

*Gordon, Helmut: Die Beneš-Denkschriften. Die Tschechoslowakei und das Deutsche Reich 1918/19 – Kommentar und Kritik.*

Verlagsgemeinschaft Berg, Druffel-Verlag 1990, 336 S. (Deutsche Argumente 8).

The reader is immediately alerted to the attitude which Helmut Gordon will adopt in any discussion of the Sudeten problem by the author's preface. Gordon views it as his task to reassess the formative years of the Czechoslovak Republic in order to prepare for a new Czech-German dialogue on the subject. Such a dialogue would, presumably, begin from Gordon's premise that an "act of violation" was committed in 1919: against their will Germans were placed under a Czech yoke, and this accounts directly for the "injustices" suffered by Germans during the First Republic and for the "crime of the expulsion" after the war. Indeed, according to Gordon, the memoranda which Edvard Beneš set before the peacemakers in Paris in 1919 are a vital key in explaining the events of 1938–47. For 1919 witnessed the first criminal act committed

against the Sudeten Germans; and Beneš was the real criminal, a "Czech nationalist extremist" who ended up by 1948 with the blood of a quarter of a million Germans on his hands.

Needless to say, Helmut Gordon, who suggests (p. 50) that he is a "serious historian", soon launches into a blinkered diatribe of a kind which might spring from the pen of Hans Krebs or Hermann Raschhofer. Indeed, it is part of Gordon's mission to try to resurrect the emotions aroused by Dr. Raschhofer when he published Beneš's memoranda in Berlin in 1937. Whether this is a worthwhile or even practicable exercise in the 1990s is debateable. But we can at least be grateful to the author for republishing Beneš's eleven memoranda, which are often hard to find, together with a number of the accompanying maps drawn up by Beneš's skilled team of experts at the peace conference.

Less commendable are the four chapters with which Gordon seeks to explain the background and results of the memoranda. It is perhaps significant that only in the final chapter – *Die Memoranden als Sammlung der Wahrheiten* – does he attend to the real subject in hand. The other chapters are used to expound his opinions on the *Vertreibung* and on the great "liar" Beneš. Concerning the *Vertreibung*, Gordon equates Beneš's "transfer plan" (allegedly the only plan which Beneš possessed on this issue) with the extermination of the Jews; on another occasion he insists that the injustices of 1945–47 in the Czech lands must receive equal condemnation with those of 1939–45. While Gordon's readership may agree with this latter idea, they will be only too aware that they are being treated to a polemic rather than an attempt at any historical objectivity. For Gordon's is a book which seethes with emotion, dismissing all those who do not toe the correct Sudeten line: these include Adenauer, Strauss and Brandt for abandoning Germans from the East, Rudolf Jaworski for suggesting that any Czech-Sudeten reconciliation was possible under the First Republic, and even the present Pope for not condemning the expulsion. In short, Gordon is a man of the 1930s, trying to revive the Sudeten question as a moral issue, unashamedly convinced that the Sudeten Germans were always an innocent party.

When he turns to get his teeth into Edvard Beneš, Gordon's account is as tendentious as it is inaccurate. He dismisses Beneš's own writings as a pack of lies, but then proceeds to use them as a major source for his biographical sketch; the chapter is otherwise based on a selective choice of secondary sources, rather than any new or original research. Thus we are assured that Beneš marvelled at everything French before 1914 – whereas any study of Beneš's newspaper articles written from Paris in 1906 would qualify such a contention. We are also told, amongst other things, that the Czechs did not really suffer under Habsburg rule, that Kaiserin Zita betrayed the Central Powers in 1917, and that Beneš by this time was in league with the "all-powerful" Lord Northcliffe and his sinister propaganda organization at Crewe House. Clearly the resurrection of these myths does little to enhance Gordon's later commentary on the memoranda themselves.

Gordon indicates quite correctly in his last chapter that Beneš presented in his memoranda a wholly partisan and exaggerated set of Czech arguments. But the author is equally selective with his own presentation. He sheds no light at all on the German minority's attitude or behaviour in 1918–19. He attempts no analysis of how the

memoranda were composed: there is for example no mention here of the role of experts such as Jan Kapras or Antonín Boháč, nor even of Masaryk himself who had discussed the Czech arguments with Beneš in December 1918 (Masaryk's influence is clear – not least over the idea of a state on the Swiss model; he had mentioned it at an extraordinary cabinet meeting in Prague in early January, but Gordon simply ascribes the idea to Beneš). Gordon in fact assigns all blame to Beneš: his historical survey in the first memorandum was a mass of "fabricated legends" (p. 295) his territorial demands were a "perversion of history" (p. 301). Lloyd George is brought in as a witness to Beneš's behaviour, only to be reprimanded himself a few pages later for his own responsibility for the injustices meted out to the Germans at Versailles.

When it comes to assessing the importance of the memoranda Gordon provides no clear conclusions. He admits that the documents were propaganda tracts, not accurate descriptions; he admits that the allied committee on Czechoslovak borders decided to preserve the historic frontiers even before hearing Beneš's testimony. And yet he still feels the memoranda to be weighty significance. For allegedly they are evidence of the policies which Beneš tried to pursue against the German minority for the next thirty years. While there is a grain of truth in this, Gordon's rambling account is too partisan to provide any balanced assessment of the continuity in Beneš's attitudes to the Germans. Gordon naturally feels that all would have been well if only the Sudeten Germans had joined Germany in 1919, or at least if Beneš had made a deal with the Nazis in 1936. Yet, as usual, his interpretation of the Sudeten problem is as anachronistic as Beneš's description of Czech history in the first memorandum. Both are provocative, but both are also no substitute for modern objective scholarship.