



## The Munich Agreement 80 Years On

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: An important lesson of the notorious Munich Agreement, which marked its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary last month, is that small nations must defend their independence at all costs, even at the risk of defying most of the international community. Had Czechoslovakia defied the Munich sellout and defended its territory, Hitler's bluff would have likely been called. And even if he had made good on his threat and invaded, the Czechoslovak army could have put up a spirited resistance that might have contained the German army, which was not yet at the peak of its operational competence. This clash might have sparked an international backlash that could have stopped the invasion and possibly prevented the outbreak of WWII.**

In discussions of international relations, the Munich Agreement, which marked its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary last month, has become synonymous with the perils of appeasing megalomaniacal tyrants. Yet while most discussions focus on the Anglo-French betrayal of Czechoslovakia that would trigger the worst war in human history, there is a commonly overlooked lesson to this tragedy: the need of small nations to defend their independence at all costs, even at the risk of defying most of the international community.

Had Czechoslovakia defied the Munich sellout and defended its territory, Hitler's bluff would have likely been called. And even if he had made good on his threat and invaded, the Czechoslovak army could have put up a spirited resistance that might have contained the German army, which was not yet at the peak of its operational competence. This clash might have sparked an international backlash that could have stopped the invasion and possibly prevented the outbreak of WWII. That this did not happen was due to the timidity of Czechoslovak President Eduard Benes, who was a mirror image of the appeasing British PM Neville Chamberlain.

A fervent believer in the soft power of diplomacy, Benes was virtually incapable of contemplating the use of military force despite his keen awareness of the years-long Nazi strategy of exploiting the large German ethnic minority in the Czech Sudetenland to subvert the Czechoslovak state. Things came to a head on September 13, 1938, when an incendiary speech by Hitler sparked widespread clashes between the Nazi proxy Sudetenland group, *Freikorps*, and the Czech authorities. Five days later came an Anglo-French ultimatum and Benes decided to accept its major demand: the transfer to Germany of all districts in the Sudetenland that comprised more than 50% ethnic Germans.

This was too much for ordinary Czechoslovaks, and on September 21-22, huge crowds took to the streets of Prague making their way to the presidential castle. "Give us weapons," chanted the crowd as hundreds of demonstrators broke into the castle. "We want General [Jan] Syrový." On September 22, the decorated general and former chief-of-staff of the Czechoslovak army reluctantly accepted Benes's request to assume premiership of a national unity government, and the president announced military mobilization.

This did not mean Benes was prepared to fight. On the contrary: rather than ask the parliament to discuss means of confronting Hitler's threats, as required by the constitution, he heeded the appeasing voices emanating from London and Paris while anxiously watching the spreading restiveness in the Sudetenland. Also relevant to Benes's response was US President Roosevelt's appeal on September 26 for a peaceful resolution of the crisis, in which he carefully refrained from distinguishing between aggressor and victim, as well as the Kremlin's effective admission that there was nothing it could do to help Prague. By way of reaffirming his predisposition, Benes canvassed his three top military advisers, two of whom accepted his view that capitulation would be the least of all evils.

This defeatist outlook was diametrically opposed to the defiant mood in the army and among the Czechoslovak public at large. Though outnumbered by the German army, Czechoslovakia had the sixth-largest army in Europe, was well equipped with its own manufactured weapons, and was able to mobilize well over a million men. The formidable defense line that extended across parts of the country, especially in Bohemia and Moravia, was likely to slow down, if not stop, the German advance. Were the Germans to breach those defenses, the army would retreat to mountainous Slovakia and even Ruthenia, from where it would carry out anti-German guerilla warfare. This resistance, it was hoped, would awaken Western public opinion to the Nazi danger and bring about military intervention on Prague's behalf.

This assessment was not wholly unrealistic, given the lack of appetite in Germany for a military adventure. On September 27, Hitler was deeply dismayed as Berliners watched the parade of a motorized division in Wilhelmstrasse with atypical indifference. "With this nation I cannot conduct the war," he commented to his coterie.

There were even reports about opposition of key generals to Hitler's threatened invasion. General Ludwig Beck, who on August 18 resigned his post as Chief of the General Staff over the Czechoslovak crisis, had secretly approached the British government for confirmation that it would declare war in the event of a German attack on Czechoslovakia, in which case he would "finish the Hitler regime." In a prophetic memorandum in May 1938, Beck forecast the chain of events that would eventually lead to war on two fronts and to Germany's eventual defeat. On September 28, a day before the signing of the Munich agreement, conspirators met at the military headquarters in Berlin, only to decide to wait and see the outcome of the next day's negotiations.

Had the Czechoslovak government signaled its unwavering determination to reject the looming sellout of its territory, world history might have taken a very different course. In the words of Prokop Drtina, Benes's young secretary and a future minister of justice, who sought to convince the president to resist the international pressures: "A nation must not lose its freedom without struggle, in order to prevent its entire moral collapse." Sadly, that is what happened to Czechoslovakia in 1938, and yet again in February 1948 with the communist takeover. And the road to recovery was long.

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