

Appeasement in Crisis: From Munich to Prague, October 1938 – March 1939

Review Number:

731

Publish date:

Sunday, 1 March, 2009

Author:

David Gillard

ISBN:

978-0-2305-0040-2

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£45.00

Pages:

240pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Robert Boyce

On 18 September 1938, British policymakers, shocked by Hitler's evident readiness to go to war over the Sudetenland, the German-speaking fringe of territory around the western half of Czechoslovakia, offered to guarantee what remained of Czechoslovakia once it renounced its alliances with France and the Soviet Union and agreed to transfer the territory in question to Germany. This, as David Gillard points out, was a hasty decision and remarkable for its break with British diplomatic tradition, which had generally eschewed guarantees to foreign countries. It was also, in his opinion, unwise, since guaranteeing any Central European country was impossible of fulfilment. He therefore presents as reasonable the British government's efforts to render the guarantee to Czechoslovakia impracticable by making it contingent upon similar commitments from France, Italy and/or Germany, and to redefine it as a 'moral' guarantee which did not require practical action. Indeed, he is in no doubt that in 1938 and 1939 Britain had no alternative but to appease Germany, since it could not risk a conflict in which it stood alone against the three Axis powers, Germany, Italy and Japan, nor could it hope to organise a coalition of powers to oppose the Axis because '[t]he governments in Paris, Moscow and Washington were, whatever their rhetoric, as shy of precise commitments which might draw them into general war as were Chamberlain and his colleagues' (p. 18).

This predicament, Gillard argues, was well understood by British diplomats and political leaders. The puzzle for him is why, in these circumstances, the same men should have repeated the mistake of September 1938 by offering to guarantee Poland and Roumania in March 1939. The answer, he argues, lies in the 'crisis of appeasement', when Hitler's decision to absorb Bohemia and Moravia on 15 March prompted a storm of press and parliamentary criticism of the British government and threatened to embarrass Britain in the eyes

of its potential allies in America and the British Empire. Britain's decision to adopt a firmer line by extending the guarantees, he points out, has been applauded ever since by historians and statesmen as a return to sanity: the moment when the men of Munich 'redeemed themselves' in the eyes of their critics. But notwithstanding the pressure to be seen to do something, he argues that the guarantees were an egregious mistake. Instead, '[o]n the present reading, ministers should have been confining themselves, in 1938 and 1939 alike, to coalition-building and organisation for war for the purposes of deterrence and defence' (p. 185).

Gillard's challenge to the broadly conventional view of British pre-war foreign policy is well-focussed and clearly written, and will be appreciated by those seeking a detailed account of what was said in Cabinet and to the Cabinet by its senior Foreign Office and military advisers. It must be said, however, that this is already very familiar territory, given that the Cabinet and Foreign Office papers upon which Gillard relies have been the subject of minute examination in the nearly forty years since they were opened to the public. Gillard implicitly acknowledges this by omitting practically any account of the background to the emerging crisis, any introduction to his cast of historical characters, or any description of contemporary events taking place outside the narrow corridors of Whitehall. It must also be said that the assumptions on which his argument rests are inconsistent or at least far too briefly stated. Nor could they be established by a study restricted to British sources and indeed almost exclusively to the official British record. For if, as Gillard states in his opening pages, neither France nor the Soviet Union nor the United States were willing to unite in resisting Axis aggression, it is far from clear why, as he claims in his concluding pages, a policy of trying to persuade them to join a conservative front was preferable to one of deterring German aggression through the promotion of solidarity with lesser but more amenable powers such as Poland and Rumania. At any rate, the potential to create an effective anti-Axis front can only be established by examining the diplomatic record of all the Great Powers concerned. Gillard, like most other defenders of Britain's appeasement policy, simply asserts the unwillingness of France, the Soviet Union and the United States to act together or alone in face of Axis threats, or, equally unsatisfactory, relies upon the views of contemporary British politicians and statesmen who were anything but unbiased observers. From the available international evidence, a strong case can be made for saying that Paris and Moscow were almost desperate to join an anti-fascist coalition, and that by 1938 Washington would have openly applauded such a development.

In December 1918, Marshal Foch, Commander-in-Chief of the victorious Allied forces, explained to British political leaders the main challenge of the post-war world. Germany would not willingly accept the peace terms imposed upon it, and would constantly agitate to overturn them. But it would not immediately challenge the Western powers. Instead, it would first turn eastwards and seek to dominate the Slavic countries. Then, if allowed to appropriate land and resources in the East, it would turn West with such force as to be practically unstoppable. In strategic terms, therefore, Eastern and Western Europe were two halves of a single whole, making it unrealistic to pursue the security of Western Europe without due regard for the security of Eastern Europe as well.

Foch was of course perfectly correct, not only in his grasp of the fundamentals of European security but also the time-scale of the challenge, predicting in 1919 that the Versailles settlement was merely a twenty-year truce. For indeed Germany did expand eastwards before turning West, signalling its intentions as early as 1925 at Locarno when it refused to enter into the same frontier guarantees in the East as it accepted in the West. Its intentions were confirmed in 1939 when it absorbed Czechoslovakia, part of Lithuania and much of Poland, and suborned the Soviet Union, thereby securing further resources. Thus strengthened, it turned to conquer the West and in 1940 swiftly overran Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium and France.

British statesmen had acknowledged the essential unity of Europe in 1907 when they negotiated an *entente* with Russia, paving the way for closer military relations. Churchill acknowledged it in 1941 when he formed an alliance with the Soviet Union. British statesmen again acknowledged it in 1945 when they sought to establish a *modus vivendi* with the Soviet Union after the war, and once again in the 1990s when they supported the extension of the NATO alliance to Eastern Europe. But what of the statesmen responsible for British defence in the years before the second world war? Gillard does not directly address the question of their strategic assumptions. He does however present them as capable leaders who thought in strategic terms.

A careful examination of the evidence he adduces points towards a different conclusion.

At the time of Munich in the months following, Gillard claims, Chamberlain believed that Eastern Europe was strategically important to Britain, which must therefore have a say in its future. In mid-December 1938, Chamberlain referred to an 'Eastern quarrel' (p. 66) which did not concern Britain, but Gillard affirms that he must have been thinking of a minor issue such as Memel, not German aggression against Poland or Russia, since surely he would not have been indifferent to such large issues. From various sources, however, it is evident that Chamberlain shared the view of Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary, Sir Nevile Henderson, the ambassador in Berlin, Sir Alexander Cadogan, the permanent under-secretary of the Foreign Office, and even the British military chiefs of staff that Eastern Europe was Germany's natural hinterland. Unlike Foch, they did not regard Germany's expansion into this region as a threat to the European balance of power. Indeed, unlike Foch, neither Chamberlain nor Halifax, who together dominated British policy-making at this time, gave much time to strategic calculations when taking their decisions.

They had already gone well down the road to the Munich settlement before addressing the question of how the loss of the Sudetenland would affect Czechoslovakia's ability to defend itself, and even then they did not directly confront the question of how the loss of Czechoslovakia would affect the European balance of power. Nor at any time did they squarely confront the implications of excluding the Soviet Union from a conservative Great Power coalition or of including Poland, despite warning advice from Labour party critics and at least a few Cabinet colleagues and diplomatic advisers. Evidently their interest in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Eastern Europe as a whole derived not from their strategic importance, but from their own fear that German aggression in the East would draw in France and willy-nilly Britain as well. The fact that British leaders in February 1939 were 'immensely' relieved to learn that Hitler's next step was to seize control of the two remaining Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, that they found signs of growing friction between Slovakia and Prague 'reassuring' (p. 111), and welcomed German military intervention since it would end 'the persistent embarrassment of the guarantee' (p. 112) nicely illustrates the point. As Foch would have appreciated, the Czech provinces were major strategic assets. Indeed, tanks and other armoured vehicles made in Czechoslovakia's Skoda arms factories greatly strengthened Germany's offensive capability when it launched its invasion of France in May 1940 and destroyed Britain's sole major ally.

As remarkably, Gillard's account confirms that British leaders were also ambivalent about the strategic importance of Western Europe. For centuries, the cardinal principle of British defence policy had been to oppose any foreign power that sought to dominate the Continent and occupy the North Sea and Channel ports, since this would expose Britain to the disruption of its trade and the threat of invasion, thus undermining its independence. In earlier times Britain had been able to rely upon its naval power to blockade a Continental challenger, while preparing forces for a counter-attack at a time and place of its own choosing. But as the British general staff had acknowledged as early as 1909, with modern technology increasing the speed and range of military operations, Britain no longer enjoyed the luxury of being able to wait on events and respond in its own time. If Germany attacked in the West, naval intervention would come too late to affect the outcome. France would face 'overwhelming force', and its defeat would leave Britain without a Continental ally and dangerously exposed to invasion. The general staff had therefore recommended a military *entente*, later re-defined as a military alliance, to which both powers committed their naval and military strength, and the creation of a five-division British expeditionary force, to be available for immediate despatch to the Continent. By 1938 Germany had reached, and probably exceeded, the level of threat it posed in 1909, and late in 1938 rumours reached London of German plans to seize Holland in order to intimidate Britain into conceding German terms. Yet as Gillard's account confirms, Chamberlain and his colleagues were reluctant to accept that Holland was worth fighting for, and agreed to defend its neutrality only when the chiefs of staff affirmed that this was essential to maintain the respect of the United States and the Dominions (pp. 86-7).

Similarly with France, Chamberlain announced in the House of Commons on 6 February 1939 that Britain's interests were so close that 'any threat to the vital interests of France from whatever quarter it came must evoke the immediate co-operation of this country.' (p. 98) This was a timely assurance since, as Gillard

points out, even with the military support of several Great Powers, France had come perilously close to defeat in the Great War, and in the winter of 1938 Bonnet, the French foreign minister, betrayed signs of defeatism. Yet, the appearance of strategic clarity was deceiving. Even in March 1939 the British cabinet, in conjunction with the chiefs of staff, rejected conscription and agreed only to the expansion of the Territorial Army, while taking other decisions on defence independently of France. At the same time the cabinet renewed efforts to encourage support from the United States and British Dominions. But since American and Dominions support would become essential only in the event that the balance of power in Europe was radically overturned, it made no sense to regard it as an alternative to a substantial Continental commitment. The cabinet's tendency to do so only further illustrates its strategic muddle.

On 31 March 1939, Britain and France issued guarantees to Poland and Roumania. This, Gillard writes, was '*politically* an inescapable commitment to fight' (p. 177) because of the strength of public opinion in support of Britain honouring its promises. But, as is well known, British governments, and not least Chamberlain's government, did not passively yield to public pressure. Britain pursued appeasement almost until the outbreak of war, and even after formally honouring its guarantee to Poland by declaring war in September 1939 it continued to hope for an end to the conflict before the need actually to fight. Indeed, even after British forces engaged in combat in Norway and France in the spring of 1940, Halifax and a majority of the War Cabinet favoured a further effort at appeasing Germany. Public opinion may have contributed to a brief 'crisis of appeasement' in March 1939, but the failure of appeasement itself lay elsewhere, in the international system and the shortcomings of a succession of British governments, most notably the Chamberlain government which failed to rise above the strategic miscalculations and political prejudices of its predecessors.

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