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Foreign Policy and National Deterrent

By William Keylor
The Munich Conference and the events leading up to it have been the topics of many scholarly discussions; however, few have investigated the parochial perspective of the national interests of the two countries which were most intimately involved in the final settlement: Great Britain and France.

At the time of the Munich Conference in 1938, the world did not have a sense of the sanctity and the validity of international law. Therefore, one cannot speak about the legality or the illegality of the decisions that were taken 50 years ago. In fact, by 1938 the attempt to codify international law, and establish an institutionalized system for the solution of international disputes by peaceful means, The League of Nations, had already failed.

Therefore, when we discuss the Munich Agreement we cannot rely on abstract concepts of international law, morality or ethics. Instead, we must, unfortunately, approach the issue from the perspective of clashing national interests. Of primary importance to such a discussion are the national interests of Great Britain and France.

The British position in Munich was rather straightforward. The documents that would help us to understand the British position have been in the public domain for decades, so it seems one can speak about British policy in Munich with a great deal of confidence.

Great Britain had no interest whatsoever in preserving the territorial integrity of the nation-state of Czechoslovakia. It had minimal economic interests in the state. Indeed it had minimal interests in Eastern Europe as a whole. Furthermore, ever since the Treaties of Versailles, St. Germain and Trianon, the three peace treaties signed in and around the city of Paris in 1919-1920 after World War I, Great Britain exhibited a lack of support for the new international system, including its most visible manifestation, the League of Nations. Specifically, at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919-1920, Lloyd George, the
Prime Minister and the spokesman for the British delegation, consistently opposed the mostly French attempt to redraw the map of Europe in such a way as to insure that Germany would never again threaten the stability and the security of the continent. The British delegation was very ill at ease with the new international system that was established, even before the ink was dry on those peace treaties. In particular the British were very uncomfortable that the principle of national self-determination, applied to the reconstruction of Europe after the War through the influence of President Wilson, was violated in a number of cases, notoriously and notably in the case of Czechoslovakia.

When the new state of Czechoslovakia was formally established and recognized by the Great Powers, it included large minorities which did not speak the Czech language and did not consider themselves part of the new Czechoslovak state. In particular, the 3.25 million comprising the German-speaking minority in the borderlands of Bohemia (later known as the Sudetenland) were regarded as a potential threat to the stability of the Czechoslovak state going as far back as 1919.

The British recognized this anomaly and battled with the French. They eventually lost. When the new Czechoslovak state was formed, therefore, it included not only a large German-speaking minority, but also a large Hungarian-speaking minority in Slovakia, a considerable Polish minority in the former duchy of Teschen and a considerable minority of Ukrainians or Ruthenians in the east portion of the state. In short, Czechoslovakia represented a contradiction to the general theme of the Paris Peace Conference, namely the application of national self-determination to the new map of Europe.

In the 1920s, the issue of Czechoslovakia's national integrity did not intrude itself onto the consciousness of the British, and therefore they did not feel compelled to deal with it. After the advent of the Hitler Regime in Germany in January 1933, however, it became an issue, as did the status of all other German-speaking minorities in countries outside of Germany, including Austria and Poland.
In the spring of 1938, following the Anschluss, the British unmistakably conveyed to the world in general, and to their French allies in particular, that they had no intention of participating in any diplomatic settlement in Eastern Europe which would support the interests of Czechoslovakia against Germany. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, in a background conference with journalists at the time, made it unmistakably clear that he recognized the essential validity of Hitler's claims that the 3.25 million German-speaking citizens in the Sudetenland deserved to have at least autonomy within Czechoslovakia and, if they so desired, separation from that state and annexation by Germany.

In addition to the guilt the British felt about the Treaty of St. Germain, which established the Czechoslovak State, as well as the guilt they felt about the settlement in Eastern Europe (the former Habsburg Empire), there are other factors worth noting which played an important role in the eventual pursuit of the appeasement policy. An important factor was Great Britain's decision in 1920-1921 to disengage herself from the European continent and to focus her intentions, not exclusively, but predominantly, on her imperial and naval interests outside Europe. Henceforth, the balance of power in Europe became a secondary concern of the British. They were unwilling to go to war at any time in the 1920s or 1930s, up until the spring of 1939, to guarantee the political settlement in Eastern Europe. They were willing to guarantee the political settlement in Western Europe thanks to their endorsement of the Locarno Treaty of 1925, but they were not prepared to guarantee the political settlement east of the Rhine.

Another factor in British foreign policy toward the problem of Czechoslovakia and the Sudetenland in particular was the very strong suspicion the British ruling elite held vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, both in ideological and realpolitical terms. In ideological terms, this suspicion was influenced at the time by the essentially anti-Bolshevik position of the dominant British Conservative Party. In realpolitical terms, the British were concerned that the Soviet Union threatened the interests of the British Empire, particularly in Central Asia.
Under these suspicions, the British were not going to intervene in the affairs of Central Europe or Eastern Europe in such a way that would assist the Soviet Union.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the Chamberlain government, in the autumn of 1938, pressed for a solution to the crisis in Czechoslovakia that would enable Germany to annex the Sudeten regions of Bohemia, which included within its population at least 50 percent German-speaking citizens. They never wavered from that policy and they pursued it with determination to the very end at the Munich Conference.

The position of the French, on the other hand, is much more interesting, much more nuanced and, perhaps, worth a more careful examination than the British policy. We do not know and we will probably never know precisely what motivated the French for one very good reason: the information and documents available are very sparse indeed. First of all, the French, unlike the British, do not permit minutes to be taken at cabinet meetings. Consequently, no records are available from those crucial meetings in the summer and fall of 1938, which determined French policy during the Czechoslovak crisis. Secondly, the diplomatic documents of the French Foreign Ministry at the Quai d'Orsay are very unreliable, largely because a considerable portion of them was destroyed in May 1939 to avoid capture by the German army approaching Paris. Those remaining were destroyed in the summer of 1944 when fire broke out in the French Foreign Ministry during the liberation of Paris. Thirdly, the memoirs of the policy makers at the time are simply without merit and cannot be relied upon for accuracy. The French Foreign Minister during this period, Georges Bonnet, consistently doctored documents and manipulated information in such a way as to make it virtually unreliable.

It is, therefore, a daunting prospect to piece together the disparate elements of French foreign policy during the Munich crisis. The French position is much more ambiguous than the British position. The British pursued appeasement continually. They had no interest in going to war over Czechoslovakia, and indeed they acted in a very logical and consistent manner given the general ideological and doctrinal position they took.
France, however, was an ally of Czechoslovakia. It signed an alliance with Czechoslovakia in 1924 and updated it again in the aftermath of the Locarno Conference of 1925, whereby France was committed, unlike Great Britain, to the defense of Czechoslovakia in the event of unprovoked aggression. The French continually reaffirmed their pledge to that alliance.

The important point to keep in mind, however, is that that alliance with Czechoslovakia was agreed upon in the first half of the 1920s, at a time when France was pursuing a very aggressive diplomatic policy which was aimed at straightjacketing Germany, i.e., Weimar Germany, not Hitler's Germany, through the establishment of bilateral connections with as many powers as France could possibly find in Eastern Europe. They entered into an alliance with Poland in 1921, with Czechoslovakia in 1924, and then, in the second half of the 1920s, France signed treaties of friendship with Yugoslavia and Rumania.

In short, the French were attempting to ring Germany with a set of hostile states. They did so for two reasons. First, they did not have the benefit of an alliance with the United States and with Great Britain, that is, security treaties that would commit the two Anglo-Saxon powers to the defense of France in the event of unprovoked aggression from Germany. This arrangement had been an objective of French diplomacy since the Paris Peace Conferences. It never came to pass, or more accurately, it was agreed to by the heads of state at the Paris Peace Conference, but never put into practice. Secondly, France did not have the benefit of the great alliance that she had in 1914 which had permitted her to foil the German war plan in the early months of World War I, viz., the alliance with Russia. Russia was traditionally regarded as the natural counterweight to German expansion in the East, and therefore a natural ally for France.

After World War I, of course, Soviet Russia was unavailable as an ally. She was racked with revolution, counterrevolution, and civil war. There was a number of disputes and conflicts between France and Lenin's Russia concerning pre-war debts which made it
impossible for Paris and Moscow to become allies. Finally, in 1935, France overcame her ideological hostility and signed a mutual defense treaty with the Soviet Union. The French, however, were unwilling or incapable of translating the 1935 treaty into an ironclad military alliance. Therefore, the Soviet attempt to involve the French in joint staff talks to coordinate strategy and tactics and to share intelligence came to naught.

Why did France fail to make good on the original intention of resurrecting the old Franco-Russian alliance and what are the implications of that for the position of Czechoslovakia in 1938? First, the French did not believe the Soviet Union would be a reliable ally. Russia had signed a separate peace with the Germans in March 1918, and had pulled out of the War. Paris expected that, in case of another war, Moscow would again sign a separate peace with the Germans and pull out. Second, the French did not consider the Red Army a very valuable commodity in 1938. In the Big Purge of 1937-8, Stalin had liquidated many of the best army and navy officers. The Red Army was in total disarray, and, a decimated force, an army without a head. Third, even if the Soviet Union could have been trusted, even if the Red Army had not experienced the trauma of the 1930s purges, the Soviet Union had no way of participating in a war against Germany because the two countries did not share a common frontier. Poland and Romania stood between the Soviet Union, Germany and Czechoslovakia. From the French point of view, therefore, the Red Army was a useless ally in the forthcoming conflict with Germany.

After Hitler heated up the temperature in the summer and fall of 1938, the French felt they were facing a hopeless diplomatic and military situation. Belgium, France's ally since 1920, had reneged on its commitment and had abrogated its alliance with France in 1936. On several occasions the Belgian government informed the French that, were French military forces to seek transit rights across Belgian territories in 1938 to come to the defense of their Czechoslovak ally in a war with Germany, the Belgian army would resist and go to war with France.
Yet the most important point, often overlooked by historians of the Munich agreement, is that by the end of the 1920s, the French had *de facto* abandoned the possibility of pursuing an offensive military policy in Eastern Europe. They abandoned this policy because of pressure, primarily from the British and the Americans, to give up the Rhineland as a buffer zone between Germany and France. The Rhineland enabled France to intervene in Western Germany, particularly in the Ruhr Valley, the center of Germany’s military and economic might. Once the French were persuaded to evacuate the region five years ahead of schedule, as a consequence of the Young Plan of 1929, and once they were persuaded to give up the right they had according to the Treaty of Versailles to prolong their occupation of the Rhineland should national security interests justify the action, they had, in effect, given up the possibility of playing a significant military role in Eastern Europe.

It is no coincidence that in 1929, the very year the French agreed to evacuate the Rhineland, they began construction of the Maginot line. From 1929 and throughout the 1930s, the French recognized that their only hope was in husbanding their military and economic resources, such as they were, behind a system of stationary fortifications, and protecting themselves against what the French called an "attaque brusquée," a sudden, surprise attack which would lead to a rapid disintegration of French defense. In case of war, French strategists decided to mobilize their resources, and to hope that the British and the Americans would come to their aid as they did in 1914 and 1917, respectively. By implication, the French gave up any hope of protecting their allies in Eastern Europe, particularly Czechoslovakia.

From that point on, French foreign policy towards Czechoslovakia was characterized by what can only be called an illusion: an ironclad diplomatic commitment to defend Czechoslovakia in the event she was subjected to an unprovoked aggression from Germany, coupled with a military strategy which emphasized the protection of French national territory and did not even provide for the kind of offensive warfare that alone would permit France to deter Germany in 1938 from meddling in Czechoslovak affairs.
When the Berchtesgaden, Godesberg, and ultimately Munich conferences were held between Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Hitler, in September 1938, the French had already given up even the slightest hope of affecting a military solution to the problem. The only solution which ultimately remained could be a political one. The political solution agreed upon was a tawdry, shabby affair from the standpoint of all concerned, including the French, who were embarrassed by it. But it spared them, they thought, a new war.

Make no mistake about it. Hitler wanted a war in 1938. He was willing to fight. He was eager to go to war and regarded Munich as a great diplomatic defeat after the conference broke up because it prevented him from going to war. He wanted to annihilate the Czechoslovak state; he did not want to slice off the Bohemian borderland, he wanted to destroy Czechoslovakia. Now he had to wait another six months to do that.

The French were not ready for war, did not want war. They certainly were not going to go to war to defend seven million Czechs against the grievances of 3.25 million Germans.

Throughout the negotiations between the British and the French in the summer and fall of 1938, there is, I think, a common theme: the French, taking a strong position of defending their Czechoslovak ally, the British, refusing to support them, and then the French using the pretext of that refusal to back down. Over and over again, M. Edouard Daladier, the Prime Minister of France, used the opposition of Mr. Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, to justify the underlying objective of French foreign policy since the advent of the 1930s: to seek a political solution to the embarrassing remnants of the early 1920s when France could still attempt to enforce her will on Germany and to seek a diplomatic solution which would enable Germany to cast off the shackles of Versailles, without leading to what everyone in France wanted to avoid: a repetition of the Great War.