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Stalin’s Diplomatic Maneuvers During the 1938 Czechoslovak Crisis

By Igor Lukes
The whole 1938 Czechoslovak crisis and especially the Munich Conference provoked a vast amount of historical writing. In fact, there is hardly an aspect of the drama that has not been discussed from many, often diametrically opposed, points of view. The scale of opinions on Munich is particularly broad. For some, it was a failure on the part of Western democracies to face an imminent danger, an illustration of the contention that appeasing aggressors is self-destructive. Others, however, side with the doyen of British historians, A.J.P. Taylor, and see in Munich a "triumph for British policy... a triumph for all that was best and most enlightened in British life."

My colleague, Professor William Keylor, examines the events in Central Europe which brought the world toward World War II as they were perceived by British and French decision-makers. I propose to look at the 1938 crisis from the perspective of the two important absentees at Munich, namely, the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. The dismantling of the Czechoslovak Republic from September 1938 to March 1939 has been described in a number of competent studies. But historians have only a fuzzy understanding of the Soviet role in the 1938 crisis. Moscow's options and intentions are hardly ever mentioned, even in specialized monographs on the Munich Conference.

Ignoring Stalin's role in the Czechoslovak crisis makes little sense; by 1938 the Soviet Union had established itself as a European force, ready to place its weight on the scales of power. Here are some of the questions that ought to be examined: was the Soviet Union prepared to live up to its obligations under the 1935 Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty? If so, was it ready to go beyond its obligations and assist Czechoslovakia unilaterally, that is, without France? What objectives did Stalin set for himself regarding Czechoslovakia? What means did he utilize to achieve his goals?
Sources: Disunity of Opinion

By the mid-1930s, Joseph Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union had developed into one of the most oppressive political systems in recorded history. Nevertheless, Moscow would emerge from the 1938 Czechoslovak Crisis in an excellent light. Its image would contrast sharply with that of the democracies, i.e., Great Britain and France, whose diplomats made no secret in the summer of 1938 that, in violation of their legally binding commitments, they were pushing Czechoslovak President Dr. Eduard Benes toward accepting Adolf Hitler's escalating demands and, eventually, capitulation.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, would go down in history as the one European power which was prepared to live up to its international obligations. Often quoted is the Soviet assurance to Prague that the Red Army was prepared to assist the Czechs "under any circumstances, even in spite of Munich." The authoritative History of Soviet Foreign Policy, edited by Boris Ponomaryov and Andrei Gromyko, no less, states that "at all stages of the Czechoslovak tragedy springing from the Munich betrayal, the Soviet Union was prepared to carry out its treaty obligations." Such assertions are clearly at variance with the way Soviet behavior was assessed by German diplomats who reported to Wilhelmstrasse that "the Soviet Union neither between September 19 and September 30 [1938] nor in the first half of September considered to start its military machinery and assist Czechoslovakia in a military manner."

These signs of disunity among German and Soviet observers become less surprising when one considers that even Czech politicians who were directly involved in Prague's efforts to manage the 1938 crisis disagree about Stalin's role. For instance, Dr. Benes paints a flattering portrait of Moscow's behavior in his Memoirs. On the other hand, Eduard Taborsky, Benes's secretary, thought that the Kremlin would not have and could not have assisted Czechoslovakia in any meaningful way.

It is also worth noting that evidence regarding the Soviet role, both positive and negative, comes from unpredictable parts of the political spectrum. Thus, Rudolf Beran, a
Czech banker and conservative politician known for his extreme anti-Sovietism, stated according to Pravda that "the only ally who remained faithful to Czechoslovakia was the Soviet Union." But Eugene Loebl, an important pre-World War II member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, comes out on the other side: "In 1938 I was in a position to know that there was no unilateral offer of Soviet aid whatsoever." Even this brief review of sources indicates that the Soviet role in events immediately preceding the 1938 September Conference has produced some unlikely allies.

In the following, I propose to examine four related areas of inquiry which have a direct bearing on the role of the Soviet Union during the 1938 Czechoslovak crisis. First, I will outline Benes's contribution to bringing the Soviet Union into the community of European states in order to create a balance of power in Central Europe after Hitler's success in 1933. The second section looks at the Anschluss and its impact on the defensibility of Czechoslovakia. In the third section, I focus on the so-called partial mobilization of the Czechoslovak Army in May 1938 and I try to determine what factors may have contributed to Prague's decision to call up reservists. Finally, I seek to identify Stalin's diplomatic maneuvers during the escalating Czechoslovak crisis in September 1938.

I.

Benes's Ostpolitik: 1933-1937

Had it not been for Adolf Hitler's assumption of power in January 1933, Czechoslovakia might have stayed separate from, and unentangled with, the Soviet Union. But after Hitler had ceased being a mere beer-hall Putschist and became the official representative of Germany, Benes knew he had to act. The rise of Hitlerism in Germany corresponds clearly with Benes's Ostpolitik. He was not alone. Journal de Geneve summed up Europe's reaction to Hitler's success: "The fear which the Hitlerian regime inspires everywhere in Europe, its racist doctrine and its nationalistic claims have recently made many a Government turn to the Soviets for support and even alliance. Democracies and autocracies
alike vie with one another in paying court to the Kremlin." This fully applied to Benes. In June 1934, disregarding all domestic and international complications, the Czechoslovak Government recognized the Soviet Government de jure, exactly twelve years after its de facto recognition.

In September, Benes achieved his next objective: the Soviet Union became a member of the League of Nations. In his first speech at the League's Assembly, Vyacheslav Molotov recorded with gratitude "the initiative taken by the French Government... and the President of the Council, Dr. Benes, in the furtherance of this initiative." Simultaneously, Benes started working toward achieving a mutual assistance pact with Moscow. Only a political connoisseur can appreciate fully the refined steps that Benes took. Instead of approaching the Soviet Union directly, Benes had first sought to bring Paris and Moscow together. This was meant to have two advantages. First, French involvement with the Soviet Union would stretch the field of Quai d'Orsay's operations so as to cover Czechoslovakia, left in a limbo by the Locarno Pact of 1925; second, the French action would legitimate Benes's own Soviet initiative, especially in the eyes of his opposition at home.

Overall, Benes's political legacy is one of crucial strategic defeats (1938, 1948) resulting, paradoxically, from scores of tactical successes. The Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance, signed in May 1935, was one of his many tactical victories. Only now, when the scene had been prepared and the principal actor insured, was Benes ready to go to Moscow himself. Merely a week after the signing of the Franco-Soviet Treaty, Benes was welcomed by Litvinov in Moscow "as an outstanding champion of international collaboration and of reinforcing universal peace."

The Franco-Soviet Treaty and the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty were closely intertwined: Article II of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty's Protocol of Signature stipulates that the Red Army would be required to march on behalf of Czechoslovakia "only insofar as... aid will be accorded by France to the party who is victim of the attack." It remains unclear who insisted on the stipulation. It may have been added by the careful Benes who feared
that, in an emergency, Moscow could seize the initiative, force a corridor through Romania, and occupy Czechoslovakia on the invitation of a "provisional government," consisting of a few Moscow-trained "revolutionary workers." This explanation is not water-tight.

The other possibility, namely, that the stipulation was inserted into the Treaty's text on the insistence of the Kremlin, appears plausible when one examines the changing tune Soviet sources. The authoritative Soviet Istoria diplomattii, published in 1945, states that Moscow had to make sure it would not be drawn into conflict under unfavorable conditions because it was "aware of the danger that France could place the burden of military assistance to Czechoslovakia on the Soviet Union, if the Soviet aid was not directly related to assistance by France." In conclusion, Istoria diplomattii views the stipulation as "a wise reservation of Soviet diplomacy." Jiri Hochman has pointed out that once this work was safely out of print, other Soviet publications, e.g., Istoria mezhdunarodnych otnoshenii of 1967, began developing a different theme: the stipulation was imposed on the Soviet negotiators by Benes. The Czechoslovak president so mistrusted the socialist Soviet state that, guided by his bourgeois background, he used the stipulation as a security fence preventing a closer cooperation between the Czechoslovak Republic and the Soviet Union.

The Czech delegation spent only nine days in the Soviet Union, but what one of its members had to share "confidentially" with the U.S. Ambassador in Prague upon his return deserves mention here: "Foreigners are given no opportunity of conversation with Russians," complained the Czech diplomat. Wherever the Czechoslovak delegation led by Benes went "they were followed by a host of secret agents. While in Moscow, the delegation felt as if they were living in prison." Such impressions notwithstanding, Benes was proud of his achievements. He had no illusions about the nature of the Soviet regime but he, as others, preferred literally anybody to Hitler.

Prague failed to understand especially the Poles: one day fighting, the next day signing non-aggressions pacts. Benes was particularly angered by the German-Polish Treaty of Non-Aggression of 1934. He viewed it as a catastrophe; it broke the isolation of
Nazi Germany, covered its eastern flank, and enabled the concentration of German military power against Czechoslovakia and Austria. Benes was convinced that he, contrary to the impulsive Poles, followed a historically correct, scientifically precise, dynamic, pragmatic, and logical foreign policy.

During his 1935 trip to Moscow, Benes had a long conversation with William Bullitt, the first U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union. He explained that Germany's rearmament had so altered the balance of power in Central Europe that it would be necessary to establish "the most intimate possible relations with the Soviet Union." He went on to say that the kernel of his entire policy was not to make the Soviet Union dominant in the region, but to produce a balance of power between the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy.

But what kind of Soviet Union was Benes inviting to coproduce a balance of power in Central Europe? Less than one month before Benes outlined his geopolitical views to Bullitt, Stalin had delivered a chilling speech at a graduation of Red Army officers. It described his treatment of the so-called opposition. It consisted, Stalin said, in "sweeping from the road all obstacles of any sort. True, in doing this, we had to give a drubbing to some... comrades along the way. But this cannot be helped. I must admit that I also took a hand in this matter. (Strong applause, shouts of 'Hurrah!')" At the end, the graduating officers heard a story from Stalin, the point of which was that horses were more valuable than people. "Why should we pity people?" Siberian peasants once asked Stalin, "we can always make people. But a horse? Just try to make a horse." Without a doubt, such sentiments found a captive audience in Adolf Hitler.

The spirit of Rapallo had suffered many setbacks after Hitler's Machtübernahme in 1933, but Stalin never gave up the view that Russia and Germany were bound by a special relationship. Many in Germany shared this sentiment. For instance, Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, the German Ambassador in Moscow, spoke of Schicksalgemeinschaft between Germany and the great Eastern Power. Despite Berlin's unbridled anti-Bolshevik propaganda, Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky stated at the height of the campaign that the
"Reichswehr has been the teacher of the Red Army and that will never be forgotten." The young Marshal remained at the forefront of Soviet signalling to Berlin through 1935, when Maxim Litvinov joined in, proposing a toast to the "restoration of the old friendship." And to top it off, shortly before the end of 1935, the Soviet charge d'affaires in Berlin offered the Germans a bilateral pact of non-aggression, independent of any French or Czechoslovak commitments and obligations. Although the Germans turned down the offer, these were the foundations of the Stalin-Hitler Pact of August 1939.

By 1935, Hitler accelerated his pace. The Nuremberg Laws deprived Jews of all civil as well as human rights. In violation of the Versailles provisions, open military training was reintroduced in Germany and the British, instead of taking measures against this illegal act, signed a naval agreement which implicitly accepted, if not legitimated, this violation. Mussolini attacked Ethiopia in October 1935. By 1936 Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland and got involved in a bloody civil war in Spain. Equally dramatic developments occurred in the Far East.

Under such circumstances, Prague was watching Moscow's behavior more and more closely. The news from the East was confusing. On the one hand, Benes learned about Tukhachevsky's conversation with Bullitt in which the Marshal had stated openly that "at the present moment the Soviet Union would be unable to bring any military aid to Czechoslovakia in case of German attack." Prague also knew that Litvinov continued negotiations in Berlin for a 500 million mark credit. This had to have a chilling effect on the Czechoslovak president.

On the other hand, Moscow told Benes indirectly, via Warsaw, that "Czechoslovakia can count on a full-scale Soviet help under any circumstances." This seemed to be confirmed publicly when Tukhachevsky told the Central Committee in January 1936 that the Red Army was prepared to fight simultaneously on Far Eastern and Western fronts. Such war-like élan was further reaffirmed by Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, who stipulated that the Red Army took the offensive as its doctrine. He
warned in September 1936 that the Soviet Union, far from appeasing any potential aggressor, would never allow the enemy to enter the Soviet Union. Instead, the Red Army was going to "strike him on the territory whence he came."

The Soviets exposed the already disoriented President Benes to a barrage of conflicting information; in fact, this tactic developed into a full-scale Soviet policy toward Prague. One consequence was that the country's diplomats, never among the most popular in Western European capitals, now lost momentum and began badly failing in the struggle for public opinion in France and Great Britain. Despite the Nuremberg Laws, the Kristallnacht, and the Long Knives, which should have taught him about the nature of Hitler's Reich, William E. Dodd, the U.S. Ambassador to Berlin, opened his official report to Washington on Czechoslovak-German problems with this revealing sentence: "I have the honor to report that Czechoslovak-German relations continue to be troubled by incidents mostly of Czechoslovak making."

What was even worse from Prague's point of view was the emergence of the myth that Czechoslovakia had become Stalin's Flugzeugmutterschiff. And it seemed that no amount of Czech arguments to the contrary was going to convince the world. At one point Prague felt so desperate that the German Military Attaché and several of his colleagues from the diplomatic community in Prague were offered open inspections of any airport in the country, no matter how sensitive. Nevertheless, from 1935 to the Anschluss, many in Europe lived under the impression that Stalin was building airfields in Czechoslovakia and that they were to serve as starting points for previously deployed Soviet bombers in an attack on Europe. This myth, and myth it was, was rendered even more serious by the fact that the Soviets had succeeded in building up enormous airborne army reserves by 1936. In September, Pravda described with excitement and pride one "spectacular operation involving a parachute jump and the reassembly, in battle formation, of 1,200 men."

If foreign observers found the Red Army to be quite impressive in 1936, their views changed dramatically the next year. Between May 1937 and September 1938 the of-
ficer corps of the Red Army was virtually decimated by Joseph Stalin's purge. As many as 
65% of all higher officers and 15% of all lower officers were executed or driven to suicide. 
There is no question that the mass slaughter weakened the Red Army substantially and 
caused its importance in European affairs to decline sharply. The purge did not weaken 
only the Soviet Union. It indirectly weakened also Vienna and Prague. The Soviet Union, 
upon which Benes relied to coproduce a balance of power in Central Europe, now seemed 
to be in the process of committing a multiple public hara-kiri. Ironically, Benes was tricked 
into playing a role in the purge of the Red Army. On this, more below.

From then on, Czechoslovakia's position would get only worse. By the end of 
1937, the Times of London began expressing the idea that Hitler's irritation with 
Czechoslovakia was well-founded. After several explicitly anti-Czechoslovak articles, Hu- 
bert Ripka, a man with excellent connections in the Prague Government, summed up the 
situation: "One must assume that the pro-German British would not care if Czechoslovakia 
would surrender and thus substantially increase the power and influence of Germany 
throughout the world."

II.

1938: The Anschluß

In early 1938, a French editor asked Litvinov whether the Soviet Union would 
consider a reorientation of its foreign policy. Litvinov could not have been more honest: 
"Why not?" And is there a possibility of a rapprochement with Germany? "Why not?" It 
would require, he continued, "merely a note to the German Government stating that the 
Soviet Government would offer no opposition to German designs in Europe."

Hitler occupied Austria on 13 March 1938. The Wehrmacht showed itself a poor 
performer on the Austrian "battlefield," where the only obstacles were too enthusiastic 
crowds of Austrian Nazis who rushed to the streets to throw flowers in the path of German 
mechanized columns, thereby slowing down their advance. Yet, those very columns man-
aged to break down near Linz because of a minor snowstorm. Czech diplomats seized on this and tried to portray the Anschluss as a failure. Nevertheless, it was clear to all military-minded people in Czechoslovakia that the new situation was disastrous: Hitler in Austria meant that the country's undefended soft underbelly was exposed to a surgical strike by the Wehrmacht.

Coincidentally, when Frantisek Moravec, the Chief of Czechoslovak Military Intelligence, was up for promotion to a full colonel in 1936, he had to appear before a board of General Staff officers. He was given a fictitious strategic situation and expected to demonstrate his ability to make correct judgements, arrive at swift decisions, and issue the appropriate orders to troops at his disposal. The scenario was as follows: "Czechoslovakia has been attacked by Germany. Hungary and Austria are also hostile. Poland still neutral, but potentially hostile. France has not mobilized yet and the Little Entente has only started. Present military solution for Czechoslovakia." The candidate answered in one sentence: "The problem has no military solution." Since Moravec was in fact promoted, despite his refusal to engage the enemy militarily under the given circumstances, it seems that the General Staff of the Czechoslovak Army shared his pessimistic view. Yet, after the Anschluss the reality was worse than the 1936 worst-case scenario.

Benes had little hope that his country was going to defend itself militarily. But he was not resigned. First of all, he had faith in his "scientifically" designed system of international treaties and, secondly, he was convinced that Hitler's domestic situation was far from stable. He told Colonel Moravec that "such regimes as Hitler's, based on violence and oriented toward the lowest human instincts, must fall after the first failure. That is a sociological law." But who was going to bring about Hitler's first failure?

1938: After the Anschluss

Immediately after the Anschluss, Moscow intensified its barrage of conflicting information targeted at Benes and his French ally. For instance, Soviet diplomats in Paris
assured the French Prime Minister that the Soviet Union would go immediately to Czechoslovakia's assistance if France did so, in case of attack by Germany. In Warsaw, however, the Soviets were telling a different story: they would march if France did, but a corridor would have to be *provided* for their assistance to Czechoslovakia. In Moscow, Litvinov told U.S. Ambassador Joseph Davies that the Red Army might go to the assistance of Czechoslovakia *even though France did not*. Meanwhile, influential members of the French communist party were spreading yet another story in diplomatic circles: the Soviet Union would not fight for Czechoslovakia, and Germany would therefore gain mastery over the region without provoking a general war. And finally, Litvinov, less than a week after his surprising suggestion of unilateral Soviet assistance, informed the U.S. Ambassador that France had no confidence in the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union had no confidence in France, and Czechoslovakia would surrender voluntarily. Prague picked up most of such reports and found them, of course, confusing and contradictory. As if this was not enough, Ward Price, a British journalist, arrived in Prague and told the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry that President Benes should fly to Berlin, kneel before the *Führer* and agree to Czechoslovakia being limited to small areas around Prague.

Benes tried to crack the mystery of the Soviet position in case of a German attack upon Czechoslovakia. He instructed his Ambassador in Moscow, Zdenek Fierlinger, to force the Soviets to reveal their cards. But Fierlinger could report only more of the same: conflicting signals. On March 15, Litvinov had only a series of conditions for the Czech Ambassador: if France did not evade, if she gave Germany a direct and effective rebuff, then Britain would be compelled to follow, like it or not. And the Soviet Union? Nobody had ever been able to reproach the Soviet Union with evading its international obligations. Yet, only one day later, on March 16, Litvinov sounded upbeat: he stated to Fierlinger that the Soviet Union would carry out its treaty obligations toward Czechoslovakia "as a matter of course." In reply to a further question, regarding how the USSR could help, he replied that some sort of corridor was certain to be found.
Finally, on 17 March, Litvinov stated that his government was prepared to "join in collective action" against aggression. And what kind of collective action? Litvinov spelled it out: the Soviet government would "proceed immediately to discuss practical measures... with other Powers in the League of Nations or outside it." If the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe pounced at Czech, Moravian, and Slovak cities, Benes was hoping for meaningful military assistance, not debates in Geneva. Furthermore, Litvinov's promise to bring Czechoslovakia's case before the League was in violation of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of 1935; Article II of the Treaty imposes on the Parties the legal obligation "immediately to come to each other's aid and assistance" in the case of "an unprovoked aggression on the part of a European State." At a minimum, Article I of the Treaty calls on the Parties to undertake "immediate consultation" if one of them should be threatened or in danger of aggression from any European state. Therefore, Litvinov's promise to get involved in a collective action, particularly given the sorry record of the League of Nations with regard to the Italian aggression in Ethiopia and the Civil War in Spain, not to mention the conflicts in the Far East, was really a slap across Benes's face.

III.

May 1938

Perusal of contemporary Czech newspapers and periodicals shows that there was little if any public despairing in May 1938. In fact, Prague felt quite confident. There were as yet no serious indications that France would disregard its obligations toward Czechoslovakia, a country perceived by many to have been a French creation. And the Soviet Union accelerated its involvement in the developing Czechoslovak crisis. As far as Soviet military assistance was concerned, it was hoped that it would take the shape of air support. The Red Air Force was thought of highly, but the effectiveness of the Red Army after its decapitation in the Big Purge was deemed doubtful, certainly outside the Soviet Union. Furthermore, there was a feeling in Prague, not shared by most members of the small but
prestigious Communist Party, that if the Red Army actually marched into Czechoslovakia, the country would suffer as much hardship from the "hordes of troops... as from the invading force," according to a U.S. Embassy report.

Soviet diplomats in several European capitals, almost in a united voice, offered variations on one major theme: the situation was grave, but not hopeless. It could be improved only if all Powers, including the Soviet Union, joined in a system directed against Hitler's Third Reich. I will try to demonstrate that Moscow wanted to create such a system, drive it into conflict with Hitler--and stand aside.

In March, Benes and others in Prague had been saying that the Red Army's assistance, partly because of the Big Purge, had ceased being a serious factor in their decision-making. By May, however, there was a new sense of optimism regarding the Soviet card in the Czech foreign affairs community. It was not a coincidence. On 8 May, Mikhail Kalinin, titular head of the Soviet Union, assured a visiting Czechoslovak delegation that Moscow would fulfill its treaty obligations toward Czechoslovakia and France "to the last letter." There may have been some other positive Soviet signals to Benes, because sometime before 13 May, the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry had indicated to U.S. diplomats its "positive belief" that Moscow would come to the assistance of Czechoslovakia within twenty-four hours. Prague also believed that the recent visit to Bucharest by the Soviet Ambassador to Prague, Sergei Alexandrovsky, was designed to reach a Soviet-Romanian understanding regarding the transfer of Soviet troops over Romanian territory to Czechoslovakia in case of war. All in all, Benes and his friends in the Prague Castle probably shared the Soviet line that the situation was grave, but not hopeless.

**The Czechoslovak "Partial" May 1938 Mobilization**

The "partial" mobilization of 20-21 May, 1938, played an important role in the whole Munich drama. Its analysis is crucial for an understanding of Stalin's diplomatic maneuvers during the Czechoslovak crisis. Interestingly, it is hardly ever mentioned in
Soviet accounts of the crisis. For instance, Ambassador Maiski omits the event altogether in a volume of some 530 pages.

Claiming hostile military maneuvers by the Wehrmacht during the night of 20-21 May, Czechoslovakia called up one year-class of reservists and five classes of technical troops, the latter consisting of 47,000 men in aircraft and security services, 24,000 in the SOS (Straz obrany statu, State defense guard), and 25,000 specialists. The reservists, together with the standing Army, marched into the Sudetenland and occupied the front-line fortifications. They could hold the frontier and prevent a possible German surprise attack. If Hitler were to move there would be a shooting war. The reservists reported for duty promptly and with enthusiasm; after many months of passivity, uncertainty, and humiliation the course now seemed clear: Czechoslovakia was not Austria, it was not going to be wiped out without an organized, liberty-or-death kind of defense.

The May mobilization turned out to have had a positive influence upon the communal and municipal elections which took place on 22 May. The vote was decisively against Radical Right parties, while anti-Fascist parties gained. The National Socialists, who were generally thought to have the support of President Benes, ended up with a bloc of 35%.

However, having mobilized, Prague now discovered to its great embarrassment that the Wehrmacht had made no aggressive moves whatsoever. It resorted to fabrications; for instance, the Czechoslovak Military Attaché, Colonel Hron, claimed that German troops had been moving toward the Czechoslovak frontiers, but he failed to provide any basis for his assertion. The truth was that, for once, Hitler was neither a liar nor an aggressor. The British Military Attaché posted in Prague, Colonel H.C.T. Strange, a loyal friend of the democratic cause, drove all around Saxony and Silesia, but found no traces of military movements. German documents captured at the end of the War also demonstrate that in May 1938 there had been no Wehrmacht offensive in the making.
owever, having mobilized, Prague now discovered to its great embarrassment that the *Wehrmacht* had made no aggressive moves whatsoever. It resorted to fabrications; for instance, the Czechoslovak Military Attaché, Colonel Hron, claimed that German troops had been moving toward the Czechoslovak frontiers, but he failed to provide any basis for his assertion. The truth was that, for once, Hitler was neither a liar nor an aggressor. The British Military Attaché posted in Prague, Colonel H.C.T. Stronge, a loyal friend of the democratic cause, drove all around Saxony and Silesia, but found no traces of military movements. German documents captured at the end of the War also demonstrate that in May 1938 there had been no *Wehrmacht* offensive in the making.

The May mobilization made a most dramatic impact on Adolf Hitler. The swift and enthusiastic Czech strategic troop concentration brought about, Berlin felt, a loss of German prestige. Enraged and humiliated, Hitler sat down to rewrite the Operation Green directive, that is, the German plan for Czechoslovakia's destruction. He crossed out the first sentence ("It is not my intention to smash Czechoslovakia by military action. . .") and wrote instead: "It is my unalterable intention to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the nearest future." This alone attests to the importance of the May mobilization and it is intriguing that the cause of it is not so obvious.

"What is the explanation of this mysterious episode?" asks A.J.P. Taylor, "Certainly not the Russians who were as surprised as everybody else." I believe that Taylor's statement is in error and that Moscow in fact may have manipulated Prague into the May mobilization.

The key to Soviet thinking can possibly be found in an 11 May conversation between Litvinov and a Czech diplomat, Arnost Heidrich, in Geneva. In a rare fit of glasnost', the Soviet diplomat described to Heidrich Moscow's overall approach to the Czechoslovak crisis. Soviet leaders did not "intend to enter the coming war at the beginning." Instead, they were going to "stand by until near the end when they would be able to step in" and arrange the remnants of the inferno according to Soviet designs.
Even if the account of Litvinov's talk with Heidrich is correct, and even if Litvinov was telling the truth, we still do not know exactly how the Soviet Union would have been able to manipulate Prague into mobilizing against a nonexistent German offensive. It ought to be considered that the Czechoslovak-Soviet contacts were not merely on the diplomatic level, via Sergei Alexandrovsky in Prague or Fierlinger in Moscow. There was also Klement Gottwald, the Czechoslovak Communist Party boss, who travelled frequently between the two capitals and was received by Benes at the height of the crisis.

*The May Mobilization and Soviet Intelligence*

There was one other channel of communication between Prague and Moscow: their intelligence services. Colonel Frantisek Moravec asserts in his *Memoirs* that the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of 1935 contained a secret protocol on cooperation in the intelligence field. In 1936, on the basis of this agreement, Moravec, and other officers from the Czechoslovak Army's Second Bureau (Military Intelligence), were ordered by the General Staff to travel to Moscow.

A group of six Czech intelligence officers arrived in Moscow in the summer of 1936. They were received at the train station by General Uritsky, and introduced to Marshal Tukhachevsky, who welcomed the Czechs "as representatives of our ally. . . . You are the first foreigners who will enter [the] building [of our *Rozvedka*, the espionage service]." The purpose of the meeting was, *inter alia*, for the two parties to share information about the *Wehrmacht* and to agree about the most appropriate ways for the parties to cooperate in gathering and exchanging information of an urgent nature.

The Soviets gave away virtually nothing during the meeting, partly, Colonel Moravec suspected, because they were both deceitful and ignorant. But they presented many tall orders. Uritsky, for instance, suggested that, to begin with, one hundred Soviet intelligence officers should be "trained, briefed and prepared" in Czechoslovakia and thence deployed as resident-agents, mostly to Germany. This seemed too much for the Czech ne-
gotiators, who finally agreed to form one joint intelligence center in Prague, which was to be permanently staffed by one Soviet intelligence officer whose support personnel would be Czech. Moravec felt good about having brought the original Soviet request for one hundred intelligence officers down to one. But he dreaded how such cooperation, fruitless from Prague's perspective, was going to influence Czechoslovak relations with Poland. His concern, of course, was justified. Soon after his return from Moscow, Poland, obviously not without its sources in the Soviet capital, strongly protested that Czechoslovakia allowed a Soviet intelligence operation against Poland from Czechoslovak territory. Warsaw rejected any claims of Czech innocence and recalled its liaison intelligence officer.

Colonel Moravec determined that Soviet military intelligence was relying mostly on ideological agents, primarily members of the German Communist Party. But after three years of concentrated efforts by the Gestapo, German communists could hardly have gained and maintained access to sensitive military and intelligence sources. And the Big Purge, of course, did not bypass Soviet intelligence. General Uritsky himself fell into the bottomless pit of the Stalin purge less than a year after Moravec had met him in the summer of 1936.

Nevertheless, in the fall of 1936, the first Soviet officer arrived in Prague, and Moscow put the new base for intelligence operations to good use almost instantly. In October, the Soviets requested and received Czechoslovak assistance in infiltrating Soviet agents to Western Europe. President Benes and Foreign Minister Kamil Krofta agreed to equip the Soviets with Czechoslovak passports. On occasion, Czech intelligence officers even travelled with the Soviets, who lacked the sophistication of international travellers, to put it mildly. Moravec recalls that, during one operation, his service had helped to infiltrate 150 Soviet officers to Western Europe; of these, 120 actually made it, others having been returned by the vigilant Swiss.

President Benes and Prime Minister Krofta were involved in another operation, one with serious implications for the Red Army, the Soviet Union, but also Czechoslovakia.
Ivan Pfaff and Walter Laqueur have shown that throughout 1936, the Czechs had been approached by a variety of less than sincere characters, including White Russian double and triple agents, German diplomats, and Nazis, such as Hermann Goering and the Gestapo chief Heinrich Müller. They offered documents implicating Marshal Tukhachevsky as head of a large Red Army conspiracy, in cahoots with certain Wehrmacht elements, against Stalin. It seems more than likely that Marshal Tukhachevsky and some of his colleagues thought of the Rapallo period with nostalgia and regretted the breakdown of Soviet-German cooperation, particularly in the military area. But the documents made available to Benes had been forged. There is now evidence indicating that in February 1937 a White Russian General, Nikolai Skoblin, met with Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the SS secret service, and the two designed a disinformation operation targeting Tukhachevsky. Their material was delivered to the Czechs.

In late April and early May 1937, there were four meetings between Benes, Krofta and the Soviet Ambassador in Prague, Sergei Alexandrovsky. The Czechs, convinced that they were acting to protect their Soviet ally, presented the "evidence" against Marshal Tukhachevsky to the Soviet Ambassador. Since Skoblin was a Soviet agent and because Tukhachevsky had been implicated already in the Pyatakov-Radek Trial, it is almost certain that Stalin was not the innocent victim of a German diabolical disinformation operation. Instead, he used the Skoblin-Heydrich forgeries to trigger the 1937 Purge of the Red Army, knowing full well that the evidence had been forged. Of course, only Stalin knew why he was doing it.

Colonel Moravec had a distinctly low opinion of the Soviet military intelligence. It seemed unsophisticated, lacking in basic political and military understanding of Germany. That may well be so, but it was not the whole picture. The Rote Kapalle, one of the most successful intelligence operations of World War II, could not have been put together and conducted by the primitives Moravec describes. A history of the organization suggests that around 1937 or 1938, Le Grand Chef of the Rote Kapelle, Leopold Trepper, discussed the
creation of a network in Czechoslovakia. Contacts between the Czechoslovak and Soviet intelligence services continued even after Colonel, later General, Frantisek Moravec moved his service to London in March 1939. Finally, Rudolf Roessler, a.k.a. Lucy, one of the best Soviet World War II agents, was partly handled by the Czechoslovak intelligence service representative in Switzerland, Karel Sedlacek, a.k.a. Simpson. Roessler was in fact so close with the Czechoslovak service that he agreed to be reactivated two years after the war. The Swiss arrested him for espionage, not for the first time, in March 1953, the month Stalin died.

**Did Prague Mobilize in May on a Soviet Tip?**

Here is how the political and intelligence channels between Prague and Moscow may have been used to bring about a Czechoslovak mobilization. According to one source, on 23 April, the Czechs had provided "a number" of Soviet intelligence agents with facilities to cross clandestinely into Germany. The demand was granted. On 15 May, the U.S. and French Ambassadors in Moscow, Davies and Coulondre, were told by the Soviets that the Wehrmacht was on the point of invading Czechoslovakia. On 20 May, Soviet intelligence officers started returning from Germany en masse via Czechoslovakia. Each had the same story to tell: the Wehrmacht is about to attack Czechoslovakia. That very night Prague declared the "partial" mobilization.

The argument that Prague mobilized in May as a result of Soviet disinformation is strengthened considerably when one examines the Soviet press. The mobilization was reported by TASS on 22 May; the agency simply stated that the Czechoslovak Government had called up a class of reservists and sent military units to the German frontier. No other comment was offered. The next day, Soviet media resorted to the "second degree." Moscow papers carried news dispatches under foreign date lines on the Czech situation, but refrained from any editorial comment. Stalin was waiting for the situation to develop in one
way or another, while preserving for himself the complete freedom to choose sides once the dust had begun to settle down.

On 23 May, a Soviet official told the U.S. Ambassador that it would be an error to expect a repetition of the Austrian affair, "for Czechoslovakia would fight." Meanwhile, the Czechoslovak Ambassador in Moscow "received renewed assurances that the Soviet Government will do its utmost to assist Czechoslovakia." On 24 May, four days after the mobilization, still not a word from the Kremlin appeared in the official press. The next day, Pravda announced that should Hitler choose to attack, "the direct responsibility will rest upon the Governments of England and France." The paper said nothing about the attitude of the Soviet Union.

Finally, on 26 May, the Kremlin published its opinion. Izvestia brought out an article which declared sympathy with the timely mobilization. It was one of the reasons why Hitler had to postpone his aggression. The other was the determination of the French to carry out their obligations. The article concluded: "the fact that no one doubts the loyalty of the USSR to the obligation which it has assumed played a tremendous role."

The Soviet silence during the gravest crisis so far was well understood by German observers in Moscow. Ambassador Count Friedrich Werner von Schulenburg's summary of the Soviet attitude toward the May mobilization stated that Soviet diplomacy made every effort in Paris, London, and Prague to influence the respective governments and was likely "to have recommended an energetic course of action and a firm attitude toward Germany."

The Czechoslovak Ambassador in Moscow, reported Schulenburg, "kept in constant touch with Litvinov. . . . It looks as if Litvinov advised the Czechoslovak Government in these conversations as well as through the Soviet Minister in Prague."

At the same time, Schulenburg reported, the Soviet Union would be unwilling to march on behalf of Czechoslovakia. After all, "The Soviet Government. . . is hardly likely to allow the Red Army, created for its own protection and to further world revolution, to march in defense of a bourgeois state." There is other evidence that the Kremlin had at-
tempted to manipulate Prague into a conflict with Hitler. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow reported on 22 May that Fierlinger, the Czechoslovak Ambassador in Moscow, "was in constant touch with the Soviet authorities who were manifesting 'one hundred percent pessimism' on the possibility that war could be avoided." The report then stated that in Fierlinger's view the Soviets had in fact already taken "certain military measures."

The Soviet Union's *modus operandi* during the May crisis was based on the premise that a European war was not to be feared, as long as it took place outside the Soviet Union. Stalin did not fear war. He feared isolation which would sooner or later result in an attack on the Soviet Union. Moscow had realized by April and May that its influence upon international affairs began decreasing as a result of the Red Army purge, the suspicious political trials, and the failure in Spain.

Therefore, the Kremlin struggled to bring about or at least to accelerate the outbreak of the Czechoslovak-German war. Prague was falsely informed by the Soviet Union by diplomatic as well as intelligence channels that Hitler would attack any minute. Stalin expected that, possibly, the unprovoked Czechoslovak mobilization would make the impulsive Hitler unleash the *Wehrmacht* and *Luftwaffe* on Prague; France, and eventually, Great Britain would declare war on Hitler; and the Soviet Union could sit, wait, watch, choose and join at the right time on the right side. Such a conflict outside the Soviet Union's border appeared to be a guarantee against a Franco-British-German rapprochement, which would constitute the greatest threat to Soviet security. No definitive proof that Moscow had deliberately manipulated Prague into mobilizing in May has been presented. Therefore, the above remains merely a working hypothesis.

**IV.**

*European Diplomacy on the Road to Munich*

To stress their preference for diplomatic over military solutions, the British dispatched to Prague Lord Runciman who was supposed to find a peaceful solution to the
Czechoslovak-German conflict. He arrived in early August and it was a bad omen that the British Ambassador in Prague, Basil Newton, insisted on bringing to the train station and introducing to members of the Runciman mission Messrs. Ernst Kundt and Wilhelm Sebekovsky of the Sudeten German Party.

That proved to be only the beginning. It transpired that some members of the Runciman group felt free to return the Nazi salute, and Andor Hencke, Counselor of the German Embassy in Prague, reported to Berlin that Lord Runciman's secretary had said that he had a "great understanding for the Sudeten German Party's attitude of dislike for the Jews in Czechoslovakia, whom he described as not comparable with British Jews." Such sentiments were not rare.

In the summer of 1938, diplomatic reports from London, Paris, Berlin, and other important European centers seemed almost unanimous in their mistrust of Prague, cautious sympathy for the German demands, and overwhelming desire to prevent war, cost what it may. In June 1938, G.S. Messersmith, U.S. Ambassador to Vienna, cabled to Washington a strictly confidential memorandum, which presents a devastating portrait of his diplomatic colleagues. Writing about Sir Nevile Henderson, the British Ambassador in Berlin, Messersmith warned that he was not the only Englishman expressing the view that "there was no excuse for the existence of Austria and Czechoslovakia." Newton, the British Ambassador in Prague, expressed "much the same view as Henderson was expressing in Berlin." Hadow of the British Legation in Prague, also stated that "Austria and Czechoslovakia had no right to separate existence." He believed that German hegemony in Southeastern Europe was not only inevitable, but desirable. The British Ambassador in Paris stated flatly that "Churchill was a fool and his present activities criminal."

**September 1938**

Throughout August, Stalin continued exposing President Benes to conflicting signals regarding Soviet behavior in case of a Czechoslovak-German war. Soviet diplomats
stationed in European capitals issued one statement after another, often full of semantic subtleties, leaving Prague confused. Both the French and the Czechs tried to get a clearer picture of Moscow's plans in case of a shooting war; they were told, correctly, that France was under an obligation to assist Czechoslovakia irrespective of Soviet help.

Several U.S. diplomatic sources reported to Washington that the aim of the Soviet Union seemed to be "to create a second Spain" in Czechoslovakia. The Soviet press and official sources remained virtually silent regarding Soviet options in case of an unprovoked German attack on Czechoslovakia. But members of the Comintern, mainly in France, began spreading wild, but invariably optimistic, rumors that the Red Army would "immediately march to aid Czechoslovakia." Another fabrication, discussed passionately by Western diplomats from Moscow to London, involved the story that Stalin had warned Prague: if any further concessions are made to Berlin the Soviet Union would cease feeling bound by the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of 1935. At the same time, rumors were being spread throughout Europe that the Soviet Air Force had begun delivering bombers to Czechoslovakia. None of that was true.

Unofficially, the Soviet Union sought to portray itself as ready to fight on Czechoslovakia's behalf or, at a minimum, to join an anti-Hitler front. Officially, Soviet diplomacy tried to achieve a seat for itself in a Munich-like conference. The Czechoslovak Ambassador, Fierlinger, saw Litvinov on 5 September to ascertain what the Soviet Union might do in case of a German attack. Litvinov told him that Soviet plans could be discussed, but that the League of Nations could not be ignored. The problem, Fierlinger was advised, "must be discussed by all parties involved." This was a resurrection of an old theme; but what seemed merely unfortunate in March had a devastating effect upon Benes in September.

On 12 September, Hitler delivered his famous Nuremberg speech. In reference to the Sudeten Germans of Czechoslovakia, Hitler stressed he was in "no way willing that here in the heart of Germany through the dexterity of other statesmen a second Palestine
should be permitted to arise. The poor Arabs are defenseless and perhaps deserted. The Germans in Czechoslovakia are neither defenceless nor are they deserted, and folk should take notice of that fact." And the Soviet response to the Nuremberg speech? It was not mentioned in any Moscow newspapers.

Only two days after the Nuremberg speech, Moscow came up with a devastating suggestion: with no reference to Hitler’s threats to their Czechoslovak ally and no mention of a possible common front against Hitler, the Soviet Union now suggested an international conference dealing with Czechoslovakia. "At last even in London," writes *Journal of Moscow*, "the necessity of a consultation between France, England, and the Soviet Union on the Czech problem with the eventual participation of the U.S. is spoken of." Naturally, this was again in direct violation of the terms of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of 1935.

Soviet intentions toward Czechoslovakia were further put to test after the Franco-British ultimatum of 19 September. On that day, France and Great Britain suggested that Benes give up the Sudeten territory to Hitler: "Czechoslovakia’s vital interests cannot effectively be assured unless these areas are now transferred to the Reich." With this document before him, Benes sent for Alexandrovsky, the Soviet Minister in Prague. There was one crucial question he had to ask: "What will be the attitude of the Soviet Union if France refuses to fulfill her obligations?" This is Benes’s version of the question. Alexandrovsky recorded a different type of question, one inquiring whether the USSR was going to assist Czechoslovakia as a member of the League of Nations on the basis of the League’s Covenant. It does not take much speculation to see that Alexandrovsky’s version makes little sense. Benes needed military assistance from an ally who was bound by the Treaty of 1935, not assurances from a member of the notoriously slow and inefficient League.

Although the Soviet Embassy received a response from Moscow on 20 September in the afternoon, Alexandrovsky went to see Benes only the next day. The delay was crucial. Benes had first rejected the Franco-British ultimatum on 20 September at 7 p.m. But seven hours later, reacting, in part, to another visit by the British and French Ambassadors,
amidst tears, Benes decided to give up. *Now was the time* for Alexandrovsky to show up with his answer. Since Benes had already given up, and because the crucial question had been distorted, Stalin had nothing to lose by saying "yes, in every respect!" This was a sophisticated diplomatic maneuver which gave the Soviet side the appearance of a positive initiative without any responsibility. Moscow was going to repeat this trick a few days later.

For the moment, it continued the pattern of conflicting signals. On 21 September, Litvinov spoke in Geneva. The Soviet Union, he told the League of Nations, was going to render Czechoslovakia immediate and effective aid "if France, loyal to her obligations, rendered similar assistance. . . ." The next day, the Soviet government effectively warned Poland against seeking to exploit the Czechoslovak crisis by grabbing a chunk of territory for itself. But on 24 September, the Soviet Union pointedly ignored Romania's decision to allow a transfer of Soviet troops, guns and ammunition from the Soviet Union to Czechoslovakia across Romanian territory. "The Royal Government of Romania," said the official note from Bucharest to Litvinov, "recognizes solemnly and objectively the right of transfer by rail of the Red Army across Romania to Czechoslovakia, including the transport of men, light as well as heavy weaponry, munitions and provisions of all kinds." The note further urged the Soviets to commence the transfer immediately upon Germany's attack on Czechoslovakia. Moscow did not respond. The existence of this document, surfaced by Ivan Pfaff and published by Jiri Hochman in his 1982 dissertation, has never been acknowledged by the Soviet Union.

Although Benes had all but surrendered on 21 September, two days later he changed his mind. In response to a British and French communication and a tremendous domestic desire to fight German Nazism with good Czech weapons and behind solid Czechoslovak fortifications, the Czechoslovak government declared a general mobilization. In the Czech districts of Bohemia and Moravia, the response of the soldiers was overwhelming. The U.S. Embassy described railroad stations full of "cheering, laughing
crowds packed into trains frontierwards . . . . There was no confusion, but everyone fell into places with utmost promptitude." Other reports stated that men were at their posts within six hours. There were in fact serious problems with the German recruits in the Czechoslovak Army, but for the moment observers saw a fine, strong, and gung-ho army ready to do the utmost in defense of liberty.

The general mobilization of 23 September had a positive effect throughout Czechoslovakia. Two days later Jan Masaryk, Prague's Minister in London, rejected the Godesberg Memorandum of 23 September in which Hitler demanded a Czechoslovak evacuation of the Sudeten regions, broadly defined, within five days. Masaryk told the British Foreign Office that Hitler's demands were "absolutely and unconditionally unacceptable," and pointed out that the Czechs would "not be a nation of slaves." Even Chamberlain, who probably had gone to Godesberg prepared to surrender, was appalled by the extent as well as the form of Hitler's demands. Consequently, they were rejected by Prague, but also by London and Paris.

However, even before Masaryk announced in London Prague's rejection of the Godesberg platform, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had sent a personal note to Hitler in the evening of 25 September. He asked the Führer not to take the expected Czechoslovak refusal of Godesberg as the "last word." He suggested an international conference to deal with the Sudeten problem, an idea which Prague accepted.

Hitler prepared the atmosphere for the conference with his brutally belligerent speech in the Sportpalast on 26 September. Now he demanded "self-determination" not only for the Sudetens, but all the other minorities in Czechoslovakia. Hitler stated ominously "now two men stand arrayed one against the other. There is Mr. Benes and here stand I . . ." For now, Hitler accepted Chamberlain's proposal to meet again, this time in Munich. British and French diplomats, instead of energetically capitalizing on the momentum that had been achieved by the general mobilization, wilted.
The evening of 26 September brought the realization of the worst possible scenario from the Kremlin's point of view. A conference on Czechoslovakia of major European powers, but excluding the Soviet Union, was more than ominous. Pravda of 26 September for once agreed with Churchill's opinion that the British government, faced with the choice between dishonor and war, had chosen dishonor only to receive war. Pravda added its own commentary: "there is still time. The English government may avoid dishonor and prevent war. Otherwise, it will have both." Izvestia on the same day reproduced the text of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of 1935 and drew attention especially to the fact that Soviet assistance was conditional on prior French action. It concluded that in case of French refusal to assist Czechoslovakia "the Soviet government in the literal sense of the Treaty is free from all obligations vis-a-vis Czechoslovakia."

The Kremlin must have felt desperate: the Munich conference meant that the Soviet Union would be isolated and, in the future, sacrificed to Hitler, whose appetite had been whetted by Austria and Czechoslovakia. There were only two ways out of the situation. One, Czechoslovakia must be persuaded to fight, cost what it may. The French, Moscow hoped, would then be shamed into marching on Prague's behalf sooner or later. Two, if Czechoslovakia did not fight, then the Kremlin must participate in the Munich Conference. The two alternatives were immediately explored.

First, came an attempt to lure Czechoslovakia into active military resistance. On 27 September, a deputy of the Soviet Chief Air-Marshals made an offer that stunned the Czechoslovak General Fajfr: the Soviet Union was prepared to fly 750 military aircraft immediately to Czechoslovakia. The offer was accepted, with many thanks. And no one heard about it again. To strengthen Prague's determination to resist militarily, Moscow supplied other leads. It claimed it had "30 infantry divisions drawn up in the areas in the immediate vicinity of the Western frontiers . . . . The units have been accordingly reinforced
with reservists. With regards to technical troops -- aviation and tank units -- they are in full readiness." This was as untrue as the previous offer of 750 aircraft.

Simultaneously, Soviet diplomats were trying to win a seat for themselves at an international conference dealing with the Czechoslovak crisis. Litvinov had mentioned such a conference already on 5 September, but he was ignored. He tried again on 28 September. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow received a note from the Soviet government reacting to the personal appeal of Franklin D. Roosevelt to Hitler and Benes. The Soviet note stated that Moscow accepted the U.S. proposal to assist in the prevention of war. The USSR is "prepared to support the proposal put forward by the Government of the United States of America for the calling of an international conference and to take an active part therein."
The confused U.S. chargé, Kirk, did not understand: the Soviets were thanking the U.S. for an invitation that had never been extended to them in the first place. There are obstacles in the Anglo-French mediation of the Czechoslovak crisis, the Soviets responded, indicating to Kirk that they could do a better job. Kirk viewed the episode as surreal. Clearly, there was going to be no seat reserved for a Soviet delegation in Munich, although Benes and Fierlinger had hoped that the Soviet government would be represented.

Now that there was going to be neither war nor a Soviet delegation in Munich, Moscow resorted to its last strategy. The General Secretary of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, had been dispatched to Prague on 14 September. He stayed throughout the crisis until 4 October. Dimitrov's mission was to organize the "utmost resistance against any concession in the Sudeten question" mainly among "students, young officers, left social democrats, liberal left journalists, workers and trade union leaders. . . . [T]he Comintern wants to translate armed resistance against Germany into the creation of the first Soviet stronghold in Central Europe."

It was all very clever but it did not work. Despite their enormous desire to participate at Munich, the Soviets had been left out. Ironically, this is precisely what would make the Soviet Union quite popular when the symbol of Munich would acquire some rather un-
pleasant connotations. Yet, had Litvinov attended the Munich Conference there is no telling how he would have behaved on the issue of Czechoslovakia's territorial integrity.

The Czech messengers received the harsh verdict in Munich at 2:15 a.m. on 30 September. They left Munich at 6 a.m. and flew to Prague. At 7:30 a.m. Benes sent for the Soviet Ambassador, Alexandrovsky. He asked him three questions and insisted that the answer be delivered within four hours, i.e., by 11:30 a.m. of 30 September. Benes had chosen 11:30 a.m. because the Czechoslovak government was expected to meet at that time.

These were the three questions: (1) What will be the Soviet attitude if Czechoslovakia refuses Munich and fights alone? (2) Is the Soviet Union ready to render immediate military assistance without France, disregarding the attitude of the League of Nations? (3) How would the Soviet Union react if Czechoslovakia surrendered?

According to official Soviet records, Alexandrovsky cabled the three crucial questions to Moscow at 11:20 a.m., only ten minutes before the answers were needed. Benes's government met as planned at 11:30 a.m. and accepted the Munich Diktat. It had done so without any knowledge and understanding of the Soviet position. In fact, at 12:15 p.m. the Prague Castle telephoned the Soviet Embassy, saying that the answer was no longer needed. Alexandrovsky promptly sat down and sent a message to Moscow that "Benes no longer insists on an answer . . . because the Government has already passed a decision to accept all the conditions. Occupation of the Sudeten district by German troops will begin tomorrow morning."

This was the right time for the Kremlin to spring into action. The Czechoslovak Ambassador was summoned to the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs where he received a very positive answer to the three questions submitted by Benes on 30 September at 7:30 a.m. The "Soviets had been prepared to help us in any case," Fierlinger reported from Moscow to Prague, "under any circumstances; they would have gone with us even in spite
of Munich, had we refused it." Benes received this communication on 2 October at 11 p.m.

Historians who believe that the Soviet Union was prepared to assist Czechoslovakia in a militarily meaningful manner during the 1938 crisis almost invariably quote this passage. But, as Ivan Pfaff demonstrated, the Soviets talked to Fierlinger 58 hours after Benes's questions had been asked, 54 hours after Benes had accepted the Munich Diktat, and 36 hours after the German troops moved to occupy the Sudetenland.

Under the circumstances, the Kremlin was dealing only with hypotheticals. It had nothing to lose by providing affirmative answers to questions rendered irrelevant by the course of events. In reality, the Soviet Union did not intend to deploy its armed forces and assist Czechoslovakia against Germany.

The Soviet Union's role during the Czechoslovak crisis of 1938 remains unclear because neither Moscow nor Prague has made its archives fully available to researchers. With this caveat, a working hypothesis can be offered: after the Anschluß, when Prague became the main target of German aggression, Soviet diplomats exposed Czechoslovak President Benes to conflicting information regarding Moscow's plans in case of a shooting war. On the one hand, they attempted to strengthen Prague's willingness to resist if attacked by Germany. On the other hand, when the situation dangerously escalated in May and September, the Soviet Union withdrew and allowed events to progress without any Soviet intervention. There is some unverified evidence indicating that, having failed to achieve for itself a seat at the 1938 conferences dealing with Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union may have sought to manipulate Prague into an open conflict with Hitler, in which the Red Army would have remained a passive observer.

In the end, nobody won. Neither the Czechs and the Czech Jews, now standing naked before the Gestapo. Nor the Sudeten Germans who, as new citizens of the German Reich, were impressed into a Wehrmacht division which would be almost pulverized at
Stalingrad. And certainly not Great Britain and France who would have to endure six years of World War II. And Stalin's Soviet Union? Having been excluded from the Munich Conference, a conference it wanted to attend, the Soviet Union now attacked "the pseudo-pacifist fog" spread by Chamberlain and the French Premier Edouard Daladier so that those who had been badly beaten by Hitler could appear "in a triumphant light." Let us not be sentimental about Czechoslovakia, urged Izvestia, much more is still to come. The Conference of Munich had not done away with war, it had only postponed it; there would be new demands by Hitler and the democracies would have to deal eventually with their own fears and dilemmas.

Unlike Benes, whose tactical victories resulted in strategic failures, Stalin suffered many tactical defeats, only to crown them with a strategic success. Exclusion from the Munich charade would turn into an advantage for the Soviet leader. By 1945, every one of the Munich protagonists would be either dead or discredited. But Joseph Stalin would be well on the way toward the creation of a powerful empire. And Czechoslovakia, the apple of discord at Munich, would soon become one of the empire's crown jewels.