

15TH MARCH 1939 — THE REACTION OF THE POWERS

Martin Broszat

The first section depicts the political situation resulting from the Munich Agreement. Far from appeasing or satisfying Hitler, Munich only served to release an intensified drive for action. Not content with exploiting the political hegemony he had achieved, Hitler sought further territorial expansion. In this way he could demonstrate to the Western powers the strength of Germany's „free hand in the east“. The coup de main which followed on 15th March 1939 was clearly improvised.

The second section describes the reaction of the Powers to Hitler's action, up to the guarantee to Poland on 31st March 1939. Both in France and in

England the governments, which had hitherto pursued a course of appeasement, found themselves after 15th March under heavy pressure and in the face of alarming rumours of further threatened moves for expansion by Hitler, diplomatic steps, initiated by Great Britain, were taken to gain the support of the countries which seemed most endangered for a mutual security pact. This pact was envisaged primarily as a deterrent and was concerned first and foremost with securing mutual guarantees; only in a secondary sense was it an effective military alliance. The door to a continued policy of appeasement still remained open. The Soviet plan for a Six Power conference was rejected. Little came of these diplomatic overtures and their lack of success led to renewed pressure of public opinion. It was this pressure which forced the British government's hasty guarantee to Poland.

This improvised answer to Hitler's improvised demonstration of power was to have more serious consequence than either of the originators could have foreseen.