

EDOUARD DALADIER AND MUNICH: THE FRENCH ROLE
IN AN INTERNATIONAL TRAGEDY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

September 30, 1938, was a day of great rejoicing in Europe. It was generally assumed that this date would go down in history as a day on which reason had prevailed over national ambitions and on which a generation of peace had been secured for Europe. Less than a year was required to show how illusory those hopes were, but, at that time, relief that war had been averted was almost universal and good will prevailed.

Great crowds gathered at the airports of London and Paris to welcome home the statesmen who had brought peace to Europe when war had seemed certain. Protected from the rainy English skies by a large black umbrella, Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, proclaimed to the world his hope that the Munich Agreement was only a prelude to a larger settlement which would embrace all of Europe. Thousands of Londoners cheered wildly as Chamberlain made his way to his car and was whisked off to receive the thanks of the King and Queen.

This triumphal reception was repeated in Paris where the French Premier, Edouard Daladier, was mobbed in the most tumultuous reception Le Bourget airport had seen since Charles Lindberg completed his transatlantic flight in 1927. As Daladier drove back to his office at the Ministry of Defense, a French reporter, following in

a newsreel van, caught the emotion of the moment:

I saw men and women kiss our premier's hand. For he had given orders that the two policemen on either side should let the crowd do as it liked. Not that he was eager for adoration but because at that moment he was being adored. He, that is to say a representative of that crowd whose irresistible surge was not to be strangled or lessened by a policeman's angry interference.

Next to him [Foreign Minister] Bonnet was weeping. And mixed with the cries of "Long live the peace!" and "Thank you, Daladier!" there was a "Bravo Bonnet!" every other moment, which made him smile through his tears. For his part, Daladier did not cry; but his tense smile was even more moving...

At the crossing of the rue Lafayette and the boulevard Haussmann the thousands of people brought the car to a halt. A woman flung her arms around Daladier's neck and kissed him heartily on both cheeks...

The Pont de la Concorde thundered beneath us. A blind ex-serviceman waved his white stick, shouting, "Long live peace!"¹

Hundreds of flowers were thrown into the Premier's open car as he drove through Paris. Daladier thoughtfully had them sent to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier under the Arch of Triumph and appeared there himself a few days later with a large wreath to give thanks that another costly conflagration had been averted.

But there was a significant and ominous difference in the attitudes of the leaders of the two great Western democracies. Chamberlain, obviously fatigued by the trip and tension, was nevertheless gay and confident. Daladier, on the other hand, appeared despondent and displayed noticeably less enthusiasm for the Munich Agreement than did the crowds who greeted him in Paris. Although Daladier's public statements tended to bolster confidence in the pact, his appearance and his private statements reveal that he had serious doubts about the future peace of Europe. Before landing in Paris, Daladier asked his pilot to circle the field so that

he could regain his composure and prepare some soothing words for what he expected to be a hostile crowd. When he was cheered for bringing peace instead of booed for abandoning France's most important ally in the East, the French Premier remarked to an aide, "The imbeciles--if they only know what they were acclaiming!"² Later, when he placed the wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Daladier appeared "tired and worn" amidst the public rejoicing.³ On October 3, Daladier told the American Ambassador in Paris, William Bullitt, that within six months he expected France and Great Britain to be faced with new German demands, possibly in the colonial field, and probably also with Italian demands supported by Germany for Tunis and Syria.⁴

The French Premier obviously did not share Chamberlain's optimism and recognized from its inception that the Munich Agreement was a mistake. In fact, Daladier had warned Chamberlain only ten days before the Munich Conference that Hitler intended to destroy Czechoslovakia, build hegemony in the East and then turn on the West.⁵ The question thus arises of why Daladier acquiesced at Munich when he understood so clearly the consequences of his action. The motivations of the British Prime Minister were simple and straightforward: Chamberlain, although he had some doubts as to how long the Agreement would last, sincerely believed that he had achieved an equitable settlement of the Sudeten problem and hoped that in appeasing Hitler he had opened the door to a generation of peace for Europe.⁶ Daladier, however, had no such illusions and the questions of why he signed the Munich Agreement and what he hoped to gain are therefore more complex and more puzzling than Chamberlain's

motivations. This study is an attempt to gain insight into Daladier's motivations through an examination of his life and character and his actions before, during and after the Munich Conference.

To date, most historians who have dealt with the Conference have not extensively discussed the role of the French Premier. Daladier is usually ignored as a secondary figure in the proceedings or is treated relatively simplistically. Many historians assume that Daladier did not have the strength of will to stand up to Hitler, and he is most frequently characterized as "weak." This interpretation takes its most extreme form in the writings of André Géraud. Géraud, who wrote with great bitterness while his country was occupied by Germany, describes Daladier as a "patriot without strength of will," a spineless man with no will power.⁷ To Géraud, Daladier was a weak and irresolute man who achieved success as a politician by jumping from one popular cause to another, but was a failure as a statesman because he hated to be forced into making a decision. Géraud ruthlessly castigates everyone involved with the French defeat in 1940 with no apparent attempt at objectivity, and it is consequently difficult to take seriously his generalized and highly emotional interpretation. Nevertheless, his charge of weakness has been echoed by more objective and scholarly writers such as John Wheeler-Bennett.

Wheeler-Bennett presents Daladier as a weak man who understood what would happen if France and Britain gave in to Hitler, but who vacillated between the conflicting views of the men in his cabinet. The French Premier is credited with the intellectual integrity which enabled him to perceive the situation clearly, but

Wheeler-Bennett faults him for failing to take energetic action to rectify the problems he saw because of his dislike of the disagreeable:

For the tragedy of Edouard Daladier is that when he became aware of the evils which surrounded him he had not the strength of character to apply the drastic measures necessary to remove them. He preferred to shift the onus of responsibility elsewhere rather than to purge his entourage.⁸

He attributes Daladier's efforts to restrain British concessions to Hitler prior to Munich to the arguments of the resistance group in the French cabinet and says that when the French Premier finally gave in he salved his conscience by surrendering to Chamberlain rather than directly to Hitler. Wheeler-Bennett paints a tragic portrait of Daladier at Munich as perhaps the only person there besides Hitler who was aware of the catastrophic consequences of the Agreement, but who did not have the strength of will to plunge his country into war.

This interpretation seems quite plausible at first since it neatly explains both why Daladier signed the Munich Agreement and why he appeared so despairing about doing it. However, there are certain indications that Daladier's motivations were not so simple as the phrase "lack of strength of will" implies. For example, when Daladier took office in April, 1938, he was generally regarded as a strong man, as possibly the only man in France with the strength to restore order and pull the country out of the chasm of chaos into which it appeared to be falling.⁹ Within a few days, Daladier had settled the widespread strikes which were crippling the country's aircraft industry. The mere fact that Daladier held office for two

years, from April, 1938 to March, 1940, as compared to the inter-war average of six months for premiers of the Third Republic indicates that he was a man of no ordinary mettle. These considerations do not necessarily protect Daladier from a charge of weakness at Munich, but they do indicate that there must have been severely extenuating circumstances which caused him to sign the Munich Agreement against his better judgment. If it was not personal weakness, what then could have prompted Daladier to agree to the Munich settlement?

Andrew Rothstein sees an answer in ulterior motives which, although implausible, deserve consideration. Rothstein asserts that Chamberlain and Daladier conspired to encourage Nazi expansion eastward to provoke a conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union. Lacking public statements to the effect, Rothstein uses quotations from private conversations to show that there was a strong fear among French and British leaders that the only victor of a Franco-German conflict would be the Soviet Union. Because of their morbid fear of Communism, says Rothstein, Chamberlain and Daladier sacrificed Czechoslovakia hoping that Hitler's "March to the East" would eventually result in a conflict with the Soviet Union in which the two countries would kill each other off and thus end the threats from both Communism and Nazism. Rothstein uses the analogy of two outwardly respectable businessmen (Chamberlain and Daladier) who buy off two gangsters (Hitler and Mussolini) to keep the gangsters pointed in the other direction while their own businesses remain safe.¹⁰ The strongest argument in Rothstein's book is that since

Stalin feared a clash with Hitler, surely Chamberlain and Daladier must have been hoping for the same thing.

This argument not only lacks logic but also fails to account for Daladier's dejected appearance at Munich. Surely the French Premier would have been more cheerful if he thought he had just successfully initiated a clash between his two most feared enemies. While Rothstein does succeed in showing that Daladier and Chamberlain were concerned and fearful about the role of the Soviet Union in European politics, he fails to prove that this concern was the primary motivation for the Munich Agreement.

More recent studies tend to be more sympathetic toward Daladier and emphasize the pressures on him at Munich. For example, Gilbert Fergusson, in an article comparing the French and British roles at Munich, describes Daladier as the most unhappy person at Munich because he was extremely conscious of his moral failure in abandoning Czechoslovakia.¹¹ While Ferguson raises more questions about Daladier's motivations than he answers, he points to the poor condition of the French Air Force and the fact that neither France nor Great Britain had a great deal of confidence in each other as factors which weighed heavily on Daladier's mind at Munich, implying that it was the weakness of the French military and diplomatic positions at the time rather than personal weakness which caused him to sign the Munich Agreement.

A similar position is taken in a more lengthy study by Albert Gay Jr. who finds that Daladier can be partially vindicated of his actions at Munich by French internal divisiveness, military unpreparedness and British intransigence.¹² While Gay notes that no one

today would refer to Daladier as the strong man he was known as in the mid-1930's, he also points out that few today accept Géraud's interpretation of the "patriot without strength of will." How then are we to understand this man who loved his country so much and yet failed to avert the war which he knew would be a horrible catastrophe for all of Europe? This study of Daladier's life and character, of the events which led to the Munich Conference and of Daladier's reactions to Munich will show brilliant flashes of strength and understanding but also discouraging lapses. Daladier emerges as a relatively strong man among the politicians of the Third Republic, yet as a man who was not strong enough to conquer the tide of the times. It may seem a mere semantic difference to say that Daladier was not weak, he simply was not strong enough, but today it seems a much more accurate and understanding way to describe this man who tried so hard to do the best for France.

FOOTNOTES

¹Henri Noguères, Munich. 'Peace for our Time,' tr. Patrick O'Brian (New York, 1963), p. 305.

²Ibid., p. 304.

³The Times (London), October 3, 1938, p. 11.

⁴United States, Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1938, Vol. 1 (Washington, 1955), pp. 711-712. (Hereafter cited as FRUS.)

⁵E. L. Woodward and Rohan Butler, eds., Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939, Third series, 10 vols. (London, 1949), Vol. II, No. 928, p. 384. (Hereafter cited as DBFP.)

⁶Keith Feiling, The Life of Neville Chamberlain (London, 1946), pp. 375 and 382.

⁷André Géraud, The Gravediggers of France (Garden City, N. Y., 1944), p. 85.

⁸John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich, Prologue to Tragedy (New York, 1948), p. 67.

⁹The Times (London), April 11, 1938, p. 13.

¹⁰Andrew Rothstein, The Munich Conspiracy (London, 1958), p. 271.

¹¹Gilbert Fergusson, "Munich: the French and British Roles," International Affairs, XLIV (October, 1968), pp. 649-665.

¹²Albert C. Gay Jr., "The Daladier Administration, 1938-1940" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1970).

CHAPTER II

THE MAN AND THE TIMES

Edouard Daladier was born in June, 1884, in Carpentras, a town near the Rhone River in the Province of Vaucluse. His father was a baker, a man of the lower middle class and of mildly left-wing political persuasion. Edouard, however, displayed academic inclinations, forsook his father's vocational footsteps and pursued his education by successfully competing for scholarships. At the Lycée of Lyons, Daladier studied under Edouard Herriot who would later become his political mentor and then rival. Daladier received the diploma of Etudes Supérieures with the citation of "Very Good" after answering his examination question on the administration of a large abbey in Carolingian times according to ancient documents.

In 1909, Daladier took the difficult state competitive examination, the Aggregation of History and Geography, and received the highest score, an achievement which entitled him to a year's study abroad and marked him as a man who would some day be an excellent professor. Daladier first taught a year at the Lycée of Nîmes, and then spent his year abroad in Rome studying the nineteenth-century revolutionary movement which led to Italian unification. On returning to France, Daladier taught briefly at the Lycée of Grenoble and then, turning to politics, was elected mayor of Carpentras in May, 1912. As a public official, Daladier paid attention to foreign as well

as local affairs and expressed concern over the level of German armaments and the Balkan situation.¹

When war came in 1914, Daladier was mobilized and served as a sergeant in the Second Regiment of the Foreign Legion in Champagne and Arras. After an offensive near Souchez in 1915, Daladier's battalion was so decimated that it was disbanded and the survivors redistributed. Sergeant Daladier was assigned to the 209th Infantry Regiment, which participated in the September, 1915, offensive in Souain. Next, the 209th was sent to Verdun where the unit was cited for excellent organizational and defensive work in the sector of Avocourt, the hinge of the Verdun position. Daladier was personally rewarded in April of 1916 with a promotion to lieutenant. His citation read in part, "In the fighting in which he has taken part as a sergeant and as leader of a section, notably at Arras and the redoubt of Avocourt, has given proof of coolness, energy and a great deal of bravery."² In May, 1917, he was again cited for bravery and awarded the Legion of Honor. Daladier's regiment participated in the last great offensives of the war and was the first to cross the Somme River.

Undoubtedly Daladier's experiences in the war had a great impact on his character. The carnage of the war, which many commentators attributed to the then dominant "doctrine of offense," produced strong reactions throughout France, and many Frenchmen became strongly pacifistic for the next two decades. Daladier himself shared the general hatred and horror of warfare, but believed that the best way to avoid war or conduct an unavoidable war was through the "doctrine of defense," as expounded by Generals

Henri Pétain, Maxime Weygand and Maurice Gamelin. This theory held that modern technology made it possible to construct impregnable defensive fortifications and that the most efficient means of conducting warfare was from such defensive positions. This idea was so firmly ingrained in French thinking that France spent billions of francs constructing the Maginot Line of fortifications facing Germany. In fact, adherence to this doctrine was a major reason why France was not prepared to conduct an offensive war against Germany in support of Czechoslovakia in 1938, and Daladier must share the blame as one of the major supporters of that theory in the interwar years. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in propounding the doctrine of defense, Daladier was following the thinking of most French military leaders and of most of public opinion as well. Having fought in some of the worst battles of the Great War, Daladier was determined that France should never undergo another such ordeal if it could reasonably be avoided. His abhorrence of warfare, however, did not lead to the "peace at any price" attitude which characterized some French leaders in 1938.

After the war, Daladier married Mlle. Madeleine Laffone, the daughter of a Paris doctor, and returned to Carpentras, where he was elected to the French Chamber of Deputies as a member of the Radical Socialist party. The Radical Socialists, commonly referred to as the Radicals, were far more moderate than their name implies, occupying a position only slightly left of center in the French political spectrum. In general terms, the party stood for:

Minimal regulation by the government, opposition to strong trade unions and apprehension concerning the giant companies,

belief in equal opportunities for achievement and hence an opposition to entrenched, traditional groups such as the clergy and the aristocracy.³

The party had its greatest strength in rural, provincial France representing the lower middle class, but including some liberal professions and farmers as well. Because of its central position in French politics, the Radical party tended to act as a balancer party, never in power by itself but always allied with groups to the right or left to form the ruling coalition.⁴ Thus as a member of the Radical party, Daladier was in the mainstream of the French politics.

In the Chamber, Daladier seldom spoke, but when he did, he defended his statements with great stubbornness and tenacity.⁵ Although he habitually wore a frown, Daladier had a straightforward and unpretentious personality which combined with his unquestionable honesty and loyalty to his friends to win him many supporters among party workers. Daladier assiduously cultivated the legend of the strong, silent man. In 1928, he told the residents of Orange in his native Vaucluse:

I wish to recall once again the life of William of Orange, wrongly known as the "the Silent," when he should have been called "the Reticent." He spoke only of what he knew well, and thus did not encounter the inconsistencies to which facile popularities lead. He had an intense interior life, the only resource that enables one to dominate the anger of men and the caprice of events.⁶

Without a doubt, Daladier was describing himself as well, or at least the model he was trying to emulate. Many French leaders did take Daladier's silence for strength, and he rose quickly in the party hierarchy.

Daladier held his first cabinet post in 1924 as Minister of French Colonies under Edouard Herriot's Cartel des Gauches. Once astride the spinning carrousel of French cabinet posts, Daladier successively held portfolios of War, Public Instruction and Public Works. His unquestioned favorite was the Ministry of War. Here Daladier worked to reorganize the army to conform with the doctrine of defense but was greatly hindered by ministerial instability.

In 1926, the Radical party leader, Edouard Herriot, moved to the right to join Raymond Poincaré's conservative government. Daladier preferred to stay with the Cartel des Gauches and led a successful intra-party rebellion which culminated in his being elected president of the party in 1927. Although Herriot and Daladier put on a public pretense of amiability, most of France was aware that they did not get along well together and were the rival leaders of the right and left wings of the party.

The 1928 national elections reflected public approval of the prosperity which Poincaré had brought to France, and Daladier spent the next four years in opposition. By 1932, however, the depression had produced a reversal of public opinion. The Radicals and the Socialists engineered a successful electoral alliance which worked mostly for the benefit of the Radical party and greatly increased the strength of the Left in Parliament. Although the Socialist leader, Léon Blum, in a surprising break with tradition, offered Socialist participation in a Radical government, the idea was rejected by Herriot. A series of Radical governments in 1932 failed to produce workable parliamentary majorities, and the task of governing the country was left substantially undone, as was the

custom of the Third Republic during most of the interwar years. The financial situation was especially crucial and controversial, with the Right insisting on budgetary deflation to establish a sound fiscal system and the Left demanding increased spending to boost the country out of the depression.

In December, 1932, Herriot's government fell over the question of the repayment of the war debt to the United States, and a brief government by Joseph Paul-Boncour, another Radical leader, failed to improve the situation. On January 29, 1933, the day before Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, Edouard Daladier was asked to form a government. Although it was to be primarily a Radical government, Daladier initially offered the Socialists five cabinet posts to win their support. The Socialists agreed if Daladier would abide by the spirit of their reform program, which included nationalization of insurance companies, railways and arms production and the establishment of a forty-hour work week.⁷ However, the consummation of this historic alliance was thwarted by the right wing of the Radical party which expressed its disapproval of Socialist participation to Daladier in no uncertain terms. The Socialists, seeing they were not wanted, withdrew their acceptance of Daladier's offer, although many of them gave support to the Radical government which Daladier formed the next day.

At least one reputable scholar has maintained that Daladier was not sincere in his offer to the Socialists, but was instead making a supposedly unacceptable offer which, although impossible for the Socialists to accept, would secure their support for Daladier's government.⁸ Daladier certainly was not in sympathy with most of

the Socialist reform program, but, in any event, the result was the formation of a Radical government and a split in the Socialist party over whether or not to support Daladier. Even though the Socialist right wing supported Daladier, he could not obtain a secure parliamentary majority without support of the entire party. Thus Daladier found himself in the same position as many of his predecessors.

It was predictable that, without a majority in Parliament, Daladier would introduce no drastic changes in government. In fact, his administration differed little from those which had preceded it, except for its relatively long existence of ten months. Daladier's lengthy tenure in office was as much fortuitous as it was skillful. His political maneuvering to stay in office was aided by the split in the Socialist party which prevented their effective opposition, greater unity within the Radical party and restive public opinion which displayed the exasperation of the people at the frequency of governmental crises.⁹ As Premier,¹⁰ Daladier tried to achieve a balance between the Right and the Left in France by giving something to each side. Finance was left in the hands of the right wing of the party, and a policy of budgetary deflation, which actually tended to worsen the economic crisis, was followed. On the other hand, numerous proposals for social reform were made to woo the Socialists. In the end, these two basic policies proved incompatible, although Daladier and other Radical leaders did not see them as such.¹¹ Daladier's government was finally overthrown on October 23 by a combination of Socialist on the left and moderates on the right. Daladier had not accomplished a

great deal for France, but his reputation as a strong man remained intact, and the impact of a fresh government scandal soon gave him another chance to govern the country.

Any history of the scandals of the Third Republic, and it would be a long one, must include a chapter on the Stavisky scandal of 1934. This scandal not only led to the downfall of two French governments, but also produced the worst riots in Paris since the days of the Commune. Serge Alexandre Stavisky was a confidence man who earned his living by speculating in inflated bond issues and remained free of prosecution through his political connections. The affair became public on December 28, 1933, and at first seemed to be just another of the many financial scandals of the Third Republic, except for the fact that Stavisky's political connections were widespread and reached into high government positions. In fact, the man responsible for postponing Stavisky's trial nineteen times over a five year period was the Chief Prosecutor in Paris and the brother-in-law of the current Radical Premier, Camille Chautemps. The situation grew more intense when it was learned that two of Chautemps' cabinet ministers had had financial dealings with Stavisky.

Then, on January 8, 1934, Stavisky was found dead under circumstances which suggested police complicity, perhaps under orders from the Minister of the Interior. Stavisky had shot himself trying to avoid capture, and the police apparently allowed him to bleed to death before summoning help.¹² Public indignation was extreme as French newspapers railed against corruption in government and public assassinations to conceal culpability. A series of

riots broke out in Paris, and Chautemps only made matters worse by trying to censor the press and refusing to appoint a commission to investigate the affair. Chautemps was even attacked by members of his own party when a group of Radical deputies published a tract demanding the "pitiless punishment of all misdemeanors" and a cabinet composed of "forceful men above suspicion, who are resolved not simply to stay in office, but to govern as men of action."¹³ At last, on January 28, Chautemps could take no more and submitted his resignation. The man who most nearly approximated the Radical's demand was Edouard Daladier. He was irreproachably honest with no hint of scandal in his public career, and his reputation as a strong man presented him as the ideal person to restore order in this time of crisis.

Recognizing a shift to the right in public opinion, Daladier broke with the Cartel des Gauches and tried to form a government across the political spectrum. In doing so, he neglected his own party and alienated many Radical leaders. Thus when Daladier's coalition proved impossible to construct, he had no political foundation to fall back on. The predominantly Radical government which he finally put together had no political basis and, therefore, no chance for survival.¹⁴

With this fragile basis for action, Daladier launched an investigation of the scandal. Learning of the complicity of Jean Chiappe, the popular right-wing Prefect of Paris Police, Daladier ordered his dismissal. This action touched off a huge demonstration by right-wing groups at the Place de la Concorde on February 6. Inflamed by the hysterical Parisian press and joined by Communist

demonstrators, the mob turned violent and clashed with police. Firing broke out as the police tried to prevent the crowd, estimated at 40,000, from storming the Palais-Bourbon where the Chamber of Deputies was in session. For several hours there was a distinct possibility that the rioters might seize the deputies and overthrow the Republic. Although this danger was narrowly averted, the disturbance continued far into the night. By the next morning, eighteen were dead and large areas of Paris were extensively damaged.

The violence upset Daladier considerably. At first, supported by several votes of confidence from the Chamber before it hastily adjourned and fled the Palais-Bourbon, Daladier maintained that he would stay in office and protect the security of the state. The next morning, however, he received a stream of leading political figures all of whom except Léon Blum urged him to resign to forestall further violence. Faced with the possibility of renewed rioting and with the realization that his government had no support, Daladier gave in and announced his resignation.

Some historians have maintained that Daladier quit out of weakness or fear.¹⁵ He certainly was afraid that his remaining in office would lead to greater violence and the necessity of declaring martial law to maintain order, but is it weakness to concede an untenable position? After the Second World War, Daladier told the commission investigating events in France leading up to the conflict that remaining at his post in 1934 would probably have brought more violence and more deaths. "Following many invitations, in the interest of the country, in the interest of re-establishing calmness of spirit, I rendered my resignation."¹⁶ Considering also the lack

of political support for his government, Daladier had little choice but to resign. His reputation as a strong man was tarnished, and he suffered political eclipse for more than a year, but the riots ended and order was reestablished. In retrospect, it can be said that Daladier might have been able to resolve the situation and continue in office, although this theory is by no means certain. The emphasis in this study, however, is on the fact that Daladier resigned, not out of weakness, but from the honest and logical conviction that leaving office was the best thing he could do for France. The fact that there were no other "strong men" to take Daladier's place and resolve the crisis rather than merely letting it pass was certainly damaging to France and to the Radical party, but this was not the fault of Daladier.

The French governments of 1934 and 1935 which followed that of Daladier were essentially conservative and their deflationary fiscal policies greatly aggravated France's poor economic situation. By mid-1935, Daladier realized that a drastic change was necessary, and he emerged as the leading politician who brought the Radical party into Léon Blum's Popular Front. In April, 1936, the French people expressed their discontent by giving a substantial electoral victory to the Popular Front combination of Radicals, Socialists and Communists. Daladier once more returned to the Ministry of War to continue his reforms in accordance with the doctrine of defense.

It was under the Blum government that Daladier made his greatest contributions to the defense of France.¹⁷ Following the remilitarization of the Rhineland by an audacious Adolf Hitler in

March, 1936, Daladier asked General Maurice Gamelin, Chief of the French General Staff, for a comprehensive plan of defensive military reorganization of several years' scope. The result, in September of 1936, was a four-year plan calling for the expenditure of fourteen million francs for rearmament. Daladier saw the program initiated and insured that the Chamber never denied the army the necessary funds. Furthermore, in June, 1936, Daladier established the legal conditions for requisitioning defense plants and two months later obtained a law authorizing nationalization of the manufacture of war materials. By 1937, Daladier was recognized as a stalwart defender of the army. Thus while the Popular Front coalition gradually degenerated into the Unpopular Front, Daladier maintained public acclaim as the strong man of French defense.

Part of the reason for Daladier's popularity was his espousal of the doctrine of defense, then in vogue in France. On February 2, 1937, Daladier spoke to the Chamber of Deputies in opposition to the concept of the "armée de métier," or professional, specialized army, then under consideration.¹⁸ It had been proposed that specialized offensive forces, such as a tank corps, be added to the regular French Army. Daladier opposed this reform for two reasons. First, the specialized forces would be difficult to create because they would require nearly doubling the size of the standing army and, by their elite character would destroy the unity of the army. But more importantly, Daladier argued, specialized forces were incompatible with the doctrine of defense. Such forces might achieve some local success in actual combat, but would eventually be decimated in conformity with the great law of warfare that

offensives can only be undertaken after the accumulation of great quantities of men and material. When these specialized forces were destroyed, he asked, what then would be the fate of the country?

Daladier warned against placing faith in specialized units and, as an example, pointed to the Fascist attack on Madrid, where entrenched firepower had repelled a tank attack and had sustained air strikes without weakening. Entrenched firepower was the most efficient way to wage war. Rather than specialized forces, Daladier greatly favored construction of a defensive umbrella which, in case of war, would protect the country and permit the mobilization of forces sheltered from enemy attack by land, air or sea. He went so far as to propose extension of the Maginot Line to cover the entire French frontier from Dunkerque to Switzerland. The fortifications then could not be by-passed and would provide a much more durable protection for France than specialized offensive forces could ever assure. Such was the doctrine of defense as elucidated by Daladier and applauded by the Chamber. Its basic assumptions were that entrenched fortifications with sufficient firepower were impregnable and that any offensive resulted in considerable loss of men and materials. May of 1940 would prove how mistaken Daladier was on this point, but in 1937, his opinions, formed as a result of his experiences in the Great War, were in accord not only with the thinking of the French General Staff but also with the vast majority of public sentiment.

The doctrine of defense, in which Daladier sincerely believed, and the Popular Front, about which he had reservations, were Daladier's springboards to a political comeback. By 1937, however,

he recognized a swing to the right in French public opinion and began to drift a bit to the right himself. Whether this shift in politics, as well as those earlier in his career, was the result of sincere changes in Daladier's own thinking or of a desire to reflect the popular majority is not known, but, considering his reputation for honesty and sincerity, it would seem that he was not, to any great extent, guilty of the crass political motivation of seeking popular acclaim. In any event, as public esteem of the Popular Front declined, Daladier's popularity grew.¹⁹

The Popular Front had been instituted to cope with France's severe social problems, but it foundered on economic and foreign policy. The governments of Léon Blum and Camille Chautemps failed to solve French economic problems and divided France deeply over the Spanish Civil War. The deathblow to the Popular Front, however, was the annexation of Austria by the Third Reich.

Following Adolf Hitler's meeting with Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg on February 12, 1938, and Schuschnigg's March 8 decision to hold a plebiscite on the question of Austrian independence, most observers realized that German-Austrian relations had reached the crisis point. On March 10, Chautemps, as was his habit in times of crisis, resigned as Premier. The next day Schuschnigg was replaced by the Austrian Nazi Arthur Seyss-Inquart, who was promptly told by Germany to invite the German army into Austria to help maintain order. On March 13, Austria was formally annexed into the German Reich, and the Anschluss, forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles, was completed.

In Paris, there was no government to deal with the situation and, consequently, nothing was done. Léon Blum hastily formed a government but deemed it too late to act. Daladier, his title now changed to Minister of National Defense, had earlier declared that nothing effective could be done to save Austria, although if Czechoslovakia, with whom France had treaty obligations, were attacked by Germany, he would immediately order French mobilization.²⁰ Hitler was therefore permitted to continue his defiance of the Western powers without opposition.

The impact of the Anschluss on French politics was tremendous. French governments of the 1930's had been primarily concerned with internal problems, but now the focus of attention began to shift to foreign affairs. Blum's government lasted less than a month, falling on April 8, amid strikes which were crippling French aircraft production and damaging the rearmament effort. With the international situation deteriorating, strikes threatening to spread and the franc declining on the international market, France desperately needed a man of great talent and determination to take command of the country. Consequently, Edouard Daladier was called upon to form his third government and received unprecedented votes of confidence from both the Chamber and the Senate.²¹

Daladier, in terms of defense and foreign policy, was, above all else, a man of his times. The Great War had affected him much the same as it had affected most Frenchmen. He abhorred warfare and was determined that France should never again undergo such anguish if it could reasonably be avoided. He believed that the offensive strategy which had been used two decades earlier was a terrible

mistake and that French security lie in a combination of the doctrine of defense, which demanded a solid defensive covering, and the principle of collective security, by which several countries would unite to restrain the aggression of another. These two ideas, in fact, were the main currents of French foreign policy during the inter-war years. Daladier differed from most French politicians of his time in his reputation as a strong, silent man and in his sincerity and honesty among the corruption and scandals of the Third Republic. Such was the man to whom the fate of France was entrusted in 1938.

FOOTNOTES

¹Edouard Daladier, In Defense of France (New York, 1939), p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 17.

³Peter J. Larmour, The French Radical Party in the 1930's (Stanford, California, 1964), p. 7.

⁴Ibid., p. 18.

⁵Gay, p. 4.

⁶Daladier, p. 28.

⁷Gay, p. 10.

⁸Larmour, pp. 128-130.

⁹Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁰A literal translation of Daladier's title would be President of the Council of Ministers, an office which corresponds to that of the British Prime Minister. The title is commonly rendered in English as either Prime Minister or Premier. I have chosen to use the latter to avoid confusion with the British office.

¹¹Larmour, p. 130.

¹²William L. Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic (New York, 1969), p. 208, footnote.

¹³Larmour, p. 142.

¹⁴Gay, p. 14 and Larmour, p. 142.

¹⁵See, for example, Larmour, p. 144 and Shirer, p. 222.

¹⁶Cited in Gay, p. 16.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁸France, Chambre des Députés, Journal Officiel, Débats parlementaires, 1937, pp. 289-293.

¹⁹Gay, p. 17.

²⁰FRUS, p. 29.

²¹Shirer, p. 337.

CHAPTER III

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SUDETEN CRISIS

The advent of Daladier's third government was well received both in France and abroad. The Times of London, for example, commented favorably on the new Premier's reduction of the cabinet from over thirty members to nineteen for greater efficiency and noted that "M. Daladier has acted with the celerity and firmness which the occasion demanded."¹ In evaluating the new French cabinet, The Times observed that:

The Government's main strength, however, is the personality of the Prime Minister, who as Minister of Defense... has gained during the past two years a reputation both for ability and for firmness of character.²

Daladier quickly justified his reputation as a strong man by ending the strikes which threatened the French rearmament effort and obtaining parliamentary permission to rule by decree in financial matters.

Among Daladier's most crucial decisions in the formation of his new government concerned the question of who should be the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The previous occupant of that office had been Joseph Paul-Boncour, a prominent member of the left wing of the Radical party who favored taking a strong stand against German expansion and had tried unsuccessfully to get British support for such measures. Daladier, however, considered several other people for the Foreign Office, including Georges Bonnet, a right-wing

Radical who was known to be highly intelligent and very ambitious. Bonnet favored strong ties with Britain and imitated her policy of restraint and conciliation toward Hitler's Germany.

On the morning of April 10, Daladier interviewed Paul-Boncour on the question of French foreign policy and listened to him outline his ideas about support for East European countries and resistance to the use of force by Germany. In the middle of the conversation, Daladier received a telephone call, which Paul-Boncour suspected was planned in advance,³ informing him that the Chamber was upset with Paul-Boncour's foreign policy and that his appointment to the Foreign Ministry might endanger the government. Nevertheless, Paul-Boncour reports, Daladier listened to his arguments and was impressed. When the new Premier hesitated to make a decision, Paul-Boncour told him to telephone later and went home to lunch. Daladier soon called and told him:

I have thought it over: the policy which you expounded to me is very good, very worthy of France, but I do not believe that we have the means to carry it out. I am going to take Georges Bonnet.⁴

The decision was a fateful one for Daladier and a difficult one for historians to understand in view of Daladier's subsequent policies which were more in accord with Paul-Boncour's ideas than with Bonnet's.

There are several possible explanations of Daladier's decision to drop Paul-Boncour. Parliamentary opposition might have been a factor, but the telephone call which Paul-Boncour mentions seems to have been more of an excuse than a basic reason. On the other hand, the British let Daladier know that they would not be pleased

with the retention of Paul-Boncour, and the decision may well have been aimed at placating the country on whose foreign policy France was so dependent at that time. Furthermore, Bonnet had just returned from a tour of duty as French Ambassador to the United States, and Daladier probably assumed that his appointment would be favorably received in America. Daladier may also have thought that the choice of Bonnet would be taken in Berlin as a sign that he wished to seek peace through conciliation with Germany, an attitude which he expressed several times in public speeches during the summer of 1938.

In spite of these considerations, Daladier's own statement to Paul-Boncour should not be discounted. The new Premier was impressed with Paul-Boncour's arguments and very likely agreed with his conclusion that German aggression in the East should be resisted. Indeed, this was the approach that the Premier took in talks with the British at the end of April. But it should be noted that, if Daladier's statement was an accurate reflection of his views, and there seems to be no reason to doubt it, then Daladier himself, as Minister of National Defense since 1936, must share a large portion of the blame for the fact that France was not in a position to carry out the foreign policy which he favored. For it was largely the development of a purely defensive army which prevented France from taking effective, aggressive action in response to German expansion in Eastern Europe. Of course, Daladier may have been referring to other factors weakening France over which he had less control, such as internal disunity or the lack of cooperation from other East European countries, but, considering his subsequent

concern for the French military position, the fact that Daladier must share part of the blame for the Munich Agreement is clearly established. Bonnet's appointment indicated that Daladier intended to take a relatively "soft" line toward Germany. Although the Premier and his Foreign Minister subsequently clashed over foreign policy, Daladier, for whatever reason, refused to replace him.

The choice of Bonnet as Foreign Minister was especially significant with regard to French policy toward Czechoslovakia. The peace settlement following the First World War had created Czechoslovakia out of remnants of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, and since that time the Czechoslovaks had been among France's staunchest allies in the cordon sanitaire designed to restrain German expansion. Besides being the only country in Eastern Europe to preserve a democratic government since 1919, Czechoslovakia occupied a very strategic position in the heart of Central Europe and possessed the great Škoda industrial works. In addition, the Czechoslovaks had constructed a solid wall of fortifications facing Germany and mustered a tough and determined army. Czechoslovakia could therefore be of great help to France in the event of a conflict with Germany, both as a base from which to attack Germany in the east and as a substantial military threat in her own right. French statesmen recognized the importance of Czechoslovakia in the paranoid post-war years, and the relationship of the two countries was cemented by the Franco-Czechoslovak Treaty of Mutual Assistance of 1925. The treaty provided for immediate assistance from either country if the other were the subject of unprovoked German attack and was generally interpreted in France to mean that, if Germany

attacked Czechoslovakia, France was required to respond with an attack on Germany which would draw enough German troops from the eastern front to enable the Czechs to successfully defend themselves.

Daladier recognized the importance of Czechoslovakia to French security, but was also aware of the country's problems. Foremost was the minority problem which plagued all of Eastern Europe. Of the 14.7 million people in Czechoslovakia, there were 6.8 million Czechs, 2.0 million Slovaks, 3.2 million Germans, and several other minorities in lesser numbers.⁵ The Czechoslovak government generally treated its minorities well and had avoided the serious ethnic disputes which disturbed other Eastern European countries. This harmonious situation ended when Adolf Hitler assumed power in Germany in 1933. Espousing the Aryan Myth and dedicating himself to bringing all German-speaking people into the Reich, Hitler instigated Nazi agitation in the predominantly German Sudeten area of Czechoslovakia. By early 1938, this agitation had reached a fever pitch and demands were being made for Sudeten autonomy.

Hitler's interest in the Sudetenland, however, was not entirely racial. The area was composed partially of a series of mountains which formed a natural frontier with Germany and an effective barrier to the German Army. Furthermore, most of the Czechoslovak fortification system lay within the Sudetenland. Hitler knew that if he could control the Sudetenland, the rest of Czechoslovakia, the heartland of Central Europe, would be his for the taking.

The annexation of Austria gave Germany an excellent strategic position vis-à-vis Czechoslovakia. The latter country was now

surrounded on three sides by Germany, and a potential invasion route was opened through the relatively unfortified Danube plain. The weakening of the Czechoslovak position caused great consternation in Paris. Immediately upon taking over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paul-Boncour asked the British government for a public declaration that "if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia and France went to latter's assistance, Great Britain would stand by France."⁶ Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary, refused the request and responded only with the evasive statement that the British obligation to Czechoslovakia was that of one member of the League of Nations to another.⁷

This exchange of notes aptly illustrates the course and conflict of Anglo-French diplomacy in the 1930's and particularly during 1938. The French were vitally concerned with restraining German power and expansion, because any growth of Germany was regarded as a threat to France. But the French would not act without assured British support.⁸ The British, on the other hand, were extremely reluctant to become involved in Continental affairs and tended to believe that Germany deserved some degree of revision of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Therefore, they took a conciliatory stance toward Germany and refused to give France the diplomatic support she was seeking. The French, insisting with some reason that they themselves could not establish a policy of collective security, found their hands tied and reluctantly followed in the footsteps of British Continental policy throughout the second half of the 1930's.

Edouard Daladier firmly believed that British support was essential if any action was to be taken to restrain German aggression. Thus, after consolidating his position in Paris, he agreed to meet with British leaders in London on April 28, in an attempt to persuade them that German aggression must be resisted. To determine beforehand France's exact bargaining position, Daladier first asked his Chief of Staff, General Gamelin, what military action France could take against Germany to help Czechoslovakia. Gamelin's reply was neither informative nor encouraging. He said that after complete mobilization, which Daladier knew would require at least a week, the French could initiate offensive operations by land and air, the effectiveness of which would depend on the Italian reaction and the extent of aid supplied to Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia and Great Britain.⁹ Realizing that Poland and Romania not only would not help Czechoslovakia, but also would not permit Soviet troops to pass through their territory to reach Czechoslovakia, Daladier could not have been heartened by this equivocal response.

With Gamelin's note in hand, Daladier flew to London on the evening of April 27 to meet with Chamberlain and his Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax. Chamberlain was a sincere public servant and was strongly dedicated to peace in Europe. When accepting his first national office in 1916, at the age of 47, he wrote, "It is an appalling responsibility. If it was only my own career that was at stake I wouldn't care a rap, but the outcome of the war may depend on what I do."¹⁰ Thus, though Chamberlain was no stranger to wartime leadership, he was utterly dedicated to avoiding that task

again. Knowledge of the weighty consequence of his acts left its mark on Chamberlain. A photograph taken in March, 1938, shows a surprisingly strong face for a man of 69--an austere countenance with a broad forehead, square jaw, bushy eyebrows and mustache, but a face softened by drooping eyes that reflected the sorrow and sadness born of responsibility. Chamberlain's attitude toward Czechoslovakia was revealed in a letter to his sister on March 20, 1938:

You have only to look at the map to see that nothing that France or we could do could possibly save Czechoslovakia from being overrun by the Germans, if they wanted to do it... I have therefore abandoned any idea of giving guarantee to Czechoslovakia or to the French in connection with her obligations to that country.¹¹

This statement flatly contradicted French policy, and, in April, Daladier and Bonnet, who accompanied him to London, were not able to sway Chamberlain from his policy of minimal involvement.

The talks opened on April 28, with a discussion of proposed Anglo-French air staff conversations.¹² Halifax quickly showed that he would not deviate from his Prime Minister's policy by stating that the proposed conversations "should be clearly understood on both sides not to give rise in respect of either Government to any political undertaking nor to any obligation regarding the organization of national defense."¹³ The contacts were to assume that only Germany was the aggressor and would not encompass other powers either as potential enemies or allies. Halifax also insisted that "the first and main effort of each of us must be directed to home defense," which, to the British leaders, included overseas possessions and the protection of trade routes.¹⁴

Halifax not only stressed minimal international involvement with a maximum of defense, but also clearly regarded France as Britain's first line of defense. He proposed that air staff talks be directed both at coordinating the two air forces and at planning the movement to France on the outbreak of war an advanced British air contingent. Although the British appeared generous with their air force, they were much more careful with their army. Halifax commented that, concerning land forces, the best Great Britain could do would be to send two divisions, possibly not fully equipped, to France within fourteen days of the outbreak of war.

After a recess for lunch, during which the French considered the British proposals, Daladier responded that the proposed air talks were perfectly satisfactory, but added that similar meetings between army and navy staffs were indispensable. Furthermore, while he appreciated the two British divisions, Daladier commented that their effectiveness would be greatly enhanced if they were motorized. Chamberlin, however, brought up limitations of manpower and the difficulty of obtaining munitions from the United States as factors which limited the potential of equipping a land army. He also cautioned that the possibility of sending two divisions to France was not a commitment and that, therefore, army talks would be hypothetical and not very useful. Chamberlain maintained that British military participation in a war on the Continent would not be sufficient to justify army or navy staff talks on the same scale as air conversations. Daladier's efforts to induce the British to be more cooperative only caused the Prime Minister to insist more firmly that he could not undertake any real commitment to aid the

French. The day closed with substantial agreement only on air talks. Naval talks were agreed to in principle, but no meetings were actually scheduled, and army talks were limited to the installation of two British divisions in France with the understanding that no firm commitment was involved.

If the first day's consultations were disappointing to the French, the second day, concerning Czechoslovakia, only served to further accentuate Anglo-French differences. Halifax pointed out that the British government was very concerned about Czechoslovakia because any serious incident in the Sudetenland could have grave consequences. Although he acknowledged that Great Britain might be drawn into war, a statement which must have made his Prime Minister wince, Halifax placed strong emphasis on the weakness of the Czech military position. The Polish attitude toward Czechoslovakia was uncertain and it was doubtful if the Soviet Union would help because of internal unrest and the execution of many of the Soviet Army High Command. Therefore, if Germany decided on hostile action, it would be impossible to prevent her from achieving immediate success. Halifax therefore proposed that the French and British governments jointly urge Eduard Beneš, the Czechoslovak president, to settle the country's minority problems as quickly as possible, preferably by direct negotiations with the Sudeten German leader, Konrad Henlein. The Foreign Secretary posited a two-pronged diplomatic attack. First, the German government should not be encouraged to think that they could impose a settlement by force, and, second, it should be made clear to the Czechoslovak government that they should seize this opportunity to make a supreme effort to

settle the Sudeten question. Halifax further suggested that the settlement proposals be evaluated, not only by their intrinsic value, but also by their "settlement value," which is to say their effectiveness in quieting the Sudeten Germans.¹⁵ In other words, the British were making it quite clear that their primary consideration was not justice to any of the parties involved, but rather the elimination of a point of tension in European diplomacy which they feared would lead to a war in which they might become involved.

Daladier agreed that joint diplomatic efforts should be made, but placed considerably different emphasis on the direction of those efforts. The French Premier pointed out that Czechoslovakia had made more concessions to minorities than any other European country. It was apparent from Herr Henlein's latest speech that his object was not merely further concessions, but the destruction of the Czechoslovak state. If the Czechs refused the concessions proposed by the French and British governments, Daladier declared that the Western powers "should be prepared to support the Czechoslovak Government and prevent the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia."¹⁶ Daladier felt that pressuring only the Czechs was inappropriate, since, "The ambitions of Napoleon were far inferior to the present aims of the German Reich."¹⁷ The French Premier feared that after Czechoslovakia would come the conquest of Romania. With that country's wheat and oilfields at his disposal, Hitler would then turn against the West. Daladier agreed that every effort should be made to avoid war, but he was convinced this could only be done the determination of Great Britain and France jointly to respect the liberties and rights of independent peoples. Only if the

British and French were firm would Yugoslavia, Romania, and Poland change their attitude and actively support peace. "If, however, we were once again to capitulate when faced by another threat, we should then have prepared the way for the very war we wished to avoid."¹⁸ Daladier disagreed with Halifax's assertion that the Czechs could not be effectively supported on the basis that the Czechoslovak defences were strong and that firm Anglo-French action could bring support from other East European nations. If Great Britain and France pressured Czechoslovakia and at the same time declared that they would not permit the destruction of the Czechoslovak state, Daladier felt that peace could be saved.

Chamberlain, however, was unmoved by Daladier's reasoning. He contended that Daladier's suggestion of pressure on Germany "was what the Americans in their card games called bluff."¹⁹ In view of the military situation, he did not think that pressure on Germany would be successful. Chamberlain saw no way to save Czechoslovakia and hoped only to avoid war. Daladier continued to argue that:

if there were not signs of a determined policy and a common agreement between His Majesty's Government and the French Government, we should then have decided the fate of Europe, and he could only regard the future with the greatest pessimism.²⁰

Unfortunately, the French Premier could not persuade the British to undertake any commitment to preserve Czechoslovakia.

By the end of the day's conversations, the two governments had agreed only to a limited diplomatic effort. They would make a simultaneous *démarche* in Prague to ask for maximum concessions to the Sudetens. The British government would report this diplomatic

intervention to the Germans and ask for their position, observing that British efforts in Prague obviated the need for German action. If a peaceful solution could not be reached by this means, His Majesty's Government would point out to Germany that if she resorted to force, France would be compelled to intervene and the British government could not guarantee that they would not do the same. Although this statement was not the support Daladier had envisaged, he had at least provoked the British into taking action to assist in the settlement of the Sudeten problem.

Although Parisian newspapers generally rejoiced that Great Britain had compromised, Daladier took a more sanguine view of the talks.²¹ "The only advance that I could note after that long day of talks," he later observed, "was that England no longer held aloof from Czechoslovakia, and that she, together with ourselves, accepted joint action, though solely on a diplomatic level."²² The April conversations illustrate a clear pattern in Anglo-French relations of French leaders urging support for a policy of firmness while the British tried to avoid commitment on the Continent. Both were trying to avoid war but were using very different tactics to achieve that end. Hindsight shows us that the French approach was more likely to meet with success than the British, but the tragedy of the situation is that the French could not and would not pursue a policy of firmness toward Germany without assured British support.

Hindsight also gives us the impression that Daladier was much more aware of the subtleties of the international situation than Chamberlain or Halifax. While this may indeed have been so, the

situation was not necessarily as clearcut then as it appears now. Daladier was actually torn between the conflicting policies advocated by various members of his cabinet. Sir William Strang, a member of the British Foreign Office who had a rather poor opinion of French leadership, noted just before the April conversations that:

Unlike the British Government, the French Government were deeply divided, with Georges Mandel and his friends all for resistance and Georges Bonnet and his like for surrender, and with Edouard Daladier ... torn between the two, leaning towards a robust policy, but lacking the resolution to hold to it.²³

Furthermore, a week after the talks, Daladier indicated that he had doubts about some of the very arguments he had used to dispute Halifax. When asked by William Bullitt, who was his close friend as well as Ambassador from the United States, if France would go to war with Germany if the latter attacked Czechoslovakia, Daladier replied, "With what?"²⁴ After noting that "the contentions in Europe today depend on force and force alone," Daladier observed that French aircraft production, which had doubled in the past month from forty-two to eighty-four planes per month, was totally inadequate to cope with Germany's estimated production of five hundred planes per month. In view of the disparity between the French and German air forces, the French Premier judged that it would be impossible for France to go to war to protect Czechoslovakia.

Daladier continued that he had considered the position of Czechoslovakia hopeless since the annexation of Austria by Germany. The Anschluss meant that Germany could force whatever concessions it wanted out of the Czechoslovaks through economic pressure alone; military action was not necessary.²⁵ Bullitt's evaluation of the

situation indicated that British and French action would be based on the assumption that the dissolution of Czechoslovakia was inevitable and the best that could be hoped for was that it would take place without bloodshed and in such a way as to save the face of France and of England.²⁶ Thus, while Daladier's public statements continued to express a policy of firmness, it is apparent that he had private doubts about the ability of France to effectively aid Czechoslovakia.

Daladier's undercurrent of doubt and preoccupation with internal problems led to inaction, and British initiative was asserted in the Sudeten problem. The joint *démarche* agreed to by Daladier and Chamberlain in April was presented to the Czechoslovak government on May 7, and the British plan was clearly followed: Czechoslovakia was pressured for concessions while little was done in Berlin after the Germans responded that the problem was a matter between Herr Henlein and Prague.²⁷ However, in less than two weeks, German troop movements on the Czech border caused an international crisis which caused the British to intensify their efforts to negotiate a settlement and caused Daladier to lean even more strongly toward a policy of resistance.

On May 18, 1938, Czech intelligence reported concentrations of German troops on the Bohemian border. Fearing a German attempt to influence the forthcoming municipal elections, Beneš ordered a partial mobilization to display Czech resistance to the Nazi regime. Henlein promptly broke off negotiations with the Czechoslovak government, and it appeared that Germany was about to intervene militarily. The tense situation produced a flurry of diplomatic

activity in London and Paris. While Hitler denied that any troop concentrations were taking place, British and French diplomats tried to exert pressure in Prague and Berlin to ease the crisis. First, Halifax urged the Germans to influence Henlein to resume negotiations, but met only stubborn refusal in Berlin. Bonnet, meanwhile, was endeavoring both to restrain the Czechs from further provocation of Germany and to persuade the British to deliver to Germany the warning they had promised on April 29. In the midst of the crisis, the French Foreign Minister was publicly following Daladier's policy of firmness toward Germany and support of France's treaty obligations with Czechoslovakia. On May 21 he told reporters, "If Germany crosses the Czech frontier that will automatically start war."²⁸

The British, meanwhile, upheld their promise to the French. On May 22, Halifax sent a personal message to the German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, warning that if resort were made to forcible measures, Germany could not count on Great Britain staying out of the ensuing conflict.²⁹ Hitler was enraged by Czechoslovak resistance and by Anglo-French firmness, but he also was not yet ready to wage war for Czechoslovakia. The day after Halifax's message reached Berlin, the Chancellor issued a statement insisting that the Reich had no aggressive intentions toward the Czechs and that the rumors of troop concentrations were without foundation. The Czechs responded, under French prodding, by withdrawing their troops from the frontier, and the crisis quickly passed. Meanwhile, Henlein and the Sudeten German Party swept all the local elections

in the Sudetenland, increasing their bargaining power in Prague and their prestige abroad.

While most Frenchmen breathed a sigh of relief that British firmness with Germany had avoided war, the situation under the surface was not quite so encouraging to Daladier. In spite of the British leaders' relatively resolute stand toward Germany during the crisis, they had taken a very different position toward France. Following Halifax's message to Ribbentrop, the British government reported this step to the French and added that they would aid France if she were subjected to an unprovoked German attack. But, on the other hand, Halifax stressed that the warning to Germany did not mean that Great Britain would join France in an attack on Germany in support of Czechoslovakia.³⁰ In other words, unless Germany actually attacked France without provocation, which Hitler had no intention of doing at that time, Great Britain would stay out of any Continental conflict. To the French, whose treaty obligations required them to join the conflict if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia, the British statement was a clear warning that Britain did not intend to become militarily involved in the Sudeten situation and that the French should not count on such aid.

To make matters worse, the French position was not a great deal more secure than the British, for Bonnet, in spite of his performance during the crisis, was also very reluctant to support Czechoslovakia. The French Foreign Minister responded to the British warning by assuring the British Ambassador, Sir Eric Phipps, that France was ready to apply any necessary pressure on Czechoslovakia to avoid having to choose between war or defaulting on the

treaty, including the warning that if Czechoslovakia were not reasonable, France would consider herself released from the treaty.³¹ Since the execution of French foreign policy was normally handled by the Foreign Office and Bonnet, the French and British appeasers were able to mutually reinforce each other and convince themselves that Czechoslovakia should be abandoned. When Daladier, occasionally tried to introduce a note of firmness into French foreign policy, he found that he was fighting not only his own doubts and the British Foreign Office, but his own Minister of Foreign Affairs as well. While Bonnet and the British appeared to learn nothing from the success of British resistance in the May Crisis, Daladier must have been encouraged by it, since his actions and statements of the succeeding months show an ever increasing determination to aid and defend Czechoslovakia. The most significant reaction to the May Crisis, however, occurred in Germany. On May 30, Adolf Hitler, still fuming over Czech resistance, signed the directive for "Operation Green," the code name for the invasion of Czechoslovakia, in which he emphatically declared, "It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future."³² The attack was scheduled to take place not later than October 1.

Hitler's resolve, of course, was not known in Paris or London, and the summer months of 1938 exemplified a post-crisis cautious relaxation of international tempers. The British government constantly pressured the Czechoslovaks to reach a prompt settlement with the Sudetens and urged the French to exert similar pressure. While the French also recommended a speedy settlement, they were less overbearing than the British and occasionally found it

necessary to caution His Majesty's Government that Czechoslovakia should not be pushed too far.³³

Also unknown to the Western governments was the fact that Henlein had strict orders from Hitler to gradually increase his demands so that no settlement could be reached with the Czechoslovak government.³⁴ Daladier, familiar with Hitler's methods, may have suspected this arrangement, for on June 23 he told Bullitt that he was not confident in the apparent improvement in the European situation. He expected Czechoslovakia to make a reasonable offer to the Sudetens but doubted that either the Sudetens or the Germans would accept. If the matter came to war, Daladier held that "France could not preserve her honor if she should run away from war."³⁵ Whether England liked it or not, France would not hesitate to go to war to defend Czechoslovakia, provided Czech concessions were considered reasonable. These were brave words from a man who had seen the carnage of Verdun, and they were no doubt uttered as much for diplomatic effect as out of conviction. Daladier did not want war, but neither was he willing to tarnish the honor of France. If a way could be found to honorably settle the Sudeten dispute without recourse to war, he was eager to find it.

The British were not so concerned about French honor and were becoming very impatient with the lack of progress in Prague. In mid-July Chamberlain proposed sending an independent mediator to Czechoslovakia to help settle the dispute. To fill this post, the Prime Minister proposed Lord Runciman, a nearly seventy-year-old British businessman of fundamentally conservative nature who tended to agree with the British government that the Czechs were

deliberately stalling the negotiations. Daladier and Bonnet quickly agreed, but President Beneš was quite upset by the British proposal until he was finally convinced that Runciman's mission was not to impose a British settlement on the Czechs.

The Czechoslovak government formally accepted the British offer of a mediator on July 23, and Lord Runciman arrived in Prague on August 3. Although his mission was favorably commented on by the press, it quickly became the farce that Beneš must have feared. Runciman seldom associated with the Czechs but was lavishly entertained by the Sudeten leaders, who took advantage of his taste for hunting, fishing, golf, and social gatherings. Wealthy Sudeten Nazis saw to it that this supposedly independent mediator spent more time being indoctrinated by their side than in actual mediation. The object of this indoctrination was clearly explained to the Sudeten negotiating team by one of their leaders:

It is the duty of the Sudeten German Party to convince His Lordship (Runciman) that the nationality problem in Czechoslovakia cannot be solved within the State, and that the Czechs are in no way prepared to make concessions of a kind that could lead to a real pacification of the State. His Lordship must take away with him the impression that the situation in this state is so confused and difficult that it cannot be cleared up by negotiation or diplomatic action, that the blame for this lies exclusively with the Czechs, and thus that the Czechs are the real disturbers of peace in Europe.³⁶

Under such intense Sudeten tutelage, Runciman's decision was easily predictable. The Sudeten leaders, however, managed to put off any definitive settlement until Nazi agitation made the situation so acute that German annexation of the Sudetenland appeared to be the only possible means of avoiding further disturbances.

It is perhaps convenient to pause here to consider the various factors which weighed on Daladier's mind as the month of Munich drew near and led him to consider cession of the Sudetenland to Germany. Foremost among his concerns was the inadequacy of French military capabilities in a struggle with Germany. The First World War had destroyed almost an entire generation of French youth. That factor combined with a low birth-rate to put France at a severe population disadvantage vis-à-vis Germany. The French male population between the ages of twenty and thirty-four, the arms-carrying years, was less than half that of Germany--roughly four million to nine million--meaning that Germany could put considerably more soldiers in the field than France.³⁷

Furthermore, Daladier knew that the French army lacked the offensive capacity to adequately fulfill its treaty obligations by attacking Germany if that country invaded Czechoslovakia. Not only was the army totally geared to defense, but Daladier was also aware that work on the Siegfried Line, Germany's answer to the Maginot Line, was progressing at full speed. Since Daladier's own military theories told him that entrenched fortifications were impregnable, he believed that an assault on the German line would have little effect other than to decimate the French army. Daladier told Bullitt on September 8 that a French attack on Germany would be very costly and would not get very far, but nevertheless maintained that France was bound by interests of honor and public decency to make such an attack if Germany threatened Czechoslovakia.³⁸

Daladier's fears about the weakness of French air power have already been commented upon. These fears, however, were greatly intensified at the end of August when General Joseph Vuillemin, Commander in Chief of the French Air Force, visited Germany and was treated to an impressive display of power by the German Luftwaffe. Before returning to Paris, Vuillemin told the French Ambassador in Berlin, André François-Poncet, that in case of war, French planes would disappear from the skies within two weeks.³⁹ The French general repeated his observation to Daladier, who could only encourage work to increase French aircraft production and intensify his efforts to purchase planes from the United States. While Vuillemin's statement, as well as many of Daladier's other fears about French military weakness, proved to be exaggerated, there can be no doubt that these concerns were a major factor in Daladier's eventual decision not to go to war over Czechoslovakia.

Unable to face Germany alone, France could only turn to her friends for aid. But her closest and most powerful ally, Great Britain, had already bluntly informed France that she would not help unless France were flagrantly attacked by Germany. The Soviet Union had a mutual assistance treaty with Czechoslovakia similar to that of France, but there were problems with its implementation. Soviet aid to Czechoslovakia was conditional upon prior French response. Russia would march only after France did, and the Soviets seemed to think that France would not march. Furthermore, since the Soviet Union did not border on Czechoslovakia, Russian aid could be supplied only by passing through Poland or Romania. These countries were more afraid of the Soviet colossus than they were

of Germany and refused even to let the Soviet Air Force, the largest in Europe, fly over their territory to reach Czechoslovakia. The Czechs could not count on help from other East European nations, as their partners in the Little Entente, Romania and Yugoslavia, appeared intent on staying out of the conflict. Czechoslovakia's other neighbors, Poland and Hungary, far from wanting to aid the Czechs, were actually anxious to help themselves to slices of Czechoslovakian territory. The Polish attitude, serious though it was, did not completely overcome Daladier's sense of humor. When William Bullitt referred to the Polish intention to seize Slovakia and split it with Hungary, the French Premier, "with a twinkle in his eye said that he hoped to live long enough to pay Poland for her cormorant attitude in the present crisis by proposing a new partition of Poland to Czechoslovakia."⁴⁰ Had this little diplomatic joke become public, the Poles, no doubt would have found a way to be even more recalcitrant with regard to the Sudeten situation, but, as it was, their predatory posture represented a serious setback in Daladier's attempts to establish collective security in Eastern Europe and left France isolated.

A further consideration was Daladier's attitude toward Czechoslovakia. In none of his public speeches or private comments did Daladier indicate that his determination to uphold French treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia was based upon any particularly high regard for the Czech people. Indeed, he appeared sympathetic to the Sudeten cause when he told Bullitt that the Sudeten was been badly treated by the Czechs and had a genuine grievance. The Czechs had suffered under German domination for centuries and, now

that the stick was in the other hand, it was understandable that the Czechs would tend to abuse the Sudeten Germans.⁴¹ Bullitt also reported to his superiors in Washington that Daladier had expressed opposition to the peace treaties of the First World War and had pointed out the necessity of revising the Czechoslovak state twenty years earlier.⁴² The American Ambassador insisted that Daladier had not changed his mind about Czechoslovakia, although he was adamant that revision be accomplished by peaceful agreement rather than at the point of a gun. Viewed from this perspective, Daladier's determination to defend Czechoslovakia must have been difficult to maintain. The justification which he most frequently gave for holding that position was that French honor would be impugned if the country did not stand by her treaty commitments to Czechoslovakia. Since Daladier was predisposed to the revision of the Czechoslovak state, his primary concern was that changes be made in a peaceful and honorable manner. While Daladier displayed understandable reluctance to give in to German pressure, since he had read Mein Kampf and was aware of Hitler's intentions in Eastern Europe, he was also very reluctant to commit France to repeat the ordeal which she had suffered twenty years earlier.

While these thoughts were churning in Daladier's mind, events were not standing still in Central Europe. The German Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbles, was stepping up his two-pronged attack on Czechoslovakia.⁴³ The first tack consisted of accusing the Czechs of collusion with Soviet Russia, asserting that Bohemia, the part of Czechoslovakia which protruded deep into Germany, had been covered with airfields to serve as a base for Russian air strikes

against the Fatherland, thus making Czechoslovakia a permanent menace to German security. The second theme accused Prague of systematically mistreating Sudeten Germans. The German press provided daily accounts, all fabricated or wildly exaggerated, of Czech atrocities and injustices to the people of the Sudetenland. Many of the reported incidents were actually instigated by Sudeten Nazis as a part of their program to build up mistrust and hatred of the Prague government.

Goebbels' propaganda had a noticeable effect in London. As early as June 17, the British government had proposed to the French that Czechoslovakia be approached regarding the remodeling of her treaty arrangements with France and the Soviet Union, on the theory that these treaties were regarded as provocative by Germany and that this provocation was the root cause of Germany's conflict with the Czechs.⁴⁴ Overlooked by the British was the fact that the treaties under discussion were purely defensive and therefore could hardly be taken as a serious provocation in Berlin. The French government stalled as long as possible, but, finally, on August 10, Bonnet replied that neutralization of Czechoslovakia should be a last resort and that presentation of this idea at that moment would be an unnecessary escalation of concessions.⁴⁵ Thus, months before Munich, the British were urging concessions which would have drastically altered French security arrangements in the East, while the French government, led by Daladier, was resisting those concessions in hopes that a settlement more favorable to Czechoslovakia could be reached.

The situation was becoming all the more critical because by this time both the French and British were aware of Hitler's determination to use force against Czechoslovakia. When General Vuillemin was touring Germany in August, Hermann Goering, Commander of the Luftwaffe, asked him what would happen if Germany were compelled to take forcible action in Czechoslovakia.⁴⁶ The general responded that France would immediately help Czechoslovakia. Goering appeared disappointed but remarked that the treaty would not come into play if the Czech were the aggressors. If this could be engineered, then France would be in the position that, if she considered Germany the real aggressor and helped the Czechs, she could not count on aid from Great Britain. Furthermore, the French had unconfirmed information that infiltrated German Nazis were working to arouse a popular uprising among the Sudeten Germans in the hope that Germany would have an opportunity to intervene following Czech action to suppress the insurrection.⁴⁷ In addition, Foreign Minister Bonnet told William Bullitt on August 26 that recent conversations of German ministers in Romania and Yugoslavia indicated that Germany intended to use force against Czechoslovakia.⁴⁸

The British had even more concrete evidence. On August 21, a highly placed informant told the British Military Attaché in Berlin that Hitler had announced his intention to attack Czechoslovakia by the end of September.⁴⁹ British strategists, however, chose to ignore the warning, and there is no evidence that the French were ever informed of this intelligence.

The lack of Anglo-French cooperation made matters easier for Hitler. In early September, following the Chancellor's timetable,

the crisis began to come to a head. The annual German Nazi Party Congress met at Nuremberg from September 5 to September 12, and Hitler's opening remarks were extremely incendiary. Throughout the week his lieutenants tried to outdo him in threatening Czechoslovakia. All of Europe waited tensely for Hitler's closing address on the twelfth, fearing that the Fuehrer would burn all his bridges and leave no recourse but war.

Hoping to avert German mobilization or extreme statements by Hitler, leaders in Prague, Paris and London all took steps to induce Hitler to take a more moderate stand in his closing speech at the Nuremberg Sportpalast. First, Beneš decided to give in to the Sudetens. On September 5, he called in two Sudeten leaders and asked them to write out their full demands. Whatever they were, he would accept them. While the French and British were quite pleased with this decisive step toward a settlement, the Sudeten Germans were stunned. To avoid reaching an agreement, they arranged a "provocation."⁵⁰ On September 7, several Sudeten Party deputies who were looking into the arrest of eighty-three Sudeten Germans for gunrunning and spying started a quarrel with Czech police. One of the deputies was struck with a whip by a Czech officer, and the Sudeten delegation promptly broke off negotiations until the affair could be settled.

Meanwhile, in Paris, Daladier sought to restrain Hitler by a demonstration of French resistance to the use of force. On September 8, the French Premier met with the German Chargé d'Affaires and assured him that whatever course England took, the French government would order immediate mobilization and attack Germany at

once "if the foot of a German soldier should cross the Czechoslovak frontier."⁵¹ Daladier told the American Ambassador that he made these remarks to show the Germans that however much England might wobble or vacillate, there would be no hesitation on the part of France. Daladier was convinced that if Hitler were permitted to settle the Sudeten question by force, there would be no more public law in Europe.⁵²

While maintaining this strong stand, Daladier was careful not to close the door to accommodation with Germany. He also told the German Chargé that the Sudeten Germans had a genuine grievance and, if they wanted autonomy, they should have it. Furthermore, if they wanted to join Germany respecting the principle of self-determination, Daladier had no basic objection, but he could not permit Hitler to settle the matter by force. The French Premier was, in effect, paving the way for the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany. He made it known that he had no objection to Germany obtaining possession of that area, as long as it was done peacefully; but if Hitler resorted to war, France would fight.

Daladier's firm stand was reported to London by Phipps:

M. Daladier declares most positively that, if German troops cross the Czechoslovak frontier, the French will march to a man. They realize perfectly well that this will not be for les beaux yeux of the Czechs but for their own skins, as, after a given time, Germany would, with enormously increased strength, turn against France.⁵³

The British Ambassador also commented that Daladier was quite optimistic since the Siegfried Line appeared incomplete and the French internal situation was considerably improved.

While Daladier was steadfastly maintaining his stance that only resistance to German aggression could curb Hitler's ambitions, the British, as another crisis approached, again displayed a bit of determination. On September 2, the British delivered a mild, but significant, warning to Germany. The British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir Neville Henderson, who was very reluctant to make any statement which might antagonize the Germans, intimated to the Undersecretary of the German Foreign Office, Baron Ernst von Weizsaecker that if German troops should enter Czechoslovakia and France then declared war on Germany, it would be almost impossible for Great Britain to avoid fighting on the French side.⁵⁴ Although Henderson tempered the warning so as to make it almost meaningless, the British government made a somewhat less equivocal declaration on the eve of Hitler's speech at Nuremberg. On September 11, the British Foreign Office issued an authorized statement warning Berlin not to indulge in illusions about the gravity of the Sudeten situation. The statement cautioned the German government not to believe that it could attack Czechoslovakia without facing "the possibility of intervention by France and thereafter by Great Britain."⁵⁵

However, behind the facade of British resolution, the story was once very different. On September 10, Bonnet probably at the instigation of Daladier, told Phipps that if Germany attacked the Czechs, France would mobilize. The Foreign Minister put the question to Phipps point-blank, "We are going to march, will you march with us?"⁵⁶ The confidential British response of September 12

was much less encouraging to the French than their public statement of the previous day:

While His Majesty's Government would never allow the security of France to be threatened, they are unable to make precise statements of the character of their future action, or the time at which it would be taken, in circumstances that they cannot at present foresee.⁵⁷

According to Phipps, Bonnet "seemed genuinely pleased at the negative nature of your reply to this question."⁵⁸ Thus, while the British government continued its refusal to make any substantial commitment to the French, Bonnet was seeking a policy more in line with that of the British than with that of his own Premier.

In spite of this behind-the-scenes equivocation, the efforts of the Prague, Paris and London governments to restrain Hitler were evidently not without effect. For in his speech on September 12, the Fuehrer, although he bitterly attacked the Czechs and called for self-determination for the Sudeten Germans, refrained from declaring outright that Germany would take military action against the Czechs. The Western governments reacted to the speech with cautious approval. Daladier and Bonnet thought it was not so dangerous as they had expected, and the Foreign Minister felt that Hitler had left the door open to further negotiations.⁵⁹ Although the British also breathed a sigh of relief that no ultimatum had been delivered, the Sudeten Germans reacted with demonstrations, riots which resulted in several deaths, and attacks on Czech police.⁶⁰ The Czechoslovak government was forced to proclaim martial law to restore order, and Sudeten leaders responded with an ultimatum demanding that martial law be rescinded and that a plebiscite be held on the question of cession of the Sudetenland to Germany.

Fearing that Hitler would use the unrest in the Sudetenland as an excuse to launch his attack, Bonnet panicked and completely lost his nerve. The French Foreign Minister called Phipps several times on September 13 to urge that Lord Runciman take immediate action to cool tempers in Czechoslovakia. Bonnet insisted that "peace must be preserved at any price as neither France nor Great Britain were ready for war."⁶¹ No doubt, Bonnet's collapse was hastened by a report from the American Colonel Charles Lindbergh who had just returned from a tour of Germany and was horrified at the preponderance of German military strength.⁶² Lindbergh estimated that Germany had 8,000 military aircraft and a production capacity of 1,500 planes per month. Although this was an exaggeration of as much as four times, Bonnet, and Daladier for that matter, could only be impressed by the Colonel's observations. Phipps, who thoroughly agreed with Bonnet's attitude although he was not so panicky, telephoned London and told Halifax, "His Excellency [Bonnet] seems completely to have lost his nerve and to be ready for any solution to avoid war."⁶³

The British Ambassador was so concerned about Bonnet's state of mind that he sought an immediate conference with Daladier. The French Premier had not panicked but was despondent over the prospect of imminent war. The previous day he had met with his chief military advisors who told him that the Siegfried Line could not be broken at the beginning of the hostilities and that, even if Germany were committed in Czechoslovakia and had to protect her Polish flank, she would still have enough troops on the Rhine to be on a numerical par with France.⁶⁴ Under Phipps' questioning, Daladier stood by his

September 8 statement, but did so "with evident lack of enthusiasm."

Phipps concluded that:

M. Daladier of today was quite a different one to the M. Daladier of September 8, and tone and language were very different indeed. I fear the French have been bluffing, although I have continually pointed out to them that one cannot bluff Hitler.⁶⁵

Daladier was obviously worried. He went so far as to telephone Chamberlain to propose that Lord Runciman immediately announce that he would soon present a plan to resolve the Sudeten conflict and that the mediator try to bring the two parties together in his presence for more substantive discussions. If this should prove insufficient, Daladier further proposed a three-Power conference, with Germany representing the Sudetens, France representing the Czechs and Great Britain representing Lord Runciman, to obtain the pacific settlement which Hitler had advocated in his speech the previous night.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the two leaders had a bad connection, and Chamberlain apparently did not understand the substance of Daladier's comments. However, Daladier understood Chamberlain to reply "that he had come to a decision some time before, a decision he believed would be useful, and that he would tell me about it later."⁶⁷

Daladier's call to London illustrates several important points. First, it shows how dependent the French were on British foreign policy and to what degree British initiative prevailed in dealing with Germany. Daladier, rather than taking direct action himself, was asking the British mediator to do something. Second, it brings out the lack of coordination in Anglo-French diplomacy toward the Third Reich, for Chamberlain had taken a momentous step and would

not tell the French about it. Finally, it shows that Daladier, although he had not forsaken the French commitment to Czechoslovakia, was doing everything within his power to insure that the terms of the Franco-Czechoslovak Treaty would not be called into play.

Daladier, realizing that Chamberlain probably had not understood him over the telephone, quickly put his proposals into writing and sent them off to London. However, when the British Prime Minister finally received them, he did not give them serious consideration. Chamberlain had for several weeks been considering a personal meeting with Hitler to discuss the Sudeten situation, and now, with tensions mounting feverishly and upon Runciman's insistence that the announcement of a prospective settlement would do nothing to restore law and order, Chamberlain disregarded the French suggestions and sent a personal message to Adolf Hitler:

In view of the increasingly critical situation I propose to come over at once to see you with a view to trying to find a peaceful solution. I propose to come across by air and am ready to start tomorrow.⁶⁸

Without consulting his French allies, Chamberlain had taken a decisive step which put the negotiations over the Sudetenland on a new plane, one that boded ill for Czechoslovakia.

FOOTNOTES

¹The Times (London), April 11, 1938, p. 13.

²Ibid.

³Joseph Paul-Boncour, Entre Deux Guerres, Souvenirs sur la IIIe République, Vol. III; Sur les chemins de la défaite, 1935-1940 (New York, 1946), p. 100.

⁴Ibid., p. 101.

⁵Hugh Seton-Watson, Eastern Europe Between the Wars 3rd ed., rev. (New York, 1962), p. 414.

⁶DBFP, Vol. I, No. 81, p. 50.

⁷Ibid., No. 106, p. 84.

⁸For examples of French reluctance to act without British support with regard to the Spanish Civil War and the annexation of Austria by Germany see FRUS pp. 28 and 488.

⁹Noguères, p. 50.

¹⁰Feiling, p. 62.

¹¹Ibid., pp. 347-348.

¹²DBFP, Vol. I, No. 164, pp. 198-234.

¹³Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 200.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 215.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 216-217.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 217.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 220.

²⁰Ibid., p. 226.

²¹Geneviève Vallette and Jacques Bouillon, Munich, 1938 (Paris, 1964), p. 53.

²²Noguères, p. 55.

²³Ibid., p. 51.

²⁴FRUS, p. 493.

²⁵Ibid., p. 494.

²⁶Ibid., p. 495.

²⁷DBFP, Vol. I, No. 187, p. 260 and No. 188, p. 261.

²⁸Ibid., No. 261, p. 340.

²⁹Ibid., No. 264, p. 341.

³⁰Ibid., No. 271, pp. 346-347.

³¹Ibid., No. 286, p. 357.

³²United States, Department of State, Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Series D, Vol. II: Germany and Czechoslovakia, 1937-1938 (Washington, 1949), p. 358. (Hereafter cited as DGFP.)

³³DBFP, Vol. I, No. 424, pp. 498-500.

³⁴Noguères, pp. 47, 48, and 57.

³⁵FRUS, p. 526.

³⁶DGFP, p. 578.

³⁷Shirer, p. 143.

³⁸FRUS, p. 583.

³⁹André François-Poncet, The Fateful Years: Memoirs of a French Ambassador in Berlin, 1931-1938, tr. Jacques LeClerq (New York, 1949), p. 265.

⁴⁰FRUS, p. 669.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 582.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 581 and 601.

⁴³François-Poncet, p. 256.

⁴⁴DBFP, Vol. I, No. 421, pp. 496-498.

- ⁴⁵Ibid., Vol. II, No. 601, p. 72.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., No. 655, p. 124.
- ⁴⁷Ibid.
- ⁴⁸FRUS, p. 554.
- ⁴⁹DBFP, Vol. II, No. 568, p. 125.
- ⁵⁰Noguères, p. 96.
- ⁵¹FRUS, p. 581
- ⁵²Ibid.
- ⁵³DBFP, Vol. II, No. 807, p. 269.
- ⁵⁴FRUS, p. 570.
- ⁵⁵Shirer, p. 357.
- ⁵⁶DBFP, Vol. II, No. 843, note, p. 303.
- ⁵⁷Ibid., p. 303.
- ⁵⁸Ibid., note, p. 303.
- ⁵⁹FRUS, p. 591.
- ⁶⁰Noguères, p. 117.
- ⁶¹DBFP, Vol. II, No. 855, p. 310.
- ⁶²Ibid.
- ⁶³Ibid., No. 852, p. 309.
- ⁶⁴Noguères, pp. 113-114.
- ⁶⁵DBFP, Vol. II, No. 857, p. 312.
- ⁶⁶Ibid., No. 861, p. 314.
- ⁶⁷Shirer, p. 360.
- ⁶⁸DBFP, Vol. II, No. 862, p. 314.

CHAPTER IV

DAYS OF DRAMA AND TRAGEDY

September 15-30, 1938

The Chancellor of the Third Reich was delighted with Chamberlain's offer and accepted immediately. The prospect of the sixty-nine year old British Prime Minister flying to Germany not only flattered Hitler immensely but also indicated to him how far the Western Powers were willing to go to settle the Sudeten conflict. Furthermore, just before receiving Chamberlain's message, the Fuehrer received word from the German Charge in London that Chamberlain considered European war unavoidable after Hitler's September 12 speech and was therefore prepared "to examine far-reaching German proposals, including plebiscite, to take part in carrying them into effect, and to advocate them in public."¹ According to one Munich historian, the word "plebiscite" was the key to Hitler that he had been right about the willingness of the West to give way.² When the Chancellor received Chamberlain's offer, he knew that Great Britain and France would abandon Czechoslovakia.

The Fuehrer did not even bother to meet Chamberlain half way. The British Prime Minister had to fly across Germany to Hitler's mountain retreat at Berchtesgaden. When he arrived on September 15, no time was wasted admiring the magnificent Bavarian panorama.³

The Fuehrer quickly made his position clear: three million Sudeten Germans were being persecuted by the Czechs, and Hitler was determined that they would be brought into the Reich. The basis of his argument was racial unity. He wanted only Germans, no Czechs. But the Chancellor would go to any lengths to get what he wanted. He claimed that three hundred Sudetens had been killed and that the situation must be settled at once. "I do not care if there is war or not: I am determined to settle it soon, and am prepared to risk a world war rather than to allow this to drag on."⁴

At this point, the Prime Minister sensed an impasse and almost closed the discussion. But Hitler mollified his tone and suggested that a settlement by negotiation might still be possible if the British government were prepared to accept the principle of the succession of the Sudeten territory on the basis of national self-determination as the foundation of future talks. Chamberlain agreed personally, but could not act without consulting the French government and Lord Runciman. The meeting ended with Chamberlain promising to use his influence on his government and on the French, Hitler promising not to intervene in Czechoslovakia before negotiations were resumed unless an "impossible situation" arose, and both agreeing to meet again in a few days.

The French were generally pleased with Chamberlain's initiative in going to Berchtesgaden, although Daladier was piqued at being left out, and some leaders, such as Edouard Herriot and Paul Reynaud, feared that the meeting might unduly increase Hitler's prestige. Daladier, being treated very shabbily by Chamberlain, was anxious to discuss the Berchtesgaden meeting and, when no

communication from the British arrived by September 17, he conveyed his interest to Phipps. The Prime Minister promptly rectified his neglect of the French by inviting Daladier and Bonnet to come to London immediately for discussion and the invitation was instantly accepted.

Bonnet, meanwhile, had been busily engaged in compromising the French position. The Foreign Minister was very likely aware of the frantic messages to London from Henderson in Berlin to the effect that no solution was possible unless the French and British immediately accepted the principle of self-determination. Ever since the fourteenth of September, Bonnet, looking for a peaceful settlement above all else, had repeatedly told Phipps that, although the French government would prefer to see an autonomous Sudetenland within a federal Czechoslovakia, they would, in the last resort and to avoid German aggression, accept any solution, including plebiscite in the Sudeten area, and impose that settlement on the Czechs.⁵ Bonnet also told the American Ambassador that "the Czechs were not playing straight with the French and...the French would be fully justified in washing their hands of their obligation to the Czechs."⁶ The French Foreign Minister was saying exactly what Hitler and the British wanted to hear, but his statements were a direct contradiction of Daladier's policy.

The French Premier was prepared to take a much firmer stand against Germany, but his determination to protect Czechoslovakia was weakened by two events which immediately preceded his trip to London. First, Daladier received word on September 17 that the Czechs were willing to cede part of Bohemia to Germany. This

message came from Jaromir Nečas, a Socialist member of the Czech cabinet, who told Léon Blum on behalf of Benes that since the Czechs were expecting Great Britain and France to demand concessions, they were sending a map with military works and fortifications clearly marked so they would know the furthest boundary of what could be ceded without destroying Czechoslovakia. When Daladier received the map and the message from one of Blum's associates, he got the impression that it was an actual proposal for cession from the Czechoslovak government.⁷ He later told a commission investigating events in France from 1933 to 1945 that he was embarrassed by the proposition, but it was in line with what Chamberlain was asking for and circumvented the plebiscite which was dangerous to Czechoslovakia because the country's other minorities might demand the same privilege.⁸ Thus the idea of cession, which Daladier had previously invoked only reluctantly because of Czech opposition, now became a viable policy. Although the Czechs later claimed that the message was misunderstood, its impact on Daladier's thinking is unmistakable. The Czech map enabled Daladier to plead for cession in London because he thought the Czechoslovak government approved that policy.

The second discouraging incident before the September 18 conversations was a report from the French High Command. Daladier had asked General Gamelin what France could do alone to help Czechoslovakia in case of German aggression. After consulting his staff, Gamelin replied that "Germany could destroy Czechoslovakia in a few days and that a French offensive could not be mounted in less than fifteen days and even then it would not be a frontal /

offensive."⁹ In other words, without help, France could not hope to save Czechoslovakia.

In spite of these discouragements, Daladier still took a fairly strong stand in favor of the Czechs at the London talks and produced a significant change in British policy. The French and British leaders met at eleven o'clock on the morning of September 18, for the first time since April.¹⁰ Chamberlain opened the discussions with an account of the Berchtesgaden meeting and explained that he now realized the situation was much more urgent and critical than he had thought. The vital question, as he saw it, was whether Great Britain and France should resume negotiations with Hitler on the basis of self-determination for the Sudeten Germans or whether they should expect war.¹¹ In the ensuing discussion it became clear that the British wanted to know the French position on the principle of self-determination, the French wanted to know the British position, and neither would speak first.

By way of introduction, Chamberlain explained Lord Runciman's view that Beneš and the Czechs were to blame for being "dilatatory" and that the "only possible solution which remained was some scheme based on acceptance of the principle of self-determination."¹² The Prime Minister tried to place the onus of acceptance on the French by pointing out that their treaty obligations put them in a different position than the British. It was therefore the French responsibility to say whether or not self-determination should be accepted.

After failing several times to obtain a British opinion on the question, Daladier finally began to express his reservations about

acceptance. In doing so, he demonstrated a much clearer understanding than Chamberlain of Hitler's nature and objectives. First, he observed that the majority of German generals were in favor of peace, but "the Fuehrer lived in an atmosphere of exhaltation and excitement, which was particularly noticeable in his immediate entourage."¹³ The French Premier also brought up German duplicity by reminding Chamberlain that Field Marshall Goering had recently told Halifax that "he did not think of annexing Sudeten territory," but now that was exactly what the Germans were contemplating, "and probably had many other objects in view as well."¹⁴

Then Daladier turned to the question of plebiscite, which was the heart of the question of self-determination. He saw that, because of the German minorities throughout Central Europe, the plebiscite would become a weapon to "keep Central Europe in a constant state of alarm and suspense" which would only favor "ultimate German aims."¹⁵ If the principle of self-determination were applied in Czechoslovakia, the state would be destroyed. The Poles, the Magyars and even the Slovaks would demand equal treatment; then Germany would march on to Romania, which already had a Nazi Fuehrer in Transylvania; and then would come Poland. If the principle of self-determination were adopted, "Instead of establishing peace in Czechoslovakia, we should have only opened the door to further conflicts and eventually to a European war."¹⁶

Chamberlain argued in return that Hitler did not see the principle of self-determination as a weapon to destroy Czechoslovakia. He was interested only in the Sudeten question and not in a broad application of that principle. Daladier reiterated that

Hitler's objective was the destruction of Czechoslovakia and a German "March to the East." "Within one year we might expect her to turn back against France and Great Britain, who would then have to meet her in much more difficult circumstances than those existing to-day."¹⁷ These were prophetic words which, no doubt, returned to haunt Daladier at Munich.

When Chamberlain again avoided Daladier's request for a statement of the British position, Lord Halifax finally spoke up by saying that the British government first wanted to consult the French, who were much more directly concerned because of their treaty obligations. He wanted to know if the French could "reconcile their Treaty obligations with the fulfillment of the condition which...was essential to enable him to continue the negotiations."¹⁸ The Foreign Secretary pointed out the hard facts that French and Russian aid to Czechoslovakia would be difficult to accomplish and that Hitler had made it clear that the only way to continue negotiations was on the basis of self-determination.

The Prime Minister then broke in to suggest the meeting adjourn for lunch so the French delegation could discuss the matter among themselves. But first he emphasized that negotiations could proceed only on the basis of considering ways and means of putting the principle of self-determination into effect. If there were no further negotiations, there would be war. Chamberlain then added a not-too-subtle hint that, in light of the French treaty obligations, it was the right of the French government to advise the Czechoslovak government how to act in certain circumstances so as to bring those obligations into effect. The Prime Minister wanted to make

it clear the British "did not wish to separate (themselves) from the French government or leave the French government alone."¹⁹

He said the British government would associate themselves with "certain advice" if the French felt they could give it to the Czechoslovak government. Thus, while Daladier was seeking British aid in opposing Hitler, the British were offering support against Czechoslovakia.

However, Daladier left the door to compromise open a crack by explaining that his purpose in London was to find a way to prevent "France from being forced into war as a result of her obligations and at the same time to preserve Czechoslovakia and save as much of that country as was humanly possible " implying that he was desperately searching for some mean between appeasement and war.²⁰

When the conference readjourned following lunch, Daladier commented that the French objections to the use of a plebiscite retained their full force. "It would be almost impossible for the French Government to accept any formula on this basis."²¹ However, Daladier then presented an alternative plan on a carefully drawn, and possibly artificial, distinction. While maintaining his rejection of self-determination and the use of a plebiscite, the French Premier, without mentioning his recent message from the Czechs, argued that the Czechoslovak government might be persuaded to accept outright cession of the territory to Germany. There were to be two guarantees to Czechoslovakia. First, the valuable Czech fortifications in the Sudeten area would not be ceded to Germany, and, second, there would be an international guarantee of

the Czechoslovak state. Furthermore, the agreement was conditional upon prior consultation with the Czechs.

Daladier's distinction may be a bit difficult to understand, for his plan at first glance seems to achieve the same goal as Hitler's principle of self-determination, except that there is no uncertainty involved as with the plebiscite. However, his object was to avoid giving other minorities in Czechoslovakia a basis for demanding their own independence. This meant that he could not support self-determination or a plebiscite which would be based on that principle. Evidently he assumed that other excuses could be made for outright cession of the territory to Hitler, thus avoiding the issue of self-determination. Believing that the Czechs were now willing to consider cession of parts of the Sudetenland to Germany, Daladier's main concern was that the remaining Czechoslovak state be protected from her voracious neighbors. Daladier's plan therefore would solve the Sudeten question by giving the territory to Hitler, while at the same time, preserving and guaranteeing the integrity of the Czechoslovak state.

An alternative interpretation, less flattering to the French Premier, would be that Daladier had abandoned his support for the Czechs, but was trying to keep that fact from being obvious by drawing an artificial distinction between the ideas of plebiscite and cession. In light of the message which led Daladier to believe that the Czechs would accept cession and considering his later support for the Czechs, this latter position does not seem to be too credible. However, it should be noted that one of Chamberlain's first statements to Hitler at Godesberg was that the French and

the Czechs had accepted the principle of self-determination. The British account of the Anglo-French conference does not uphold that statement. No such declaration was made at the London meeting, and the Czechs obviously would never agree to that principle since it would mean the disintegration of their state. Daladier meant to draw a definite and valid distinction between self-determination and cession, but either this distinction escaped Chamberlain or the Prime Minister lied to Hitler.

In any event, the British quickly adopted the idea of cession and the discussion moved to a consideration of the problems involved with that approach. Chamberlain felt that the Czechs should be warned that territorial cessions would generally involve those areas in which Sudeten Germans were a majority of the population. Daladier, supported by Bonnet, argued that the frontier should be as ethnically correct as possible, but it should be adjusted by an international commission to take into consideration the defense and security of the Czechoslovak state. While no consensus was reached on the specifics of that point, both parties agreed that an international commission should be entrusted with final delimitation of the German-Czechoslovak frontier and that problems of transfer of population should be allowed for.

Discord erupted, however, over the question of the international guarantee of Czechoslovakia's new boundaries. The French delegates insisted on the guarantee, similar to that given Belgium and Switzerland, in order to forestall Hitler's eastward expansion. But the British refused to make any commitment involving more than diplomatic support for the Czechs, offering the excuse that they

spoke also for the Dominions and could not commit them to military action. Daladier explained that Hitler's objectives, as set forth in Mein Kampf, were quite clear, and that a guarantee of Czechoslovakia's strategic position was necessary to prevent German domination of Europe. Finally at five o'clock, Chamberlain asked for a recess in order that the British Cabinet might consider the question of the guarantee.

In the course of the recess, British diplomatic leadership in the matter was reasserted. A draft joint message to the Czechoslovak government was drawn up by the British and both parties considered it over dinner. Daladier, too tired to argue further, reluctantly agreed to everything of substance in the telegram "in the interests of European peace," and returned to Paris.²²

The substance of the Anglo-French proposals was that Czechoslovakia was to cede to Germany approximately those areas with at least fifty per cent Sudeten German population, with an international commission set up, with a Czech member, to adjust the final boundary. In return, Great Britain agreed to join in an international guarantee of the new Czechoslovak frontiers if such a general guarantee against unprovoked aggression replaced the present treaties involving reciprocal military obligations.

In spite of the condemnation of Daladier by later writers such as Hubert Ripka for agreeing to the cession of Czech territory which would leave the country defenseless, the French Premier had actually done his best to preserve Czechoslovak security while at the same time settling the Sudeten problem.²³ Daladier's intransigence had produced a profound change in British policy. The idea

of a plebiscite to determine the future of the Sudetenland on the basis of self-determination originally considered essential by Chamberlain, was rejected and replaced by the cession of territory under international control. While no mention of Czech fortifications was made in the final proposals, the British did agree, at French insistence, to an international commitment far beyond what they wanted to accept. The proposals as a whole, however, based on the conciliatory positions of France and Great Britain and on their mutual hesitation to act without the support of the other, represented a substantial concession to Hitler. Daladier had managed to reduce the seriousness of the concession and had endeavored to guarantee Czech security, but the essential concession--the transfer of territory to the Reich--had been made and the weakness of Anglo-French diplomacy established.

The French had extracted one further concession from the British: the Czechoslovak government was to agree to any proposals submitted to Hitler. Therefore before Chamberlain could meet again with the Fuehrer, the Czechs would have to accept the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany. The Prime Minister had compromised a great deal, but since the Anglo-French proposals achieved the desired end of handing the Sudetenland to Germany, Chamberlain assumed that the proposals would be acceptable to the Fuehrer. This program, as Chamberlain saw it, was the only road to peace, and that road could not be jeopardized by Czech rejection. Consequently, the next few days saw intense diplomatic pressure to force the Czechs to accept the Anglo-French proposals. British initiative clearly dominated this pressure, but Bonnet eagerly agreed

to every British action. Daladier's role in this episode is not entirely clear. He apparently remained rather passive and allowed Bonnet and the British to extract the Czech agreement which he had expected would be forthcoming.

The Anglo-French proposals were presented to President Beneš in Prague at two o'clock on September 19 by Victor-Léopold de Lacroix and Sir Basil Newton, the French and British ambassadors, respectively. The Czech leader was bitter and very disturbed, but Newton noted that he would probably accept the proposals and was receptive to any reason which would help him justify acceptance to the Czech people.²⁴

Meanwhile, in Paris the French cabinet met and unanimously approved the Premier's actions in London. Those in the cabinet who favored appeasement, led by Bonnet, brought up the consideration that if Czechoslovakia rejected the proposals France should consider herself released from her treaty obligations. But Daladier was not yet ready to go that far, and the suggestion was tabled. Events, however, were soon to change that decision. For the British Ambassador in Prague had misjudged the Czech temperament. On the evening of September 20, the Czechoslovakian government, in spite of strong diplomatic pressure, rejected the Anglo-French proposals, insisting instead that the Sudeten dispute be settled by application of the German-Czechoslovak Treaty of Arbitration of 1925.

The Czech rejection appeared conclusive, but while Lacroix was sending Paris his version of the Czech action, he received a call from Dr. Milan Hodja, the Czechoslovak Prime Minister. Hodja was convinced that the French were preparing to abandon Czechoslovakia

and favored acceptance of the Anglo-French proposals. He told Lacroix that a French note confirming that France would not fight for Czechoslovakia would force Beneš^v to accept the proposals and was the only way to save peace. Lacroix thereupon wired Paris that the Czechoslovak government had requested a "cover note" to justify acceptance of the Anglo-French proposals.²⁵ Although Lacroix apparently believed the note was requested only in case the French government had already decided not to honor her commitment to Czechoslovakia, the message was not interpreted that way in Paris.²⁶ Bonnet, Daladier and two other Foreign Office officials accordingly drafted a message which contradicted the cabinet's position of the previous day and provided the Czechoslovak government with an excuse to accept the Anglo-French proposals:

France, in accord with England, has set forth the only procedure which it judges in the actual circumstances can prevent the Germans from marching into Czechoslovakia.

In rejecting the Franco-British proposal the Czech government assumes the responsibility for Germany resorting to force. It thus ruptures the French-British solidarity which had just been established and by doing so it removes any practical effectiveness of assistance from France....

Czechoslovakia thus assumes the risk which we believed to have been removed. She must herself understand the conclusions which France has the right to draw if the Czechoslovak government does not accept immediately the Franco-British proposal.²⁷

In French eyes, the message was a mere response to a Czechoslovak request, but to the Czechs who had hoped to resist Hitler, it was a betrayal.

The British had prepared a note similar to the French cover note, and at 2 a.m. in Prague the two ambassadors presented the messages to Beneš^v, who evidently knew nothing of Hodja's appeal to

Lacroix. Benes^V was totally demoralized now and had no choice but to give in. On September 21, the Czechoslovak government announced acceptance of the Anglo-French proposals:

Under pressure of urgent insistence culminating in British communications of September 21 Czechoslovak Government sadly accept French and British proposals on supposition that the two Governments will do everything in carrying them out to safeguard vital interests of Czechoslovak state.²⁸

The official Czech communiqué to the people explained it quite simply: "We had no other choice because we were left alone."

Privately, Benes^V was not so tactful. "We have been basely betrayed,"²⁹ he declared.

The concessions extracted from Czechoslovakia on September 21 were actually a greater capitulation to Hitler than the Munich Conference itself. Once the Czechs had accepted the idea of cession of the Sudetenland to Germany, the negotiations which culminated in the Munich Agreement were simply a matter of how much, how fast and under what conditions. The only remaining question was whether or not what remained of Czechoslovakia would be a viable state.

The policy which led the Western democracies to this stage was inspired principally by the British.³⁰ Although many of the details of Anglo-French pressure on Czechoslovakia have been omitted here, only a few examples are necessary to show the degree to which French diplomacy was under British domination. On September 21, for instance, Bonnet wired Halifax that Germany had concentrated five more divisions against Czechoslovakia and told him that the French government was contemplating putting another seven divisions

behind the Maginot Line so that Hitler would know that the French were ready to act if Germany launched an invasion of Czechoslovakia. But first, Bonnet wanted to get the British opinion on whether or not this action would interfere with the upcoming negotiations at Godesberg.³¹ Halifax replied that his Majesty's Government could not presume to offer advice but "would see no objection" to such an action.³² Thus, while the British were acting independently at Godesberg, Bonnet was seeking British advice in the guidance of French policy.

The British took a further initiative on September 22 when the Sudeten "Freikorps," organized in Germany by Konrad Henlein, crossed the frontier and occupied the district of Asch. In view of the increasing German military threat, Halifax suggested to Alexis Léger, Secretary-General of the French Foreign Office, that the British and French should withdraw their advice to Prague, in effect since September 18, not to mobilize. Léger agreed, but before the action was officially taken, word was received from the Prime Minister at Godesberg that all parties should refrain from actions which might interfere with the progress of the conversations.³⁴ The order was consequently rescinded, and it was not until the afternoon of September 23, at Daladier's request, that the Czech government was told that the "French and British Governments cannot continue to take responsibility of advising them not to mobilize."³⁵ No longer constricted the Czech mobilization began at 10:30 p.m. Only a few days earlier in London, Chamberlain had insisted that the French make the decision regarding self-determination because

they were more directly concerned about the fate of Czechoslovakia. Now the British were openly directing French policy regarding the Czechs.

The development which led to the rescinding of the Anglo-French advice to the Czechs not to mobilize was the unfavorable course of Chamberlain's meeting with the Fuehrer at Godesberg.³⁶ The Prime Minister flew to Godesberg on September 22 to resume his role as mediator, again without a French or Czech representative. He informed Hitler of the Anglo-French proposals of territorial cession and an international guarantee of the new Czechoslovak frontier. If Hitler was surprised that the British and French had wrung such far-reaching concessions from the Czechs, he did not show it. The Fuehrer calmly replied that those proposals would no longer suffice. The reign of terror by Czech officials and the lawless disorder that pervaded the Sudetenland necessitated immediate evacuation of the area by the Czechs and occupation by the German army. Neglecting the fact that the reign of terror was manufactured by German propagandists and that the riots were incited by Nazi agitation, Hitler demanded that a frontier be drawn at once with no international commission. Realizing that the Western powers would not oppose him, Hitler had decided to maintain his objective of destroying Czechoslovakia by military action and would not accept a peaceful solution.³⁷

The Fuehrer said the German army would occupy the Sudetenland immediately to restore law and order, and then plebiscites would be arranged so that the people might decide whether or not to remain within the Reich. Any area not wishing to remain would be returned

to Czechoslovakia. Hitler added the implicit threat that if a peaceful settlement with ethnic frontiers could not be reached quickly, he would be forced to resort to a military solution which would result in a "strategic frontier."³⁸

Chamberlain was stunned. He questioned Hitler, but challenged him only on the basis that the plan was analogous to the seizure of conquered territory in the eyes of the public. Eventually the Prime Minister agreed to adjourn until the next day. That evening Chamberlain wrote Hitler a letter stating that he would transmit the new German proposals to the Czechoslovak government but also pointing out the difficulties involved. The Fuehrer's reply maintained his demands.

When the two leaders met again on the evening of September 23, Hitler handed Chamberlain a map and a memorandum setting forth his demands. The map showed areas colored red which were to be evacuated between September 26 and 28 and occupied by German troops immediately. In addition there were areas within what remained of Czechoslovakia colored green which were also to be subject to a plebiscite. Finally, there was to be no destruction of property, foodstuffs or equipment by the withdrawing Czechs.

Chamberlain said he would convey the proposals to the Czechs, but he made it clear what the outcome would be. "He would go home with a heavy heart... But his conscience was clear; he had done everything possible for peace. Unfortunately he had not found an echo in Herr Hitler."³⁹ With this display of apparent resignation to war, Hitler became somewhat more conciliatory. He accepted minor changes in the wording to make the memorandum less abusive and

added the option of an international boundary commission. The Fuehrer also agreed to substitute his timetable with a single date of October 1, the very date he had set in May for the destruction of Czechoslovakia. Having obtained these minor concessions, Chamberlain returned to London.

There were many people in London and Paris who thought that the Godesberg proposals were substantially the same as the Anglo-French plan, except that the territorial exchange was to be more immediate. There were, however, fundamental principles involved which brought Europe to the brink of war. Hitler had cast aside all guarantees of the political, military and economic viability of the new Czechoslovak state upon which Daladier had insisted in London. The plebiscites which Hitler demanded raised the question of self-determination and, in the course of his remarks, the Fuehrer had pressed the claims of all minorities, not just the Sudetens as at Berchtesgaden. The territory demanded by Hitler was significantly larger than that agreed to in the Anglo-French proposals, and there was no possibility that Czechoslovakia might retain her high-quality fortifications. They were to be handed over to Germany at once and intact. Finally the green areas in which Hitler demanded additional plebiscites were very strategic industrial and agricultural centers in Bohemia and Moravia. To deprive Czechoslovakia of these areas would cut the state in half and strangle it economically. The Anglo-French proposals at least left a possibility of survival for Czechoslovakia. The Godesberg memorandum was designed to destroy the state.

The Czech reaction to the Godesberg proposals was quick and categorical. On September 25, the day after Chamberlain returned to London, the Czechoslovak Ambassador to Great Britain, Jan Masaryk, told Halifax, "Herr Hitler's demands in their present form are absolutely and unconditionally unacceptable to my Government." He promised "utmost resistance" and swore that "the nation of St. Wenceslas, John Hus and Thomas Masaryk will not be a nation of slaves."⁴⁰

When Hitler's demands became known, public opinion in France, which had been ardently opposed to war, underwent a startling reversal. There was no enthusiasm for war, but there was a growing conviction that it would be necessary to curb Nazi expansion. French mobilization was speeded up, and within forty-eight hours, fourteen divisions were sent to the Maginot Line. It was in this atmosphere that the French leaders were summoned to London on the evening of September 25 to discuss the Fuehrer's latest proposals.

Chamberlain opened the meeting at 9:25 p.m. with an account of the Godesberg meeting.⁴¹ Daladier immediately attacked the memorandum on the grounds already given, but Chamberlain tended to be conciliatory. He noted that the memorandum did not call for occupation by force, but rather for military occupation by agreement to maintain law and order. Furthermore, the occupation was not final, but was subject to a plebiscite to be carried out under international control. Daladier insisted, as his Council of Ministers had agreed that morning, that acceptance of the Godesberg

memorandum would constitute the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and the domination of Europe by Germany.

But Chamberlain doubted both French determination to aid Czechoslovakia and her military capability to do so. When the Prime Minister asked what France proposed to do, Daladier's only answer was "Our next step should be to say to Herr Hitler that he should return to the Anglo-French proposal agreed upon last Sunday."⁴² To the question of what should be done if Hitler refused, the French Premier replied evasively, "In that case each of us should have to do his duty."⁴³ He had no further proposal to make.

The British were not content with this. They wanted to know what France would do if Czechoslovakia rejected the memorandum and Hitler invaded the country. Daladier replied hesitantly and with reluctance that France would honor her treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia. It is not difficult to imagine what was going through Daladier's mind. Having fought in the Great War and some of its bloodiest battles, it was very difficult to speak the words which would commit Europe to a repetition of that horror. But that was precisely the task facing the French Premier.

In response to specific questions, Daladier finally admitted that land and air operations would be attempted against Germany. The British, for their part, were skeptical of French military preparedness. At last Daladier explained what was on his mind. He said he wished to speculate more on the moral obligations of France than on war and strategy. The following, in the indirect quotation of the British Foreign Office is the French Premier's statement:

It should be remembered that only a week ago he (Daladier) had agreed, without consulting the other members of his Government, to dismember a friendly country bound to France not only by treaties but by ties centuries old. This was France's sacrifice to the peace of Europe. Like a barbarian M. Daladier had been ready to cut up this country without even consulting her and handing over 3 1/2 million of her population to Herr Hitler. It had not been a very agreeable task for him. It had been hard, perhaps a little dishonoring; but he had felt this was better than to begin again what we had seen 20 years ago. He had been there, although he would not stress this point. But it was a different thing to give Herr Hitler the possibility of saying to his people that, without firing a shot, Great Britain and France had handed over to him 3 1/2 million men. This would not suffice for him. M. Daladier asked at what point we would be prepared to stop and how far we would go. Like the British Ministers, M. Daladier was seeking peace, and if means could be found by which Herr Hitler could take over these areas which the French Government had agreed to abandon to her (sic), even if this involved adding to French sacrifices, he would agree. The Czechs were, however, human beings. They had their country and had fought at our side. We must ask what they thought of all this. Perhaps formulae of conciliation might be found, although he feared that all conciliation was only preparing for the destruction of Western civilization and of liberty in the world. If, however, it was possible to make fresh concessions, then they should be studied with the Czechoslovak Government. There was one concession, however, he would never make, and that was that marked on the map (Note in the original: M. Daladier was referring to the proposed arrangements in Moravia), which had for its object the destruction of a country and Herr Hitler's domination of the world and of all that we valued most. France would never accept that, come what might.⁴⁴

Daladier then put forth a proposal of his own. He suggested maintaining the Anglo-French proposals but adding a time limit of a week or ten days to the time given the international commission to set the final boundary for German occupation. This he hoped, would overcome Hitler's objection that haste was necessary. This suggestion was followed by a period of questioning when both parties tried to get more specific information from each other and neither would give it.

The French Premier finally said that he did not wish to enter too far into technical discussions and put three specific questions to the British ministers: (1) Did they accept Hitler's plan? (2) Were they thinking of pressuring the Czechoslovak Government to accept, knowing that the Czechs would rather die than accept? (3) Did they think France should do nothing?

Chamberlain cautiously avoided all three questions. To the first he answered only that it was not for the British government to accept Hitler's proposals; to the second that the Czechoslovak government had already indicated they would refuse and Britain had no means to compel them to reverse their decision; and to the third that it was not for the British government to express an opinion, but for the French government to decide. Chamberlain wanted specifics from the French in order to understand clearly the circumstances in which the British government would have to make its decision. He closed the evening meeting with a request that General Gamelin come to London the next day to fill in the military aspect of the picture.

That informal meeting with Gamelin the morning of September 26 was not encouraging. France was indeed not well prepared for war and her generals were unmistakably fainthearted. Nevertheless, Daladier would not yield on the French commitment to Czechoslovakia, and his moralistic stand had a profound effect on Chamberlain. When formal discussion resumed, the British Prime Minister announced that he was sending a personal messenger, Sir Horace Wilson, to Hitler with a letter explaining that the Czechs reaffirmed their acceptance of the Anglo-French proposals but rejected the Godesberg

memorandum.⁴⁵ The note also contained a final plea to avoid war by negotiating directly with the Czechoslovaks the peaceful annexation of the Sudetenland. Wilson was also intrusted with a personal communiqué which represented a victory for Daladier's diplomacy. If Hitler rejected Chamberlain's offer, Wilson was to explain that the French would uphold their treaty obligations if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia, and Great Britain had no alternative but to stand by France. This message was the strongest British statement of support for France, and its dispatch was a direct result of Daladier's determination to forcibly resist German aggression.

Chamberlain had closely questioned French preparedness and appeared to favor further appeasement of Hitler, but Daladier's commitment had swayed him. The Prime Minister knew that he could never allow French security to be threatened, for that in turn was a threat to British security. If France, in fulfilling her treaty obligations to Czechoslovakia, had to attack Germany, Great Britain would have to be prepared to aid France. While Chamberlain was the acknowledged leader in dealing with Hitler, Daladier remained, although with some reluctance at the thought of war, the defender of Czechoslovakia. When France decided to fight for Czechoslovakia, Great Britain, for her own security, had no choice but to follow the French lead.

The British Foreign Office reinforced its commitment to France in a public communiqué issued on the afternoon of the twenty-sixth which explained the French and British positions:

The German claim to the transfer of the Sudeten areas has already been conceded by the French, British and Czechoslovak Governments, but in spite of all efforts

made by the British Prime Minister a German attack is made upon Czechoslovakia the immediate result must be that France will be bound to come to her assistance, and Great Britain and Russia will certainly stand by France.⁴⁶

Although Daladier was quite pleased with the British statement, Bonnet was following a policy entirely at odds with that of his Premier and reacted strongly to the communiqué. He first demanded an explanation from Phipps, and then tried to suppress publication of the statement in the French press, evidently fearing that it would encourage those whom he thought were trying to push France into a war with Germany. The Foreign Minister went so far as to deliberately spread the rumor that the British statement was a falsification.⁴⁷

The British stand, on the other hand, seemed to inspire Daladier. William Bullitt reported that, "If Bonnet was devious and weak Daladier was sure of himself and strong."⁴⁸ Daladier had repeated to the American Ambassador his determination to attack Germany if German troops entered Czechoslovakia and commented that Hitler's latest proposals were an attempt to humiliate England and France. But France would not give in. "To fight and die was better than to submit to such a humiliation."⁴⁹ Daladier realized that the rejection of the Godesberg proposals made war a virtual certainty, and his confidence in the outcome of the conflict was tempered by his awareness of the difficulties which he had tried to conceal from Chamberlain. The French Premier believed that "the war would be long and terrible but whatever the cost in the end France would win."⁵⁰ Daladier's determination to defend Czechoslovakia was

unyielding, but behind that resolution lay a great reluctance to commit France to repeat the horrors of 1914.

While the leading French statesmen were working at cross-purposes in Paris, Sir Horace Wilson was making his way to Berlin. He was ushered in to see Hitler and delivered the Prime Minister's letter at 5 p.m., only three hours before the Fuehrer was scheduled to deliver an address at the Sportpalast. Hitler's reaction was violent. On hearing that the Czechs rejected the Godesberg proposals, Hitler started to walk out of the room, "and it was only with difficulty he was persuaded to listen to any more and then only with insane interruptions."⁵¹ The Fuehrer insisted on his October 1 deadline and demanded that the Czechs accept the Godesberg memorandum by 2 p.m., September 28. Wilson, who was not a professional diplomat, was so shaken by Hitler's fury that he decided the time was not right to deliver the additional message. He arranged to meet with the Chancellor the next morning.

Hitler's speech a few hours later left little room for hope. Screaming insanely and insulting the Czech president personally, the Fuehrer demanded possession of the Sudetenland by October 1. His disposition was hardly improved the next morning when Wilson informed him that France would faithfully fulfill her obligations to Czechoslovakia, and, if in so doing she should become engaged in hostilities with Germany, Great Britain would come to the aid of France. Hitler, insisting that he would not invade France, interpreted the message to mean that if Germany attacked Czechoslovakia, France and Great Britain would attack Germany. Wilson returned to London with a very pessimistic report.

Meanwhile in France, on September 26, the partial mobilization was assuming major proportions. Phipps reported to London that public opinion and the feelings of legislative leaders seemed to be resigned to the approach of conflict.⁵² The next day, however, produced a reaction. Those who were not so resolute in the face of the inevitability of war began to make their presence felt. Bonnet, himself a major figure in the anti-war movement, took heart from the reaction and tried again to seek a peaceful solution. Early in the evening on September 27, less than twenty-four hours before the German ultimatum was due to expire, the Foreign Minister suggested to Phipps a vague compromise plan by which the areas of the Anglo-French plan would be evacuated by the Czechs on October 1 and occupied in a manner to be agreed upon.⁵³ An international commission would be set up to establish a final boundary as soon as possible.

The British government, however, was acting independently rather than waiting for French initiative. At 6:45 p.m., only ten minutes after Bonnet's plan was telegraphed to London, the British Foreign Secretary was wiring his own plan to Berlin.⁵⁴ Halifax suggested a token occupation by German troops of Egerland and Asch, two districts outside the Czech line of fortifications, on October 1. On October 3, there would be a meeting of British, German and Czech plenipotentiaries to arrange for the immediate withdrawal of Czech troops, to be replaced by a British Legion to maintain order. The plenipotentiaries were to draw a tentative frontier to be occupied by German troops on October 10. Meanwhile, an international

boundary commission with representatives from each of the three countries was to make a final boundary decision by October 31.

These two uncoordinated initiatives highlight Britain's leading role as the mediator with Germany. While Bonnet made his suggestion to London, Halifax made his offer directly to Berlin with no attempt at consultation with the French. Furthermore, neither government sought Czechoslovak advice concerning their plans. Consequently, both proposals were mere anxious attempts to placate Hitler and avoid war, and Bonnet was making even more generous concessions than Halifax.

However, before either of these plans could be acted upon, Bonnet handed over to Britain an initiative of a much more important nature. At 8:30 Halifax wired Phipps to tell either Bonnet or Daladier that, since no British or French action could prevent a sudden fait accompli with regard to Czechoslovakia, it was important that subsequent action of the two governments "should be closely concerted."⁵⁵ He asked for Anglo-French consultation and agreement before any offensive action was taken. Bonnet was looking for a way out of committing France to war, and this request presented a perfect opportunity. If the British did not agree to offensive action, France would have a good excuse for not taking it. So just before midnight, Phipps was able to report that Bonnet agreed "not to take any offensive measures without previous consultation with and agreement by us."⁵⁶ Whether or not Daladier would have upheld a British veto of French action is a matter of speculation, but from Bonnet's position, French policy was now effectively subordinated to and dependent upon British policy.

This agreement, however, was never tested. For the German Fuehrer had calmed down considerably after raving at Wilson. Hitler was beginning to have doubts about his "military solution" in the face of Western resolution. On the evening of September 27, he dispatched a letter to Chamberlain which was carefully calculated to elicit a response from the compromising Prime Minister. The letter included a very moderate interpretation of the German demands, and Hitler gave an assurance that Czechoslovakia's political and economic independence would not be interfered with.⁵⁷

Chamberlain saw the way open for a peaceful settlement and immediately replied to Hitler:

After reading your letter I feel certain you can get all essentials without war and without delay. I am ready to come to Berlin myself at once to discuss arrangements for transfer with you and representatives of France and Italy if you desire.⁵⁸

At the same time, the British Prime Minister wrote Mussolini informing him of his letter to Hitler and encouraging him to use his influence in urging the Fuehrer to accept this final offer of negotiations. And so ended the tense day of September 27. War had seemed inevitable that morning, but evening brought hope that peace might soon break out instead of war.

The next morning, however, the French government resumed its policy of firmness with Hitler. François-Poncet was instructed to see the Fuehrer as soon as possible and impress upon him the seriousness of his refusal to compromise over Czechoslovakia. The French Ambassador's urgent request for an interview was put off until late morning, but at eleven o'clock, he was finally received in the Reich Chancellery amid scenes of intense military activity.

François-Poncet presented a map with Sudeten districts already conceded to Germany marked in red to show the Chancellor what he could have without war. He also warned Hitler in strong terms what the result of German aggression against the Czechs would be. "If he believed that he could localize the conflict today, I told him, he was in error. If he attacked Czechoslovakia, I said, all Europe would be caught in the holocaust."⁵⁹

With the expiration of the German ultimatum a little more than two hours away, François-Poncet's meeting with Hitler was interrupted by word that the Italian Ambassador, Bernardo Attolico, had just arrived with an urgent message from the Duce. Mussolini sent word that Chamberlain had asked him to mediate in the Sudeten question. The Duce supported Hitler's position but urged acceptance of the British suggestion. According to Hitler's interpreter, Paul Schmidt, it was at this moment that the decision for peace was made.⁶⁰ But François-Poncet reports that Hitler had not yet changed his mind when the meeting ended, although the Fuehrer was "very disturbed" about the situation.⁶¹ Hitler next met with Henderson who delivered Chamberlain's response to the Chancellor's letter. Hitler still refused a definite response, saying he wanted to consult Mussolini first. Then, at 2:30, Goering called François-Poncet to tell him that Hitler had postponed his ultimatum for twenty-four hours. The Fuehrer furthermore proposed a conference to settle the Sudeten problem and invited Daladier to come to Munich the next day for that purpose.

Daladier promptly accepted the invitation, although with some reluctance, for he seemed to know beforehand that the conference

would be a substantial diplomatic victory for the Fuehrer. The previous day the French Premier's determination had been dealt another severe blow by his pusillanimous generals. Following Gamelin's uninspiring performance in London, General Vuillemin again warned that the French air force was too weak to effectively oppose the Luftwaffe. His report of September 27 indicated that France had only seven hundred combat planes, many of limited effectiveness. The general estimated losses of forty per cent of initial strength by the end of the first month of a war with Germany and sixty-four per cent by the end of the second. Reserves were practically non-existent, and little help could be expected from the British. Furthermore, when French air strength was depleted, the enemy would be able to attack factories from the air at will, greatly reducing industrial production.

The thought of German aircraft mercilessly bombing a defenseless France was too much for Daladier. He later told the American journalist and historian William Shirer that this report was "perhaps the chief consideration that forced him to make the crucial decisions of the next four days."⁶² Daladier had already compromised a great deal by agreeing to the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany. Having made that concession and having obtained Czech agreement, it seemed senseless to go to war over relatively minor issues when France was so poorly prepared to meet German military strength. If the transfer of territory could take place peacefully, the French Premier was willing to sacrifice part of Czechoslovakia rather than face the catastrophe of another European war. On the other hand, if Germany refused the terms of the

cession and invaded Czechoslovakia, Daladier would have no other choice but to ask his Parliament to authorize a counter-offensive against Germany.

In search of a peaceful agreement, Daladier took off from the fog-shrouded Le Bourget airport at 8:45 a.m., September 29, for the two-and-a-half-hour flight to Munich. A small crowd of about one hundred spectators joined the many dignitaries to cheer him on, but the French Premier obviously was not looking forward to his journey. François-Poncet met Daladier in Munich and commented on the Premier's appearance: "Broad-backed, sunburned, his head buried deep between his shoulders, his brow deeply furrowed with wrinkles, Daladier appeared gloomy and preoccupied."⁶³ Driving through Munich to his hotel and then to the Fuehrerhaus for the conference, Daladier was genuinely astonished at the warmth of his reception. Thousands of Germans lined the streets to cheer the statesmen who had come to Munich to fashion the peace which the people of Germany desired as ardently as those of France and Great Britain. Although Daladier was impressed by his cordial welcome, a French journalist noted that, "One felt that he was, nevertheless, engrossed in his thoughts, and that he had not come to Munich to enjoy himself."⁶⁴ While most of the world hoped for peace, Daladier anticipated only defeat.

The French Premier arrived at the Fuehrerhaus shortly after noon and met Hitler for the first time. Daladier thought he looked "pale and tense." As usual, Hitler's startling eyes caused comment:

His dull blue eyes had a hard, strange look, and during the short greetings they suddenly turned upwards... In London

I had said and repeated that his aim was to set up his domination over Europe. On seeing him I thought that I had not been mistaken.⁶⁵

Hitler's personal charm, however, was not at its peak that day, and he failed to exert on Daladier and Chamberlain that nearly-hypnotic effect which entranced so many people in the Fuehrer's presence.

The first session opened at 12:45. Present were the heads of state and foreign ministers of France, Great Britain, Germany and Italy. Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were not invited to the conference, an omission bitterly resented by both countries. Both also chose to blame the Western powers for this lack of representation rather than Hitler, who had issued the invitations. No attempt was made by the leaders of the democracies to secure a Soviet representative, because they thought such a request would unnecessarily delay the conference, but both Daladier and Chamberlain requested the presence of a Czech delegate who was waiting in an adjoining room. Hitler, however, refused to let the Czechs participate, and the two Western statesmen gave way.

There was no formal agenda. Hitler opened the conference with a harsh indictment of the Czechs in which he expounded on Czech persecution of the Sudeten Germans and insisted that "the existence of Czechoslovakia in her present form is a danger for the peace of Europe."⁶⁶ Chamberlain allowed this comment to pass, but Daladier took up the challenge. Speaking forcefully, he posed the crucial question:

Did the Conference wish Czechoslovakia to exist or not?
Was the proposed amputation intended to make her healthier and to give her better chances for life in the future?

Or was it but a means to weaken her, a mutilation bound to bring about her death? If the point was to prepare the dismemberment and disappearance of Czechoslovakia, then he, Daladier, had no business in this place. He refused to be associated with such a crime and would take his leave. If on the contrary, the point was to assure Czechoslovakia's future, then he was prepared to concur with the others in a spirit of reciprocal concession and collaboration.⁶⁷

Hitler quickly apologized for expressing himself poorly and insisted that he wanted no Czechs in the Reich and would not take them if offered, the last comment being a slip of the tongue which shows how obsequious the Chancellor thought Daladier and Chamberlain were.

Hitler's statement eased the tension, and Mussolini took advantage of the opportunity to present his proposals for a settlement, which, unknown to Daladier and Chamberlain, had been drawn up by the German Foreign Office and sent to the Duce just before he left for Munich. The proposals included the following points:

- (1) Evacuation of the Sudetenland was to begin by October 1.
- (2) England, France and Italy would guarantee to Germany that the evacuation would be completed by October 10, without any existing installations having been destroyed.
- (3) The conditions governing the evacuation would be laid down in detail by an international committee composed of representatives from Germany, Italy, England, France and Czechoslovakia.
- (4) Doubtful territories would be occupied by international forces until plebiscites could be held for the people to choose between Germany and Czechoslovakia, with the final determination of the frontiers to be carried out by the international committee.
- (5) The occupation, by stages, of the predominantly German territory by German troops would begin on October 1.⁶⁸

The meeting then broke up into small, and increasingly chaotic,

groups which gathered over maps working out the details of the settlement.

Daladier continued to defend Czechoslovak interest, but, unfortunately, not with the same determination and tenacity he had shown in his opening comments. According to Paul Schmidt, whose interpreting was constantly interrupted by dignitaries eager to reply before hearing the entire translation, Daladier sat quietly most of the time, except for a few occasions when he was prodded into action by Alexis Léger and took a fairly stiff attitude toward Hitler.⁶⁹ At one point, Daladier did propose that a Sudeten district containing some Czech fortifications and an important rail line be exchanged for a less strategic area, but Hitler objected because of the purely German nature of the district. Daladier argued, but finally gave in and settled for a compromise that a formula concerning frontier rectifications should appear in the text of the agreement. Under this formula, the areas to be transferred to Germany without plebiscite were also to be subject to exceptions in the judgment of the international commission. Daladier obviously hoped that the commission would be able to preserve Czechoslovakia as a viable state, but was due to be sorely disappointed.

Chamberlain repeatedly urged Germany to pay the Czechs compensation for the ceded territory until Hitler lost his temper and shouted that he did not have the time to waste on such trifles. Chamberlain was startled by Hitler's fury and dropped the subject. The only other problem hindering agreement was the question of an international guarantee of the remaining Czechoslovak state. France and Great Britain pressed for the guarantee but Germany and Italy

hesitated and made reservations. The two dictators finally promised to join the guarantee as soon as the claims of Poland and Hungary against the Czechs were satisfied, a promise which was of little value to Czechoslovakia.

Although Daladier remained rather passive throughout most of the conference, he did resist some of Hitler's demands in an attempt to preserve Czechoslovakia. There is, however, an additional bit of evidence which gives the impression that Daladier took a much more forceful stand than other accounts of the conference indicate. On October 3, Bullitt sent Washington an account of his lengthy discussion of the Munich Agreement with Daladier.⁷⁰ According to the American Ambassador's version, Daladier, apparently in his opening remarks, announced that certain terms of the German ultimatum, evidently the demands that the Czechs leave all cattle and foodstuff behind, were entirely unacceptable to him and he was ready to make war rather than accept them. When Hitler reacted with a violent outburst, Daladier left the room and walked up and down in an anteroom smoking cigarettes for an hour until Hitler appeared and said he would concede this point to Daladier.

Bullitt's account implies that Daladier walked out of the conference to obtain concessions from Hitler. Certainly if this were so, it would have been so dramatic a moment as to cause a great deal of comment from contemporary observers. Since Schmidt nor François-Poncet mentions the incident, it seems safe to conclude that Bullitt's version is somewhat exaggerated. However, it should be noted that the British account of the conference, which otherwise scarcely mentions the French Premier, does indicate that Daladier

persisted for several hours in centering the discussion on clauses three and four of the Italian proposals which concerned the conditions of the evacuation and the international guarantee of Czechoslovakia.⁷¹ Furthermore, François-Poncet's comment, cited above, that Daladier said he would leave the conference if the future of Czechoslovakia were not assured indicates that there may be some grain of truth in Bullitt's story. Daladier may actually have excused himself from the conference in the midst of one of Hitler's tirades, but the action clearly was not in the form of an ultimatum to the Fuehrer as Bullitt implies.

Nevertheless, the various versions of the conference do confirm that Daladier did not meekly accept all of Hitler's demands. When the agreement was finally signed in the early morning hours of September 30 by the four weary statesmen, the French Premier had done his best to preserve Czechoslovakia and had obtained two concessions which represented a significant departure from the Godesberg ultimatum. The first was the agreement that the international commission would establish the limits of the ceded territory, giving the Czechs an opportunity to preserve their fortifications. Secondly, Great Britain had agreed to join in an international guarantee of Czechoslovakia, a step which the British had long resisted. But the French Premier was clearly too disheartened by the poor military and diplomatic position of France to press Hitler too far. Whenever Hitler insisted upon a point, Daladier, as well as Chamberlain, gave in rather than risk breaking up the conference and face the war that would inevitably result.

Daladier knew that the conference was an immense diplomatic defeat for France and Great Britain, and took no joy or relief in the settlement as Chamberlain did. François-Poncet noted that:

We were bitterly aware of the cruelty of the event. Daladier shook his head, muttered, and cursed circumstances. He refused to take part in the congratulations exchanged by the other delegates.⁷²

Deeply depressed, Daladier returned to Paris, where his triumphal reception was even more amazing to him than his welcome in Munich.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹DGFP, p. 754.
- ²Noguères, p. 119.
- ³DBFP, Vol. II, No. 895, pp. 338-341.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 340.
- ⁵Ibid., No. 874, p. 323.
- ⁶FRUS., pp. 595-596.
- ⁷Noguères, p. 136.
- ⁸Gay, pp. 234-235.
- ⁹Ibid., pp. 233-234.
- ¹⁰DBFP., Vol. II, No. 928, pp. 373-400.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 379.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 380.
- ¹³Ibid., p. 379.
- ¹⁴Ibid.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 381.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p. 382.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 384.
- ¹⁸Ibid., pp. 384-385.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 386.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 387.
- ²¹Ibid., p. 388.
- ²²Ibid., p. 397.

- ²³Hubert Ripka, Munich: Before and After (London, 1939), p. 58.
- ²⁴DBFP, Vol. II, No. 961, pp. 416-417.
- ²⁵Excerpt from Bonnet's memoirs published in Dwight E. Lee, ed., Munich: Blunder, Plot, or Tragic Necessity? (Lexington, Mass., 1970), p. 19.
- ²⁶Shirer, p. 367.
- ²⁷Ibid.
- ²⁸DBFP, Vol. II, No. 1002, pp. 444-445.
- ²⁹Shirer, p. 369.
- ³⁰François-Poncet, p. 253.
- ³¹DBFP, Vol. II, No. 1009, p. 451.
- ³²Ibid., No. 1015, p. 456.
- ³³Ibid., No. 1020, pp. 457-458.
- ³⁴Ibid., No. 1030, p. 462.
- ³⁵Ibid., No. 1027, p. 461.
- ³⁶Ibid., No. 1033, pp. 463-473, and No. 1073, pp. 499-508.
- ³⁷Alan Bullock, Hitler, A Study in Tyranny, rev. ed. (New York, 1962), pp. 458-459.
- ³⁸DBFP, Vol. II, No. 1033, p. 471.
- ³⁹Ibid., No. 1073, p. 502.
- ⁴⁰Ibid., No. 1092, p. 519.
- ⁴¹Ibid., No. 1093, pp. 520-535.
- ⁴²Ibid., p. 526.
- ⁴³Ibid.
- ⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 528-529.
- ⁴⁵Ibid., No. 1096, pp. 536-541.
- ⁴⁶Ibid., No. 111, p. 550.
- ⁴⁷Shirer, p. 379.

- ⁴⁸FRUS, p. 667.
- ⁴⁹Ibid., p. 668.
- ⁵⁰Ibid.
- ⁵¹DBFP, Vol. II, No. 1115, p. 553.
- ⁵²Ibid., No. 1106, pp. 546-547.
- ⁵³Ibid., No. 1139, p. 571.
- ⁵⁴Ibid., No. 1140, pp. 572-573.
- ⁵⁵Ibid., No. 1143, p. 576.
- ⁵⁶Ibid., No. 1150, p. 582.
- ⁵⁷DGPF, pp. 966-968.
- ⁵⁸DBFP, Vol. II, No. 1158, p. 587.
- ⁵⁹François-Poncet, pp. 266-267.
- ⁶⁰Paul Schmidt, Hitler's Interpreter, ed. R. H. C. Steed (New York, 1951), p. 107.
- ⁶¹François-Poncet, p. 267.
- ⁶²Shirer, p. 388.
- ⁶³François-Poncet, p. 268.
- ⁶⁴Noguères, p. 258.
- ⁶⁵Ibid., p. 262.
- ⁶⁶Ibid., p. 264.
- ⁶⁷François-Poncet, p. 270.
- ⁶⁸DBFP, Vol. II, Appendix to No. 1227, p. 634.
- ⁶⁹Schmidt, p. 109.
- ⁷⁰FRUS, p. 711.
- ⁷¹DBFP, Vol. II, No. 1227, p. 632.
- ⁷²François-Poncet, pp. 272-273.

CHAPTER V

AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSIONS

Daladier had expected the people of France to be more conscious of their moral guilt in abandoning Czechoslovakia. When they cheered for him and wept with joy because war had been avoided, Daladier could only accept their accolade and caution them that peace was a tenuous state of European affairs. On October 4, Daladier spoke to the Chamber of Deputies defending the Munich Agreement. He explained that the Agreement was concluded because the French government had been placed in the dilemma of either saying "No" to the Sudeten demands, which would encourage German aggression and lead to the destruction of Czechoslovakia, or else trying to find a compromise solution through negotiation. Daladier argued that the Agreement was beneficial because it avoided the resort to force; it was an improvement over the Godesberg memorandum because it mentioned the right of option for individuals and eliminated "all stipulations that might have appeared in an armistice imposed by the victor on the vanquished;" it brought the Czechs the security of an international guarantee; and, finally, it provided for an international commission to avoid unilateral and arbitrary decisions concerning the cession of territory to Germany.¹

The French Premier, however, urged his countrymen not to sit back and relax because one crisis had been resolved. He attributed

the success of Munich to a show of force and said he believed the Germans respected France because they knew she was ready to fight. Daladier included in his speech a veiled warning that, without vigilance, the peace would soon be lost:

The safeguarding of peace ought not to encourage relaxation. It must mark, on the contrary, a resurgence of all French energies. I am telling you this with all the strength of my conviction: if the country were to relax, if the maintenance of peace were for it only an excuse for apathy, we should--in less time than you may believe--drift toward dangerous tomorrows.²

Daladier thus, in cautious terms, expressed his distrust of Hitler and warned France that the Munich peace was a fragile and uncertain affair.

Privately, Daladier was able to express himself more clearly. The evening before his speech to the Chamber, Daladier spent several hours discussing the European situation with William Bullitt.

Bullitt reported:

Daladier sees the situation entirely, clearly, realizes fully that the meeting in Munich was an immense diplomatic defeat for France and England and recognizes that unless France can recover a united national spirit to confront the future a fatal situation will arise within the next year.³

In the course of their conversation, Daladier and Bullitt devoted an hour and a half to the state of French aviation, indicating the importance of that factor to Daladier's thinking at Munich. The French Premier knew that France could never match German aircraft production and was anxious to buy the latest American planes to supplement his air force. He was anticipating Hitler's continued expansion and preparing for a final showdown with the Third Reich.

Whatever hopes Daladier might have had for the viability of the Czechoslovakia state were dissipated in the course of the next few

days as the guarantees for which Daladier had fought at Munich were obviated by Polish and German actions. The international guarantee of Czechoslovakia's new frontiers never came into effect. On the very day of the signing of the Munich Agreement, Poland presented the Czechoslovak government with a demand for territory containing a predominantly Polish population. The French and British told the demoralized Czechs to accept the ultimatum. Hungary, wanting to appear less belligerent, presented its request for a slice of Czechoslovakia to the international commission and was awarded 4,000 square miles of Slovakia in a settlement arranged by the German and Italian Foreign Ministers.

The international commission itself was totally dominated by Germany and gave in to every German demand.⁴ The final area ceded Germany without plebiscite totaled 11,000 square miles and contained 2,800,000 Sudeten Germans and 800,000 of the Czechs Hitler did not want at Munich, as well as all the fortifications which had protected Czechoslovakia from Germany. The failure of the international commission represented the penultimate step in a gradual series of concessions which led to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. The final tragedy occurred on March 15, 1939, when Hitler used the pretext of an appeal from the puppet government of Slovakia to swallow up what remained of the original Czechoslovakia. The Munich Conference was the most dramatic step, but it could not have taken place without the many prior concessions which had been offered by the British and resisted by Daladier. The conference itself would not have had such drastic repercussions if the international

commission, upon which Daladier had insisted at Munich, had been more resistant to Hitler's demands.

While these considerations tend to lessen Daladier's guilt in the Munich affair, the French Premier cannot be totally vindicated. Faced with a choice between war and peace, Daladier chose peace, even though it meant a tremendous sacrifice for Czechoslovakia and for French honor. It was not an easy decision for Daladier to make, and it obviously disturbed him greatly. However, considering French diplomatic isolation and the poor condition of her military forces, peace, at the time, appeared to be the only logical choice. Daladier was convinced, rightly or wrongly, that France was not ready to fight Germany. For that reason, he accepted the Munich Agreement in spite of his realization that it was a diplomatic tragedy for all of Europe.

Critics who argue that Daladier's decision was made out of weakness fail to comprehend the intense pressures on the French Premier. The four years of the First World War were a deep scar on the French memory, and neither Daladier nor the rest of France were prepared to repeat those bloody times. Daladier certainly did not anticipate the total collapse of France which occurred in 1940, for he believed that France was well protected behind the Maginot Line. But he did fear German air power. He realized that within a short time the Luftwaffe would have complete command of the air and would be able to raid French cities unhindered. Rather than face war in 1938, Daladier chose to put it off while he tried to unite and strengthen France for the coming ordeal. Winston Churchill was certainly correct in asserting that the following year found France

and Great Britain less well prepared compared to Germany than in 1938, but this could not have been foreseen by Daladier.⁶

If Daladier had a weakness, however, it was not fear of war, for, if Germany had invaded Czechoslovakia, he was prepared to attack Germany. France had more than one million men mobilized at the time of the Munich conference, and, although Daladier could not himself order an attack on foreign soil, he had made arrangements to call parliament within twelve hours to request the necessary authorization. Daladier's weakness was to be found more in his intellectual perceptivity which enabled him to see both sides of a question, but which combined with the lack of strong ideological convictions to make it difficult for him to choose one path over another. Thus he could sympathize with the plight of the Sudeten Germans even though he realized that German propaganda exaggerated accounts of Czech atrocities and even though he understood Hitler's ultimate aims. Although Daladier chose to pursue a path of resistance to Hitler and stoutly defended that policy in London, his many doubts and his sympathy for the Sudeten Germans prevented him from being completely on the side of those who advocated resistance to German pressure within his divided cabinet. When this policy of defiance led him to the point of a war for which France was not prepared, Daladier chose to abandon that policy, a step which he took with great sadness and reluctance, "cursing the circumstances," as François-Poncet put it.

Commenting on Daladier's fall from power in 1940, W. H. Chamberlan said, "He was an average man whose misfortune it was to be called on to deal with a crisis that required the combined talents

of a Napoleon and a Talleyrand."⁷ While Daladier was perhaps a bit more than the "average man" for which Chamberlain gives him credit, he certainly was not a man of the genius of Napoleon. If this is weakness, then Daladier was a weak man. But how many of us would fare well by this standard? It seems more appropriate to say that Daladier, although one of the best men France had to offer, was not strong enough to conquer the events which confronted him. Some historians may condemn Daladier on the basis of their superior hindsight, but few statesmen at the time had the foresight to do better than Daladier did.

FOOTNOTES

¹Daladier, pp. 186-187.

²Ibid., p. 191.

³FRUS, p. 712.

⁴Noguères, pp. 338-340; Ripka, pp. 485-509; and Keith Eubank, Munich (Norman, Oklahoma, 1963), pp. 237-240.

⁵Noguères, p. 339.

⁶Winston S. Churchill, The Second World War, Vol. I: The Gathering Storm (New York, 1948), p. 339.

⁷William Henry Chamberlan, "Daladier, the Tragedy of France," The American Mercury, L (August, 1940), p. 477.

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Thesis: EDOUARD DALADIER AND MUNICH: THE FRENCH ROLE IN AN
INTERNATIONAL TRAGEDY

Major Field: History

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, December 29,
1948, the son of Mr. and Mrs. James R. Wildermuth.

Education: Graduated from Midwest City High School, Midwest
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degree in Political Science from Oklahoma State University
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Professional Experience: Member and Vice-President of
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