

REVISION AND EXPANSION: REFLECTIONS ON THE GOALS, METHODS AND PLANNING OF HITLER'S POLICY VIS-À-VIS CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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The theses of a radical Darwinism which Hitler set forth in the second volume of *Mein Kampf* in 1926, using such catchwords as „Bodenerwerb“ and „Lebensraum“, and the fanatical racism which he elevated to the rank of an ideologized component of foreign policy seemed too unbelievable to be taken seriously by the responsible European politicians in the years before and shortly after the Nazi seizure of power. For Hitler, however, the ČSR

— as the most important pillar of the French system of pacts in East-Central Europe — had as early as the 1920's wholly lost any right to exist.

After the radical transformation of the domestic scene and the consolidation of the regime in Germany, Hitler was able to proceed with the realization of his ideas in the foreign policy sphere. Thanks to his clear program and the consequent and unscrupulous way in which he pursued it, he managed — in an astonishingly short time, marked by bewildering shifts between continuity and new initiatives — to force the protagonists of an „appeasement policy“ over to the defensive. A combination of promises and threats, treaty proposals and alliance offers, the cancellation of existing treaties and the conclusion of new ones helped him to undermine the system of collective security guaranteed by the League of Nations. Under Foreign Minister von Neurath an attempt was made to continue the traditional approach of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs aimed at a compromise solution. Hitler, however, supported by Rosenberg and Ribbentrop, increasingly forced the defenders of the status quo in Berlin into a corner. Beneš' effort to appease the Reich failed, Hitler rejecting his offer of a non-aggression pact. The wide prevalence of illusions abroad played no small role in preparing the way for the next phase marked by an active National Socialist foreign policy, which, after the *Anschluss* with Austria and the liquidation of the residual Czech state in March 1939, brought Hitler to the pinnacle of his personal power.

This article uses Hitler's action against Czechoslovakia as a case-study for his foreign policy and strategy, methods and planning.