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The “Munich Question” is a rich complex of issues—at once both broad and narrow, political and ethical, historical and contemporary—of worldwide applicability and of specifically Czechoslovak significance. For the world, “Munich” is a familiar synonym for diplomatic betrayal and the appeasement of aggressors. For the Czechs, the term “Mníchovancé” (Munichites) and “Mníchovanství” (Munichism) are no less pejorative. The difference is that, despite the vast amount of literature on the subject, Czechoslovak writings and viewpoints (beyond a few obvious ones) are not widely known outside that country. From the Munich Conference to the present day, the Czech side of the debate—for political or linguistic reasons—has been comparatively inaccessible to, and ignored by, the rest of the world.

The Czechs, however, have been doing an immense amount of talking about “Munich” among themselves. No segment of Czech society since 1938 has been able either to escape the “Munich Trauma” or to resist the compulsion to examine and reexamine the subject endlessly. “Munich,” writes Jan Křen, “is one of those great, dark questions of our history to which one must constantly return.” President Edvard Beneš, his close political collaborators, the socioeconomic stratum they represented, the communists who replaced them in 1948, and the Czech people as a whole—those who lived through Munich and its aftermath, as well as those born since who have some embarrassing questions for their elders—all have been preoccupied with the Munich question and have developed their own explanation for it and for their own role in it.

Beneš has stated that, during the last ten years of his life, Munich was his idee fixe. Whether he had made the correct decision during the terrible crisis and the way in which posterity would judge him for it were questions that plagued him. He rarely failed to refer to Munich in any significant publication or public utterance, and the complete political and moral negation of it became “the single goal of his life.” The final
rationale and personal self-justification he worked out during the war were not published until 1968. But long before then, during World War II, his close collaborators, Žabotský, Smatný, Opotůžský, Feireabend, and Ripka (“those whose hands had prepared the Munich betrayal”), had made the basic scenario public. Fundamentally, they insist on the inescapability of Czechoslovakia’s capitulation, and place the blame for it squarely on the governments of its allies—France and Britain. Numerous factors forced Prague to choose between capitulating to Hitler’s demands and delivering the nation to his diabolical will, on the one hand, and fighting alone, committing national suicide, and plunging Europe into a war for which it was not yet prepared, on the other. Some of these factors were: Hitler’s exploitation of the Sudeten Achilles’ heel and the cooperation of Czechoslovakia’s right-wing parties; the shortsighted, even cowardly, reluctance of the British and French governments to risk involving their own peoples in war to defend their exposed Czechoslovak ally against Germany; and the unbearable pressures these governments placed upon the Czechoslovak leadership. The Czechs, as in other crises, chose reason and sacrifice. In the end, the Czech nation and its leaders, “who suffered for everyone and harmed no one,” would emerge morally justified. According to Czechoslovak communist historians, this rationale was developed to justify not only Beneš and his government-in-exile, but the entire bourgeoisie, the class that controlled Czechoslovakia in 1938 and was collectively responsible for handing it over to Hitler. In communist eyes, Munich even betrayed the Czech middle class’s own much-touted “Masarykism,” the defense of humanitarian principles linked to the self-defense of the Czechoslovak nation. In their view, the “Munich Complex” will forever haunt the conscience of the Czech bourgeoisie:

“No writer,” claimed a member of Beneš’s wartime government-in-exile, “no historian has the power to describe the terror and the pain that went through the Czech lands after Munich.” The Czechs were demoralized by the loss of their national and geographic frontiers, which had remained virtually unaltered for centuries and had been regarded as indispensable to the state’s defense and integral to the national tradition. Later, especially when the capitulation at Munich became linked with charges of Czech nonresistance, and even collaboration, under Nazi rule, some of the pain turned to guilt, feelings of inferiority, and a loss of national self-confidence. Perhaps this topic of investigation is even more amenable to techniques of mass psychology than to traditional historical analysis. Since little can be found on it in print, one is forced to approach it obliquely, mostly through contemporary novels and poetry by such writers as Marie Majerová, František Halas, and Vítězslav Nezval, and reminiscences of eyewitnesses. That the issue continues to trouble the Czechs, however, is evident to anyone who has broached the topics of Munich or the wartime pattern of behavior with practically any adult Czech, regardless of his or her political coloration. The response is immediate, emphatic, emotional, and defensive, based on the rationale that to resist Munich would have meant national suicide—once the frontiers were lost, all further resistance was impossible, and German occupation was, therefore, inevitable. The accessibility of the Bohemian—Moravian terrain and the great size of the occupying force would have made opposition ineffectual and suicidal. In these circumstances, the Czechs’ only responsibility was to save their nation. Most of the writing about Munich published in Czechoslovakia has, of course, been produced by Marxist historians. Representing the new masters of the state since 1948, they inherited the function of analyzing and interpreting this major and controversial issue from the nation’s past. They were more than eager to do it. The debacle of the previous regime, still painfully imbedded in popular memory and ripe for embellishment from the domestic archives, presented them with a classic opportunity to discredit their bourgeois enemies and bolster their own following among the masses. Their writings, which also are not well known outside Czechoslovakia, follow a rough periodization: highly dogmatic, rigidly schematic, rather amateurish indictments and explanations until the mid-1950s; increasingly sophisticated analyses and conclusions based on steadily growing historiographical expertise from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s; dangerously objective interpretations, often highly critical of previous Marxist work on the subject, in the years of the Prague Spring, 1967 and 1968; and a return to the orthodox Marxist line, though possibly with greater polish and historiographical ingenuity, in “normalized” Czechoslovakia during the past two decades. Certain subordinate issues, such as the role of the Sudeten Germans, the sincerity of the Soviet Union’s offer of unilateral aid, the diplomatic irresponsibility of France and Britain, to be sure, have not aroused significant debate, except during the 1960s. Other issues, however, such as Beneš’s personal guilt and motivation, the degree of culpability of the Czech bourgeoisie, the relative weight of domestic and foreign factors, and the role of the Czechoslovak Communist Party itself, have undergone almost continual revision.

There were few nuances in the Czechoslovak Marxist treatment of Munich in the first half of the 1950s. Western policymakers were uniformly condemned for having engineered the betrayal; even its notable opponents such as Churchill were unceremoniously lumped with Chamberlain and Daladier. Similarly undifferentiated was the archvillain—
the Czechoslovak bourgeoisie. Apparent disagreements within the bourgeoisie camp were regarded as mere tactical maneuvers aimed against the masses, who wanted to resist Hitler and were feared by the bourgeoisie. Beneš, aided by his loyal cronies of the Hrad (Castle) and the "reformist" political parties, was the devil-in-chief, the focal point of the "conspiracy against the masses," an open agent of the "Western imperialism," an example of "inveterate anti-Sovietism," and the mechanic of "the base betrayal of the interests of the people, the nation, the state, democracy, and peace." Czechoslovak Marxist historiography unquestionably served the ideological needs of the Party—particularly in the latter's campaign against "cosmopolitanism." Its "teachings from history" had a dissemination so massive that Western historians might well envy it. Evident inconsistencies in its slogans—for instance, with which "democratic, non-communist elements" in the country was the Czechoslovak Communist Party urging a "popular front" in 1938, if the entire bourgeoisie leaned toward fascism?—were simply dismissed. In the early 1950s, it ignored pre-1948 Marxist publications that separated the Czech bourgeois classes into a "progressive" faction (Masaryk, Beneš, the Hrad) who wanted to defend the Republic and a "reactionary" faction (primarily the Agrarian Party) that represented the big capitalist interests and was profascist.

From the mid-1950s, with the deepening maturity of Czech Marxist historiography and the increasing accumulation of new documentary evidence, the old, bald formulas became difficult to maintain, and a more complex explanation began to emerge. It now appeared unlikely that the Hrad and its bourgeois constituents had consciously and secretly plotted Munich together with Hitler and the Western powers. Beneš was transformed from a demonic to a tragic figure—from a Western agent to the pathetic and intimidated leader of a small state. The Great Powers themselves now became the real villains, and Beneš, with his avowedly pro-Western orientation, their effective, though possibly unwilling, tool. Three interwar political "lines" were now accepted: the Hrad attempted to maintain a Czechoslovak bourgeois democracy and align its foreign policy with the West's; the "agrarian reaction" aimed to integrate Czechoslovakia with Nazi Germany; and the Communist Party strove to defend the republic with a "popular front" and the help of the Soviet Union. There were some discrepancies, however. The communists had openly supported General Syrový's government, which was embarrassing. A lame explanation was offered to the effect that, at the time, the masses still followed Beneš and could not have been swayed by communist tactics. This factor rendered the Party vulnerable to the charges

of left-wing critics that it had actually been subordinate to, rather than a leader of, the masses.

In a new approach during the early 1960s, Czech Marxist historians took a new tack, embarking on broad studies of interwar European diplomacy, especially Czechoslovak foreign policy. As a result, the impression of interwar Czechoslovakia was that of far more than a mere stooge of the Western powers. Czechoslovakia emerges as far more of an active political force in its own right—dedicated to developing a system of collective security for Europe, and thereby ensuring its own security. Czechoslovakia had persisted the longest in striving toward that goal; it had refused to imitate such countries as Poland, Yugoslavia, France, Romania, and Britain in seeking a direct accommodation with Hitler and adopting an official anti-Soviet stance. When the West chose appeasement, Czechoslovakia was left stranded. If Beneš had relied too long on collective security, the reason was that he had underestimated the strength of the anti-Hitler, antiappeasement forces in Britain and France. He was guilty of "exaggerated optimism," but there was, nonetheless, a realistic chance until the very end that the antiappeasement forces would win—that there was a solution other than Munich to the German-Czechoslovak confrontation. Beneš's thinking also justified the support given him by the Communist Party, which, like the Soviet Union itself, aimed to ally itself with all antifascist forces in Europe. If, however, Beneš himself could not accept a common front with the communists and preferred to steer a course between the right and left extremes of Czechoslovak politics, it was simply because of his ingrained bourgeois-capitalist "fear of the people," his apprehension about the growing mass appeal of socialism.

This brief outline indicates the stage reached by Czechoslovak communist historiography in its treatment of Munich when the Prague Spring briefly freed the country's historians from the constraints of unchallenged Marxist ideology. During that short season, in 1968, two noteworthy works were published on the Munich crisis—Edvard Beneš's personal memoirs, Mnichovské dny (Munich days), and Mila Lvová's Mnichovské dny (Munich days), and Mila Lvová's Mnichovské dny (Munich days). Beneš was well known to Czech historians, although, submerged by the invasion and the quick reimposition of sovietization in the autumn of 1968, neither one was extensively reviewed or mentioned either in the popular press or in scholarly publications. A French version of Beneš's memoirs published in Paris in 1969 has received very little public attention, and Lvová's book, hailed in Czech intellectual circles as a model of painstaking, imaginative historiography, is proscribed from Czechoslovakia.
Sure, the last memoir of a leading participant in the Munich proceed­ings to be made public, but it is not rich in revelatory new facts. It illustrates once again the cleverness of Nazi propaganda against the Czechs and the Czechs' ineptitude at countering it. It gives the details of the extremely complicated changes in governmental structure on every level—arrangements so complex that it is virtually inconceivable that any governmental business could have been conducted at all—that the Czechoslovak leaders were formally willing to concede to placate the Sudeten German minority and their own Western allies. Benes exhibits a warm attitude toward the Soviets, although individuals close to him have insisted that this attitude had changed by 1947-48, and that his revisions of the manuscript to that effect were interrupted by his death. The chief value of this book lies elsewhere, however. Similar to the famous Czech Black Book that was compiled during the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, it describes, step by step, the feelings of a victim who is slowly being strangled.13 Despite Benes's complicated legal-diplom­atic-literary style, the reader cannot help but experience the crushing pressure and despair of the president. Indeed, even the redogmatized post-1968 Marxist historians in Czechoslovakia are not immune to this impression, which they cite frequently.

Mila Lvova's Munich and Edvard Benes is nothing less than an attempt to reconstruct the Czechoslovak president's thinking in the fifteen days preceding, and the five days after, the Munich Conference. It amounts to a meticulously reasoned, warmly compassionate defense, if not ex­oneration, of Benes. The vulgarized sketch of the early 1950s of Benes as the puppet of the bourgeois class is completely erased and replaced by an intricate portrait that comes perilously close to the one first pre­sented to the West by Benes and his associates during the war. There is never any doubt in this book that Benes consistently defended his na­tion's interests. He capitulated only when, in his view, no other accept­able path was open to him—when the Western powers had finally chosen to abandon collective security in favor of appeasement, and left him isolated. (Benes had often said that it was not the commander of the Czechoslovak army, but the Czechoslovak foreign minister, who would have to guarantee the country's defense.) He was not a coward afraid to fight alone; he simply refused to risk the annihilation of his people in a hopelessly ill-matched war with Germany. It was clear that once hostilities began Czechoslovakia would have to hold out alone for a significant period, absorbing enormous punishment, particularly through air raids, while waiting—and hoping—that the European pow­ers would intervene. Would they intervene? Most important, would they intervene in time to save the Czech and Slovak peoples from destruc­tion? Would the defeated anti-Munich elements in France and Britain recover their strength and reverse their governments' policies quickly enough? Benes doubted it, and would not wager the lives of his coun­trymen on it. To be sure, he could have gone to war with Soviet military assistance. Lvova does not deny that Benes feared the sovietization of Czechoslovakia nor that, more important, he feared a negative reaction from the Western powers to his acceptance of Soviet aid. But, attacking one of the holiest of Czech Marxist dogmas about Munich, she points out that no concrete documentary evidence exists to prove unequivocally that Moscow actually offered unqualified unilateral aid to the Czechs.14 Although Moscow did make overt military preparations ear­lier in September, at the time of Munich, it seemed to be pulling away, probably fearful of provoking the aggression of Nazi Germany, as well as that of the Western powers, against itself. Furthermore, there is little evidence that Soviet military aid, if given, would have been effective. Lvova points out in deadpan earnest that at the very time of her writing the stationing of Soviet troops on Czechoslovak soil is being justified by the great difficulty of transporting them all the way from the Soviet Union in time to counter a potential attack from West Germany. Surely, this problem would have been just as great, if not greater, in 1938, considering the less-developed military technology available thirty years earlier. History does not take place without the participation of people, concludes Lvova, but it does sometimes take place against the best efforts of some of them, "and that includes even the second president of the First Czechoslovak Republic, Dr. Edvard Benes."

Intellectually constrained from 1968 to 1988, Czechoslovakia pro­duced little significant historical scholarship on Munich. The subject certainly continued to attract a respectable stream of researchers, es­pecially in connection with conferences held in the special anniversary years, 1973, 1978, 1983, and 1988. The results, however, in terms of
both the topics treated and the treatment, are very similar to the publications that appeared before the Prague Spring, though generally more detailed, thanks to the growing fund of relevant primary and secondary material.

The thirty-fifth anniversary of Munich witnessed the usual commemorative scholarly conference as well as two noteworthy events of a different sort—a controversial epic film and an international treaty. The wide-screen, technicolor documentary Days of Betrayal (Days of Betrayal) arrived in Czechoslovak theaters in early 1973. Lavishly filmed in the original locations, employing masses of actors, including carefully selected look-alikes playing the central characters, and drawing its scenario and dialogues largely from historical records, the film was expected to draw huge crowds. It was widely advertised for its "topical" and "contemporary" importance and recommended especially to the younger generation, to remind it of "who alone remained at the side of imperialism and the betrayal of the Czech bourgeoisie."

After the first days, attendance dropped off so sharply that the theaters had to be filled with brigades of government employees, transported en masse to view the film during working hours. Little wonder, for the production alternated between a lampoon and a pageant-epic of the Cecil B. DeMille variety. The villains included a yawning, foppish Chamberlain and the Nazis ranged from an earnest, pipe-puffing Gottwald urging the government to "go to the factories" to ranks of sober-faced Czech citizens and sadly proud Czech soldiers who "warned to defend their country but were not allowed to." Interestingly enough, Beneš, played by the actor Jiří Pleskot, a remarkable look-alike, was treated with marked generosity, even sympathy. This provoked the ire of the od Marxist warhorse, Václav Kláš, whose career had been badly shaken in 1968 but who had since recovered his earlier authority among Czechoslovak historians with a vengeance. In his review of the film, 16 Kláš warned that Beneš must not be considered merely a passive victim of Western pressures: he had deliberately based Czechoslovak foreign policy exclusively on Western support, had himself indicated to the French which border areas of Czechoslovakia could be ceded to Germany, and had even solicited Western diplomatic pressure at decisive moments to justify his backsliding to an alarmed Czechoslovak populace. In addition, he had not complained that during the Munich crisis virtually all of the day-to-day negotiations had been placed in his hands alone!

The following September, at an international scholarly conference on "Europe and Munich" held in Liberec (Reichenberg), the former Sudeten German stronghold, Kláš was able to present the official Czechoslovak Marxist post-1968 line on Munich—a line that remains basically unchanged to the present—repudiating the revisionism of the late 1980s and chastising those responsible for it. After a grandiose "review" of the world literature on the Munich question, he delivered only a dull and dogmatic reaffirmation of all of the formulas of the doctrinaire early 1950s. Some of his listeners insisted that Kláš, an exceptionally prolific but rather unequal writer, must simply have dusted off something he had written twenty years earlier, inserting a few pointed warnings to the hapless Lvová and the bantered, but still stubborn, survivors of the Prague Spring. He warned that a historian who doubts that a popular front could have saved the republic in 1938 does not believe in the power of the people. He pointed out that to many Czechs "even in recent years," Masaryk and Beneš had been the objects of sentimental attachment, but that they needed to be judged very critically. "To be sure," he added, "it is indispensable that this be done soberly, temperately, tactfully, and decently"—a remarkable exhortation coming from one notorious for his coarse verbal bullying of his opponents.

In December 1973, Czechoslovakia and West Germany finally signed a treaty normalizing their relations. 19 The negotiations, conducted intermittently since 1967, had repeatedly founded over the juridical nature of the Munich Pact. The Czechoslovaks insisted that it had been "legally invalid from the start," the Germans that it was "currently invalid." (The final wording of the treaty merely declared the Pact "void in regard to [their] mutual relations under [the present] treaty.") The ghost of Edvard Beneš was present even here, providing the means for a convenient compromise. Attempting to secure recognition for his government-in-exile in wartime London as the continuation of the Czechoslovak government of 1938, Beneš had insisted that the Munich Pact had been automatically canceled by the events of 15 March 1939. Another Czech reference to Beneš almost backfired, however. In a pamphlet intended to summarize the Czechoslovak case, Kláš charged that the Czech president had "solicited" the Munich Pact from Hitler and the Western powers to excuse his surrender in the eyes of the Czech populace. 20 The pamphlet was hastily withdrawn from sale when Sudeten German expellee groups in West Germany, bitterly opposed to the new treaty, began to exploit Kláš's charges in arguing that the Munich Pact had not, in fact, been imposed upon Czechoslovakia by force.

It is discouraging to compare Czechoslovak publications on Munich over the past two decades with those that appeared before the Prague Spring. Collections of documents 21 and of essays 22 and monographs are
all afoot in the same time-worn issues and dusty dogmas. Much of the
newer production consists of journalistic popularization,2 trivial ac-
counts of the contemporary repercussions of Munich across Bohemia
and Moravia, and homely reminiscences of the time by members of a
variety of occupational groups, such as teachers or athletes. Noticeable,
although not really new, is the repeated and heavy emphasis on
the fervent desire of the Czechoslovak masses to defend themselves militar­
ily, the adequacy of the Czechoslovak forces to defend the country, and
the genuineness of the Soviet offer, based on the treaty of 1935, to come
to Czechoslovakia's aid.3 Similarly noticeable and familiar is the une-
quivocal thesis of the only broad synthetic study of Munich to appear
during this most recent period—namely, 1978—Jaroslav Cesar's
PhD thesis of Munich.4

1. See, for example, Marie Majerova, Cesta na Hel (Path of the lightning) and Sedm hrobů
(Seven graves), F. Halas, Zmr zahrady (Tomo of hope), V. Nezval, Neznámá cesta (Historical
guide); S. K. Neumann and F. Janoušek, eds., Cestopis tátu a bratru Václava (Czech poetry of the Munich period)
(Chomutov, 1979); Věra Holí and others, eds., Muzeum: Výroční zpráva muzea (Munich: a
chronicle of memoirs) (Prague, 1980); and Křen's evocative, somewhat Communist-
slanted description of the "Munich Complex," Do emigrace, 85—109. See also F. Kubíček,
Muzeum: Munich) (5th ed., Prague, 1985), a widely read novel about a Czechoslovak
journalist drifting about Europe's diplomatic capitals at the time.

2. For example, documentary collections such as: Muzeum v dokumenzích: Munich in documents).
3. See, for example, Hubert Ripka, Dvacet let CSR (Thirty years of Czechoslovakia in
documents). 5 vols. (Prague, 1985); Věra Holí and others, eds., Nov Documen~
as the Munich Agreement.

11. Translated by Slovak Frederick Pacek (Editions Stook).


14. The same argument is made on the basis of a thorough examination of the relevant Czechoslovak archival materials by František Luketin in "Poznámky k čes.-sovietským stykům v září 1938" (Notes on Czechoslovak-Soviet relations in September 1938), Československo-sovietské vzájemnosti v roce 1938 (Czechoslovak-Soviet relations in the year 1938) in Prague, 1972.

15. Robert Kvacek, "Vztahy Československa a Sovětského svazu v zániku krize v roce 1938" (Czechoslovak-Soviet relations in the September crisis) (Prague, 1971), and Den, kterí četli Československý deník (Days that shook Czechoslovakia) (Prague, 1975).


17. See, for example, Vaclav Hyndrak, "K otázce vojenské připravenosti Československa v roce 1938" (The question of Czechoslovak military preparedness in 1938) in Sborník 1 (1971): 49-54; 51-57; 64-69; 72-77.


20. The same views are rendered in more popular form in Kral's small paperback surveys of Munich, Zájazd do Mnichova (September days of 1938) (Prague, 1971), and Prot je Mnichov neplatny (Why is Munich no longer valid) (Prague, 1971). For a summary and bibliography of world opinion on the legal nature of the Munich Pact, see Karin Schmid, "Synopsis der Meinungen zum Miinchener Abkommen" (Cologne, 1972), 2 pts., Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien 7/1972.


23. Robert Kvacek, Ilustrace jednoho roku (The history of one year) (Prague, 1979); Karel Donátová, Jist se Euroopou s mlynou (How the bell of treason began to toll) (Prague, 1983).

24. See, for example, Václav Hyndrak, "K otázce sovětského připravenosti Československa v roce 1938" (The question of Czechoslovak military preparedness in 1938) in Sborník 1 (1971): 49-54; 51-57; 64-69; 72-77.

25. O šampačově dítěti (The meaning of Czech history) (Prague, 1955), 49.