

Czechoslovakia's Crucifixion of 1938

by Norman Berdichevsky (February 2018)



Adolf Hitler at Prague Castle, March 16, 1939 (photo credit: Bundesarchiv/Wikipedia)

In 1938, Lawrence Morrell, a British journalist, was sent by his newspaper to report on the “Czech Crisis” threatening war between Nazi Germany and the Anglo-French Alliance which, along with the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Romania, had pledged themselves to come to the aid of the beleaguered country in case of German aggression. His book, *I Saw the Crucifixion* (London, Peter Davies, 1939), was a cry of despair over how Britain and the other Great Powers had betrayed Czechoslovakia. The moral blindness of western Europe made the transfer of valuable resources and strategic strengths to Nazi Germany and paved the way toward the inevitability of World War II.

Earlier, Morrell had unsuccessfully tried to warn world opinion of the German threat to absorb Austria and later went on to play an important role in the formation of what became the British Secret Service. His firsthand account of the Sudeten crisis is a masterful portrayal of the immense pressure put on a proud nation to surrender its strategic defenses in the name of "Peace".

He was born in Lancashire, England, and began his career there in 1930 as a reporter for *The Manchester Daily Herald*. Later he was a foreign correspondent for the *London Daily Express* in Vienna, Prague, Budapest and the Middle East.

The book casts an eerie spell over all those concerned about current events and the mounting pressure on Israel from all sides to accommodate the Palestinians who are a Trojan Horse today parallel to the Sudeten Germans in 1938. Czechoslovakia then, like Israel today, had the will and means to defend itself against its mortal enemy but was deprived of the right to do so by its "friends" who exercised enormous pressure and mobilized to deprive this democratic state of its right to defend itself and its borders.

It was not the rights and wrongs of the Sudeten Germans which constituted Hitler's problem. It was precisely the integrity of Czechoslovakia, the barrier which the Czechs presented to his drive towards becoming the strongest power in Europe. The Sudeten Germans were pawns which he used for his public policy. For his not so public policy, for the benefit of the Communist-haunted handful of people in England, he used the scare of the Czech-Soviet pact and raised the ghost of Communism in Germany. Perhaps I did not and still do not see things as Mr. Chamberlain sees them,

but to my mind the issue seemed very simple that day: England's vital interest lay in Czechoslovakia. After all, when you play chess, you do not wait until your opponent is two moves off checkmating you before moving to defend your king. (pp. 172-173.)

Morrell was able to observe how British opinion was deceived by the Chamberlain government and the "establishment," which had basically used the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 as its starting point for a delineation of a geo-political division of world power between Germany and Britain. This agreement was hailed in much of the press as a step towards "disarmament." Germany agreed not to expand its battle fleet to more than 35% of British military tonnage thus conceding British dominance of the world's seas and naval power in return for an acknowledgement that Germany would continue its military build-up on land to dominate Central Europe, an idea that found favor with all those in the West who underestimated Hitler and were frightful of Stalin and Soviet power. Hitler had already acknowledged the truth in Bismarck's statement that "Bohemia is the heartland from which to control Europe."

Morrell observed how Walter Runciman, 1st Viscount Runciman of Doxford, a prominent National Liberal politician in the United Kingdom between the 1900s and 1930s with a distinguished background of humanitarian aid he helped organize during World War I, was deceived by Chamberlain to lend his hand as an "impartial mediator." Runciman returned to public life at the beginning of August 1938, at the cynical invitation of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and sent on a mission to Czechoslovakia to "mediate" in the dispute between the Czechoslovakian government and the Sudeten German Party (SdP), representing the ethnic German population of the border regions.

Although Chamberlain knew full well of the Nazis' unalterable demands, he nevertheless played with the idea to satisfy anti-Nazi sentiments at home, that various compromise positions based on the Swiss cantonal arrangement of local autonomy might be reached in which the Sudeten region would still formally remain part of Czechoslovakia with only the local police and army units still under the control of Prague.

When the Czechs had reluctantly agreed to accept even this—which granted the local Sudeten regions the right to introduce the same policies as Nazi Germany including anti-Semitic measures (Czechoslovakia had granted full equality to its Jewish population—the only state in Central or Eastern Europe who actually lived up to this promise during the Versailles Treaty deliberations)—the SdP leader, Konrad Henlein, balked and withdrew from what were, in fact, his original demands. He and Hitler had agreed not to stop short of anything less than a complete annexation by Germany of the entire Sudeten region. Can the Israelis expect any better type of negotiation and “compromise”?

Runciman was chosen for his readiness for compromise and a well-deserved reputation as someone who had served in humanitarian relief to war-torn European areas after World War I. The SdP, while ostensibly calling for local autonomy, had received instructions from Nazi Germany not to reach any agreement and thus all attempts at mediation failed in much the same way that Arafat's PLO, Hamas and a dozen other Palestinian “resistance groups” backed by the political strength at the U.N. of two dozen Muslim majority countries, never were ready to honestly negotiate a compromise.

Time and again, Morrell was an eye-witness to purported events falsely claiming "Czech atrocities against the local Sudeten population" but unable to get his evidence in time for publication to deny German propaganda eagerly swallowed by the British press at home.

While international tensions rose in Central Europe, Runciman was recalled to London on 16 September 1938 and his controversial report devoted to achieving what he believed was "peace in our time" provided support for British policy towards Czechoslovakia and culminated in the dismembering of the country under the terms of the Munich Agreement. Further controversy arose from Runciman's use of his leisure time in Czechoslovakia where he was wined and dined by the pro-SdP aristocracy and afforded the mistress of his choice. The Runciman Report, issued on his return to London, recommended the transfer of the Sudetenland to Nazi Germany and asserted that there was "massive" discrimination against ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia.

Runciman fulfilled Chamberlain's fondest hopes and wrote in his report that *"The rise of Nazi Germany gave them (the Sudeten ethnic Germans) new hope. I regard their turning for help towards their kinsmen and their eventual desire to join the Reich as a natural development in the circumstances."* Following the Munich Agreement (June 30, 1938), Chamberlain reshuffled his Cabinet in October, 1938 and appointed Runciman as Lord President of the Council. He held that post until the outbreak of the Second World War.

The parallels and sense of déjà vu between Morrell's book and today's continued mounting pressure on Israel to throw away all its advantages and risk all it has achieved is startling.

Many historians are reluctant to make historical comparisons but, in this case, the parallels are inescapable. They extend to the very similar sense of a far-flung diaspora and its aspirations for the continued welfare of the original homeland and close cultural ties. Not only the Czechs and Slovaks abroad but all of the Southern Slavs that comprised Yugoslavia identified with the most successful, vibrant, culturally creative and democratic state of Czechoslovakia.

Morrell describes the sense of elation and pride across the world on the part of emigrant communities who participated in the Sokol Athletic Movement and the celebration of its annual festival:



A Huge stadium on a hill, with a line of hills beyond it . . . Then suddenly figures in white coming through two wide gates into the arena, marching in line . . . 32,000 of them coming nearer . . . Of all the mass displays I have ever seen, this was far and away the greatest . . . The athletes in the arena were Slavs from all corners of the earth. But this was no ordinary acrobatic festival. With the exception of the Poles and the Russians, every branch of the Slav race sent its sokols to Prague and the Czechs saw in this display a token of the unity of the Slav people; and when they cheered, they were cheering their brothers from all corners of the earth. (pp.71-72); see illustration.

Is it any wonder that this sense of solidarity and common fate linked Czechoslovakia and Israel during and after Israel's War of Independence in 1948? The leaders of the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine), already in the summer of 1947, intended to purchase arms and sent Dr. Moshe Sneh (the Chief of the European Branch of the Jewish Agency, a leading member of the centrist General Zionist Party who later moved far leftward and became head of the Israeli Communist Party) to Prague in order to improve Jewish defenses. Sneh met with the Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Clementis, who succeeded the non-Communist and definitely pro-Zionist Jan Masaryk. Sneh and Clementis discussed the possibility of arms provisions for the Jewish state and Czechoslovakia gave its approval,

In January, 1948, Jewish representatives were sent by Ben-Gurion to meet with General Ludvik Svoboda, the Minister of National Defense, and sign the first contract for Czechoslovak military aid. At first, a "Skymaster" plane chartered from the U.S. to help in ferrying weapons to Palestine from Europe was forced by the FBI to return to the USA. By the end of May, the Israeli Army (IDF) had absorbed about 20,000 Czechoslovak rifles, 2,800 machine-guns and over 27 million rounds of ammunition. Two weeks later, an additional 10,000 rifles, 1,800 machine-guns and 20 million rounds of ammunition arrived. One Czechoslovak-Israeli project that alarmed the Western intelligence was the so-called "Czech Brigade", a unit composed of Jewish veterans of "Free Czechoslovakia", which fought with the British Army during WWII. The Brigade began training in August 1948 at four bases in Czechoslovakia.

Czechoslovak assistance to Israel's military strength comprised a) small arms, b) 84 airplanes—the outdated

Czechoslovak built Avia S.199s, Spitfires and Messerschmidts that played a major role in the demoralization of enemy troops; c) military training and technical maintenance. On January 7, 1949, the Israeli air-force (consisting of several Spitfires) and Czechoslovak built Messerschmidt Bf-109



fighters (transferred secretly from Czechoslovak bases to Israel) and shot down five British-piloted Spitfires flying for the Egyptian air-force over the Sinai desert (see illustration) causing a major diplomatic embarrassment for the British government. Since May,

2005, the Prague Military Museum has displayed a special exhibition on the Czechoslovak aid to Israel in 1948.

Israel learned from the history of interwar Czechoslovakia not to rely on anyone, least of all, the “international community” or formal alliances with the Great Powers. The long memory of the Czech people and their sense of solidarity with the modern state of Israel coupled with the gratitude of many Israelis to the only state that afforded real aid on the ground during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence is a lasting heritage. It explains the recent vote of the Czech Parliament to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and its recommendation to the government to take steps to do so as well as the Czech vote along with other East European states such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, Latvia and even Bosnia-Herzegovina to abstain in the recent vote of the U.N. General Assembly criticizing the United States for its stated plan to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

Of course, historians are fond of drawing historical parallels

and others are just as fond as writing “revisionist” treatises challenging established views and proclaiming that one cannot judge history with hindsight. The Sudeten crisis and the Munich Agreement are fertile ground for revisionist claims that Chamberlain did the only “right” thing because British public opinion would not have tolerated potential involvement in another European or world-wide conflict.

English novelist Robert Harris wrote just such a novel, *Munich*, on the 80th anniversary of the events, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2017) with a sympathetic description of Neville Chamberlain and attempts to demonstrate that the agreement bought was vital because it gave Britain time to rearm. Harris claimed that Chamberlain was not the weak or misguided leader so often portrayed but a shrewd operator. He and others also correctly point out that the weak moral point in Czechoslovakia’s cause was the disaffection of segments of the other national minorities—even the Slovaks, as well as Hungarians, and Poles.

The proponents of these views have argued that public opinion was already very opposed to the prospect of war and the potential damage it would do to British morale. What these historians neglect to do is to take into account the other even more probable alternative on the other side and weigh the likely conclusions that: War in September, 1938, would have seen a powerful Czech army of two million men in the highest state of readiness and morale, strongly entrenched enjoying topographic advantages dealing the German invaders massive casualties. Such casualties would have undoubtedly rocked German morale and grievously damaged the Nazis’ image of invincibility.

Reading of Morrell's face-to-face encounters with the decision makers, especially Runciman and how the British journalists on the scene were constantly delayed, hampered and kept in the dark by the British Foreign Office, can hardly accept the Revisionist view. Munich was the culmination of the "domino effect" in which each concession (Demilitarization of the Rhineland, 1935, Annexation of Austria, 1937) made the painful decision to stop Hitler by Force impossible. Czech President Beneš had not been invited to participate in the Munich deliberations and the Czechs were excluded from the talks completely; they weren't even allowed into the room to observe. Chamberlain told Beneš that the matter was now in his hands to resolve alone if he did not accept the Munich Agreement. Knowing this, the French and the Soviets felt betrayed as well as the Czechs.

Hitler himself said in August, 1939, *"When after Munich we were in a position to examine Czechoslovak military strength from within, what we saw greatly disturbed us; we had run a serious danger. The plan prepared by the Czech generals was formidable."* At the Nuremburg trial, Gen. Wilhelm Keitel, the German chief of staff, said The High command had been greatly relieved by the Munich Agreement because, *"We did not believe ourselves strong enough at that moment to take Czechoslovakia."*

Even more shocking were the later revelations that a serious plot had existed in the German Army High Command to arrest and depose Hitler if he provoked general war by attacking Czechoslovakia (The so-called Oster Conspiracy). General Hans Oster, deputy head of the Abwehr, opposed the regime that threatened to engage Germany in a war that he believed it was not ready to fight, discussed overthrowing Hitler and the Nazi regime through a planned storming of the Reich Chancellery by

forces loyal to the plot.

The prominent American historian William Shirer, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960), took the view that, although Hitler was not bluffing about his invasion plans, Czechoslovakia would have been able to offer significant resistance, even going so far as to claim that the Western allies would have been able to pursue a rapid and successful war against Germany.

Morrell's book is a collector's item today. I was thrilled to remember that I had acquired it at a used book store in London for less than two pounds about 20 years ago. It now sells on Amazon for over \$200. It brought history alive from an eye-witness who had amazing prescient powers of observation and did not hesitate to call a spade a spade. What can be said today is that Israelis learned his lesson and are overwhelmingly united by their resolve to avoid the mistakes of Czechoslovakia eighty years ago.

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