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A Moral Point of View

By Erazim Kohák
Fifty years ago, Neville Chamberlain emerged from an airplane, gestured with his umbrella and announced to his anxious countrymen that the abject surrender he just signed in Munich would assure them what the Prayer Book pleads for: "peace in our time." The major effect of his act was to give both umbrellas and peace a bad name for generations to come. Within a year, the world was at war while the Munich agreement went down in history as proof positive of the futility of concessions and the virtues of uncompromising strength. Its putative lesson has since been invoked to justify causes as diverse as the American intervention in Vietnam, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and opposition to arms control agreements. Nor would it surprise me if, behind the Kremlin's secretive walls, Soviet strategists invoked that lesson to oppose a withdrawal from Afghanistan, Poland or Hungary, gravely warning of "another Munich."

Yet is the lesson of Munich really so simple, that appeasement is bad and uncompromising strength good? Unquestionably, the Munich agreement was one of the pivotal tragedies of our time. By surrendering Czechoslovakia to Hitler, the Western democracies brought on precisely what they feared. Their surrender broke the back of German opposition to Hitler. It destroyed the one genuinely free, democratic state east of the Rhine and helped discredit democracy in that part of the world. It did not turn Hitler's fury toward the east; instead, it armed him with state-of-the-art weaponry for a war which effectively eliminated both France and the British Empire as world powers and drew Soviet might into the very heart of Europe.

It is, however, far from clear that the outcome would have been significantly different had the allies rejected all compromise and opted for war. The wishful "if only" scenario has
traditionally been that German opposition, emboldened by a vigorous French and Czechoslovak attack, would have overthrown Hitler and saved the world a second world war. All available evidence, however, makes a rather less sanguine scenario more likely. There is absolutely no reason to suppose that the dispirited French draftees would have fought any more vigorously in 1938 than they did a year later. For all their valor, the Czechs would have, in all likelihood, had their hands too full of their own hostile minorities to mount a vigorous attack on Germany, for which they were neither armed nor prepared in any case. Even if France managed to dispatch an expeditionary force to aid them, through the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and Romania, it seems most unlikely that such a force would have arrived in time to be much use. Nor does it seem likely that Stalin would have been willing to provide effective aid and to withdraw again when done. It seems far more likely that he would have done what he in fact did a year later -- allied himself with Hitler to deflect him toward the west, perhaps finishing off Poland along the way.

Unquestionably, the Franco-British attempt at last-minute compromise was as contemptible as it was futile, but it seems highly doubtful that an uncompromising stance would have been any more effective. By then, it was simply too late, whether for compromise or for force. The pieces were all in place, set there by twenty years of French foreign policy. Unquestionably, it would have been more honorable had the West fought rather than surrendered, but it seems doubtful that such a course would have accomplished anything more than to discredit policy of force as much as the attempt at compromise discredited "appeasement." Thus I would suggest that what is interesting is not what happened at Munich but rather what led to Munich, the entire Franco-British policy on the continent since the end of the war to end all wars.

Interestingly enough, that strategy is not marked by a posture of appeasement as by its very opposite, a policy of uncompromising strength. The center piece of that strategy is
French policy toward Germany in the wake of its defeat. At that point, there was certainly significant room for "appeasement." Germany was ready for a change. The agony of war and defeat had discredited the arrogant "Prussian" model of German national identity. Had the French followed the policy commended by Abraham Lincoln at the close of America's war between the states -- "with malice toward none, with charity toward all" -- as the Americans did after the second world war, Germany might well have responded as it responded to the American strategy and might have become a democratic core of an Europe at peace.

In 1918, however, the French were in no mood for appeasement. They opted instead for a policy of uncompromising strength, designed to crush and humiliate their erstwhile opponent. Rather than making a mighty effort to encourage and support the new republican government that was struggling to transform Germany, they did everything to undercut it. While a policy of generosity would have at least opened a democratic, peaceful option for Germany, the policy of strength left it with defiance as the only option.

_Mutatis mutandis_, the same can be said of French policy toward its former ally, Russia, as well. Here, too, the war and the defeat discredited the old regime. Russia, too, was ready for something new. To be sure, in the case of Russia it is far less clear that the country was capable of responding to a policy of generosity. Still, even here it is clear that the policy of strength, including an armed intervention on behalf of the most discredited, most corrupt remnants of the old regime -- as Admiral Kolchak in Siberia -- helped mightily to rally the undecided Bolshevik cause. Once again, while a policy of generosity might have helped build the preconditions of peace, the policy of strength sowed the seeds of future conflict.

Less dramatically, though for me more painfully, similar reflections apply in Czechoslovakia. To be sure, the Czechs were far more victims than villains. They seized no alien territory: the western boundaries of the restored Czech state were what they had been for centuries, at least since the 1350s. Centuries of Austrian rule, however, had encouraged
the growth of a strong German minority within the traditional Czech lands. Nor was the incor­poration of Slovakia in the Czech cause in the latter half of the 19th century and in the Czechoslovak state in 1918 an act of aggrandizement as much as an act of generosity: after a millennium of Magyar rule, the Slovaks had little hope of revival without Czech help. The new boundary in the south of Slovakia, where no boundary had existed for a thousand years, did incorporate nearly half a million ethnic Magyars in the republic, although that was far more the work of French military cartographers than of the Czechs. Altogether, the Czechs inherited rather than created their multinational state.

Again, and in fairness to the Czechs, the new republic offered its ethnic minorities far more freedom, justice and opportunity than of any neighboring states. Given a century of peace, Czechoslovakia might well have become another Switzerland, winning the allegiance of a heterogeneous population for a common ideal. The shift in minority attitudes toward Czechoslovakia during the first ten peaceful years, before the depression and the rise of Hitler put an end to it, does suggest much.

Yet here again, it was a policy of generosity towards the minorities -- of "appeasement," if you wish, bitterly criticized by Czech nationalists, that strengthened the new republic and the policy of strength, and of Czech centralism, strongly encouraged by the French general staff, that weakened the support of Czechoslovakia's non-Czech nationalities for the new state. At the time, it did not seem to matter: the Czechs were in charge, enjoying full French support, the others simply had to live with it.

It was, though, the consequences of a policy of strength, not of generosity, that prepared the way to the dead end of Munich. French policy toward Germany and Russia assured France of two enemies, in place of an enemy and an ally. France responded to the new situation with its system of alliances. Poland and Czechoslovakia were to play the role Russia once played, that of an ally in Germany's rear. However, with Soviet Russia now also
perceived as an enemy, they were called upon to play the traditional German role as well, that of a *cordon sanitaire* against possible Russian expansion.

With the revival of German strength, this inner contradiction proved fatal. At Munich, Hitler forced France to choose: should France's allies be used against Germany -- or Germany against the Soviet Union? To great many Frenchmen, Hitler, however odious, came to appear as a more effective barrier against the Soviets than a democratic Czechoslovakia with its legal Communist party and its treaty with the Soviet Union. There were, to be sure, residual sympathies for Czechoslovak democracy in the way. However, Czechoslovakia's failure to win the allegiance of its minorities offered an excuse. Unconvincing though it was even at the time, the French could console themselves that they were not betraying the Czechs, only redrawing Czechoslovakia's boundaries along ethnic lines. In retrospect, Munich appears less a failure of appeasement than a failure of a particularly odious bit of realpolitik, a failure of a policy of strength rather than generosity over the years.

Why, then, did France consistently choose a policy, in Germany, in Russia, even in Czechoslovakia, which was bound to generate maximal hostility in situations when it could have afforded to be generous? Here a philosophical rather than an empirical analysis might well prove most helpful -- an analysis of the philosophical prism, of the philosophical assumptions about the nature of good and evil through which the French read the lessons of history.

Speaking in rather compressed philosophical shorthand, I would suggest that the conceptual prism that led the West from Versailles to Munich was essentially a Manichean one. It is the assumption that reality is ultimately not one but two, and that history is the story of a basic conflict of two opposed forces, Good and Evil, locked in an ongoing struggle. On such a reading, in any historical situation we are dealing with a conflict between Good and Evil, and any compromise between them is a victory for Evil. For Evil is simply and purely
evil, incapable of any goodness. It is incapable of compromising, only of taking advantage of any sign of weakness on the part of the Good. The Good must oppose it relentlessly, uncompromisingly, never yielding an inch. There can be no resolutions, only victories and defeats in a struggle without compromise and without quarter.

In polarized historical situations, a Manichean perspective can appear quite persuasive. That was how the world in fact appeared to Lenin and, even more so, to his heir and successor, Stalin. In our time, we might very well label it the "Stalinist" rather than Manichean view of history -- except that it was a view shared by some of Stalin's most vehement opponents. When John Foster Dulles asserted that "neutrality is treason," he was speaking from a Manichean perspective -- and Stalin's policies did much to make it persuasive. Both the reality of the Great War -- hostages shot, libraries burnt, poison gas released in the trenches -- and the rhetoric used to fight the war would certainly have helped convince the French, and the Czechs, that they were the force of Good while Germany was simply Evil. Given that conviction, any policy of generosity would have appeared as folly, weakness, and only a policy of strength realistic. Evil must be crushed.

The Manichean perspective, however, is problematic already philosophically. How is Evil conceivable as a positive force at all? Evil, after all, is the will to destruction: it would self-destruct. We can conceive of Good as a positive force: Good is the affirmation of being. But Evil is negation: how can it even posit itself? Philosophically, an Augustinian reading is rather more persuasive. Being is one, and it is good. Evil is not an autonomous reality: it is a corruption of the Good. Frustrated in its attempt as self-fulfillment, a part of the Good turns to destruction and so comes to function as evil.

So stated, the contrast might appear academic to the point of meaninglessness. Consider it, though, in a very ordinary practical application. Anti-Semitism is one of the clearest examples of pure evil I know, a will to destruction. How comes it about? On a Manichean
reading, we would have to say that some people simply are anti-Semites, just as others respect their fellow humans: that's the way it is. Anti-Semites are evil, respectful persons are good, and compromise between them is permissible. The anti-Semites must simply be crushed. Or, as German acquaintance told me in 1953, "Germany must free itself of anti-Semitism. All the anti-Semites should be rounded up and shot."

On an Augustinian reading, we would argue differently. Anti-Semitism is no positive reality of its own. It is a vicious perversion of an impulse to good. Specifically, we could argue, humans all seek a sense of their own worth. When they are blocked from achieving it, whether by an oppressive social system or by their own sloth, they seek a substitute in oppressing their fellow humans. In fact, anti-Semitism has been most virulent in oppressed and oppressive societies. Seeking to crush the anti-Semite will make it more virulent: anti-Semitism must be cured.

While in our fiery rhetoric the Manichean/Stalinist perception of evil as a force to be crushed may be popular, in our daily practice it is even more problematic than in philosophy. For one, it is devilishly hard to identify any man or society as THE GOOD, pure and simple. We can always convince ourselves that we represent The Good, but that conviction blinds us and makes it impossible to correct our own flaws. We can likewise always convince ourselves that our opponents are pure Evil, but that makes it incomprehensible why so many people are willing to support them and, still worse, makes it impossible for us to find any strategy for dealing with our opponents other than seeking to crush them. When push comes to shove, such perception becomes fatal, leaving us with only the options of surrender or destruction.

Munich, I would suggest, demonstrated less the bankruptcy of appeasement than the utter self-destructive bankruptcy of the Manichean vision of the world. Certainly, France should have fought, whatever the consequences. Its inept attempt at last-minute appeasement
cost it much and won it nothing but contempt. But that is not a lesson we could generalize. There are times to make peace: the real lesson of Munich is that the Manichean perception of reality makes it impossible for humans to recognize the need of a time and to respond appropriately.

That, unfortunately, is also the unlearned lesson of Munich. Reflections on the Munich Dictate routinely restrict themselves to a rather academic debate about the virtues of war and appeasement as instruments of foreign policy while the world continues to prepare new Munichs: situations in which evil can only be fought -- and so triumphs, one way or another. The Lesson of Munich shall have been learned only if we ever learn the importance of generosity, in curing evil before it becomes so powerful and autonomous that the only option left is to fight it -- or surrender to it.