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Introduction: The Munich Diktat: fifty years after

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Introduction

By Igor Lukes

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In the fall of 1938, English upper class ladies wore small pins shaped like umbrellas. This was to show their support, indeed admiration, for British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, the architect of the Munich Agreement. Many believed that his moral strength, conviction and diplomacy had given Europe peace and saved it from the edge of an abyss. By March 1939, however, the pins were out of fashion and by September, the umbrella had become a symbol of failure. How did it come about?

Half a century ago, Adolf Hitler was at his most demonic. Before a frenzied crowd in the Berlin *Sportpalast*, spitting out words like a machine-gun, he summed up the political situation with finality: "Now two men stand arrayed one against the other: there is Mr. Benes and here stand I." He made his intentions absolutely clear. Either Czechoslovak President Eduard Benes agreed to surrender a large part of his country, the predominantly German-speaking Sudetenland, to the Third Reich, or Hitler would take it by force.

Was Europe on the eve of another war? It seemed likely. But the Europeans had fresh in their memory the horrors of the Great War, its trenches, barbed wire, and poisonous gas. And now a new form of warfare, air bombardment, was threatening to make the next war even worse. The Spanish village Guernica, wiped out by the *Luftwaffe*, and Chamberlain's own recent flight in an airplane, among the first by an important politician, led many to believe that in the air age European cities had become as vulnerable as front-line soldiers.

Therefore, the British Prime Minister and his French colleague Edouard Daladier were not prepared to march blindly toward another conflagration. Was it really conceivable, Chamberlain asked his fellow countrymen, that the British "should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks because of a quarrel in a far-away country" of which they knew nothing? Should the peace of Europe be shattered because of an apparently petty issue? Surely there had to be a rational alternative to the endless cycle of European wars.

Paris and London chose to solve the Czechoslovak crisis by the policy of appeasement, which was based on the assumption that conflicts among nations arise mainly from a lack of understanding of their respective objectives and needs, and can be solved through diplomatic initiatives alone. Chamberlain was convinced that the crisis over Czechoslovakia was taking place because the parties involved were merely uninformed. "If only I could sit down at the table with Hitler," he lamented, "and with pencil in hand go through all his complaints and claims, I think this would bring us very close to reconciliation." On the night of 29 September 1938, Chamberlain got his chance. In Munich, France and Great Britain, together with Hitler and Mussolini, presided over the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, the last remaining outpost of democracy in Central Europe. In return for Hitler's promise that this was his last demand, France and Great Britain abandoned their ally. Consequently, the word "Munich" has become for millions of Europeans not just a beautiful Bavarian city, but a symbol of betrayal.

Within weeks, Europe and soon the whole world would discover that the Munich Agreement was worthless. Czechoslovakia, deprived of its militarily vital border regions, was occupied by the *Wehrmacht* in March 1939. Now nothing could prevent Hitler from attacking Poland. But Munich was not only a geostrategic error which brought Europe closer to war; it was also a tragedy for democracy. The sight of British and French diplomats shaking hands with *Herr* Hitler at the conclusion of the meeting at Munich hurt the cause of democracy in Central Europe so significantly that it took fifty years for democracy to start returning to the region.

What were the forces which brought about Munich? What motivated the main protagonists of the Conference? What can be learned from the Munich drama and its results? Can one approach Munich as a philosophical and moral issue? On 3 October 1988, Boston University's Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology & Policy organized a commemo-

rative event, "The Munich *Diktat*: Perspectives on Appeasement," to answer such questions.

William Keylor's contribution to the present publication, "Great Britain, France, and the Munich Settlement: Foreign Policy and National Deterrent," focuses on diplomatic events which shaped the emerging Central Europe at the end of World War I and analyzes the declared as well as the actual considerations which brought the two European democracies to Munich. Great Britain had never committed itself to the preservation of the status quo in Central Europe and France, by evacuating the Rhineland already in the 1920s, had de facto abandoned the possibility of an offensive action against Germany. Therefore, the position of Hitler's opponents in the late 1930s can be characterized only as an illusion.

The second part of the publication, "Stalin's Diplomatic Maneuvers During the 1938 Czechoslovak Crisis," by Igor Lukes, looks at the 1938 crisis from the perspective of the two absentees at Munich, *i.e.*, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. It seeks to determine whether Stalin, during the two crucial crises in May and September, intended to assist Czechoslovakia in a militarily meaningful manner. In the fall of 1938, Stalin was hoping for a prolonged Czechoslovak-German war, with French, and possibly British, participation; that failing, Stalin wanted to participate in any conference dealing with the crisis. From his perspective, Munich was a tactical defeat, one from which he would recover in August 1939.

Erazim Kohák's "The Munich Dictate: A Moral Point of View" examines the concept of appeasement. Of course, the appeasement of Hitler, as practiced by the French in the 1930s, was an utter failure. But appeasement, when viewed as generosity in international as well as domestic affairs, often strengthens rather than weakens states. Thus, the failure in Munich does not necessarily indicate that there is no place for appeasement on the international arena or when dealing with minorities. The point is to work against the development of situations in which evil can be only fought because then it triumphs, one

way or another. Generosity can cure evil before it becomes so powerful and autonomous that one must either go to war, or surrender.

The three essays on the 1938 Munich Conference contained in this volume do not seek to present any final "lesson of Munich." There probably is not one kind of message which one could identify and pass on to future policy-makers. At the same time, we must continue learning not only about Munich, but also from it. The present publication of Boston University's Institute for the Study of Conflict, Ideology & Policy seeks to contribute to this effort.

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