Shukman, Ann: 44 Days in Prague. The Runciman Mission & the Race to Save Europe.

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Ann Shukman is a renowned expert on Russian semiotics and literature, but also, for example, on the cultural and religious development of Scotland. This monograph dealing with a remarkable episode in the history of interethnic frictions in interwar Czechoslovakia, as well as international tensions at the end of the 1930s, may therefore appear a surprising undertaking on the part of the author.

Shukman was motivated by her close personal connection to the main protagonist of the whole story: Walter Runciman, who, in the summer of 1938, was tasked by the British government with attempting to mediate a *modus vivendi* between the Czechoslovak government and the political representation of the Sudeten German minority, was the author's grandfather. She views his efforts, which, over the course of 44 long days in Czechoslovakia, increasingly grew to resemble *Mission: Impossible*, with obvious sympathy. In doing so, she attempts to dispel certain established myths – above all that from the outset the British government was merely engaged in a cover-up manoeuvre on the road to the "Munich solution" to the Sudeten German "problem" in the form of the secession of the Czechoslovak borderlands, or that "Walter" was mainly meeting from the outset with representatives of the Sudeten German nobility, who only succeeded in confirming his alleged conviction that the continued coexistence of Czechs and Germans in Czechoslovakia was impossible. Shukman, on the contrary, aptly points out several important facts: British attitudes towards the German minority in Czechoslovakia evolved over time. Her grandfather arrived in Prague with an open mind, so to speak, and divided his time more or less equally between representatives of the government and the Sudeten German Party (SdP), but also, at weekends, between representatives of the Czech and German nobility. And as late as 15 September 1938, the day before his return to London, he considered the cession of the Czechoslovak borderlands to Germany unacceptable (which, of course, changed in the days that followed under the influence of Chamberlain's policy and personal diplomatic initiative).

At the same time, however, Sudeten propaganda about the intolerable suffering of the German population of Czechoslovakia did have an impact on the members of the mission, as revealed, among other things, by the previously unexploited diary entries of Runciman's wife Hilda, stored together with other documents belonging to the Runciman family at Newcastle University Library. These are also the author's main source in her endeavour to reconstruct the more than six weeks that the Runcimans and other members of the mission, most prominently the Foreign Office expert

Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, spent in the Bohemian lands. Thus, Ann Shukman captures, to a large extent, views of dramatic events from the position of a woman who had political experience herself and was eminently interested in the proceedings in Czechoslovakia, but was not permitted to participate in them beyond the scope of social interactions. When it came to information about key conversations, she was dependent on what her husband told her. However, after about a week in Czechoslovakia, he was very tired as a result of the whole merry-go-round of negotiations and more or less negative news, which gradually narrowed his room for manoeuvre and chances of success. He suffered from insomnia, and the last thing he wanted to do was to recount the course of the day's talks to his wife in the evenings. However, the author quotes her grandmother's diary *in extenso* – including sometimes almost banal passages about who Hilda sat next to at lunch at Rothenhaus/Červený Hrádek (p. 77) or a two-page description of a visit to Adolph Schwarzenberg "in the south of the country", including her impressions of the local countryside and an unnamed castle (Český Krumlov, pp. 86-88). The parts in which Shukman allowed herself to be perhaps a little too carried away by sources of a personal nature are extended by quotations from the diary of her uncle Leslie, who arrived to join his parents on Friday 9 September in a private plane and then recorded in detail his visit to the residence of Count Eugen Czernin in Petrohrad in West Bohemia, including not only a Sudeten German demonstration but also a partridge hunt (pp. 163-169).

On the other hand, many of the accounts from Hilda's diary are of undoubted historical value. One example is Runciman's critical attitude to the almost hysterical call by Nevile Henderson, the British ambassador in Berlin, on 25 August, to make a public statement in favour of the SdP in order "to appease the Führer". Quotations from the diary also reveal the hastiness with which the wife of the British "mediator" formed strong opinions about the people she met, as well as the ease and even naivete with which she succumbed to the "charm" of the SdP representatives and their interpretations of the Sudeten German problem. They also realised quickly how to make an effective impression on the British emissary's wife – as when eight of them brought her a bouquet of flowers to her hotel on 19 August and, with friendly smiles, were ready to listen to her schoolgirl German (pp. 81-82). Shukman draws attention to Hilda's "susceptibility to flattery", which ultimately only reinforced her view of "Czechoslovakia as a country whose integrity was something dispensable" (p. 86), provided that peace could be maintained.

On the contrary, the Czechoslovak leadership, headed by the president, made tactical errors in its communication with the British mission, which typologically characterized Edvard Beneš's entire political career. First, he surprised the British emissaries with his "Third Plan", which Runciman learned about indirectly (pp. 77-78, 91), and then he literally overwhelmed them with documents (p. 94). Here, the author draws on another important source – the unpublished memoirs of another member of the mission, Robert Stopford, kept at the Imperial War Museum. However, some of the passages that are quoted would merit comparison with the records in the Foreign Office archives – in the relevant volumes of FO 371 series (for example, Stopford's negotiations with Ernst Kundt – p. 101). Shukman naturally refers in her footnotes to a number of other documents, particularly from the editions

Documents on British Foreign Policy and *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, as well as Milan Hauner's three-volume critical edition of Beneš's memoirs, and, selectively, also to some important titles from the specialized literature. However, the key guide to the international political context of the Runciman's mission for her is by far the most cited work by Paul Vyšný, *The Runciman Mission to Czechoslovakia, 1938: Prelude to Munich* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and K. M. Palmer's unpublished dissertation *The Runciman Mission to Czechoslovakia, August 1938* (Belfast, Queen's University, 1989).

The author uses her sources to describe the diplomatic and social activities of the mission members on a day-by-day basis, with occasional retrospectives. For example, she very successfully captures the dual nature of Konrad Henlein and his successful trip to London in May 1938 (pp. 71-75). The passages about Beneš's willingness to make truly extensive concessions are also significant; not only did he send Jaromír Nečas to Paris on 15 September with an offer of limited territorial concessions to Germany, but, according to Runciman's statement of the following day at a meeting of the British *inner cabinet*, he was also prepared to agree to a plebiscite if Prime Minister Chamberlain concluded that it was unavoidable (p. 191). However, it is precisely the threat of this solution, with its predictable outcome, that is often cited as the main reason why the president gave up defending the principle of territorial integrity. What is less convincing is the author's hypothetical argument that if Runciman had stayed in Prague just a few days longer, the Czechoslovak government's negotiations with "moderate" representatives of the SdP on an arrangement based on "the Fourth Plan" with Runciman's mediation could have been resumed – in a situation where the security forces had suppressed the uprising in the border regions and the radical leaders, headed by Henlein and K. H. Frank, had fled to Germany (p. 183). Both of them, with Hitler behind them, would undoubtedly have prevented such a hopeful development.

In the most compelling passages, Ann Shukman intertwines her narrative with her own journey in the footsteps of Runciman's actions, which she undertook in 2017. For example, she visited Teplice, "the rather neglected and run-down little town" (p. 110), and also Červený Hrádek, where "the ethos of fifty years of Communism still hung over the place, with uncooperative staff and grudging hospitality". To her great surprise, she found in the guest book, next to her grandparents' entry dated 28 August 1938, the signature of her mother Margaret Fairweather, a "pioneer woman pilot" and "the most rebellious of the five Runciman children", who also flew to Czechoslovakia in her own plane, later became "the first woman to fly a Spitfire", and lost her life in August 1944 while serving in the Air Transport Auxiliary (pp. 117-121).

Despite several factual errors (for example, Beneš did not become president in 1937, but two years earlier – p. 14), the book *44 Days in Prague* represents a significant contribution to our understanding of this important British diplomatic initiative from the summer of 1938, particularly through the prism of ego-documents. It is a pity that the entire text was not checked by someone knowledgeable in Czech (and also German): at least a third of the personal and local names are misspelled.

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