



**HITLER AND  
CZECHOSLOVAKIA  
IN WORLD WAR II**  
**DOMINATION AND RETALIATION**  
**PATRICK CROWHURST**

BLOOMSBURY



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# HITLER AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN WWII

Domination and Retaliation

PATRICK CROWHURST

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# MAP



-  **SUDETENLAND** Czech Territory ceded to Germany at Munich, September 30th 1938
-  Czech Territory given to Hungary by Germany and Italy at Vienna, October 2nd 1938
-  Czech Territory annexed by Poland November 1, 1938

# INTRODUCTION

Czechoslovakia lost the Sudeten German borderlands to Germany after the Munich Agreement in September 1938. Approximately six months later German troops occupied the remaining part of Bohemia and Moravia and declared it a German protectorate. Czechoslovakia had existed for little more than 20 years. For many Germans, it was a state that should never have been created. In some ways it was the product of unforeseen circumstances rather than a gradual and inevitable political process. Earlier, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there had been a rise in Czech nationalism, which reflected growing Czech financial power as industry developed. The Czechs built a national theatre, created savings banks and other financial institutions, established large cultural and social societies and demanded a greater share in the government of Bohemia, where Czechs were in a majority. But Czech politicians were not united and the Germans were able to deny them any significant increase in political power. During the First World War, contrary to later Czech claims, Czechs generally served loyally as soldiers in the Austrian army. There were no mass desertions and when Czech prisoners in Russia asked to fight against the Austrians, their request was refused. It was only later, when Tomáš Masaryk visited Russia, that the Czech Legion was formed, but it did not see service in the First World War. However, there were Czechs who fought with distinction in the French and Italian forces and these had helped to raise the political profile of Czechs by the time the war ended.

### Emergence of the Czech state

Within the traditional Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, Czech politicians demanded autonomy, not independence, during the First World War. It was the decision by US President Wilson to create nation states – the right to self-determination – that significantly changed the situation, though Britain did not want the Austro-Hungarian Empire to collapse. The Emperor of Austria Franz Joseph offered the Czechs autonomy, but he was too late. The first step towards the creation of a Czech and Slovak republic was taken by Czech politicians independently in Prague. When the fighting was coming to an end in October 1918, the Romanian military garrison in Prague returned home. On the 28th the Prague National Council, consisting of representatives of all political parties, proclaimed itself to be the new government. The following day the Slovak representative, Dr V. Šrobár, was appointed a member of the Council. He was a supporter of Tomáš Masaryk, a former Professor of Philosophy at the Czech University in Prague, who had become the leader of the Czechs in exile during the war. Šrobár declared in Turčanský Sv. Martin that ‘the Slovak nation is both by language and history a part of a united Czechoslovak nation’. This laid the basis for a single Czech and Slovak state. The Council elected Masaryk as the first President of the democratic Czechoslovak Republic. He returned to Prague on 21 December 1918. But the new state had to wait for official recognition from the Allies and the boundaries had to be decided at Versailles. There, the Czech and Slovak delegations were invited to present their case for defining the new state and the frontiers were established by the treaties of St Germain with Austria (September 1919) and Trianon with Hungary (June 1920).

These treaties created the First Czechoslovak Republic and guaranteed the rights of all citizens, including the minority Germans, Hungarians, Poles and Ruthenes (Ukrainians or Little Russians). But the creation of this new, Czech-dominated state roused fierce antagonism among the German population. Not only did they lose their former dominant status, but many felt that they were being unjustly denied the right to self-determination that had been given to others. They thought little of Czechs in general and even less of Slovaks.

German opposition ranged from sadness to indignation. The picture of Emperor Franz Josef that had hung in every school and public office and was a familiar sight to all Germans was replaced by one of Masaryk, who was virtually unknown to them. Many Germans felt so strongly that they tried to join their areas to the adjoining German or Austrian provinces. But this attempt to break away and ignore the treaty of St Germain was crushed by former members of the Czech Legion, who had fought in France and Italy. Many Germans fled and there was some loss of life. The result was that Czechs regarded Germans as politically unreliable and never gave them the full legal rights enjoyed by Czechs and Slovaks. This remained a source of discontent throughout the short history of the First Czechoslovak Republic. It reflected anger on both sides. Austrians demonstrated in Vienna against 'Czech tyranny' in 1919.<sup>1</sup> The feeling was mutual. The Czech attitude towards Germans was reported by Michael Spencer-Smith, sent to Prague as representative of the Bank of England to negotiate the transfer of the assets of the Anglo-Austrian bank. He wrote: 'The hatred of the Czechs for the Austrians is intense and colours every thought and action. The Austrians are treated like dirt ...'<sup>2</sup> German politicians, reflecting this mood among their compatriots, initially refused to take any part in the political process of creating the new Czechoslovak Republic.

### **The industrial development of the new state**

Although the Republic was riven by deep political divisions, in theory the new state had many economic advantages. It had been given the major part of the industries of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and had a well-educated and experienced population to exploit them. What proportion of these were German and Czech it is impossible to state with any certainty, for many ambitious Czechs had learnt German and became assimilated into German society as a means of gaining economic and social advantages. There were similar problems over ethnicity in the Slovak lands, where Hungarian had been imposed as the state language and the Slovak language and culture suppressed. What is clear, however, is that in the Sudeten area along the German and Austrian frontiers, there was a wide variety

of successful industries: coal mining and quarrying, chemical, textile, glass and porcelain, civil and mechanical engineering and musical instrument making. In reality, many of these faced serious difficulties in the new state. In the textile industry, for example, some spinning and weaving mills were now separated because they were in different countries. Some manufacturers had to import raw materials instead of buying them within the former Empire. All faced the difficulty that they could produce more than the new Czechoslovak Republic could consume, and the surplus had to be sold abroad across tariff barriers, which reduced their competitiveness. The new successor states (Austria, Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia) were anxious to establish their own industries and used tariffs as a way of excluding Czechoslovak competition. The former tariff-free Empire, stretching from West Bohemia to Romania and from southern Poland to the Balkans had disappeared. Many of the workers in these factories facing new competition were Sudeten Germans (Germans living in the western border area of the new state). Unemployment, or the fear of it, increased their antipathy towards the new Czech-dominated government, which appeared to have little interest in their problem.

### **The creation of the new Czechoslovak currency**

The first priority for Alois Rašín, the new finance minister, and the government was to establish Czechoslovak control over the state's assets. A census of the population and their property was carried out to see what these consisted of. The next step was to isolate the country from the economic uncertainty and inflation in the neighbouring states. The frontier was officially closed to prevent the movement of currency into or out of Czechoslovakia and all banknotes in the country were overprinted. These became the only form of legal money in Czechoslovakia. The next step was to replace these overprinted notes with new ones and fix the exchange rate of the new Czechoslovak crown in relation to other currencies. All this was carried out smoothly and efficiently, though the initial exchange rate was too high. The new currency created economic stability and Sudeten German businessmen and workers were able to see the benefits of



belonging to the new state in comparison to the uncertainty elsewhere. As a result, the attitude of the Sudeten German population began to change and their politicians became more willing to take part in Czechoslovak politics.

### **The transfer of industrial control**

The Czechoslovak government also wanted to establish control over the state's assets, especially its industries. Originally these had been financed by Austrian and Hungarian capital and, until the First World War, Vienna had been the centre of Central European finance. As a result, Viennese banks were major shareholders in Czechoslovak companies, whose head offices were situated in Vienna. Rašín ordered that all head offices of Czechoslovak companies should be moved to Prague and this was followed by the transfer of shares from Vienna to Prague. This was only possible because foreign capital was invested in Czechoslovak companies and banks. The difficulty facing Czechoslovakia was that the Czech banks were not as large as the Viennese. Before the war Prague had been no more than a provincial capital. There were large Czech investments, but they were mainly in savings institutions and not in commercial banks.

The largest Czech bank, the *Živnostenská banka*, was a major investor in Czech industry.<sup>3</sup> The second, the *Agrární banka*, attracted the funds of small agricultural, financial institutions, especially local agricultural companies and credit cooperatives. Others, formed before the First World War, specialised in different areas of business and had been helped by a wave of nationalism in 1903, which had led many Czechs to transfer their investments from German to Czech banks. The Czechoslovak government solved the problem of national control by ordering that branches of Austrian banks in the new Republic should become Czechoslovak institutions and sever their links with the parent banks. The result was that Czechoslovak banking in the interwar period consisted of Czech banks, led by the powerful *Živnostenská banka*, several Czech-German banks, some German banks and one Anglo-Czech, the Anglo-Czechoslovak Bank (formerly the Czech branches of the Anglo-Austrian Bank).<sup>4</sup>

### Foreign investment in industry

The replacement of Viennese by Czechoslovak capital was only possible with large American, French and British investments, some of which were in banks (which owned companies' shares) and companies. Before the war, Britain, France and Germany had been the major creditor nations in the world, but after 1918 Germany was replaced by France.<sup>5</sup> Britain was still the largest investor, but most of British capital went to the British Empire. Comparatively little British finance (8 per cent) went into Europe. On the other hand, more than half of all French investment (60 per cent) was in European business. The USA, also a major financial power after the First World War, also invested considerable sums in Europe – much more than France – but these only amounted to 30 per cent of American overseas investments.

But this only tells part of the story. Foreign investment in Czechoslovak business was by no means evenly spread. Some industries were more important economically and strategically. One was mining and metallurgy – coal, iron and steel – and Britain invested far more in this (61 per cent of foreign investments) than any other foreign country (second was France with 15 per cent).<sup>6</sup> Closely linked to the iron and steel industry was Škoda, which had been the main armaments industry in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One of the main Allied concerns at the Versailles peace negotiations was that this should not be owned by Germany or Austria. Immediately after the Versailles Treaty had been signed, the French company Schneider et Cie bought 73 per cent of the shares.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter, when more were issued, Schneider bought some of them. Although the French majority holding was never in doubt, it was not clear what proportion the French company owned. French ownership of the majority of the shares did not, however, mean that the French dictated commercial policy. The French were content that their control of Škoda, as in other French investments, had prevented it remaining in German hands.

This French interest in strategically important industries was not confined to Škoda. One of the other important French investments was in the oil industry, which was becoming more important with the development of motor transport after the First World War.

The French bought control of Apollo, an important company that refined Romanian oil.<sup>8</sup> Founded in 1895 in Bratislava, the company was Hungarian, with headquarters in Budapest. Apollo bought Romanian oil, transported it by barge via the Danube, refined it at its own refinery in Bratislava and produced paraffin and lubricating oil. These were carried by rail to markets in the main cities and manufacturing centres in the Empire. But by the end of the First World War the company was also beginning to produce petrol. In 1924 the headquarters were moved from Budapest to Prague and the company was registered as Czechoslovak, with a share capital of 7 million Czechoslovak crowns. Finance for this transfer came from France: the Société Française des Pétroles de Malopolska and the Crédit Général des Pétroles. Motoring developed in the 1920s in Czechoslovakia: cars were made by Laurin and Klement (later bought by Škoda), ČKD (Českomoravské Kolben Daněk) and Tatra. These companies also made commercial vehicles. Besides these there were smaller firms such as Aero which made lightweight two-seaters, and others which manufactured rudimentary canvas covered vehicles (cyclocars). Motorcycles were made by Jawa and other small firms. All helped to create a market for petrol and Apollo decided to have its own petrol stations. The firm increased its capital in 1925 to 12 million crowns (60,00 shares) and used the additional shares to merge with a Czechoslovak company which owned petrol stations. French control of Apollo thus gave it an important stake in the Czechoslovak industrial economy.

The rest of Czechoslovak industry was dominated by three companies: Vítkovice Mining and Foundry Works in Ostrava, the Mining and Metallurgic Company in Třinec and the Prague Iron company in Kladno. These produced virtually all pig iron, and almost three-quarters of steel and rolled products. All were very large conglomerates, owning coal mines, coking plants and related industries. Like other companies in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they had formed a cartel before the war and continued to dominate the industry during the First Republic, gradually absorbing most of the smaller producers. Their evolution from Austrian to Czechoslovak companies shows how the change took place.

Vítkovice had originally been founded jointly by the Viennese branch of the Rothschilds and the Guttman brothers, Viennese financiers. After the war, although the shares were still in the same hands, all accounting was done in Paris and the company's representative was Eugène Rothschild.<sup>9</sup> The Viennese branch of the Rothschilds had transferred much of its capital to Paris and it was the Rothschilds rather than the Guttmanns who set the pace of modernisation and increased the company's efficiency and output. The second firm was the Mining and Metallurgic Company of Třinec. This was also situated in the North Moravian coalfield, east of Ostrava. It was an area with a mixed Czech, German and Polish population, in which it was widely believed that Poles formed a majority and which Poland claimed, unsuccessfully, after the First World War.<sup>10</sup> It was also an area in which the workers were increasingly attracted to Marxism, and strikes had broken out in 1920. The result was that the value of the shares had declined and German and Austrian shareholders had decided to sell. But because of the size of the company, even the Živnostenská banka had insufficient capital to buy the majority of these shares. In 1920 after lengthy negotiations it was left to the important French iron and steel company, Schneider et Cie-Creusot, to buy a controlling interest.<sup>11</sup> The third company in this group, the Prague Iron Company, had originally been the major steel producer before the First World War and was the principal shareholder in the Österreichische Alpina Gesellschaft. In the spring of 1919 the Niederösterreichische Escomte Gesellschaft, the main shareholder, bought the shares of the Alpina company and later, in 1926, transferred a major part (57 per cent) to the German Vereinigte Stahlwerke. Czech control of the company was maintained through directors who represented the Czech Escomte Bank and Credit Institute in Prague, which before nostrification (Czech control) had been part of the Niederösterreichische Escomte Gesellschaft in Vienna, and which retained an important presence on the board.

### Major Czechoslovak companies

This industrial expansion was typical of Czechoslovak companies in the 1920s. Škoda was the outstanding example of a company that

changed from being an armaments manufacturer to a company with a wide variety of industrial interests.<sup>12</sup> The Austrian owner, Karel Škoda, was replaced by Josef Šimonek, who linked the company to the large and influential Czechoslovak Agrarian Party. Many of the managers were also members of this party and the Živnostenská banka was an important shareholder. Schneider Creusot provided financial stability and management expertise to help with reorganisation to reduce the very high production costs. From 1919 Škoda began to design and manufacture locomotives, diesel engines, brewery and sugar refining equipment, agricultural implements and buses (many for relatively undeveloped countries such as Afghanistan, Indonesia and China) and equipment for breweries and sugar refineries. Repayment was spread over a number of years, but financed by foreign (mainly British) loans negotiated by the finance director, Karel Loevenstein, in 1923. In the opinion of one Dutch rating firm, this loan established Škoda as the largest European engineering company. Three years later Loevenstein negotiated an even larger loan – £22.5 million.

The second half of the 1920s was a period of intense rivalry between Škoda and ČKD, which produced a similar range of products. There was a serious clash in the mid 1920s when ČKD claimed that Škoda's monopoly of supplying arms to the Czechoslovak army enabled it to charge unrealistically high prices and discouraged research. However, this did not end Škoda's monopoly. In 1928 it signed a new contract with the Ministry of Defence worth 451 million crowns but also promised to build new armaments factories at Dubnica nad Váhom in Slovakia and Adamov near Brno that would be less vulnerable to German attack. In the second half of the 1920s Škoda's exports rose from just under 690 million crowns in 1926 to 1,638 million crowns in 1930. This reflected a rapid rise in output in 1928–9 which was roughly double that of its rival ČKD.<sup>13</sup> In the 1930s both survived the Depression, mainly by sales of armaments to Romania, Czechoslovakia's ally in the Little Entente, and payments for earlier sales. As the Depression ended and the threat from Germany increased under Hitler, both companies took an active part in equipping the country for possible war. Both produced tanks, guns, weapons of all types, motor vehicles and other forms of military *materiel*.

Another major Czechoslovak company with a European reputation was the boot and shoe manufacturer Bat'a.<sup>14</sup> Whereas Škoda's success was built on scientific knowledge and engineering experience, Bat'a's was based initially on village craftsmanship. From humble beginnings, by the end of the First World War this firm had grown into a major manufacturer of boots and shoes. Tomáš Bat'a, the firm's founder and driving force, had gained first-hand experience of factory production by working in American factories and based his approach to factory production on Taylor's theory of Scientific Management, using the most modern machinery and methods of manufacture. Workers were trained to perform simple tasks efficiently and quickly and output was governed by the speed of the assembly line. Employees worked as teams and it was in their joint interest to maximise production and maintain a high quality. Under Bat'a's control, output rose and prices fell, driving many smaller firms out of business.

The story of the Bat'a company during the First Republic is one of steady progress. The company expanded to cover all aspects of production from the purchase and preparation of leather and other raw materials to manufacturing and sales. Tomáš Bat'a claimed that he wanted to provide simple, cheap, good quality shoes for the whole world. His factory at Zlín became a large industrial complex which included not only the manufacture of boots and shoes but also the machines with which these were made. But Bat'a was not simply a hard-driving taskmaster. He created a factory town in which all the employees, managers and workers alike were well housed in modern buildings. He also provided a school and college for training workers, a hospital, hotel and leisure facilities. When foreign countries threatened to block imports of his shoes in the 1930s, he established factories there which were largely self-supporting, though linked to the head office at Zlín by a common work ethic and methods of business. He was also unique in insisting that all his employees who worked overseas should respect local customs. But above all, Bat'a created a worldwide, commercial empire. Within Czechoslovakia Bat'a made boots and shoes, motor tyres, machinery, socks and stockings. The company also owned quarries, an advertising agency, a film company, an airline, a shipping company, a company savings scheme and made

light aircraft. The company also had a subsidiary, Omnopol. This had originally been created to sell Bat'a products overseas. But it also acted as agent for many small companies that wanted to import and export but could not afford to employ their own staff. The basis of this commercial empire was efficient manufacture and carefully planned marketing. Managers of Bat'a shops who achieved sales above the company targets were well rewarded. Those who failed to meet the targets were penalised. It was said that being a manager of a Bat'a shoe shop ended either with making a man rich or driving him to suicide. But Bat'a himself was a driven man who also took considerable personal risks. When sales fell disastrously in 1932 he cut his prices by half and advertised this reduction widely in a big advertising campaign. Sales soared and he was able to clear stocks that would not have been sold if he had followed the traditional policy of making successive small, piecemeal reductions. But he was forced to reduce production. He laid off 5,000 workers and reduced the wages of the others. Thanks to this, his business survived and although Tomáš Bat'a was killed in an air crash in 1932, the company continued to develop in the same way in the second half of the 1930s.

These were the main Czechoslovak companies which were the principal German target for exploitation. None was specifically German or Czech. There was also a wide range of other companies, many medium or small, which represented the range of Czechoslovak industrial strength in the First Republic. They included heavy and light engineering, chemical, glass making and textile companies. The common feature was an ability to innovate and develop beyond their original expertise. They showed a general sense of progress and prosperity, temporarily halted by the Depression, but recovering before the full effect of the Sudeten crisis and the Munich Conference.

### **Sudeten nationalism**

While this is true of Czech companies, it does not reflect the feeling among Sudeten Germans. In the early years of the First Republic they had been involved in an unsuccessful struggle to maintain their independence of Czech control.<sup>15</sup> Although economically life improved after

1923, there remained a strong nationalist sentiment and the Sudeten German firms did not necessarily share in the economic progress. The nationalist sentiment was expressed, for example, in the *Sudetendeutscher Katechismus* published in 1923 and which followed a similar 'catechism' published in 1919. The author was Erwin Volkmann, a pseudonym for Erich Gierach of Reichenberg (Czech Liberec), who taught at the German University in Prague from 1921 to 1936 and then joined the Nazi Party and went to Munich. He claimed that it was the Germans who had the true historical claim to the Sudeten area, and not the Czechs.

The Czechoslovak government was aware of right-wing German attitudes and the danger this posed to the state. In 1927 a law was passed making it a serious crime to do anything that might undermine the unity of the state. Two years later the Nazi Party made its first appearance as the *Volkssport*, or to give it its full name *Verband Volkssport, Nationalsozialistischer Verband für Wandern, Radfahren, Spiel und Sport aller Art*. On the surface, this was no more than a sporting club organised by a minor right-wing political party. It was given official recognition – and approval – in April and was based in Fulnek. In reality it was a Nazi SA (*Sturmabteilung*) organisation that set out to indoctrinate young Sudeten Germans. Among the courses it offered was one on leadership (*Führerkurse*). This was not a course for potential leaders but one intended to teach the need to be disciplined and obey a strong leader: the *Führerprinzip*. *Volkssport* also taught paramilitary subjects: weapons training and map reading as well as a range of physical activities. The sessions were held as *Heimatabende*, stressing the element of German folk culture. The organisation gradually became more confident and its members began wearing a uniform with swastika armbands and jackboots. It was active in Prague among German students and Joseph Goebbels was invited to speak in February 1930. The banner announcing his visit stated: 'Achtung hier [ist] Deutschland. Der Nationalsozialismus marschiert. Burschen heraus zur N. S. Woche. Alle Mann [sic] an die Front. [Attention. This is Germany. National Socialism is on the march. Contribute to National Socialist week! Everyone must take an active part]



This Nazi activity took place at a time of rising unemployment. Sudeten Germans were alarmed about their economic prospects and there was good reason for this. One example is Josef Kaub's machine construction and foundry company in Domažlice in West Bohemia, which expanded in 1927 but soon had to begin laying off workers. It did not recover until 1944. In September 1930, the Social Democratic Party and the *Gewerkschaftsbund* united and held a congress in Prague to publicise the rising economic hardship. Speakers claimed that unemployment among Sudeten Germans was higher than among Czechs. A speaker claimed that in 61 purely Czech districts there were 27,288 unemployed of a total population of 2.8 million. In 41 purely Sudeten German districts there were 27,042 unemployed out of 1.5 million. For the country as a whole unemployment among Czechs was 9 per 1,000 but 18 among Sudeten Germans. There were similar complaints from workers in the chemical, tobacco and clothing industries. This combination of rising unemployment and increasing Nazi activity led the Czechoslovak government to ban members of *Volkssport* wearing their official uniform. But all that happened was that they began wearing another: blue cap, white shirt and black tie. The cap badge had the monogram VS, which could be reversed to appear as SA. In neighbouring Austria, Nazi activity became more threatening. In 1931 Nazis tried to seize power in Upper Styria and in 1932 a memorial concert was held in Salzburg to commemorate those killed in demonstrations for Sudeten German independence in 1919. Membership of *Volkssport* increased in Czechoslovakia from 5,000 to 40,000 in 1932 and groups openly sang the Nazi song '*Die Fahne hoch*' ['Carry the flag high'].

### Czech reaction

Finally the Czechoslovak government reached the limits of its tolerance. In September 1932 a group of Sudeten German Nazis in Brno were charged with organising Nazi storm troop groups under the guise of *Volkssport* and *Jungsturm* organisations. The trial was intended as a warning. Although the movement was intended to destroy the Czechoslovak state – a crime under the 1927 law – the accused were

only given jail sentences of one to three years. But this was followed by the arrest and trial of five Sudeten German parliamentary representatives in January 1933 – an action which was criticised by the Communists who were afraid the same might happen to them ('We don't need a trial. Give us bread and work'). This was the start of a concerted attack by the Czechoslovak government on all members of extreme right-wing Sudeten German groups. In June 1932 the government proclaimed a state of emergency with fines of a maximum of 50,000 crowns. Forty-two Sudeten German Nazis from the West Bohemian textile town of Asch – which was suffering extreme hardship in the Depression – were put on trial for attending Nazi meetings in Germany. This was only the beginning. On 19 June the German ambassador in Prague reported to the German Foreign Office that there were 1,300 trials of political activists and 700 were in prison awaiting trial. Sudeten German students at the German University in Prague could not engage in politics. No activity calling for the union of all Germans in one state (*gleichgeschaltet*) was tolerated and another 98 Reich newspapers had been banned.

### Official German support for Sudeten Germans

This marks the point at which the German Foreign Office began to become actively involved in the activities of the Sudeten German Nazi Party. The German embassy in Prague learnt of many Sudeten Germans in prison awaiting trial. This caused serious economic hardship for all their dependants. When this was reported to Berlin, funds were made available for their support, on Hitler's orders. But since all participation in this political activity, or even association with it, was illegal, the German diplomats had to be extremely careful to avoid disbursing this money openly and being accused of breaking the law. News of this money began to circulate among the Sudeten German political activists, who appealed to the embassy for help. The correspondence between Koch, the senior German diplomat in Prague, and the Foreign Ministry in Berlin show how the embassy was gradually forced to become the Nazi Party's representative in Czechoslovakia. Koch disbursed money to the dependants of activists,

paid back money that had been taken illegally from union funds to pay for legal representation (600,000 crowns for the defence of the union leader Krebs) and eventually became Konrad Henlein's paymaster as the latter moved towards leadership of the apparently more moderate SdP (Sudeten deutsche Partei). He passed on considerable sums of money for Sudeten German (Nazi) newspapers and for election expenses at a time when Germany was very short of foreign exchange. Koch himself was not a Nazi. But he believed in the German superiority over Czechs and considered that the Sudeten Germans had been harshly treated.

This was the situation when Konrad Henlein swept to victory in the 1935 elections with 66 per cent of the Sudeten German votes. He represented apparently moderate Sudeten German opinion and struck a balance between the extreme Nazis and the moderate 'activists' who supported the Czech-led government. In reality, Konrad Henlein had received a great deal of financial help from Germany and from right-wing groups in the Sudeten German community. He was also an experienced organiser of mass community sporting activities. From 1935 Konrad Henlein followed a policy of pressing the Czechoslovak government for greater political power for the Sudeten German population but had to hold a balance between his moderate supporters and the extreme Nazis such as his deputy Hans Frank.

### Hitler's plans to invade Czechoslovakia

By July 1936 Hitler had decided that he could start planning his eastward expansion: a continuation and development of Germany's eastern policy in the First World War (*Drang nach Osten*). His Order No. 23 instructed the army to plan an invasion of Czechoslovakia. Hitler realised that Henlein's pressure on the Czechoslovak government would not be enough to cause its collapse. Konrad Henlein was demanding an improvement in Sudeten German rights; but their status as second-class citizens did not change. There was still widespread discontent. Sudeten Germans considered that they had not been supported during the Depression and felt excluded from the renewed prosperity of Czech companies which were benefiting

from government defence contracts. However, Henlein's bargaining position was weakened by the continued support given by Sudeten German 'activist' (traditional) parties to the Czechoslovak government. These continued to claim to represent Sudeten German interests and the government was prepared to negotiate with them on this basis. The speech by President Beneš at Reichenberg in August 1937 was conciliatory and seemed to show that the government was prepared to make reasonable concessions.

Unknown to Beneš, German plans to invade Czechoslovakia had been approved in outline in June. By July they had reached an advanced stage; the military garrison at Dresden would make the main attack. Additional military activity to the west would divide Czechoslovak military forces. These advanced preparations for war encouraged Hitler to hold a meeting with senior German diplomats and military leaders in November. The only record of this, the Hossbach memorandum, has been discussed at length because although it seemed to set out a plan of campaign – an attack on Czechoslovakia and Austria – this is not what actually happened. The main purpose of the November meeting was to prepare senior members of the Foreign Ministry and army for war in the near future, though they believed that war would not come before 1942.

### **The Anschluss and Sudeten crisis**

Early the following year Hitler increased the pressure on Austria for a union with Germany. Hitler had already created the Austrian Legion of Austrian Nazis. These were trained in street fighting by members of the *Leibstandarte* 'Adolf Hitler' and were infiltrated into Austria. The Austrian Chancellor, Schuschnigg, resisted Hitler's demands and was summoned to the Obersalzberg on 12 February. On his return to Vienna he asked Britain for support and organised a plebiscite on the proposed union. Before this could take place, on 12 March Hitler sent German troops into Austria. Seyss Inquart replaced Schuschnigg and on 14 March Hitler entered Vienna.

These events were closely followed by the Sudeten German population. Hitler's success led the Sudeten German activist parties to ally

themselves with Henlein's SdP. This unleashed a wave of popular feeling among Sudeten Germans, who believed that it would quickly lead to changes in Czechoslovak government policy. The situation is vividly described in a telegram by Eisenlohr, who had replaced Koch as the senior German diplomat in Prague:

Following the merger of the German Activist parties with the SdP about 36 meetings of Henlein's movement with some 500,000 members took place in Sudeten German area on Sunday March 27. Demonstrations naturally overshadowed by happenings in Austria [the Anschluss] and were characterized by very violent outbreaks of enthusiasm on the part of Sudeten German people, who expect complete reshaping of their destiny. In this connection, understand from reliable agent that, for instance, [Nazi] Party flags were hoisted on town hall in Asch, accompanied by pealing of all church bells, during armed demonstration. Out of 34,000 inhabitants of Eger, 25,000 Germans deployed likewise to accompaniment of church bells. Henlein's movement war standard was hoisted on town hall. Out of 18,000 inhabitants of Saaz, 15,000 Germans marched shouting "One people, one Reich, one Führer." In Görkau, where Government representatives had forbidden German salute, speaker commenced his speech with "On behalf of you all I salute our Führer and the entire German people with upraised hands." In locality where formerly Activist or non-party burgomaster went over to Sudeten German Party, this even was symbolised by hoisting German Sudeten Party flag on town hall to accompaniment of church bells.

On orders from above Czechoslovak police and *gendarmérie* showed great restraint. At various places Government representatives were obliged to render military salute to Sudeten German Party flag. Population feel behaviour of police to be helplessness and abdication of civil authority. They reckon on complete *volte-face* after 10 April [probably a reference to the plebiscite on union of Austria with Germany] and possibly even Reich intervention.

... Party leaders of Sudeten German Party have recognised present enthusiastic mood as dangerous.<sup>16</sup>

This was followed by rumours that members of German athletic clubs were being armed and that the former *Ordnerdienst*, a paramilitary organisation that had formerly protected party meetings, was being re-created. Henlein tried to calm the situation by enlarging the SdP membership and enforcing discipline on members. But tension remained high. The Nazi Party, SA and SS in Austria were circulating rumours along the frontier that German troops would invade Bohemia and Moravia after the plebiscite that Hitler had called for 10 April to approve the Anschluss. It appeared that Sudeten Germans were being asked to prepare fighting units as soon as possible. Henlein reported that uniforms were being made in Krumau (Czech Krumlov) in preparation for the entry of German troops. Women's organisations were making swastika flags and importing many more illegally. Henlein felt that he was losing control of the situation and was being criticised by students in Prague who considered his policy too moderate. The Czechs responded by arming Czech civilians in the frontier districts, Sokol clubs, Red Guards and the frontier guards. Heavily armed, motorised Czechoslovak units were also formed. War was expected; the Czech Chief of General Staff, Krejčí, had remarked to the departing Austrian military attaché, Longin: "We shall probably come to blows."<sup>17</sup>

Faced with the threat of war, France restated its support for Czechoslovakia, but this failed to calm the situation in the Sudetenland. On 9 April Henlein's, deputy, Frank reported that the situation in northern Bohemia was 'catastrophic and shattering'. Sudeten German opinion was turning against the Czech minority. Dr Eckert, Henlein's agent, reported that a 'single shot for Sudeten Germans would suffice to start a blood bath among Czechs'. At the same time, support for Henlein was being weakened by his willingness to negotiate with the Czechoslovak government. Sudeten Germans thought that he had abandoned his demand for autonomy. All he had achieved was a promise to move the elections, which offered to give the SdP greater power at a local level, forward to June. His failure to present a clear political programme was also damaging his reputation abroad. Hitler reconsidered his plans to invade Czechoslovakia. On 21 April

in discussion with Keitel, chief of staff, he decided to abandon *Fall Grün* (Case Green), the planned invasion of Czechoslovakia, because of world opinion. He no longer had any confidence that the army could complete the conquest of Czechoslovakia in four days as originally planned. Instead, he decided to foment political unrest and hoped that this would provide an opportunity for intervention in the Sudetenland.

The next stage in the crisis was Henlein's Karlsbad speech on 24 April. Although if accepted, his demands would have breached the Czechoslovak constitution and undermined Czechoslovak democracy, Hitler expected that, like the Austrian ultimatum that precipitated the First World War, Henlein's demands would be rejected by the Czechoslovak government and provoke war. The German Foreign Ministry was finally informed of the invasion plans and told that mobilisation had already begun. All missions abroad were warned that war could break out. Czechoslovakia also prepared for war. In the May Crisis that followed, Czechoslovakia called up a large part of its army and manned the frontier defences. Mobilisation was carried out swiftly and efficiently. There were also rumours on the 18th and 19th of a German invasion and that four motorised divisions – part of a force of 11 divisions – had been formed north of Bohemia. The British consul in Dresden heard of forces massing in Silesia and northern Austria. There were also stories of Germans being taught Czech and roads from Chemnitz being full of troop convoys.<sup>18</sup> These were denied by the German Foreign Ministry. It is possible that German troops had earlier moved from their barracks in Dresden to take up positions near the frontier as part of the planned attack. Hitler and the German army felt that they had to be prepared for war. When the immediate crisis was past and the Czechoslovak government was persuaded to demobilise its forces, British diplomats were sent to the German–Czechoslovak frontier to check whether the rumours had been true. It was hardly surprising that they found no sign of the soldiers.

The situation in the summer of 1938 was that Europe had apparently come close to war. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain tried to discover the causes of the Sudeten complaints by sending Lord

Runciman to Czechoslovakia, but he was unsuited to the task, failed to understand what was happening and spent most of his free time with Sudeten Germans rather than Czechs. Runciman's mission had little or no influence on events. In any case Henlein and other Sudeten Germans had already presented their case to Vansittart and other British diplomats and politicians in London and had been able to create the impression that the whole Sudeten population was on the brink of civil war. This marks the final stage of the Sudeten crisis. Believing that only concessions by the Czechoslovak government could avert war and that Hitler's demands were reasonable, Chamberlain tried to find what concessions Hitler would accept. There followed the two meetings and the Munich Conference, in which Britain and France believed that they had averted war by sacrificing a minor power to a major. So little did Chamberlain really understand about the matter that it was comparatively easy for Hitler to fix the terms of the agreements and set the new frontiers.

This effectively destroyed Czechoslovakia as a viable state because it took away the frontier defences and a large part of Czechoslovak industry. It also encouraged Poland to demand the strip of territory north of Ostrava and the exodus of Czechs and anti-Nazi Germans from the Sudetenland was matched by a smaller flow of refugees from the territory seized by Poland. Public outrage in London, a British loan and public donations to the Lord Mayor of London's appeal to help these refugees marks the end of the First Czechoslovak Republic. It was only a short time before Germany took the remaining part of Bohemia and Moravia, encouraged Slovak demands for independence and began to assimilate the Czech economic and social assets in the preparation for war. The German army already had a good general idea of Czechoslovak industry (major industrial centres and numbers employed) from an earlier report in the 1920s. From the end of March 1939 they were able to seize everything of economic and military importance and the equipment of the Czechoslovak army. The German population of Czechoslovakia, not all of which was in the Sudetenland, expected to be once again in control and were potential allies for Hitler's plans to exploit the country. Czech weakness – their inability in a crisis to obtain help from their allies the USSR,



France and the Little Entente – suggested that it would be simple to exploit them in any way that Hitler and the German army thought necessary to help in the planned eastward expansion. Thus the scene was set for the final preparations for war on Poland and, later, the USSR.

# CHAPTER 1

## DEEPENING CRISIS, THE MUNICH CONFERENCE AND REFUGEES

Reduced to the bare essentials, Hitler's policy in the final Czechoslovak crisis of September 1939 and the subsequent dismemberment of what remained of Czechoslovakia was based on no more than bluff. Conditions in the Sudeten German area were never as bad as he claimed, though there was serious hardship and widespread discontent. Events which he claimed were 'proof' of Czech hostility were exaggerated or deliberately provoked. Nor was there any real risk of civil war in Czechoslovakia. Equally, there had been discontent in the predominantly Polish area around 'Teschen' (Czech Český Těšín, Polish Cieszyn) and 'Freistadt' (Czech Karviná-Fryštát) for a long time, but nothing to suggest that the area was in such ferment that a transfer to Poland would solve the matter. The same could be said about the southern border of Slovakia inhabited by a majority of Hungarian speakers or the Ruthene area in the extreme east occupied by people who were ethnically Ukrainian. Yet within six months of the Munich Conference, Czechoslovakia had lost territory to Germany, Poland and Hungary and the remaining Czech lands in Bohemia and Moravia had been seized and renamed the Protectorate. Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist, but without creating the peace and stability that Hitler and German diplomats had claimed would be the result.

Every move by Hitler was accompanied by violent threats of imminent destruction. He claimed in every case to be acting in the name of peace, trying to find a solution to events that were rapidly falling into chaos. He succeeded partly because he appeared plausible and because he was a unique head of state. Diplomats and politicians had never encountered such a man before in that position. He was the first twentieth-century politician to base his aggressive policy on the simple, Machiavellian thesis that anything was permissible if it was successful. His later policy from March 1939 to the outbreak of the Second World War was no more than a continuation of this. He wanted more living space for Germans. At the same time he was thinking of ways of disposing of (killing) as many of the inhabitants of these lands in Central and Eastern Europe and the USSR that could not be 'Germanised'. In the case of the Czechs, at the centre of this study, this would have resulted in a 'solution' that would have destroyed them as a people, either by starving them or turning them into some form of second-class 'German' people.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately for the Czechs, Hitler never had the time or opportunity to complete these plans and put them into effect, though German control of the former Czechoslovakia from 1938 to 1945 caused immense hardship. It also resulted later in the expulsion of virtually all of the Sudeten Germans in an act of revenge. Only those married to Czechs or who were regarded as pro-Czech were allowed to stay and they changed the spelling of their German family name to make them appear 'Czech'. The German presence in Czechoslovakia disappeared.

### Prelude to the Munich Conference

By August 1938 Hitler's plans for invading Czechoslovakia were complete and the army had been persuaded that it could be successful. The Sudeten German political demands had been backed by German writers in Czechoslovakia and Germany, who claimed that the Sudeten Germans had never been treated fairly and that Czechs and Germans had hated each other for centuries. In Berlin, Rudolf Jung's book, *Die Tschechen; Tausend Jahre deutsch-tschechischer Kampf* had appeared in 1937 in a second, enlarged, edition. In 1938, as the crisis deepened, there