

any idea of giving guarantees to Czechoslovakia, or the French in connection with her obligations to that country."⁹¹

The formal British reply to the Soviet proposal was nothing better than an indelicate snub. Dated March 24, it rejected Litvinov's suggestions for determining "the practical measures required to check the further development of aggression, and to counteract so far as possible the increasing danger of war." The reply expressed Britain's "warm" wish for an international conference at which "all European states would consent to be represented."

This, of course, was an impossibility with Hitler and Mussolini in power.

The following lines were a clear insult to the Soviets:

In the present circumstances, however, it would not appear that such a meeting could be arranged. A conference only attended by some of the European Powers, and designed less to secure the settlement of outstanding problems than to organize concerted action against aggression, would not necessarily, in the view of His Majesty's Government, have such a favorable effect upon the prospects of European peace.⁹²

Furthermore, that same day, in explaining the British reply in the House of Commons, Chamberlain asserted that the Soviet plan would "aggravate the tendency towards the establishment of exclusive groups of nations which must...be inimical to the prospects of European peace."⁹³ The thrust of the British position is quite apparent: the Soviet Union is not a European power and must not be permitted to become one. There is simply no other way to reconcile the blatant contradiction inherent in the British position: on the one hand striving for a four-power understanding between Britain, Germany, France and Italy, excluding Russia, and on the other, rejecting the Russian proposal on the basis that it would tend to create "exclusive groups of nations."

British policy after the Anschluss followed two lines. The first was to more seriously pursue negotiations with Italy for the purpose of driving

Mussolini away from Hitler and weakening the Axis. The negotiations, which had begun in earnest in February 1938 after Eden's resignation, were concluded on April 16 with an agreement to settle all matters dividing England and Italy, dependent on Italy's withdrawal from Spain. Chamberlain rejoiced that "the Anschluss and the Anglo-Italian agreement together have given the Rome-Berlin axis a nasty jar."⁹⁴ The second line of policy was to assure the peaceful settlement of Hitler's claims against Czechoslovakia and the Sudeten Germans, given Chamberlain's determination not to go to war over the Czechs. In the immediate aftermath of the Austrian invasion the Cabinet looked toward the future and discerned two basic policy alternatives: Britain could assume new responsibilities towards Czechoslovakia, which would entail accelerated rearmament and new defensive alliances, or she could work to help Germany achieve her aims in Central Europe without war. At a meeting of the sub-Cabinet Foreign Affairs Committee Halifax presented the choice as one between full mobilization on the one hand and taking a firm attitude with France that "she would be well advised to exert her influence in Prague in favour of an accomodation" on the other. Chamberlain spoke strongly in favor of the latter alternative, stressing the difficulty of aiding Czechoslovakia in the event of war and arguing that "If Germany could obtain her desiderata by peaceful methods, there is no reason to suppose that she would reject such a procedure in favour of violence."⁹⁵ Halifax also favored pressuring Prague, and in a position paper dated March 18 he argued against new commitments to Czechoslovakia directly or through a treaty network with France or Russia, for such a course would involve an acceleration of rearmament and perhaps turn the economy over to a war basis.⁹⁶ By April 1, Halifax was holding conversations with his assistants as to

"what concessions we might urge on Czech Government to make to Sudeten."⁹⁷
"It was thus a foregone conclusion," writes one historian, "when Anglo-French talks in London on 28-29 April produced a decision to put pressure on Benes to settle the Sudeten question."⁹⁸ On May 4, Halifax instructed Henderson to inquire, for British consideration, about "the lines of a settlement which in (the German) view would be satisfactory to the Sudeten Deutsch."⁹⁹ Privately, the British let the Germans know that they would allow the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany provided it was accomplished without violence. "As in the case of Austria, therefore," the above-quoted historian writes, "Hitler was encouraged by Britain to satisfy the growing clamour of Nazis outside the Reich."¹⁰⁰ By the end of April, the British and French Governments became principals in the Czech question, and their object, writes A. J.P. Taylor, "however disguised, was to exact concessions from the Czechs, not to restrain Germany."¹⁰¹

On April 23, while the French and British pondered how to persuade Benes to accede to German demands, Stalin informed the Czechs: "If requested, the U.S.S.R. is prepared--in agreement with France and Czechoslovakia--to take all necessary measures relating to the security of Czechoslovakia. She disposes of all necessary means for doing so."¹⁰² On May 12, Litvinov discussed the Czech question with Bonnet in a meeting at Geneva. In response to a question from Bonnet as to how Russia could aid Czechoslovakia in view of the Polish and Rumanina refusal to allow the passage of Soviet troops, Litvinov asserted that, in view of the lack of Soviet influence in these countries, it was necessary that France obtain permission for this. Litvinov also suggested just military talks between Soviet, French, and Czech general staffs. Bonnet indicated that he accepted the current negative position of Poland and Rumania, and the talk terminated.¹⁰³ There can be

no doubt about the vehemence of the Polish and Rumanian refusal to permit the passage of Soviet troops; both countries informed Bonnet at Geneva in May that such an attempt would provoke an immediate declaration of war against the Soviet Union. The Polish Ambassador to France told William Bullitt that if Soviet planes flew over Poland en route to Czechoslovakia they would be attacked by the Polish air force.¹⁰⁴ Regardless of this opposition, as Taylor correctly notes, "it was indeed no part of Bonnet's policy to make Soviet intervention possible."¹⁰⁵ Quite the contrary, Bonnet wished to prevent Soviet intervention. On July 26, 1938 he told William Bullitt and Henry Morgantheau that he was

attempting to obtain assurance from the Soviet Government that if war should come in Central Europe the Soviet Union would positively not attempt to march armies across the territories of Poland and Rumania and would not send airplanes across those territories but would confine its assistance to the furnishing of munitions and implements of war to the Polish and Rumanian Governments.¹⁰⁶

France, following Britain's lead, was determined to avoid war at all costs. The history of the events culminating in the Munich agreement is vitally important in understanding the Cold War.

The Czech crisis seemed to come to a head on May 20 when widespread rumors of German troop movements at the Czech border were met by partial Czech mobilization. Immediately Britain and France announced their intention to stand by Czechoslovakia. Bonnet declared that France would "provide the utmost help" if Czechoslovakia were attacked, and Halifax warned Ribbentrop that "if from any precipitate action" a general conflict were to ensue, Britain should not be counted on to stand aside.¹⁰⁷ These were empty promises, as both governments realized. During the weekend crisis following May 20, Bonnet urged the Czechs to halt their mobilization and assured the British Ambassador, Phipps, that "if Czechoslovakia were really unreasonable

the French Government might well declare that France considered herself released from her bond. Furthermore, Bonnet stated "that he would readily put any pressure on Czech Government that you (Halifax) might think at any moment desirable in order to ensure a peaceful settlement of the Sudeten question."¹⁰⁸ This French position was in response to the warning from Halifax, dated May 22, that, "If...the French Government were to assume that His Majesty's Government would at once take joint military action with them to preserve Czechoslovakia against German aggression, it is only fair to warn them that our statements do not warrant any such assumption."¹⁰⁹ Also, as one historian notes, "it is difficult...to avoid the word servility when describing British dealings with Berlin in this period."¹¹⁰ On June 1 Henderson told German State Secretary Weizacker, that Britain and France had warned Prague that they would abandon her if she would not listen to reason.¹¹¹

The British were now feeling the heat. They expected Hitler to act, but were not sure when. They deduced that September 12 would be the earliest date, and the object of their policy was to force Benes, before September 12, to make the decisive concessions which they felt alone could deter war.¹¹² Chamberlain groped for a solution, wishing to avoid for the British the task of coercing Benes. Ultimately, he had to force a British "mediator" on Prague. On July 26, he sent Lord Runciman to Czechoslovakia to work out the German-Czech problem. In announcing the mission in the House of Commons on that date, Chamberlain, in the words of one historian, "lied brazenly and deliberately" by declaring that Prague had requested a mediator and denying that Britain had interfered in the internal affairs of Czechoslovakia.¹¹³ Another prominent historian of the Munich period has called Chamberlain's speech "as remarkable an example of prevarication as that Chamber can ever have heard."¹¹⁴

Benes, however, out-maneuvered Runciman by calling in the Sudeten leaders on September 4 and promising to give in to their every demand. This concession by Benes undermined the very pretext by which Hitler planned to make war on Czechoslovakia. As Taylor writes, "The Sudeten Germans had a good case: they did not possess national equality...By September, thanks to Benes, the bottom had been knocked out of this case."¹¹⁵ September 12 did not bring the German aggression anticipated by Britain, but on that date Hitler did make a speech demanding the remedy of all Sudeten grievances, and the next day, the Sudeten leaders broke off their negotiations with Benes and gave the signal for a revolt, which might have been used by Hitler as a pretext for intervention. Again, Benes succeeded. Within 24 hours, he restored order and demonstrated his authority over his entire country.

While Runciman was pressuring Benes, the Soviets affirmed their treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia. On September 2, in response to a query by the French, Litvinov pledged that the Soviets would fulfill their treaty commitments, which obliged them to act in the event that France acted first. As to how the Soviets intended to fulfill their commitments should the situation arise, Litvinov proposed immediate staff talks between France, Czechoslovakia and Russia, and suggested that "in view of the negative attitude adopted by Warsaw and Bucarest he could see only one practical step," an appeal to the League of Nations under Article XI to secure the right of passage for Soviet troops through Poland and Rumania.¹¹⁶ The very idea that Czechoslovakia's plight be brought before the League struck fear in the hearts of the British and French, for such a move would have undercut any efforts at accomodating Hitler. Thus, Bonnet suppressed this element of the Soviet reply.¹¹⁷ On September 11, Bonnet saw Litvinov personally at

Geneva, where the latter again raised the issue and said "that he would like to get the Czech question discussed by an ad hoc committee." Bonnet and R. A. Butler, from the British Foreign Office, discouraged the idea; "Let us hope no more will come of this idea," Butler wired home.¹¹⁸ Officially, the British ignored the Soviet proposal.¹¹⁹

Whether the Soviets were sincere in pledging to fulfill their treaty commitments is academic. An early historian of Soviet foreign policy, Max Beloff, has asserted that there is "very little evidence" that the Soviet Government "was preparing its own people for the possibility that it would itself be involved in war" over Czechoslovakia. Beloff suggests that "the Soviet Union was certain from very early on that France and Great Britain would not fight for Czechoslovakia and that Czechoslovakia would not resist without their support."¹²⁰ Fontaine takes a similar position; in reference to the Soviet pledges of September 1938 he asks "what good were these words if the man who spoke them was convinced that France would not make a move?"¹²¹ There is some substance in the skeptical view that the only reason the Soviets pledged to fulfill their commitments to Czechoslovakia is that they firmly believed they would never have the opportunity to do so. Still, one can not overlook certain considerations: 1) the Soviets made proposals for measures which were clearly not required of them under the terms of their treaties with France and Czechoslovakia, such as concerted action including Britain; 2) in view of the Soviet attitude toward the League, it would seem that Litvinov's proposal to bring the Czech problem to the attention of the League was calculated to put pressure on the British and French to reach some understanding with Russia, and (3) the Soviets really had nothing to gain by making the proposals they did, and, in fact, stood to lose if they were

insincere and Britain and France decided to "call their bluff." The Soviet position and conduct, whatever its sincerity, is irreproachable. They repeatedly opted for a joint conference between Britain, France and the U.S.S.R. "with a view to publishing a declaration which may serve to prevent an attack by Germany on Czechoslovakia."¹²² In the event this failed, they stated their willingness to enter into military staff discussions which were a necessary first step to fulfilling the Franco-Soviet and Czech-Soviet treaties. In short, the Russians did all they could; it was up to France to agree to the military talks suggested by Moscow, and it was inconceivable that any governments except those of France or Britain could apply the diplomatic pressure necessary to secure the right of passage for Soviet troops through Poland and Rumania.

Yet, while France publically clung to her treaties with Moscow and Prague as vital elements in her foreign policy, privately she "was desperately anxious for a possible way out of this 'impasse' without being obliged to fight."¹²³ By September 13, with the Sudetens in revolt, Bonnet told the British Ambassador Phipps that "Peace must be preserved at any price."¹²⁴

On September 11, Chamberlain wrote of his opposition to the theory that German aggression could be stopped by the threat of force, based on his unwillingness to go to war over a country in which Britain was not vitally interested. He added that "another consideration" in his decision not to risk war with Hitler involved a "plan" he had:

The time for this has not yet arrived, and it is always possible that Hitler might act so unexpectedly as to forestall it. That is a risk which we have to take, but in the meantime I do not want to do anything which would destroy its chance of success because, if it came off, it would go far beyond the present crisis, and might prove the opportunity for bringing about a complete change in the international situation.¹²⁵

What Chamberlain had in mind was to grant all of Hitler's demands toward Czechoslovakia, including separation of the Sudetenland without a plebiscite, with a view toward resuming efforts for an Anglo-German understanding. On September 13 the French Cabinet voted against war, and Bonnet confessed his desperation for anything that would preserve peace. This gave Chamberlain the opportunity to act. The same day he wrote to Hitler, offering to fly to Germany overnight for personal negotiations.¹²⁶ Hitler accepted, and on September 15 the two leaders were conferring at Berchtesgaden.

It was at this meeting that Chamberlain sealed Czechoslovakia's fate. He conceded the principal of detachment of the Sudetenland and made it his mandate to secure the approval of his colleagues and the French. As Taylor points out, "he did not enquire whether a truncated Czechoslovakia could remain independent or what the strategic consequences would be for the Western powers; he did not consider how the national composition of Czechoslovakia could be ascertained."¹²⁷ In effect, the Czechs were expected not only "to surrender territory which they firmly held so that France could escape war,"¹²⁸ but also "to abolish political liberties, suppress free speech...relinquish her tie with France and Soviet Russia, give up her responsibilities as a 'grown up' member of the League...accept a guarantee by the 'principal powers', and enter the German economic system."¹²⁹

After securing agreement among his colleagues and the French Government, Chamberlain presented his terms to Prague on September 19: The Czechs would automatically cede all areas with over 50 percent German population to the Reich, with boundaries in question to be settled at a later date and possibly guaranteed by all bordering countries and Britain and France.¹³⁰ At the same time, the British tried to prevent the Czechs from mobilizing.¹³¹ Cadogan

thought these terms "pretty stiff--telling him to surrender!"¹³² The Benes Government was in an untenable position, having to choose between the dismemberment of its country or an invasion which it could not withstand alone. After receiving the Anglo-French proposals, Benes urgently inquired of the French and Soviet Governments whether they would fulfill their treaty commitments to Czechoslovakia in the event of war; he also asked the Soviets if they would come to the aid of his country under Articles 16 and 17 of the League covenant.¹³³ The next day, the Soviet Government conveyed the following message to Prague:

With France remaining loyal to the pact, is the U.S.S.R. resolved to help instantly and effectively? The Government replies Yes, instantly and effectively, To the second question, whether in the event of an appeal being made to the League of Nations, the U.S.S.R. is willing to fulfill its duties according to Articles 16 and 17, the Government replies Yes, in every respect.¹³⁴

The same day, September 20, Benes rejected the Anglo-French proposals. It is doubtful that he did so because he accepted the Soviet assurance, but rather because he was counting on France's aid at the last minute.¹³⁵

Faced with Benes' intransigence, the British and the French quickly delivered an ultimatum to the Czech Government. The Czechs were curtly informed that England would not go to war and, if war should break out France "will not fulfill her treaty obligations"; if the Government persisted in its refusal to accept the terms offered, "she would bear the responsibility for the war."¹³⁶ Prague accepted, and the government of Premier Hozda resigned in shame.¹³⁷

When Chamberlain met again with Hitler at Godesburg, Hitler declared that the previous proposals were no longer sufficient, and that German troops must occupy Czech territory by October 1. Why Hitler made this new demand is not relevant to this study, and is open to question. He may have wanted

to provoke war. Taylor has suggested that Hitler's position was altered by the demands of Poland and Hungary for similar concessions for their minorities in the Tesin and Slovakia regions of Czechoslovakia.¹³⁸ It is true that Poland and Hungary were hovering overhead like vultures, as Churchill described them, anxious to pick at the carcas of what was once Czechoslovakia.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, Chamberlain rejected Hitler's ultimatum on September 23; he could not agree to an outright invasion of Czechoslovakia. The British and the French, still determined to avoid war, had to come up with some compromise acceptable to Hitler. In the first few days following the 23rd this seemed impossible, and war seemed imminent. Halifax, against Chamberlain's wish, told the Czechs that there could no longer be any objection to their mobilizing.¹⁴⁰ Britain mobilized her fleet, and France called up two categories of her reserves, only about half a million men.¹⁴¹ The Russians informed the French and the Czechs that thirty infantry divisions, reinforced with reservists, had been drawn up at her Western frontiers, and that aviation and tank units "are in full readiness."¹⁴²

The British at first went overboard in their declarations to stand by Czechoslovakia. At Churchill's urging, on September 26, the Foreign Office issued a communique stating that if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia, "France will be bound to come to her assistance, and Great Britain and Russia will certainly stand by France."¹⁴³ Yet, neither France nor Russia had been consulted in advance, and Bonnet denounced the communique as a foregery.¹⁴⁴ The same day, Horace Wilson delivered a special message from Chamberlain to Hitler, in which the British repeated France's intention to fight for Czechoslovakia and Britain's obligation to support the French.¹⁴⁵

There are several indications that the Soviets expected a change in Anglo-French policy in the days following September 22. In a letter of September 23, a British representative at Geneva, Robert Boothby, summarized a conversation with Litvinov. The Soviet Foreign Minister told Boothby that he had been in touch with the Czechs during the previous week and had assured them that in the event of an attack by Germany, Russia "would give them effective aid. Help in the air would certainly be given, but it was more doubtful whether it could be given on land."¹⁴⁶ There is evidence that the Russians sent hundreds of planes to Czechoslovakia during September.¹⁴⁷ On the 23rd, Halifax wired Butler at Geneva with instructions to contact Litvinov and inquire about the intentions of the Soviet Government. Litvinov repeated the pledge that Russia would come to the aid of Czechoslovakia if France did; however, he seemed to attach a new significance to this British overture:

He said he welcomed the fact that we had asked him to talk to us. He had for long been hoping for conversations between Great Britain, France and Russia, and he would like to suggest to us in this informal conversation that a meeting of the three Powers mentioned, together with Roumania and any other small Power who could be regarded as reliable, should take place away from the atmosphere of Geneva...and so show the Germans that we mean business...He would be ready then to discuss military and air questions.¹⁴⁸

Furthermore, Litvinov told his British associates, in confidence, that the Soviet Government had informed Poland that if the latter attacked Czechoslovakia, "pact of non-aggression existing between Poland and Russia would automatically lapse and Russia would take actions."¹⁴⁹ Max Beloff writes that "foreign observers in Moscow began to see signs of definite intentions to act on the part of the Soviet Government." On September 26, the same day that the British Foreign Office issued a warning to Germany which mentioned Russia, the Soviets announced for the first time in public that

Poland had been warned not to attack Czechoslovakia; also published was the text of the Czech-Soviet treaty, emphasizing Russia's obligation to aid Czechoslovakia.¹⁵⁰

As in May, the British were insincere in their pledges. Chamberlain and Wilson were willing to accept the Godesburg terms¹⁵¹ and Chamberlain's central problem was to arrange his acceptance in such a way that he kept Hitler from making war while not losing the popular support of the British people. In this context, all the components of the war scare following September 22 actually helped Chamberlain gain acceptance for Hitler's harsher demands because the British people now came to feel the flames of war grow so hot that they would accept almost anything to extinguish them. The British had no confidence in France's ability to wage war against Germany, and on September 27, Halifax urged the French not to move if Czechoslovakia were invaded.¹⁵² Bonnet could not have agreed more: "France will not fight with any heart in a hopeless offensive war against Germany, for which she is not prepared."¹⁵³ That evening, Chamberlain addressed the British people and spoke in general terms of avoiding war. After his talk, he received a message from Hitler which seemed to offer the possibility of a peaceful settlement. In his response, Chamberlain offered to come to Berlin to settle the issue with French and Italian representatives, assuring Hitler that "you can get all the essentials without war, and without delay."¹⁵⁴ Simultaneously he sent a personal appeal to Mussolini. The following day he was able to announce in the Commons that the four powers, Britain, France, Germany and Italy were to meet at Munich.

Russia, who had an unmistakable interest in the settlement of the Czech question, was not invited to the Munich meeting. One could devote pages to

this apparent diplomatic outrage. Yet, the essential observation is that Chamberlain could never have arranged the meeting had there been the slightest chance Russia would be invited.¹⁵⁵ Chamberlain wanted to accommodate Hitler, which meant excluding Russia from European affairs. As Deutscher has explained, "the unwritten maxim of Munich was to keep Russia out of Europe."¹⁵⁶ At the Nuremberg trials, Marshal Keitel testified that Germany would not have attacked Czechoslovakia in 1938 had the Western Powers backed Prague. "The object of Munich," he said, "was to get Russia out of Europe, to gain time, and to complete the German armaments."¹⁵⁷ As for Chamberlain's and Halifax's motivation, I note the provocative statement by Andre Fontaine: "It was their anti-Soviet prejudices much more than fear of war that explains the whole policy that led to Munich."¹⁵⁸ I believe this interpretation makes a vital distinction which helps clarify the rather tenuous assessment of the meaning of Russia's exclusion at Munich which some historians have advanced. There can be little doubt that the British policy that led to Munich was based, in part, on anti-Bolshevism and fear of the Soviet Union; it was also based on a fear of war, an unwillingness to undertake the preparations for war, and a desire to restructure Europe. This was a policy evolved over a period of years, usually not in the midst of crises, and never at a stage where war appeared imminent in a matter of days. By the time of Godesburg ultimatum of September 22, 1938, the exclusion of Russia from Europe was merely an assumed aspect of the general policy that Chamberlain sought to pursue. The week following September 22 was a period of great crisis, and the immediate need of the British, as formulated by Chamberlain and Halifax, was to avoid war. Munich was a last ditch effort to prevent war and, at the same time, salvage the whole policy of appeasement. The British did not

exclude the Soviet Union from Europe at the time of Munich; they did this long before the Czech crisis, and at Munich they merely reaffirmed their determination to keep Soviet Russia detached from European affairs by actively pursuing a new European order dictated by Hitler.

The Czechs fared little better than the Soviets; their representatives were present at Munich, but excluded from the four-power talks. The negotiations were relatively brief, and at 2 A.M. on September 30, a memorandum was drawn up and signed which reflected "in essentials the acceptance of the Godesburg ultimatum."¹⁵⁹ Stripped of some of the more brutal aspects of Hitler's stiff terms, it still provided for military occupation in five stages beginning October 1 to be completed in 10 days.¹⁶⁰ The Czech representatives were shown the agreement after it had been signed, and were given until 5 P.M. that day to accept or take the consequences of rejection. Of course, there was no choice. The Czechs accepted and Benes resigned.

Chamberlain, at his initiative, met alone with Hitler on September 30. The two leaders discussed some outstanding issues between their countries, such as disarmament and economic relations with Southeast Europe. At the end of the meeting, Chamberlain produced a declaration which he had prepared earlier and asked Hitler to sign it, which the latter did eagerly.¹⁶¹ The Declaration read as follows:

We, the German Fuhrer and Chancellor, and the British Prime Minister...are agreed in recognizing that the question of Anglo-German relations is of the first importance for the two countries and for Europe.

We regard the agreement signed last night, and the Anglo-German Naval agreement, as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.

We are resolved that the method of consultation shall be the method adopted to deal with any other questions that may concern our two countries, and we are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of differences, and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe.¹⁶²

In short, the declaration affirmed that Britain's policy would remain the same with respect to seeking an understanding with Germany, and added Hitler's approval of and apparent cooperation with the policy.

Halifax outlined the philosophy behind Britain's post-Munich foreign policy in answer to a request from Phipps for the British Government's attitude toward France's efforts to improve her relationship with Germany. Halifax's discussion is quite illuminating and deserves lengthy quotation:

Hence forward we must count with German predominance in Central Europe....

In these conditions it seems to me that Great Britain and France have to uphold their predominant position in Western Europe by the maintenance of such armed strength as would render any attack upon them hazardous. They should also firmly maintain their hold on the Mediterranean and the Near East....

The greatest lesson of the crisis has been the unwisdom of basing a foreign policy on insufficient armed strength....It is one thing to allow German expansion in Central Europe, which to my mind is a normal and natural thing, but we must be able to resist German expansion in Western Europe or else our whole position is undermined...

The immediate future must necessarily be a time of more of the painful readjustments to the new realities in Europe. While my broad conclusion is that we shall see Germany consolidate herself in Central Europe, with Great Britain and France doing the same in Western Europe, the Mediterranean and overseas, certain factors remain obscure. What is to be the role of Poland and of Soviet Russia? If the Poland of Beck...can never ally herself with Soviet Russia, and if France...relaxes her alliance with Poland the latter can presumably only fall more and more into the German orbit. Soviet Russia, on the other hand, can scarcely become the ally of Germany so long as Hitler lives, although there are obvious economic reasons for bringing them together; she may choose to go into isolation or else she may prefer to maintain contact with the Western Powers through the French alliance.

There is also the problem raised by possible German expansion into the Ukraine. Subject only to the consideration that I should hope France would protect herself--and us --from being entangled by Russia in war with German, I should hesitate to advise the French Government to denounce the Franco-Soviet pact as the future is still far too uncertain! Russia, for good or for evil, is part of Europe and we cannot ignore her existence.

Finally....although we do not expect to detach Italy from the Axis, we believe the (Anglo-Italian) Agreement will increase Mussolini's power of maneuver and so make him less dependent on Hitler, and therefore freer to resume the classic Italian role of balancing between Germany and the Western Powers.¹⁶³

This document is startling in its frank but hopelessly self-serving analysis. Acceptance of German predominance in Central Europe had been and would have to be the sine qua non of a policy of cooperation with Hitler. Churchill wrote of Chamberlain on November 17, "he believes that he can make a good settlement for Europe and for the British Empire by coming to terms with Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini."¹⁶⁴ Halifax clearly defined the areas of interest to Britain: Western Europe, the Mediterranean, and her colonies. France was the key to Britain's position in Western Europe, because she would inevitably bear the heaviest burden if Hitler ever struck in the West. A rearmed and independent France was vital to Britain, Halifax wrote, because without French resistance, "we might have to face alone the full weight of German military power in the West."¹⁶⁵ British policy was thus based on three inter-related assumptions: (1) sufficient military power to deter an attack on any area of British interest, (2) fulfilling, to the degree possible, Hitler's terms, and (3) maintaining friendly relations with Mussolini to have some means of restraining Hitler; these three factors would preserve peace and insure the development of a new status quo in which British interests, largely commercial and economic, could thrive.

Halifax had stressed the first two of these assumptions with brutal frankness in a discussion with American Ambassador Kennedy on October 12. He stated that there was no point in fighting Germany unless Hitler directly interfered with Britain or her colonies. To deter the risk of war against her vital interests, Britain should build up her air strength. Kennedy's report continues:

After that...let Hitler go ahead and do what he likes in Central Europe. In other words, there is no question in Halifax's mind that reasonably soon Hitler will make a start for Danzig, with Polish concurrence, and then for Memel, with Lithuanian acquiescence, and even

if he decides to go into Rumania it is Halifax's idea that England would never have got into the Czechoslovak situation if it had not been for France.¹⁶⁶

Eastern Europe and Russia were the snags in the British plan. Halifax's suspicion that Poland would fall more into the German orbit was justified at the time, and he was absolutely correct in presuming that Hitler would soon "make a start for Danzig"; Ribbentrop began pressing German claims to Danzig in discussions with the Polish Ambassador on October 24.¹⁶⁷ However, his analysis of Russia's position is naive and self-serving. Halifax knew that Russia was "part of Europe," but he was apparently unwilling to admit that she had any national interests to protect; to him, Russia existed only insofar as she could be of service to Britain or France. When Halifax wrote of the impossibility of a Nazi-Soviet alliance, he did not have in mind an alliance against Britain and France, but rather one which would benefit the two Western nations, as he made obvious in his follow-up statement that "there are obvious economic reasons for bringing them together." Although the British were against political cooperation with Soviet Russia, they freely acknowledged the value of commercial cooperation; Russia was a huge market. If she could somehow be integrated into the European economic community through an understanding with a powerful and predominant Nazi Germany, the economic benefits could be great. Of course, Halifax realized that this was not a possibility. What, then, was Soviet Russia to do, faced with a hostile and expansionist Germany whose predominance in Central Europe was openly encouraged and facilitated by Britain and France and whose domination of Eastern Europe seemed inevitable either through military action, internal subversion of Nazi fifth columns, or economic assimilation, all of which the West and the East European governments would not be depended upon

to resist? What was Russia to do when she shared a border with the manical German leader who had justified so much of his foreign policy on the basis of the "Soviet threat" and his violent anti-Bolshevism? Indeed, could Russia tolerate having any of her bordering states, particularly Poland, allied with or subservient to Germany? Obviously, Russia had to protect herself; it would not have taken any elaborate intelligence operation to discern that after Munich, one of the vital objectives of Soviet diplomacy would be to seek such protection, which meant, in any case, active Soviet opposition to the European order Britain was trying to create. Indeed, on November 26, 1938, Russia signed an agreement with Poland reaffirming the 1932 Polish-Soviet Nonaggression Pact. As Ulam has written, "the prospect of Poland becoming a German satellite or being conquered by Germany had to be viewed as a mortal danger to the Soviet Union."¹⁶⁸

In this context, Halifax's conjecture about the future courses of Soviet policy is a striking example of blindness caused by wishful thinking. Russia could either isolate herself or keep in touch with the West "through the French alliance," he deduced. One wonders if when Halifax wrote that Russia could "choose to go into isolation" he anticipated that the Soviet leaders might physically move their country to a new location, for otherwise, there was no way that Moscow could "isolate" Russia from Europe. It is particularly revealing that Halifax, who had encouraged France to break her treaty with Moscow and Prague and who had thus completely undermined the tenuous system of alliances which Russia had built in her defense, could really believe that Russia would still depend on her alliance with France. The British attitude is further revealed by Halifax's advice that France not denounce her alliance with Russia because of possible unforeseen future

contingencies, provided that France not allow Russia to use the alliance to draw the West into a war with Germany. Taylor has concisely translated this passage of Halifax's letter: "In plain English: Russia should fight for British interests, but Great Britain and France should not fight for hers."¹⁶⁹ It should be noted that Halifax invoked the Franco-Soviet alliance in reference to German expansion into the Ukraine. The clear implication of his letter to Phipps, stated more openly in conversation with Joseph Kennedy, is that Britain and France should not fight for the Ukraine unless Hitler made it untenable for them to stand aside, i.e., if he engaged in "unprovoked aggression" against that region.

The British were anxious to let the Germans know that they still sought a comprehensive agreement, and suggestions of this nature were made even during the sensitive maneuverings at the height of the Munich crisis. Sir Horace Wilson met with Hitler, Ribbentrop and Henderson in Berlin on September 27, 1938, the day before the four powers agreed to meet at Munich. Wilson spoke openly with Hitler:

Many Englishmen, and he was one of them, wished heartily to enter into a discussion with Germany on all questions outstanding between the two countries....In the opinion of the British, a period of great economic prosperity throughout the world must result from the settlement of all these questions. On the British side there was also the earnest desire for a discussion and an agreement with Germany. He, Sir Horace, remembered that the Fuhrer had once described Britain and Germany as bulwarks against the forces of destruction, particularly from the East. He himself and many other Englishmen had not forgotten these words.¹⁷⁰

On October 7, Halifax met with the German Ambassador in London, Herbert von Dirksen, and expressed his hope that "a further extension of the basis for Anglo-German relations found in the Munich conference between the Fuhrer and Chamberlain would shortly be made possible." Halifax, however, was quite sensitive to the importance of public opinion in enabling the British

Government to carry out the policy it desired; thus he was disturbed at reports in the British press about the ill-treatment of Sudetens by the Germans. At this meeting he told Dirksen "he would be grateful if by means of relevant German reports he might be enabled to combat such assertions, the spreading of which might in fact hamper the advocates of friendly Anglo-German relations in the realization of their aspirations."¹⁷¹

On October 18, British Home Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare had a meeting with Dirksen. Hoare spoke of a four power agreement on a wide range of issues, and then "let slip the observation that, after a further rapprochement between the four European Great Powers, the acceptance of certain defense obligations, or even a guarantee by them against Soviet Russia, was conceivable in the event of an attack by Soviet Russia."¹⁷²

Although the experience of Munich gave many members of the Cabinet, including Halifax, serious second thoughts about the wisdom of Britain's policy toward Germany and rearmament, Chamberlain seems to have been strengthened in his determination to continue along the same lines. At a Cabinet meeting of October 3, "one view...strongly held...as that we must never again allow ourselves to be got into the position in which we had been for the last few weeks, and that every effort should be made to intensify our rearmament programme." Halifax expressed his strong support for this view. Chamberlain spoke cautiously, as if to soften his dissention from the general view:

Ever since he had been Chancellor of the Exchequer he had been oppressed with the sense that the burden of armaments might break our backs. This had led him to try to resolve the causes responsible for the armaments race. We were now in a more hopeful position, he thought. The contacts established with the Dictator Powers opened up the possibility that we might be able to reach some agreement with them that would stop the armaments race. It was clear, however, that it would be madness for the country to stop rearming until we were convinced

that other countries would act in the same way. For the time being, therefore, we should relax no particle of effort until our deficiencies had been made good. That, however, was not the same as saying that we would embark on a great increase in our armaments programme.¹⁷³

On October 31, Chamberlain was even more emphatic with the Cabinet:

Our policy is one of appeasement (he said). We must aim at establishing relations with the Dictator Powers which will lead to a settlement in Europe and a sense of stability. A good deal of false emphasis has been placed...in the country and in the Press ...on rearmament, as though one result of the Munich Agreement has been that it will be necessary to add to our rearmament programme.¹⁷⁴

In the early months of 1939, Chamberlain remained content to maintain the same program of rearmament as before Munich; he opposed any effort at expansion or redefinition. At a Cabinet meeting of February 2, 1939 he became disconcerted with a proposal that six army divisions be equipped for a Continental role, owing to the unprepared state of the Army for a war on the Continent. Chamberlain argued, "An unanswerable case can be made for increased armaments in every Service, if the financial aspect is ignored, but finance can not be ignored since our financial strength is one of our strongest weapons in any war that is not over in a short time."¹⁷⁵

Toward the end of November 1938 Oliver Harvey spoke with William Strang about Britain's post-Munich policy, and his diary entry reveals some interesting reflections on Chamberlain's opposition to expanded rearmament. Strang explained Chamberlain's philosophy as

play for time and avoid fighting at all costs except on a first-class vital British interest. On the other hand, while accepting this reasoning as tenable, W. Strang says the corollary is that we should at the same time re-arm as hard as possible, and that is what the Government and P.M. are not doing. Strang and I agree that the real opposition to re-arming comes from the rich classes in the Party who fear taxation and believe Nazis on the whole are more conservative than Communists and Socialists; any war, whether we win or not, would destroy the rich idle classes and so they are for peace at any price.¹⁷⁶

Thus, in the winter after Munich, Britain was determined to defend her vital interests, but she had no intention of fighting in Eastern Europe. Accordingly, she almost immediately moved to release herself from the rather ambiguous guarantee of the truncated Czechoslovakia she had made at Munich. In the protocol of the Munich agreement, Britain and France announced that they stood by their original offer for an international guarantee of Czechoslovakia's new borders against unprovoked aggression.¹⁷⁷ Such a guarantee was virtually meaningless since the penetration of Nazi fifth columns into Czechoslovakia could easily enable Hitler to provoke a situation by which he could "justify" military action. Furthermore, the Anglo-French offer contained as "one of the principle conditions...the substitution of a general guarantee...in place of existing treaties which involve reciprocal obligations of a military character."¹⁷⁸ In simple terms, the Czechs were asked to renounce their treaties with France and Russia and accept instead a guarantee from Britain, France, Germany, and Italy--with Russia excluded. The chief ambiguity of such a "general guarantee" was whether it was to be invoked collectively or individually. Chamberlain used this loophole to escape from a commitment to Czechoslovakia. In a meeting with the French and British Foreign Ministers in Paris on November 24, Chamberlain interpreted the guarantee as collective only: "He had never conceived of a situation in which Great Britain might have to carry out her obligations alone."¹⁷⁹ Disturbed at Czech nonresponsiveness on the question of the nature of the guarantee, Halifax on December 8 curtly informed the Czechs as follows:

His Majesty's Government are not prepared to consider a guarantee which might oblige them, alone or with France, to come to the assistance of Czechoslovakia in circumstances in which effective help could not be rendered. This would be the case if either Germany or Italy were the aggressor and the other declined to fulfill the guarantee.¹⁸⁰

In other words, Germany or Italy held the power to veto any aid in defense of Czechoslovakia; or, to be more concise, in the opinion of the British Government, there was no guarantee.

As Halifax had stated in his letter to Phipps, the British regarded Mussolini's influence as instrumental in controlling Hitler. Thus, faced with "the failure of Hitler to make the slightest gesture of friendliness" in the last months of 1938¹⁸¹, Britain devoted increasingly more attention to Rome. In October the British pushed for ratification of the Anglo-Italian agreement of April 1938, despite the absence of the required Italian withdrawals from Spain. Ratification was secured, and the agreement signed November 16, but in the process the British Ambassador to Italy, Perth, suffered such abuse that one historian has commented, "Perhaps only Henderson among British diplomats could have rivalled Perth in inviting and accepting such treatment."¹⁸² In early January, Chamberlain flew to Rome for a personal meeting with Mussolini and a chance "to reach the Italian people." The Prime Minister's contemporaneous impression was "that I am satisfied that the journey has definitely strengthened the chances of peace."¹⁸³ The Italian Foreign Minister, struck with the weakness evidenced by Chamberlain and Halifax, told Ribbentrop that "the visit was a fiasco" which convinced him of the necessity for a "Triple Alliance" including Japan; with the British engaged in "this somber preoccupation of theirs....we could get whatever we want."¹⁸⁴ In February 1939, Chamberlain recognized General Franco as the legitimate ruler of Spain.¹⁸⁵ No one could dispute the judgment that "the belief that Mussolini could restrain Hitler was misplaced."¹⁸⁶

Soviet foreign policy during the winter following Munich reflected a careful search for security on Russia's Western frontier. Munich had under-

mined the already shaky system by which Russia strived to protect her position in Europe; Moscow could no longer count on help from the West in resisting Hitler's expansion East. Furthermore, the strategic situation had been altered against Soviet interests. "There can be no doubt," writes Max Beloff, "that Czechoslovakia was the principal barrier to Germany's eastward expansion."¹⁸⁷ As Sumner Welles wrote in 1944, "The agreements of Munich confirmed the conviction of the Soviet government that the Western powers strove to keep Germany from the west only by turning her to the east."¹⁸⁸ After Munich, one prominent historian of the period has written, "Hitler was going East; every newspaper correspondent, every business house, every embassy and legation in Europe knew it and reported accordingly."¹⁸⁹ Of particular danger to Soviet Russia was the prospect of a Polish alliance with Germany, for "Germany could organize a serious campaign against the U.S.S.R. only from Polish territory."¹⁹⁰ Polish hostility to Russia was an unconcealed fact, the non-aggression agreement notwithstanding. During the Czech crisis, the Poles refused to allow the passage of Soviet troops, and threatened to attack Russia if Polish territory were violated. Now, with Hitler pressing his demands on Poland, the possibility of either a German-Polish alliance or a German invasion of Poland which would not be resisted by the West could not be excluded by Soviet policy makers. "Either way," writes Ulam, "Germany would effectively become a neighbor to the Soviet Union....It became a vital objective of Soviet foreign policy that Poland should resist the German demands and, if attacked, should find allies in the West."¹⁹¹

Thus, in the period of the "Munich winter", Russia faced no imminent threat, but rather a situation in which the eventual confrontation between

Russia and Nazi Germany had to be the major consideration in Soviet foreign policy. Stalin's paramount interest was to do everything in his power to avoid or delay such a confrontation. Ulam praises the "masterful coolness and strength of nerves" in Soviet diplomacy of this period, "and although I disagree with his particular interpretation of Soviet reasoning, I believe he is correct in his observation that "now (the Soviets) tried hard to create an impression Russian aloofness and self-confidence."¹⁹² Stalin was sharper than the British appeasers; he realized, as he had always made clear in his efforts at collective security, that an essential element in a policy of resisting or containing Hitler was to present an image of strength and determination. To approach Hitler with offers to help him achieve his goals was to encourage him, for there was no more effective manner of convincing him of his opponent's weakness. There was no chance of collective security having its intended effect if Britain and France publically shunned cooperation with Russia and privately displayed to Hitler their desperation for an agreement with him. Now Stalin would have to keep his options open, and work carefully to insure that he did not obstruct any conceivable alternative. After Munich, Andre Fontaine, has suggested, Stalin decided to "put a second iron in the fire."

Either an alliance with the West against Hitler or a Soviet rapprochement with Germany in order to give the U.S.S.R. time to get itself in better shape to resist the inevitable attack. It was preparing itself for either alternative, and it would choose between them at the appropriate time on the basis of what the two sides had to offer and of the state of the U.S.S.R.'s defenses.¹⁹³

The essential qualification in the above-quoted passage is the specification that Stalin prepared for a possible Soviet-German rapprochement "in order to give the U.S.S.R. time to get itself in better shape to resist the inevitable attack." There is no evidence that Stalin at any time sought an

understanding with Hitler as part of a broader scheme of recognizing a new European status quo and living in peace; Stalin doubtlessly recognized that long-range cooperation with Hitler was impossible. Furthermore, in the period of the Munich winter, there is no evidence that Stalin was actively pursuing a temporary rapprochement with Hitler. What he was doing was (1) keeping his options for an agreement with Germany open and (2) seeking a diplomatic edge vis a vis Britain and France by carefully exploiting economic negotiations with Germany.

By November of 1938, Germany's foreign trade and raw material situation was such that many efforts were made to expand trade, including overtures to England and Russia.¹⁹⁴ In December, the Director of the Economic Policy Department, Wiehl, began sounding out the Russians on resuming credit negotiations. The Soviet Ambassador in Berlin, Merekalov, was receptive to the idea and insisted that the negotiations take place in Moscow, as opposed to Berlin where they had always occurred in the past. Wiehl was opposed to the idea for practical reasons, but recommended that the chairman of the German trade delegation, Schnurre, be sent to Moscow because Germany's need for raw materials and the credit agreement "is so great that it does not appear expedient to frustrate the negotiations in any way." However, the Germans did not miss the significance of this peculiar Soviet request (it would have been easier to hold the talks in Berlin): Wiehl wrote to State Secretary Weizacker, "The strong desire to have a German delegation come to Moscow can therefore only be interpreted in the sense that the Soviet Government would like to demonstrate to the outside world the value placed also by the Third Reich on the continuation of economic relations." News of Schnurre's pending visit was leaked to the press, and the Soviets did nothing to dis-

courage or deny the reports. However, this publicity angered Ribbentrop, who cancelled the visit on January 26.¹⁹⁵

During approximately the same period, the British were engaged in a series of economic negotiations with Germany, but their intention was significantly different from that of the Soviets. While evidence is lacking that the Soviets regarded their credit negotiations with the Reich as anything other than a means of gaining valuable economic concessions, impressing and perhaps frightening the West, and keeping the door open to a possible future agreement with Hitler, the British approached their trade negotiations with the specific understanding that they were to pave the way for the far-reaching agreement desired by Chamberlain. As relations between Britain and Germany cooled toward December, the German Ambassador in London, Dirksen, searched for a means of improving relations. Later he wrote, "I came to the conclusion that the economic way offered the best prospects."¹⁹⁶ It is doubtlessly true, as his written recollections suggest, that Dirksen "came" to this conclusion under orders from Berlin, for at the time expanded export trade and raw materials were greatly needed by Germany. Dirksen continues:

Consequently, in the middle of December, I began to lay increasing stress in my talks with influential Englishmen on the idea that the way to relieve the tension must be sought in the economic field: there were plenty of causes of political friction, but economic interests were common and they were capable of being developed; furthermore they at present held first place with us. It was therefore necessary and expedient to achieve calm and confidence by means of co-operation in the economic sphere; then we would see.¹⁹⁷

By the end of January, the British demonstrated an eagerness to enter into significant economic negotiations with Germany. Plans were made for negotiations at Dusseldorf in late February between the central industrial federations of the two countries (the Federation of British Industries and the Reichsgruppe Industries). Chamberlain personally approved the negoti-

ations and planned that in March the President of the Board of Trade, Oliver Stanley, should visit Berlin.¹⁹⁸ The British attached importance to the visit to Berlin of someone of such high standing as Stanley, and "trial balloons" were released by the British for a visit to Britain by a German official of equal standing.¹⁹⁹ In February, with the conclusion of a coal agreement and completion of final arrangements for the Dusseldorf conference and Stanley's visit, Dirksen noted, "The atmosphere was unusually favorable and also had an alleviating effect on the political tension."²⁰⁰ On February 19, Chamberlain wrote a diary entry which expressed his optimism in poetic terms and concluded, "All the information I get seems to point in the direction of peace."²⁰¹ Bouyed by his optimism, Chamberlain spoke with a group of journalists in March and told them that he hoped for much from Stanley's visit to Berlin and that "a disarmament conference might meet before the year's end."²⁰²

At the same time, the British sent the head of the economic office of the Foreign Office, Frank Ashton-Gwatken, to Berlin to sound out top German leaders on the prospects of political negotiations. In a conversation with Wiehl on February 20, Ashton-Gwatken said "Britain was of the opinion that economic agreement must be reached between the two countries this year in order to put an end to the armaments race." Wiehl told his visitor that an arms limitations agreement was a political rather than economic matter and that he was not "the proper authority" for the discussion of political questions.²⁰³ Later the same day, Ashton-Gwatken met with Foreign Minister Ribbentrop, who gave a cold reception to ideas for political rapprochement. Ashton-Gwatken told Ribbentrop that his ideas on how to improve trade between the two countries (ostensibly the purpose of his visit) "extended beyond the

limits of economy into the sphere of politics"; he "suggested that the Foreign Minister should invite Sir Horace Wilson to Germany." Ribbentrop replied that such an invitation was not possible "until clearer relations existed between Germany and Britain."²⁰⁴ Before leaving Germany, Ashton-Gwatken met again with Wiehl, who realized that the suggestion of an invitation of Horace Wilson to Germany was the most important of the British "political feelers." At the conclusion of this last meeting, Wiehl was asked if it was not possible to reach "an agreement between the two governments to undertake no alteration in the status quo during the next three to four years. When I (Wiehl) asked whether by that he meant a political peace pact, he answered in the affirmative."²⁰⁵

In the next month Britain's plans for rapprochement with Germany received a rude shock when Hitler, with the help of Poland and Hungary, invaded the remainder of Czechoslovakia.