The policy of the Czechoslovak government aimed at neutralizing the German threat during 1935 – 1938 with a focus on the situation in Slovakia

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Abstract:
The second half of 1930s was a period of dramatic political changes in Europe. The stability established by peace agreements concluded after World War I underwent gradual but continual erosion. The main reason for the transforming political landscape was the political developments in Germany which resulted in the collapse of the democratic parliamentary system. In the spring of 1933 The Nazi Party assumed power in Germany and over the span of a few years succeeded in remaking Germany into a totalitarian state. The German dictator Adolf Hitler openly declared his intention to destroy the system of peace treaties, which had formed the basis of peaceful relations amongst states in Europe after World War I. Keeping to this declaration, he openly pursued a provocative policy of step-by-step destruction of the Versailles Treaty. In the context of Hitler’s political aims, the growing economic and military power of Germany constituted a clear threat to Central European states. The Czechoslovak government concluded that it had to apply all possible means to reinforce the defense ability of the state, and consequently a policy of rapid fortification on the border with Germany was initiated. Military maneuvers aimed at enhancing the defense capabilities of the Czechoslovak Army were enacted throughout Czechoslovakia (CSR). State propaganda on the radio and in the press portrayed the Czechoslovak Republic as a state capable of repelling any invasion and re-assuring the population. However, despite such propaganda, it was continually emphasized that Czechoslovakia could only resist Germany with the added protection of its allies France and the Soviet Union.

In 1938 Hitler began a policy of territorial expansion under the pretense of Germany’s right to unify all Germans in one state. The primary targets of this strategy were Austria and Czechoslovakia. He was helped in his intention by a sizeable segment of Nazi sympathizers in Austria and the large minority of Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia. In regards to Austria, through a mixture of subterfuge, threats and ruthless pressure, Hitler succeeded. On March 13th 1938 the German army occupied Austria without any resistance. It was clear that France and Great Britain, who were principal guarantors of the Versailles Treaty, were not able to mount any meaningful resistance. France, which was plagued by a prolonged political crisis, was on the day of German invasion without government. Great Britain expressed solely a verbal protest. It became clear that there was no power in Europe capable of effectively resisting Germany. Emboldened by the generally positive reaction of the German public, Hitler set his next goal – to “liberate” Sudeten Germans from the Czechoslovak “yoke”. Despite this meaning a fundamental violation of Czechoslovak integrity and rendering Czechoslovakia militarily exposed to Germany, the German dictator threatened military action if his demands were not met. The Czechoslovak government desperately tried to find a solution. Sudeten Germans were offered minority rights, and a form of autonomy, named the National Statute, was prepared. However, this was flatly refused by representatives of Sudeten Germans led by Konrad Henlein. It was clear that the leadership of Sudeten Germans was not interested in any form of accommodation with the Czechoslovak government and was an obedient tool of Hitler. The Czechoslovaks hoped that the Western powers (namely France, who had a defense treaty with the CSR and had on numerous occasions professed a determination to come to Czechoslovak defense in case of German aggression) would fulfill its obligation. Another ally was the Soviet Union, but according
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The policy of the Czechoslovak government aimed at neutralizing the German threat during 1935 – 1938 with a focus on the situation in Slovakia. France and Great Britain instead pressurized the Czechoslovak President Edvard Beneš to peacefully accommodate Hitler. However, the situation in the Sudetenland worsened after Hitler’s speech at the Nazi Party Congress on September 11th 1938. A number of clashes occurred in the Sudetenland, but Czechoslovak security forces successfully suppressed the revolt. It was becoming clear that to reach accommodation by peaceful means was becoming increasingly unlikely. The British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, with the aim of averting war with Germany, in an unprecedented move offered to travel to Germany and meet Hitler. During the meeting on September 15th Hitler declared that if Czechoslovakia would agree with the German annexation of Sudeten territory, he was willing to abstain from an invasion, to which Chamberlain agreed. France and Great Britain then began to coerce the Czechoslovak government into accepting the annexation of Sudetenland by Germany. Aware that in the case of refusal Czechoslovakia would face German aggression alone, the Czechoslovak government accepted the ultimatum. However, the next meeting between Chamberlain and Hitler at Bad Godesberg ended in disarray as a result of Hitler’s increased demands. Chamberlain refused to accept the new demands and only agreed to let the Czechoslovak government know about them. The Czechoslovak representatives rejected Hitler’s latest demands as unacceptable. On September 24th the Czechoslovak government declared mobilization, with war appearing inevitable. But again Chamberlain, in an attempt to find accommodation with Hitler, arranged a conference with the French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, the Italian leader Mussolini and Hitler. Despite the fact that the fate of Czechoslovakia was about to be decided, no representative of the Czechoslovak Republic was invited. The signatories of the conference accepted Germany’s demands. The outcome of the conference, The Munich Agreement, resulted in the end of Czechoslovakia as a sovereign, democratic state. The loss of the heavily fortified Western frontier fatally weakened the CSR and opened the way to German further expansion. The hopes of the British and French political leaders by abandoning the CSR to save peace in Europe were unrealistic. On the contrary, the reluctance of Western democracies to stand up to Hitler encouraged Nazi Germany to initiate further aggression.

This paper maps the steps taken by the Czechoslovak government to implement measures aimed at protecting the Republic against German aggression.

**Key words:**
Versailles Treaty. Defensive measures taken by CSR. Strategy of Nazi Germany. The Anschluss. The Munich Agreement.

**Introduction**

The aim of the paper is to summarize the most relevant reactions of the Czechoslovak government to the growing danger of Nazi Germany during the period 1935-1938. Besides the military build-up and construction of defensive works capable of thwarting or at least slowing down the attack of the German Army, the focus is placed upon mapping the intricate web of international relations which had a vital importance for Czechoslovakia. In that regard France and the Soviet Union were extremely important for Czechoslovakia’s political representation. The Czechoslovak defensive measures accelerated after the occupation of Austria in March 1933 and the growing passivity of the Western Powers. The narrative also contains the reactions of the Czechoslovak public and the role of media in mobilizing resistance to the threat of military aggression. Space is also given to events as they unfold which were hidden from the general public; namely the reluctance of certain prominent European politicians to act decisively in their struggle to preserve peace in Europe at any price. In our judgment the use of till now unpublished archive materials has also helped to broaden the understanding of the various angles of this dramatic and in the final outcome tragic event. In that we see the main contribution of the paper.

The ascent of Adolf Hitler to power ushered a rapid transformation of Germany from a democracy into a totalitarian state. This change resulted in a number of consequences affecting
Germany as well as Europe. Besides the transformation of the economy, the destruction of political plurality and the imposition of National Socialism as the only admissible ideology, the most alarming development was the rapid militarization of Germany. On October 1st 1934, in direct breach of the Treaty of Versailles, the German Army increased from 100,000 to 300,000 soldiers. This, however, was only the beginning of the Nazi regime’s policy aim at changing the existing geopolitical situation in Europe. On January 13th 1935 a plebiscite was held in the region of Saar, in which inhabitants of this territory decided to unify with Germany. Almost 90% of inhabitants (477,000 to 48,000) of the Saar region voted for unification. On March 16th 1935 universal military service in Germany was decreed. Great Britain and France protested, but abstained from interference in German internal affairs. It was becoming clear that the Western Powers were lacking the resolution to stop Germany from becoming an imminent danger to peace in Europe.

Aware of the growing danger caused by the militarization of Germany, France decided to make an alliance with the Soviet Union. On May 2nd 1935 the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Pierre Laval signed the Franco – Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance. However, France refused to agree to a complementary agreement with the military convention demanded by the SSSR. Czechoslovakia, a strong ally of France, signed the Treaty of Mutual Assistance between the ZSSR and Czechoslovakia on May 15th 1935 (the Treaty). But the Treaty contained one important condition – the Soviet Union was obliged to assist Czechoslovakia in the case of a hostile attack only if France would assist the CSR in its defense.

The defense strategy of the CSR was primarily based on an alliance with France and possibly with the Soviet Union. Therefore the Czechoslovak government prized the Treaty as a great achievement, which would increase the security of the Republic. Edward Beneš, a signatory of the Treaty, wrote in his memoirs that he supported a build-up of good relations and military cooperation between the CSR and the Soviet Union. As proof of the superior quality of the Red Army, Beneš cited a report of a general Ludvík Krejčí, the head of the headquarters of the

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1 According to the Czechoslovak diplomat Kamil Krofta, „Western Powers...could not quietly accept one-sided decision of Germany. During the Conference at Stresse, which was enacted to solve this issue on April 1935, representatives of Great Britain, France and Italy sharply condemned one-sided decision of Germany and a resolution prepared by them later (April 17) was approved by the Council of United Nations in Geneva.” KROFTA, Kamil. Z dob naší první republiky. Praha : Jan Laiter, 1939, pp. 102-103.


3 “Both parties accept that obligations in regard to mutual assistance will be affected only if conditions assumed by this treaty will be realized and if the victim of aggression will be helped by France.” This condition was included in the Treaty, under name „signature protocol“.


5 „With the Soviet Union our cooperation after the signing of the Treaty from 1935 was generally good, lasting and consequential...Already in May 1935, with my consent, visited the Soviet Union a military delegation...and established the first air force cooperation with Moscow. In December of the same year a delegation of the Soviet Army, led by general Šapošníkov, took part on our first large military exercises, inspected our whole military industry and prepared our first significant delivery for Soviet Army.” BENEŠ, Edward. Paměti. Od Mnichova k nové válce a k novému vítězství. Praha : NAŠE VOJSKO, 2004, p. 65.
Czechoslovak Army, who after his return from the Soviet Union declared that “The Red Army, its discipline, its high moral level and its technical armament...must raise admiration of every military expert.” Beneš even admitted that Czechoslovakia was supplying the Soviet Union with special arms. However, not every politician was positively inclined to openly advocating friendship with the Soviet Union and admiration of the Red Army.

Beneš’s positive attitude to the Soviet Union was crowned by his visit to the ZSSR between June 8th – 9th 1935. He exhorted the achievements of the ZSSR, its technical advancement and its army. His admiration was shared also by many leading publicists and writers such as F. Peroutka and K. Čapek, who perceived the ZSSR as a country which established “a new type of democracy”.

The signing of three-way pact between France, the ZSSR and Czechoslovakia did not dissuade Hitler from pursuing an aggressive policy. On the contrary, encouraged by the timidity of Great Britain and France, on March 7th 1936 Hitler committed an act of unprecedented provocation with grave consequences for French security. At 10 a.m. a relatively small detachment of the German Army, approximately 35,000 soldiers, crossed the river Rhine and entered the demilitarized Rhineland. Despite this relatively small military force, which indicated that Hitler at that time was not determined to start a full scale war and most likely would retreat, there was not a resolute response from the Western Powers. The Prime Minister of Great Britain, Stanley Baldwin refused to support France in the case of possible military intervention and without British support the French government hesitated in attacking the German troops. The decision to abstain from military action was made certain after the French general Maurice Gamelin, as a precondition for military intervention against Germany, requested full mobilization of the French Army. Even if hostilities would end in Hitler’s defeat, the possibility of a communist takeover of Germany was in Baldwin’s judgment far worse than the Nazi regime. According to Baldwin, this would most likely lead to communist proliferation throughout the whole of Western Europe and cause mortal danger to the England itself.

This latest and most serious breach of the Versailles Treaty committed by Germany was perceived by the Czechoslovak government as a grave development dangerous to security of the CSR. The Czechoslovak political establishment therefore adopted several legal norms and regulations aimed at the enhancement of the CSR’s defense ability. In October 1933 “the Highest Council of State Defense” was established. It was authorized to manage preparations of the whole national economy for defense. A momentous decision was adopted to construct a line of defense

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6 BENEŠ, E. Paměti..., p. 66.
7 “An agreement was concluded to...export a sizeable amount of special arms, which the Soviet Army especially needed and which could not be sent from France or from other places.” BENEŠ, E. Paměti..., p. 67.
8 According to J. Cesar „In the following period began endeavors to change Czechoslovak politics in regard to Soviet Union. These opinions were finding fairly a strong reflection also at the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had support of significant segment of Czechoslovak ambassadors, for example Mastný in Berlin, Chvalkovský in Roma and Osuský in Paris. Only after management of this ministry assumed adherent of so called Castle Group K. Krofta, this tendency, at least temporary, was suppressed.“ CESAR, Jaroslav. Mnichov 1938. Praha : Melantrich. 1978. p. 13.
10 KLIMEK, A. Velké dějiny..., p. 404.
fortifications along the boundary lines. On April 30th 1936 the Chamber of Deputies adopted Law no. 131 “For Protection of the State.” In rare consent, all political parties, with the exception of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (CPC), voted for it. To raise money needed to finance the needed expense, the Chamber of Deputies adopted Law no. 142 “In regard to the Loan for the Defense of State.” The importance of Law no. 142 was emphasized by Beneš, who characterized it as a crucial public commitment to make financial contribution to defense of the Republic. Unlike the majority of political parties, the CPC abstained from the vote and was sharply critical of the adopted legal norm. The Communists criticized Law no. 142 because it allegedly would enrich the richest segment of Czechoslovak society. The communist Václav Kopecký, in his speech on floor of the Chamber of Deputies, argued that the loan should be imposed only on the rich.

Facing the growing military power of Nazi Germany, the Czechoslovak authorities initiated a systematic policy aimed at enhancing the military build-up of the Army. The following years, till the Munich Agreement, were spent on increasing the defense abilities of the CSR.

The press portrayed the Czechoslovak Army positively as a force capable of maintaining peace and in the case of an unprovoked attack of defending the country. In their public appearances politicians and representatives of the military establishment created an impression of optimism to try to convince the general public that thanks to the armed forces Czechoslovakia had nothing to fear.

Among the favored topics to which the press gave its attention were military manoeuvres. Manoeuvres offered the opportunity not only to illustrate the prowess of the Army, but served as a good occasion for President Beneš and members of government, especially the Minister of National Defense František Machník, to demonstrate their commitment to the Czechoslovak military forces.

On August 20th 1936 in the region of the Eastern Czechlands began the largest manoeuvres of the Czechoslovak Army in the existence of the CSR. The total number of soldiers exceeded 100,000. The military exercises were observed by President Beneš, members of the government and military representatives of the allied armies. At the conclusion of the manoeuvres President Beneš declared that all objectives of manoeuvres were achieved and expressed his complete satisfaction with the “moral and physical condition of soldiers”. In his “Army Order” the

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12 Zákon 131/1936 Sb ze dne 13. května 1936 o obraně státu. (The Law No. 131/1936, on May 13, 1936, in regard to the defense of state)
13 Zákon 142/1936 Sb ze dne 29. května 1936 o půjčce na obranu státu. (The Law No. 142/1936, on May 29, 1936, in regard to loan to the defense of state).
14 E. Beneš was elected President of the Czechoslovak Republic on December 18 1935.
15 According to E. Beneš “…to write out this loan is for all of us... primarily a moral imperative... Preparations for defense of country is the best work for peace...To this work, that is to work for peace I call all citizens of the Republic.” České Slovo, June 5, 1936, Volume (Vol.) XXVIII, Issue 131. Pan President o půjčce obrany státu Mobilisace peněz a lidí do práce.
17 Frequently these commentaries were exceedingly optimistic and corresponded only partially to real situation.
President praised the coordination of all military units, and the preciseness with which all tasks were realized. Beneš also expressed his gratitude to the civilians who exhibited a “burning adherence to the Army, understanding its significance in the present time.” A few months later, at the beginning of September, manoeuvres in Slovakia were held. Approximately 45,000 soldiers simulated a battle in the rugged terrain of Western Slovakia. In a typical positive tone of that time the daily Venkov. Periodical Slovenský východ in its report characterized the fighting spirit of soldiers as “excellent” and wrote that “the population living in the area of the manoeuvres warmly welcomed the army, giving to soldiers fruit, and is fulfilling all their needs.”

Signing the Czechoslovak – Soviet treaty resulted in the growing tolerance of the authorities to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Communist newspapers were allowed to write articles describing the strength of the Red Army in an admiring style, which would not have been possible in earlier years. In Slovakia, the communist Slovenské Zvesti published articles intended to convince readers that the Soviet armed forces were capable of protecting the CSR. Despite the great purges which Stalin unleashed in the second half of 1930s which had a catastrophic impact upon the Red Army, Slovenské Zvesti asserted that the Red Army is united and actually stronger. A radically different attitude to the purges of the armed forces in the Soviet Union was expressed in Slovak, the official periodical of the Slovak autonomist Hlinka’s Slovak People Party (HSPP). In spite of the political and ideological abhorrence toward the CPC felt by the overwhelming majority of Czechoslovak political parties, the Communists, who were obedient followers of Soviet Union, were capitalizing on the growing importance of the ZSSR as an ally and protector of Czechoslovakia against Nazi Germany. On their part, they toned down their anti-establishment rhetoric and frequently professed their determination to defend the CSR.

Beneš expended a great amount of energy reassuring the public that the Czechoslovak Army was capable of defending the Republic against any aggression. In his “Army Order” issued on January 17th 1936, the President defined the duty of the Czechoslovak Army as a task “to raise to the highest degree the firm determination, tenacity and responsibility in fulfilment of its duty.” Six months later, at the close of first three days of the already mentioned manoeuvres in the

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25 The development of the situation in the Soviet Union, according to Slovak, was indicating that execution of top military officers was only a prelude to a whole series of executions and it was impossible to foretell when this massacre will end. Slovák wrote, that a political system of ZSSR, was heading to „Red Czarism“ and was more evil variant of Nazi regime in Germany. Slovák, June 19, 1937, Vol. XIX, Issue 107. Už 4 000 zatknutých.
26 In his work Mnichovské dny (Munich days) E. Beneš wrote that „Our Communism was till 1935 very radical and extremely oppositional, but since signing our agreement with Soviet Union in 1935 and as a consequence of milder Soviet policy toward the Western Powers since 1934, also Communists moderated their internal policy. An expression of this was their active cooperation on preparations for sufficient military defense of the Republic against Nazi aggression”. BENEŠ, Edvard. Mnichovské dny. Paměti, Praha : Svoboda, 1968, p. 18.
Eastern Czechlands, during a meeting with media representatives, Beneš exhorted the technical, professional and moral advancement of the Army. At a meeting with members of the Army he praised the quality of the military forces and expressed his conviction that soldiers were imbued with a “high spirit of determination and indomitable will to defend the homeland and resist no matter what.”

Czechoslovak political leaders also endeavored to utilize historical events to support the patriotic sentiments of the population. On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Battle of Zborov, ostentatious celebrations were held. The significance of the commemoration was underlined by the attendance of President Beneš, the Prime Minister Milan Hodža, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Kamil Krofta, and the Minister of Defense František Machnik. F. Machnik asserted that “It is our task to preserve and to defend what we learn from the example of Zborov in how to be victorious, firm, relentless and perseverant regardless of circumstances, so we can achieve the biggest success.”

Periodicals representing government political parties created an image of security and excluded any negative information in regard to the geo-political situation. This was exemplified by Slovenské Zvesti – “We can say that our soldiers with ardor are utterly responsible to fulfill the most precise mathematical calculations and the most courageous plans. Their relation to the defense of the Republic, similarly as in case of the Red Army, allow them...to crush the enemy, to disorganize its system and to uproot its morale.”

In contrast to the general optimistic assertions regarding the strength of the Czechoslovak Army, V. Bystrický struck a more considered tone: “…the concept of passive defense was based on the irrefutable fact that the defense of a surrounded Czechoslovakia was against Germany and its allies impossible for longer period of time.”

Since the establishment of the CSR, the most revered ally and a mainstay of Czechoslovak security was France. Agreements between the CSR and France, signed in 1924, 1925 and 1935, were presented by the political leadership as the bedrock of Czechoslovak security. Another political alliance significant to the security of the Republic, the Little Entente, was formed at the beginning of the 1920s. The Little Entente, an alliance of Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Yugoslavia, was a pact aimed at preventing any hostile action by Hungary. Until Hitler’s rise to power these alliances were rightfully judged as capable of securing the independence of the Republic.

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However, the growing military and economic power of Germany enabled the Nazi regime to increase its political influence in Romania and Yugoslavia and weaken their ties with Czechoslovakia. The first cracks in the unity of the Little Entente occurred as consequence of the increasing economic dependence of Romania and Yugoslavia on Germany. Whereas the commitment of these states to act in firm unity with Czechoslovakia against Hungary did not change, their determination to stay on the side of the CSR if in conflict with Germany was increasingly questionable. In spite of this troubling development, Czechoslovak propaganda portrayed the Little Entente as an unbreakable monolith and a firm wall capable of stopping German expansion.\(^{35}\) In reality, the changing geopolitical situation in Europe resulted in the strengthening of ties between Yugoslavia, Romania and Germany.\(^{36}\)

Besides the Little Entente, which served primarily as a regional alliance, the most important ally was France. With the growing threat by Germany, the importance of France to Czechoslovakia was gradually increasing. Czechoslovak politicians were continually expressing the fundamental significance of France to the security of the Republic, and reassured that France was determined to stand by the CSR in case of German aggression. These optimistic expectations were based on the frequent declarations of French politicians to defend the Czechoslovak Republic.

Unlike Yugoslavia and Romania, whose determination to go to war against Germany in the case of aggression against CSR was highly debatable, France frequently expressed its determination to fulfill its alliance obligation to Czechoslovakia; even if meant war with Germany. Since her establishment, the CSR had been a loyal ally of France and close ties with France had become for the CSR even more vital as the political situation in Europe was deteriorating.

However, the value of France as an ally was weakened by her political instability. In stark contrast to the unity forged by the Nazi Party in Germany, France was politically divided between leftist parties on one side and rightist political agitators on the other, which was weakening France’s strength to act as a military power.

The political chasm in France deepened after the 1935 elections, when a political caucus called “People’s Front”, composed of Communists, Socialists and Radicals, was established in May of the same year. The program of nationalization initiated by the socialist Leon Blum, who became

\(^{35}\) In a final communique Yugoslav Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović and Rumanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ion Antonescu avoided any concrete declaration of support for Czechoslovakia in possible conflict with Germany and expressed their desire to pursue a policy of “a general peace” and of “a peaceful cooperation”. Despite the vague position of both officials to deepen an alliance with Czechoslovakia, the daily Novosti emphasized a “growing unity” of the Little Entente. Novosti, September, 15, 1937, Vol. XXXIII, Issue 34. Výsledok bratislavskej konferencie: Ešte tesnejšie zomknutie Malej dohody. Not knowing or ignoring a reluctance of Yugoslavia and Romania to unequivocally declare support for Czechoslovakia, Robotnicke noviny declared an unshakable unity of the Little Entente. Robotnicke noviny, June 19, 1937, Vol. XXXV, Issue 117. Niet sily na svete, ktorá by oslabila Malú dohodu. However, the policy of building close relations with Germany, pursued by the Yugoslav Prime Minister Stojadinović, made Yugoslavia hardly a trustful ally of Czechoslovakia in potential conflict with Germany. In a report describing the visit of Stojadinović in Germany at the beginning of 1938, Lidové noviny wrote that “Göring and Stojadinović exchanged words of extraordinary strong friendship pointing to mutual trustful understanding of these two men.” Lidové noviny, January 23, 1838, Vol. XLVI, Issue 39. Stojadinovič v Nemecku Újišťuje Hitlera obdívem.

\(^{36}\) According to historian A. Garajová: „Yugoslavia, which viewed with growing anger French support for Italy, was attracted especially by its economy to Germany...the advent of the government of M. Stojadinović in June 1935 led to worsening Czechoslovak – Yugoslav relations.” GARAJOVA, Alena. CSR a středoevropská politika velmocí (1918 – 1938). Praha : ACADEMIA, 1967, p. 344.
the Prime Minister, had a negative impact upon the economy and resulted in deep social tensions which pushed France to the brink of civil war. On March 16th 1937 violent clashes erupted, which resulted in some deaths.\textsuperscript{37} Resistance against the Peoples Front eventually led to its demise, but political turmoil in France persisted.

Regardless of the political and economic difficulties, the leaders of France frequently confirmed their obligation to the CSR, and Czech and Slovak periodicals used every opportunity to emphasize declarations made by French politicians as proof of the firmness of the alliance with France.\textsuperscript{38}

There is strong evidence that state authorities were engaging in an increasing control of the periodical press. On January 17th 1938 the Provincial Office in Bratislava (POB) issued an instruction to all state institutions in Slovakia prohibiting propaganda from Germany.\textsuperscript{39} But with the aim not to worsen relations with Germany, the POB on February 21st 1938 instructed government authorities in Slovakia which were authorized to control the periodical press “to pay the utmost attention to all news about Germany and make sure that no caricatures of Adolph Hitler and of all leading personalities in Germany will be published”. Also derogatory reports in regard to Germany were to be eliminated. In regard to situation in Germany, only information released by the Czechoslovak Press Agency was allowed to be published.\textsuperscript{40}

Those especially subjected to control by state authorities were the periodicals of opposition political parties such as HSPP, the CPC and newspapers of ethnic minorities, which had criticized government policies. After a speech given by the Prime Minister Hodža on March 4\textsuperscript{th} 1938 the POB informed the state authorities controlling press that “It is necessary to thoroughly monitor writing of periodicals Slovak and Slovenska Prava,§ to make sure that their comments of speech made by M. Hodža will not be critical and serve in any way to anti state propaganda.”\textsuperscript{41} On February 3\textsuperscript{rd} 1938 the Provincial Office in Bratislava informed the security authorities about instructions issued by the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of National Defense and other state agencies about the elimination of information related to military activities. According to the aforementioned instructions, all information of a military nature was to be suppressed, as well as information about movement of military units, reports about preparations against attacks of enemy air force and any other type of hostilities.\textsuperscript{42} Also reports about ethnic clashes, articles

\textsuperscript{37} Slovenský východ, March 18, 1937, Vol. XIX, Issue 64. Barikády a streľba na uliciach. Úradné miest potvrdzujú o 2. hodine 6 mŕtvych.


\textsuperscript{39} Štátny archív Košice (The State Archives Košice, hereinafter referred to only as SA K), pracovisko Rožňava (hereinafter referred to only as section (s.) R, fund (f.) Okresný úrad Rožňava (The District Office in Rožňava, hereinafter referred to only as DO R), carton (c.) 42, no. 1244/1938 prez.

\textsuperscript{40} Slovenský národný archív (Slovak National Archives; hereinafter referred to only as SNA, fund (f.). Policajné riaditeľstvo Bratislava (Police Directory Bratislava – hereinafter referred to only as PD B), c. 335, no. 11.180/38 prez.


\textsuperscript{42} Štátny archív Banská Bystrica (State Archives Banská Bystrica; hereinafter referred to only as SA BB), pracovisko Rimavská Sobota; hereinafter referred to only as section (s.) RS, f. Okresný úrad Rimavská Sobota (District Office Rimavská Sobota; hereinafter referred to only as DO RS), c. 19, no. 69.384 prez.
criticizing political leaders, the foreign policy of the CSR and commentaries which could encourage ethnic violence were to be eliminated.\textsuperscript{43}

To increase the defense abilities of the CSR, government agencies issued in 1938 a series of circulars dealing with various issues relevant to security.\textsuperscript{44}

The high level of anxiety during the final periods of the existence of the Republic was illustrated by a rather undemocratic measure enacted by the Ministry of Schools and National Enlightenment (MSNE), which demanded that clerics of all churches signed an attestation of their loyalty to Czechoslovakia. State authorities had to make lists of all persons who refused to sign these attestations and send it to the MSNE.\textsuperscript{45}

With the aim of preparing the young generation for military duty, the School Authority (SA) in February 1934 issued instructions dealing with issues of defense training at middle schools and pedagogical institutes. Ivan Dére, the Minister of Schools and National Enlightenment, declared defense training to be \textit{“an organic part of educational worth for these schools.”} A year later the SA issued an edict which established defense training in elementary schools also.\textsuperscript{46}

On July 1st 1937 the National Assembly adopted Law no. 184 \textit{“In Regard to Defense Education”}, which in detailed fashion defined the significance and all aspects of this measure. The general purpose of Law no. 184 was \textit{“...to raise in the population of the Czechoslovak Republic...moral values, physical endurance, faculties and abilities needed for defense of state.”}\textsuperscript{47} According to Law 184, defense education was compulsory for pupils and students of all schools, also for women and men who were not exempted without relevant reasons.\textsuperscript{48} On May 13\textsuperscript{th} 1938 the Government Ordinance no. 109 was issued which defined the general rules of defense education implementation. Ordinance no. 109 in detail defined the duties of schools, associations, economic enterprises and civil authorities in securing the realization of defense training.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{43} SNA, f. PD B, c. 333, no. 31. 963/38 prez.
\textsuperscript{44} The Provincial Office in Bratislava, in accordance with a request of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense, instructed all security offices in Slovakia to make sure that public and security offices \textit{“in case of need could smoothly and without hindrance perform activities related to extraordinary measures of military nature (mobilization, evacuation etc.) if they will assist on such activities.”} SA K, s. R, f. DO R, c. 42, no. 1084 prez. May 23, 1938. On September 10 1938 the Provincial Office in Bratislava issued a circular recalling all employees from vacation and prohibited persons dealing with “military agenda” to be absent from their place of employment. SA BB, s. RS, f. DO RS, c. 23, no. 58.348/1938/ prez. May 23, 1938. On September 10 1938 the Provincial Office in Bratislava issued a circular recalling all employees from vacation and prohibited persons dealing with “military agenda” to be absent from their place of employment. SA BB, s. RS, f. DO RS, c. 23, no. 58.348/1938/ prez. To prevent activities which would lead to further destabilization of situation, on September 14 1938 Czechoslovak government prohibited all political public gatherings. SA BB, s. RS, f. DO RS, c. 23, No. 58. 845/1938 prez.
\textsuperscript{45} SA BB, s. RS, f. DO RS, c. 23, no. 134.888/38-VI/1.
Another type of defensive preparations was “Civil Air Protection” (CAP) established on April 11th 1935. Local authorities were obliged to prepare shelters and gas masks in case of air attacks. During following years several instructions regulating issues connected with the CAP were published by government authorities.50

An important place in the defense system of the state had so-called “State Defense Guards”, established on October 23rd 1936. Their tasks was to guard state borders, preserve peace in frontiers and assist custom offices in occurrences of “extraordinary circumstances”. In war their task was the temporary defense of the front line and suppression all acts of sedition against the state. The State Defense Guards were composed of gendarmerie units, financial guards, police and reservists. These military forces were manned exclusively by volunteers. State authorities were trying to keep these forces secret and their training, which commenced in 1937, was held in remote regions.51

A dramatic political change which would have incalculable consequences upon the security of Czechoslovakia occurred during the first months of 1938. On February 20th 1938, in his speech in the German Parliament, Hitler openly declared that Germany had the right and duty to “free” millions of Germans from “servitude” in which they lived in foreign countries. Hitler declared that, “Over ten million Germans live in two states adjoining our frontiers... In the long run it is intolerable for a self-respecting World Power to know that across the frontier are kinsmen who have to suffer severe persecution because of their feeling of unity with Germany, because of their common fate, their common point of view”52. There was no doubt, Hitler’s speech was a direct warning to Austria and Czechoslovakia. This aggressive assertion by Hitler roused a response from the French Prime Minister Camille Chautemps and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Yves Delbos, who declared that France would honor the Alliance with Czechoslovakia.53 Czechoslovak Prime Minister Hodža reacted to the diatribe of Hitler in his speech in the Czechoslovak Parliament on March 4th 1938. Hodža refuted Hitler’s claim that Germany had the right to annex regions inhabited by German population outside Germany and classified it as an interference in internal affairs of sovereign states. Hodža ended his speech with the assurance that “We haven’t been worried for a thousand years and we are not worried today, certain of unity of our hearts and minds of all parts of our nation and cooperation with Europe which as well as we don’t want aggressions, but wants peace”.54

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50 For example, instructions how to organize brigades established as a part of CAP were issued by the Provincial Office in Bratislava (PO B) on March 5 1936, no. 12702/1936 prez. Sh. Examinations of readiness of CAP issued by PO B on March 31 1937, Issue 250/1937 prez., Ordinance no. 250/292/1937 prez. CAP, issued by PO B on April 26 1938 In Regard to Obligation to Cooperate with Private Enterprises, Ordinance of PO B, Issue 46.572/38-III/B, dated May 9 1938, Instructions to distribution of gas masks, Instruction no. 250/729/38 prez. CPO, issued by PO B on August 4 1938, publishing lists of approved types of gas masks.


53 KROFTA, K. Z dob naši... pp. 253-255.

Unlike Czechoslovakia, which could count on support of contractual allies – France and the Soviet Union – there was no country in Europe which had a defense treaty with Austria. Mussolini, who had in previous years acted as a protector of Austrian independence, had as a consequence of his growing ties with Hitler accepted Germany’s growing influence in the Central Europe, including Austria.

In February 1938 Hitler decided to act. He invited the Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg to Germany. Schuschnigg could not refuse the invitation, which in reality was only a veiled command. On February 12\textsuperscript{th} 1938 he visited Hitler in his residence in Berghof. Schuschnigg was strongly pressurized into accepting Hitler’s conditions in regard to the arrangement of German – Austrian relations, which would reduce Austria to a position of German satellite. Having no alternative, Schuschnigg agreed.\textsuperscript{55}

After his return to Austria, Schuschnigg decided to stand-up to Hitler in a speech made on February 24\textsuperscript{th} 1938. He proclaimed his readiness to fight for the independence of Austria. He declared that a plebiscite would be held on March 13\textsuperscript{th} 1938 in which citizens could express their wish to uphold the independence of Austria. However, Hitler was determined not to allow that plebiscite to happen. In the early hours of March 12\textsuperscript{th} 1938 the German Army entered Austria.

The occupation of Austria, known as the Anschluss, shocked the whole of Europe. Hitler’s bold stroke definitively proved that the German Dictator was willing to use violence to take over sovereign countries. This was breach of the inviolable principle of relations among European states. He was also confident, and right, in thinking that no European country would try to stop him. There was no intervention from European Powers, except verbal protests. France, paralyzed by political turmoil, was not able to mount any meaningful reaction.\textsuperscript{56} At the time of German invasion as consequence of political crisis France was without a government. Though the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain instructed the British Ambassador in Berlin to announce to the German acting Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath, that “His Majesty’s Government feel bound to register a protest in the strongest terms”, no further measures were taken.\textsuperscript{57} On March 14\textsuperscript{th} 1938 Neville Chamberlain in his speech in the House of Commons stated: “It seems to us that the method adopted throughout these events call for the severest condemnation and have administered a profound shock to all who are interested in the preservation of European peace”.\textsuperscript{58} However, despite his indignation he admitted that “The hard fact is that nothing could have arrested this action by Germany unless we, and others with us, had been prepared to use force against it”.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55} Hitler threatened that if Austria would not concede to the suggested arrangement of mutual relations, the German Army would occupy Austria. Schuschnigg’s objection that this would result in war Hitler refuted as unrealistic, and said that nobody would risk war for Austria. LUKES, Igor. Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler. The Diplomacy of Edward Beneš in the 1938. London – New York – Toronto : Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{56} E. Beneš opined that the situation in France became dismal: „Occupation of Austria affected French generals very balefully. A mood of defeat passed through the whole of France, which the political Right used to split even more internal situation and weaken the Left“. BENĚŠ, E. Mnichovské dny.... p. 69.


\textsuperscript{58} BROOK-SHEPHERD, Gordon. The Anschluss. Philadelphia and New York : J. B. Lippincott Company, p. 207

\textsuperscript{59} BROOK-SHEPHERD, G. The Anschluss, p. 207.
Despite the assurances of French politicians to protect Czechoslovak sovereignty, to which Czech and Slovak media, as usual, gave ample attention,\textsuperscript{60} it was clear that the security of the Republic was seriously compromised. A glimpse of hope, which future events proved to be utterly unrealistic, was the assurance by Hermann Göring, the supreme commander of the German Air Force, given to Czechoslovak Ambassador Vojtěch Masný, that Germany had no hostile intention toward Czechoslovakia, and the German invasion was strictly a “family affair” between Austria and Germany.\textsuperscript{61}

The state authorities immediately reacted to the changed situation on the Czechoslovak borders with Austria. The Provincial Office in Bratislava on March 11\textsuperscript{th} 1938 informed the Police Directory that “as a consequence of events in Austria” it was necessary to implement all necessary measures to assure that no public peace would be disturbed. At the same time the Police Directory was to make sure that no refugees from Austria would be allowed into Czechoslovak territory.\textsuperscript{62} The next day the Ministry of Finance in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior instructed the Financial Guard to prevent entry of Austrian citizens even if they had valid travel documents with the exception of persons “who are permanent residents, own real estate in the CSR or travel to the Czechoslovak Republic for reasons important for Czechoslovak interests”. Finally, the Ministry of Finance advised subordinate authorities that all measures must be realized “inconspicuously”.\textsuperscript{63} On March 12th 1938 the Ministry of Interior imposed increased security along the whole Czechoslovak – Hungarian border. It also ordered that gendarmerie in frontier regions would be not permitted to leave their posts. All scheduled vacations were to be cancelled and members of staff who were vacationing were to be recalled.\textsuperscript{64}

Many Austrian citizens, especially Jews and members of leftist political parties, were desperately trying to emigrate from Austria. However, the Czechoslovak government authorities were determined to stop a flood of refugees from Austria. The POB informed district offices in Slovakia that some people were trying enter Slovak territory with false Czechoslovak travel documents and ordered an increase of border controls.\textsuperscript{65}

Despite the worsening situation of the Jewish population in Austria, the Provincial Office in Bratislava on April 9th 1938 instructed district offices in frontier regions to prevent illegal entry onto Czechoslovak territory. The frontier authorities were also required to search for Austrian

\textsuperscript{60} Slovak and Czech periodical press quoted various French politicians who were creating the impression that it is impossible to doubt French commitment to security of Czechoslovakia. \textit{Robotnicke noviny} informed that “The new French government of Léon Blum hold as is foremost duty to clearly confirm French-Czechoslovak Alliance and not to anyone doubt that France will immediately help Czechoslovakia, if it was attacked. Among the first acts of government was instruction given to French Ambassador Corbin in London to inform the British Government that France would immediately act militarily, if Germany attack the Czechoslovak Republic”. \textit{Robotnicke noviny}, March 17 1938, Vol. 35, Issue 71. Francia pripravuje pomoc Československu. According to periodical \textit{Pražské noviny}, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Yvon Debos explicitly confirmed the obligations of France to Czechoslovakia. \textit{Pražské noviny}, February 24 1938, Vol. 259, Issue. 46. Francie věrná svým spojencům a úmluvě o Společnosti národů.


\textsuperscript{62} SNA, f. PD B, c. 777, no. 15.162/1938 prez.

\textsuperscript{63} SNA, f. PD B, c. 777, no. 34.273/38-Pres.insp.a org.

\textsuperscript{64} SA BB, s. RS, f. DO RS, c. 20, without number.

\textsuperscript{65} SA BB, s. RS, f. DO RS, c. 21, no. 18.363/38 prez.
emigrants and deport them from Czechoslovakia. The Provincial Office in Bratislava instructed district offices to ban entry of people from Austria, even if they had German passports.

The annexation of Austria by Germany had not only a negative impact on the defense ability of the Republic, but also led to a destabilization of the internal political situation. Ethnic Germans and Hungarians, with increasing determination, demanded an improvement of their political, economic and civic status. Slovak autonomists were also exhibiting their growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. The most aggressive posture was taken by the Sudeten German Party (SGP), who became the uncontested leader of Germans living mainly in the Sudeten region. A majority of Sudeten Germans, who were incorporated into Czechoslovakia against their will, were supportive of Germany’s ascent. After the Anschluss, the SGP attracted a growing number of ethnic Germans and became the largest political party in Czechoslovakia. The demands of rights for ethnic-Germans, including territorial autonomy, intensified and culminated during the Congress of the SGP in the Czech town Karlsbad. On April 24th 1938 the chairman of the SGP Konrad Henlein declared eight points, which constituted a political program for the Sudeten German Party. The implementation of these demands would result in the creation of an autonomous Sudetenland, which would in its practical consequences end Czechoslovakia as a centralized state. The impact of such change for the CSR would be catastrophic. Therefore the demands formulated by K. Henlein – the so-called “Karlsbad Program” – were refused by Czechoslovak political representation and by the overwhelming majority of public.

Consequently the negative attitude towards the SGP, especially from the Communists, hardened. Since the ascent of the Nazi Party to power in Germany, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia changed its policy toward the Republic. The CPC, as a loyal member of the Communist International, traditionally portrayed the CSR as a capitalist state which must be destroyed. However, the growing danger of a German invasion and the possibility that the Nazis would occupy Czechoslovakia, and end the CPC, led to a reverse of its policy – the condemnation of the CSR was superseded by the determination to fight for the protection of the Republic. Even though leaders of the CPC retained their criticism of the “bourgeois” regime, they supported government measures intended to increase the defense ability of the CSR. In November 1937 the CPC issued a circular letter to all Party organizations advising members of the CPC to join the Civil Air Defense. According to the Provincial Office in Bratislava, which became aware of this communist initiative, the aim of the CPC was to gain a significant position in local organizations of the CAP. The Provincial Office in Bratislava (POB) requested local state authorities to pay attention to communist initiatives and to report the activities of communists in organizations in the CAP. As ardent protectors of the Republic acted, in Parliament a communist member of the House of Parliament (HP). Ján Šverma, in his rather more propagandist than pragmatic speech declared: “We Communists, the most consistent defenders of democracy and the Republic against fascism, are appealing to all workers, anti-fascists, democrats and all those, to whom the destiny of the Republic and its independence is important. To all those people we are offering our hand to cooperate and we call on them for preparedness.”

67 SA BB, s. RS, f. DO RS, c. 23, no. 55.331/38 prez.
68 SA BB, s. Lučenec (L), f. Notary Office Poltár (NO P), c. 3, no. 21.040/1997 prez.
The CPC intended also to assist in the defense of CSR. The POB informed the security authorities that the headquarters of the CPC instructed local organizations to monitor the activities of the Sudeten German Party in frontier regions and to create so called “Fight-Actives” able to intervene in the event of any conflict. The POB requested local authorities to pay the greatest attention to the CPC and report occurrences of such activities.\textsuperscript{70}

The transformation of the CPC from an assumed enemy to a supporter of the government resulted in a more tolerant attitude from the state authorities. For example, the Provincial Office in Bratislava on April 1\textsuperscript{st} 1938 revoked the prohibition of the public distribution of the Communist periodical \textit{Rudé Právo}.\textsuperscript{71}

Unlike the leaders of the the CPC, who warned of the danger of German aggression, government officials stubbornly played down the possibility that Czechoslovakia could become a target of attack. On the occasion of twentieth anniversary of the Battle of Bachmač, F. Machník, the Minister of Defense, declared that there was no reason to be worried.\textsuperscript{72} Government propaganda also made unceasing effort to convince public that the Czechoslovak Army was capable of defending the CSR and there was no need to be worried. The Commander in Chief of the Czechoslovak Army, F. Krejčí, during an interview given to representatives of the press declared that defense installations constructed at the frontiers were “perfect”. However, he admitted that in case of the commencement of military operations, during the first days the Czechoslovak Army would have to fight alone.\textsuperscript{73}

The top army officials and politicians played great attention to the construction of chain of fortification in frontier regions with Germany and Hungary. Despite the fact that in 1938 a system of strongholds built on the border with Germany and after the Anschluss also on border with the former Austria was far from complete, it was presented as impenetrable. An over-optimistic assessment of the situation was given by F. Machník after an inspection of the defensive installations undertaken in June 1938. He declared that “Our Army can be valued as one of the best armies”.\textsuperscript{74}

The drain on the state budget caused by military expenditure was partially solved by borrowing and by the organization of voluntary financial aid by government and public associations.\textsuperscript{75} With the intention to organize financial support for military forces, on June 10\textsuperscript{th} 1938 prominent members of political, financial, economic and cultural institutions decided to establish a collection for the defense of the Republic, and issued a proclamation addressed to “All citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic”. They appealed to the public with a request to contribute to the “Fund for Defense of the CSR”, “Because it is extremely important that in this crucial moment

\textsuperscript{70} SA BB, s. RS, f. DO RS, c. 21.
\textsuperscript{71} SA K, s. R, f. DO R, c. 42, no. 18.862/38 prez.
\textsuperscript{72} F. Machník assured the gathered crowd, that „Events of the recent days are raising among all people questions, in what situation we actually are. I am saying to you that the situation of our beloved Republic, for which we were fighting is in every aspect firm and by recent events not touched at all”. Venkov, March 13, 1938, Vol. XXXIII, Issue 61. Ministr Machník: Na ohrožování naši samostatnosti nikdo nepomýšlí.
\textsuperscript{75} The sources of needed finances were the Loan for Defense of State and the Contribution to Defense of State. According to Z. Kárník, „These measures enabled the state to cover substantially increased military budget, on the others side to engage public in preparations for defence.” KÁRNÍK, Zdeněk. České země v éře První republiky (1918 – 1938) Díl třetí o přežití a o život (1935 – 1938). Praha : Libri, 2000, p. 482.
they will display their solidarity, their will to life and their attitude to the Republic with this sacrifice, which will bring help to the Republic and which will have in the eyes of the whole world a great moral value and will document our inner power”. These desperate measures were intended to keep the state solvent in the face of a rapid increase in defense expenditure, especially for the enormously expensive fortification works in frontier regions. In 1938 the economic situation of the state worsened with increasing capital flight from the CSR. Government agencies also implemented involuntary defense measures, which in extraordinary situations were necessary to continue with military activities”.

In his aforementioned speech in February 1938, Hitler openly declared his determination to annex regions inhabited by Germans in states neighboring Nazi Germany. Though he did not name these countries directly, it was clear that it was Austria and Czechoslovakia. After occupation of Austria the possibility that Germany would also occupy Sudeten region became real. Therefore, it was essential for the Czechoslovak government to reform the status of ethnic minorities, especially the status of the German minority in such a way as to deflect criticism voiced by minority representatives. On March 29th 1938 the Prime Minister Hodža announced that a complex legislative regulating all aspects of the status of ethnic minorities would be prepared, known as “the Minority Statute”. However, the systematization of the already existing legislative norms without an implementation of a radical increase in the political and economic rights of minorities was unacceptable to the SGP. Despite months of negotiations, which were characterized by a forthcoming approach from the Czechoslovak government, an agreement was not reached. A strong suspicion emerged that Hitler was behind the uncompromising position of the SGP. In July 1938 the chairman of the SGP, K. Henlein, visited Germany. In spite of the secrecy which shrouded Henlein’s visit, suspicions that Henlein conferred with Hitler in regard to further strategy of SGP were widely held. In the end this suspicion proved to be true. No matter how far was the Czechoslovak government was willing to go to fulfill the demands of the Sudeten German Party, their compromises were rejected.

In an atmosphere of nervousness induced by the incessant anti-Czechoslovak Nazi propaganda, an event occurred which could have resulted in an immediate outbreak of hostilities. On May 20th 1938 the Intelligence Service of the Czechoslovak Army received a report that German divisions were moving toward the Czechoslovak border. Though there was no positive proof, information was confirmed by the Headquarters of the First Army Corps. Later the same day an emergency government session, in which Beneš also participated, was held and a decision was made to mobilize a limited number of reservists, numbering approximately 200,000 men. However, rumors about the massing the German Army on the Czechoslovak border were false and resulted

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77 A. Klimek stated that government expenditure increased from 12, 3 billion in 1934 to 18, 5 billion crowns in 1937, internal indebtedness grew from 25, 95 billion in 1929 to 36, 61 billions of crowns in 1937. Process of capital escape from country intensified and after Anschluss of Austria changed into a panic exodus. KLIMEK, A. Velké dějiny..., pp. 566-567.
78 For example the right to use private motor vehicles, billet military personnel in private houses and confiscation of real estate for army use. KÁRNÍK, Z. České země..., p. 482.
79 A communist periodical Slovenské zvesti argued that „It is more than probable that he (Henlein) was there to obtain further instructions for his advancement against Czechoslovakia.” Slovenské zvesti, July 19, 1938. Vol. III, Issue 107. Henlein bol v Berline.
80 KLIMEK, A. Velké dějiny..., pp. 557-558.
81 KÁRNÍK, Z. České země..., p. 525.
in a negative reaction from Germany, France and Great Britain. The French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet allegedly told the British Ambassador that “If Czechoslovakia were really unreasonable the French Government might well declare that France is considering herself released from her bond.” Also Beneš admitted that partial mobilization, which is known under the name the “Little Mobilization”, was not a success at all because its consequences were more negative than the display of government decisiveness to defend the Republic.

Immediately after the decision to mobilize was made, the Ministry of Interior prohibited publishing all reports about the concentration of armed forces on Czechoslovak borders. Also all reports given by the SGP to press about mobilization were to be suppressed. Periodicals were eventually permitted to inform about partial mobilization, but it was to be described only as “training of reservists”.

Despite dissatisfaction with partial mobilization, which the CSR enacted without knowledge (and approval) of France, French representatives repeatedly confirmed the commitment of France to defend Czechoslovakia in the case of German aggression. The Czechoslovak press made great effort to draw an optimistic picture about the firmness of the alliance with France. However, the reality was quite different. According to historian A. Klimek, Bonnet openly said to Štefan Osuský, the Czechoslovak Ambassador in France, that “France will not wage a war on account of Sudeten. Publicly of course we confirm our solidarity according to wishes of Czechoslovak government...with an aim to achieve an honest, peaceful resolution”.

Besides assurances about the loyalty of France, the press ascribed the important role of the Soviet Union in providing help to Czechoslovakia against German aggression. The most reassuring, in regard to Soviet help, regardless of the reality, was the communist daily Slovenské Zvesti. Also

82 “On the following day, the 21st, it seemed to be certain that the rumors were false. The German Army had not moved. Ribbentrop denounced Czech action as ‘provocative’. He was not alone. Britain and France were not pleased since the Czechs seemed deliberately to have jeopardized the work they had been doing for six weeks”. ROBBINS, Keith. Munich 1938. London : Cassell, 1968, p. 224.
83 LAFFAN, R. G. D. Survey..., p. 130.
84 „However, a success which was achieved during the May crisis, hasn’t been for us without bad portends for the future...Great Britain began seriously to contemplate that for Czechoslovak’s sake could be found a great European conflict“. BENĚS, E. Mnichovské dny..., p. 85.
85 SNA, f. PD, c. 335, no. 31.153/1938 prez. 20.V.1938.
86 SNA, f. PD, c. 335, no. 31.441/1938 prez. 21.V.1938
87 For example: A-Zet, May 22, 1938, Vol. XXXV, Issue 120. Jeden ročník zálohy povolaný ku cvičeniu Zaisťujeme. ROBOTNICE noviny, informed about the joint pronouncement of Georges Bonnet and the British Ambassador Erick Phipps, in which both politicians declared that “the position of the French and British government toward Czechoslovak issue remain in perfect harmony, without change, same firm and clear as before”. Robotnicke noviny, June 15, 1938, Vol. XXXV, Issue 135. Francia a Anglia rovnako pevne a jasne za ČSR. Pražské noviny cited a speech the French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, in which he declared, that “Our obligations to Czechoslovakia are sacred. We wish that we do not have to fulfill these obligations, however, when this hope will disappoint us, then we are firmly committed to never betray our word, which we give”. Pražské noviny, July 12, 1938, Vol. CCLIX, Issue 160. Francouzská vláda znovu prohlašuje: Závazky Francie ČSR jsou posvátné.
88 KLIMEK, A. Velké dějiny..., p. 594.
89 Shorty after the Anschluss Slovenské Zvesti informed about an interview of Maxim M. Litvinov, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, given to the news media representatives, who, when asked if the ZSSR will help Czechoslovakia, answered: “Of course!” Slovenské Zvesti, March 20, 1938, Vol. III, Issue 56. Otázka: Pomôže SSSR
some non-communist politicians exaggerated the resolution of the ZSSR to help the CSR and the strength of the Red Army. One of the most irresponsible assurances was expressed by the chairman of the Defense Committee Josef David, who after his return from the ZSSR spoke about “thousands” of planes ready to be sent to the CSR, and three million Soviet soldiers massed on the Romanian border. These assertions were clearly fabrications made for propaganda purposes.\(^{91}\)

The possibility of effective military assistance provided by the ZSSR was even more questionable that in case of France. Unlike France, which could attack Germany directly, the Soviet Union had no direct border with the CSR nor with Germany. If the Red Army wanted to attack Germany, it had to be crossed via Romania or Poland. Neither of these countries had agreed to let the Red Army enter their territory. In spite of assurances to help Czechoslovakia, Soviet leaders never clearly specified the mode of their military assistance to Czechoslovakia.\(^{92}\) According to Prokop Drtina, a Secretary of President Beneš, even Beneš himself did not trust the Soviets.\(^{93}\)

Despite the desperate struggle of Beneš to keep negotiations with representatives of the SGP alive, the hope to achieve a compromise became increasingly elusive. A solution was unable to be reached also by a British emissary W. Runciman, who officially came to Czechoslovakia as an independent “investigator and negotiator”, but in reality he was sent by the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain with the mission to arrange a peace agreement which would satisfy Hitler. On September 7\(^{th}\) 1938 the SGP ended negotiations under the pretence of an incident in Moravská Ostrava, where during a demonstration a German member of Parliament was hurt by a policeman. It was clear that the leadership of the SGP was not interested in coming to an agreement with the Czechoslovak government but was acting as an obedient tool of Hitler’s strategy to destroy Czechoslovakia. There was also another aspect which should be taken into consideration – the hostile attitude of Hungary and Poland.\(^{94}\)

President Beneš remained defiantly optimistic. In a radio broadcast on September 10\(^{th}\) 1938 he praised the achievements of the Czechoslovak Republic. He stressed the necessity to improve the status of its ethnic minorities, which according to Beneš, would be solved in a short time. After the incident in Moravská Ostrava, however, there was a minimal possibility of bringing the leaders of the SGP to the negotiation table. On the contrary, encouraged by Hitler’s speech at Congress of the Nazi Party in Nuremberg on September 12 1938, Sudeten Germans initiated violent protests. Henlein and prominent representatives of the SGP escaped to Germany,
followed by a number of German refugees. The Czechoslovak security forces restored order in the Sudeten region, and the situation was diffused, but it proved only the calmness before the storm.95 Seeing his mission devoid, in existing circumstances, of any purpose, Runciman also left Czechoslovakia.

Highly surprising was a communique from the British government issued on September 14th 1938, informing that the Prime Minister Chamberlain, “motivated by the intention to preserve peace in Europe” would visit Hitler in Germany, if invited. It was an unprecedented offer and Hitler agreed to meet Chamberlain on September 15th 1938.96 With the exception of the interpreter Paul Schmidt, there was no other person present at the meeting. According to Chamberlain, Hitler declared that besides the annexation of the Sudeten region he had no further claims and was willing to abstain from military interference. Chamberlain had no objections, but remarked that he had to consult his colleagues in government. Hitler agreed.

With the intention of forming a common strategy in dealing with the looming crisis, members of British and French governments met on September 18th 1938 in London to discuss their options. They agreed that to assist Czechoslovakia militarily in any meaningful way was impossible. Therefore the only solution was to accept the annexation of Czechoslovak territory by Germany, where more than 50 % of inhabitants were ethnic Germans. Pressured by the French, the British agreed that rest of Czechoslovakia was to be granted an international guarantee.97 The next day the French Ambassador M. V. De Lacroix and the British Ambassador Basil Newton submitted to Beneš a proposal describing regions which had to be transferred to Germany. The President refused.98 On September 20th 1938 Krofta submitted to the Ambassadors of France and Great Britain a negative response from the Czechoslovak government. However, the refusal was not accepted. In the early morning on September 21st 1938, both the Ambassadors visited Beneš and presented him with a sternly formulated ultimatum – either Czechoslovakia accepted the proposal or France and England would be disinterested in the further course of events.99 The French Foreign Minister Bonnet later argued that ultimatum was requested by Beneš or Hodža with an aim to find an excuse for its acceptance. However, convincing evidence is lacking and Beneš described these accusations as totally false.100

During the government session convened by Beneš on September 21st 1938 generals Ludvík Krejčí and Jan Syrový stated that without help from their allies the Czechoslovak Army could resist only for a short time. In spite of negative reactions voiced by several members of government, Beneš accepted the ultimatum.101 When news about the acceptance of the ultimatum

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95 To prevent occurrence of any disturbances in Slovakia the Provincial Office in Bratislava instructed authorities controlling the periodical press to allow publishing of only articles describing the situation in border regions as released only by official sources. SNA, f. PD B, c. 335, no. 58.629/1938 prez.
96 LAFFAN, R. D. G. Surway...., pp. 323-325.
97 KLIMEK, A. Velké dějiny..., p. 628.
98 BENEŠ, E. Mníchovské dny..., pp. 255-256.
99 In his memoirs E. Beneš, enraged by alleged French duplicity, published the French ultimatum in its entirety: “If the Czechoslovak government will be immediately not able to accept proposals and refuse them and if such situation will lead to war, Czechoslovakia will be responsible for it and France will not participate in this war “. BENEŠ, E. Mníchovské dny..., p. 260.
100 BENEŠ, E. Mníchovské dny..., p. 265.
101 The Foreign Minister Krofta informed Czechoslovak Foreign Embassies about of response of government: „To French and British Ambassadors was today at 17 hours submitted this answer of the Czech. Government. Compelled by circumstances and extraordinary pressure by French and British governments the Czechoslovak government with
became publicly known, mass protests erupted in Prague and other Czech cities. On September 22nd 1938 the government resigned and a new government was formed led by General J. Syrový. It seemed that an essential condition for the preservation of peace in Europe – the transfer of the Sudeten region to German sovereignty – was achieved. With this optimistic expectation on September 22nd 1938 Chamberlain flew again to Germany. After his arrival at Godesberg, a small town situated on the banks of the river Rhine, the Prime Minister introduced his version of the Sudeten territory transfer. The regions inhabited exclusively by Germans were to be transferred outright. The regions inhabited by a mixture of Czechs and Germans were to be divided according to the decision of the commission composed of representatives of Germany and Czechoslovakia and of a representative from a neutral state. Further, Czechoslovakia’s military agreements were ended and instead it accepted the protection of international guarantees. Hitler, however, refused the proposal with the argument that thousands of refugees were escaping to Germany from Sudeten region daily, and that the situation was unstable and it was impossible to know what would happen. Hitler categorically demanded that whole transfer should be executed “in a span of several days”. In addition, he emphasized that the requirements also of Hungary and Poland should be satisfied. In regard to guarantees, they could be given by Germany if neighboring countries – Hungary and Poland would agree. Chamberlain, enraged by the refusal of his proposal, left. Nevertheless, he decided to stay in Germany. During their next meeting with Hitler, on September 23rd, Chamberlain received the memorandum containing the German demands with a map attached. Convinced that the response was for the Czechoslovak leaders to make, he dispatched Hitler’s decision to Prague. Speaking for the Czechoslovak government, Jan Masaryk, the Czech Ambassador in Great Britain, rejected the memorandum. The next step taken by the Czechoslovak government was full-scale mobilization. On September 23rd, after consultations with general Syrový and representatives of political parties composing of the ruling coalition, Beneš issued an order to mobilize the military forces of the CSR. Even though mobilization proceeded smoothly, it did not incite a similar reaction in the ranks of Czechoslovakia’s allies. Conscious of the necessity to react to the existing situation, representatives of Great Britain and France discussed their options during a meeting in London between September 25th – 26th 1938. Daladier, who considered Hitler’s ultimatum unacceptable, declared that in case of conflict the French Army would attack German fortifications with the support of the airforce. Chamberlain was skeptical and expressed also doubts that the Soviets would engage in military operations.
When questioned what measures England would take, he avoided a direct answer. He asked Daladier to invite Maurice Gamelin, the Commander-in-chief of the French Army, so the general could express his opinion about the military situation. Gamelin judged the French Army to be stronger than the German army except for their airforce. He also had a positive opinion in regard to the fighting ability of the Czechoslovak Army. However, as a serious problem he perceived the unpredictability of Poland. Chamberlain, who was far more reluctant to assume more a resolute approach than was exhibited by Daladier, offered symbolic help in the case of war with Germany. According to the British Prime Minister, Britain could during the first six months of fighting commit only two divisions and 150 planes.

Chamberlain voiced his abhorrence to wage war with Germany also in a radio broadcast on September 27th 1938, in which he pointed to the absurdity that Londoners must dig trenches around the city and test gas masks, because conflict was looming caused by a country basically unknown to them.

A breakthrough in the situation saw a joint initiative by the British Prime Minister and the Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini. They agreed that the last chance to prevent war would be a conference of leaders of European Powers. Hitler agreed on condition that the meeting would be enacted without delay. Daladier also agreed to take part. Representatives of Czechoslovakia were not invited.

The conference, in line with Hitler’s wishes, was hastily convened on September 29th in Munich. Unlike Chamberlain and Daladier who came separately and did not consult on their strategy with each other, Hitler met Mussolini in the Austrian town of Kufstein. Hitler arranged the meeting to make sure that his ally would act according to his wishes. He had no qualms disclosing to Mussolini how he intended to destroy Czechoslovakia and also about his hostile plans against France. Mussolini had no objections against Hitler’s suggestions and assumed, seemingly, a leading role after the conference started at noon on September 29th. Daladier tried to invite representatives of Czechoslovakia to the conference, but it was refused by Hitler. Surprisingly, Daladier was more willing to accept Hitler’s demands than Chamberlain, who tried, in vain, to guarantee the personal property of Czechs living in the annexed territory.

The conference, which became known as the Munich Agreement, was concluded on September 30th 1938. As Hitler requested in the ultimatum formulated in Godesberg, the German Army started the process of annexation of the Sudeten region on October 1st.

Despite the readiness of the Czechoslovak Army to fight, Beneš, refused to give the order to go to war with Germany with the explanation, that in the existing circumstances it would result in the massacre of the citizens of the Republic.

The diplomatic victory Hitler had immense consequences. Czechoslovakia became basically defenseless and soon was swallowed up by Nazi Germany. But it was not only the tragedy of Czechoslovakia. According to the Czech historian Jindřich Dejmek “the mutilation of Czechoslovakia by “Munich” and its consequences led to the breakdown of the fragile balance in the whole region of the Central Europe and a definitive turn away by governments of the majority from remnants of the principle of collective security.”

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106 ČELOVSKÝ, B. Mníchovská dohoda..., pp. 336-337.
107 LAFFAN, R. D. G. Surway..., pp. 397-398.
108 LAFFAN, R. D. G. Surway..., pp. 397-398.
109 ČELOVSKÝ, B. Mníchovská dohoda..., p. 345.
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