

## BRITISH ATTITUDES TOWARDS CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1944-45 \*

By Vilém Prečan

The position occupied by Czechoslovakia (or what might be described as the Czechoslovak question or agenda) in British military and political strategy during World War II was of no great importance *per se*. Its importance, if any, derived more from its relationship with other – crucial – British interests. This was true both as regards the original plan for the postwar stability of Central and Southeast Europe on a confederative basis and Britain's later attempt to take Soviet interests in Central and Eastern Europe into account and do nothing which might, in that respect, stand in the way of long-term Anglo-Soviet cooperation.

Nevertheless, as far as British policy-making was concerned the Czechoslovak agenda did have certain rather special overtones which ensured that it was an issue in its own right, and one, moreover, that required handling with kid gloves. These special and delicate overtones had much to do with the manner in which the fate of pre-war Czechoslovakia had been decided prior to the outbreak of war and with Great Britain's decisive role in that decision. I am referring, of course, to the Munich Conference of 1938 and to the developments which either resulted directly from the Munich Agreement or were indirectly connected with it (e. g. inactivity over the question of protecting the frontiers of post-Munich Czechoslovakia, and *de facto* recognition of the Slovak state.)

An entire set of factors came together to ensure that the restoration of the Czechoslovak Republic was a *de facto* – albeit undeclared – aim of the military and political alliance of the three Great Powers. These factors included:

- Overall developments in the global military conflict, including the consequences of the Soviet Union's entry into the war as a belligerent power in June 1941.
- Edvard Beneš's personal drive and diplomatic acumen.
- The fact that in British political circles the awareness gradually made itself felt that Czechoslovakia had been wronged and that this must be atoned for even at the cost of special concessions.

One certainly should cite other factors in addition to the above, or at least expand on the question of the overall global conflict and the need for all available resources to be devoted to it including ideas and ideologies. All of these had the effect of trans-

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forming the Czechoslovak Government-in Exile, which had started life inauspiciously as the Czechoslovak National Committee, into a fully-fledged "minor ally" and partner in European politics.

Once the Czechoslovak government had been acknowledged as a partner in bi-lateral relations and in the "United Nations" alliance (though, admittedly, its position was still rather weak in comparison with the Polish government in London, for example), it was precisely Great Britain – far more than the other Great Powers of the anti-Hitler coalition – which found itself confronted by the Czechoslovak government's particular concerns, plans and intentions. By all evidence, the Czechoslovak government was to prove a great nuisance as a partner to the British in light of the lengthy struggle which they had to wage for recognition and legitimacy<sup>1</sup>, and in order to be ranked among the other "minor allies". An additional cause was the profound despair into which the Czechoslovaks had been plunged after the foundering of their sovereign state which was exacerbated by the bitter blows they suffered during the first years of emigration, all of which engendered an enormous inferiority complex.

This was a factor with which Soviet diplomacy undoubtedly reckoned when skillfully exploiting the desire of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile to increase its prestige, without displaying the least embarrassment over the Soviet Union's behaviour while the Russo-German Pact was still in force. July 1941 was to be the Czechoslovak government's "Sternstunde" as the Germans say. In other words, there was an upswing in its fortunes, most of all because of the brazen Soviets' *volte-face*, when – virtually overnight – they were ready to recognise the Czechoslovak Government in London as the representative of the Czechoslovak state in its pre-Munich frontiers.<sup>2</sup> It was this readiness on the part of the Soviets that finally got the Czechoslovak talks with the British out of their blind alley. Apart from certain other practical considerations, the fact that it offered one government in exile the chance to be a "negotiating partner" of the "Great Powers" was also bound to have played a major role in the Czechoslovak government's tenacious assertion, in summer 1943, of its readiness to sign a treaty with the Soviet Union (in the face of British objections). One can readily appreciate how tempting the chance was to be placed, in a sense, on the same footing as the British who had signed a similar twenty-year treaty with the Soviet Union in 1942.

During the last sixteen months of war on the European continent, the importance of the Czechoslovak agenda within British strategy – as earlier characterised – remained unchanged, or even diminished. The idea for a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation was finally buried as an outcome of Russian opposition to any confederative plans. Britain yielded to the Soviets on the question of the so-called "self-denying ordinance" (agreement not to conclude treaties on post-war matters with the so-called "minor allies"). This was when in the course of negotiations on that point of the programme at the tri-partite conference of foreign ministers in Moscow in October 1943, Anthony

<sup>1</sup> For the most recent survey see Bruegel, Johann W.: The Recognition of the Czechoslovak Government in London. Kosmas vol. 2. No. 1, Summer 1983, pp. 1–13.

<sup>2</sup> The best picture of the sudden change in Soviet behavior towards Czechoslovak representatives is given by Lockhart's despatches to Eden Nos. 61–63, 26 June, 7 and 9 July 1941, Public Record Office London (henceforth PRO) FO 371/26394.

Eden unexpectedly gave British blessing to the conclusion of a Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty.

What undoubtedly influenced the level of British commitment, or more precisely Britain's reluctance or reserve in matters concerning Czechoslovakia (such as assistance for the Slovak uprising in autumn 1944 and refusal to commit itself to providing military aid to uprisings in Bohemia and Moravia in the closing phases of the war) was the combination of circumstances which determined the overall British position and its active radius in the final months of hostilities.

The following factors seem to have been uppermost in British thinking:

1. In Central and a large part of Eastern Europe the overwhelming might of the Soviets was increasingly evident, while ignorance prevailed as to what use or misuse the Soviets would put their military presence in the area. What was clear, was that the Soviets were in a position to dictate a solution of their own, and there was no force in the area to prevent them from doing so. Under the circumstances, the British strove to respect what they regarded as the legitimate interests of Soviet security. They did what they could to allay Soviet suspicions, particularly in view of the bitter lesson of the Warsaw Uprising. By adopting a position of restraint and avoiding conflicts of any kind, they sought to preserve a basis for future cooperation with the Soviet Union which they regarded as a *sine qua non* both for victory in the war and for an all-embracing post-war global settlement. It must be borne in mind that in 1944 the British and Americans estimated that the war with Japan could drag on for an additional eighteen months following the cessation of hostilities in Europe. With a view to protecting their vital interests, the British were subsequently to concentrate on those areas which had priority in their eyes: Western Europe and Greece. They did not, however, renounce their interest in the Central European situation and continued their efforts to make certain of some post-war influence in that area as well. They had to take into account the American President's repeated assertion that American troops would withdraw from Europe during the six months following an armistice.
2. Britain's influence on military and political decisions in Europe, particularly in the last ten months of hostilities, declined in favour of the United States. This was another reason why the British initiative in favour of a more rapid advance of General Dwight D. Eisenhower's allied expeditionary force towards Czechoslovakia and the occupation of Prague, met with so little success.

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Foreign Office minutes provide a fairly accurate definition of British priorities in 1944 as regards Czechoslovakia. They are remarkable not only for their frankness but also because they coincide with how we would assess these priorities with historical hindsight several decades later. Frank K. Roberts of the Central European Department noted on 29th May 1944 that the primary purpose of Beneš's policy was to maintain the balance between east and west, that Beneš was rather anxious about future Russian intentions and had no desire "to be left alone in Soviet company". Roberts' minute went on to point out that Beneš and the Czechoslovak Government had

been at great pains to improve their relations with the British and to obtain from London some concrete gesture of continuing British interest in Czechoslovakia. It was in Britain's interest "to encourage this healthy tendency in Czech policy", provided though, that it would not involve the British in "undesirable commitments or in any trouble with the Russians".<sup>3</sup>

The second reservation needs neither comment nor explanation. There is plenty of documentary evidence of the great pains the British took to avoid any trouble with the Soviets. On closer examination, the first reservation, "undesirable commitments," can be seen to conceal a whole number of very different considerations:

- a) "undesirable commitments" meant anything that might prejudice future decisions on matters reserved – in the British view – for talks on a peace treaty or for decision by the "principal Allies," for example the question of Czechoslovakia's definitive frontiers and the transfer of the Germans from Czechoslovakia, or questions on which the British regarded their hands as tied by American policy, which would be solved later as part of an overall post-war settlement of security questions;
- b) another "undesirable commitment", for instance, would have been the British acceptance of any military commitments guaranteeing the post-war security of Czechoslovakia against German aggression such as were contained in the Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty. (See Appendix 1. "Extract from the Memorandum on Soviet Policy in Europa, 9.");
- c) equally "undesirable" of course, was any allied treaty with Czechoslovakia.

Roberts should have added still one more objection: the limitations resulting from the exhaustion of British resources of all kinds. That particular consideration was undoubtedly another reason why the British could not have adequately encouraged the Czechoslovak exile government's "healthy tendencies" however much they might have wanted to, had circumstances and concern for their priorities permitted.

The upshot of all this was that during 1944 and 1945 the basic attitude adopted by the British political and military circles in respect of the Czechoslovak agenda, was to react only, and not to develop any initiatives of their own. Each of the outside initiatives – most of them from the Czechoslovak government – was, in the light of the reservations voiced by Roberts, laboriously negotiated by the British, in an obvious attempt not to inform their Czechoslovak partner about British negative attitudes or decisions and because they had such little scope to respond positively to the Czechoslovaks' suggestions and requests.

One might well ask whether the British attitude toward the Czechoslovak demands, requests and proposals was influenced by the Czechoslovak government's insistence on sticking to its plan for a Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty against the express wishes of the British. In other words, did that treaty give rise to a rupture between Beneš and the Czechoslovak government, on the one hand, and the British government or diplomatic corps on the other, which took the subsequent form of a certain coolness on the part of the British towards Czechoslovak issues? I do not think so.

Certainly, several times during the summer and early autumn of 1943, Foreign

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<sup>3</sup> PRO FO 371/38922 Roberts minute 29. 5. 44.

Secretary Eden was put out by the intransigence of the Czechoslovak side towards his arguments. On more than one occasion he expressed his discontent in the form of cutting remarks about Beneš in Foreign Office minutes. And when he informed Prime Minister Winston Churchill from Moscow about the outcome of discussions on the item "agreements between major and minor allies on post-war questions" at the conference on 24 October ("... I told M. Molotov at the close of discussion, that I had no objections to make and that I thought the Treaty a good one for its purpose")<sup>4</sup> he added in the following cable: "I trust we shall offer Beneš no bouquets. His part in this business seems to have been to tell half-truths to either side, making as a result a good deal of unnecessary mischief."<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it was clear to Anthony Eden and all others involved that on this issue, they had yielded to Soviet pressure and had compromised with the Soviets and no one else. After all, the dispute over the Treaty had by then long ceased to be the petty duel between the Czechoslovak Government and the British Foreign Office or Eden, that it had seemed to be, say – up to the beginning of July 1943. In the Foreign Office (see Alexander Cadogan's letter to Churchill of 25 October 1943)<sup>6</sup> it was evident that in agreeing with Molotov and signing the Treaty, Eden was acting contrary to the British Cabinet's decision of 28 September 1943 which he himself had tabled.<sup>7</sup> The result: the protocol to the Treaty which made it possible for Poland subsequently to accede to the agreement, could hardly have been "little more than a face-saving device" as Cadogan described it. It certainly did not correspond to one of the alternative instructions in the Cabinet decision mentioned, which was formulated as "the desirability of a tripartite Soviet-Polish-Czechoslovak arrangement, possibly with British participation".<sup>8</sup>

And Eden never – even in his memoirs – explained the reasons for his change of heart, which one of his recent biographers has criticised as capitulation.<sup>9</sup> Cadogan's view in the letter mentioned was that "wider considerations arising out of the Moscow talks" were the likely explanation for Eden's change of attitude from the negative one he held at the moment he left for Moscow. It is possible to find only one subsequent attempt in Foreign Office minutes to interpret the reasons why "the British Govern-

<sup>3</sup> PRO FO 371/38922 Roberts minute 29. 5. 44.

<sup>4</sup> PRO FO 371/34340 Moscow 81 Space to FO 24. 10. 43.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Moscow 86 Space to FO 25. 10. 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* P. M. 43/ 355 Cadogan to Churchill 25. 10. 43.

<sup>7</sup> On 28th September 1943, Eden asked his colleagues' approval of the following line at the Conference:

"a) I should endeavour to secure Soviet agreement to the proposed 'self-denying ordinance'.

b) I should not myself take the initiative in proposing any exceptions to the 'self-denying ordinance', and should oppose the early conclusion of any bilateral Soviet-Czechoslovak arrangement.

c) If other discussions at the Conference on matters affecting Soviet-Polish relations suggest that the atmosphere is favourable, I would inform the Soviet Government that His Majesty's Government, while maintaining their objections to a Soviet-Czechoslovak agreement, would be prepared to collaborate in trying to arrange the conclusion of a tripartite agreement between the U.S.S.R., Poland and Czechoslovakia." PRO FO 371/36957 W. P. (43) 423 28. 9. 43 Memorandum by Eden.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



ment" changed its opinion of the question of a Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty. As the British ambassador to the Czechoslovak government, Philip Nichols, told Capsalis, Greece's minister to Beneš's government, in course of conversation on 8 December 1943:

... it may have been that the Secretary of State, viewing the negotiations as a whole at Moscow, had felt that it would be wise not to insist on a negative attitude towards this treaty and had therefore approved it with a view to ensuring the success of the negotiations as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the Treaty was signed with the "official blessing" of the British, as Nichols later recalled.<sup>11</sup> On his return from Moscow at the beginning of 1944, Beneš was far from being *persona non grata*. On his way back to England, he had been received in Algiers by Churchill who met with him for over four hours.<sup>12</sup> The main item of their talks was the Polish issue. Churchill cabled Roosevelt shortly afterwards that (Beneš) "may be most useful in trying to make the Poles see reason and in reconciling them to the Russians".<sup>13</sup>

Beneš arrived in London on 6 January and two days later was the guest at a political luncheon with the Foreign Secretary. Describing that conversation to Churchill, Eden stated rather cynically: "... we had a good session ... We arranged a plan of campaign with the Poles. He will see Mikołajczyk on Monday and I will follow up 24 hours later when Mikołajczyk has had a chance to digest Beneš' lecture."<sup>14</sup>

It is not our concern here to pass judgement on the practices of the British diplomatic kitchen or comment on the fact that the British used Beneš as their forward line in their campaign to put pressure on Stanisław Mikołajczyk, or on the fact that Beneš accepted that role. What was entailed, no less, was putting pressure on the Polish government to concur with the Soviet position on the question of Poland's eastern frontiers and to accept territorial compensation in eastern Prussia and Silesia – a plan that had been discussed at Teheran and enjoyed Churchill's ardent support.<sup>15</sup>

This episode has been mentioned because it serves to show that Beneš was not out of favour with the British after the signing of the Treaty. Were one to engage in the "what might have happened if" variety of hypothesis, one could go so far as to say that the British approach to the question of Czechoslovakia during 1944–45, in both general and particular matters, would have been basically the same had there been no Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty. British policy towards Czechoslovakia was determined by higher priorities, or was dictated by external circumstances of such importance that against their background the existence of the Treaty in question was more or less irrelevant.

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<sup>9</sup> Carlton David: Anthony Eden. A Biography. London 1981, p. 226.

<sup>10</sup> PRO FO 371/34341 Nichols to Roberts 8. 12. 43.

<sup>11</sup> PRO FO 371/38922 Nichols to Cadogan 20. 7. 44.

<sup>12</sup> PRO FO 371/39385 Frozen 1104 Churchill to Eden 4. 1. 44.

<sup>13</sup> PRO FO 954/4 533 Churchill to Roosevelt 6. 1. 44 in 150 FO to Washington 7. 1. 44.

<sup>14</sup> PRO FO 371/39386 Grand 1251 Eden to Churchill 8. 1. 44.

<sup>15</sup> PRO FO 371/39456 Uncorrected Records of Tehran Conversations. Passages concerning Poland; FO 371/39387 W. P. (44)48 23. 1. 44 Record of conversation between P. M. and the Polish Ministers on 20. 1. 44.

Roberts was correct in his assessment of what he described as "healthy tendencies" in the policies of Dr. Beneš and the Czechoslovak government. As of March 1944, in the suggestions brought forward by the Czechoslovak government and military circles one can indeed observe signs of a kind of diplomatic offensive (with the modest means at their disposal) aimed at bolstering the Czechoslovak position in the West and ensuring a Western influence and presence (British above all) on Czechoslovak territory in the final phase of the war, even should the Anglo-American units not reach Czechoslovakia. It should be pointed out, however, that in 1944 no one counted on their doing so, least of all the Anglo-American supreme command as a whole.

There can be no doubt that the Czechoslovak Government in London wanted to sign a treaty on the lines of the agreement with the Russians, with either or both of the main Western allies. This was out of the question, however, and Czechoslovak diplomacy realised it was futile even to broach the matter with the British. (As Nichols wrote to Cadogan in July 1944: "The Czechs would like, of course, to conclude a treaty with ourselves similar to the one they signed in Moscow last December, but this we are not at present prepared to grant."<sup>16</sup>

For this reason, they tried to obtain at least a symbolic gesture such as an agreement between the British and Americans and the Czechoslovak government on an adjustment of relations between the Czechoslovak civil administration and the allied commanders, in pace with the liberation of Czechoslovak territory (described as a "Civil Affairs Agreement").

Such an agreement became a topical issue in Czechoslovak-Soviet relations in the Spring of 1944 as Soviet troops drew nearer to the territory which had been part of the Czechoslovak Republic before the war. Neither the British nor the Americans, who received a proposal for a Civil Affairs Agreement from the Czechoslovak representatives, and were informed by the Soviets that Czechoslovak-Soviet talks on these lines were already in progress – regarded such an agreement as appropriate in their case. They expressed understanding for such an adjustment in relations between the Soviet high command and the Czechoslovak authorities, but in view of the geographical factors and the remote likelihood of British or American units entering Czechoslovak territory for the time being, they politely declined to deal with the matter.<sup>17</sup>

The Czechoslovak side was equally unsuccessful with another proposal they tabled to ensure a symbolic British involvement in Czechoslovakia at the end of the war. In this case, there was an attempt to see whether the British government was willing to appoint a liaison officer or military mission of some kind to the representative that the Czechoslovak government was intending to send to the territory liberated by the Soviet army. Discussions within the Foreign Office reached the conclusion that a British officer in that capacity would inevitably become a *de facto* British representative to the local Soviet military command, with the implicit complications that might involve.

<sup>16</sup> see n. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Nichols to Roberts 27. 5. 44, Roberts minute on Anglo-Czechoslovak Relations 29. 5. 44, FO minute on a meeting held at FO 17. 5. 44; National Archives (Washington) RG 59 860F.01/524 Schoenfeld 3 to Secretary of State 17. 3. 44, and Department of State 3524 to Schoenfeld 2. 5. 44.

Their main fear was, however, that such a solution, were the Soviets to accept it, might give the Soviets the idea of making a counter-proposal, that is the appointment of a Soviet liaison officer or military mission to any of the representatives of the allied Anglo-American command in individual Western European countries.<sup>18</sup>

In May 1944, discussions within the Foreign Office culminated in the view that the rejection of the Czechoslovak proposals ("none of them practicable") should be offset by a public gesture to demonstrate that the British had not lost interest in Czechoslovakia and its future. The most suitable gesture was thought to be a statement in reply to an inspired parliamentary question. Any suspicions that the Soviets might have that it was an operation with wider political overtones could be dispelled by informing them of these plans beforehand.<sup>19</sup>

The implementation of this proposal, originally scheduled for the beginning of June, was postponed, among other reasons because at that time the Czechoslovak government, without prior consultation with the British and against their wishes, recognised General Charles De Gaulle's French National Liberation Committee. Some weeks later, when the Central European Department raised the issue of the parliamentary question again, Eden's first reaction was still negative:

I don't much like this, and I think would get some pretty nasty supplementaries. Czecho-Slovakia is not popular in any quarter of this house just now, and Dr. Beneš is much distrusted. All this may be unjust, but it is a consequence of what is regarded as Dr. Beneš's over-eagerness to obey Moscow's behest. Unfriendly people describe Dr. B. as Stalin's jackal.

Therefore if this question has to be asked it had better be written not oral. Personally I should prefer to have it entirely alone, for I don't want to be fulsome to Dr. Beneš and his Govt. just now. I don't consider that they have done anything to deserve compliments from us.<sup>20</sup>

It was to require a vigorous appeal on the part of Nichols to get things moving again. Among other things, Nichols wrote:

What the Czechs want, and what, I believe, it is to our interest to supply, is some public declaration, which can be quoted back to their own country, to the effect that we have not in fact lost interest in them and that we wish them well and a secure and prosperous future . . . The alternative is a continued silence which is very likely to be misinterpreted both here and in the occupied territories: for it will no doubt be regarded as confirmation of the fact that we look upon them as sold to the Russians.<sup>21</sup>

The parliamentary question and answer – carefully prepared in the Foreign Office – were duly read out on 2 August 1944. Explaining why there was no need for an Anglo-Czechoslovak agreement for the administration of the liberated territory, the Foreign

<sup>18</sup> PRO FO 371/38945 Nichols to Roberts 26. 4. 44, another FO minute of a meeting held at FO 17. 5. 44.

<sup>19</sup> PRO FO 371/38922 Roberts minute 29. 5. 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* Eden minute 15. 7. 44.

<sup>21</sup> see n. 11.



Secretary's reply stressed the warm and sympathetic interest of the British government in the future of Czechoslovakia and the maintenance of amicable relations with Beneš's government (see Appendix).

With the aim of increasing British influence and presence on Czechoslovak territory, the Czechoslovak Government strove, during the course of 1944, for increased British support for the resistance in Slovakia and the Czech lands. Even in this case, the results were fairly meagre.

The modest supply of weapons for the Slovak resistance – intended as the first of its kind – which the Czechoslovak side had requested in mid-July, failed to materialise because the British made it conditional on prior agreement of the Soviets. At first Moscow was evasive and then maintained a stony silence until the matter was no longer relevant.<sup>22</sup>

When the rising in Slovakia finally took place, and support from abroad was a matter of life or death for the insurgents, the Czechoslovak government urgently appealed to Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union for assistance in the form of weapons deliveries, the bombing of military targets in Slovakia and recognition of the insurgents as belligerents. The Foreign Office and then the British Chiefs of Staff adopted the following position:

- Slovakia is in the Soviet operational sphere and any really effective aid must come from the Russians.
- No action can be taken unless the Russians are in complete accord.
- No supply drops can be approved until Moscow has shown clear approval of the rising.
- Belligerent status can only be declared if the Soviet government acts jointly.<sup>23</sup>

The guiding principle on the British side was without disinteresting themselves or rebuffing the Czechs, they must leave it to the Soviets to take the initiative with regard to the Slovak rising.<sup>24</sup> Moscow remained deaf to all British enquiries as to Soviet intentions with regard to the Slovak rising, and this stance condemned the British to total inactivity. In the end the latter decided to drop a small consignment of medical supplies in mid-September, and in October, three weeks after the Soviets accorded the insurgents belligerent status, the British government followed suit.

During the last week of October, shortly before the collapse of the Slovak insurgent front, the Foreign Office changed course and told the British Chiefs of Staff to authorise the Special Operations Executive (SOE) to make small deliveries of specialized military material of the kind requested by the insurgents in Slovakia.<sup>25</sup> The decision of the Chiefs of Staff was negative, mainly on the grounds that any effective help would involve at least 100 to 200 aircraft which was beyond the resources of the entire Medi-

<sup>22</sup> PRO FO 371/38927 Gen. Miroslav to Perkins 13. 7. 44, FO 2329 to Moscow 31. 7. 44; FO 371/38941 Vyshinski to Clark Kerr 6. 8. 44.

<sup>23</sup> PRO FO 371/38941 Roberts to Hollis 3. 9. 44; CAB 80/87 COS (44)805(O) 4. 9. 44; CAB 79/80 COS (44)298th Mtg (O) 5. 9. 44.

<sup>24</sup> PRO FO 371/38942 FO 2923 to Moscow 9. 9. 44.

<sup>25</sup> PRO CAB 80/88 COS (44) 923 (O) 25. 10. 44.

terranean theatre.<sup>26</sup> The decision was then made known to the Czechoslovak side in accordance with the agreed formula that only military considerations had prevented British assistance to the Slovak rising.<sup>27</sup>

The attempt to obtain more extensive British help for the resistance in Bohemia and Moravia met a similar fate. At the end of September 1944, the Czechoslovak supreme military commander approached the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (C. I. G. S.) to discuss requests from the Czechoslovak military command for assistance to ensure the success of the armed risings planned for Bohemia and Moravia towards the end of the war. The response was negative and took no account of Foreign Office political arguments, especially those advanced by Nichols. It explained that effective support for a large scale rising, including air operations, could only come from the Soviet forces.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, as before, the only support that the British side was prepared to offer was the despatch, via the SOE, of weapons and materials solely for sabotage operations in the Protectorate. It is true that in December 1944 there was a decision to increase the number of sorties from ten to twenty a month, although later, the need to give priority to Italy and Yugoslavia led the Chiefs of Staff to cut the number of sorties back to their previous level.<sup>29</sup> This created a delicate situation: the Czechoslovak authorities in London did not dare tell the resistance organisations at home pressing for help in the form of more and more weapons the unadorned truth and inform them that the weapons they wanted from Britain would not be forthcoming.<sup>30</sup> The British were aware of the problem but they had only one fundamental concern: that they should not have to bear the responsibility for a rising in Bohemia and Moravia to which they could not lend effective support. The BBC's Czechoslovak broadcasts were carefully vetted to ensure that no call to arms should be sent to Czechoslovakia, whose outcome might place the British in a sticky situation.<sup>31</sup>

The second area of concern with which the Czechoslovaks approached the British, and which constituted a major part of the Czechoslovak agenda of British policies in the final sixteen months of the war, related to Czechoslovak requirements in connection with the drafting of armistice and surrender terms with German and Hungary. The European Advisory Commission was to deal with these questions and the Czechoslovak government duly presented that body with a list of their objectives in August 1944.<sup>32</sup> What was decisive for the Commission's deliberations, of course, were the views of the four governments it represented. If the Czechoslovak government was to have any chance of success with its proposals, it would have to win support for them from the governments of the great powers.

<sup>26</sup> PRO CAB 79/82 COS (44) 351st Mtg (O) 27. 10. 44.

<sup>27</sup> PRO FO 371/38943 FO Despatch 216 to Nichols, Roberts to Nichols 11. 11. 44.

<sup>28</sup> PRO WO 216/99 Gen. Ingr to C. I. G. S. 27. 9. 44, Nye to Ingr 18. 10. 44; FO 371/38942 Nichols to Roberts 5. 10. 44.

<sup>29</sup> PRO FO 371/47099 copy of COSMED 207 19. 1. 45 referring to MEDCOS 227.

<sup>30</sup> PRO FO 371/47099 Flathouse minute 5.2.45.

<sup>31</sup> PRO FO 371/47085 Flathouse minute 5.3.45, Allen minute 9.3.45, Perkins to Warner 5.3.45, Lias to Allen 8.3.45.

<sup>32</sup> PRO FO 371/38945 Aide-memoire of the Czechoslovak Government on the subject of armistice conditions for Germany 24. 8. 1944.

Of the various requests presented by the Czechoslovak side, it regarded two as crucial:

- the question of the area over which the Czechoslovak government would exercise administrative control after the signing of an armistice with Germany;
- the Czechoslovak plan for the mass expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia.

The first of these in fact concerned only the British, because Great Britain was the only one of the three major allied powers to have reserved its position on the question of Czechoslovakia's definitive frontiers even after the Munich Agreement had been declared null and void, in the sense that a final settlement would have to be decided by a post-war peace treaty. Confirmation that the British no longer regarded themselves bound by the Munich Agreement was contained in the formula that the British Government "would not be influenced by any changes effected in and since 1938".<sup>33</sup>

The problem now was the territory which the Czechoslovak government was to administer pending a final decision on the question of the Czechoslovak state frontiers. Discussion on this issue lasted from September 1944 to March 1945.<sup>34</sup> The British side was agreed that the Czechoslovak government should exercise administrative authority within the pre-Munich frontiers, irrespective of the fact that parts of that territory had been annexed during 1938 and 1939 by Germany, Hungary and Poland. When discussions opened, their reservation about this general principle concerned two main points above all:

- the formula they proposed spoke in terms of administrative control over the territory in question, not "sovereignty" as Beneš had wanted, a term they rejected in principle on legal grounds;
- the allocation of *Těšínsko* (the Teschen area) was a matter to be settled by the two allies concerned, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Eden subsequently gave way on the second point, in January 1945, when he submitted the matter to the Cabinet for discussion. In his memorandum he explained that the Polish occupation of *Těšínsko* at the time of Munich "inflicted a wrong upon Czechoslovakia". He felt this justified the Czechoslovak demand to administer "the Teschen area" pending a final territorial settlement, in the same way as the other areas concerned.<sup>35</sup>

In the end, the term "administrative control" was replaced by the formula "full political authority", and the expression "pre-Munich frontiers" was superseded by a formula which avoided reference to the events of 1938. The eventual formulation of 20 March 1945 expressed the British government's agreement that the Czechoslovaks should exercise full political authority from the date of the unconditional surrender of Germany, throughout the area bounded by the frontiers of Czechoslovakia as these

<sup>33</sup> PRO FO 371/30935 Eden to Masaryk 5. 8. 42.

<sup>34</sup> PRO FO 371/38945 Nichols to Harrison 7. 9. 44 and attached FO minutes; FO 371/38946 Eden Despatch 231 to Nichols 27. 11. 1944, FO minute (Allen) 8. 12. 44; FO 371/47085 throughout.

<sup>35</sup> PRO FO 371/47085 Extract from War Cabinet Concl. 7 (45) 22. 1. 45; W. P. (45) 16 8. 1. 45 Czechoslovak Frontiers (Memorandum by Eden).

existed before 31 December 1937. The question of the final settlement of Czechoslovak frontiers was to remain in abeyance until the international frontiers in Central Europe were definitely laid down in the peace treaty.<sup>36</sup>

If on the first of these questions so cherished by the Czechoslovaks, the British government even mutely accepted a greater part of Beneš's theories about legal continuity, they were not accommodating in their stand concerning the fate of the German population in Czechoslovakia.

Regarding the latter, the Czechoslovak government set out a detailed proposal in a memorandum sent to the British, Americans and Russians on 23 November 1944.<sup>37</sup> The main points were:

- The Czechoslovak state was to be established along national lines, with neither the Germans nor the Hungarians enjoying minority rights;
- All the Germans in Czechoslovakia, save those who had actively fought for Czechoslovak liberation were to lose their Czechoslovak citizenship;
- Of the 3 million or so Germans living in the Czechoslovak Republic according to the 1930 census, no more than 800,000 would be allowed to remain. The rest, unless they had fled or died in the mean time, were to be expelled from Czechoslovakia. The figure assumed for the organised transfer was at least 1,600,000 Germans. (A similar solution was proposed for Czechoslovakia's Hungarian population).

This was the final version of the proposals which had gradually crystallised on the Czechoslovak side over a period of several years. They had previously been submitted to the British as preliminary items for discussion on which the Czechoslovak government sought immediate agreement from the three great powers or at least some sort of guarantee, before their return to the homeland.

During the previous years, the British had not committed themselves to supporting the Czechoslovak government in any one of its specific demands and proposals as regards the transfer of the Germans. Britain stuck to the position conveyed to the Czechoslovak side as early as 1942, according to which

"His Majesty's Government . . . have approved the general principle of a transfer to Germany of German minorities in central and south-eastern Europe after the war, in cases where this seems necessary and desirable."<sup>38</sup>

Neither on receipt of the Czechoslovak memorandum nor at any time up to the end of the war, did the British give the Czechoslovak side any assurance of support for any of its demands. In fact they were to remain silent on them right up to the Potsdam Conference.

On instructions from the Foreign Office, Ambassador Nichols sent Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk a note on 17 January 1945 which stated among other things:

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* W.P.(45) 180 20.3.45 Czechoslovak Frontiers (Memorandum by Eden, and Formula).

<sup>37</sup> PRO FO 371/38946 Nichols Despatch 189 to Eden 28. 11. 1945.

<sup>38</sup> PRO CAB 65 War Cabinet Concl. 86 (42) 6.7.42; CAB 66/26 W. P. (42) 280 2.7.42 Anglo-Czechoslovak Relations Memorandum by Eden; FO 371/34352 Eden to Campbell 1077 13. 9. 43.

As . . . this memorandum (of 23rd November) raises very important issues in connection with the whole German settlement, His Majesty's Government do not feel able to offer observations until they have discussed these questions with their principal allies . . . For the time being, therefore, His Majesty's Government must reserve their attitude in regard to the proposals contained in the memorandum of the Czechoslovak Government.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, the Foreign Office instructed its ambassadors in Moscow, Washington and Paris to convey this standpoint to the governments represented in the European Advisory Commission, the body which the British regarded as the correct forum for discussion of the Czechoslovak demands.<sup>40</sup>

In the course of February 1945, the British started to exert great pressure on the Czechoslovak representatives in London not to take any decision on the matter nor to make any statement about it without prior consultation and agreement with the great powers. They had no objections to Beneš publicly declaring his relevant plans on his return to Czechoslovakia and justifying them on the grounds that these objectives had been submitted for the consideration of the major allies. They did insist, however, that the Czechoslovak government do nothing that might commit the great powers or to which they had not given prior consent. This also applied to the planned legislation to deprive those of German origin of their Czechoslovak citizenship.<sup>41</sup>

The British feared that Beneš would not respect their standpoint and requests, and would make a public statement likely to cause them embarrassment. For this reason Nichols was asked to send the Czechoslovak government a further note which stressed, by reference to the note of 17 January, that:

His Majesty's Government wish to make it clear that they have not yet themselves reached agreement with their principal Allies upon the manner in which the whole question . . . should be dealt with.<sup>42</sup>

As noted earlier, this position remained unchanged up to the Potsdam Conference.

\* \* \*

In March 1945, a discussion about the framework of short-term British policy towards Czechoslovakia took place in the Foreign Office. The occasion was provided by preparations for the departure of the first section of the British embassy for the site from which the Czechoslovak government would temporarily operate. The suggestion came from Nichols and his formulation was received with general agreement.

Nichols formulated Britain's main aims with regard to Czechoslovakia as follows: to ensure that Czechoslovakia did not fall completely within the Soviet orbit, but that it would continue to be dependent upon the Western Powers as well as the Soviet Union, and would continue to follow the lead of the major allied powers in the general

<sup>39</sup> PRO FO 371/47085 Nichols Note 3 to Masaryk 17. 1. 45.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* FO 313 to Washington, FO 149 to Moscow, FO 43 Saving to Paris, all 11. 1. 45.

<sup>41</sup> PRO FO 371/47120 Eden Despatch 23 to Nichols 23. 2. 45; FO 371/47085 Nichols to Allen 20. 2. 45, Nichols to Warner 27. 2. 45.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* Nichols Note 8 to Masaryk 8. 3. 45.



area of security and reconstruction; Britain should seek to improve upon the pre-war standards of its commercial exchanges with Czechoslovakia; and lastly, Britain should strive to achieve a pre-eminent position among the Western powers as regards cultural relations with post-war Czechoslovakia.<sup>43</sup>

Nichols was ready to leave for Košice in the last week of March 1945. His luggage was already on its way when the Soviets sent a message that "due to accommodation difficulties", they could not agree to Western diplomatic missions accredited to the Czechoslovak government – this concerned chiefly the British and Americans – transferring to the liberated territory of Czechoslovakia. In discussing this Soviet act of obstructionism, Churchill wondered in passing if the Soviet might be intending to tell the American ambassador whether he could take a toothbrush with him or not, in the event of the Americans reaching Prague first.<sup>44</sup>

The limited scope of this article prevents consideration of Eden's and Churchill's initiative of April 1945 in favour of a faster American advance towards Czechoslovakia and Prague. Suffice it to say that in my view this initiative provided no evidence of any change in British policy towards Czechoslovakia.

## APPENDIX

### *Parliamentary Question, 2nd August 1944\**

*Captain Gammans* asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs whether His Majesty's Government intend to conclude with the Czechoslovak Government an agreement for the administration of liberated Czechoslovak territory similar to those recently concluded by His Majesty's Government and the United States Government with the Governments of Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway.

*Mr. Eden:* His Majesty's Government trust that the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the united efforts of the Allied nations and of the Czechoslovak people will not now be long delayed. They accordingly welcomed the recent Liberation Agreement between the Soviet and Czechoslovak Governments, about which they were kept fully informed in advance. These Agreements are, however, intended to meet certain immediate practical necessities arising out of the entry of liberating forces into Allied territory. In view of the present disposition of Allied Forces, no useful purpose would at present be served by an Anglo-Czechoslovak agreement on similar lines. I am, however, glad of this opportunity of reaffirming the warm and sympathetic interest of His Majesty's Government in the future welfare of Czechoslovakia and their desire that the close and amicable relations now happily existing between them and Dr. Beneš' Government in London shall be maintained and developed between the peoples of the two countries after Czechoslovakia has resumed her rightful place as an independent nation, making her own contribution once again to the stability and prosperity of Central Europe.

<sup>43</sup> PRO FO 371/47107 Nichols to Warner 14. 3. 45 and attached minutes.

<sup>44</sup> PRO FO 371/47121 P. M. Personal Minute M. 344/5 16. 4. 45.

\* PRO FO 371/38922.

*Extract from the Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on Soviet Policy in Europe, 9 August 1944\**

8. Relations between Russia and the territories now comprising Czechoslovakia have been traditionally friendly. There has never been any source of dispute, and the Soviet Union clearly bases its Central European policy largely upon the fixed point of the Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty of 1943. Soviet readiness to leave Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia within Czechoslovakia despite the close kinship between the Ruthenians and the Ukrainians is a measure of Soviet confidence in Czechoslovakia. The Soviet Union also seems perfectly prepared to accept the present social structure in Czechoslovakia, and to deal with the *bourgeois* politicians who form the present Czechoslovak Government. Russia is probably sufficiently sure of Czechoslovak support in the last resort to raise no objection to Dr. Beneš's policy of maintaining a balance between the East and the West, and therefore of strengthening his ties with this country and with France as a counterpart to the Czech-Soviet Treaty. In fact, Czechoslovakia is probably as useful to Russia as a link with the West as she may be to us as a link with the East.

9. It is clearly unnecessary and undesirable for this country to assume military commitments in Czechoslovakia similar to those assumed by Russia under the Czech-Soviet Treaty. On the other hand, it is to our interest that Czechoslovakia should remain independent and strong, and for that purpose should be protected from any repetition of German aggression by reliance upon Soviet military support. It is equally to our interest that Czechoslovakia should remain a stable political, social and economic element in Central Europe, and for that purpose that our relations with the restored Czechoslovakia, which is likely to remain a "petit bourgeois" State as she was before the war, should be close and intimate. Czechoslovakia will look to this country for increased economic and cultural exchanges. We should be well advised to take advantage of this to spread British influence in Czechoslovakia and thus throughout Central Europe.

\* PRO CAB 66/53 W. P. (44) 436, Annex III. Central Europe.

*Brief for the Secretary of State's luncheon with President Beneš prepared by the Central Department of the British Foreign Office, 24 November 1944 (Extract)\**

*Support for a general rising*

The Czechoslovak Government have of course urged His Majesty's Government to send military assistance to the recent rising in Slovakia. They have also pressed us to commit ourselves to support a general rising in Bohemia and Moravia in due course. Both of these requests have had to be turned down by the Chiefs of Staff on the grounds that Czechoslovakia is at present too far from an active British theatre of operations to make effective support a practical proposition without serious prejudice to other operations of more direct concern and assistance to ourselves. The importance, from the political point of view, of our not misleading the Czechs that we are abandoning them entirely to the Russians, was of course fully taken into account before these decisions were reached. It was, however, decided, as is inevitable in time of war, that the military objections raised by the Chiefs of Staff were decisive. Mr. Nichols suggests that it is important that, if an opportunity arises, the Secretary of State should leave Dr. Beneš in no doubt that our recent decisions were taken on purely military grounds and that, although the military arguments were overwhelming, they do not of course affect our general attitude towards Czechoslovakia, either now or in the future.

\* PRO FO 371/38944, C 16522/1343/12.