

DOCUMENTS ON  
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1919—1939

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*Shelle*

*Note by Mr. Stopford of a Conversation with Herr Kundt*

[C 10546/1947/18]

LORD RUNCIMAN'S MISSION, PRAGUE, September 17, 1938  
Herr Kundt came at 4.30 to-day and followed in the main the line of his manifesto, that everything must wait for the result of the Chamberlain-Hitler conversations and that nothing must be done in the meantime to disturb them.

He said that it was still uncertain whether the measures to be taken against the Sudeten German party were to be dissolution (which would involve total loss of mandates, parliamentary and communal) or merely a form of suspension, which would mean the retention of mandates. The question was to be settled by the Standing Committee of Parliament, which had been summoned for 11 o'clock on Monday. He pointed out that it was necessary, if further disturbances were to be avoided, that he and the other Sudeten deputies should retain their rights and be in a position to control their people. He said that the ultimate decision lay with the President and asked that we should see someone near the President and urge on him the importance of taking a moderate course.

He also referred to the danger of house-to-house searches for arms, the suppression of newspapers in the German area which refused to attack Henlein's policy and the victimisation of German officials, particularly in the German University at Prague, where all the staff had been forced (under threat of expulsion) to sign a statement rejecting Henlein's manifesto.

He said that the whereabouts of Henlein, Frank and Sebekowsky was unknown, but that they were thought to be in Germany. Peters is in Prague, but Rosche and Schickelanz are in Dresden, where Rosche went from Asch to visit his wife who is very seriously ill.

He obviously disapproved of the line taken by Henlein and Frank but was very anxious to impress on us that there was no split in the party and that his efforts were directed to preserving the position pending the result of the Chamberlain-Hitler conversations. He seems to regard himself as the only man who can handle things on his side in such a way that a solution may be possible without war.

His anxiety to stand well with the German authorities was shown by his evident satisfaction that his manifesto to-day had been given out in full by the German wireless.

He said that he thought that the situation would remain quiet over the weekend, but he expressed great anxiety as to what action the Government might take on Tuesday or Wednesday, as he had been warned by a friend of his in the President's office to go away from Prague on Tuesday. He had the impression that the President intended something in the nature of a coup d'état, by which he would get rid of Hodza and form a Government of officials, so that the real power would be in the hands of the military.

Asked as to the formation of a new middle party, he denied that anything of this sort was contemplated, adding that of all the names mentioned on his side, he alone was in Prague and would never split the Sudeten ranks in this way. He said that in some districts former Activist officials who had some time ago attached themselves to the Sudeten organisations were now throwing in their lot with the Government, but the movement was not of any importance.

He mentioned in great confidence that his French friend, Professor Bruner, had written a letter to Mr. Stopford to Mr. Ashton-Gwatkin dated September 18, 1938.

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returned to Prague after a brief visit to Paris, at the request of Daladier and Bonnet, to act as a sort of unofficial rapporteur for them. Bruner had seen the President last night. He had gathered the impression from Bruner that a premature Czechoslovak mobilisation would not be viewed with favour in France.

IV

LETTER FROM LORD RUNCIMAN TO PRESIDENT BENEŠ<sup>1</sup>

[C 10677/1941/18]

WESTMINSTER, s.w. 1, September 21, 1938

My dear President,

When I undertook the task of mediation in the controversy between the Czechoslovak Government and the Sudeten German party, I was, of course, left perfectly free to obtain my own information and to draw my own conclusions. I was under no obligation to issue any kind of report. In present circumstances, however, it may be of assistance to you to have the final views, which I [have] formed as a result of my mission, and certain suggestions which I believed [believe] should be taken into consideration, if anything like a permanent solution were [is] to be found.

The problem of political, social and economic relations between the Teuton and Slav races in the area which is now called Czechoslovakia is one which has existed for many centuries, with periods of acute struggle and periods of comparative peace. It is no new problem, and in its present stage there are at the same time new factors and also old factors which would have to be considered in any detailed review.

When I arrived in Prague at the beginning of August the questions which immediately confronted me were (1) constitutional, (2) political, and (3) economic. The constitutional question was that with which I was immediately and directly concerned. At that time it implied the provision of some degree of home rule for the Sudeten Germans within the Czechoslovak Republic; the question of self-determination had not yet arisen in an acute form. My task was to make myself acquainted with the history of the question, with the principal persons concerned and with the suggestions for a solution proposed by the two sides, viz., by the Sudeten German party in the 'Sketch' submitted to the Czechoslovak Government on the 7th June (which was by way of embodying the eight points of Herr Henlein's speech at Karlsbad), and by the Czechoslovak Government in their draft Nationality Statute, Language Bill and Administrative Reform Bill.

It became clear that neither of these sets of proposals was sufficiently acceptable to the other side to permit further negotiations on this basis, and the negotiations were suspended on the 17th August. After a series of private discussions between the Sudeten leaders and the Czech authorities, a new basis for negotiations was adopted by the Czechoslovak Government and was communicated to me on the 5th September and to the Sudeten leaders on the 6th September. This was the so-called 4th Plan. In my opinion—and I believe in the opinion of the more responsible

<sup>1</sup> This letter was handed to the Czechoslovak Minister in London on September 22. A similar letter was addressed by Lord Runciman to Mr. Chamberlain at 8.30 p.m. on September 21. There are verbal differences between the two letters. These differences are indicated in the text printed above by the inclusion in square brackets of words which occur only in the letter to Mr. Chamberlain. The text printed in Cmd. 5847 is that of the letter to Dr. Beneš.

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Sudeten leaders—this plan embodied almost all the requirements of the Karlsbad eight points, and with a little clarification and extension could have been made to cover them in their entirety. Negotiations should have at once been resumed on this favourable and hopeful basis; but little doubt remains in my mind that the very fact that they were so favourable operated against their chances with the more extreme members of the Sudeten German party. It is my belief that the incident arising out of the visit of certain Sudeten German Deputies to investigate into the case of persons arrested for arms smuggling at Málnusch-Oshan was used in order to provide an excuse for the suspension, if not for the breaking off, of negotiations. The Czech Government, however, at once gave way to the demands of the Sudeten German party in this matter and preliminary discussions of the 4th Plan were resumed on the 10th September. Again, I am convinced that this did not suit the policy of the Sudeten extremists and that incidents were provoked and instigated on the 11th September and, with greater effect after Herr Hitler's speech, on the 12th September. As a result of the bloodshed and disturbance thus caused, the Sudeten delegation refused to meet the Czech authorities as had been arranged on the 13th September. Herr Henlein and Herr Frank presented a new series of demands—withdrawal of State police, limitation of troops to their military duties, &c.—which the Czechoslovak Government were again prepared to accept on the sole condition that a representative of the party came to Prague to discuss how order should be maintained. On the night of the 13th September this condition was refused by Herr Henlein, and all negotiations were completely broken off. It is quite clear that we cannot now go back to the point where we stood two weeks ago, and we have to consider the situation as it now faces us.

With the rejection of the Czechoslovak Government's offer on the 13th September, and with the breaking off of the negotiations by Herr Henlein, my functions as a mediator were, in fact, at an end. Directly and indirectly, the connexion between the chief Sudeten leaders and the Government of the Reich had become the dominant factor in the situation; the dispute was no longer an internal one. It was not part of my function to attempt mediation between Czechoslovakia and Germany.

Responsibility for the final break must, in my opinion, rest upon Herr Henlein and Herr Frank and upon those of their supporters inside and outside the country who were urging them to extreme and unconstitutional action.

I have much sympathy, however, with the Sudeten case. It is a hard thing to be ruled by an alien race, and I have been left with the impression that Czechoslovak rule in the Sudeten areas for the last twenty years, though not actively oppressive, and certainly not 'terroristic,' has been marked by tactlessness, lack of understanding, petty intolerance and discrimination, to a point where the resentment of the German population was inevitably moving in the direction of revolt. The Sudeten Germans felt, too, that in the past they had been given many promises by the Czechoslovak Government, but that little or no action had followed these promises. This experience had induced an attitude of unveiled mistrust of the leading Czech statesmen. I cannot say how far this mistrust is merited or unmerited; but it certainly exists, with the result that, however conciliatory their statements, they inspired [inspire] no confidence in the minds of the Sudeten population. Moreover, in the last elections of 1935 the Sudeten German party polled more votes than any other single party, and they actually formed the second largest party in the State Parliament. They then commanded some forty-four votes in a total Parliament of 300. With subsequent accessions, they are now

the largest party. But they can always be outvoted, and consequently some of them feel that constitutional action is useless for them [and that the Czech democracy is a farce].

Local irritations were added to these major grievances. Czech officials and Czech police, speaking little [or no] German, were appointed in large numbers to purely German districts; Czech agricultural colonists were encouraged to settle on land transferred [confiscated] under the Land Reform in the middle of German populations; for the children of these Czech invaders Czech schools were said to have been built [were built] on a large scale; there is a very general belief that Czech firms were favoured as against German firms in the allocation of State contracts and that the State provided work and relief for Czechs more readily than for Germans. I believe these complaints to be in the main justified. Even as late as the time of my Mission, I could find no readiness on the part of the Czechoslovak Government to remedy them on anything like an adequate scale.

All these, and other, grievances were intensified by the reactions of the economic crisis on the Sudeten industries, which form so important a part of the life of the people. Not unnaturally, the Government were blamed for the resulting impoverishment.

For many reasons, therefore, including the above, the feeling among the Sudeten Germans until about three or four years ago was one of hopelessness. But the rise of Nazi Germany gave them new hope. I regard their turning for help towards their kinsmen and their eventual desire to join the Reich as a natural development in the circumstances.

At the time of my arrival the more moderate Sudeten leaders still desired a settlement within the frontiers of the Czechoslovak State. They realised what war would mean in the Sudeten area, which would itself be the main battlefield. Both nationally and internationally, such a settlement would have been an easier solution than territorial transfer. I did my best to promote it, and up to a point with some success, but, even so, not without misgiving as to whether, when agreement was reached, it could ever be carried out without giving rise to a new crop of suspicions, controversies, accusations and counter-accusations. I felt that any such arrangement would have been temporary, not lasting.

This solution, in the form of what is known as the 'Fourth Plan,' broke down in the circumstances narrated above, the whole situation, internal and external, had changed; and I felt that with this change my mission had come to an end.

When I left Prague on the 16th September, the riots and disturbances in the Sudeten areas, which had never been more than sporadic, had died down. A considerable number of districts had been placed under a régime called 'Standrecht' [amounting to martial law]. The Sudeten leaders, at any rate the more extreme among them, had fled to Germany and were issuing proclamations defying the Czechoslovak Government. I have been credibly informed that, at the time of my leaving, the number of killed on both sides was not more than seventy.

Unless, therefore, Herr Henlein's Freikorps are deliberately encouraged to cross the frontier, I have no reason to expect any notable renewal of incidents and disturbances. In these circumstances the necessity for the presence of State police in these districts should no longer exist. As the State police are extremely unpopular among the German inhabitants, and have constituted one of their chief grievances for the last three years, I consider that they should be withdrawn as soon as possible. I believe that their withdrawal would reduce the causes of wrangles and riots.

Further, it has become self-evident to me that those frontier districts between Czechoslovakia and Germany where the Sudeten population is in an important majority should be given full right of self-determination at once. If some cession is inevitable, as I believe it to be, it is as well that it should be done promptly and without procrastination. There is real danger, even a danger of civil war, in the continuance of a state of uncertainty. Consequently, there are very real reasons for a policy of immediate and drastic action. Any kind of plebiscite or referendum would, I believe, be a sheer formality in respect of these predominantly German areas. A very large majority of their inhabitants desire amalgamation with Germany. The inevitable delay involved in taking a plebiscite vote would only serve to excite popular feelings, with perhaps most dangerous results. I consider, therefore, that those frontier districts should at once be transferred from Czechoslovakia to Germany, and further that measures for their peaceful transfer, including the provision of safeguards for the population during the transfer period, should be arranged forthwith by agreement between the two Governments.

The transfer of these frontier districts does not, however, dispose finally of the question how Germans and Czechs are to live together peacefully in future. Even if all the areas where the Germans have a majority were transferred to Germany, there would still remain in Czechoslovakia a large number of Germans and in the areas transferred to Germany there would still be a certain number of Czechs. Economic connexions are so close that an absolute separation is not only undesirable but inconceivable, and I repeat my conviction that history has proved that in times of peace the two peoples can live together on friendly terms. I believe that it is in the interest of all Czechs and of all Germans alike that these friendly relations should be encouraged to re-establish themselves; and I am convinced that this is the real desire of the average Czech and German. They are alike in being honest, peaceable, hard-working and frugal folk. When political friction has been removed on both sides, I believe that they can settle down quietly.

For those portions of the territory, therefore, where the German majority is not so important, I recommend that an effort be made to find a basis for local autonomy within the frontiers of the Czechoslovak Republic on the lines of the 'Fourth Plan', modified so as to meet the new circumstances created by the transfer of the preponderantly German areas. As I have already said, there is always a danger that agreement reached in principle may lead to further divergencies in practice. But I think that in a more peaceful future this risk can be minimised.

This brings me to the political side of the problem, which is concerned with the question of the integrity and security of the Czechoslovak Republic, especially in relation to her immediate neighbours. I believe that here the problem is one of removing a centre of intense political friction from the middle of Europe. For this purpose it is necessary permanently to provide that the Czechoslovak State should live at peace with all her neighbours and that her policy, internal and external, should be directed to that end. Just as it is essential for the international position of Switzerland that her policy should be entirely neutral, so an analogous policy is necessary for Czechoslovakia—not only for her own future existence, but for the peace of Europe.

In order to achieve this, I recommend—

- (1) That those parties and persons in Czechoslovakia who have been deliberately encouraging a policy antagonistic to Czechoslovakia's neighbours should be forbidden by the Czechoslovak Government to continue their agitations;

and that if necessary legal measures should be taken to bring such agitations to an end.

- (2) That the Czechoslovak Government should so remodel her foreign relations as to give assurance to her neighbours that she will in no circumstances attack them or enter into any aggressive action against them arising from obligations to other States.
- (3) That the principal Powers, acting in the interests of the peace of Europe, should give to Czechoslovakia guarantees of assistance in case of unprovoked aggression against her.
- (4) That a commercial treaty on preferential terms should be negotiated between Germany and Czechoslovakia if this seems advantageous to the economic interests of the two countries.

This leads me to the third question which lay within the scope of my enquiry, viz., the economic problem. This problem centres on the distress and unemployment in the Sudeten German areas, a distress which has persisted since 1939, and is due to various causes. It constitutes a suitable background for political discontent. It is a problem which exists; but to say that the Sudeten German question is entirely or even in the main an economic one is misleading. If a transfer of territory takes place, it is a problem which will for the most part fall to the German Government to solve.

If the policy which I have outlined above recommends itself to those immediately concerned in the present situation, I would further suggest: (a) That a representative of the Sudeten German people should have a permanent seat in the Czechoslovak Cabinet. (b) That a commission under a neutral chairman should be appointed to deal with the question of the delimitation of the area to be transferred to Germany and also with controversial points immediately arising from the carrying out of any agreement which may be reached. (c) That an international force be organised to keep order in the districts which are to be transferred pending actual transfer, so that Czechoslovak State police, as I have said above, and also Czechoslovak troops, may be withdrawn from this area.

I wish to close this letter by recording my appreciation of the personal courtesy, hospitality and assistance which I and my staff received from the Government authorities, especially from you [Dr. Benes] and Dr. Hodza, from the representatives of the Sudeten German party with whom we came in contact, and from a very large number of other people in all ranks of life whom we met during our stay in Czechoslovakia.

Yours very sincerely,

RUNCIMAN OF DOXFORD