

DOCUMENTS ON THE SUDETEN QUESTION: GENUINE OR FORGED?

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One of the important tasks of the historian is to evaluate the authenticity of the documents on which he is basing his analysis and interpretation. It is very important obviously that he does so, for the credibility of his interpretation will often rest on the genuineness of the sources. And yet the problem is more complex than that, because even forged materials, or genuine documents of questionable provenance, can be useful under certain circumstances, for they can shed light on those protagonists in the historical process who find it necessary or advantageous to act in devious ways.

For the historian involved with the German-Czech controversies in pre-war Czechoslovakia the problem of document verification and evaluation is of prime importance. Particularly with regard to the Sudeten German camp this is the case, for internecine rivalries and conflicts among the Sudeten Germans were often pursued with as much treachery as were the conflicts between Sudeten Germans and Czechs. It was not at all uncommon, for instance, for members from the ranks of the DNSAP, or the *Aufbruch* circle, or the *Kameradschaftsbund*, to carry out their conflicts with one another in the form of denunciations to the authorities, forged or leaked correspondence, articles lanced to the press, or planted incriminating evidence, among other methods.

The record attests fully to such activities and the documentation arising out of them whether spurious, forged, genuine-but-leaked, or in whatever form is an important witness to one of the darker, but nonetheless important, aspects of the background to the Sudeten crisis. One very useful and important body of evidence documenting this kind of underground political activity and a touchstone to the question of the authenticity of historical documentation from this period is represented by a collection of documents from the Chancellery of the President of the Republic (AKPR)¹ to which this author gained access in 1968 and which have not yet been used in scholarly analysis. Copies of these documents are now in the custody of the Collegium Carolinum.

This documentation is from the „Fond T139/34: Konrad Henlein“ and represents, in part at least, duplicates of the originals. It is in two sections. One dates from the period April to July 1937 and consists of correspondence between Walter Brand and Heinz Rutha, both highly placed leaders of the Sudeten German Party and confidants of Konrad Henlein as well as a lengthy report by Rutha detailing

¹ Archiv Kanceláře Prezidenta Republiky.

his activities in England, particularly his attempts to contact prominent Englishmen attached to the League of Nations Society who might use their influence on behalf of the Sudeten German minority in Czechoslovakia. The other group of documents spans the period February to June 1936 and consists of correspondence among Brand, Friedrich Bürger, Henlein's man in Berlin, and Friedrich Köllner, another prominent leader of the SdP as well as other individuals.

The correspondence deals largely with internal rivalries within the SdP as well as with relations between the SdP and various agencies in Germany, particularly with Hans Pfundner, *Staatssekretär* in the Reich Interior Ministry, and Robert Ley, head of the Reich Labor Front. In addition, there is a protocol of a three day meeting of the *Bundestagung des Bundes für gesellschafts-wissenschaftliche Bildung und Erziehung* at Hellbrunn, Austria, from March 16—18, 1936. This organization included among its members many prominent Sudeten German Party leaders as well as Austrian and German nationals, most notable Hans Steinacher, leader of the *Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland*.

These documents are important for they deal with some crucial elements of Sudeten German politics at a time of crisis and rapid change. During the years 1935—1937 contacts across the border to Germany and Austria were proliferating and creating a net in which the Sudeten German Party leadership would find itself inextricably entangled. At the same time, the SdP was becoming increasingly active on the international level, particularly in France and England, in an effort to communicate to the governments and influential people in those countries an understanding of the German minority problem in Czechoslovakia. This activity would also eventually come to represent a trap, since the resulting „internationalization“ of the Sudeten problem would offer Hitler a pretext for massive intervention. And finally, these years also witnessed a corrosive struggle within the SdP itself between radicals and moderates, replete with treachery and denunciation, a struggle which would not remain isolated but would become evermore intertwined in the complex web of relationships which bound the Sudeten German party to various Reich German agencies².

The documentation here under discussion attests to all of that, but then so does much other material. More importantly, as we try to assess the value of this particular material, it becomes clear that the documents themselves, how they were generated at the time, how they were used, and how they got into the hands of the authorities assume an importance *apart from their actual content* in the political struggles which pitted Sudeten German against Czech as well as against his ethnic brothers during the late 1930s. The story behind these documents housed in the archives of the President's Chancellery represents an interesting detective story the unraveling of which should shed light on that dramatic period.

All of which brings us back to the initial question about authenticity. Raising that question about these particular documents does not amount to presenting a straw man, for their authenticity has been denied by the very people who allegedly

² See Smelser, Ronald M.: *Das Sudetenproblem und das Dritte Reich 1933—1938*. München 1980, 130—149.

generated them in the first place: Walter Brand and Friedrich Bürger. In lengthy interviews with the two men in which they were able to examine the documentation in detail, both Brand and Bürger insisted that the material represented forgeries perpetrated either by their radical enemies in the party (Brand) or possibly by the Reich Security Service, the *Sicherheitsdienst*, which was in league with their enemies in the party (Bürger). Both men also raised questions about the propriety of the one scholar who to date had reprinted a portion of this material, Václav Král³.

These objections and allegations, of course, make necessary the task of authenticating the documents if they are ever to be used by scholars seriously, a task which the author now proposes to do. There is evidence both circumstantial and internal on both sides of the question, but on balance the weight of the evidence suggests strongly that the documents are genuine, that they were written by the people whose names appear on them, that they passed into the hands of the Czech authorities either by confiscation or betrayal and were subsequently used both in litigation and as part of a series of press exposés on the Sudeten German Party.

One must recall the context in which these documents were generated. During the years 1935–1937 the Czechoslovak government was becoming increasingly aware of the growing number of contacts between the Sudeten German Party and various party and state agencies in the Reich, contacts which it believed with some justification were subversive and which would lead to a mounting radicalization of the Sudeten Germans and a gradual destabilization of the whole country. With this in mind, the government redoubled its efforts to secure intelligence information on the activities of leading SdP figures through heightened surveillance, confiscation of correspondence and other documents and infiltration of the rival groups in the Sudeten German camp⁴.

The government was aided in this endeavor by the fact that precisely during the period 1936 and early 1937, when most of this material was generated, the internal rivalries within the Sudeten German Party between the radical *Aufbruch* circle and the more moderate *Kameradschaftsbund* people, were reaching their highest level of intensity in a crisis which threatened to split the party asunder. These rivalries were often carried out in terms of denunciations to the authorities and through „leaking“ incriminating materials to government agencies and to the press. A particularly odious example of this was the denunciation of Heinz Rutha in 1937 and his subsequent incarceration and suicide while in prison⁵.

As we examine the documents here under consideration with an eye to establishing their authenticity the following scenario emerges with some plausibility. Evidence points initially to two malcontents in the Sudeten German Party who had come to associate with one another: Peuker and Förster (their first names were not identifiable despite frequent references to the two men). Peuker, a former DNSAP man and a *Kreisleiter* in the SdP (SHF) since 1934, was a troublemaker

³ The interviews were conducted on November 11, 1968. See Král's document collection: *Die Deutschen in der Tschechoslowakei 1933–1947*. Prag 1964.

⁴ See: *Master of Spies*. The Memoirs of General František Moravec. New York 1975, especially chapters 5 and 6.

⁵ See Smelser: *Sudetenproblem* 1980, 182.

and a supporter of the radical *Aufbruch* circle. His name is mentioned in this context in a SdP *Hauptleitungssitzung* of October 23, 1934, when two *Hauptabteilung* members are detailed to negotiate with him on his piccadillos. The point is forcefully made in this discussion that there is no prospect of his being reelected *Kreisleiter* in the future, though some mention of monetary compensation is made⁶. Peuker, then, had added reason to harbor ill intentions toward the leadership of the party.

Förster was former editor of *Die Zeit*, the SdP newspaper, and apparently a courier to deliver secret messages between SdP organizations and various agencies in the Reich during 1936. What the SdP leaders who delegated these courier tasks to Förster apparently did not know was that Förster was also an informer for the President's Chancellery and had taken a Czech police official in Reichenberg, a man named Cmolnik, into his confidence. On December 7, 1936, as a matter of record, Förster turned over, presumably not for the first time, confidential materials to Peuker, some of it including Brand's correspondence, and then both men proceeded to leak this material both to the police and to the press⁷.

The fact that much of the material here under consideration was generated during the period just before Förster and Peuker acted, that Förster had been a courier for correspondence to Germany and that much of this correspondence consisted of letters between Brand and Bürger, and that this material, as its markings indicate, passed through the police presidium in Reichenberg on its way to the President's Chancellery, seems to build a strong case for the fact that this documentation in part represents genuine correspondence which was leaked by the two malcontents, Förster and Peuker. As we pursue the trail of these leaked documents, it becomes at least partially clear what then became of them. They were leaked to several newspapers. One, *Die Tat: Demokratische Zeitschrift für Politik und Kultur*, definitely aquired from Peuker photocopies of correspondence which it published. Another, the *Prager Montagsblatt*, also had materials from Peuker⁸. Perhaps most importantly, the *Prager Presse*, a semi-official newspaper which often reflected the government line, also received copies of incriminating documents on the basis of which it increasingly called the loyalty of the SdP and its leaders into question. Already earlier, in fact, in September 1935, Konrad Henlein had taken the paper to court on a libel suit and in this trial confiscated documents played an important role⁹.

As far as the materials directly under consideration here are concerned, it is presumably them to which Minister Eisenlohr refers in a report to Berlin on November 4, 1936 — that is, at the time when Peuker and Förster were leaking

⁶ Státní Ústřední Archiv (SÚA). Prag 2KKh, #6.

⁷ See César, Jaroslav / Černý, Bohumil: *Politika německých buržoazních stran v Československu v letech 1918—1938* [Die Politik d. dt. bürgerlichen Parteien in d. Tschechoslowakei in d. Jahren 1918—1938]. Bd. 2. Prag 1962, 382, n. 222. Förster is mentioned in a letter from Köllner to Bürger of February 21, 1936 in the collection here under scrutiny.

⁸ *Ibidem* 334, n. 49.

⁹ See Stein to Auswärtiges Amt (AA), September 25, 1935. National Archives Microcopy T-120, Roll 3523, frames E 643732—35.

documents. According to Eisenlohr, an informant has passed information on to him indicating that Förster has been funneling documents to Dr. Kraitner of the *Prager Presse*, including confirmation of money shipments from Berlin as well as material „which Dr. Brand has directed to be burned. The incriminating material... was collected and photographed by the *Prager Presse* and the copies notarized“. Apparently, Kraitner first approached the informant six months earlier, i. e. in May of 1936, during the time in which much of Brand's correspondence originated¹⁰. Moreover, in the *Aktenverzeichnis* of the AKPR there is a notation referring to many of these documents to the effect that the originals of these copies are to be found with a Dr. Bouček-Laurin. Interestingly enough in the Henlein libel suit against the *Prager Presse* earlier a Dr. Václav Bouček was the attorney for the chief editor of that newspaper, a man named Laurin!

Moreover, a report on the activities of the *Kameradschaftsbund* made by the Czechs in October 1936 makes note of the fact that „all the letters now in the archives of the *Prager Presse* referring to the *Kameradschaftsbund* were sent to Friedrich Bürger in Berlin“¹¹.

Add to this evidence a report from Colonel Tschunke, a military attaché in Prague during the summer of 1936, which indicates that information coming from the British Legation points to an intense concern on the part of the Czechs about SdP activity. According to this report, Walter Brand's correspondence had come into the hands of the authorities and his arrest was imminent, along with that of Friedrich Köllner¹².

And finally, one notes that several authors of a history of the Henlein movement, who had access to official sources at the time, indicated in their book that in June 1936 the *Kameradschaftsbund* had 64 300 RM in its Berlin account. By „*Kameradschaftsbund*“ it is clear that they mean the Sudeten German Party leadership around Henlein, i. e. Brand, etc. and their man, Bürger, in Berlin. The figure they mention corresponds very closely to the amounts shown in the documentation here under consideration for April 1936 (54 060) and May 1936 (72 630), and suggests that the documents turned over to the President's Chancellery were made available to the three authors for their book¹³.

It is interesting as well to note in what other semi-official ways these documents were used. Two polemical tracts written by Czechs in exile in London during the war tracing the rise of Nazi aggression against Czechoslovakia and the complicity of the Sudeten German Party in that aggression both cite as their *single documented example* of Sudeten contacts with the Reich the same document: one which details an agreement of May 27, 1936, between the VDA and Bürger and Hans Neuirth of SdP engaging the help of Robert Ley to coordinate the press in both countries.

¹⁰ See Eisenlohr to AA, November 4, 1936. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bonn (PA), Pol. II (Verschluß), POg, Tsched. / 1.

¹¹ Berlin Document Center (BDC): Akte Hans Neuirth. Geschäftsregister: Akten des Gaugerichtes Sudetenland.

¹² Altenburg Aufzeichnung, June 15, 1936. PA / Pol. IV / Politik 6 / RFN / 1.

¹³ Fischer, Josef / Patzak, Václav / Perth, Vincenc: Ihr Kampf. Die wahren Ziele der Sudetendeutschen Partei. Karlsbad 1937, 81, 84.

Interestingly enough, that document is one of those in the material we are considering here ¹⁴. Against this overwhelming body of circumstantial evidence for the authenticity of the documentation, there is only one piece of evidence, apart from the assertions of Brand and Bürger, which one can interpret as politically self-serving, for the fact that they might be forgeries.

In a letter to the *Gaugericht Sudetenland* in 1941, Hans Neuwirth, a former SdP leader with shady activities, referred to a number of forgeries perpetrated by Peuker during the summer of 1936, including letters from Fritz Köllner to him (Neuwirth) and from Bürger to Brand. In another letter to the *Gaugericht*, Neuwirth notes: Peuker tried through forged documents to prove the danger the Sudeten German Party represented to the state ¹⁵.

In considering this piece of evidence one needs to note, first, that the dates which Neuwirth cites for his correspondence do not match those on the letters in the AKPR; and, secondly, and perhaps more importantly, at the time Neuwirth wrote these letters to the *Gaugericht* a number of former leaders of the Sudeten German Party were under severe pressure, and occasionally, arrest and incarceration at the hands of the SD and the Gestapo. This was particularly true of former *Kameradschaftsbund* members. In light of these developments, it would have been in Neuwirth's interest as a former KB member himself, to assert in any affidavit submitted to the court that alleged correspondence among KB members was forged.

Apart from the body of circumstantial evidence which speaks for the authenticity of these documents, we would cite their internal consistency as proof as well. For many passages reflect attitudes and positions which are at odds with the possibility that the documents were forged with the intent of incriminating those mentioned in a plot to overthrow the Czechoslovak state.

Perhaps the best example of this is represented by the minutes of the *Bundestagung des Bundes für gesellschafts-wissenschaftliche Bildung und Erziehung* held at Hellbrunn near Salzburg from March 16—18, 1936. The lists of participants and guests clearly indicate a gathering of „traditionalists“ with respect to the Sudeten question. They include, among others, Brand, Köllner, Bürger and May, all moderates in the Sudeten German Party, as well as Dr. Hans Steinacher, leader of the *Volksbund für das Deutschtum im Ausland* and an active collaborator with the Sudeten moderates. In the minutes reference is made to the fact that representatives of the group meeting at Hellbrunn will be present at the annual *Pfingsten* meeting of the VDA to be held at Bremen. Steinacher mentions this meeting conspicuously in his memoirs, noting that it had been forbidden by *Reich* authorities already on March 11, but that he was not allowed to reveal the fact ¹⁶. This would explain how,

¹⁴ See Bílek, Bohumil: *Fifth Column at Work*. London 1945, 28, n. 1. — Uhlíř, František: Prague and Berlin. London 1944, 53. Uhlíř was a member of Beneš party, a Deputy in Parliament from Moravská Ostrava, and official in the Ministry of Education and, finally, Vice-President of the Czechoslovak State Council in the London exile government.

¹⁵ See Neuwirth letters of August 16 and 17, 1941, to *Gaugericht Sudetenland*. BDC: Akte Neuwirth.

¹⁶ See Jacobsen, Hans-Adolf (Hrsg.): Hans Steinacher. Bundesleiter des VDA 1933—1937. *Erinnerungen und Dokumente*. Boppard 1970, 336—337.

at Hellbrunn one week later, the group was still talking about sending a representation to Bremen. At this same point in this memoirs, Steinacher notes that he was wary of his VDA appearing to the outside world as a irredentist organization. This preoccupation is reflected in one of the resolutions passed at the Hellbrunn meeting and suggests the authenticity of the minutes. According to the resolution the organization establishes from the outset that it has no interest in the destruction of any political entity in the German *Raum* and is not working toward that end.

In the next paragraph the minutes go on to say that the organisation must ascertain with regret that certain circles in Germany stand in opposition to their actions and that the differences and misunderstandings reflected in that opposition will have to be ironed out at Bremen.

These passages which clearly underscore the differences between the radicals and traditionalists in the Sudeten question are clearly not the work of someone trying to implicate these people in treasonous activities; to do that one would want to minimize any differences between radicals and traditionalists and suggest that they were all working toward the same destructive goals.

Thus the evidence, both circumstantial and direct, would suggest that this important body of documentation, a portion of which has found its way into print already but which has been seriously questioned as to its genuineness, is indeed authentic and reveals some important details behind one of the most important crises in central Europe in our century: the Munich crisis.