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# AN ANALYSIS OF THE DIPLOMATIC SITUATION OF THE FIRST CZECHOSLOVAK REPUBLIC AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE NATION'S DEMISE AFTER THE MUNICH AGREEMENT

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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

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## ABSTRACT

Speaking of the First Czechoslovak Republic, many people, including historians, attribute its demise to Nazi Germany's territorial aggression, as shown in the Munich Agreement in 1938. True as it was, there were underlying causes that prompted Germany to invade it. In fact, the Czechoslovakian diplomacy was inherently flawed since the very first day of the nation's creation in that it failed to provide peace and safety for this newborn nation surrounded by hostile neighbors and created during a turbulent period. Czechoslovakia, as a nation born in the ruins of the First World War and artificially created to serve French interests in the region, naturally faced diplomatic adversaries that caused it to be one of the first victims of fascism, despite possessing a strong industry and potent army. The objective of this research is to dive into the details of the First Czechoslovak Republic's diplomacy and examine the impacts and significance of its diplomacy on its doomed national security.

**Keywords:** Diplomatic Situation; nationality; democracy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The territory of Zaolzie was a disputed region between the Second Polish Republic and the First Czechoslovak Republic. After the end of World War I, both of the two newly created independent states of the Second Polish Republic and First Czechoslovak Republic claimed the area of Cieszyn Silesia [1]. Czechoslovakia claimed the area partly on strategic and ethnic grounds, but especially on economic and historic grounds — the disputed area was part of the historic Czech lands of Bohemian Crown, and the only railway from Czech territory to eastern Slovakia ran through this area (Košice-Bohumín Railway) [2]. For Czechoslovakia, access to the railway was

critical: the newly formed country was at war with Béla Kun's revolutionary Hungarian Soviet Republic, which was attempting to re-establish Hungarian sovereignty over Slovakia. The area was also very rich in black coal, and it was the most industrialized region of all Austria-Hungary. The important Trinec Iron and Steel Works were also located here. All of these factors raised the strategic importance of this region.

On the other hand, while there were substantial Czechs in the area, the majority of the population was Polish. Therefore, Poland based its claim to the area on this ethnic criterion.

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In January 1919, a war erupted between the Second Polish Republic and the First Czechoslovak Republic over the Cieszyn Silesia area in Silesia. The Czechoslovak government in Prague requested the Poles to cease their preparations for national parliamentary elections in the area that had been designated Polish in the interim agreement as no sovereign rule was to be executed in the disputed areas. The Polish government declined and the Czechoslovak side decided to stop the preparations by force [3].

Czechoslovak troops entered the area managed by the Polish interim body on January 23 [3]. Czechoslovak troops gained the upper hand over the weaker Polish units, since the majority of Polish forces were engaged in fighting with the West Ukrainian National Republic over eastern Galicia at that time. This conflict did not end until Czechoslovakia was forced to stop the advance by the Entente, and both sides were compelled to sign a new demarcation line on February 3, 1919, in Paris [3].

A final line was set up at the Spa Conference in Belgium. On 28 July 1920, the western part of the disputed territory was given to Czechoslovakia, while Poland received the eastern part, creating a Zaolzie with a substantial Polish minority. The conflict was only resolved by the Council of the League of Nations (International Court of Justice) on 12 March 1924, when it was decided that Czechoslovakia should retain the territory of Javorina and Ždiar and which entailed an additional exchange of territories in Orava - the territory around Nižná Lipnica went to Poland, the territory around Suchá Hora and Hladovka went to Czechoslovakia (Nicolson).

The border dispute soured the relationship between the two countries. Due to this tense relation, Poland was more than willing to see Czechoslovakia facing threats from Nazi Germany. Although Poland did not seek further military actions against Czechoslovakia, the strategic geographic location of Poland caused serious consequences for Czechoslovakia [4].

Poland was a geographical barrier between Czechoslovakia and its ally, the Soviet Union. If Poland decided to deny the Soviet army's access, the bulwark of the Red Army could do nothing more than blatantly watch Czechoslovakia's demise. This was exactly what Poland did when the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia begged for military access in Poland.

Unworried about Soviet intervention, Nazi Germany became more pressing on its diplomatic stance.

Overall, a tense relationship with Poland was extremely unfavorable for Czechoslovakia's survival.

### 1.1 Aligning with the Soviet Union

During the Russian Civil War, the western world sent expeditionary forces to intervene on behalf of the White Army, consequently causing the Soviet Union's animosity towards the western capitalist world. The Soviet Union's main diplomatic strategy was to prevent the western world from containing and blocking the newborn red regime.

However, in the 1930's, the rise of facism in Germany pushed Europe closer and closer to the edge of war. Facist forces in Germany purged communists and its sympathizers and advocated against communist ideologies, as well as its base, the Soviet Union. Japan also showed its hostility towards the Soviet Union, especially since the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, which greatly broadened the border between two countries. To make things worse, Japan and the Soviet Union also had long-time territorial disputes over the Sakhalin island. Facing threats from both sides, the Soviet Union had to make compromises to its diplomacy. The Soviet Union shifted its diplomatic stanpoints and hoped to make peace with capitalist countries in order to contain facism aggression and expansion together with the west. One of the potential allies was the newly-created state Czechoslovakia.

In June 1934, the Soviet Union shocked the world by announcing that it had started to establish official diplomatic relations with the First Czechoslovak Republic.

Czechoslovakia's geographic proximity to Germany made it a natural geopolitical ally against Nazi Germany. Czechoslovakia's decent industry and formidable army made it a valuable ally for the Soviet Union. For Czechoslovakia, its sovereignty and independence could be better secured by aligning with the Soviet Union, a nation with the largest army in the world at that time. Therefore, it is natural for Czechoslovakia to believe that alignment with the Soviet Union could deter German aggression. On 16 May, 1935, the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of Alliance was signed, which stated that if one country was subjected to threat or danger of aggression, the other country shall proceed to an immediate mutual consultation on measures to take. If one country was subject to unprovoked aggression, the other country shall immediately lend each other reciprocal aid and assistance. However, it is noteworthy that Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union did not share a land border, which means that for the Soviet army to

assist Czechoslovakia, it had no choice but to pass through other countries (either Poland, a nation that was eager to weaken Czechoslovakia, or Romania). Thus, the willingness of either of those countries to allow the Soviet Union to come to the rescue of Czechoslovakia in case of German aggression remained the main issue.

## 2. THE LITTLE ENTENTE

### 2.1 A Powerful Alliance

The Little Entente was an alliance between Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia formed after World War I. The main and obvious aim of this alliance was to defend against Hungarian revanchism, and to stop the restoration of the Habsburg monarchy.

The alliance was particularly successful in thwarting the restoration of the Habsburgs. On March 26, 1921, Charles I of Austria returned to Hungary from Switzerland [5]. He reclaimed the Hungarian throne, but his action did not earn the consent of the Little Entente. Thus, Charles was forced to leave the country on April 1, 1921. On October 20, 1921, however, he returned to Hungary and renewed his claims. The situation was complicated by the fact that Charles had managed to gain the support of a certain part of the army.

The Little Entente reacted promptly, under the guidance of Beneš, the president of Czechoslovakia. Its member states began to mobilize their armies, and the threat of direct involvement from them was imminent. The Hungarian government defeated Charles's followers and arrested him on October 24, 1921. Despite deating Charles's followers, the Hungarian government was reluctant to deprive Charles of his titles. At this moment, the role of the Little Entente came to play. The increasing danger of a military incursion of the Little Entente into Hungary somewhat pressed the Hungarian government to pass an act abrogating Charles's sovereign rights on November 10, 1921, eliminating the possibility of future Habsburgs restoration. This protected the security of the Little Entente, as the Habsburg monarchy had large territorial claims in Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia.

The Little Entente was not only a military alliance, but also served as an institution and instrument of all-round collaboration. The Pact of Organization formally institutionalized this alliance. The goal was to establish permanent collaboration among the member states of the Little Entente. The Permanent Council regularly held meetings of the ministers of

foreign affairs of member states, and the Economic Council was formed to better coordinate economic interests among members. This institutionalization of the Little Entente economically benefited its members, and, more importantly, further strengthened the ties between members, and thus, better protecting the security of member states. This alliance promoted regional stability and peace by demonstrating its level of closeness and defensively deterring potential enemies.

Although the thwarted restoration of the Habsburgs was an unambiguous success, subsequent events revealed increasing disagreements and tensions within the alliance. The Genoa Conference highlighted the different opinions among the member states. The problem arose from the possible recognition of the Soviet Union by its European counterparts.

Czechoslovakia was mainly an industrial state, due to it being the industrial heartland of Austria-Hungary. The Soviet Union was also rapidly industrializing under its Five Year Plans. Therefore, Czechoslovakia was disposed to normalize its relations with the Soviet Union and to recognize the newly-formed state. Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, both as industrialized states, were interested in possible mutually-beneficial economic co-operations.

Yugoslavia and Romania, however, were both agrarian countries that were uninterested in economic co-operation with the Soviet Union.

### 2.2 The Alliance Dissolved

The alliance remained solid and firm when facing the common enemy of its member states, Hungary. However, when one of its member states encounters a threat from a country that was not perceived as a threat by other members, the unity of the Little Entente remains questionable. When Czechoslovakia faced German aggression, Yugoslavia and Romania were not prone to come to the aid of Czechoslovakia.

Prior to the outbreak of war, the Yugoslavian government of Milan Stojadinović tried to navigate between the Axis Powers and the imperial powers by seeking neutral status, signing a non-aggression treaty with Italy and extending its treaty of friendship with France. Yugoslavia did not aid Czechoslovakia during the Munich Conference, due to its diplomatic policy of neutrality. After the fall of France, Prince Paul and the government saw no way of saving Yugoslavia except through adopting policies of accommodation with the Axis powers: Italy was claiming large parts of Yugoslavian territory, and it

blocked the way for Germany to invade Greece. Having steadily fallen within the orbit of the Axis during 1940 after events such as the Second Vienna Award, Yugoslavia followed Bulgaria and formally joined the Axis powers by signing the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941.

As early as 1937, Romania had come under control of a fascist government that bore great resemblance to that of Germany's, including similar anti-Jewish laws. Romania's king, Carol II, dissolved the government a year later because of a failing economy and installed Romania's Orthodox Patriarch as prime minister. But the Patriarch's death and peasant uprising provoked renewed agitation by the fascist Iron Guard paramilitary organization, a paramilitary group that sought to impose order. In June 1940, the Soviet Union co-opted two Romanian provinces, and the king searched for an ally to help protect it and appease the far right within its own borders. Therefore, on July 5, 1940, Romania had virtually no choice but to ally itself with Nazi Germany—only to be invaded by its “ally” as part of Hitler's strategy to create one huge eastern front against the Soviet Union. On November 23, 1940, Romania signed the Tripartite Pact, officially allying itself with Germany, Italy and Japan. The fascist influence and pro-German sentiments in Romania made it unwilling to be hostile to Nazi

Germany and aid Czechoslovakia.

## 2.3 Aligning with France

### 2.3.1 French point of view

Although France was a victor of World War I, it was severely weakened by the war because of its significant sacrifices. France's main potential enemy and threat was Germany, with which it had fought several wars. Thus, France had been interested in protecting its security by seeking more potential allies. Britain had a history of pursuing the balance of powers in Europe to prevent the emergence of a single strong power. Germany had just lost the war, making it a weak nation. Therefore, Britain was uninterested in an alliance with France, worrying that France may become too powerful.

The Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye created several new nations in Central and Eastern Europe, one of which was Czechoslovakia [6]. France turned its eyes to those newly created states, whose independence were supported by France. Among those newly formed states, Czechoslovakia was most ideologically similar to France, as both countries were republics and implemented democratic principles. What is more, Czechoslovakia was a natural ally for France

against Germany geopolitically, since this alliance would coerce Germany into a two-front war that it always tried to avoid if France and Germany entered into a war. In fact, the policy of surrounding Germany on two sides was always a key theme of French diplomacy, starting when France allied with Czarist Russia before World War I [7].

### 2.3.2 Czechoslovakian perspective

As for Czechoslovakia, diplomatic and military support from a strong power was invaluable for a newly-independent state, signaling a milestone success of its diplomacy.

The Treaty of Alliance and Friendship between France and Czechoslovakia was signed on January 25, 1924, in Paris, which was concluded for an unlimited time [8]. This was the first treaty France signed with members of the Little Entente, and the only permanent treaty signed with its members [8]. (The Treaty of Friendship between France and Romania was signed on June 10, 1926 in Paris and was originally concluded for 10 years. The Treaty of Friendship between France and Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was signed on November 11, 1927 in Paris and was originally concluded for five years)

## 2.4 Nazi Germany and the Sudeten Crisis

### 2.4.1 Stopping a war

On March 1938, Nazi Germany annexed Austria [9]. This longed the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia, which made the latter harder to defend against Germany. The pre-Anschluss border was protected by the defense fortifications previously built, but the border between Austria and Czechoslovakia was not as fortified.

After annexing Austria, Hitler turned his eyes on Czechoslovakia. However, the situation of Czechoslovakia was completely different than Austria: Czechoslovakia had support from France and the Soviet Union. In addition, Czechoslovakia was a member of the Little Entente, although this alliance was not far from collapse at that time.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia was pre-planned: Fall Grün, or Case Green, was a Nazi Germany's plan for an aggressive war against Czechoslovakia, with the goal of uniting ethnic Germans in the Czechoslovakia's territory of Sudetenland. Therefore, the relations between Czechoslovakia and Nazi Germany was at the rock-bottom. At this time, Britain and France did not react fiercely against

German aggression. Instead, they pressured the Czechoslovak government to make as many concessions as possible. They believed that by making some concessions to Nazi Germany, their own security can be guaranteed, causing them to make a series of diplomatic moves, known as appeasement [10]. Facing abandonment from its allies, the Czechoslovak government had to prepare for concessions during negotiations with Nazi Germany.

Despite Czechoslovakia's willingness to negotiate, Hitler was not keen to continue negotiations. On May 19, Germany suddenly single-sidedly terminated negotiations and gathered troops along the border. A day later, Czechoslovakia also started total mobilization. The war between two nations seemed to be inevitable.

Since Czechoslovakia signed mutual-aid treaties with both France and the Soviet Union, war with Czechoslovakia would be equivalent to war with France and the USSR.

However, the treaty between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union included an additional clause: if the war between Czechoslovakia and Germany broke out, the Soviet Union would join only if France complied with its treaty with Czechoslovakia first. In simple words, the Soviet Union would join the war if and only if France joined [7]. As for France, since it was unready for war, whether or not to comply with the treaty would be dependent on Britain's attitude. Therefore, the security of Czechoslovakia heavily relied on Britain, which was not an ally of Czechoslovakia. Britain, a nation without any treaty of alliances with Czechoslovakia, had the most important role during this crisis.

On May 21, the foreign ministers of France, Britain, and the USSR met, and later, France declared that it would commit to its treaty if German troops crossed the border [7]. Britain approved this and openly declared its support of France. The Soviet Union also clearly stated its willingness to oblige to the mutual-aid treaty and protect Czechoslovakia. Hitler re-entered the negotiation table under the pressure of this declaration. The alliance successfully halted this crisis — for a while.

#### **2.4.2 The situation changes**

However, the situation rapidly shifted in September. As Nazi Germany continued to put pressure on Britain, the latter began to seriously consider the option of appeasement. On 13 September, after internal violence and disruption in Czechoslovakia ensued, Chamberlain asked Hitler for a personal

meeting to find a solution to avert a war. Chamberlain decided to do this after conferring with his advisors Halifax, Sir John Simon, and Sir Samuel Hoare. The meeting was announced at a special press briefing at 10 Downing Street and led to a swell of optimism in British public opinion. Chamberlain arrived by a chartered British Airways Lockheed Electra in Germany on 15 September and then arrived at Hitler's residence in Berchtesgaden for the meeting [7]. The flight was one of the first times a head of state or diplomatic official flew to a diplomatic meeting in an airplane, as the tense situation left little time to take a train or boat. Henlein flew to Germany on the same day. That day, Hitler and Chamberlain held discussions in which Hitler insisted that the Sudeten Germans must be allowed to exercise the right of national self-determination and be able to join Sudetenland with Germany. Hitler repeatedly falsely claimed that the Czechoslovak government had killed 300 Sudeten Germans. Hitler also expressed concern to Chamberlain about what he perceived as British "threats" [7]. Chamberlain responded that he had not issued "threats" and in frustration asked Hitler "Why did I come over here to waste my time?" Hitler responded that if Chamberlain was willing to accept the self-determination of the Sudeten Germans, he would be willing to discuss the matter. Hitler also convinced Chamberlain that he did not truly wish to destroy Czechoslovakia, but that he believed that upon a German annexation of the Sudetenland the country's minorities would each secede and cause the country to collapse. Chamberlain and Hitler held discussions for three hours, and the meeting adjourned.

Chamberlain flew back to Britain and met with his cabinet to discuss the issue.

Discussions began at the Führerbau immediately after Chamberlain and Daladier arrived, giving them little time to consult. The meeting was held in English, French, and German. A deal was reached on 29 September, and at about 1:30 a.m. on 30 September 1938, Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain, Benito Mussolini and Édouard Daladier signed the Munich Agreement [7,11]. The agreement was officially introduced by Mussolini although in fact the Italian plan was nearly identical to the Godesberg proposal: the German army was to complete the occupation of the Sudetenland by 10 October, and an international commission would decide the future of other disputed areas.

Czechoslovakia was informed by Britain and France that it could either resist Nazi Germany alone or submit to the prescribed annexations. The Czechoslovak government, realizing the hopelessness

of fighting the Nazis alone, reluctantly capitulated and agreed to abide by the agreement. The settlement gave Germany the Sudetenland starting 10 October, and de facto control over the rest of Czechoslovakia as long as Hitler promised to go no further. On 30 September after some rest, Chamberlain went to Hitler's apartment in the Prinzregentenstraße and asked him to sign a statement calling the Anglo-German Naval Agreement "symbolic of the desire of our two countries never to go to war with one another again." After Hitler's interpreter translated it for him, he happily agreed (Pike).

### 2.5 Pathetic Ending

The First Czechoslovak Republic came to its demise after the Munich Agreement. It was forced to accept its final fate:

1. The Sudetenland became part of Germany in accordance with the Munich Agreement (October 1938).
2. Poland annexed Zaolzie, an area with a Polish plurality, over which the two countries had fought a war in 1919 (October 1938).
3. Border areas (southern third of Slovakia and southern Carpathian Ruthenia) with Hungarian minorities became part of Hungary in accordance with the First Vienna Award (November 1938).
4. On 15 March 1939, during the German invasion of the remaining Czech territories, Hungary annexed the remainder of Carpathian Ruthenia (which had been autonomous since October 1938).
5. Germany established the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia with a puppet government, on 16 March 1939.
6. On 14 March 1939, a pro-Hitler Catholic-fascist government declared the Slovak Republic as an Axis client state.

### 3. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The history of the First Czechoslovak Republic was a tragedy. While the direct cause of its demise was inevitably Nazi Germany, its flawed diplomatic relations with other countries were the root of its demise, allowing Germany to seize the appropriate opportunity to expand at Czechoslovakia's expense (Bradescio). In conclusion, the rapid shift of the geopolitical situation in Europe after World War I

created significant challenges for the newly-born states, including the First Czechoslovak Republic, to adopt diplomatic stances to safely protect their security and survival on the turbulent continent.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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