Debunking History

had at least kept the peace between the different ethnic divisions, and had checked the violence of national and religious wars. The grim and relentless faction fighting that brought suffering and destruction to Croatia, Bosnia and to Kosovo showed that nationalism was just as brutal and even more destructive than anything that Marshal Tito had ever employed to subdue and unify his people. Western observers might think in their heart of hearts that it was better for these eastern European factions to be killing each other, rather than killing them, but given the choice between factional national strife and single-minded communist repression, the answer remained far from obvious.

INTERNATIONAL RE-EVALUATIONS

Munich: The Policies of Betrayal?

Late in September 1938, Hitler, Mussolini, Daladier and Chamberlain met at a crisis conference in Munich to discuss the future of the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia. In the accord that was eventually signed, it was finally agreed to surrender the disputed area to Germany within a matter of days, and shortly afterwards German troops, acting on behalf of the substantial minority of ethnic Germans living there, entered and occupied the whole region of the Sudetenland. This action was bitterly denounced by the Czech government as an act of betrayal by their treaty allies, a view that came later to be shared by many in these countries themselves. But even today controversy still surrounds the question over whether the policies followed at Munich constituted a betrayal of the Czechs.

The Czech attitude was clear. Their position in the Sudetenland rested on the authority of the Treaty of St Germain (1919) with the Austrian government at the end of the First World War, a treaty that assigned the area to them. The region was highly industrialised, Pilsen being the home of the Skoda armaments works, and was well fortified, its defences so effective that even the German troops who took control of them in 1938 were impressed. The forty divisions of the Czech army were among the best trained and best equipped in Europe. Furthermore they could rely on the support promised by two major powers: France, whom they accused
specifically of betrayal at Munich, and the Soviet Union, whose representatives, like their own, were excluded from the conference. The Czechs believed that a firm stand by the Western democracies would not only have stopped Hitler in his tracks and saved their country, but would also have given the German Chief of Staff, Ludwig Beck, the chance he had been waiting for to rally the German officer class and put an end to the Nazi regime altogether. At Munich, however, France, instead of fulfilling its treaty obligations to its ally, had taken part in a craven conspiracy to strip it of one of its richest and most important provinces and to reduce it to impotence in the face of the German threat.

Czechoslovakia was prevented by these actions from resisting Nazi Germany alone. On the face of things the decision to fight alone does not seem unreasonable. The Czechs had a front-line army of 800,000 men and reserves that would increase that to 3.5 million. This army was almost as large as that of Germany. In addition the Czechs possessed an air force of 1,600 planes; the Germans had 2,600. The Czechs could put 470 tanks into the field, and these could have given a good account of themselves against the 720 of Germany. The concrete defences along the mountains of the Bohemian frontier were formidable and judged by the German generals who inspected them later as almost impregnable. Field Marshal von Manstein said: 'There is no doubt whatever that had Czechoslovakia defended herself, we should have been held up by her fortifications, for we did not have the means to break through.'

But the Czech advantage was an illusion. The Bohemian flank had been turned by the Anschluss, and German troops could take Czechoslovakia in the rear by crossing the Austro-Czech frontier. Fortifications here were only primitive. Besides, a surprise German attack could well have destroyed the Czech air force on the ground, as later was to happen in Poland; and had it come to air battles, German planes would certainly have been technically superior.

So much for the Czechs themselves. The other powers involved in the Czechoslovakian problem did not think their actions involved betrayal so much as self-preservation. In their eyes, their own interests came first, and if the only way that peace could be maintained was the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany, such a price they were willing to pay.

Soviet Russia claimed to be affronted at the failure of the Western democracies to invite their representatives to Munich, leaving them with the idea that the Russians were willing to give their full support to the Czechs as they had promised in 1935. That impression was itself part of the problem: in fact neither Britain nor France was anxious to see Soviet influence extended any further in central Europe. Both preferred to solve the problem in their own way. But in truth the Soviet Union had little real desire for any entanglement over Czechoslovakia, and certainly no wish to pull the Western powers' chestnuts out of the fire for them. Stalin had already shown a marked coolness over involvement in Spain, where he was willing to allow Spanish communists to fight for the Republic, but wanted only to play a minor part himself - a part for which he insisted he should be handsomely paid. His priorities remained chiefly domestic, and he continued to smear foreign adventures with the epithet of 'Trotskyism'. He revealed his real attitude to foreign involvements when he said in 1931: 'We are fifty to a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make up this gap in ten years. Either we do this, or they crush us!'

This meant that he concentrated on the collectivisation of agriculture, the industrialisation of Russia, and on maintaining discipline and cohesion within the party, rooting out deviationists and purging the dissidents. These defensive attitudes prevented any active involvement in Czechoslovakia, the outcome of which, even if favourable, could only be of marginal importance to Russia. In truth, in spite of the obvious Slavonic connection, he rather despised the Czechs, whose democratic system he dismissed as bourgeois and reactionary. It is perhaps unfortunate (though entirely understandable) that Stalin was not invited to Munich. If he had been - and if he, or Molotov, had agreed to attend! - his bluff would have been
called and everyone would have seen his lukewarm enthusiasm for the Czech cause.

France, denounced by the Czechs as being chiefly responsible for the Munich betrayal, was apparently in a strong position in Europe. It had the biggest army in Europe and was linked to the Soviet Union by the Franco-Soviet pact of 1935, which also contained pledges for the defence of Czechoslovakia. But French strength was illusory. The Popular Front government, which had introduced an ambitious programme of social reform, had led the country to devaluation, unemployment, strife and social conflict, and had been replaced in 1938 by a right-wing government of National Unity, conscious of the country’s divisions and weakness. The much-vaunted French army, furthermore, was ill-equipped, its fighting morale shaky. Paralysed by divisions in French opinion and incapable of providing a firm lead, Daladier’s government feared the growth of communism in France and was willing to leave the initiative to Britain, fully aware that Britain had made no promises to Czechoslovakia and was unlikely to provide the support which France felt it needed to defend the country. At Munich it became obvious that the French lacked the resolve to honour their promises and that they were prepared to sell out to the Germans in the interests of their own survival.

Britain, for its part, was ill-disposed to come to Czechoslovakia’s rescue. The British Prime Minister, Chamberlain, referred in a broadcast to the crisis as a ‘quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing’, and seemed anxious to preserve peace almost at any price. The Cabinet discussed the problem, and in Chamberlain’s words: ‘... was unanimous in the view that we should not utter a threat to Hitler, and that if he went into Czechoslovakia we should declare war on him. But it was of the utmost importance that the decision should be kept secret.’

Since such a decision in order to be effective should be well publicised, the secrecy he suggested seems incomprehensible, except on the assumption that the British did not want to harden France’s resolve to hold out against Germany’s demands, and further that they did not wish to topple Hitler by encouraging the military to remove him from power. Chamberlain seems to have thought that Hitler’s removal would expose Germany to the danger of a communist takeover, saying that ‘the disappearance of Hitler would lead to another ten million communist votes in Germany’. This may help to explain why Chamberlain, though he hated air travel, made three flights to Germany in September 1938, and why, though he disliked Hitler intensely, he strove to patch up an agreement with him that would avert war. It also explains his eagerness to strike a bargain with him the day following the Munich conference, when the two men signed the famous ‘piece of paper’ in which Britain and Germany pledged their joint commitment to future peace. It was this piece of paper that Chamberlain waved triumphantly on his return to Heston airport, and to which he was referring when he told the cheering crowds in Downing Street later that evening ‘I believe it is peace for our time’. It is in truth very doubtful whether he accepted Hitler’s assurances. He had already been thoroughly disabused of his earlier view that the Chancellor was a reasonable man who would be prepared to settle, and expected that he would soon produce another ‘absolutely final demand’ that would expose Europe to a new danger of war. But Chamberlain felt he had to make sure of the support of the Commonwealth and the approval of the United States when war eventually came, so that no one would make the mistake of thinking that it was the British who were the aggressors. He also imagined that Britain could take advantage of the breathing space provided by Munich to complete the country’s war preparations. In fact, Britain’s efforts remained sluggish, while Germany used the interval to close the armaments gap between the two countries: Britain would have had a better opportunity (even if Hitler had not been overthrown) of defeating the Germans in 1938 than it did in 1939. Indeed the British government was so obsessed by its gnawing fear of communism that all its judgments at the time of Munich appear to have been tainted by it. So it would appear that the doctrine of ‘collective security’ at
the end of the 1930s became the doctrine of 'devil take the hindmost'. No power had the clear intention of betraying Czechoslovakia, and yet the Czechs are to be understood in their opinion that in effect this is precisely what happened.

8:2

How Complete Was US Isolationism Between the Wars?

It is sometimes said that the United States between the wars followed policies of 'isolationism' in its external relations, seeking to minimise its dealings with the outside world. To what extent was this idea no more than a cherished myth in the American tradition, and to what extent was it a reality?

In fact there were many forces pulling the Americans into world affairs. The USA, one of the great manufacturing countries of the world, was constantly seeking new markets for its produce, and searching for supplies of raw materials necessary for its manufacturing industry. Its great corporations, like Ford, Woolworth and Standard Oil, opened outlets all over the world, and simply could not afford to turn their backs on them. Cultural links between the USA and the outside world also flourished very strongly: the literature, broadcasting, films and music of the United States became part of the fabric of world life. American customs, speech patterns and even cigarette tobacco became as familiar to most people as even their own native equivalents. In fact, in many countries of Europe and the world, Hollywood and jazz music dominated the entire cultural scene in the years between the wars.

However, isolationism was essentially a diplomatic rather than a social policy. The idea behind successive American governments was to keep the country out of trouble by keeping out of foreign entanglements. This was not always easy. Policy had the unfortunate habit of getting itself involved with matters of money and trade. As far as trade went, the desire for separateness could be seen in US immigration and tariff policies, aiming at cutting down on foreign contacts; but in the end America depended on foreign trade and would suffer if this were unduly hampered. America, too, also needed and wanted foreign immigrants; its policies were directed not to abolishing immigration, but to controlling it. War debts, too, arising from the First World War were a persistent source of US irritation, and the more Europe wriggled, the more insistent America became. The American attitude was expressed very simply if rather harshly by President Coolidge, when he said 'They hired the money, didn't they?' To them, it seemed right and proper that the borrowers should pay back what they owed.

Essentially, however, the USA had as its main diplomatic aim the wish to keep out of foreign alliances or out of binding commitments to the outside world. This could clearly be seen at the time of the Senate's refusal in 1919 to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, with its clause committing the USA to membership of the League of Nations. Instead, the United States made a separate peace treaty with Germany in 1921. The same could be said of the Neutrality Act of 1935, which tried to prevent the USA becoming involved in any European war, by banning American exports of arms to either side in any war and forbidding American ships from carrying goods for either side. This Act was revised in 1937 and was put into force in the Spanish Civil War.

But it would be a mistake to think that US diplomatic activity was significantly reduced through the existence of such a policy. The United States was deeply involved in what might be termed preventative diplomacy. After the Washington Conference of 1921–2, the US government, concerned at what they saw as the expansion of Japanese power, signed in 1922 both the Four-Power Treaty (with Japan, Britain and France) arranging mutual guarantees of each other's positions in the Pacific, and the Nine-Power Treaty of all the major Pacific powers upholding the independence of China, and the policy of what Senator Hay had called the 'open door' in China. These were linked with a third treaty, the Five-Power Treaty, between