hoped to assure lasting peace. When the war came, the appeasers, however, had to find another justification for their policy.

The most energetic and least repentant among them, the former French Foreign Minister, Bonnet, now defending his policy from his exile in Switzerland, affirms that Czechoslovakia would have fallen quickly, that the events of 1940

<sup>4</sup> Mendelssohn, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-6

in the West would have come much sooner, that France would have been occupied and Britain probably forced to capitulate. For with the war coming a year earlier the Battle of Britain would also have started sooner, and then the R.A.F. could not have repelled the German onslaught, lacking as they still did Spitfires and Hurricanes in any large numbers. This theory, however, cannot stand any serious examination.

While it is true that England and France grew stronger between September, 1938, and September, 1939, there can be no doubt that Germany gained considerably more strength in almost every respect. Here are the facts:

(1) Munich paved the way to the complete absorption of Czechoslovakia by Germany the following spring. Thus in one day Hitler got 1,582 aircraft, 501 anti-aircraft guns, 2,175 light and heavy guns, 469 tanks, and a vast quantity of other arms. This enormous booty considerably changed the balance of power in Europe.

(2) Germany took over the powerful Czech armament industry in full working order. Besides Czechoslovakia this industry helped to arm many other countries, especially in the Balkans, which now became more dependent than ever on Germany. Before the war Czechoslovak armament exports represented 24.6 per cent of the world total. The Skoda works alone produced in the twelve months after Munich almost as much as all the British arms factories together.

(3) In 1938 the German Army would have had to force its way through the strong Czech fortifications, for which the German General Staff had a healthy respect. General Keitel considered them almost equal to the Maginot Line. Because of these mountain fortifications, the war against Czechoslovakia would have been no easier than that a year later against Poland, which had a stronger army but no fortifications and no mountains.

(4) The Allies lost the Czech Army, which, fully mobilized, was 36 divisions strong.

(5) The German Western Wall, or Siegfried Line, was far from being ready in 1938. During a staff conference with Hitler on 10 August, General Wietersheim declared that "the Western fortifications can only be held for three weeks." In a rage Hitler shouted that they could be held for three years, but the opinion of the generals seems more realistic. A year later the work on these fortifications was much advanced.

(6) Hitler could only spare 5 divisions to hold the Western Wall against the French Army. A year later he again denuded the front in the West to throw almost the whole of his army against Poland, but nevertheless he left 14 divisions to defend the now much stronger line of fortifications.

(7) The formidable tank forces that overran Poland in 1939 and France in 1940 did not exist in 1938. Generally speaking, the German Army grew stronger every month, while the French was stationary.

Thus in every respect but one the situation was more favourable to the Allies in 1938 than in 1939. The one exception was in the air. Britain desperately needed time to replace her obsolete fighters with modern types. The British factories had only just started turning out the Spitfires and Hurricanes; without which the Battle of Britain could not have been won. A year later the position was much improved. Would a war in 1938, however, have meant that the Battle of Britain would have taken place in 1939 instead of 1940? As we have just seen, the aspects of the war on land were so much more favourable in 1938 that in all probability Germany might not have been ready in a year's time for the attack on Britain.

## V

The attitude of Poland, which in 1938 took up a position against Czechoslovakia and a year later fought Germany, is sometimes quoted by the Munichites in support of their case against war in 1938. But here, too, everything depended on the attitude of France and Britain. Like Hitler, the Polish Foreign Minister, Colonel Beck, was acting upon the conviction that the Western democracies would not fight in defence of Czechoslovakia. Accordingly, he tried to make the best of a bad bargain. It was not, however, until Chamberlain flew to Berchtesgaden that Poland advanced her claims on the Teschen district and, had the Western democracies decided for resistance, Poland would most certainly have avoided getting involved in a conflict with the Czechs and would sooner or later have joined the Allies.

Hitler knew this better than anybody else, and the fact that Poland advanced claims parallel to his own did not mislead him. When issuing his directives for "Case Green," as the operation against Czechoslovakia was called, he ordered on 7 July that in case of a penetration by Poland the Germans

must hold the eastern fortifications and East Prussia, using the Frontier Guards and other formations, until the conclusion of "Green" once more gave them freedom of movement. The French, too, although sharply critical of the Polish attitude, strongly hoped that should it come to war Poland would finally join the Allies.

In any case, the situation in 1938 was that there existed on the eastern frontier of Germany an unconquered Poland, which Germany had to watch closely, taking into account a possible attack by her 39 divisions, and a strongly fortified Czechoslovakia with 21 mobilized and 16 reserve divisions against Germany's 40. A year later only Poland remained against a much stronger Germany Army, able to turn 51 divisions against her, including all the armoured and mechanized ones, now numbering 14. What a difference!

## VI

We have as yet taken no account of the attitude of Russia. What would she have done in case of war? Was she willing and able to help Czechoslovakia? The anti-Munichites reply that she was, while the Munichites believe that, although she was perhaps willing, she was not in a position to give any assistance because of Poland's and Rumania's refusal to permit the transit of Russian troops through their territory. Both are perhaps wrong.

The truth is that, while promising help to the Czechs and expressing willingness to fight the Germans, Russia was really interested only in bringing about a war between Germany and the Western democracies so that they should both bleed white and leave her the strong arbiter of Europe. She first tried to achieve this a year earlier in Spain, and was only to be successful the following year. The methods employed were in every case different, but the same aim was always there.

Today, after so many countries of Eastern Europe have earned what it means to be "liberated" by Russia, nobody could be surprised that Moscow's offers of help were met with so much suspicion. Even among the Czechs, who were traditionally friendly towards Russia, there were many misgivings. The common fears were expressed by General Syrový, Inspector-General of the Army, who said during the crisis to an English visitor: "We shall fight the Germans either alone,

or with you and the French, but we don't want the Russians in here. We should never get them out."<sup>5</sup> The Poles, too, had very good reasons to fear that if they permitted the transit of Russian troops through Poland they would never get them out again; it had happened before in Polish history, and the events of the following years proved how great was this danger. The same was true of Rumania.

Privately some Russians—for instance the Soviet Military Attache in Paris—did not conceal that what they really intended was to attack Poland. Once installed in Eastern Poland which they annexed the following year in collaboration with Hitler, they would probably have quietly awaited the outcome of the war in the West.

What Czechoslovakia needed was not Soviet troops anyway; the real problem was to get help in the air. Russia was perfectly able to provide that, in spite of the refusal of Poland and Rumania to let Soviet armies through. For early in September the Rumanians gave the French a hint that they would close their eyes to any violation of their air frontiers by Russian Planes. The Rumanian Foreign Minister, Comnene, told the French Ambassador: "At 9,000 feet nobody can do anything about it."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, he stressed how bad the Rumanian anti-aircraft artillery was!

The Russians knew from the French of Rumania's attitude. They preferred, however, to ignore it and insisted on the transit of troops, which was impossible anyway because of the completely inadequate rail communications between Russia and Czechoslovakia across Rumania. Thus Russia's willingness to go to war with Germany must be considered rather doubtful.

But whatever doubts exist about Russia's possible attitude in case of a war in 1938, the situation was infinitely better than that of a year later, when the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact gave Hitler the certitude of Soviet neutrality and friendship. In 1938 Hitler had no guarantee of this kind; quite the contrary, he had to, and indeed did, expect Russia's intervention on the side of the Allies. Once more, what a colossal difference that would have made!

<sup>5</sup> John A. Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich Prologue to Tragedy* (London, 1948) p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> In a letter from Adrien Thierry, former French Ambassador in Rumania, to the editor of *Le Monde*, 18 November 1947.



## VII

How then can anybody believe that Munich bought precious breathing-space? After a year had passed, Britain and France found themselves in a much worse position than in September, 1938. The chance of stopping Hitler without a terrible war was no more, and all opposition that may have existed to the bloodthirsty dictator in 1938 had been silenced by the Fuehrer's peaceful triumph. And the war itself was to be fought under much more unfavourable conditions.

It would be unjust to put all the blame for this tragic failure on the men of Munich: Chamberlain, Daladier, and Bonnet—for many others share the responsibility with them. They were all guilty of refusal to face the fact that often the only way to prevent war is to run the risk of it.

Among the opportunities of preventing the second world war which were lost through the policy of appeasement, Munich was not the greatest; there were at least two much better ones in 1933 or in 1936, when strong action would almost certainly have brought about Hitler's fall, or, had it come to war, one that would have been won with a minimum of bloodshed. In 1938 the risks were already quite big. Yet there was still a chance of preventing the conflict. Once that was lost nothing remained but a long and terrible struggle. Such is the tragic reward of appeasement.