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Britain and the Sudeten Issue, 1938: The Evolution of a Policy

It was not uncommon at one time for scholars to think of Britain's policy on the Sudeten issue of 1938 as singularly defeatist.¹ Some even felt that she successfully conspired to take a reluctant France along with her.² One got the distinct impression of a steely-eyed Chamberlain, as assured of his environment as of himself, leading the confused French and the pitiable Czechs on the road to surrender.³ With the opening of the archives in the 1960s, a quiet but definite trend towards reassessing various aspects of 'appeasement' set in.⁴ Amongst other things, the above characterization of British policy was objected to but so far as is known, not systematically re-examined. This is what the present article sets out to do.

One item comes across rather forcefully as one examines the archives pertaining to the period March-September 1938. It is that Britain's rulers found it difficult to define the situation confronting them. They could not decide what *specific* goals to aim for. There was little in the situation that could be taken for granted and much that was obscure. Indicative of this uncertainty was the disjointed manner in which the March deliberations (specifically those of the all-important Foreign Policy Committee meeting of 18 March 1938) were conducted. An alternative would be suggested, discussed, and dropped; unconnected questions would be introduced and uneasily answered; relevant questions would be left hanging in the air. Another alternative would be picked up, hazily dealt with and then abandoned in favour of the earlier one, now resurrected in a somewhat different garb. The ministers would seldom speak unequivocally and sometimes even contradicted themselves. It was

not that the British ministers were uncertain of their intentions. It was rather that they were uncertain of the intent of the other actors in the drama. What designs did Hitler have on Czechoslovakia? How did Czechoslovakia plan to deal with him? Above all, what would France do? France had a commitment to come to Czechoslovakia's aid should Germany attack her. Would she honour it?

It was primarily this uncertainty over France's commitment to Czechoslovakia that left the British leaders somewhat scared, somewhat bitter, even a little angry. It is in the context of this uncertainty that we should view the development of their thinking over the issue. Five phases can be discerned in this evolution and it is to an examination of these phases that we now turn our attention.

The Deliberative Phase (March 1938)

Czechoslovakia, in 1938, hardly evoked any sympathy, let alone affection, in the British Cabinet. The Foreign Policy Committee, its crucial policy-making organ, did not expend any effort on establishing the *need* to save Czechoslovakia. Meeting on 18 March and then on the 21st, the Committee rather agreed with the view⁵ that Czechoslovakia was a 'highly artificial' creation with no real roots in the past; a politically untenable unit that belonged neither to Eastern Europe nor to the West; a source of ever-present friction in a sensitive area; and certainly not a state whose continuing existence was of vital importance to Britain. Even if the need to save Czechoslovakia could somehow be established, the means to do so did not exist. In a web of uncertainty, the one certain thing was that 'Germany could overrun the whole of Czechoslovakia in less than a week'.⁶ The only result of Britain's intervention in the situation would be to bring upon herself a war the outcome of which could by no means be regarded as assured. Britain's defences were not ready and her one real weapon — a blockade — would lose its effectiveness if Germany enlarged her resource base by expanding eastwards.⁷

Of course, it was by no means certain that Germany wished to annex Czechoslovakia. Hitler's intentions with respect to the latter were largely unclear. If his ambitions were indeed racially based, he might be satisfied with the Sudetenland and the reduction of the

rest of Czechoslovakia to 'a condition of dependent neutrality'.⁸ He might indeed want less, i.e., only autonomy for the Sudeten areas. Then again, he might want something more for, as Chamberlain put it, it was 'rash to forecast what Germany would do'.⁹ In any case, for the moment, Hitler should not be driven into the very obduracy Britain wished to avoid.

Thus, Britain's military unpreparedness (made more unnerving because of her existing commitments) and Hitler's unpredictability (as well as the force of opinion in the country and the Commonwealth) forced the Foreign Policy Committee to reject any kind of commitment to Czechoslovakia. The Foreign Office had presented it with three possible responses to the new situation in the European system.¹⁰ One was a Grand Alliance of anti-German powers. The second was a conditional commitment to France, the commitment applying only if Czechoslovakia undertook a generous and satisfactory programme to meet the Sudeten grievances. The third was not to do anything substantial.

The first possible course was hardly debated. Winston Churchill, its most prominent votary, was indeed rebuffed. The second was discussed and rejected as too risky. Even the limitation of the proposed commitment to a definite time period was not seen as reducing the risk. It was the third option that was chosen, namely, not to do anything but

remind France of what we had often told her in the past, namely that we were not prepared to add in any way to our existing commitments and that therefore she must not count on military assistance from us if she got embroiled with Germany over Czechoslovakia and that she would be well advised to exert her influence at Prague in favour of an accommodation being reached with Germany.¹¹

*Czechoslovakia was, indeed, not the problem. It was the French commitment to her that was.*¹² As Halifax put it, 'Whether we liked it or not, we had to admit the plain fact that we could not in our own interests afford to see France overrun'.¹³ Britain's dilemma, as expressed in Lord Stanley's constant refrain during the March policy deliberations, was: Britain could not abandon France. France could not forsake Czechoslovakia. Britain's fate was, therefore, willy-nilly, bound to that of Czechoslovakia. France was the crucial link. Czechoslovakia could be ignored only if France made it possible.

The policy-makers were unable to determine if the latter would

stay committed to Czechoslovakia. Impelling her to do so, they guessed, would be her belief in herself as a Great Power, her steadfast faith in her army and her irritating habit of taking British military assistance for granted. She had, in Chamberlain's words, 'always relied on the argument that whatever might be the position under the Locarno Treaty, we, in fact, could not afford to see France destroyed and must therefore always come to her aid if attacked by Germany'.¹⁴ At the same time, there was a strong possibility (so felt the British leaders) that France would abandon her Central European ally. With all her faith in her army, France could not ignore the mounting strength of the German defences. More importantly, she could not hide the fact that she was in 'a hopeless position'¹⁵ with regard to air defence, the economy and the domestic political situation. She had too many enemies and no real friends. Her relations with Germany, Italy and Nationalist Spain were bad, and her influence in Central Europe was on the wane.¹⁶ Lastly (such was the FPC rationalization), even her assumption regarding the inevitability of British aid to her was vulnerable. If France took British assistance for granted, why was she constantly pressing her northern neighbour for a formal commitment?¹⁷

Unable to fathom French intentions regarding her commitment to Czechoslovakia and desperate for greater room to manoeuvre, all the British leaders could hope for was that the commitment itself would gradually crumble. The possibility of weaning France away from her Slavic ally would, however, recede if Britain lost the little influence she had over France. As the Prime Minister himself put it, he did not wish 'especially at the present juncture to risk offending France beyond what might be absolutely essential'.¹⁸ France, therefore, had to be reassured, but the reassurance could not be so specific as to amount to a fresh commitment. Not only might this land Britain in difficulties with the Germans, it might make France more recalcitrant. It might then become more difficult to arrange that she should not be called on to fulfil her obligations to Czechoslovakia. Needless to say, such a reassurance precluded a public expression of the real feelings towards Czechoslovakia.

In practice, what this implied was that a necessary vagueness was introduced in the policy announced by Britain to the world. In a statement to the British Parliament on 24 March 1938, Chamberlain took no clear stand on any aspect of the Sudeten issue.¹⁹ There was a fair degree of reassurance to the French, but not such as to alienate the Germans or embolden the Czechs. The

Germans were informed that Britain would support some redress of their grievances, but not in terms that would commit her. The world, especially France and Germany, was to be left guessing as to what the British attitude in the matter would be. It was hoped that this guessing, by itself, would have a restraining effect upon both France and Germany.

In the immediate aftermath of the Austrian events, then, the British government refused to intervene actively in Central Europe. As Chamberlain confessed to the Cabinet, he 'did not feel clear how far they were to go and in what direction'.²⁰ In his Diary, he wrote:

In face of such problems, to be badgered and pressed to come out and give a clear, decided, bold and unmistakable lead... is calculated to vex the man who has to take responsibility for the consequences.²¹

This did not mean, however, that he and his colleagues washed their hands of Czechoslovakia. Because of France, they were unable to. This became apparent when the dust over Austria had settled down.

The Activist Phase (April-May 1938)

April 1938 saw the British leaders manifest a desire to do something constructive to resolve the problem that faced Europe. This marked a new phase in the evolution of Britain's Sudeten policy. Two statements, one by Halifax and the other by Chamberlain, both made at this time, show a spirit that is clearly different from that which dominated the March deliberations of the British Cabinet.

Halifax's statement, made to Ambassador Henderson in Berlin, was clearly activist in tone. 'I do not think,' he wrote, with negotiations leading to a general settlement in mind, 'that we ought to give up the idea of getting on to terms with them (Germans), difficult as it no doubt is. Too much depends on the chance to let it go...'²² If this statement evidenced a belief that the Germans were still amenable to persuasion, the statements by Chamberlain indicated a belief that firmness could be fruitfully employed in this direction. Turning to the COS plea that Staff Conversations with France not take place, Chamberlain felt it somewhat anomalous that Britain should accept obligations and then hesitate to make them good.

The relevant minutes, dated 6 April 1938, run as follows:

He [Chamberlain] could not reconcile the acceptance of such obligations with the frequent rejection of French approaches which only meant that our action would not be decided until the emergency arose. His opinion in this matter had been reinforced by what had happened in Austria. In modern warfare, the aggressor was able to move with such rapidity that there was not time for making plans. He thought, therefore, that all concerned would be easier in their minds if each knew what part the other could play.²³

The last sentence is particularly interesting. If the broad conclusion of the March deliberations had been that Europe should be left guessing as to what the British attitude towards the German challenge generally and the Sudeten issue specifically should be, the April statement of Chamberlain suggested that a clearer delineation of her attitude might be in Britain's interest. Chamberlain, it must be pointed out, did not hold this opinion for long.²⁴ Nevertheless, he had to take recognition of Halifax's argument that

in the immediate future, which can be foreseen in some detail, we shall need to induce in the French a most collaborative disposition — to be precise, in regard to Czechoslovakia in particular if we are to avoid grave dangers in Europe. We shall most certainly not induce this frame of mind in the French if we produce any unnecessarily bad effect upon them with this communication in regard to military co-operation.²⁵

This sensitivity to French feelings was apparent in the crucial Anglo-French Conversations of 28-29 April 1938. Rather than think of these conversations as occasioning a French surrender, one should more accurately think of them as impelling the British towards an activist line over the Sudeten issue. In a sense, it was the British who surrendered to the French. After all, we must remember that the one factor which worried the British political leaders more than any other was the French commitment to Czechoslovakia. Their one constant assumption was that any French participation in a Central European war would inevitably draw Britain in. Their one agonizing desire was to influence the extent and direction of French involvement in Central European politics. As they saw it, unless Britain made this attempt, her fate would rest not in her own hands but in those of an unpredictable neighbour.²⁶

The *apparent* French determination to stick to their commit-

ment, evidenced on the first day of the Conversations,²⁷ could only have increased British fears on this count. The French delegation declared it had no illusions as to Hitler's real objective in Czechoslovakia. He wanted to destroy her. But that was not all. Czechoslovakia would be merely the first step in Hitler's policy of expansion. 'The ambitions of Napoleon,' claimed the French Prime Minister, Daladier, 'were far inferior to the aims of the present Reich.'²⁸ It was for this reason that France regarded her defence treaty with Czechoslovakia as 'vital' and considered 'it must be respected and executed'.²⁹ The attention of the German government should be unambiguously drawn to the point 'beyond which they could not go with impunity'.³⁰

The activist element in this second phase was largely the result of a British attempt to meet the French half-way. The discomfiture over the French connection felt in the first phase was accentuated in the second not only by the fresh evidence of French determination, but also by the enunciation at Karlsbad of the contentious and near-irredentist Sudeten demands. The German minority in Czechoslovakia was becoming bolder, the press in the Reich was becoming more strident and the situation showed signs of slipping away unless something positive was done. An assurance to make Germany respect 'justice and the public law of Europe' was the price that Britain had to pay for a French declaration of intent to make the Czechoslovak government more amenable to the Sudeten demands. Thus, British policy during this phase was aimed at inducing a reasonable attitude in both the Czechs and the Germans. In the policy-makers' view, this involved the following: if the Czechs could be persuaded to meet '60 percent or 70 percent' of the German demands, it behoved the Germans to accept the Czech offer. If, however, they rejected such a compromise and insisted on the full 100 percent of their demands, then there was 'the gravest risk that they could only achieve their object by war...'³¹

The *démarches* at Prague and Berlin that followed the Conversations, with whose drafting Halifax was personally associated, reflected this emphasis on equity. The crux of the *démarche* at Prague lay in the exhortation to the Czech government to make 'a supreme effort to reach a settlement with the representatives of the Sudeten German Party in the interest of Czechoslovakia's survival, as well as of European peace'.³² Not only should negotiations with the Sudeten Germans be started at once — 'Delay,' said Halifax, 'seems to me dangerous'³³ — but they should aim to be as com-

prehensive and as realistic as possible.

The *démarche* at Berlin justified the British interest in the problem on the grounds that it could threaten the peace of Europe if not energetically dealt with. Britain was prepared to intervene in the situation in the belief that she could assist in the attainment of 'an equitable solution'.³⁴ But the German government would have to 'use their influence with the Sudeten Germans in the direction of moderation and to work with His Majesty's Government in promoting a settlement'.³⁵ Halifax also requested the German government to give him an idea of their desiderata. Once they possessed this, 'His Majesty's Government would consider how far they could recommend acceptance by the Czechoslovak Government'.³⁶ It is pertinent that the word 'equitable' appears three times in the seven paragraphs containing the substance of the *démarche*.

The May crisis of 1938, ignored by some traditionalists and regarded as an aberration by others,³⁷ should, in fact, be regarded as the logical culmination of the second phase, marking as it did the highest point to which the British leaders were prepared to go.

The details of the events leading to the crisis do not concern us here. There were incidents in the Sudeten areas, reported movement of troops by Germany and a partial mobilization by the Czechs. These developments were especially unwelcome to a Britain that had expected negotiations between the Czechoslovaks and the Sudeten Germans to start soon. Halifax was also impressed by the threat made by the German Foreign Minister to the British Ambassador, to wit that 'Germany could not sit by and allow Germans to be murdered. . . Germany would not wait much longer and if provocation continued, her 75 millions would act as one man.'³⁸ Simultaneously, in the hope of involving Britain further in the matter, France urged that she warn Germany to stay her hand.³⁹ This was accordingly done.

Sir Neville Henderson, the British Ambassador, was asked to inform the Reich authorities of his government's strenuous efforts to 'promote a peaceful solution of this question'. The Czechs had responded well to the British initiative and it behoved the Germans 'to give this opportunity of favourable development every chance of maturing'. But if the German government did not cooperate and if as a result of this non-cooperation, a conflict arose, then they should be warned that France was bound to intervene and 'in such circumstances His Majesty's Government could not guarantee that they would not be forced by circumstances to become involved

also'.⁴⁰ Originally, this warning was meant to have been used to get the Germans to accept those Czech concessions thought reasonable by the British. It was used, largely at the French behest, in circumstances other than those the Anglo-French Conversations had envisaged. It was never to be used to fulfil its original purpose.⁴¹

The Passive Phase (June-July 1938)

The primary impetus for the shift from the second to the third phase came from the perceived reduction in the probability of threat to Britain's important interests. Here again, it was the French factor that was important. Immediately after the May crisis, France showed herself prepared to forsake her obligations to Czechoslovakia, should the need arise. On 23 May 1938, the British Ambassador in Paris, Sir E. Phipps, wrote of Foreign Minister Bonnet's declaration to him that 'if Czechoslovakia were really unreasonable, the French Government might well declare that France considered herself released from her bond'.⁴²

This was the *first* time the French had ever raised with the British the possibility of not observing their treaty with Czechoslovakia. It was, thus, a crucial declaration.⁴³ It was this treaty, as pointed out earlier, that had been the source of anxiety for the British. It was because of it that the situation in Czechoslovakia had posed a threat to them. With the possibility now opening up of the French being weaned away from Czechoslovakia, thus enabling Britain to escape from the problem rather than frustratingly tackle it, the passivist strand in the British Cabinet's thinking was revived. As Halifax told his ministerial colleagues on 25 May, British policy must develop in the light of the French attitude. The French shakiness made it possible and, in view of the probable impermanence of any Sudeten settlement, indeed desirable for Britain to endeavour 'to obtain a release for the French from their obligations'.⁴⁴ But if Britain hoped France would now be persuaded to exact concessions from Czechoslovakia, she was mistaken. The French game-plan was simple. It was to get Britain more involved in the situation, i.e., exert more pressure on Czechoslovakia so that if France had ultimately to renege on her commitments, the odium would not be attached to her alone. On 31 May, Halifax asked Bonnet to join him in putting the greatest possible pressure on the Czech government. Bonnet agreed — but suggested separate

demands to enable the French representation to be somewhat more severe. When made by the French Minister in Prague, it was anything but severe. The British happened to learn of this and protested. Bonnet thereupon told them that the representation had been made to the Czech Minister in Paris. But when the relevant document was finally obtained by the British, its tone was disappointingly vague. By now it was the end of June and a month of valuable time had been lost. And France had come back to 'square one'.⁴⁵ Regarding the threat to revise the alliance if the Czechs did not deliver the goods, Bonnet had this to say:

Such a threat . . . without justification, would have appeared incompatible with the very spirit of the existing agreements between France and Czechoslovakia, for it would have implied doubt towards the goodwill or even the good faith of the Czech leaders.⁴⁶

A notable example of French refusal to do Britain's bidding concerned the proposal to neutralize Czechoslovakia that Britain's ruling elite, after a period of hesitation, had finally accepted and passed over to the French for consideration. The idea entailed the transformation of Czechoslovakia into another Belgium, free of any defence obligations to other countries without, however, losing the protection that the major powers could bestow upon her. The official French attitude was one of studied indifference. The suggested neutralization was not felt to be the right solution for the moment. It would only make the Germans more voracious and the French public more restive.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Britain did not at this point entirely play the French game. For one thing, the apparent weakening of the French connection reduced pressure to act strongly in Prague. For another, she suffered a natural hesitation to press Czechoslovakia too strongly lest the latter react in an undesirable manner. But most important, she feared that too active an involvement in the Sudeten situation would lead her to pronounce openly upon the various schemes that might come up for examination. Thus, she might be led to back up one scheme or the other. British support for a particular scheme would, in Halifax's words, mean 'some obligation to support Benes if he carried it out'.⁴⁸ Britain could, therefore, set herself on a path of confrontation with the Germans. She would then either have to back out and risk humiliation or carry on and risk war. Neither course was appealing to Halifax or Chamberlain

or to any other members of the British Cabinet, in their passivist state of mind.⁴⁹ With this sort of attitude, it was not surprising that the pattern of British response to the Czech-Sudeten negotiations that stretched over the summer was to give general exhortations to the Czechs on the one hand,⁵⁰ and accept the Czech assurances that they were doing their best on the other. The British leaders preferred to let the Czechs move at their own pace, hoping only that they would be wise enough to adjust this pace to the needs of the situation.⁵¹ It was, thus, natural enough for the British Minister in Prague, Basil Newton, to write late in June that

We are still (officially) unaware of what Sudeten Germany have proposed. . . and though we know views of the Government on the Sudeten proposals, we are also ignorant of what precisely they themselves have in mind to offer.⁵²

If the actual pressure exercised on the Czech government was not overly strong, the pressure exercised on Hitler was far less. In fact, extreme caution now marked Britain's relations with Germany. For instance, in the aftermath of the May crisis, Halifax rejected a Foreign Office suggestion that observers be dispatched to the Sudeten areas with a view to either recommending a solution to the overall problem or investigating frontier incidents. The Foreign Secretary felt that Hitler, smarting over his diplomatic defeat in the May crisis, would not tolerate such an affront to his *amour propre*.⁵³

All in all, Anglo-German contacts during this phase were both infrequent and non-consequential. On 9 July, when the French, somewhat concerned by reports that an increasingly impatient Hitler was contemplating firmer action over the Sudeten issue, suggested through their Ambassador in London that Britain make some *démarche* in Berlin, he was politely turned down.⁵⁴ Britain clearly thought it expedient not to disturb Hitler's summer repose.

The Passive Mediation Phase (July-August 1938)

We have seen, in the previous phase, the conflict between the French desire to tie the British up in the Sudeten issue and the latter's desire to increase the distance between France and her damning commitment. The dispatch of the Runciman mission was in line with the French view, though the French were not directly respon-

sible for Britain's move. What happened was that the negotiations between Czechs and Sudetens, on which Britain had based her hopes, appeared to be grinding to a halt. Reports were also coming in of an increase in military activities within Germany. Of course, France's inability to extricate herself from her dismal affair with Czechoslovakia certainly heightened the danger for Britain — and to that extent the French were responsible (if only indirectly) for the British decision. Britain could have suffered the uncertainty caused by France earlier in the summer. In mid-July, she simply could not allow matters to drift out of control. France, it is true, had finally talked to the Czech government in a stern fashion, but Britain was not aware of what had been said or if aware, felt the French action had come too late in the day. The situation demanded that the lines of communication be kept open between the Czechoslovaks and the Sudeten Germans. It is interesting to note that Bonnet advised the former to accede to Britain's demands that a mediator be invited to Prague. It would be in Czechoslovakia's interest, he said, 'to involve the British as directly as possible in the Sudeten Affair'.⁵⁵

It may be asked why the British did not invite a French mediator to add to the efforts of Runciman. The French had indeed picked someone already — René Brunet, a socialist Deputy and Professor of International Law. Britain obviously felt that Runciman could, perhaps, function better alone, in view of the limited nature of his mission.⁵⁶ Runciman was sent by Halifax not so much to find a solution to the Sudeten problem as to prevent the problem from becoming a crisis. In Runciman's own words, the main aim of his mission was 'to hold the fort'.⁵⁷ In fact, he asked Halifax, in his first letter from Prague, how long he would be required to do this. Halifax, rather optimistically, even seemed to believe that the presence of Runciman in Czechoslovakia might tend to restrain Hitler from sending his troops in. In any case, he informed the Mission Chief that if the situation became intolerable he was merely 'to record the fact with regret and come away'.⁵⁸ Putting blame on either side could merely harm Britain. If blame were attached to the Sudeten Germans, Berlin might protest and loudly accuse the 'mediator' of partiality. If blame were attached to the Czechs, it would unnecessarily build up the German case for a forcible solution. Runciman was clearly told that he should not come out with a plan of his own. Such a plan could only cause embarrassment to the British government since it might be called upon to guarantee it. The manner in which the proposal was presented to the Czechs is an

indication of the British state of mind. The Czechs were asked to 'invite' the mediator, thus giving the world the impression that the proposal emanated from them.⁵⁹

Another possible reason why the British felt disinclined to involve the French in the mediation effort was the need to maintain an aura of impartiality in the eyes of the Germans. As it was, the mediation effort was to be announced without consulting the Germans lest they reject it. Any German irritation would only be compounded if the French were to be involved in that effort as well.⁶⁰ In fact, that peculiar tendency to tread softly where Germany was concerned — so much a feature of the third phase — was a feature of the fourth as well. Halifax dismissed an FO suggestion that a public request (backed by a public demand, if necessary) be made to Germany not to worsen the situation through ostentatious military preparations. When Ewald von Kleist, on his London visit, informed Chamberlain of Hitler's unswerving intention to force his will upon Czechoslovakia, the British Prime Minister refused either to direct an explicit warning to Hitler or to utter words of encouragement to the German moderates. Instead, he publicly summoned Ambassador Henderson from Berlin for consultations. Still later, when under pressure from various sources (amongst them the French),⁶¹ the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Simon) delivered a warning at Lanark, it turned out to be a rehash of Chamberlain's warning of 24 March 1938 — and thus inappropriate to a situation that had developed considerably in the intervening period. The Meeting of Ministers on 30 August decided that no stronger warning was needed.⁶²

The Active Mediation/Retreat Phase (September 1938)

The fifth phase is a little difficult to define. It was on one side a phase of active mediation by Britain. But because Britain was willy-nilly involved in the matter to the extent that she was a near party to the conflict, it must also be regarded as one of tactical retreat. This retreat did not come about easily. It is its agonizing nature that we wish to highlight here.

This retreat was a reaction both to the French factor and to the German threat. When uncertainty on both counts reached an intolerable level, it was time for Britain to act. That is indeed what the French wanted. The first few days of September saw a public

re-affirmation of the French commitment⁶³ along with a flurry of private requests to Britain for an explicit warning to Germany.⁶⁴ The French actions added to the pressure on the British leaders from their own Foreign Office officials for firm action in Berlin. Halifax seriously contemplated the idea of a public warning that went beyond Lanark. Parts of it were to run as follows:

I know something of how the British mind works... They want peace... But British people are a strange folk and might be quickly swept to stern action... We are strengthening our defences. We could give a pretty good account of ourselves... We need not fear war... I have spoken frankly.⁶⁵

According to Sir Horace Wilson, the Chief Industrial Adviser, who culled these phrases from the draft, they amounted to 'threatening' Germany: making 'more explicit' the warnings of 24 March and 21 May.⁶⁶ In any event, the speech was vetoed by Chamberlain⁶⁷ who thought the speech suggested (wrongly, in his opinion) that Czechoslovakia was a cause worth fighting for.⁶⁸ An equally telling comment was made by Halifax himself as he shelved the speech: 'Public speeches are likely to do as much harm as good'.⁶⁹ The idea of a public warning gave way to a private warning to be delivered to Hitler at Nuremberg by the British Ambassador. Instructions were sent to the latter to deliver such a warning. They were countermanded, revived once again and then finally buried. These fluctuations, one must conclude, reflected the government's inability to come to terms with the uncertainty of the times through which it lived. This uncertainty was evident in Chamberlain's lament that

We are daily subjected to a perfect barrage of reports. Many of these reports (and of such authority as to make it impossible to dismiss them as unworthy of attention) declare positively that Hitler has made up his mind to attack Czechoslovakia on some date during this month after the 20th... Against this view, Henderson steadily maintains that Hitler has not made up his mind to violence... with these contradictory views before us we are, at present, proceeding on the basis of the latter and more optimistic forecast.⁷⁰

Of course, French pressure for a meaningful warning to Germany was somewhat weakened by her erratic record on the matter of her commitment to Czechoslovakia. In fact, Ambassador Corbin reported to Quai d'Orsay that he had been told by 'several political personalities' that 'one of the reasons why the British Government experienced such difficulty in reaching a decision was

because it was not yet quite sure of the likely attitude of the French Government in the event of war'.⁷¹ In any event the matter was unambiguously resolved on 13 September 1938. The French leaders, especially Bonnet, importuned the British to prevent them from being dragged into what they deemed would be a disastrous war.

The occasion was, as is well known, Hitler's speech at the Nuremberg Rally on 12 September and the events it inspired. For some time, the conviction had grown among the British leaders that Runciman could not possibly prevent a crisis from occurring. Something more would have to be done. The reluctance to support a particular plan seemed increasingly irrelevant in this context. But what plan could satisfy Hitler? Both the British and the French felt that Hitler would give his answer at Nuremberg. He did. He wanted self-determination for the Sudeten Germans.⁷² Hitler's speech sent a shock wave through Czechoslovakia. The Czech-Sudeten negotiations, already tottering, collapsed completely. The Sudeten leaders fled to the Reich, leaving behind them a Sudetenland wracked by riots. Runciman, his mission a failure, returned to Britain.

In Paris, Bonnet panicked. He communicated to the British Ambassador, in terms the latter could not misinterpret, his desperate desire for peace.⁷³ Phipps also saw Daladier, who, though calmer than his Foreign Minister, yet appeared singularly unenthusiastic about the alliance with Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain hesitated no longer. He decided to visit Hitler at Berchtesgaden. Bonnet, as the American Ambassador in Paris put it, was 'gleeful' since 'the chief aim of his diplomacy had been to engage British intervention'.⁷⁴

From the policy-making perspective, the main decision for the British leaders concerned their response to Hitler's demand for a plebiscite.⁷⁵ Could they now propagate something they had viewed with some reluctance in earlier months?⁷⁶ The inner Cabinet — consisting of Chamberlain, Halifax, Simon and Hoare — admitted that a plebiscite would be extremely unwelcome to the Czech government and might prove difficult to conduct.⁷⁷ In the existing circumstances, 'the immediate acceptance of a plebiscite would be a complete surrender'.⁷⁸ Holding a plebiscite on a delayed basis, however, might not only prepare the Czechs and thus ensure a calmer atmosphere, it might also minimize the negative impact on British prestige. Simon, who first mooted the possibility of delay, suggested that it cover a period of five years. Chamberlain thought this impracticable and advocated a delay of only six months. Chamberlain's view prevailed. It was felt that the idea of a delayed

plebiscite might be put up to Hitler, should he insist (as expected) on self-determination in the forthcoming talks at Berchtesgaden.⁷⁹ As is well known, this was not done. Rather, the British Prime Minister gave his personal agreement to the idea of an immediate plebiscite. As he later explained to the Cabinet, the atmosphere at Berchtesgaden had been such as had prevented him from making attempts 'to put smaller points, or to try and impose conditions, or to get Herr Hitler to accept alternative solutions which seemed reasonable here. . . .'⁸⁰

There were murmurs in the Cabinet over this but in the main, attention shifted to the question of whether the plebiscite would be conducted in a well-ordered manner. A disorderly plebiscite, it was generally felt, could very well explode into war — the very situation one wished to avoid. The debate on the topic was inconclusive. The Cabinet failed to see how Britain could ensure order in a plebiscite. The French leaders, with whom Chamberlain and Halifax met shortly thereafter, saw another danger in a plebiscite. They thought that it would give the Germans a weapon that could be constantly used to keep Europe in tension. They could invoke it not only with respect to the German minorities over the Continent, but other dissident minorities as well, in case it suited their interests.⁸¹ A solution now suggested itself to Chamberlain's eminently rational mind.⁸² Why not ask Czechoslovakia to cede the Sudeten areas to the Reich?⁸³ Since the results of a plebiscite were a foregone conclusion, why not dispense with it altogether? Why not avoid the practical difficulties of conducting a plebiscite the British apprehended or the domino effect the French feared? If there was agreement on the substance, surely no one would insist on the form. Nevertheless, as Adamthwaite points out, the French extracted a price for their agreement, a cheeky ploy considering they had come to the conference prepared to accept cession in principle.⁸⁴ France badly wanted a British guarantee of the truncated Czechoslovakia to deter Hitler from expanding eastwards. They got it. For years Britain had been against any commitment to Central Europe. Now, to obtain French help in persuading Czechoslovakia to accept cession and thus 'ensure' peace in Europe, she accepted the French demand.⁸⁵

Till this point, the British Cabinet had been reluctantly, and not without some bitterness, giving Hitler what he wanted. But now the Nazi leader began flaunting his victory. At Bad Godesberg, on 22 September 1938, Hitler peremptorily dismissed the Anglo-French

plan and started a process of intense heart-searching amongst the leaders of the two western democracies.⁸⁶ Since it is Britain with whose policy evolution we are primarily concerned, we shall focus upon her and mention the French only when affecting the British Cabinet's thinking.

One section of the Cabinet, led by Chamberlain, certainly felt that the new demands should be accepted.⁸⁷ These demands, it argued, were not radical ones, but a mere advance on those already accepted by the Cabinet. They did not involve a significant increase in the area to be transferred. All they involved was an increase in the speed of its transfer. Could this, in itself, justify a fearsome war? Could it justify the loss of the opportunity offered to improve Anglo-German relations, now that a basis of mutual trust had been established between himself and Hitler? The Czechs should, therefore, be urged to accept the new demands.

The other section of the Cabinet, of which Halifax became the most noteworthy member, felt that a matter of principle was involved. The Godesberg demands differed from the Anglo-French proposals in a vital respect, in the orderliness of the transfer involved. The latter had been what had persuaded it to agree to Hitler's original demands even though it had 'felt strongly the immorality of yielding to force'. But now it appeared that Hitler was dictating terms 'as though he had won a war without having to fight'. As opposed to the Prime Minister, it thought that the best course would be merely to transmit the new demands to the Czech government and let the latter decide for herself. Some ministers, of whom the foremost was Duff Cooper (Admiralty), were even of the opinion that Czechoslovakia should be advised to reject Hitler's terms.⁸⁸

The Prime Minister tried to gloss over the conflict but was finally led to admit that consensus appeared to be to recommend neither rejection nor acceptance of Hitler's demands to the Czechoslovak government but to put before it the 'full facts of the situation'.

Unable to reach a decision over the new demands, the British Cabinet decided to consult the French. The British decision, as so often before, was to be based on the French attitude. That decision is well known. It was to dispatch Sir Horace Wilson to Berlin with a conciliatory letter in his pocket and a stern warning on his lips. In the formulation of this warning, a warning that Duff Cooper called 'a startling reversal of British policy',⁸⁹ there is no doubt that the French played a crucial role. This they did not so much by urging a

warning to the Germans upon the British, as they had been wont to do in the past, but by allowing the British to convince themselves that France would, in the post-Godesberg stage, honour her treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia. Admittedly, this did not happen at the late-night Anglo-French talks on 25 September 1938.⁹⁰

In an exchange that would be hilarious if not for the deadly seriousness of the situation, the British kept on trying to pin the French down as to what they would do if Hitler refused to back down, only to find the latter evasive. Finally, the French had to admit that if Czechoslovakia was attacked, 'France would fulfil her obligations'.⁹¹ Thereupon, to plumb the sincerity of the statement (an understandable intention in view of the guessing games the two nations had played so long), the French were asked if they had some concrete plan as to how they would come to Czechoslovakia's assistance. Did France plan to stay behind the Maginot Line, or did they plan inroads into German territory? Did France plan to use her Air Force as she must if she declared war? Again the French hedged, before stating that they would carry the war, both on land and in the air, to Germany. Could they really do this, asked the persistent and still sceptical British, when the French Air Force was reportedly in such poor shape? Britain wanted to make some move not only because the situation was pressing but also because Cabinet disunity could not be allowed to continue. But first, she had to come to terms with the scepticism that the French aroused in her. If in a desperate time she was contemplating a desperate solution, she would have looked foolish if she had threatened Germany, only to find France backing out at the last moment. As Chamberlain explained to the French delegation,

If the British Ministers had seemed to press the French Ministers unduly, it was because they must have clearly before them, the circumstances in which His Majesty's Government would have to take their decision.⁹²

What Britain was looking for were facts and figures — concrete evidence — that France would indeed come to Czechoslovakia's aid. This the French Chief of Staff, General Gamelin, obviously supplied to Chamberlain when summoned from Paris the next morning. The latter was satisfied, one assumes. For, at this private meeting with Gamelin and Daladier, of which curiously no minutes were kept, Chamberlain presented his idea of an oral warning to Hitler accompanied, of course, by a stern plea for conciliation.

Daladier, one presumes, agreed to the idea.⁹³ After meeting with the entire French delegation, at 4.10 in the afternoon, Chamberlain sent Wilson (who had flown at mid-day to Berlin) the following telegram:

Since you left, the French have definitely stated their intention of supporting Czechoslovakia by offensive measures if the latter is attacked. This would bring us in: and it should be made plain to [the] Chancellor that this is [the] inevitable alternative to a peaceful solution.⁹⁴

It was not so much that the French had ‘definitely’ stated their intention as that the British believed they had done so. In any event, this belief and the desperate situation in which it had been born led Britain to give a commitment not merely to a truncated Czechoslovakia, as it had done earlier in the month, but to Czechoslovakia as it stood. It is ironic that it was given when the French desire for it was at its lowest point. But it was not surprising. During most of the inter-war period, the two great democracies of Europe had been working at cross-purposes as far as Germany was concerned. Their goal had been peace but their strategies had differed. Munich brought them together, in circumstances not too pleasing to either.

Horace Wilson, we know, came back to London ostensibly empty-handed and convinced Hitler would not budge. Chamberlain wanted to advise the Czechs speedily to withdraw their forces from the disputed areas but the Cabinet would not have it. But Wilson’s words had apparently lingered on in Berlin. A proposal came from Hitler for a four-power conference at Munich. That conference took place on 30 September 1938. Its details do not concern us here. Chamberlain returned to London, sharing with his fellow Britons the relief of the moment. Daladier returned to Paris, fearful as to how his countrymen would react to the Pact.⁹⁵ The Czechoslovak representatives returned to Prague, without having participated in the Conference.⁹⁶

It should be apparent now that the road to Munich was not an easy one. It was certainly not the road of base surrender. It was marked by flashes of spirit, often overlooked. It was marked by a decisional agony and confusion that only acute uncertainty could cause. Paralysis of will alternated with a desperate desire to act.

The delineation of the five policy phases is inspired by a desire on our part to portray things more accurately than done hitherto. Even then, we are conscious that the divisions in question are not overtight. It is difficult to say precisely when one phase ended and another began. Rather they seemed to merge into one another. What seems clear is that at various times one trend dominated the thinking of the elite. The passivist trend marked the first phase; the activist, the second; the third phase marked a return to the passivist trend, which continued into the fourth, but with a hint of desperation about it; and the last — or the Munich — phase marked a tactical retreat by Britain.

As for the myth of a hapless France being led to sacrifice her *honneur* by a determined Britain, it remains just that — a myth. The latter sought, but never really achieved, control of French policy in Central Europe. She knew all along that she had to come to France's aid in the event of a war. But she mistakenly thought that she could keep the latter in check by keeping her in suspense over this. France, on her part, however, was not oblivious to British vulnerability. Her aim was to involve the latter as directly in the matter as possible. This involvement, as she saw it, meant greater pressure on Germany (and thus approach a commitment to France) or greater pressure on Czechoslovakia (and thus reduce the need for war). This meant giving Britain the impression either that the French commitment to her Slavic ally was firm (and force Britain to focus her attention on Germany), or that this commitment was weakening (and arouse British expectations of active French co-operation in pressurizing Czechoslovakia). It was France, then, that kept Britain in suspense and achieved her diplomatic goal to a greater extent than Britain did.

Certain causal factors remained constant — or near-constant — throughout the period in question. There was the appreciation of Britain's (and France's) military strength relative to Germany — pessimistic throughout; there was the perception of public opinion both in Britain and in the Commonwealth — steadily pitching for accommodation with Hitler; and there was the lack of any affection for Czechoslovakia. All this made for some measure of acquiescence. But there was also the consciousness of Britain and France as Great Powers; the assumption that Britain's security was bound with that of France; and the feeling that Czechoslovakia should not be persuaded to commit suicide. These factors countered the drive towards acquiescence.

The two sets appeared to balance one another. What caused the shift from one phase to another seemed to be the shifting appreciation of firstly, the French commitment to Czechoslovakia and secondly, the German threat to Czechoslovakia. In the first phase, ambiguity marked both; in the second, both seemed to register an increase, causing Britain to take an activist stance; in the next phase, France wavered and Germany waited; in the fourth, Germany started moving; and in the last phase, France basically broke down and the German threat reached its climax, causing Britain to take the path of tactical retreat, albeit somewhat unsteadily. Britain proved herself vulnerable to the extraordinarily complex situation facing her. France exploited this vulnerability to increase the British involvement in the situation. But the end result was that the responsibility of Munich devolved on both. Both thus ended as losers.

Notes

1. For a list of the leading 'traditional' works, the reader may like to refer to D.C. Watt, 'Appeasement, the Rise of a Revisionist School?', *Political Quarterly*, 36 (1965), 197.

2. See, for example, Arthur Furnia, *The Diplomacy of Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations and the Prelude to World War II 1931-38* (Washington 1960), 308.

3. The following statement is typical: 'it was he [Chamberlain] who took the initiative in surrendering all to Hitler; and he who conducted a solitary and secretive policy, made decisions and then informed the British Cabinet or the French or the Czechs. . . ' Margaret George, *The Warped Vision* (Pittsburg 1965), 187.

4. Because of space constraints, one cannot evaluate the relevant literature here. But an interested reader has only to refer to recent issues of various relevant scholarly journals (like the present one, for instance) to observe this trend.

5. Expounded by Inskip, the Minister for Coordination of Defence, and Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

6. Foreign Policy Committee Minutes, F.P. (36), 26th Mtg., 18 March 1938, CAB 27/62.

7. The military factor was one (and perhaps, not even the primary) determinant of Britain's Sudeten policy. Gibbs writes that 'even had Britain's rearmament programme been much more advanced than it actually was in 1938, the British Government would still not have advised Benes differently or chosen to go to war had Benes

compromised and yet been attacked'. N.H. Gibbs, *Rearmament Policy*, Vol. I of *Grand Strategy*, J.R.M. Butler (ed.) (6 vols.; London 1956-1976), 648.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. FO Memorandum on 'Possible Measures to Avert German Action in Czechoslovakia'. Appendix I, F.P. (36), 26th Mtg., CAB 27/623.

11. Foreign Policy Committee Minutes, F.P. (36) 26th Mtg., 18 March 1938, CAB 27/62.

12. The treaty with Czechoslovakia, part of the French drive towards security, was signed on 25 January 1924 and re-affirmed at the time of Locarno (16 October 1925). It pledged mutual consultation and military assistance in the event of any aggression against either of the two parties. On 16 May 1935, Russia ostensibly strengthened this treaty by signing a Pact of Mutual Assistance with Czechoslovakia, making help to the latter, however, conditional upon France's initial intervention.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.* Chamberlain was obviously unsure he had persuaded the French during mutual talks the previous November that Britain would not be involved in a war over Czechoslovakia. Record of Anglo-French Conversations, 29-30 November 1937. C 8234/270/18.

15. *Ibid.*

16. The Franco-Russian treaty link over Czechoslovakia was hardly touched upon. The question as to whether this link might not embolden the French was raised by Ormsby-Gore (Colonies) but was not taken up by his colleagues. FPC Minutes, *op. cit.*

17. Perhaps the truth of the matter was not that the French did not believe Britain would not sooner or later come to her aid; it was simply that, in their view, a commitment by Britain would make her come in sooner.

18. FPC Minutes, *op. cit.*

19. Great Britain, 5 *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 333, 24 March 1938. Rogers refers to the statement as 'this masterpiece of vagueness'. Cf. Lindsay Rogers, 'Notes on the Language of Politics', *Political Science Quarterly*, LXIV (December 1949), 498.

20. Cabinet Conclusions, 23 March 1938. Cabinet 16(38), CAB 23/93.

21. Entry of 20 March 1938. Keith Feiling, *Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London 1946), 341-342.

22. Halifax to Henderson, 4 April 1938. FO 800/269.

23. Cabinet Conclusions, 6 April 1938. Cabinet 18(38), CAB 23/93.

24. Cabinet Conclusions, 13 April 1938. Cabinet 19(38), CAB 23/94.

25. Halifax to Chamberlain, 14 April 1938. C 3233/G (21653).

26. Viewing the matter from the French perspective, Adamthwaite remarks, 'The French government rightly assumed that in order to guard against the danger of being dragged into war by France, British Ministers would readily take the initiative in Berlin and Prague. . . By asking a high price for their co-operation, they secured important gains.' Cf. Anthony Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War 1936-1939* (London 1977), 181.

27. Anglo-French Conversations, 29 April 1938. C 3687/13/17. *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, E.L. Woodward and Rohan Butler (eds.), (London 1949-), Series 3, Vol. 1, 207. The abbreviation *DBFP* will be used for these

documents from now on. The small Roman numeral following the abbreviation will refer to the volume number. The series in question do not change.

28. *Ibid.*, 217.

29. *Ibid.*, 218.

30. *Ibid.*, 220. Harvey, Halifax's secretary, asked uneasily, 'Are the French bluffing to try to get more out of us?' Entry dated 28 April 1938 in *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey 1937-1940*, John Harvey (ed.), (London 1979), 133-134. But Britain was not in a position to call the bluff, even if she wanted to.

31. Anglo-French Conversations, *DBFP* (i), op. cit., 228. It may be contended that the British government never intended to put such strong pressure on the Nazis. That is speaking from hindsight. What one must remember is that pressure on Germany was not new to Britain — the 'quid pro quo' idea had been a crucial feature of her German policy since November 1936. Admittedly, the Nazi take-over of Austria implied that more risks were now involved in subjecting the Germans to pressure. By virtue of that very fact, however, more credit should be given to Britain's ruling elite for raising the possibility of such pressure being applied. It was indicative of an attempt to come to grips with the problem and not seek escape from it, as had appeared to be the case in March. If the latter phase was distinguished by a singular unwillingness to inject any meaningful initiative into the international environment, the phase that followed was not.

32. Halifax to Newton, Tel. 68, 4 May 1938. C3837/1941/18 (21717). *DBFP* (i), No. 171, 242.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Halifax to Henderson, Tel. 138, 4 May 1938. C3837/1941/18 (21717). *DBFP* (i), No. 172, 244.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 245.

37. See, for example, William V. Wallace, 'The Making of the May Crisis', *Slavonic and East European Review*, XLI (June 1963), 368-390.

38. Henderson to Halifax, Tel. 202, 21 May 1938. C4663/1941/18 (21720). *DBFP* (i), No. 249, 330.

39. Phipps to Halifax, Tel. 146, 21 May 1938. C4693/1941/18 (21720). *DBFP* (i), No. 257, 336. It is interesting to note that France herself did not formally warn Germany during the crisis.

40. Halifax to Henderson, Tel. 169, 21 May 1938. C4776/1941/18 (21721). *DBFP* (i), No. 250, 332.

41. One might argue that the warning of 27 September, delivered by Horace Wilson to Hitler, was meant to get him to accept Czech concessions thought 'reasonable'. That would be stretching the original meaning of the term. In April, the term 'reasonable' applied to concessions that met 60 percent or 70 percent of German demands. In September, the concessions made by Czechoslovakia almost totally met Hitler's demands.

42. Phipps to Halifax, Tel. 150, 23 May 1938. C4722/1941 (21720).

43. An FO minute of late June refers to this as 'the famous threat'. Minute by Sargent, 22 June 1938. C4138/1941/18 (21725).

44. Cabinet Conclusions, 25 May 1938. Cabinet 26(38), CAB23/93. Curiously enough, their apparent belief in the success of their warning did not encourage the British leaders to think it could be repeated with impunity in the future. One can attribute this peculiar development not only to the differing appreciation of the

Franco-Czech alliance but also to their disbelief that 'the reasons which had induced the German Government to exercise moderation on this occasion would be equally potent on all other occasions in the near future'. Halifax to Newton, No. 262, 25 May 1938. C4915/1941/18 (21721). *DBFP* (i), No. 315, 378. If, in the future, a 'particularly startling incident' occurred, Hitler might not be able to control his extremists, as he had done on the present occasion. The attribution of their success more to the prevailing circumstances than to the warning itself was not calculated to inspire them with any confidence.

45. See FO Memorandum dealing with the 'Failure of the French Government to carry out their promises to support the action of His Majesty's Government in Prague', C6915/1941/18 (21727).

46. Quoted by Adamthwaite, op. cit., 193. As Adamthwaite points out, 'the public record of French diplomacy had to be kept clean'. *Ibid.*, 194. A revealing instance concerned an interview that the British Ambassador had with Bonnet on 13 June promising continuing action in Prague. The report sent by Bonnet to the French mission in London stressed the impossibility of any new initiative in Prague in view of France's alliance with Czechoslovakia. *Ibid.*, 192-193.

47. Campbell to Halifax, Tel. 505 Saving, 10 August 1938. C8128/1941/18 (21731). *DBFP* (ii), No. 601, 71-74.

48. Minute by Halifax, 26 April 1938. C3868/1941/18 (21717).

49. Halifax rationalized this inactivity by arguing that 'an immediate peaceful solution of the German problem was not out of the question'. Minute by Halifax, 2 June 1938. Halifax Papers, FC 800/314. He did, however, add the proviso that 'if the Czechs did not give a suitable degree of autonomy, we may consider the possibility of more active steps in 2-3 months time'. *Ibid.*

50. For example, the Czechoslovak government was informed in early June that any unwillingness on its part to move along lines considered reasonable by the British would have an 'immediate and adverse effect upon the interest taken in the problem in this country', Halifax to Newton, Tel. 142, 31 May 1938. C5234/1941/18 (21723). Their appreciation of what was 'reasonable' was not intimated to the Czechs. Again, the Czechs were told in the week following that they could hope to save the situation only if Henlein were given something 'substantial' in the near future. There was no elucidation of what 'substantial' meant in its opinion. Towards the end of the month, Halifax was writing that the Czech government 'should educate the press and public to the need for unpleasant concessions'. Again, he remained silent on what these concessions should be. Halifax to Newton, Tel. 176, 22 June 1938. C6200/1941/18 (21725).

51. The available evidence thus goes contrary to the orthodox view, as stated by Webster, that during the summer of 1939, the British government exerted 'immense' pressure at Prague 'to satisfy the demands of the Sudeten leaders'. Charles Webster, 'Munich Reconsidered: A Survey of British Policy', *International Affairs*, 37 (1961), 143.

52. Newton to Halifax, Tel. 311, 24 June 1938. C6314/1941/18 (217255). *DBFP* (ii), No. 440, 515.

53. FO Minutes, 2 June 1938. C5334/4839/18 (21773). Ultimately, the observers were dispatched, but they were enjoined to confine themselves to Czechoslovakia and restrict themselves merely to investigating racial incidents as they might arise. The injunction forbidding the observers to involve themselves in the broader politics of the area was in line with the government's generally cautious approach to the

problem in this phase.

54. Halifax to Campbell, Tel. 1537, 12 July 1938. C6953/1941/18 (21727). *DBFP* (ii), No. 479, 551-553.

55. Bonnet to Lacroix, Tel. 672-4, 26 July 1938. *Documents Diplomatiques Français*, X, 266, 487. Quoted in Adamthwaite, op. cit., 198.

56. Characteristically, the French did not press their choice on the British, content to let the latter step into the limelight. They were only too willing to accept the Czech rejection of a French mediator.

57. Runciman to Halifax, 10 August 1938. C8510/1941/18 (21732). *DBFP* (ii), No. 602, 74.

58. Halifax to Henderson, 5 August 1938. C11048/1941/18 (21743). *DBFP* (ii), No. 587, 55.

59. Halifax to Newton, Tel. 25 Saving, 18 July 1938. C7141/1941/18 (21727). *DBFP* (ii), No. 508, 583.

60. The Germans rightly suspected the mission was a British attempt to play for time. Their irritation at the mission was expressed in a letter from Ribbentrop to Halifax. The German Foreign Minister wrote that, 'The sending of Lord Runciman was decided upon by the British Government in agreement with the French and Czechoslovak Governments without our participation. The Reich Government was not informed of this until afterward. In these circumstances, the Reich Government must disclaim any responsibility for whether the efforts of Lord Runciman lead to success or not.' Ribbentrop to Halifax, No. 379, 21 August 1938. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Volume II.

61. Halifax to Campbell, Tel. 1915, 25 August 1938. C8727/1941/18 (21732). *DBFP* (ii), No. 691, 158.

62. Meeting of Ministers, 30 August 1938. CAB 23/94.

63. The public re-affirmation of the French pledge was made by Bonnet in a speech on 4 September whilst unveiling the American war memorial at Point de Grave. Gilbert Ferguson, 'Munich: The French and British Roles', *International Affairs*, 44 (October 1968), 656. Ferguson suggests that Bonnet's restrained language was inspired by a desire not to let the American Ambassador's words of support sound too weak in comparison.

64. Bonnet made a request for British action on 7 September. Daladier made another on 8 September, pointing out simultaneously that the French commitment to Czechoslovakia would be honoured. Bonnet repeated his request on 9 September. Adamthwaite, op. cit., 206.

65. Draft of Halifax speech, PREM. 1/265.

66. Minute by Horace Wilson, 1 September 1938, PREM. 1/265.

67. Minute by Neville Chamberlain, undated, PREM. 1/265.

68. Minute by Chamberlain, undated, PREM. 1/265.

69. Halifax to Henderson, personal letter, 6 September 1938. C11048/1941/18 (21743). *DBFP* (ii), No. 792, 256.

70. Note by Chamberlain, 12 September 1938, PREM. 1/265.

71. Corbin to Bonnet, Tel. 2281-5, 10 September 1938. *Documents Diplomatiques Français*, XI, 66, 111. Quoted in Adamthwaite, op. cit., 208.

72. Note of a Meeting of Ministers, 12 September 1938. CS(38)I.

73. Phipps to Halifax, Tel. 244, 13 September 1938. C9704/1941/18 (21737). *DBFP* (ii), No. 855, 310-311.

74. *Foreign Relations of the US*, Diplomatic Papers (Washington 1955), Vol. 1,

1938, 600. Quoted in Adamthwaite, *op. cit.*, 211.

75. The Czech leaders had already agreed to almost all the Karlsbad demands — and translated them into the so-called 4th Plan: uniting the three German districts under one German committee, establishing separate racial registers and guaranteeing language equality. But Hitler's Nuremberg speech had, in British eyes, made the 4th Plan obsolete.

76. The government, for example, had formally dissociated itself from a *Times* leader (3 June) propagating a plebiscite. Halifax to Newton, Tel. 153, 4 June 1938. C5359/1941/18 (21723). *DBFP* (ii), No. 374, 444.

77. Note of a Meeting of Ministers, 12 September 1938. CS(38)1.

78. Cabinet Conclusions, 14 September 1938. Cabinet 38(38), CAB 23/95.

79. Chamberlain told the Cabinet this would be done only after an effort had been made to inform Hitler (1) that Anglo-French pressure had made Benes go 'much further than expected', and (2) that if Hitler wanted an immediate solution, Lord Runciman could be requested to arbitrate. Neither of these points were raised. As for a plebiscite, Chamberlain could have qualified his acceptance, personal though it was, with another personal statement opting for a period of delay. He did nothing of the sort.

80. Cabinet Conclusions, 17 September 1938. Cabinet 39(38), CAB 23/95.

81. Record of Anglo-French Conversations, 18 September 1938. C10729/1941/18 (21738). *DBFP* (ii), No. 928, 381. Daladier and Bonnet admitted that the circumstances were now different from what they had been in April and that 'the principle of maintaining the unity of Czechoslovakia' could no longer be insisted upon. The efforts of the two governments should rather be directed at preserving as much of it as possible and in such a way as to obviate the need for the French to discharge their obligations to the Czechs.

82. *Ibid.*, 389. According to Adamthwaite, it was Daladier who, being privy to Czech feelings on the matter, planted the idea in Chamberlain's mind, at a private meeting between the two. Cf. Adamthwaite, *op. cit.*, 214. In any case, the record of the conversations shows the British Prime Minister mentioning the matter first.

83. It was, of course, realized by the inner Cabinet that public opinion might object to the latter. Astonishingly, it felt that this difficulty could be overcome by an announcement that between a plebiscite and cession, Benes had chosen the latter. The suggestion had a mixed reaction in the Cabinet but Chamberlain's logic carried the day.

84. Adamthwaite, *op. cit.*, 214.

85. The French government, it must be mentioned, did her share of forcing the Czechs to toe the line decided upon at the conference. When, after the joint *démarche* in Prague on 19 September, the Czechs hinted at arbitration, Bonnet demurred strongly. When the Czechs asked categorically if France would refuse to march in should the Anglo-French plan not be accepted, the French replied in the affirmative. Adamthwaite, *op. cit.*, 215-217.

86. As is well-known, he audaciously demanded the immediate acceptance of a boundary he had drawn up arbitrarily and the immediate occupation of the designated territory by German forces, followed by a formal plebiscite thereafter.

87. Cabinet Conclusions, 24 September 1938. Cabinet 43(38), CAB 23/95.

88. Of the ministers whose opinions are on record, nine were for accepting the Godesberg demands and six were for refusing them. The former included Chamberlain, Simon, Inskip, MacDonald, Kingsley-Wood, Maugham, Stanhope,

Morrison and Zetland. The latter included Halifax, Hoare, Duff Cooper, Hore-Belisha, Winterton and Warr. Cabinet Conclusions, 24 September 1938. Cabinet 44(38), CAB 23/95.

89. A. Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London 1953), 237.

90. Record of Anglo-French Conversations, 25 September 1938. C11264/1941/18 (21744). *DBFP* (ii), No. 1093, 520-535.

91. *Ibid.*, 527.

92. *Ibid.*, 534.

93. It does not seem Bonnet was informed by Daladier of the oral warning Wilson was carrying. Cf. O.H. Bullitt (ed.), *For the President: Personal and Secret* (Boston 1972), 290-291. Neither was it revealed at the second meeting between the two delegations. Reference was made only to 'a personal message' for Hitler. *DBFP* (ii), 537. One presumes that the statement of French intentions had already been given to Chamberlain by Daladier at their morning meeting and that the former merely waited to see nothing untoward happened at the subsequent meeting between the two delegations before sending Wilson the important communication.

94. D. Dilks (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan* (London 1971), 106.

95. Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 663.

96. Earlier, when a tentative time-table for the transfer of the Sudeten areas had been dispatched to both Berlin and Prague, a Czech request for the extension of the transfer deadline from 31 October to 15 December had been turned down by Halifax. The Czechoslovak government had been asked not to 'render more difficult the Prime Minister's already delicate task by formulating and insisting on objections to the time table...' Halifax to Newton, Tel. 388, 29 September 1938. C11027 (21743).

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