

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

THE SOLDIER AS STATESMAN:  
THE FRENCH MILITARY MISSION TO CZECHOSLOVAKIA  
AND THE  
MUNICH CRISIS OF 1938.

by

PETER JACKSON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE  
DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

CALGARY, ALBERTA

JULY, 1991

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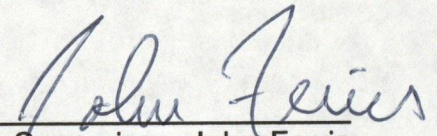
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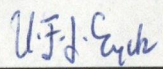
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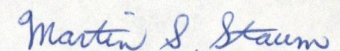


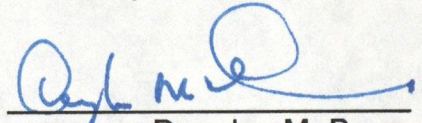
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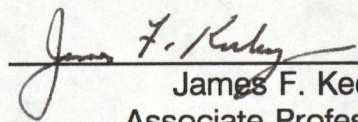
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## **Abstract**

During the interwar period the place of Czechoslovakia in French strategy and diplomacy reflected France's status as a European power. In the 1920s Czechoslovakia was the centrepiece of the French system of alliances in eastern Europe which functioned as an effective deterrent to German revisionism. During the 1930s, however, the resurgence of Germany and the effects of the Great Depression brought about a decisive change in the European balance of power. This change left France a power in decline. Although Paris retained its diplomatic ties to Prague, the likelihood of France going to war to save its ally from German aggression steadily diminished during the pre-war decade. In September of 1938 this trend culminated in the Munich Conference, where France abandoned its alliance with Czechoslovakia and agreed to the dismemberment of the young republic.

Général Louis Eugène Faucher, an officer who had been attached to the French military mission to Czechoslovakia in Prague since 1918, expressed outrage at France's behaviour during the Munich Crisis. His criticisms of the decision to abandon Czechoslovakia and his assessments of the military situation have been central to historical accounts which have condemned French policy



during the crisis. In an attempt to reassess French policy at Munich, this study will examine the role played by Faucher and the military mission during the interwar period -particularly during the spring and summer of 1938. It will also reconsider the role of Czechoslovakia in French strategy.

Using material from the French military and diplomatic archives, as well as the private papers of various soldiers and statesmen, I argue that Général Faucher's perspective during the crisis was severely limited, and that this distorted his assessments of the strategic situation. I also contend that historical interpretations which use Faucher's views as evidence are flawed because they ignore the vital imperatives of French grand strategy - most importantly the necessity of securing British support in any war with Germany - which ruled out war for Czechoslovakia in 1938. The resulting conclusion is that cooperation with Britain, which meant acceding to Hitler's demands, was the only realistic course of action for France during the Munich Crisis.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The successful completion of this study owes much to the advice and support of others. First of all I should like to thank my supervisor, Dr. John Ferris, whose perceptive insights and patient guidance have been of immeasurable value these past two years. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Martin Staum of the University of Calgary and Dr. Y.A. Bennett of Carleton University. The dedication and commitment of these scholars to students is inspiring - it instilled in me a desire to pursue history at the graduate level. To Dr. Robert Young of the University of Winnipeg, who initially suggested this topic and whose expertise in French history is matched only by his willingness to offer advice and support, I owe a special debt. This assistance was augmented by the generous financial support provided by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and the Department of History of the University of Calgary.

I am also very grateful for permission to consult the archives of the Service

Historique de l'Armée de Terre at Vincennes, the Ministère des Affaires Etrangère at Paris and at Nantes, the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques at the Archives Nationales in Paris and the Public Record Office in London.

Several friends and colleagues also made significant contributions. Barry Bristman, Francine Michaud and Robert Hanks all read parts or all of various drafts of this study and provided helpful suggestions which were greatly appreciated. Chris Henricks created the map which appears on page 112. Steven MacMillan generously provided me with a room and a computer to work on the final stages of the thesis in Ottawa. The support staff of the Department of History at the University of Calgary were also extremely helpful. A special thanks to Liam O'Connor, who unselfishly allowed me to stay with him in Paris while I conducted the research for this study.

Many thanks also to Brad Sinclair, Richard Watson, Deborah Mazar Mark Shannon and Alec Dawson for their continued interest and encouragement. Above all, I thank my family: my sister Mary Jane Jackson, my mother Mary Jacqueline Jackson and my late father Eric Jackson. Without the love and support of these people it would not have been possible to either succeed in graduate studies or to write this thesis. Finally, thank you to Sandra, for everything.



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## LIST OF MAPS

Czechoslovakia in 1938

112

"No one who depends on others, and lacks resources of his own, can ever be free. Alliances and treaties may bind the weak to the strong, but never the strong to the weak."

--Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
A Constitutional Project  
for Corsica

"Consider. France has been bled white twice in a hundred years, once in the wars of the Empire, and again in 1914: added to which, the birth rate is falling every day. Is this the moment to start another war which could cost us three or four million men? Three or four million men whom we could never replace,' he said rapping out the words. 'Win or lose, the country would decline into a second class Power: that is quite certain. And then there is something else: Czechoslovakia will be knocked out before we can move a finger. Look at a map: it's like a haunch of meat between the jaws of the German wolf. If the wolf tightens his jaws a bit ...'"

--Jean-Paul Sartre  
The Reprieve



## Introduction

Fifty years of historical debate have failed to resolve the controversy over the Munich Crisis of 1938. In the language of international politics "Munich" and "appeasement" have become loaded terms, synonymous with capitulation or cowardice. This has clouded understanding of the origins of the Munich Agreement, and especially of the policy of France during the crisis. Despite decades of work, historians have yet to effectively distinguish the "Myths" from the "Realities" of French strategy and diplomacy during the crisis.<sup>1</sup>

The assent of France to the partitioning of its Czechoslovak ally in September of 1938 has traditionally been condemned as the shortsighted policy of an indecisive and incapable leadership. France was allied to Czechoslovakia by a 1925 Treaty of Mutual Assistance. During the crisis, however, Paris cooperated with London against Czechoslovakia and in

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<sup>1</sup> The title of a colloquium on Munich held in Paris in 1978, the proceedings of which are published as Munich 1938: Mythes et Réalités in Revue des études slaves, 52, (1979).

favour of Germany. Edouard Daladier, the Premier of France, agreed to support a British effort to save the peace by satisfying all of Germany's demands for Czechoslovak territory. On 21 September Czechoslovak President Edward Benes was informed that, should he reject the British proposal, he could not count on French support should war erupt with Germany. France abandoned its ally. During the Munich Four Power Conference, Britain and France, negotiating on behalf of Czechoslovakia, formally acceded to all of Hitler's demands. On 30 September Benes decided to accept the Munich *diktat*, virtually surrendering Czechoslovakia's independence.<sup>2</sup> Six months later German troops occupied Bohemia and Moravia, bringing an official end to the Czechoslovak Republic.

Many historians have criticized France harshly for its role at Munich, and have asserted that its leaders lacked the determination to take the difficult, yet necessary, decision to go to war with Germany rather than capitulate to Nazi demands. This is commonly seen as the culmination of an "incomprehensible blindness in foreign and military policy,"<sup>3</sup> the craven policy of a nation willing

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed accounts of the Munich Crisis see, among others, these varied studies. For a general account see P.M.H. Bell, The Origins of the Second World War in Europe, pp. 229-243. For French policy during the crisis see Anthony Adamthwaite, France and the Coming of the Second World War, (London: 1977), pp.200-269, and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, La décadence: la politique étrangère de la France, 1932-1939, (Paris: 1979), pp. 204-256. For the Czechoslovak perspective see Victor Mamatey, "The Development of Czechoslovak Democracy 1919-1938," in Victor Mamatey and Radomír Luza (eds.), A History of the Czechoslovak Republic 1918-1948, (Princeton: 1973), pp. 164-167. Williamson Murray, The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939: The Path to Ruin, (Princeton: 1984), and Keith Robbins, Munich: 1938, (London: 1968) focus primarily on Britain and Munich.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in William B. Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, (London: 1970), p. xi.

to go to any length to avoid war.<sup>4</sup> Munich is the central point of reference in most entirely critical assessments of foreign and defence policies of the France during the 1930s. These studies attribute the contradiction between France's fundamentally defensive military strategy and its diplomatic commitments to eastern Europe to drift, indecision, and even decadence within the leadership and institutions of the Third Republic.<sup>5</sup> This interpretation is in accord with the widely accepted view that, during the 1930s, France was paralysed by internal divisions, suffering from a sort of collective moral decay which sapped its will to resist Germany - and ultimately produced the fall of France in 1940.

The opening of the French and British state archives during the 1970s prompted a reassessment of French foreign policy and military planning during the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> A 'revisionist' school, which includes historians such as John

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Winston Churchill The Gathering Storm, (Boston: 1948), Andrew Rothstein, The Munich Conspiracy, (London: 1958), John Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy, (New York: 1963) and Knave Fools and Thieves: Europe Between the Wars, (London: 1974), Hubert Ripka, Munich: Before and After, (New York: 1939), Guy Chapman, Why France Fell, (New York: 1968), Henri Noguères, Munich: The Phoney Peace, Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Renouvin, Histoire des relations internationales: les Crises du XXe Siècle, (Paris: 1958). Henri Noguères, Munich: The Phoney Peace, (London: 1965), Pierre Le Goyet, Le Mystère Gamelin, (Paris: 1975), J.B.Duroselle, La décadence, William L. Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, (London: 1969), Anthony Adamthwaite, France and the Coming of the Second World War, (London: 1978), Henry Dutailly, Les Problèmes de l'Armée de Terre Française 1935-1939, (Paris: 1940), Piotr Wandycz, The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances 1926-1936. French-Czechoslovak-Polish Relations from Locarno to the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, (Princeton: 1988).

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, John Cairns, "A Nation of Shopkeepers in Search of a Suitable France: 1918-1940," American Historical Review, 79, (1974), pp. 710-43, Robert Young, In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning 1933-1940, (Cambridge: 1978), Jeffery Gunsburg, Divided and Conquered: The French High Command and the Defeat of the West, 1940, (Westport: 1979), Robert Frankenstein, Le prix du réarmement français 1935-1939, (Paris: 1982). Martin Alexander's forthcoming book, The Republic in Danger: Maurice Gamelin, The Defence of France and the Politics of Rearmament, (Cambridge: forthcoming) will also follow the general lines of this interpretation, as will Elisabeth du Réau's Edouard Daladier et la sécurité de



Cairns, Robert Young, Jeffery Gunsburg, Robert Frankenstein and, most recently, Martin Alexander and Elisabeth Du Réau, has emerged. Rather than resorting simply to theories of decadence and decay to explain the fall of France, these scholars emphasize the difficulties French decision makers faced. The Great Depression, German demographic and industrial superiority, Britain's refusal to give France a military commitment, and the ideological divisions which racked the nation, were huge obstacles to French security, and imposed powerful restraints on France's freedom of action during the 1930s. According to the revisionist interpretation, war with Germany without Britain as an ally in 1938 was inconceivable. Indeed, Britain's refusal to fight for Czechoslovakia was the most important consideration in France's Munich policy. When guaranteed of British support, the French were willing to fight, as they proved in 1939.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is argued, despite its consequences for Czechoslovakia, Munich was unavoidable for France.

Other recent historians have rejected this interpretation. Anthony Adamthwaite, for example, has argued that France was looking for an excuse to abandon Czechoslovakia, and used Britain's refusal to go to war for this purpose.<sup>8</sup> Jean-Baptiste Duroselle has criticized French policy for its lack of

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la France, (Le Mans: forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Young, "French Policy and the Munich Crisis of 1938: A Reappraisal," Historical Papers, (Canadian Historical Association), 1970, pp. 186-206.

<sup>8</sup> See France and the Coming of the Second World War, pp. 234-267, "Le facteur militaire dans la décision franco-britannique avant Munich," Munich, 1938: Mythes et Réalités, Colloque: Paris Revue des études slaves, 52, (1979), pp. 59-66, and "French Military Intelligence and the Coming of War 1935-1939,"

vision and ethics. He stresses that the surrender of Czechoslovakia led to a loss of prestige and credibility, two important components in the foreign policy of any nation.<sup>9</sup> Williamson Murray has argued that the Munich Agreement tipped the strategic balance decisively in favour of Germany, and that the fall of France in 1940 stemmed directly from Anglo-French shortsightedness at Munich.<sup>10</sup> Czechoslovakia, with its large, modern and well-trained army, was removed from the military balance of power. After mobilization, the Czechoslovak army consisted of 32 divisions, including 6 armoured regiments, all with modern equipment and well-trained. Czechoslovakia was the only industrialized state in eastern Europe and the Skoda munitions factory in Bohemia was a major arsenal. Furthermore, three of the ten German Panzer divisions which overran France in June of 1940 were mainly equipped with Czech-built tanks.<sup>11</sup> According to Murray, Hitler gained these decisive advantages without a fight because the French overestimated German strength and underestimated that of Czechoslovakia.

One common feature of the various critical interpretations of France's policy at Munich is their agreement with and use of the criticisms of Général Louis Eugène Faucher, the head of the French military mission to

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<sup>9</sup> Duroselle, La décadence, pp. 354-367. See also Dutailly, Les Problèmes de l'Armée de Terre Française 1935-1939, pp. 61-62, Antoine Marès, "La faillite des relations franco-tchécoslovaques: la mission militaire française à Prague, 1926-1938," Revue Historique de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale, 111, (1978), pp. 43-71.

<sup>10</sup> Murray, The Change in the European Balance of Power, *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> Bell, The Origins of the Second World War in Europe, p. 172.

Czechoslovakia from 1926 to 1938. Général Faucher played an important role in the Franco-Czechoslovak relations during the interwar period. Assigned to Prague for nearly twenty years, he had a central role in the organization and training of the Czechoslovak army. Throughout the 1930s he provided uniformly positive evaluations of the quality of the Czechoslovak army. When war appeared imminent between Prague and Berlin in the spring of 1938 he assured his superiors in Paris that the Czechoslovak military was "en mesure de jouer très honorablement son rôle en cas de guerre." He added, however, that "son rendement dépendrait pour une large part des conditions générales dans lesquelles elle serait engagée, conditions qui ne dépendent pas seulement du gouvernement tchécoslovaque."<sup>12</sup> That is, Czechoslovakia would fight but could not win without French support. When the test arose, however, France decided that it could not effectively support its ally, and abandoned its commitment. To Faucher, this was the betrayal of an ally and meant the loss of French honour.

On 22 September, following the delivery of the French ultimatum to Benes, Faucher sent a telegram to Maurice Gamelin, the French *Chef d'Etat-Major*, which angrily described the "violent indignation" aroused in Prague at the "betrayal of Czèchoslovakia by France." He also warned that the Czechoslovaks were so outraged that Prague was now unsafe for French

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<sup>12</sup> Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, (hereafter SHAT), Carton #7n3097, 22 Mars 1938.



soldiers and suggested the immediate withdrawal of the military mission.<sup>13</sup>

The following day, Faucher tore up his French passport, demanded of Gamelin to be relieved of his duties as a French Officer, and offered his service to the Czechoslovak Minister of Defence.<sup>14</sup>

Faucher retired and returned to France in September, where he repeatedly criticized the Munich Agreement. He charged that the French High Command had disregarded Czechoslovakia's military capability and overemphasized German strength. He argued that abandoning Czechoslovakia was a cowardly and immoral decision, and that Czechoslovakia could have held off a German invasion for several months.<sup>15</sup> Historians have used Faucher's assessments to argue that France should have gone to war rather than sign the Munich accord. In Munich: The Phoney Peace, Henri Noguères treats Faucher's estimates as unassailable evidence, since he was in a position to evaluate the strategic situation "better than anyone else, and more objectively than a Czechoslovak."<sup>16</sup> Winston Churchill, Hubert Ripka, and Pierre Le Goyet have all quoted extensively from Faucher's testimonials of Czechoslovak military power. Duroselle, Dutailly, Adamthwaite and Williamson Murray have all,

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<sup>13</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, 22 septembre, 1938.

<sup>14</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, Telegrams, 23 septembre 1938. See also Noguères, Munich: The Phoney Peace, p. 152.

<sup>15</sup> Général Louis-Eugène Faucher, "La Défense nationale tchécoslovaque (1918-1939)," L'Année Politique: Française et Etrangère, 14, (1939), pp. 85-102, and "Some Reflections of Czechoslovakia," International Affairs, 18, (May-June: 1939), pp. 343-360.

<sup>16</sup> Noguères, Munich: The Phoney Peace, p. 38.

directly or indirectly, used Faucher's assessments as evidence. The revisionist school, however, has hitherto ignored Faucher's criticisms of French policy.

At issue in the debate over Munich is the nature of the strategic situation in Europe in 1938.<sup>17</sup> Should France have stood firm by the side of its ally? The decision to abandon Prague was based on three fundamental assumptions. First, the French were convinced that they could not undertake any war with Germany without the full support of the British Empire -and in the summer of 1938 Britain refused to back France in a war over Czechoslovakia. Second, French military planning was fundamentally defensive, and did not envisage an offensive into Germany. Finally, the French were convinced that Czechoslovakia would fall long before they could provide it with effective military support. Any study of French policy must evaluate the validity of these assumptions. Were they reasonable? Or, as Faucher and various historians have suggested, were they systematically biased because the French did not want to fight?

An examination of Général Faucher's role in Franco-Czechoslovak relations illuminates hitherto neglected aspects of this issue. Consideration of the existing evidence suggests that Faucher was not an objective observer. Stationed in Prague for twenty years, Faucher lost his objectivity. He became

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<sup>17</sup> Political, social and strategic considerations combined to shape France's Munich policy. This study, however, focuses on the strategic situation in Europe in 1938. On the various political exigencies which limited Daladier's freedom of action see Susan Bindorff Butterworth, "Daladier and the Munich Crisis: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 9, (1974), pp. 191-216. For a description of French economic difficulties and the effort to rearm France see Robert Frankenstein, *Le prix du réarmement français 1935-1939*.

more Czech than French and lost sight of the greater European strategic balance. He was unable to consider that France's national interest did not necessarily coincide with that of Czechoslovakia, and that honour was not the only consideration in strategy. In contrast to Faucher, French military intelligence and the French High Command carefully considered the position of Czechoslovakia in the European strategic balance. They rightly discerned that Hitler wanted a localised war that he could win swiftly before France could effectively intervene. With no guarantee of British support, the French felt compelled to take the road which led through London to Munich.

French policy toward Czechoslovakia during the entire interwar period must be examined in order to understand France's Munich policy. The alliance between Paris and Prague was a product of the international situation during the 1920s. By 1938 the position of Czechoslovakia in French grand strategy had changed along with the balance of power in Europe. The difference between the conclusions of Faucher in Prague and the French High Command in Paris reveals the gulf between French and Czechoslovak interests. This gulf is not evidence of decadence in French external and defence policy. It is instead a reflection of the decline of French power during the 1930s.

## **The Military Mission and Franco-Czechoslovak Relations 1918-1938.**

During the 1920s France was in an artificially predominant position in Europe. Although it possessed the largest armed force on the continent, it lacked the resources to maintain this advantage indefinitely. Consequently, French decision makers were determined to find other means to secure France against future German aggression. The Paris Peace Conference had failed to satisfy their concerns in this regard. Although the Treaty of Versailles restricted the size of the German army and forced Germany to pay reparations, it did not deprive her of the demographic and industrial resources with which she had held an Allied coalition at bay for four years. At the Peace Conference, French Premier Georges Clemenceau had relinquished one potential shield against Germany, a permanent French presence on the eastern bank of the Rhine River, in order to gain another - an Anglo-American guarantee of France's territory. This guarantee never materialized. As a result, France began the interwar period with profound misgivings about its security.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Marks, The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe 1918-1933, (London:1977), ch. 1.

The French were convinced that they could not defeat Germany single-handedly in another total war. Indeed, the Allied victory in 1918 had been a very near thing, and the cost of victory to France had been frightful. Over 1,380,000 *poilus*, a staggering 27% of all males between the ages of 18 and 27, had died on the battlefields of northern France.<sup>2</sup> Another 3,600,000 were left *mutilés de guerre*, grim reminders of the horror of the Great War for the next generation of French civilians, soldiers and politicians.<sup>3</sup> In 1918 two-thirds of the total French industrial plant lay in ruins. The entire nation was in need of rebuilding.<sup>4</sup> The terrible price of victory was an ever-present reminder to all levels of French society of what a future war with Germany would mean to France. It shaped French foreign policy and strategic planning between the wars.

French policy followed two distinct paths in search for security during the 1920s. The first was collective security. The second was the construction of a *barrière de l'est*, which would ring Germany within a network of potential enemies should it attempt to revise the Treaty of Versailles through force.

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<sup>2</sup> Alistair Horne, To Lose a Battle: France, 1940, (London: 1969), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Dudley Kirk, "Population and Population Trends in Modern France", in Edward Meade (ed.), Modern France: Problems of the Third and Fourth Republics, (Princeton: 1951), pp. 318-319, and Douglas Porch, "The French Army in the First World War", in Alan Millett and Williamson Murray (eds.) Military Effectiveness, 3 vols., (Boston: 1983), vol. 1, pp. 192-193.

<sup>4</sup> For a vivid picture of the devastation wrought by the war in northern France see the work of painter, Mary Ritter Hamilton, an expatriate Canadian artist in France during the 1920s. For a stark description of the toll of the war on the nation see Horne, To Lose a Battle, pp. 6-15.

Although the French tried to link these two approaches within a single coherent policy, they were somewhat contradictory and tended to undermine one another at critical stages during the interwar period.<sup>5</sup>

The policy of collective security, which reflected the international environment of the 1920s, entailed bringing Germany back into the international community. It culminated in the Treaty of Locarno of late 1925. At Locarno the German Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann, offered what amounted to a Rhineland security pact. Germany confirmed the western borders arrived at by the Versailles settlement and joined the League of Nations.

The 'spirit of Locarno' appeared to herald a new era of European cooperation. For France, the Locarno offered several distinct advantages. First, its frontier with Germany was guaranteed by Italy and Great Britain. This marked a welcome improvement in Anglo-French relations, which had hit rock bottom during the Ruhr crisis. Second, France hoped that the accords would foster economic cooperation with Germany, to the benefit of both the French economy and the stability of the Weimar regime.<sup>6</sup> Third, it provided an opportunity to create a lasting improvement in relations between France and Germany. For France, however, the *esprit de Locarno* referred as much or more to French desires for a closer relationship with Great Britain than it did to

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<sup>5</sup> Duroselle, La décadence, pp. 241-243, see also Robert Doughty, 'In Search of Security', unpublished manuscript, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Wandycz, The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, pp. 13-14.

any genuine hopes for the success of collective security. Moreover, because Germany was not compelled to recognize or guarantee its eastern borders with Poland and Czechoslovakia, France's commitments to its eastern allies were compromised.

These commitments were products of the second current in French strategic policy. At the end of the First World War, France desired above all the continuation of the 1904 Anglo-French Entente. Accordingly, the evaporation of the Anglo-American guarantee shook France both psychologically and diplomatically. The same was true of the British veto of the 1924 Geneva Protocol, which would have strengthened the ability of the League of Nations to use sanctions as a means to oppose aggression. In fact, during the early 1920s the British mistrusted France. One reason for this was their suspicion of French designs for eastern Europe. There was a strong sentiment in London that Britain had not suffered through the Great War in order to reestablish French hegemony on the continent.<sup>7</sup> By the 1930s, moreover, a common British perception was that Anglo-French staff conversations in 1913-1914 had trapped Britain into aiding France in 1914.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> On France in British strategic policy see John R. Ferris, The Evolution of British Strategic Policy 1922-1926, (Basingstoke: 1989), p. 145-147, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Masson, "Les conversations franco-britanniques (1935-1939)", Les relations franco-britanniques de 1935 à 1939, Colloque, (Paris: 1975), p.120. See also Michael Howard, The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two Wars, (London: 1972), p. 118 and Marks, The Illusion of Peace, p. 85-86.

Britain's refusal to make the full blown commitment the French desired led Paris to form a series of alliances with nations opposed to the revision of Versailles, especially with the 'successor states' formed from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. France signed a series of mutual assistance pacts with Rumania, Yugoslavia, and above all, with Poland and Czechoslovakia, the largest and strongest of the successor states. France hoped to fill the power vacuum in this area created by the decrease in German power and the collapse of the Hapsburg and Russian Empires. It hoped that a four-power bloc could be constructed which would serve as a bulwark against either German revisionism or Bolshevik expansion in eastern Europe.<sup>9</sup>

The Franco-Polish treaty of February 1921 was designed to "sauvegarder, par le maintien des traités ... la sécurité et la défense de leur territoire" through concerted political and economic action. This agreement was reinforced by a military convention which provided for mutual military assistance in the event of unprovoked aggression against either party, cooperation between general staffs, the organization of the Polish army on the French model, and provisions for a loan of 400 million francs to assist in the arming of Polish forces.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jules Laroche, Au Quai d'Orsay avec Briand et Poincaré, (Paris: 1957), pp. 167-174, Challener, "The French Foreign Office:", pp. 54-55.

<sup>10</sup> League of Nations Treaty Series, vol. 18 (1921), #12. A description of the military convention can be found in the memoirs of Maurice Gamelin, Servir II: Le prologue du drame, 3 vols., (Paris: 1946), v. II, p. 466.



In contrast to the Polish accords, the "Treaty of Alliance and Friendship" between France and Czechoslovakia was not signed until January of 1924 and had no military corollary.<sup>11</sup> It was supplemented only by a secret agreement which called for military consultation in the event of a threat to the peace.<sup>12</sup> Updated Franco-Polish and Franco-Czechoslovakian treaties of mutual assistance were attached to the Locarno agreements as annexes.<sup>13</sup> These agreements, however, were contingent upon Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which stipulated that the League General Council would determine what did and did not constitute aggression.<sup>14</sup>

Although Aristide Briand, the French Foreign Minister from 1925 to 1932, attempted to present both Locarno and the eastern alliances as complementary components of a single package, Locarno implied a revision of Versailles in the east. Even the moderates within the Weimar regime refused to renounce German claims to territory in Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, France's ability to strike at Germany diminished steadily as an indirect result of the spirit of Locarno. The Thoiry agreement between Stresemann and Briand in

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<sup>11</sup> League of Nations Treaty Series, vol. 23 (1924), pp. 164-168.

<sup>12</sup> See Gamelin, Servir, v. II, p. 397.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Johnson, "The Locarno Treaties" in Neville Waites (ed.), Troubled Neighbours: Franco British Relations in the Twentieth Century, (London: 1971), pp. 109-110.

<sup>14</sup> League of Nations Treaty Series, v. 54, (1926-1927), pp. 354-356 & 360-362.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, "The Spirit of Locarno: Illusions of Pactomania", Foreign Affairs, 50, (1972), pp. 754-756.

1926 provided for the gradual evacuation of the French troops of occupation from the Rhineland. Predictably, rapprochement between France and Germany produced misgiving in Prague and outright suspicion in Warsaw.<sup>16</sup>

London's attitude toward France's eastern network complicated the French position. The British did not consider east-central Europe vital to their strategic interests.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Winston Churchill once characterized the eastern alignment as "a pack of small nations in leash of France."<sup>18</sup> London was convinced that some territorial changes in that region were inevitable and wanted Paris to accept this fact and to divorce developments in western Europe from those in the east.<sup>19</sup> It was hoped that once a Rhineland pact materialized, France would gradually minimize her commitments to eastern Europe. Viscount D'Abernon, the British Ambassador to Berlin for much of the 1920s, expected that, "Under the pact these alliances [between France and eastern Europe] will cease to be the main protection for eastern Europe, and will probably fade away."<sup>20</sup>

Herein lay the fundamental dilemma of French strategy in the interwar

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<sup>16</sup> See Piotr Wandycz, "La Pologne face à la politique locarnienne de Briand," Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique, 95, (1981), pp. 254-255.

<sup>17</sup> Ferris, The Evolution of British Strategic Policy, pp. 147-151.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, "The Locarno Treaties", p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Schuker, The End of French Predominance in Europe, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: 1976), p.390.

<sup>20</sup> Lord D'Abernon, The Diary of an Ambassador, 3 vols., vol. III, p. 194.

years. The primary objective of French diplomacy was a resurrection of the *Entente Cordiale*; Paris, Warsaw and Prague all hoped that this would cause Britain to change its position vis-à-vis eastern Europe. Ironically, the British intended just the opposite, and exerted pressure on the French to distance themselves from eastern Europe.

With the passing of the 1920s, neither of the security policies followed by France held much promise. Hopes for the success of the League of Nations and collective security faded in 1933 with the revival of German power under an aggressively revisionist Nazi regime. Nor were the French able to construct an effective eastern bloc. The four successor states lacked common interests, especially when it came to resisting Germany. French diplomacy was able to secure only a series of bilateral pacts rather than the multilateral security system that had been envisioned in 1919-1920. This enabled Nazi foreign policy to isolate Czechoslovakia successfully by the summer of 1938.

The 1934 Nazi-Polish non-aggression pact exemplifies the way Germany exploited the weaknesses in the French eastern system. Hoping to divert elsewhere German claims to Polish territory, the Poles struck a deal with Hitler which effectively ruined French plans for cooperation between Czechoslovakia and Poland. By March of 1938, French strategists noted that Rumania and Yugoslavia were increasingly distancing themselves from Czechoslovakia, and

that relations between Prague and Warsaw were beyond repair.<sup>21</sup> The *barrière de l'est* had become a dead letter. As a result, twenty years of French policy lay in ruins and France's position as a great power was seriously compromised.

Nor was Germany the only threat to the eastern system. Britain's importance in French strategy increased commensurately with the threat of war with Germany. The British, however, were determined to participate in international affairs on their own terms. This did not bode well for the fate of the eastern allies, as the British wanted no part in France's entanglements in eastern and central Europe. Ultimately, Britain's refusal to assume any commitments in eastern Europe placed the French eastern system on increasingly uncertain ground as, by the mid 1930s, Paris had come to consider full British support the *sine qua non* for any war in Europe. The position of the eastern states in French strategy, particularly that of Czechoslovakia, would have to evolve to reflect these new realities.

The French had intended Czechoslovakia to serve as the linchpin of their plans to construct an alliance system to counter Germany's superior *potentiel de guerre*. Considerable common interest existed between France and Czechoslovakia. Both stood to lose significantly in any disruption of the status quo in Europe. The French hoped that a strong state on Germany's eastern

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<sup>21</sup> Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, (hereafter SHAT), 7n3434-2, 7 mars 1938.

borders could, if it was well disposed toward France, positively influence political and economic developments in central Europe. For this reason the Quai d'Orsay actively assisted the causes of various nationalist movements within the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the war. In particular, France had become the patron of Czech and Slovak nationalism. A 1917 agreement signed between Czech representative Eduard Benes and Clemenceau had established an independent Czechoslovak army in France, the first of any of the successor states.<sup>22</sup>

There were sound reasons for the emphasis on Czechoslovakia in French strategy. The Republic offered several strategic advantages in the creation of a second front on Germany's eastern frontier. Its geographical position, extending deep into southern Germany, posed a significant threat to Germany. Moreover, it was the most politically stable of the new eastern European states, perhaps even more stable than France. The venerable intellectual, Thomas G. Masaryk, was President of the Republic from its inception in 1918 to his retirement in 1935. During this same period Eduard Benes served as Foreign Minister. This continuity and stability increased Czechoslovakia's value as a potential ally.

Czechoslovakia's favoured status among France's eastern allies had much to do with economic considerations. It had inherited the vast majority of the industry of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and ranked tenth among the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

world's industrial powers.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the Skoda munitions factory at Pilsen was a major international arsenal. Because the Czechoslovaks desired French capital to displace the Austro-German hold on their industry, there were ample opportunities for French capitalists to invest in existing enterprises.<sup>24</sup>

To the Quai d'Orsay, Franco-Czechoslovak economic cooperation also provided an excellent means of establishing French influence in eastern Europe. Prague cooperated willingly and encouraged both state and private investment from France. This suited the Foreign Ministry, which was haunted by the nightmare of *Mitteleuropa*, an east-central European economic bloc dominated by Germany.<sup>25</sup> The Quai actively encouraged the export of French capital to Czechoslovakia during the postwar period. By the end of 1919 the *Union Européenne Industrielle et Financière* (UEIF), a holding company created by the Schneider Financial House of Paris, had gained controlling interest in both the Skoda Works and the *Berg-und-Hüttenwerksgesellschaft*, the largest coal producing consortium in eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup> The Foreign Ministry had a hand

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<sup>23</sup> Zora P. Pryor, "Czechoslovakian Economic Development in the Interwar Period", in Victor S. Mamatey and Radomír Luza (eds.) A History of the Czechoslovak Republic, 1918-1948, (Princeton: 1973), p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> Paul H. Segal, The French State and French Private Investment in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1938: A Study of Economic Diplomacy, Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1983, pp. 77-79.

<sup>25</sup> Segal, French State and Private Investment, p. 41. *Mitteleuropa* was a pre-war conception of German intellectual and economist Friedrich Naumann.

<sup>26</sup> Alice Teichova, An Economic Background to Munich: International Business and Czechoslovakia 1918-1938, (Cambridge: 1973), pp. 97-101, 109.

in this development, as Maurice Paléologue, a mandarin within the Quai, was on the Board of Directors of the UEIF.<sup>27</sup>

The French military also favoured the Schneider takeover, which brought the largest military arsenal in eastern Europe under the control of its chief supplier, Schneider, rather than that of a potential enemy.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, French investment in Czechoslovakia was mutually beneficial. French capital freed Czechoslovakian industry from dependence on Austrian or German investment, assured it access to international markets, and provided French investors with an excellent source of long-term profit. Most importantly, it allayed French fears that Germany would dominate the economies of east-central Europe.

Complementing these economic and industrial aspects, at least in French eyes, was the pro-French orientation of Czechoslovak foreign policy - from which Eduard Benes deviated little during his lengthy tenure as Foreign Minister. France had been a patron of Czechoslovakian nationalism both during the war and at the Paris Peace Conference, and had recognized Czechoslovakia as an independent state before signing an armistice with Austria-Hungary.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, desiring to ensure the future of Czech industry,

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<sup>27</sup> Segal, French State and Private Investment, p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> SHAT, 7n3094, Mission Militaire Française (MMF) -Tchécoslovaquie, "Rapport du Col. Dumon," 2 April 1919.

<sup>29</sup> France recognized Czechoslovakia on the 28th September 1918 - armistice negotiations with Austria-Hungary began on the 31st of the same month. Harry Hanák, "France, Britain and Italy and the Independence of Czechoslovakia in 1918", in Norman Stone and Eduard Strouhal (eds.) Czechoslovakia: Crossroads and Crises, 1918-1988, (London: 1989), p. 57.

the French had supported Czechoslovakia over Poland in their 1919-1920 dispute over the coal and coke rich Teschen district.<sup>30</sup> The Teschen dispute set the tone for relations between the three states throughout much of the 1920s and the 1930s - Czechoslovakia was the favoured pupil of France with Poland resentfully playing second fiddle.

Despite this cooperation, the effectiveness of French economic diplomacy during the interwar period was seriously limited. French investors were more concerned with profits than with expanding the Czechoslovakian economy. This led to conflicts, especially over the nationalization of the armament industry. In these cases the French Foreign Ministry intervened, at times quite forcefully, to protect the interests of French private investors.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Germany was Czechoslovakia's traditional commercial partner, and French finances during the 1920s and especially the 1930s were not strong enough to displace German interests.

The military provided another domain where France could exert considerable influence over developments in Czechoslovakia. Although the Treaty of 1924 had no military adjunct, the armies of the two states between the wars were closely linked. This was a direct result of the activity of the French military mission to Czechoslovakia.

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<sup>30</sup> Piotr Wandycz, France and her Eastern Allies, (Minnesota: 1962), pp. 81-82, 93-94.

<sup>31</sup> Segal, French State and Private Investment, p. 356.



Military missions were generally sent to developing states to assist in the organization, training and equipment of their armies. As such, they provided the Great Powers with an excellent means of influencing military developments in newly established nations. Indeed, the French military had competed with the German for influence in Latin America from the early 1890s to the outbreak of war in 1914.<sup>32</sup> Because Article 179 of Versailles prevented the German army from sending representatives abroad, the French were able to gain an advantage in this area during the 1920s.<sup>33</sup>

Military missions represented the French army and informed it of developments - political, economic and military - within the states to which they were posted. They were also able to promote French economic interests. By influencing the organization and training of local armies, military officials could direct purchases of armaments and technical material to French manufacturers. In Latin America before the war, for example, countries with missions from France would usually purchase arms and equipment from Schneider or St. Chamoux while those with German envoys bought from Krupp or Herstal.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For an excellent description of the role of military missions in the development of a Latin American military ethos, as well as valuable practical information on the functions of military missions in general, see Frederick M. Nunn, Yesterday's Soldiers: European Military Professionalism in South America 1890-1940, (London: 1983).

<sup>33</sup> Claude Carré, 'Les attachés militaires français, 1920-1945. Rôle et influence,' mémoire de maîtrise, Paris I, 1976.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 192. See also Billie Walsh, "The German Military Mission in China 1928-1938," Journal of Modern History, (1974), pp. 514-532.

Indeed, French officials were instructed to promote the interests of French arms manufacturers yet at the same time avoid being labelled as agents of French capitalism - a daunting assignment.<sup>35</sup> The most important French military missions during the interwar period were those posted to Poland and Czechoslovakia, France's central allies in eastern Europe. By developing the military capability of its allies, France could strengthen both the deterrent value of their eastern network and French influence over Polish and Czechoslovakian military strategy. Consequently, the French devoted significant resources to using military missions to bolster their eastern interests.

The Polish mission enjoyed less success than did its Czechoslovakian counterpart. This was due, in equal parts, to the French disdain for the Polish President, Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, and to Polish impatience with the pedantic and patronizing attitude of French officers.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, although it had "forged all the mechanisms and prepared all of the instructions,"<sup>37</sup> the French mission in Warsaw was kept out of Polish strategic planning. In 1932 the mission was unceremoniously dispatched from Warsaw as Poland drifted toward an agreement with Germany.<sup>38</sup>

Conversely, the military mission in Prague was remarkably successful in

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<sup>35</sup> Carré, 'Les attachés militaires français,' p. 198.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>37</sup> SHAT, EMA/2, "Pologne," cited in Wandycz, The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, p. 99.

<sup>38</sup> Carré, 'Les attachés militaires français,' p. 198.

representing France's interests in Czechoslovakia and was a central pillar in relations between Paris and Prague. It played an integral role in the construction of a modern, well-trained and well-equipped Czechoslovak army which was respected throughout Europe. Moreover, from June 1919 to June 1926 the *Chef de Mission* was also Commander-in-Chief of this army and, after 1926, a member of the Czechoslovak council for national defence. Thus France gained excellent representation in the development of Czechoslovak defence policy in the 1920s and 1930s. After the mission's organizational tasks were completed, it assumed an increasingly political significance in Franco-Czechoslovak relations. Integrated into the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defence, it served as an excellent liaison between the French and Czechoslovakian general staffs. More importantly, it was also a vital political intermediary between Masaryk and Benes and the French Defence Ministry. For this reason, the Czechoslovak government maintained the mission in Prague long after it had fulfilled its military role.

There were three distinct phases to the activity of the mission to Prague. During the first, from January 1919 to June 1919, and the last, after 1926, the position of the mission was one of "conseiller technique;" between June 1919 and June 1926, it was that of a "mission de commandement." Throughout, it provided France with representation in high level Czechoslovak policy making.

On 11 January 1919, at the request of Benes, France had agreed to

provide a military mission to "organize and instruct the Czechoslovakian army."<sup>39</sup> The mission was formally established in Prague on 13 February under its first Chief, Général Maurice Pellé. Its activity was initially restricted. Since most of the existing Czechoslovak army had been fighting the Austro-Hungarians in Italy, it was commanded by Italian General Luigi Piccione.<sup>40</sup> The circumstances of the mission changed dramatically when the Czechoslovaks sought to drive Hungary from the areas of Slovakia which it was occupying. The campaign went badly. By mid-June the Bolshevik forces of Béla Kun had reoccupied most of Slovakia.<sup>41</sup> These events led to the replacement of Piccione with Pellé. On 4 June 1919 Masaryk appointed Pellé Commander-in-Chief of the Czechoslovakian army, subordinate to the Minister of Defence. Observers attributed significance to this move as Masaryk was not yet considered to be particularly pro-French.<sup>42</sup> In effect, it marked the ascendancy of French over Italian influence in Prague and shattered Italy's attempts to increase its influence in east-central Europe. On 11 June the Italian mission

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<sup>39</sup> SHAT, 1k288-1, Papiers du Général Louis Faucher, "Rapport de la fin de la Mission", pp. 1-5. See Appendix I for the text of the agreement between Benes and Clemenceau. See also Antoine Marès, "Mission militaire et relations internationales: l'exemple franco-tchécoslovaque, 1918-1925," Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine, (1983), pp. 560-561.

<sup>40</sup> Hanák, "France, Britain, Italy, and the Independence of Czechoslovakia in 1918," pp. 50-51.

<sup>41</sup> Wandycz, France and her Eastern Allies, p. 71.

<sup>42</sup> Documents on British Foreign Policy, (hereafter DBFP), E.L. Woodward and R. Butler (eds.), 1st series, VI, p.3.

was recalled.<sup>43</sup> This marked the beginning of both cool relations between Rome and Prague and Franco-Italian competition for influence in east-central Europe during the interwar period.<sup>44</sup>

The recently established Czechoslovak army possessed almost no officer corps and was badly in need of instruction and technical assistance in 1919.<sup>45</sup> To accomplish this, the number of French military personnel in Prague was increased tenfold after Pellé's appointment. In July, a reorganized Czechoslovak army under French leadership drove the Hungarians from Slovakia. This campaign firmly established French military prestige in Czechoslovakia.<sup>46</sup> The British chargé d'affaires in Prague noted that "were it not for the skill and energy displayed by the French generals ... [Slovakia would] ... have fallen into the hands of the Magyars."<sup>47</sup> However, he questioned whether "French military support alone will enable Bohemia to maintain its position as an independent nation."<sup>48</sup> Clearly, the success of the mission in organizing the Czechoslovak army would be central to both the consolidation of the new

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<sup>43</sup> SHAT, 7n3096, June 1937, "Rapport sur le statut de la mission."

<sup>44</sup> Marès, "Mission militaire et relations internationales:" pp. 563.

<sup>45</sup> Antoine Marès, "La faillite des relations franco-tchécoslovaques: la mission militaire française à Prague, 1926-1938", Revue Historique de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale, #111, (1978), p. 47.

<sup>46</sup> Marès, "Mission militaire et relations internationales:" p. 566.

<sup>47</sup> DBFP, 1st series, VI, 11 July 1919, p. 71.

<sup>48</sup> DBFP, 1st series, VI, June 23 1919, p. 4.

Republic and the extension of French influence in central Europe.

In both cases the mission was undeniably successful. It worked wonders in training the Czechoslovak army. From 1929 to 1936 four of the highest ranking officials in the French High Command visited Czechoslovakia to inspect the manoeuvres of the army: Philippe Pétain in 1929, Louis Franchet-d'Esperey in 1930, Maurice Gamelin in 1934 and Victor Schweisguth in 1936. All left with a very positive impression of its quality and professionalism.<sup>49</sup> The task of the mission was eased by the strong commitment of the Czechoslovakian state to national defence. By their own accounts, Pellé and his successors Généraux Eugène Mittelhauser and Louis Faucher enjoyed excellent working relationships with Masaryk, Benes and the general staff of the Czechoslovak army.<sup>50</sup> The mission also established several *écoles de guerre*, where future Czechoslovak officers were instructed on the French way of war. It is no coincidence that Czechoslovak strategic and tactical doctrine closely mirrored that of France, emphasizing the importance of concentrated firepower and the advantages of defensive warfare.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> France: Assemblée Nationale, Rapport fait au nom de la commission chargée d'enquêter sur les événements survenus en France de 1933 à 1945: documents et témoignages, Charles Serre, (ed.), "Témoignage du Général Louis-Eugène Faucher", pp. 1191-1213, p. 1199.

<sup>50</sup> SHAT, 1k288-1, Papiers Faucher, "Rapport de la fin de la Mission.", p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> SHAT, 7n3095, "Rapport trimestriel", 3 septembre 1929. In this report Faucher stated that, given Czechoslovakia's geographical location, it was prudent to emphasize defensive operations in the training of its army. The army manoeuvres of August 1929 did not include any projected offensive action versus Germany. Pétain, who attended these manoeuvres, concluded that despite the

During the "commandement" period, French officers actually commanded individual units. However, as the training and professionalism of the Czechoslovak officers increased, they gradually replaced their French counterparts in positions of command. As a result, the size of the French contingent steadily diminished. In September of 1919, 146 French officers were attached to the military mission; by 1921 only 85 remained.<sup>52</sup> In June 1926, command of the army was transferred to Czechoslovak officers and the officers of the mission resigned their commissions. Général Mittelhauser, who had succeeded Pellé in 1922, returned to France. He was replaced as Commander in Chief by Czech General Jan Syrový, and as *Chef de Mission* by Colonel (later Général) Louis Faucher.

Faucher, who had the respect and trust of Masaryk and Benes, had been with the mission since its inception, and had served as *Sous-Chef d'Etat-Major* of the Czechoslovak army since June 1919.<sup>53</sup> In his role as "conseiller technique," Faucher was consulted on all questions concerning the organization, mobilization and instruction of the army. From 1926 to 1938 he was a fixture at meetings of the Committee for National Defence, the Czechoslovak equivalent of the French *Conseil Supérieur de la Défense Nationale*. This committee met several times monthly, and consisted of the President of the

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excellent performance of the Czech army it was ill-suited for assuming offensive operations on the eastern front.

<sup>52</sup> SHAT, 1k288-1, Papiers Faucher, "Rapport de la fin de la Mission," p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-26.

Republic, the Premier, the Minister of Defence, Commander-in-Chief Syrový, and Faucher.<sup>54</sup> This gave Faucher an intimate knowledge of the particulars of Czechoslovakian strategic planning. An extremely conscientious man, however, he kept to his position as "conseiller technique", and abstained from discussions of strategic policy.<sup>55</sup>

The Czechoslovak government had good reason to make national defence a priority. The rise of the Nazi Party to power in 1933 marked the beginning of the increasing international tension of the 1930s. This changed the relationship between Paris and Prague. Consequently, the role of the military mission also evolved. The steady development of the Czechoslovak army during the 1920s had made its role as technical advisor increasingly superfluous. As Faucher later testified, "La mission a toujours une signification politique, bien entendu. Cette signification politique s'est accentuée au cours des années, en même temps que l'intérêt militaire de la mission diminuait."<sup>56</sup> This was certainly true. The military mission played an important role in the diplomatic relations between the two states during the 1930s, owing largely to the significance which the French High Command and Foreign Minister Eduard Benes attached to its role in Franco-Czechoslovak relations.

Benes was a secretive man who died before he could write his memoirs

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<sup>54</sup> Rapport fait au nom de commission: documents et témoignages, pp. 1194-1195.

<sup>55</sup> SHAT, Papiers Faucher, "Rapport de la fin de la Mission," p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1192.



of the pre-Munich period. Consequently, studies of his foreign policy are generally based on his many speeches and public writings. Unfortunately, these studies do not reveal the inner motivations which guided his policies.<sup>57</sup> Benes was a democrat who looked to the west rather than the east when he established the direction of his foreign policy during the First World War.<sup>58</sup> He was not a soldier. His approach to international affairs was that of a calculating intellectual, and the intricate system of alliances he designed to preserve Czechoslovakia's security was based fundamentally on logic. However, Benes often "mistook logic for reality,"<sup>59</sup> and at times could not see beyond the Cartesian rationalism of his own conceptions. But Cartesian rationalism was

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<sup>57</sup> Existing biographies of Benes in English and French include Louis Eisenmann, Un Grand Européen: Edouard Benes, (Paris: 1934), Edward B. Hitchcock, "I Built a Temple for Peace": The Life of Edouard Benes, (London: 1940), E. Lenhoff, In Defence of Dr. Benes and Czechoslovak Foreign Policy, Compton Mackenzie, Dr. Benes, and Fritz Weil, Edouard Benes ou la renaissance d'un peuple, (Paris: 1934). These works vary from partisan tracts to reasonably objective discussions. They are valuable, for the most part, as contemporary sources. The same is true of E. Milyukov, "Edward Benes," Slavonic Review, 17.5, (1937-1938), pp. 297-328. There is, as of yet, no scholarly study, critical and based on unpublished material in either English or French. The best discussions of his foreign policy in English are Paul E. Zinner, "The Diplomacy of Edouard Benes," in Gordon Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds.) The Diplomats, 1919-1939, 2 vols., (Princeton: 1953), v. I, pp. 100-122 and Piotr Wandycz, "The Foreign Policy of Edvard Benes", in Mamatey and Luza (eds.) A History of the Czechoslovak Republic, op. cit., pp. 216-238.

<sup>58</sup> Hanák, "France, Britain, Italy and the Independence of Czechoslovakia," pp. 37-38, Marès, "Mission Militaire et relations internationales:", p. 563, Edward Taborsky, "President Edvard Benes and the Czechoslovak Crises of 1938 and 1948," in Stone and Strouhal (eds.) Czechoslovakia: Crossroads and Crises, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>59</sup> Wandycz, "The Foreign Policy of Edvard Benes", p. 237.

not the root of Hitler's inspiration. Ultimately, Benes' foreign policy was unable to meet the challenge of the Nazi approach to international relations. His policies were better suited to the internationalist atmosphere of 1920s than to the emotional nationalism of the 1930s. When Hitler initiated the aggressive phase of his foreign policy, Benes' carefully constructed system crumbled at its foundation - its dependence on France.

Although collective security was a catchword of Benes' diplomacy, his approach to international affairs was neither one-dimensional nor doctrinaire. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between Benes the Czechoslovakian nationalist and Benes the dedicated internationalist. Certainly, he was not utterly opposed to any revision of Versailles. His primary concerns were to prevent either an *Anschluss* between Germany and Austria or a restoration of the Hapsburgs to power in Hungary. The former would make Czechoslovakia an economic and strategic satellite of Germany. The latter stirred Czechoslovak fears of Hungarian irredentism, primarily regarding Slovakia.<sup>60</sup> Benes did not, however, necessarily oppose German revisionism where it did not directly concern Czechoslovakia, namely over Poland. Both Benes and Masaryk distrusted the semi-autocratic regime of Marshal Pilsudski, and resisted French pressure to improve relations with Poland. As Hubert Ripka, a publicist close to Benes during this period, recalled, "If Czechoslovakia did not seek a military alliance with Poland, this was because she did not want to undertake any

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<sup>60</sup> Wandycz, The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, pp. 89, 91, 103, 114-115.

commitments toward a state which had so many unsettled disputes to resolve both with Germany and Russia."<sup>61</sup> Evidently, Benes applied the principles of collective security selectively.

A strong Czechoslovak army was an essential instrument for Benes's foreign policy. However, it was one that he did not intend to use for any aggressive purpose.<sup>62</sup> He hoped instead to preserve Czechoslovakia through diplomacy backed by the threat of force, believing rapprochement with Germany to be ultimately necessary for Czechoslovakia. He often repeated that he would "never wage war against Germany unless drawn into a world war."<sup>63</sup> Thus his foreign policy corresponded to that of interwar France on a number of levels. Both states desired, above all, to maintain both the peace and the status quo in Europe. Hence, by design, the Franco-Czechoslovak alliance was political rather than military.

Indeed, Czechoslovakia could have done little militarily had Germany attacked France. During the 1930s, Czechoslovak military strategy never planned for an attack into southeastern Germany. Czechoslovak military manoeuvres did not even simulate offensive action against Germany. Nor were

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<sup>61</sup> Hubert Ripka, Munich: Before and After, (London: 1939), p. 427.

<sup>62</sup> Edward Taborsky, "The Triumph and Disaster of Eduard Benes," Foreign Affairs, XXXVI, (1958), p. 679. Taborsky, Benes' one time secretary, concludes that "the supreme aim of Benes foreign policy was to prevent war from ever involving his country."

<sup>63</sup> Public Record Office, (hereafter PRO), FO 371 15178 C 9568/221/21, Addison to Simon, 17 December 1931.

there any plans for coordination between the French and Czechoslovak High Commands. There had been no military corollary to the treaties of 1924 and 1925. The only serious arrangement made for military cooperation was the Air Collaboration Pact signed between the two countries in July of 1935, and even these accords were not binding; each signatory retained the freedom to implement them as it chose.<sup>64</sup> The French are usually blamed for this lack of coordination between French and Czechoslovak military planning. Historians, however, have failed to consider that Czechoslovakian strategy was every bit as defensive as that of France, and that, for Prague, the alliance was to serve diplomatic rather military purposes. Czechoslovakia did not intend to fight a war unless it was attacked, and then it proposed to do so entirely on the defensive. Consequently, estimates of the European balance of power which emphasize Czechoslovakia's ability to aid France in a war with Germany are misleading.

Benes avoided signing military conventions whenever possible. The only such agreements Czechoslovakia entered into were with its Little Entente partners, and these were primarily, if not exclusively, directed against Hungary. He adopted this attitude because, for reasons of internal and international politics, he had to be careful that Czechoslovakia did not appear to be a satellite of France.<sup>65</sup> For this reason, the maintenance of Faucher and the

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<sup>64</sup> SHAT, 5n579-6, Fonds Gamelin, 8 septembre 1938.

<sup>65</sup> Eduard Benes, The Problems of Czechoslovakia, p. 33.

military mission allowed Benes considerable freedom of movement.<sup>66</sup> When Germany became more hostile during the course of the 1930s, the mission was a symbol, at least to the Czechoslovaks, of military solidarity with France. Thus it freed Benes from the need to sign a military accord with Paris, while still providing an effective instrument of liaison between the French and Czechoslovak armies. Most importantly, the mission did not compromise Benes' efforts to keep up the appearance of an independent foreign policy which would provide Czechoslovakia with international credibility.

There was considerable suspicion in London, Berlin and Rome regarding the Franco-Czechoslovak alliance and the position of the mission in Prague. Viscount d'Abernon, for example, probably reflecting German as well as British suspicions, referred to the "deadly militaristic character" of the Franco-Czechoslovak alliance, and considered the mission a reflection of the "complete vassalage of Czecho-Slovakia to France."<sup>67</sup> Benes responded to such charges by protesting that the military mission was the product of "a simple technical agreement without political considerations," and by hinting that he had successfully resisted persistent overtures from Paris for a formal military alliance.<sup>68</sup> This was true, in an ingenuous sense. He had countered pressure from Paris precisely by arguing that the coordination produced by the military

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<sup>66</sup> Marès, "Mission militaire et relations internationales:" pp. 584-585.

<sup>67</sup> D'Abernon, The Diary of an Ambassador, vol. III, pp. 34-35. See also Marès, "Mission militaire et relations internationales:" p. 581.

<sup>68</sup> Wandycz, France and her Eastern Allies, p. 296 & pp.281, 299, 385-386.

mission made a military convention unnecessary.<sup>69</sup>

The mission also allowed Benes to circumvent domestic opposition to a close military alliance with France. The Czech and Slovak Agrarian Parties, as well as the German representatives in the National Assembly, opposed Benes' internationalist policy. They favoured instead a more utilitarian approach, distancing Czechoslovakia from France and moving closer to a bilateral arrangement with Germany.<sup>70</sup> Benes could forego a military convention with Paris because the mission performed the same function. It gave him the security of French military support without the embarrassment of formal ties.

By 1929 it was clear that the mission had accomplished its official purpose of organizing the Czechoslovakian army. Faucher suggested that the mission might well be withdrawn since, despite his relationship with military and political officials in Prague, "l'importance de mes fonctions de conseiller technique a diminué avec le temps."<sup>71</sup> However, he acknowledged that the mission had not merely technical, but also political functions: "La présence d'une mission militaire Française à Prague est une affirmation de la solidarité

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<sup>69</sup> Jules Laroche, Au Quai d'Orsay, p. 185.

<sup>70</sup> Zinner, "The Foreign Policy of Eduard Benes," p. 105. Benes resisted this pressure to the bitter end, remaining committed to pursuing an understanding with Germany within the general European context. For evidence of this see Gerhard Weinberg's study of the tentative discussions between Benes and a German go-between, "Secret Hitler-Benes Negotiations in 1936-1937, Journal of Central European Affairs, 19, (1960), pp.366-374 and Marès, "Mission militaire et relations internationales:", p. 580.

<sup>71</sup> SHAT, 7n2447, décembre 1929.

des deux pays; elle a par conséquent une signification politique qui n'est pas sans présenter un certain intérêt." The mission was also valuable for liaison between the French and Czechoslovak armies. Faucher admitted that "l'existence d'une mission militaire permet entre les deux armées une liaison plus intime que celle qui doit être assurée par des attachés militaires." Consequently, Faucher concluded, the withdrawal of the mission was ultimately a political question to be decided by the governments of the two states.<sup>72</sup>

In January of 1930 Paris requested the Czechoslovaks opinion regarding the continued maintenance of the military mission. Masaryk, Benes and Frantisek Urdzal, the Czechoslovak Defence Minister, responded by requesting that the mission be maintained "sans limite de durée." However, because the Czechoslovaks trusted Faucher, the maintenance of the mission was tied specifically to the maintenance of Faucher as the *Chef de Mission*.<sup>73</sup> The French Minister of Defence, André Maginot, complied, informing the Czechoslovaks that the French government "attache une particulière importance" to the mission and agreed that it should "conserve son rayonnement." Maginot informed Faucher that both Masaryk and Benes had "souligné l'intérêt particulier qu'ils attacheraient à votre maintien à la tête de la mission." He concluded that "le prestige de cette mission menacerait d'être amoindri si sa direction était confiée à un Chef nouveau qui ne saurait disposer

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<sup>72</sup> SHAT, 1K288-1, Papiers Faucher, 11 décembre 1929.

<sup>73</sup> SHAT, 7n3096, 7 mars 1937.

de l'autorité vous avez acquiescé."<sup>74</sup> In order to meet Faucher's private concern that remaining in Prague would hamper his career prospects, Faucher was promoted to the rank of Commandant de Region - the equivalent of a divisional command in the French army - and reassigned to Prague.<sup>75</sup>

Faucher again suggested the withdrawal of the mission in October of 1936 because he was passing into the *cadre de réserve* in the French army. Again both Prague and Paris agreed that the mission should remain "sans limite de durée" with Faucher at its head.<sup>76</sup> Faucher repeated his desire to retire in late 1937. By this time, however, it was politically difficult to withdraw the mission, owing to increased tension between Prague and Berlin over the Sudeten question.<sup>77</sup>

Benes submitted that he considered the mission of "definite military and political importance."<sup>78</sup> He trusted Faucher and used him as an intermediary, independent of the French embassy, through which he could communicate with Paris.<sup>79</sup> Faucher well-known sympathy for Czechoslovak aspirations was

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<sup>74</sup> SHAT, 7n3103, 13 janvier 1930, and 1k288-1, Papiers Faucher, "Rapport de la fin de la Mission", pp. 10-11.

<sup>75</sup> SHAT, 7n2447, 17 octobre 1930.

<sup>76</sup> Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1192, SHAT, 7n3096, 7 mars 1937.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.17.

<sup>78</sup> MAE, Tchécoslovaquie: 22, pp. 354-356, 28 décembre 1929, SHAT, 7n3096, 11 mars 1935, 2k288-1 octobre 1936.

<sup>79</sup> Léon Noël, La Tchécoslovaquie d'avant Munich, (Paris: 1982), p. 26n.



useful to Benes. Accordingly, Faucher was often treated as a second French ambassador, used to convey messages of a distinctly political flavour to Paris. In particular, Benes repeatedly used Faucher to allay suspicions in Paris of secret political or military accords between Prague and Moscow. In August 1936, for example, he revealed that the Soviets had offered a military pact directed against Poland and Germany, which he declined: "J'ai refusé, et je refuserai toujours, car la Pologne est l'alliée de la France."<sup>80</sup> It was through Faucher that Benes voiced misgivings concerning the defensive orientation of French military planning. In October of 1934 and several times thereafter, Faucher expressed Czechoslovak concern over the lack of any concrete plan to aid Czechoslovakia in the event of war.<sup>81</sup> He also attacked the anti-Czechoslovak bias of certain French journals. In particular, he argued that accounts of mistreatment of the Sudeten German minority were Nazi propaganda. Faucher's reliability as spokesman for the Czech point of view made him invaluable to the Czechoslovaks. It explains their insistence that he be maintained as the *Chef de Mission* after he had reached the age of retirement.

The French also had political reasons for maintaining the mission through to 1938. Initially, the mission was an instrument for competition with

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<sup>80</sup> SHAT, 7n3096, 21 août 1936

<sup>81</sup> SHAT, 7N3096, 30 octobre 1934. Faucher also expressed concern over the status of the mission and its relationship to the Czechoslovakian High Command. He expressed frustration that his efforts to ascertain the precise role the mission would play in the event of war consistently met with vague responses. *Ibid.*, 21 août 1934.

Italy for influence in Czechoslovakia. France won this struggle in 1919, which in turn led Italy to support Hungary in its disputes with Czechoslovakia.

Consequently, two loose alliances of convenience evolved in east-central Europe - Italy, Germany and Hungary on the one hand, and France and the Little Entente on the other.<sup>82</sup> Under these circumstances the mission served France as a means to combat German and Italian influence in east-central Europe and to maintain its position in Czechoslovakia.

Paris, indeed, wanted the mission to intervene in the formulation of Czechoslovak policy. For example, when Czechoslovakia declared its neutrality in the summer of 1920 and formed the Little Entente as an independent diplomatic bloc, both Pellé and Joseph Couget, the French Ambassador to Prague, were called onto the carpet in Paris to explain why they had failed to prevent these developments.<sup>83</sup> Although the mission could not direct the course of Czechoslovak policy, Benes' attempts to emphasize the distinction between the activity of the mission and Franco-Czechoslovak diplomatic and military cooperation were nonsensical. In May of 1923 the French Generalissimo Ferdinand Foch had visited Prague to coordinate a Czechoslovak invasion of Bavaria with a possible French offensive in the west.<sup>84</sup> Only after the evacuation of the Rhineland and the subsequent shift :

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<sup>82</sup> Marès, "La faillite des relations franco-tchécoslovaques:", p. 57.

<sup>83</sup> Wandycz, France and her Eastern Allies, p. 190.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 280-281.

toward defence in French military strategy did this type of cooperation cease to be a major factor for the mission. From its inception the mission had been perceived as an instrument through which French interests might be furthered. Its success in training the Czechoslovak army gave France a strong ally on Germany's eastern border. After it had completed this task, it remained a privileged intermediary between the French High Command and the leading civilian and military officials of Czechoslovakia.

Paris continued to use the mission to influence Czechoslovak policy during the 1930s. French strategists considered that the attitude of Poland would be decisive in any war between Germany and Czechoslovakia. As Germany grew more powerful, Polish-Czechoslovak rapprochement became increasingly essential to any effective eastern front against Germany. Accordingly, throughout the interwar period, the French sought to foster military cooperation between Prague and Warsaw. Paris attempted to take advantage of Faucher's position in Prague to gain improved relations between Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Quai d'Orsay suggested that "peut-être le Général Faucher, ... avec sa grande autorité, [pourrait] persuader l'état-major tchécoslovaque que sa défiance à l'égard de l'état-major polonais est excessive."<sup>85</sup> However, despite his personal desire for effective cooperation between Prague and Warsaw, Faucher kept to his role as technical advisor and declined to pressure Czechoslovak strategy to conform to French requests.

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<sup>85</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. II, #75.

Instead, he suggested that Syrový be invited to Paris where the French High Command could press the issue with him.<sup>86</sup> This tactic failed, however, because the real resistance to a military alliance with Poland came from Masaryk and Benes. Although the Czechoslovak General Staff favoured cooperation, they could not override the opinion of their political leaders.<sup>87</sup> The inability of the French diplomatic legation and the military mission to improve relations between Poland and Czechoslovakia was a constant source of frustration to Paris.<sup>88</sup>

As French strategy became increasingly defensive, the role of the military mission became increasingly political. The French feared that Prague would forsake its ties with France and enter into a closer relationship with either Berlin or Moscow.<sup>89</sup> During his visit to Czechoslovakia in 1929, Pétain became concerned about German political activity in east-central Europe. He submitted that "It is the whole question of our military relations with the states of Central Europe remaining under our influence which has to be resolved."<sup>90</sup> Pétain feared that if the military mission was withdrawn, German military influence might become ascendant and lead Czechoslovak defence policy "away from

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<sup>86</sup> 7n3007, "Coopération polono-tchèque," 25 avril 1928.

<sup>87</sup> DBFP, 2nd series, v. IV, #298.

<sup>88</sup> See MAE, Tchécoslovaquie: #73, p. 56 and SHAT 7n3444, *passim*.

<sup>89</sup> Marès, "La faillite des relations franco-tchécoslovaques:", p. 56.

<sup>90</sup> MAE, Tchécoslovaquie: #22, 11 septembre 1929, pp. 343-347.

the path we have traced for it."<sup>91</sup> In order to avert this, Paris used Faucher as an unwitting messenger of elliptical and disingenuous assurances of fidelity to Prague. This was the case after both the Rhineland crisis and the Anschluss.<sup>92</sup>

Despite the problems caused by Faucher's determination to stick to his role as technical counsellor, until early 1938 the mission was deemed too important for the French to withdraw. The French Minister in Prague, François Charles-Roux, pointed out to Paris that, because it was integrated into the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defence, the mission assured France of representation at high level councils in Czechoslovakia.<sup>93</sup> During his visit to Czechoslovakia in August 1936, Général Victor Schweisguth, Deputy Chief of Staff, noted that "Le Général Faucher occupe la toute première place dans les conseils de l'Armée tchécoslovaque et qui est là-bas, entouré du respect et de l'affection de tous."<sup>94</sup>

Faucher later testified that, for the Czechoslovaks, the mission was a symbol of French fidelity to the alliance.<sup>95</sup> As such, it provided a means of

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<sup>91</sup> SHAT, 7n3095, 2 novembre 1929.

<sup>92</sup> See for example SHAT, 7n3436, dossier of telegrams, #343, 3 mars 1936 and #1122, 19 mars 1938, I am grateful to Dr. N.T.N. Jordan of the University of Illinois for these references.

<sup>93</sup> MAE, Tchécoslovaquie: #22, pp. 221-222, 237-239.

<sup>94</sup> Archives Nationales, (hereafter A.N.), Papiers Schweisguth, 2SC2 Dr. 5, "Mission en Tchécoslovaquie."

<sup>95</sup> Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1203.

preventing Czechoslovakia from drifting from France's side during the turbulent 1930s. It also ensured that France would be kept aware of any abrupt shifts in Czechoslovak policy. This was the most important consideration in the French decision to maintain the mission "sans limite de durée." Although the French did not want to be drawn into a war with Germany over Czechoslovakia, neither did they desire to see their most valuable ally desert them and move into the German camp. Hence the role of the mission was tied to the role of Czechoslovakia in French grand strategy.

## **Czechoslovakia in French Grand Strategy**

The role of Czechoslovakia in French strategy is the key to understanding France's Munich policy. By 1938 the French High Command was convinced that it could do nothing to aid Czechoslovakia should it be invaded by Germany. Surrounded by potential enemies and dependent on the loyalty of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia was considered extremely vulnerable. The "décadence" interpretation - that the French leadership was paralysed and that French policy lacked direction - would conclude that Paris drifted through the radical shift in the balance of power during 1930s with no real plan for Czechoslovakia, hoping that they would not be forced to fight for their ally.

Another interpretation is possible and more plausible. There was a purpose to the retention of the Czechoslovakian alliance - the desire not to be left isolated before a resurgent and stridently revisionist Germany. In this regard, Czechoslovakia was not as valuable an ally as Britain. However, until September of 1938 Czechoslovakia was France's only ally. The British military commitment French strategy had long coveted was only obtained at the price of Paris relinquishing its ties to Prague. There was no attractive alternative

open to France in the summer of 1938. This does not mean, however, that French policy was utterly void of direction. French strategy reflected France's true position in Europe during the 1930s, that of a power in decline.

For the French High Command, the predominant strategic lesson of the First World War was that any future conflict with Germany would be another long war of attrition. German demographic and industrial superiority were central to French assessments of such a conflict. In 1935 the German population outnumbered that of France 65 millions to 40 millions.<sup>1</sup> French planners faced a particular dearth of manpower from 1935 to 1939. These were the *années creuses*, the lean years which reflected the sharp drop in the French birth rate from 1914 to 1918. In 1937 there were 4.3 million males of military age in France compared to 8.3 million in Germany.<sup>2</sup> More manpower meant not only more soldiers, but also more labour for war industry. German industrial potential was an ever-present spectre to French planners during the interwar period.

Absolutely imperative to French survival in a war with Germany was the inviolability of the northeastern frontier. The northern and eastern *départements* constituted the industrial heartland of France. In the 1930s the bulk of French heavy industry - 75% of its coal and textile production and 90% of its pig iron

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Jordan, "The Cut Price War on the Peripheries: The French General Staff, The Rhineland Crisis and Czechoslovakia", in Robert Boyce and Desmond Robertson (eds.), *Paths to War*, (London: 1982), p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> Dutailly, *Problèmes*, p. 73.



and steel - was situated in this area and extremely vulnerable to a German offensive.<sup>3</sup> The maintenance of secure maritime lines of communication and supply was also essential to sustain the French wartime economy, which depended on imports for the vast majority of its strategic raw material.<sup>4</sup> These imperatives, rather than drift, explain the two dominant themes in French strategic planning during the 1930s: the emphasis on *l'inviolabilité du territoire* and the necessity of securing the full support of Great Britain and its powerful navy. Hence Daladier's conclusion that "we could only defeat Germany in a war if we were assured, in every possible respect, of total British assistance."<sup>5</sup>

This conclusion can only be understood against the backdrop of French economic and military weakness during the 1930s. While late in arriving, the effects of the depression on the French economy were severe and long-lasting. The commitment of the Rightist and Radical governments of the early 1930s to orthodox economics - budgeting equilibrium, an unwillingness to devalue the franc and curtailed government spending - further worsened the state of the economy.<sup>6</sup> Resistance to devaluation kept the franc at an artificially high level, which discouraged foreign investment. Consequently, the more overvalued the franc became, the more the volume of both trade and industrial production

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<sup>3</sup> Young, In Command of France, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Dutailly, Problèmes, p. 126, Duroselle, La décadence, pp. 177-181.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Young, In Command of France, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Julian Jackson, Defending Democracy: The Popular Front in France, (Cambridge: 1988), p. 215.

declined.<sup>7</sup>

The flight of capital from France, particularly after the election of the Popular Front government in the spring of 1936, also hampered the revival of French industry. Between 1929 and 1938 France's industrial production declined by 27% and its national income fell by 18%.<sup>8</sup> This made France increasingly dependent on British and American goodwill to float the huge loans required to stabilize the franc and finance the French rearmament programs of the mid to late 1930s. As a result, Britain assumed an even greater role in French strategy.<sup>9</sup>

This economic weakness seriously compromised French military capability. From 1930 to 1935 aggregate defence spending was reduced by 25%.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, when the Popular Front instituted the first serious rearmament program in 1936, Germany had acquired a decisive head start in

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<sup>7</sup> René Girault, "The Impact of the Economic Situation on the Foreign Policy of France", in The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement, pp. 212-213.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Frankenstein, "The Decline of France and French Appeasement" in The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement, pp. 238-239. Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000, (London: 1988), p. 402.

<sup>9</sup> Girault, "The Impact of the Economic Situation", p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> Adamthwaite, France and the Coming of the Second World War, p. 165. See also, Elisabeth du Réau, "Edouard Daladier et les problèmes posés par la mobilisation industrielle au moment de la crise de Munich," Munich, 1938: Mythes et Réalités. Colloque, Revue des études slaves, 52, (1979), pp. 73-74.

upgrading its armament industry.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, by the end of 1937 Germany had achieved clear military superiority over France. On 6 April 1938, General Maurice Gamelin, the Chief of Staff for National Defence, estimated the size of the German army after full mobilization to be 126 divisions, of which 92 could be deployed against France. Gamelin put the size of the French army at 80 divisions. Thus Germany could deploy 34 divisions against Czechoslovakia while still outnumbering the entire French army on the western frontier.<sup>12</sup> While these figures were exceedingly pessimistic, especially regarding the numbers of German divisions, it is clear that Nazi rearmament had made Germany once again the dominant European power.

Nowhere is the military imbalance between France and Germany more strikingly reflected than in air power. In September of 1938 the French estimated the rate of German aircraft production at 600 planes per month. It was also estimated that the *Luftwaffe* possessed over 2,000 first-line aircraft; the French air force 500 to 600.<sup>13</sup> Not only was the French air force dramatically outnumbered by the *Luftwaffe*, its aircraft were also a generation behind in

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Frank, "Le front populaire a-t-il perdu la guerre?", L'histoire, (July-August, 1983), p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Général Jean Delmas, <<La perception de la puissance militaire française>>, in René Girault and Robert Frank (eds.), La Puissance en Europe 1938-1940, (Paris: 1984), pp. 128-129.

<sup>13</sup> SHAT, 5n 579-6, "Le facteur aérien", 6 septembre, for the estimates of German air strength. For the French side see Robert Young, "French Military Intelligence and Nazi Germany", in Ernest May (ed.), Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars, (Princeton: 1984), p. 290.

technical terms. A lack of direction and coordination in long-term planning had left the air force without a clear role, either tactical or strategic, in French military planning.<sup>14</sup> This left France at an extreme disadvantage during the spring and summer of 1938. On 9 February 1938 the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Vuillemin, told Guy La Chambre, the Air Minister that "si un conflit éclatait cette année, l'aviation française serait écrasé en quelques jours." By late August he had only slightly modified this prediction, estimating that "en quinze jours, notre aviation serait anéantie".<sup>15</sup>

The disparity in air power fundamentally shaped French policy in 1938.

Daladier was to remark in a moment of post-Munich regret

If I had had a thousand bombers behind me to support the voice of France, I would have been in a much stronger position to resist Hitler's demands; and perhaps we would not have been forced to sign what we did sign.<sup>16</sup>

The effect of the air imbalance could only have been exacerbated by the near hysterical fear of the destructive power of the bomber which was prevalent in

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<sup>14</sup> Although subordinate to the army, the French Air Force persisted in plans to construct a strategic bombing force which was at odds with the role of tactical support which the army envisioned for it. See Robert Young, "The Strategic Dream: French Air Doctrine in the Inter-War Period", Journal of Contemporary History, v. 9, 4 (October, 1974), p. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Delmas, <<La Perception de la Puissance>>, p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> Note for the Minister, 15 January 1939, Guy La Chambre Papers, cited in R.J. Young, "French Policy and the Munich Crisis of 1938: A Reappraisal", Historical Papers, (Canadian Historical Association), 1970, p. 198.

western Europe in the 1930s.<sup>17</sup>

Economic and military weakness were essential factors in the French policy which culminated in the Munich Accords. France did not possess the economic wherewithal to forge a network of strong allies to the east of Germany. Moreover, cutbacks in defence spending seriously compromised the overall effectiveness of the French armed forces. This, combined with the resurgence of German power, wrought a change in French strategy from the 1920s to the 1930s. At Thoiry in September of 1926 Stresemann and Briand had agreed on the evacuation of the last troops of occupation from the German Rhineland by June of 1930. This deprived France of a decisive strategic advantage in any projected invasion of western Germany. As a result, during the 1930s French strategic planning became increasingly defensive and its army was unable to intervene actively in eastern Europe during the latter part of the 1930s.

Speaking during a debate on national defence before the French Senate in March of 1937, Daladier outlined the essential problems of national defence for France:

to bar the roads of invasion by means of reinforced concrete as well as mobile armour, each provided with the

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<sup>17</sup> For an account of how the fear of an air attack shaped attitudes and decision making in France regarding a potential European war see R.J. Young, "The Use and Abuse of Fear: France and the Air Menace in the 1930s", Intelligence and National Security, II, 4, (October, 1987), pp. 88-109. See also Uri Bialer, The Shadow of the Bomber, (London: 1981) on the question of the widespread terror of strategic bombing in western Europe during the 1930s.

necessary effectives, and once this barrage is set up, and our forces are concentrated, to be capable of guaranteeing not only the security of France but that of nations which have pinned their faith and hope on France.<sup>18</sup>

This statement reveals the contradiction inherent in French foreign policy and military strategy. How long would it take to "set up" the "barrage" and to concentrate the forces capable of the "forward movement which alone brings decisive victory"? The answer to this question was to determine the fate of those nations which had "pinned their faith and hopes on France."

French planning anticipated a *guerre de longue durée* which would be fought in two distinct stages. The first stage would see the consolidation of French frontiers by a *couverture* force of one million active and first-line reserve troops. This would secure the French industrial base from the projected German offensive. It was in Belgium, however, that the French anticipated - and desired - the decisive battle. Consequently, the French mobilisation plan E, the Dyle-Escaut plan, called for the *couverture* also to move northward into Belgium to assume a defensive position along the Dyle River to the German-Belgian border. It was here that a British expeditionary force was expected to provide a decisive advantage.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> University Press of America: United States Military Intelligence Reports: France, 1919-1941, (Washington: 1989), vol. IV, 10 March 1937, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> D.W. Alexander, "Repercussions of the Breda Variant," French Historical Studies, 8, 3, (1974), pp. 465-467, Dutailly, Problèmes, pp. 100-111, Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, (Hamden: 1985), pp. 171-175, Duroselle, La décadence, pp. 244-247, Gamelin, Servir, v. I, pp. 90-92, Gunsburg, Divided and Conquered, passim, Young, In Command of France, ch. 1 and "La Guerre de Longue Durée:

As Daladier indicated, the French High Command appreciated that an offensive strategy was necessary to obtain decisive victory. French strategy was essentially defensive-offensive. The intention was to engage Germany in a *materialschlacht*, in which the combined resources of the British and French empires would provide a long-term advantage. In the first stage of the war, French planning anticipated that an Anglo-French economic blockade of Germany would establish a clear Allied materiel superiority. In the second stage, having sufficiently weakened Germany, the Allies would mount a decisive strategic offensive. However, any significant offensives into Germany were ruled out until the blockade had taken its toll on the German war machine. It was anticipated that this would take at least several months and possibly years. Any offensive during the first stage of the conflict would be tentative, with limited objectives, similar to Général Prétalat's operation in the Autumn of 1939.<sup>20</sup>

The emphasis on preparation for total war in French military planning reflected the experiences of the First World War. From 1914 to 1918 the Germans had occupied all or most of 10 *départments* vital to the French capacity to wage war.<sup>21</sup> To avoid a repetition of these experiences, the

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Some Reflections on French Strategy and Diplomacy in the 1930s" in Adrian Preston (ed.), General Staffs and Diplomacy Before the Second World War, pp. 41-64.

<sup>20</sup> Young, "Preparations for Defeat", pp. 155-156.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Alexander, "The Maginot Line: Economics, Psychology and Rationality in French Interwar Strategy", unpublished paper presented to the 1991 United States Army War College Conference on Strategy, p. 9.

French hoped to establish a continuous defensive front stretching from Switzerland to Holland.<sup>22</sup> Essentially, a military doctrine which worshipped a holy trinity of defence, the methodical 'set piece' style of battle and the destructive capabilities of concentrated firepower was wedded to the dogma of *l'inviolabilité du territoire*. The result was the *Ligne Maginot*.

The Maginot Line was to function as a 'force multiplier'; it was "an effort to maximise strength through the substitution of firepower for manpower."<sup>23</sup> It was hoped that its concrete ramparts would preserve the youth of France from a repetition of the carnage of the First World War and free precious divisions which could be deployed either in Belgium or along the Italian border. All of this, however, had the effect of creating an army which was "psychologically confined west of the Rhine."<sup>24</sup>

French strategic and tactical doctrine has earned scant praise since the fall of France. The High Command has been criticized for its "intellectual stultification", which discouraged innovative thinking. Important results of this

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<sup>22</sup> Gunsburg, *Divided and Conquered*, p. 64. See also Robert Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, pp. 41-71, and R.J. Young, "Preparations for Defeat: French War Doctrine in the Inter-War Period" *Journal of European Studies*, (June, 1972), pp. 155-172.

<sup>23</sup> Bradford Lee, "Strategy, Arms and the Collapse of France 1930-1940", in R.T.B. Langhorne (ed.), *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War: Essays in Honour of F.H. Hinsley*, (Cambridge: 1985), pp. 56-57. For an excellent discussion of the Maginot Line in French strategy see Général Paul Emile Tournoux, *Haut commandement: Gouvernement et défense des frontières du nord et de l'est*, (Paris: 1960).

<sup>24</sup> Young, "Preparations for Defeat", p. 168.



were the failure to develop either an armoured strike force or effective coordination between air and ground forces.<sup>25</sup> Historians have argued that 'Maginot mindedness', the emphasis placed on the importance of fortifications and the defensive style of warfare, became an obsession which delayed the modernization of the French army and constrained innovative approaches to tactics and weaponry.<sup>26</sup> Such criticism is justified, but must be qualified. It is important to remember that, given the political and economic mood of the early 1930s, the French National Assembly would not have consented to provide the French military with equipment that might become the machinery for an aggressive war. Indeed, this was why the calls of Paul Reynaud and Colonel Charles De Gaulle for an *armée de métier* - an army of professionals which would supplement the conscript army and provide France with a mobile instrument with which to counterattack - was doomed to failure. The idea of a professional army was antithetical to the Republican tradition of the *levée en masse*, and was perceived by the French Left as a potential threat to the Republic.<sup>27</sup> Given De Gaulle's contemporary politics, the latter concern was entirely

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<sup>25</sup> Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, pp. 180-185, Young, "Preparations for Defeat", pp. 155-157,

<sup>26</sup> Lee, "Strategy, Arms and the Collapse of France", p.60.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Alexander, "Soldiers and Socialists: the French officer corps and leftist government 1935-1937" in Martin Alexander and Helen Graham (eds.) The French and Spanish Popular Fronts, (Cambridge: 1987), pp. 71-72. See also Alexander's collaboration with Brian Bond, "Liddell Hart and De Gaulle: The Doctrines of Limited Liability and Mobile Defence," in Peter Paret (ed.), Makers of Modern Strategy, (Princeton: 1986), pp. 598-624.

reasonable. The Maginot Line and the *levée en masse*, along with the defensive strategy they implied, were "entirely indicative of the mood of France." If parliamentary credits had not gone toward its completion they would likely have been lost by the military altogether.<sup>28</sup>

The fundamental principles of French strategy were sound. Its defensive nature and the emphasis on the necessity of British support were intended to offset Germany's clear demographic, economic and military advantages. Plans for a fluid front emphasizing counteroffensives and mobility would have designated northern France as the major battlefield of the coming war. This was exactly what French strategists sought to avoid at all costs.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the emphasis on firepower and the methodical battle was, to a significant extent, borne out by the Allied campaign in Europe in 1943-1945, which evolved into 'set piece' battles hinging on the effective use of firepower.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the principles of the *guerre de longue durée* ultimately proved sound. The defeat of Nazi Germany was essentially a war of attrition which required a coalition of allies and a prolonged naval blockade. Although they were defined in an excessively rigid fashion, the assumptions of French military planning were basically well-founded. It was in the execution of these principles that the

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<sup>28</sup> Alexander, "The Maginot Line", pp. 26-27.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Hughes, To the Maginot Line: the Politics of French Military Preparation in the 1920s, (Cambridge, Mass.: 1971), p. 227.

<sup>30</sup> See Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, Firepower, (London: 1982), pp. 204.

French High Command failed miserably.

This strategy restricted France's freedom to manoeuvre. It aimed at victory over the long term in a total war, not for success in a short and limited struggle. In particular, it did not allow for a graduated response to threats to French security. For example, when Germany remilitarized the Rhineland in 1936, the only response that the French General Staff could offer French politicians was full mobilization.

Nor did French military planning provide a means to supply direct and effective aid to France's eastern allies. In early 1938, Gamelin listed France's military priorities as follows: defence of its frontiers, defence of its Empire, offensive action against Italy in North Africa and finally, "si possible", offensive action against Germany in support of its east-central European allies.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, after the German remilitarization of the Rhineland in March of 1936 a French offensive into western Germany was extremely unlikely regardless of the situation in eastern Europe.

The rise of the Nazi Party to power in 1933, along with the resurgence of German strength, profoundly altered the international situation. As the balance of power in Europe changed during the 1930s, so did the role of eastern Europe in French strategy. France's treaties with its eastern allies were products of the 1920s. The alliances would play a much different role in French strategy in the late 1930s than they had during the 1920s.

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<sup>31</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. VIII, #127.

In the 1920s a strong Czechoslovak state, combined with the Little Entente and Poland, had deterred German and Hungarian revisionism and Soviet expansion into eastern Europe. With the largest army among the eastern states, Poland was a major component of any eastern strategy. There were, however, serious obstacles to the realization of a *barrière de l'est*, above all the fact that Poland refused to play the role envisioned for it in French planning. A lack of cooperation, even acrimony, between Poland and Czechoslovakia was a fatal weakness in the French eastern system.

The origins of Polish-Czechoslovak ill-will went far beyond the end of the Great War and the breakup of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires. These differences were accentuated by the dispute over Teschen and the position taken by Czechoslovakia during the war between Poland and the Soviet Union in 1919-1920.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the 1920s, Czechoslovakia had remained aloof from Polish overtures for improved relations. This was largely because Danzig and the Polish corridor were the chief targets of German revisionist claims during the 1920s and Czechoslovakia did not wish to involve itself in a Polish-German conflict.<sup>33</sup> As the tables turned in the 1930s and Czechoslovakia increasingly became the focus of Nazi revisionism, Poland, in

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<sup>32</sup> The Poles resented both Czechoslovak criticism of their offensive into Russia in 1920, and inactivity as the Bolshevik army approached Warsaw later that year. Piotr Wandycz, "The Foreign Policy of Edvard Benes", pp. 219-220.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Zinner, "The Diplomacy Policy of Eduard Beneš," pp. 108. See also the above reference from Hubert Ripka, Munich: Before and After, p. 427.

turn, distanced itself from Czechoslovakia.

There were other problems with the French eastern system. France was unable to strengthen the economies of its allies in east-central Europe.<sup>34</sup> Economic weakness during the 1930s made it very difficult to forge a network of economically strong allies in an area with natural commercial ties to Germany. The Rambouillet Accords of September 1936, in which France agreed to loan Poland 800 million francs in armament credits, were an example of this. Funding for the economic reforms of the Popular Front took priority over credits to Poland. Consequently, only a fraction of the 800 million francs promised to Poland was actually delivered.<sup>35</sup> This shortage of funds raised difficult problems for French strategic planning. The French military resented the priority given to social reforms. Maxime Weygand, the former *Inspecteur Général* of the French army complained that, "our policy ... is prejudicial to our highest interests. What are some dozens of millions of francs if they could help to eliminate the risk of war?"<sup>36</sup>

After Locarno, Polish leader Marshal Jozef Pilsudski and his protégé, Foreign Minister Jozef Beck, placed less and less value on the alliance with France. Polish foreign policy was increasingly aimed at reaching an under-

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<sup>34</sup> Segal, French State and Private Investment in Czechoslovakia, pp.355-159. In his study of French economic policy in Eastern Europe, Segal has concluded that French capitalists made little attempt to strengthen the Czechoslovak economy; priority was given instead to profits.

<sup>35</sup> Wandycz, The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, p. 446.

<sup>36</sup> Dutailly, Problèmes, p. 296.

standing with Berlin independent of France.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the 1934 Nazi-Polish non-aggression pact marked the end of any realistic hopes for an effective eastern system. Despite repeated French efforts to foster military and diplomatic cooperation between Poland and Czechoslovakia, the two states drifted further apart during the course of the 1930s. In July of 1936, René Massigli, Political Director of the French Foreign Ministry, expressed frustration with the fact that all French overtures aimed at inducing Poland to improve its relations with Czechoslovakia had come to naught. In meetings at Geneva with Yvon Delbos, the French Foreign Minister, Beck had been openly hostile to the idea. The Polish government, Massigli lamented, was "un gouvernement très jaloux de son indépendance d'action."<sup>38</sup>

In November of 1936, a report from within the Quai d'Orsay postulated that Poland was hoping to use the minority issue to its advantage to claim Teschen. A later analysis concluded that, although Polish cooperation was essential to Czechoslovak resistance to any German invasion, there was a "parallélisme de l'action des diplomaties polonaise et allemande à l'égard de Prague."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the authoritarian Polish regime was ideologically closer to the German National Socialists than to the Leftist Popular Front coalition of

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<sup>37</sup> Piotr Wandycz, "Colonel Beck and the French: Roots of Animosity?", International History Review, 3, (1981), pp. 124-127.

<sup>38</sup> France: Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, (hereafter M.A.E.), Papiers Massigli, "L'Europe Centrale", pp. 205, 208-209, 213, 216.

<sup>39</sup> M.A.E., Papiers Massigli, "L'Europe Centrale", pp. 5 & 214.

Léon Blum. This may explain, in part, the failure of the Rambouillet agreement.

Léon Blum, leader of the first Popular Front government, was frustrated with the Polish alliance, complaining that

We cannot live this way. We are bound by an alliance to a state and a people we have so little confidence in that we hesitate to deliver them arms, designs, plans - for fear that they will betray us and deliver them to the enemy.<sup>40</sup>

In the spring of 1938 Beck assured Britain and France of Polish cooperation in the peaceful resolution of the Sudetenland crisis between Germany and Czechoslovakia. However, on 31 May 1938 the French Minister in Warsaw, Leon Noël, reported that "la ligne de conduite suivie, depuis lors, par le gouvernement polonais est en contradiction absolue avec cette affirmation de bonne volonté." What was worse, the eventual attitude of Poland in the event of a general European war was uncertain. Noël described Polish policy as animated with "l'esprit positif jusqu'au plus parfait cynisme" and that "elle prendrait le parti du plus fort."<sup>41</sup> Weeks later, the French military attaché in Warsaw warned that Poland was likely to join Germany should war erupt over Czechoslovakia.<sup>42</sup>

Discord between Poland and Czechoslovakia was not serious so long as German military power was effectively limited by Versailles. However, as

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<sup>40</sup> Joel Colton, Léon Blum, Humanist in Politics, (Cambridge, Mass.: 1974), p. 208.

<sup>41</sup> M.A.E., Londres, Carton #623, "Le gouvernement polonais et la Tchecoslovaquie", 31 mai, 1938.

<sup>42</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. IX, #275.

German rearmament changed the balance of power, the possibility of an effective French-sponsored second front in the east vanished. By 1938 any French hopes for cooperation between Poland and Czechoslovakia were no more than a faded dream.

Nor could Czechoslovakia hope for significant assistance from Rumania or Yugoslavia, its partners in the Little Entente. Unlike that of Czechoslovakia, the economies of both of these states were based on agricultural and raw material production. Consequently, their natural commercial ties were with Germany, which lacked these natural resources.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, in 1936 a comprehensive analysis from within the Quai d'Orsay had warned that German economic penetration of east-central Europe had created "une situation alarmante pour la solidité des liens qui unissent la France à ses alliés de l'Europe Orientale et que des mesures d'urgence s'imposent pour y faire face" and that "Ainsi le Troisième Reich combine adroitement les nécessités de sa préparation à la guerre avec la réalisation de ses visées politiques à l'est." Consequently, it concluded, a comprehensive plan designed to further French interests by strengthening economic ties between France and the countries of eastern Europe was necessary.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Gaining access to these resources was a primary objective of Hitlerian foreign policy. Magda Adám, "Les pays danubiens et Hitler: 1933-1936", Revue d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale, 25, 98 (1975), p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> M.A.E., Papiers Massigli, #217, "L'Europe Centrale", 9 juillet, 1936, pp. 154-156, 161-164.



Throughout the 1930s France had attempted to implement this policy with proposals for a Danubian economic union, which had failed miserably.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately, economic leadership in east-central Europe was beyond French means in 1936-1937. The struggles to improve the staggering economy, to begin the daunting task of rearmament, and to implement the promised social reforms of the Popular Front, were quite enough to drain its resources.

The decline of French power in relation to Germany fatally weakened France's position in eastern Europe. In 1937 Yugoslavia concluded a non-aggression pact with Italy, which was allied to Germany by this time. This effectively wrecked any remaining French hopes of strengthening the Little Entente as a military entity.<sup>46</sup> It also left Rumania isolated as Czechoslovakia's lone remaining ally. Not surprisingly, Rumania declared its neutrality during the height of the Munich crisis.<sup>47</sup> The Little Entente had been established to oppose collectively Hungarian aggression. Its collapse removed this restraint to Hungarian ambitions. Consequently, during the late 1930s Hungary became another, if less serious, military threat to Czechoslovakia.

The Soviet Union also had a direct interest in French involvement in

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<sup>45</sup> On the question of French Danubian policy see René Girault, "L'Europe centrale et orientale dans la stratégie des hommes et des diplomates français", in Les relations financières internationales, facteurs de solidarités ou de rivalités, (Centre d'Etudes Européennes: Bruxelles: 1979), pp. 365-382 and Wandycz, The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, pp. 5, 68-69, 200-201, 291-293.

<sup>46</sup> Adamthwaite, France and the Coming of the Second World War, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. IX, #134.

eastern Europe. In May of 1935 France and the USSR had signed a mutual assistance pact. A corresponding Soviet-Czechoslovak arrangement followed. The latter agreement was to become operative, however, only after France came to the aid of either party. The Soviets wished to avoid being isolated in a war with Germany in east-central Europe. Consequently, Soviet assistance to Czechoslovakia was contingent on prior French involvement.<sup>48</sup>

Several historians, most notably Anthony Adamthwaite, have argued that Soviet assistance to Czechoslovakia would have tipped the strategic balance in favour of Czechoslovakia. Adamthwaite has further argued that the reluctance of the French to take the Soviet alliance seriously is more evidence of French shortsightedness.<sup>49</sup> It is true that Paris did not consider the Soviets an effective and reliable ally; this is not, however, proof that the French lacked the nerve to fight Germany. There were other factors in the decision to dismiss the Soviet alliance.

The pact with the USSR provided France with a potential ally, but also complicated the French eastern alliance system. Poland was incorrigibly anti-Soviet, and both the Quai d'Orsay and the High Command feared that the

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<sup>48</sup> For two opposing interpretations of Soviet policy and the Franco-Soviet pact see Jonathan Haslam, The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security 1934-1938, (New York: 1985) and Jiri Hochman, The Soviet Union and the Failure of Collective Security, (Ithaca: 1984). For the texts of the Franco-Soviet and Czecho-Soviet agreements see DDF, 1ère série, vol. X, #547, #557.

<sup>49</sup> Adamthwaite, France and the Coming of the Second World War, pp. 235-236, Noguères, Munich: The Phoney Peace, p. 382.

Franco-Soviet pact would drive Warsaw closer to Berlin.<sup>50</sup> French military intelligence, the *deuxième bureau*, gave priority to the Polish above the Soviet alliance and opposed any military accords with the USSR. Predictably, this position gained the approval of a General Staff which was profoundly suspicious of Soviet motives.<sup>51</sup>

The attitude of the French military toward the USSR is embodied in the report of Général Schweisguth on Soviet manoeuvres in the Autumn of 1936. In his report, Schweisguth concluded that the USSR could not and would not undertake any military operations in Europe in the foreseeable future, Moreover, he also suggested that the Soviet leadership desired to foment a war in the west:

Not only would a war between France and Germany have the advantages of leaving almost all of the Soviet forces outside the conflict, owing to the absence of a Russo-German frontier, but it would also leave the USSR ... the arbiter of a drained and exhausted Europe.<sup>52</sup>

With its emphasis on the ideological motives of Soviet conduct, the Schweisguth report was well received, not only by the French General Staff, but also by Daladier and Delbos, both Ministers in the Popular Front Cabinet of

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<sup>50</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. III, #343.

<sup>51</sup> Duroselle, La décadence, p. 140-141.

<sup>52</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. VIII, #343. Extract taken from Young, In Command of France, p. 146-147.

Léon Blum.<sup>53</sup> As R.J. Young has noted, the report became "the official touch-stone of French conduct toward Russia." Hence it was instrumental in

deflecting pressure from the Left for a military adjunct to the 1935 pact.<sup>54</sup>

There can be little doubt that the report confirmed the preconceived notions of the French military establishment. However, its conclusions appeared to be

validated by the trial and execution of Marshal Toukatchevskii and the massive purges of the Red Army officer corps. To French military observers the Soviet

army, with its ravaged command structure, did not appear capable of prev-

enting a swift German takeover of Czechoslovakia.<sup>55</sup> The Czechoslovak High

Command concurred with this assessment. In November of 1937 Deputy Chief

of Staff Ludvik Krecji agreed with Maurice Gauché, head of the 2e bureau, that

the execution of Toukatchevskii and 10,000 Soviet officers had effectively

decapitated the Russian army and rendered it incapable of intervening

effectively in any conflict for several years.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> SHAT, 7n 3143, in Steven Ross, "French Net Assessment", unpublished manuscript, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Young, In Command of France, p. 147. This pressure was particularly strong from the Communist representatives in the Chamber of Deputies as well as Edouard Herriot and Pierre Cot, the Radical Air Minister who has been accused of being a Soviet agent.

<sup>55</sup> Maurice Gauché, Le Deuxième Bureau Au Travail 1935-1940, (Paris: 1953), pp. 76-77.

<sup>56</sup> SHAT, 7n3103, 16 novembre 1937. Benes also recalled that his Generals doubted that the USSR could provide Czechoslovakia with effective military support. See Edward Taborsky, "President Edvard Benes and the Czechoslovak Crises of 1938 and 1948," p. 125.

The Americans, the Germans, the Italians and the British shared this feeling, which was further underlined by the mediocre performance of the Soviet military against the Japanese in the Far East in 1937 and 1938.<sup>57</sup> American diplomats in London, Paris and Prague were sceptical of the intentions and capabilities of the Soviet Union. William Bullitt, the American Ambassador to France, and William Carr, Minister to Czechoslovakia, agreed that reliance on the Soviet Union was not a realistic option in the summer of 1938.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the Germans paid little heed to the possibility of Soviet intervention when planning the *Fall Grün*.<sup>59</sup> Most importantly, the British government was utterly opposed to according the USSR an important role in European affairs. In fact, London regarded the Franco-Soviet pact as "almost ... a betrayal of western civilisation."<sup>60</sup>

Nor was this the only problem with the Soviet alliance. Soviet assistance to Czechoslovakia necessarily depended on the willingness of Poland and Rumania to allow the Red Army passage through their territory - something the

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<sup>57</sup> D.C. Watt, Too Serious a Business: European Armed Forces and the approach to the Second World War, (London: 1975), pp. 56-57.

<sup>58</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, (hereafter FRUS), 1938, vol. I, pp. 558, 588-589.

<sup>59</sup> Documents on German Foreign Policy, series D, v. II, pp. 426, 473-477, 629-631, 948-949.

<sup>60</sup> Austen Chamberlain, cited in Adamthwaite, France and the coming of the Second World War, p. 51. Suspicions were not limited to politicians, see D.D.F., 2e série, v. III #312 for the views of Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Undersecretary of the Foreign Office.

Poles would never assent to.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the French assumed that any Soviet involvement in a projected war would certainly bring Poland in on the opposite side.<sup>62</sup> Further complicating matters, relations with the USSR exacerbated the Left-Right split which dominated French domestic politics during the 1930s. The French response to this problem was a policy of inertia. Repeated Soviet overtures for a military alliance or staff conversations consistently met with French evasiveness. Essentially, French policy toward the USSR appears to have been aimed at preventing another Rapallo by securing Soviet neutrality. The Franco-Soviet pact was an effort less to gain an ally for France than to deny one to Hitler.

In contrast to the Soviet alliance, real strategic possibilities were envisioned for the Franco-Italian mutual assistance agreement of January 1935 - which was reinforced by a military convention and high level staff conversations. Italy was of central importance to French strategy. Its strategic position in the Mediterranean could either threaten or shield the vital lines of communication between France and her colonial possessions in North Africa. Moreover, in principle, France and Italy shared an interest in opposing German expansion into central Europe. Political and economic union between Germany and Austria would give Germany control of the Brenner Pass and so end Italy's

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<sup>61</sup> Haslam, The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security, p. 190.

<sup>62</sup> M.A.E., Londres, Carton #638, 26 septembre, 1938.

position as a Great Power.<sup>63</sup>

The military accords provided for extensive Franco-Italian cooperation in the event of a European war. Discussions between the French and Italian Air Forces centred on the coordination of offensives against German targets - and included possible Italian use of Czechoslovakian air bases. Even more striking was the agreement to use Italian railways to move a French expeditionary force to east-central Europe. This contingent was to serve as a liaison between the Italians and the Yugoslavians in a vast eastern front encompassing Austria, the Balkans, Czechoslovakia and Poland.<sup>64</sup>

Such a strategy had undeniable appeal to the French High Command. It would ensure that the next war was fought by foreigners on foreign territory.<sup>65</sup> For the French military, Italy became indispensable to plans for successful intervention on behalf of Czechoslovakia - a fact that is apparent in French military documents but rarely recognized in the historiography.<sup>66</sup> In early 1936 the strategic planning section of the French military, the *troisième bureau*, envisaged a hypothetical conflict involving Germany, France, Italy and the

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<sup>63</sup> William Shorrock, From Ally to Enemy: the Enigma of Italy in French Diplomacy. (Ohio: 1988), p. 26.

<sup>64</sup> R.J. Young, "French Military Intelligence and the Franco-Italian Alliance, 1933-1939:", The Historical Journal, 28.1 (1985), pp. 159-160.

<sup>65</sup> Jordan, "The Cut Price War on the Peripheries:" p. 134.

<sup>66</sup> A.N., Papiers Schweisguth, 1SC2, dr. 8, 24 mars 1936 and SC4 Dr. 2, 5 novembre 1936. The fact that these agreements were reached under the shadow of the Ethiopian crisis does not appear to have cooled the ardour of the General Staff for the alliance with Italy.

eastern allies begun by a German invasion of Austria. It predicted that a French expeditionary force would arrive on the Danube, via Italy, within three weeks of the outbreak of hostilities; and that Germany would be defeated within two months.<sup>67</sup>

All of this explains why the French military resisted to the end the slow death of the Franco-Italian agreement.<sup>68</sup> However, in 1936 the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the Spanish Civil War exposed the huge gulf both in national interests and in ideology, between the expansionism of fascist Italy and the Popular Front government of France. By mid-1937 French military planning was again assuming Italian hostility.<sup>69</sup>

The demise of the alliance with Italy marked the end of any hopes for active French military intervention in eastern Europe. As its architect, Pierre Laval, later lamented

... [Italy was] the bridge constructed between France and all those countries of central and eastern Europe which were allied with our country. ... It was our chance to benefit not only from the whole of the Italian military effort, but to benefit from the military effort of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Rumania.<sup>70</sup>

Although plans to send a French expeditionary force through Italy to the

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<sup>67</sup> SHAT, 7n 3110, Spring 1936.

<sup>68</sup> See R.J. Young, "Soldiers and Diplomats: The French Embassy and Franco-Italian Relations, 1935-1936," Journal of Strategic Studies, 7, 1, (1984), pp. 74-91.

<sup>69</sup> A.N., Papiers Schweisguth, SC4, dr.4.

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Laval, Laval Parle, (Paris: 1948), p. 245. Cited in Young, In Command of France, p. 91.



Balkans were perhaps somewhat unrealistic, this should not obscure the fact that the French military believed otherwise. The evolution of a Rome-Berlin axis of 1937 changed the balance of power in Europe drastically. The loss of Italy as an ally meant that 17 extra divisions were required on the Italian frontier.<sup>71</sup> France did not have the resources to reinforce the home army and send a force to east-central Europe. Just as important in the event of war, the large Italian submarine force threatened to cut the artery connecting France with North Africa. During the Sudetenland crisis Gamelin and the General Staff reckoned that the attitude of Italy was "une facteur prépondérante" in an eventual war for Czechoslovakia.<sup>72</sup>

The collapse of the Franco-Italian alliance in 1936-1937 and the German remilitarization of the Rhineland transformed the role of Czechoslovakia in French grand strategy. As German power grew the French military increasingly believe that France could not intervene effectively in support of its ally. On 7 April 1936, in the aftermath of the Rhineland Crisis, Gamelin had concluded that

Il apparaît que les fortifications en zone rhénane auraient rendu impossible une intervention en temps utile de la France, en faveur de l'Europe centrale.<sup>73</sup>

That is, once the Siegfried Line was constructed, the French military could do nothing to save Czechoslovakia from a German invasion.

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<sup>71</sup> DDE, 2e série, v. I, #82.

<sup>72</sup> SHAT, 5n 576-6, Fonds Gamelin, "Information du Président: la question Tchecoslovaquie", 15 mars, 1938, (emphasis in original).

<sup>73</sup> A.N., Papiers Schweisguth, 1SC2, dr. 8, 7 avril, 1936.

This attitude was mirrored within the French Foreign Ministry. On 12 February 1937 René Massigli concluded that common ground for a broad anti-German front did not exist and that, given the failure to secure Polish-Czechoslovak cooperation, without British support France would be forced to abandon an active policy in central Europe.<sup>74</sup> As the military value of the French eastern network declined, the emphasis on British assistance increased. As Delbos told Bullitt:

Insofar as he could foresee the future, the position France would take would depend entirely on the position of England. France would not undertake to fight Germany and Italy alone. ... If England should wish to stand firmly by the side of France against Germany and Italy, France would act. If England continued to hold aloof, France could not act.<sup>75</sup>

Many critics of French policy have held that France could have assumed that Britain would have been forced to involve itself in a Franco-German war over Czechoslovakia.<sup>76</sup> However, throughout 1938 London made it repeatedly clear that any British commitment to aid France under such circumstances was impossible.

In October of 1937 Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Minister, told Charles Corbin, the French ambassador in London, that no one would be able

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<sup>74</sup> M.A.E., Papiers Massigli, "L'Europe Centrale", pp. 242-247.

<sup>75</sup> William Bullitt, For the President: Personal and Secret, Orville Bullitt (ed.), (Boston: 1972), p. 222.

<sup>76</sup> See the memoirs of Radical-Socialist Joseph Paul-Boncour, Entre Deux Guerres: Souvenirs sur la IIIe Republique, vol. III, pp. 84-86. See also Robbins, Munich: 1938, p. 297.

to predict the position of the British government in the event of a war in central Europe.<sup>77</sup> The English held to this line through 1938. In conversations between the British and French heads of state in London in April, the former emphasized their determination not to go to war to support the French alliance with Czechoslovakia - an alliance which they had never approved of in the first place. Moreover, Chamberlain repeatedly stressed that, strategically, the situation was hopeless.<sup>78</sup> In private, London was unsure how it would react. As late as 30 August the English Cabinet was still refusing to consider the question of aiding France should it go to war for Czechoslovakia.<sup>79</sup> On 8 September Eden's replacement, Viscount Halifax, told Corbin that France must not count on British support should it decide to fulfil its obligations to defend Czechoslovakia.<sup>80</sup> In hindsight, it appears likely that London was attempting to restrain Paris from taking any rash decisions. However, Paris could not afford to gamble on British assistance in defending Czechoslovakia. As far as French planning was concerned, if France was to come to the aid of Czechoslovakia, she would do so alone.

The German annexation of Austria of 12 March 1938 utterly ended any hope that France could provide effective aid before Germany overran

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<sup>77</sup> DDE, 2e série, v. VIII, 41.

<sup>78</sup> DBFP, 3rd series, v. II, p. 164.

<sup>79</sup> PRO, CAB 23/94 30.8.38.

<sup>80</sup> DBFP, 3rd series, v. II, p. 814.

Czechoslovakia. Surrounded by potential enemies, her newly constructed fortifications outflanked by the former Austrian frontier to the south, Czechoslovakia was extremely vulnerable strategically. On 15 March, a meeting of the French *Comité Permanent de la Défense Nationale* outlined a very bleak situation for Prague. It was estimated that Germany could bring 34 first line infantry plus four armoured divisions against Czechoslovakia and still deploy 12 active divisions against France on the West Wall. The *Comité* was also briefed on the ominous strategic consequences of the Anschluss, predicting that "lorsque se produira notre intervention, si elle se produit, il est probable que la situation de la Tchécoslovaquie sera déjà très critique."<sup>81</sup> At this meeting Daladier concluded that, owing to the nature of French strategic planning

La France n'est pas en mesure de venir directement en aide à la Tchécoslovaquie. Elle ne peut faire qu'indirectement en fixant à l'Ouest une partie des forces allemandes.<sup>82</sup>

As the crisis worsened in September, the assessments of the French military became even more pessimistic. The 2e bureau, the intelligence arm of the French military, estimated that the 12 German divisions on the westwall would quadruple within one week of German mobilization.<sup>83</sup> On 13

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<sup>81</sup> SHAT, 5n579-6, "Information du President," 15 mars 1938.

<sup>82</sup> A.N., Papiers Daladier, DA8 Dr. 5 sdr(a), "La question Tchécoslovaque," 15 mars 1938.

<sup>83</sup> Gamelin, Servir, v. II, p. 345.

September Gamelin told Daladier that a French offensive into the Rhineland would be a modernized repeat of the Battle of the Somme.<sup>84</sup> To Daladier, a veteran of the trenches of the First World War, this estimate must have assumed an apocalyptic dimension. Gamelin counselled that, as long as it did not declare war on Germany, "le gouvernement français resterait maître de la situation."<sup>85</sup> Hardly an encouraging assessment for the fate of Czechoslovakia.

On 21 September Gamelin informed Daladier that Czechoslovakia could not resist Germany for more than a few days.<sup>86</sup> Although Gamelin meticulously avoided functioning as a political advisor, his assessments clearly indicated that France could not expect to save Czechoslovakia. On 12 September he affirmed that while he was confident that an Anglo-French coalition would ultimately defeat Germany, Czechoslovakia would have to be reconstituted by a postwar peace conference.<sup>87</sup> The implication was obvious; either reconstitute the Republic and avoid war or reconstitute it anyway after a

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 346-347.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in R.J. Young, "Le haute commandement français au moment de Munich," Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine, 24, (janvier-mars, 1977), p. 125.

<sup>86</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. XI, #273. Gamelin had earlier given the Czechoslovaks one month. See SHAT, 7n 2522, 19 septembre 1938. His estimates during the crisis varied depending on to whom he was speaking and trying to influence. His predictions in London were significantly more optimistic. See below and Servir, v. II, pp. 351-353.

<sup>87</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. XI, #342.

long and bloody struggle. Gamelin held this line, "feigning optimism but deceiving no one"<sup>88</sup> through the summer of 1938.

The British military establishment concurred with the French that there was little that could be done to save Czechoslovakia. A memorandum from the Chiefs of Staff Committee concluded that the *Anschluss* had so altered the strategic situation that nothing could

... prevent Germany from invading and overrunning Bohemia or inflicting a decisive defeat on the Czech army. If politically it is deemed necessary to restore Czechoslovakia's lost integrity, this aim will entail a war with Germany, and her defeat may mean a prolonged struggle ... [which will be won] ... by a slow process of attrition and starvation.<sup>89</sup>

This assessment is striking in its similarity to that of the French High Command.

Williamson Murray, a strident critic of French policy, has speculated on what may have happened 'if' France had gone to war without Britain in 1938. Murray sees the Czechs holding out for several months while the French roll up the German forces on the western front and the German economy collapses.<sup>90</sup> While he castigates French military intelligence for basing its assessments on worst case scenarios, Murray couches his own predictions in what must be termed 'best case scenarios,' a more serious error in strategic planning. At the centre of this approach is a methodological error which

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<sup>88</sup> Young, In Command of France, p. 201.

<sup>89</sup> PRO, CAB 27/627/5887.

<sup>90</sup> Murray, The Change, p. 240-243.

cripples his interpretation. Murray ignores the way the French perceived the strategic situation in Europe.

French intelligence seriously overestimated German military strength during 1937-1938. The German armament plan of August 1939 had projected that the total strength of the wartime army would reach 102 divisions by the autumn of 1939.<sup>91</sup> Hence Gamelin's estimate of 126 divisions in the Spring of 1938 was significantly overblown. Moreover, the strategic bombing capability of the *Luftwaffe* was also overestimated. Several historians have argued that a lack of resolve to fight Germany was behind this undeniable tendency to inflate the size and strength of the German military.<sup>92</sup> However, this explanation ignores the difficulties French intelligence faced in estimating German capability.

Central to this problem was the status of the *Ersatz* class of reservists, which had reached the age of military service before conscription was introduced in Germany in 1935. The proportion of this class which had

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<sup>91</sup> Wilhelm Deist, The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament, (London: 1981), p. 52.

<sup>92</sup> On this question see Anthony Adamthwaite, "French Military Intelligence and the Coming of War 1935-1939," in Christopher Andrew and Neville Waites (eds.), Intelligence and International Relations 1900-1945, (Exeter: 1987), pp. 191-208. See also Alvin D. Cox, "Military Effectiveness of Armed Forces in the Interwar Period, 1919-1941: A Review," in Millett and Murray (eds.) Military Effectiveness, v. II, pp. 261-262, Murray The Change, pp. 364-365, Douglas Porch, "French Intelligence and the Fall of France, 1931-1940," Intelligence and National Security, 4, 1, (January: 1989) pp. 28-58, and Steven Ross, 'French Net Assessment,' p. 54.

received military training was difficult to determine with any degree of certainty.<sup>93</sup> If estimates of the size of the German army on a war footing were inflated, those of the active German army were close to exact.<sup>94</sup> It would be false to suggest that the French military establishment greeted the prospect of war with Germany with enthusiasm. It is equally erroneous, however, to suggest that the assessments of the 2e bureau were tainted with the defeatist hue which some historians too readily discern at all levels of French society during the 1930s. Once again the thesis that France suffered from an absence of willpower appears an oversimplification of the difficulties facing French planning. This is doubly evident when one considers that British intelligence also seriously overestimated the strength and capabilities of both the *Wehrmacht* and the *Luftwaffe*.<sup>95</sup> Few historians have alleged that defeatism permeated the British military establishment during this period.

By the spring of 1936 the French military believed the strategic situation in Europe would prevent France from supplying military aid to Czechoslovakia. Moreover, it had also concluded that Czechoslovakia could not block a German *Drang nach Osten*. Nor, given French strategic planning, could France exert

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<sup>93</sup> Young, "French Military Intelligence and Nazi Germany," p. 292.

<sup>94</sup> French estimates put the strength of the regular army at 33 infantry, 4 motorized infantry and 4 armoured divisions. SHAT, 5n579-6, "Information du President," 15 mars 1938. The armament plan of August 1936, which was actually surpassed, projected 32 infantry, 4 motorized infantry, 3 heavy and 3 light Panzer divisions. Deist, The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament, p. 45.

<sup>95</sup> On the question of British intelligence and the German military see Wesley K. Wark, The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939, (Ithaca: 1985)



decisive pressure on the German western front. Yet Paris retained its diplomatic ties to Prague. This dichotomy between military strategy and diplomatic commitments begs an explanation.

At this juncture the *décadence* interpretation at first appears the most plausible. French policy makers turned to Britain for leadership. Unable to decide either to relinquish or to honour this commitment to Czechoslovakia, France surrendered itself to the inexorable drift of events. Failing to negotiate the rapids of Nazi aggression, its policy was dashed against the rocks and overturned at Munich, its internal weaknesses and contradictions finally exposed. There are problems with this interpretation. *Décadence* cannot explain every decision taken in Paris during the 1930s. As explanations of causation, such monolithic theories are usually inadequate simplifications. It is very easy, using the benefit of hindsight, to argue that France should either have disengaged from its commitment to Czechoslovakia or gone to war. However, the problems confronting Paris in 1938 were not this straightforward.

The position of Italy was central to Czechoslovakia's role in French strategy. After Mussolini's visit to Berlin in September of 1937, Italy finally and irrevocably joined the German camp. At this point, Czechoslovakia ceased to be a strategic asset for France and the French eastern policy of the 1920s was dead. However, the alliance was still of diplomatic value to Paris. Czechoslovakia constituted the last remains of the French eastern system of the 1920s. Had the alliance been jettisoned somewhere between the summer of

1937 and the summer of 1938, France would have faced a revitalized Germany with no formal ally. This contravened the fundamental tenet of French strategic doctrine.

Robert Young has argued that France's primary motive for retaining the Czechoslovak alliance was the "perfectly understandable hope that one's allies would have a chance to prove themselves before they became liabilities."<sup>96</sup> One could go further. Indeed, there is evidence to support a more cynical interpretation: that, by 1938, Czechoslovakia was merely a card in the hand of France - one which it was unwilling to surrender without compensation. France had desired a firm military guarantee from Britain backed by meaningful staff conversations since the end of the First World War. Throughout the interwar period the British had refused to make such a commitment. In 1938, this commitment was more important than ever to France as the military value of its eastern alliances had depreciated drastically. Yet to persuade London to strengthen the Anglo-French entente it was necessary to make it appear that France was making a great sacrifice by abandoning Czechoslovakia in order to cooperate with Britain. This explains why, in meetings with the British in London, both Daladier and Gamelin appeared loathe to abandon a commitment which they had already decided not to honour. Had they appeared only too willing to abandon Czechoslovakia, they would probably have undermined any hopes of achieving their real goal, a close military alliance with Great Britain and

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<sup>96</sup> Young, In Command of France, p. 150.

its Empire.<sup>97</sup>

This explains Daladier's emphasis on the importance of the Czechoslovak alliance to France when he was in London in April of 1938.<sup>98</sup> At this conference the general outline of the Anglo-French Munich policy, which culminated in the ultimatum of 21 September, was established. Here Daladier warned that Czechoslovakia, with its developed industry, was a bulwark opposing Germany from dominating east-central Europe. As such, it was Germany's next target in its quest for European hegemony. Daladier warned that after he had dealt with Czechoslovakia Hitler would have access to the oil and agricultural regions of the Balkans. After securing these he would turn westward.<sup>99</sup> Clearly, Daladier did not believe that appeasing Hitler over the Sudetenland would secure European peace. He echoed this belief to his Cabinet during the Crisis.<sup>100</sup> After the London meetings, Daladier confided to

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<sup>97</sup> This possibility is raised but not developed in R.J. Young, "A.J.P. Taylor and the Problem with France," in Gordon Martel (ed.), The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered, p. 105, R.A.C. Parker, "Anglo-French Conversations, April and September 1938," in Les relations franco-allemandes, 1933-1939, (Strasbourg: 1976) and Susan Butterworth, "Daladier and the Munich Crisis:" p. 197. These historians do not consider that the French had probably envisioned such a role of the Czechoslovak alliance since 1936.

<sup>98</sup> For the British record of these crucial discussions see DBFP, 3rd series, v. I, #164 and v.II, #979. The French record of these exchanges, which is less detailed, is in DDF, 2e série, v. XI, #405.

<sup>99</sup> A.N. Papiers Daladier, 2DA1 Dr. 5, p. 45. See also DBFP, 3rd series, # 928, and DDF, 2e série, v. XI, #405.

<sup>100</sup> Jean Zay, Carnets secrets, (Paris: 1942), pp. 11, 15. Zay was Minister of Education in Daladier's Cabinet during the Munich Crisis. His memoirs were published by the Vichy regime to discredit him and other French 'war mongers'.

Bullitt that he believed the British misunderstood the strategic importance of Czechoslovakia.<sup>101</sup> For Daladier, Munich was a policy of necessity rather than choice. British support was essential to France, thus he felt he had little choice but to cooperate with the British and press Czechoslovakia to give in to Hitler's demands.

On balance, it appears likely that Daladier went to London anticipating that the English would press for appeasement of Hitler's demands, and hoped to gain a concrete British commitment to France in return. In fact, on the eve of the conference, the British Cabinet suggested to Chamberlain that it might be wise to conciliate the French for abandoning their ally by "developing at some length our commitments to France under the Locarno Treaty ... and by proposing a Conference with the French government and/or staff conversations."<sup>102</sup>

Such an interpretation also explains Gamelin's strange reversal in his meetings with British officials in London on 26 September. The British, frustrated by Daladier's affirmations that France would march, summoned Gamelin to London hoping, perhaps, to extract some damaging admission from

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<sup>101</sup> FRUS, 1938, I, pp. 711-712.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in Parker, "Anglo-French Conversations," p. 373-374. Parker suggests that the French knew exactly what they wanted in London and were successful in obtaining their objectives.

him which could be used to take a harder line with Daladier.<sup>103</sup> Yet once in London Gamelin projected an almost bellicose confidence in the French army and estimated that Czechoslovakia could hold out for a month or more - contradicting the dismal picture which he had painted in Paris just five days earlier.<sup>104</sup> Gamelin's position in London requires explaining. It appears that he, like Daladier, was projecting confidence in order to convince the British that France was willing to go to war to save Czechoslovakia. Although Daladier and Gamelin often disagreed, they were close to one another, having worked together since the former's appointment as Minister of Defence in the spring of 1938.<sup>105</sup> Thus it is quite plausible that they cooperated to convince the English that France would fight. This would reinforce the impression that Paris would require a significant return for abandoning its ally - or perhaps even force the English to support France should it come to war over Czechoslovakia.

Anthony Adamthwaite has argued ingeniously that the French desired to appease Germany over Czechoslovakia and that they exploited the British lead during the crisis as a pretext to abandon their ally. Thus Britain would gain the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 379.

<sup>104</sup> DBFP, 3rd series, v. II, #979 and Gamelin, Servir, v. II, pp. 351-352. Strangely, in his memoirs, Gamelin makes no attempt to explain this obvious inconsistency in his assessments during this crucial period.

<sup>105</sup> Martin Alexander, "The Fall of France, 1940," Journal of Strategic Studies, 13, 1, (1990), p. 24.

lion's share of the blame and France would not have to fight.<sup>106</sup> On one level, Professor Adamthwaite is correct in arguing that the French did not want to fight Germany. However he misrepresents the reasons for this. France did not want to fight Germany *alone*. He fails to consider that, once assured of full British support, France was willing to go to war. Indeed, Daladier signed the order for general mobilization on 29 September.<sup>107</sup>

It is more likely that the French were out to get what they could from their alliance with Czechoslovakia, which, by 1938, was really all that remained of France's eastern system. Daladier was after a British commitment to fight, backed by substantial staff conversations. This tactic was ultimately successful as "Daladier returned to Paris with nothing less than a full British pledge to fight."<sup>108</sup> France had gained the commitment from Britain it had coveted since 1919. By not relinquishing the Czechoslovak alliance in 1937 or 1938, the French had retained an essential chip with which to bargain for meaningful British military cooperation.

To disengage from the Czechoslovak alliance would have been a tacit abdication of power for France. By retaining the alliance Paris kept some

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<sup>106</sup> Adamthwaite, "Bonnet, Daladier and French Appeasement, April-September 1938," International Relations, 3, (April: 1967), 226-441, France and the Coming of the Second World War, pp. 353-354, and "France and the Coming of War," in Mommsen and Kettenacher (eds.) The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement, *op. cit.* p. 251.

<sup>107</sup> Young, "French Policy and the Munich Crisis of 1938," p. 187.

<sup>108</sup> Parker, "Anglo-French Conversations," p. 379.

freedom to manoeuvre. This is not to say that it was intended all along to use Czechoslovakia as a bargaining chip. Rather, the French were retaining as many options as possible. There were no tangible benefits to be gained by abandoning Prague to its fate in late 1937 or early 1938. Hence Daladier, like his predecessors, appears to have adopted a 'wait and see' attitude toward the Franco-Czechoslovak alliance.

Understandably, this does not appear in Daladier's recollections of his role in French policy.<sup>109</sup> If this policy appears morally indefensible one should remember that it was the fate of France which was at stake. That Daladier and his colleagues were unwilling to sacrifice France to preserve Czechoslovak integrity should not outrage students of the history of international relations, where morality has often taken a back seat to national interest.

The exigencies forced on France by its demographic, industrial and military inferiority to Germany compelled it to depend on full British support in order to survive a war with Germany. Britain, however, was unwilling to underwrite French diplomatic commitments in eastern Europe. To make matters even more difficult, by 1938 Italy was perceived as a potential enemy in French strategy. Nor was much faith placed on either the intentions or capabilities of the Soviet Union. Poland, France's other ally in eastern Europe, was prepared to move against Czechoslovakia so as not to lose a share of the spoils. These

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<sup>109</sup> See Edouard Daladier, In Defence of France, (London:1939) and "Munich: vingt-trois ans après," Le Nouveau Candide, (September-October, 1961).

considerations must be taken into account to understand French policy during the summer of 1938. Forced to choose between either going to war for Czechoslovakia without any guarantee of British support, or abandoning their ally in order to gain such a commitment, the French chose the latter - the importance of Britain to French strategy far outweighing that of Czechoslovakia.

These realities were less apparent to Général Faucher in Prague however. To Paris, Munich was a necessary policy, the only alternative in light of the strategic situation in Europe. To Faucher, and to many subsequent historians, it was the foolhardy betrayal of a loyal ally. The relative merits of these two very different interpretations of French policy must be considered.



**Général Faucher, French Military Intelligence,  
and the  
Strategic Situation in Europe in 1938.**

In 1934, on the 15th anniversary of the arrival of the French military mission in Prague, Bohumír Bradác, the Czechoslovak Minister of Defence, honoured the mission and its Chief in a public ceremony:

Our nation and our army will never forget the services rendered it by the officers of the French military mission. You and your eminent predecessors have admirably accomplished your duties, not only in an exemplary fashion, but also with love for our nation.

Addressing Général Faucher, Bradác continued

It is this love which inspires your efforts. From the beginning you have strived to understand our language and our ways, and have gained the trust and respect of our nation.

Faucher responded by explaining that

It is because I know what this nation has given me, it is because of what it has accomplished in the nearly twenty years that I have lived here, that I love it, consider it as my second homeland, and have

unshakable faith in its future. I ask you to continue to consider me as one of yours -as a soldier of the Czechoslovak army.<sup>1</sup>

Faucher was proud of his adopted *patrie*, and with reason. Czechoslovakia was the most stable and democratic of the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; its army, which he had helped to construct, was modern, well trained and respected throughout Europe. Both nation and army were doomed. As Général Faucher exchanged pleasantries with Bradác in Prague, Germany was preparing another bid for European domination. Abandoned by its French ally, Czechoslovakia would become an early victim of German ambitions.

In the wake of the Munich Agreement, Faucher charged that Paris had dismissed his uniformly positive reports on Czechoslovakia's ability to defend itself because it did not want to believe them, and misunderstood the value of the Czechoslovak army. He blamed Gamelin and Daladier for their "manque de confiance en la Tchécoslovaquie et en moi-même."<sup>2</sup> This charge was endorsed by many historians of the Munich Crisis during the 1950s and the 1960s who joined Faucher in condemning the immorality and shortsightedness of French policy.<sup>3</sup> More sophisticated studies of French policy, benefitting

<sup>1</sup> SHAT, 1k288-1, Papiers Faucher, 17 février 1934.

<sup>2</sup> Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1208.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapman, Why France Fell, p. 41, Churchill, The Gathering Storm, p. 303, Noguères, Munich: The Phoney Peace, p. 410-413, also Louis-Eugène Faucher, pp 31-39, Rothstein, The Munich Conspiracy, p. 128, J.W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy, p. 198 and Knaves, Fools and Thieves, pp. 178.

from archival resources, have avoided these simplistic analyses. They criticize not the morality of the decision but its efficacy. They do, however, agree with Faucher's contention that French strategy did not consider the importance of Czechoslovakia to the European balance of power when it decided not to fight in 1938.<sup>4</sup>

By any standard, Louis-Eugène Faucher was a remarkable man. An intellectual and a soldier, he represented all that was admirable in the French military tradition. He was an instructor at France's most renowned military college, a decorated veteran of the First World War and a hero of the French resistance during the Second World War. During his nineteen-year term of service in Prague his extraordinary personal characteristics won the respect and trust of Masaryk, Benes and the Czechoslovak High Command; and so permitted him to play an important role in Franco-Czechoslovak relations.

Faucher was born the son of a carpenter in October of 1874 at Saivre, a small village near Saint-Maixent-l'Ecole in western France. A bright student with a flair for mathematics, he was an *élève* of the *lycées* of Niort, Rochefort and

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<sup>4</sup> See, most importantly, Anthony Adamthwaite, "Le facteur militaire dans la décision franco-britannique avant Munich," Munich, 1938: Mythes et Réalités. Colloque: Institut national d'études slaves, Revue des études slaves, 52, (1979), pp. 59-66, "French Military Intelligence and the Coming of War 1935-1939," France and the Coming of the Second World War, pp. 234-235, 264, Duroselle, La décadence, pp. 349-354, Dutailly, Les Problèmes de l'Armée de Terre, pp. 67-68, Pierre Le Goyet, Le Mystère Gamelin, pp. 152-153, Marès, "La faillite des relations franco-tchécoslovaques:" p. 63, Murray, The Change in the European Balance of Power, p. 211-212, Telford Taylor, Munich: The Price of Peace, pp. 702,992.

Poitiers as well as the *Ecole Polytechnique* in Paris. Upon his graduation in 1896 Faucher entered the army as a junior *Officier du Génie* (engineering and logistics). He became an instructor first at the *Ecole d'Application du Génie* at Fontainebleau, then at the prestigious *Ecole Supérieure de Guerre* in Paris. At the outbreak of the First World War Faucher held the rank of *Chef de Bataillon*. He was twice decorated in the field and in 1916 joined the general staff as an *Officier de Liaison au Grande Quartier Général* (the 3e bureau). In January of 1919, Faucher, by this time a Lieutenant-Colonel, volunteered for the military mission to Czechoslovakia in February of 1919.<sup>5</sup>

With the exception of two months in late 1923, Faucher was assigned to Prague continuously for the next 19 years. He arrived in Prague with the first officers of the mission, and served as *Sous-Chef d'Etat-Major* of the Czechoslovak army during the mission's 'commandement' phase. In 1926 he became *Chef de Mission*, and retained that position until he departed Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement.<sup>6</sup>

Predictably, Faucher established a private life while in Prague, marrying a Czech woman in 1923 and cultivating friendships with the political and intellectual elite of the first Czechoslovak Republic. A tireless promoter of cultural and intellectual ties between France and Czechoslovakia, Faucher was

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<sup>5</sup> Noguères, Louis-Eugène Faucher, pp. 9-11, 15-16, 21.

<sup>6</sup> SHAT, 1k288, Papiers Faucher, "Rapport de la fin de la mission," p. 25.

an active member of the Prague chapter of the *Alliance Française*.<sup>7</sup> In June of 1936 he was granted the status of Doctor of Technical Science *honoris causa* by the Polytechnical Institute of Prague.<sup>8</sup> After 1945, he revived his ties with Czechoslovakia as the founder and first Président of *l'Amitié Franco-Tchécoslovaque*. Faucher's outrage at the abandonment of Czechoslovakia becomes more understandable when one considers these official and personal ties. He had indeed adopted Czechoslovakia as his second *patrie*. A result of this, however, was a change in his perspective. Faucher's view from Prague became that of a Czech rather than a Frenchman.

Faucher explained that the Czechoslovaks attached such importance to his maintenance as the head of the mission because he had become a fixture in Prague, asserting that "J'étais là depuis longtemps; on avait un peu oublié que j'étais Français."<sup>9</sup> He was evidently unaware, or unwilling to admit, the most important reason for this Czechoslovak attitude - his own perceived loyalty and usefulness to Czechoslovakia. Certainly, the trust Masaryk and Benes placed in Faucher was well-founded. Léon Noël, Ambassador to Czechoslovakia from 1934 to 1936, recalled that Masaryk and Benes were wont to refer to him as "our general Faucher."<sup>10</sup> More importantly, Faucher's

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<sup>7</sup> Noguères, Louis-Eugène Faucher, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> L'Europe centrale, 21 juin 1936.

<sup>9</sup> Rapport fait au nom de commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1195.

<sup>10</sup> Léon Noël, La Tchécoslovaquie d'avant Munich, p. 126.

weekly, monthly and tri-annual reports to his superiors consistently reflected the positions of the Czechoslovak government.

In fact, Faucher's perspective on all of the important issues concerning Czechoslovakia during the 1930s was that of a Czech. A passionate defender of Czechoslovakia's right to exist, Faucher minimized Slovakian grievances concerning Czech supremacy within the Republic.<sup>11</sup> This lack of objectivity was noted in Paris. Consequently, the longer Faucher remained in Czechoslovakia, the less weight his assessments carried in France. Yet because the Czechoslovaks insisted on Faucher's maintenance at the head of the military mission in Prague, it was impossible for Paris to replace him with a more objective representative. This, however, was in contravention of a cardinal rule of diplomacy - the rotation of representatives to prevent them from becoming unduly attached to the state to which they are posted. Daladier lamented several times that, because Faucher was "trop tchécoslovaqué," he was forced to rely on the 2e bureau for intelligence on Czechoslovakia.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Faucher refused to gather intelligence for the 2e bureau. In early 1938, he declined to provide specific information on the productive capabilities

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<sup>11</sup> SHAT, 7n3096 and 7n3097. The minority problem is discussed frequently in the *rapports* of the mission which are in these two cartons. For Faucher's views on the minority question in Czechoslovakia see also his contemporaneous articles "Some Recollections on Czechoslovakia," International Affairs, 18, (May-June: 1938), pp. 343-360 and "La Défense Nationale Tchécoslovaque, 1918-1939," L'Année Politique Française et Etrangère, 14, (1939), pp. 85-102.

<sup>12</sup> Marès, "La faillite des relations franco-tchécoslovaques:" p. 62.

of Skoda, protesting that, since the mission served the Czechoslovak government and was integrated into its Defence Ministry, "La mission 'renseigne' dans certaines limites, ... Elle ne fait pas, elle ne doit pas, 'faire de renseignement'." Faucher also argued that the mission operated on "le principe de la réciprocité ... Si le Général Syrový découvre que j'ai trompé sa confiance je suis obligé de baisser le nez." In conclusion, he asserted that "La mission qui est admise dans la maison, qui vit dans la maison, n'a pas le droit d'en abuser, ce ne serait pas loyal."<sup>13</sup> Not only did Faucher refuse to "faire de renseignement", he also refused to transmit to Paris information which he received in his role as technical counsellor. He suggested instead that a French military attaché be appointed to gather the desired intelligence.<sup>14</sup> Faucher's true allegiances are evident in these exchanges. His obligations to the Czechoslovak state overrode his duties as a French officer. His perspective on events throughout the Sudetenland crisis is consistent with this. He was a Czech first and a Frenchman second.

Faucher's refusal to gather intelligence caused consternation and frustration in Paris. In March of 1938 the *section midi* of the 2e bureau, responsible for processing incoming intelligence, complained that although Czechoslovakia was ever more important to French strategy, "L'importance des

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<sup>13</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, 27 janvier 1938.

<sup>14</sup> SHAT, 7n3103, "Activité de la mission militaire concernant le recherche des renseignements- Tchécoslovaquie," 28 janvier 1938.

renseignements concernant la Tchécoslovaquie et adressés à Paris par la mission de Prague est de plus en plus faible." The 2e bureau required details on the Soviet-Czechoslovak relations, the Czechoslovak order of battle, and the state of fortifications. It was recommended that since Faucher refused to provide this information, the mission should be withdrawn and replaced by a service attaché.<sup>15</sup> The Quai d'Orsay was also unhappy with Faucher. René Massigli complained that he lacked essential intelligence regarding Czechoslovakia because "il n'y a pas d'attaché militaire à Prague; et le Général Faucher est tenu à une certaine discrétion."<sup>16</sup>

Colonel Maurice Gauché, chief of the 2e bureau, informed Gamelin that because the head of the mission to Prague "refuse à jouer un rôle d'agent d'information," the French High Command was "peu ou mal renseigné sur l'activité des armées voisines à proximité des frontières de cet état." Gauché concluded that a Colonel Kuhnle should be appointed as military attaché to Prague. Gamelin concurred with this assessment and, noted that "C'est la fin de notre mission à Prague," and that the necessary function could be performed by a liaison officer or an attaché. Kuhnle was sent to Prague in late March.<sup>17</sup>

Faucher might well have helped Czechoslovakia more had he been less

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>16</sup> MAE, Papiers Massigli, 217, vol. 15, pp. 7-8.

<sup>17</sup> SHAT, 7n3103, 27 mars 1938.



scrupulous. He later complained that "Je n'avais pas la prétention d'imposer mes avis à l'état-major de l'armée, mais demandais qu'on m'en parle."<sup>18</sup> Yet he was ignored precisely because he refused to gather intelligence for the general staff. Assigned to Prague for almost twenty years, he had lost all conception of the larger picture of French diplomacy and strategic planning.

Faucher's postwar testimony provides further evidence of this inability to consider the international situation as it related to Czechoslovakia's strategic position in Europe. In 1939 Faucher was asked whether he thought that Polish aid could have been secured for Czechoslovakia. He replied that he had not followed the negotiations with Poland and added that such questions were not of concern to him as they remained in the diplomatic sphere and his duties had been of a purely military character.<sup>19</sup> This reveals the extent to which Faucher's evaluations of the strategic situation were defective. The diplomatic situation would determine the difference between war and peace. It would also determine the conditions under which a possible war would be fought. The hostile attitude of Poland toward Czechoslovakia was central to the conclusion, reached in Paris as early as 1936, that any hopes for an eastern front were illusory. Diplomacy cannot be viewed as separate from military strategy. Faucher was living in a dream world in Prague. His appreciation of the military

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<sup>18</sup> Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1202.

<sup>19</sup> Faucher, "Some Reflections on Czech-Slovakia," p. 358. This article is a transcript of Général Faucher's lecture at Chatham House in April of 1939.

situation must be viewed in this light. On balance, Faucher's protestations that diplomatic considerations were outside his area of concern ring hollow in light of his bitter criticisms of French policy.

Faucher's refusal to acknowledge the importance of diplomacy was unfortunate given the distinct political role the mission played in relations between Paris and Prague. Unaware of Czechoslovakia's true position in French strategy, Faucher remained confident of French fidelity to the alliance, something the French High Command found alarming but did not discourage.<sup>20</sup> There were, however, clues as to the direction of French policy. The most obvious was the increasingly defensive orientation of French military planning. As early as 1934 Faucher had communicated his fear that the "caractère nettement défensif" of French strategy would leave its army entombed behind its fortresses. He warned that Prague was beginning to wonder "si l'effort militaire français répondait aux circonstances et à l'esprit de nos engagements." He also expressed alarm at the passivity of the western powers during the *Anschluss*, disclosing that "On ne doute pas notre fidélité, mais notre prestige a baissé."<sup>21</sup>

Although he suggested the withdrawal of the mission, Gamelin, ever careful to delineate political from military responsibility, noted that the issue

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<sup>20</sup> Marès, "La faillite des relations franco-tchécoslovaques:" p. 58.

<sup>21</sup> SHAT, 7n3096, 30 octobre 1934.

"reste donc, à mon avis, à envisager sur le seul plan de la politique extérieure."<sup>22</sup> This question posed a delicate problem for Daladier, who warned the Quai that withdrawing the mission might be interpreted as an "indice de relâchement de nos liens avec la Tchécoslovaquie ... à un moment où les rapports de ce pays avec l'Allemagne sont assez tendus."<sup>23</sup> Thus the mission retained its political significance into the summer of 1938.

Articles in official and semi-official French journals provided clearer indications of the direction of French policy. An article by a Général Niessel, of the General Staff, outlined a very bleak picture for Czechoslovakia in Paris Midi. Niessel argued that, because Germany could ably defend its western frontier, it would be very difficult for France to come to the aid of its ally. He also noted the impossibility of counting on Soviet aid, and that Czechoslovakia's neighbours would never form a coalition against Germany. Niessel's conclusions echoed those of the French High Command.<sup>24</sup> Out of touch in Prague, however, Faucher denounced this "German propaganda in our own ranks" and warned that "il vaudrait mieux que l'on ne trouvât pas de militaires parmi les

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<sup>22</sup> SHAT, 7n3103, 29 mars 1938.

<sup>23</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, Daladier to Paul-Boncour, 11 avril 1938.

<sup>24</sup> Général Henri Niessel, "Le problème stratégique de la Tchécoslovaquie," Paris Midi, (10 mai: 1938). This article had been published anonymously in La France Militaire on 2 April. SHAT 7n3097, 5 avril and 18 mai 1938. A response to this article which reflected the official, although not the actual, French position was written by a Général Armengaud, and appeared in Revue des Deux Mondes on 15 April. Armengaud referred to the strength of the Czechoslovak army and the determination of that nation to defend itself. "La Tchécoslovaquie devant l'Allemagne," Revue des Deux Mondes, (15 avril: 1938), pp.

diplomates et les stratèges amateurs irresponsables."<sup>25</sup> More serious was an article by Joseph Barthélemy in Le Temps on 18 May. Barthélemy argued that France was not bound to defend Czechoslovakia against German aggression. From Prague, Faucher complained bitterly that Barthélemy's article, published in a journal which was "considered abroad as an official organ of our Foreign Ministry," had produced stupefaction, indignation and domestic unrest in Czechoslovakia.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, Faucher remained convinced that France would honour its alliance with Czechoslovakia. He recalled that, "Malgré tous ces indices inquiétants, je ne pouvais accepter l'idée que nous ne ferions pas face à nos engagements."<sup>27</sup> Isolated in Prague, he had lost touch with the international situation. To him, there was no question as to whether or not France would aid its ally. France was an ally of Czechoslovakia and he was a representative of France; he refused to see that the decision for war was political. His duty was simple, to ensure that Czechoslovakia could be able to defend itself until French aid took effect.<sup>28</sup> Faucher was much more comfortable with the straightforward and familiar role of a staff officer. Essentially, Faucher remained an *officier de génie*. His reports to the authorities were always technical, without

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<sup>25</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, 18 mai 1938.

<sup>26</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, 20 avril 1938.

<sup>27</sup> Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1203.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

speculation on Czechoslovak diplomacy or military strategy. He did not concern himself with international politics. Hence the problems which confronted French strategy and diplomacy did not enter into his assessments of the military situation.

At the centre of Faucher's criticisms of France's Munich policy was his outrage at the betrayal of Czechoslovakia, his adopted *patrie*. His arguments continually stressed the great sacrifices made by the Czechoslovak people for national defence and the resolve of the nation to defend itself, "La Tchécoslovaquie a fait un effort continu pour sa défense nationale; cet effort a été exceptionnel, remarquable, de 1933 à 1938." He also emphasized that, in moral terms, Czechoslovak policy was far superior to French.

La Tchécoslovaquie s'était loyalement préparée à tenir sa place aux côtés de ses alliés en cas de guerre. Elle a été loyale dans la préparation de sa défense nationale comme dans sa politique, Il n'en a pas été de même partout.<sup>29</sup>

His interpretation, however, along with those of historians who accept his perspective, has missed an essential point. Daladier believed that France could not go to war without the full support of Great Britain. Morality has obscured strategy in these analyses. The resulting conclusion, that Munich was a dishonourable and foolish agreement made by dishonourable and foolish men, is therefore inherently flawed.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1200. See also Faucher, "La Défense nationale tchécoslovaque (1918-1939)," and "Some Reflections of Czechoslovakia."

Some myths must be dispelled. The *Etat-Major de l'Armée* and the 2e and 3e bureaux did not ignore Faucher's evaluations of the Czechoslovakian army and of the sacrifices made by the nation to the cause of national defence. Indeed, they accepted them. In October of 1937 the 2e bureau noted that "Malgré une position géographique défavorable, la Tchécoslovaquie a consenti des sacrifices tels qu'elle a réussi à constituer une armée de qualité."<sup>30</sup> Another report recorded a "très bonne impression" of the Czechoslovak army which was an "instrument méthodiquement et sérieusement préparé à son rôle de guerre."<sup>31</sup> As tension mounted during the Sudetenland crisis another analysis concluded that "l'Armée tchécoslovaque acquiert certainement de jour en jour une force plus grande ... Elle instruit ses réserves. Elle est animée d'un ardent esprit national."<sup>32</sup> Another report provided a glowing review of the Czechoslovak semi-mobilization in May of 1938.<sup>33</sup>

The disagreement between Faucher and Paris centred not on the quality

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<sup>30</sup> SHAT, 7n3109, 18 septembre, 1937.

<sup>31</sup> SHAT, 7n3110, "Analyse du Rapport du Chef d'Escadron Breveté Cabanne," 12 octobre 1937.

<sup>32</sup> SHAT, 7n3109, "Renseignements sur l'Armée Tchécoslovaque," 25 mars 1938.

<sup>33</sup> SHAT, 7n3110, "Note sur la situation militaire actuelle," June 1938. For further positive reviews of the Czechoslovak army and national defence see SHAT, 7n3109, 1 novembre 1933, "Le facteur militaire tchécoslovaque," 13 avril 1934, "Notice Sommaire sur l'Armée Tchécoslovaque," *Comité de Haute Etudes de la Défense Nationale* (C.H.E.D.N.), 1938, "Tchécoslovaquie: Notice Économique." See also 7n3110, 24 avril 1934 "Note à l'étude de l'attitude stratégique de la Tchécoslovaquie au début d'un conflit," and octobre 1937, "Les Possibilités de la Tchécoslovaquie."

of the Czechoslovak army but on its ability to withstand a German invasion. On 9 March 1937, the 2e bureau estimated that in a war between Czechoslovakia and Germany, the Czechoslovak army was certain to be well prepared and give a good account of itself. Nonetheless, Czechoslovakia would be crushed in several weeks. French intervention would merely allow Prague to hold out for three or four months.<sup>34</sup> This conclusion was reinforced during a meeting between Gauché and the head of the Czechoslovak 2e bureau in late 1937. The Czechoslovaks estimated that they might be able to hold out for six to eight weeks.<sup>35</sup> However, all the determination and commitment in the world would not save the Czechoslovaks from the kind of air and armour superiority they would face if attacked by Germany.

At the heart of Général Faucher's estimates was the unspoken premise that France was honour bound to go to war with Germany on behalf of its ally. He stressed that "Le rendement du potentiel de défense nationale dépendra de la France pour [une] bonne part."<sup>36</sup> In Paris, conversely, the overriding imperative was the security of France. Faucher could not distinguish Czech from French security. This flaw fundamentally compromises the worth of his analyses during the crisis.

A second myth is the notion that the French ignored important strategic

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<sup>34</sup> SHAT, 7n2522, 9 mars 1937.

<sup>35</sup> SHAT, 7n3103, 16 novembre 1937.

<sup>36</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, "Note sur la Tchécoslovaquie et l'Anschluss," 22 mars 1938.

considerations in 1938. One historian has charged that "Nowhere in the existing documentation does it appear that the French considered what the impact on the general situation would be should the Germans gain Czechoslovakia without a fight."<sup>37</sup> This charge is baseless. There are repeated references to precisely this issue in the French military archives. A memorandum of 9 September, for example, noted that Czechoslovakia, with the best trained and equipped army in central Europe, was the chief obstacle to German eastward expansion, and that

au point de vue stratégique, l'armée Tchécoslovaque est assez forte pour attirer en Europe centrale une notable partie de l'armée allemande affaiblissant d'autant cette dernière sur les autres théâtres d'opérations.

... namely on the western front. The Czechoslovak army could tie down 30 German divisions. Occupation of Bohemia, conversely, would give Hitler control of the Skoda works. It would also be a step to further eastward expansion toward the oilfields of Rumania and the Caucasus, which would, in turn, increase Germany's ability to fight a general European conflict.<sup>38</sup> During the height of the crisis, Gamelin predicted that, if reorganized according to German demands, Czechoslovakia would not become neutralized, but a

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<sup>37</sup> Murray, The Change in the European Balance of Power, pp. 211-212.

<sup>38</sup> SHAT, 7n3110, 9 septembre 1938, Many of these points are raised by General Gamelin, "Note sur l'intérêt que présente pour la France, du point de vue militaire, le maintien de la Tchécoslovaquie", in DDF, 2e série, v. XI, #65.



German satellite.<sup>39</sup>

Critics have accused Daladier and the French leadership of lacking the guts to fight for Czechoslovakia. To be sure, most Frenchmen recoiled at the prospect of another world war. However, such criticisms rest on the assumption that fighting was the correct decision to take, that France could have taken action which would have prevented Germany from smashing Czechoslovakia. The available evidence suggests otherwise. Of all the eastern European states, Czechoslovakia faced the worst geo-strategic situation. Of its 4100km long frontier, 1540km was with Germany, 948km with Poland, 555km with Austria, 832km with Hungary and 201km with Rumania. By the spring of 1938 only the border with Rumania could be considered secure. The German annexation of Austria on 12 March forced Czechoslovakia to defend over 3500km of potentially hostile frontier. France had only 389km of frontier with Germany.<sup>40</sup> Considering the importance of frontier defence to French strategic doctrine, one understands French doubts that Czechoslovakia could withstand a German invasion for long.<sup>41</sup>

Connecting the western provinces of Bohemia and Moravia to the eastern province of Slovakia is the Moravian Gate, a narrow neck of territory

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<sup>39</sup> SHAT, 2n235, 9 & 21 septembre.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Zorach, "Czechoslovakia's fortifications: Their Development and Role in the 1938 Munich Crisis," Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen, 2, (1976), p. 83.

<sup>41</sup> For an excellent discussion of the difficulties the French perceived with defending a broad frontier see Alexander, "Repercussions of the Breda Variant."

surrounded by Germany and Poland to the north and Austria and Hungary to the south. Prior to the *Anschluss*, the primary threat to Czechoslovakia was a German thrust in the north toward Prague. Accordingly, the Czechoslovaks had begun construction of a system of fortifications in this region, which by the summer of 1938, was nearing completion. In 1933, a 3e bureau assessment of the defensive capabilities of Czechoslovakia emphasized that "dans tous les cas -la Tchécoslovaquie doit consacrer des forces importantes à la protection des faces nord et ouest. ... La condition primordiale pour que ces opérations soient efficaces, c'est la défense solide de la Bohême."<sup>42</sup>

However, after the *Anschluss* Germany could strike simultaneously into western Czechoslovakia from Silesia and Austria.<sup>43</sup> This radically altered the strategic situation. As Gamelin's staff report of 15 March noted, "L'annexion de l'Autriche crée sur le flanc sud-ouest une frontière ouverte, sans fortification, d'accès très facile."<sup>44</sup> The "défense solide" of Bohemia was now critically compromised. A *compte rendu* on 15 May noted that, with work in the north incomplete, Czechoslovakia also had to construct more fortifications along the former Austrian border to the south. Strategically, the *Anschluss* had doomed

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<sup>42</sup> SHAT, 7n3110, 26 avril 1936.

<sup>43</sup> SHAT, 7n3103, "Rapport du Capitaine Gastaldo à l'issue de son stage en Tchécoslovaquie," June 1938.

<sup>44</sup> SHAT, 5n579-6, "Information du Président," 15 mars 1938.

Czechoslovakia.<sup>45</sup>

French military intelligence discerned other important weaknesses in Czechoslovakia's defences. Of particular concern was the proximity of Czechoslovak industry to the German frontier. A 2e bureau report of 1933 stressed that three-fourths of the Czechoslovak industrial base was situated less than 100km from the German border. Although Czech industry was well developed and could easily be adopted to wartime production, it depended on Germany for 75% of its raw materials. Further, much of its industry was owned by Sudetens who exhibited clear "tendances germanophiles," which would seriously compromise national defence. The report speculated that "en cas de conflit contre l'Allemagne, les réactions des cadres, des directeurs et des ouvriers mettrait cette industrie dans une situation très sérieuse."<sup>46</sup> Contrary to what has been alleged in the historiography,<sup>47</sup> French analysts had appreciated Czechoslovak strategic and economic vulnerability long before Hitler openly menaced Czechoslovakia. Their assessments were not the result of the pressures of the international situation in 1938.

In addition to these weaknesses, a report prepared on the eve of the

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<sup>45</sup> SHAT, 7n3109, "Compte Rendu le 15 mai 1938." These conclusions are mirrored in Pierre Rocolle's analysis of the military balance in the summer of 1938, La guerre de 1940: Les Illusions, p. 148, and with less detail in Jacques Néré, The Foreign Policy of France, (London: 1975), pp. 222, 229.

<sup>46</sup> SHAT, 7n3109, "Le facteur militaire tchécoslovaque," 1 novembre 1933.

<sup>47</sup> Adamthwaite, "French Military Intelligence and the Coming of War 1935-1939," p. 194, Porch, "French Military Intelligence and the Fall of France 1931-1940," *passim*.

*Anschluss* noted that the major Czechoslovak railway system between Prague in Bohemia and Kosice-Kivulhazu in Slovakia, was extremely vulnerable. It ran dangerously close to the German, Polish and Hungarian frontiers at the Moravian gate. The Republic could not fight a prolonged war without secure interior supply routes.<sup>48</sup> Another analysis warned that these difficulties might well make Czechoslovakia a quagmire for precious French resources.

The nationality issue, present at every level of Czechoslovak society, was a constant factor in the evaluations of the 2e bureau. While acknowledging that the Czechoslovak army was well organized, trained and equipped, it was noted that "il est vraisemblable que sa valeur combative serait très différente suivant l'adversaire Hongrois, Russe ou Allemand." The fighting effectiveness of the army was deemed best against Hungary, less so versus Russia, and for good reasons "l'armée allemande reste pour l'armée Tchéco (qui compte 23% de soldats de race allemande), l'adversaire plus sérieux."<sup>49</sup>

The decisive consideration in the evaluation of the military situation, however, was German armour and air superiority. In the spring of 1938, the Germans were expected to send 31 regular, 3 mechanized or semi-mechanized infantry divisions and 4 tank divisions against a Czechoslovak force of 30 to 32 infantry divisions and 3 armoured regiments. However, since 17 of the Czechoslovak divisions were regular units, the remainder being reservists,

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<sup>48</sup> SHAT, 7n3109, "Tchécoslovaquie -Note Generale," 11 mars 1938.

<sup>49</sup> SHAT, 7n3109, "Notice sommaire sur l'armée tchécoslovaque," avril 1936.

Germany would possess a decided advantage in both troop quality and armour.<sup>50</sup> The most important consideration, however, was the overwhelming German superiority in the air. According to French estimates, which were admittedly overblown, Germany would have enjoyed an 8 to 1 advantage in numbers of aircraft. Czechoslovakia would possess 250 to 300 first line warplanes compared to 2500 for Germany, including 1300 to 1400 bombers.<sup>51</sup> Given the importance which the French attributed to air power, this imbalance was understandably of central importance to assessments of a Czech-German military confrontation.<sup>52</sup>

These considerations shaped the conclusions of the French High

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<sup>50</sup> SHAT, 5n579-6, "Information du Président," 15 mars 1938. These figures roughly concur with the actual size of the German force designated for the *Fall Grün* in September of 1938; Murray The Change in the European Balance of Power, p. 231. In the above memorandum, however, Gamelin included the 8 division strong Austrian army among the forces eventually available to Germany for operations against Czechoslovakia.

<sup>51</sup> SHAT, 5n579-6, "Information du Président," 15 mars 1938. The Czechoslovak force was to be reinforced by two 'groups' of French aircraft of undisclosed size, providing there was any Air Force left to reinforce.

<sup>52</sup> In his imaginary battle for Czechoslovakia, Williamson Murray essentially ignores the extreme disparity in airpower, comparing German airpower to the total strengths of France, Britain and Czechoslovakia. He forgets that Britain, which possessed a far larger Air Force than France, refused to go to war over Czechoslovakia, and that air strength based in France and Britain could not necessarily help the Czechoslovaks. In any case, the Czechoslovaks would have been forced to withstand the initial aerial assault on their own. Instead of addressing this problem, Murray argues that the weather in September was not conducive to airborne operations. Apparently, Murray feels that French planners should have known the nature of the weather for whatever month the Germans would choose to invade Czechoslovakia. See Murray, The Change in the European Balance of Power, pp. 228-236.

Command that the *Wehrmacht* would smash Czechoslovak resistance long before France could aid its ally. Given the nature of French strategy, France could have done little to prevent the Germans, Hungarians and Poles from overrunning its ally. Moreover, by marching in 1938, France would have realized its worst nightmare, war with Germany without British support. Romantic conceptions of honour necessarily bowed to strategic imperatives. In Prague, Général Faucher did not comprehend this larger picture, and so could not accept the outcome of the Munich Conference.

Faucher's restricted point of view prejudiced his military analysis. Although his evaluations accurately reflected the determination of the Czechoslovaks to defend themselves, they did not appreciate the extent to which the *Anschluss* crippled Czechoslovakia's strategic position.<sup>53</sup> In purely strategic terms, an organized withdrawal eastward into Slovakia would have prolonged Czechoslovak resistance to a German invasion. However, the abandonment of Prague was both politically and psychologically unacceptable.<sup>54</sup> Faucher was optimistic that the fortifications to the north would prevent a German breakthrough while the bulk of the Czechoslovak army was deployed to stop offensives from the south and west. There was no

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<sup>53</sup> This omission is reflected in the historiography. Among historians critical of French policy, only Pierre Rocolle acknowledges the extent to which the German annexation of Austria impaired Czechoslovak national defence. See Pierre Rocolle, La Guerre de 1940: Les Illusions Novembre 1918-Mai 1940, (Paris: 1990), pp. 148-149.

<sup>54</sup> Faucher, "La Défense Nationale Tchecoslovaque," pp. 98-99.

systematic analysis of the military situation. Faucher did not outline the Czechoslovak order of battle, nor did he address the key issue - how long Czechoslovakia could have defended itself.<sup>55</sup>

When asked by a French parliamentary official, who was a member of the *Commission de l'Armée*, whether Czechoslovakia could hold for five days, Faucher responded that, if supported by France, it was "capable of holding for a much longer time." He then reminded his countryman that "les conditions de sa résistance dépendraient dans une certaine mesure de l'effort que nous ferions nous-mêmes." When the Deputy retorted that a German aerial assault would easily smash Czechoslovakia's industry and civilian morale, he made no reply.<sup>56</sup>

Another myth that has obscured the true military situation in 1938 is the argument that Czechoslovakia possessed a powerful network of fortifications which would have prevented Germany from conquering it for an extended period of time. Général Faucher's evaluation of Czechoslovakia's network of fortifications has helped to substantiate this myth. His evaluation, however, was fundamentally flawed.

In 1948, Faucher testified that France ignored their capability to prevent a German breakthrough, and that they were "comparables à ceux de notre ligne

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<sup>55</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, "Note sur la Tchécoslovaquie et l'Anschluss," 27 mars 1938.

<sup>56</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, 10 août 1938.

Maginot."<sup>57</sup> This is patently false, but has assumed an important place in the historiography of the Munich crisis. In Why France Fell, Guy Chapman has asserted that "...the Czechs had transformed their northern and western borderlands - those facing Germany - into defences stronger than the Maginot Line."<sup>58</sup> In his analysis of the military situation, Winston Churchill submitted that "The Czechs had a million and a half men armed behind the strongest fortress line in Europe."<sup>59</sup> Other historians have echoed or endorsed these conclusions.<sup>60</sup> Like Faucher, these historians have seriously overestimated the value of these fortifications.

During and after the Crisis, Faucher emphasized the strength of

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<sup>57</sup> Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1196.

<sup>58</sup> Chapman, Why France Fell, p. 41.

<sup>59</sup> Churchill, The Gathering Storm, p. 309. See pp. 309-311 for his analysis of the military situation.

<sup>60</sup> Critics of the Munich agreement have tended to emphasize the strength of Czechoslovakian fortifications. See Adamthwaite, France and the Coming of the Second World War, p. 233, Eduard Benes, From Munich to New War and New Victory, (Boston: 1953), p. 28, Milan Hauner, "La Tchécoslovaquie en tant que facteur militaire," Munich, 1938: Mythes et Réalités, Colloque: Institut national d'études slaves, Revue des Etudes Slaves, 52. (1979), pp. 185-191, Murray, The Change in the European Balance of Power, pp. 233-235, Noguères, Munich: The Phoney Peace, pp. 389-390, Jonathan Rothschild, East Central Europe Between the Wars, (Seattle: 1974), p. 131, Brigadier General H.C.T. Strong, "The Czechoslovak Army and the Munich Crisis: A Personal Memorandum," in Brian Bond and Ian Roy (eds.), War and Society, vol. I, (London: 1975), Taylor, Munich: The Price of Peace, pp. 982-985, David Vital, "Czechoslovakia and the Powers, September 1938," in H.W. Gatzke (ed.) European Diplomacy Between Two World Wars, (Chicago: 1972), p. 201, Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy, pp. 13, 29, 138, 333. See also S. Grant Duff's contemporary study Europe and the Czechs, (London: 1938), pp. 18-20, 210.



Czechoslovakia's defensive network. His assessments tended to focus on the strength of the fortifications in Bohemia and ignored or passed over Czechoslovak vulnerability along the Bavarian frontier to the west and the former Austrian border to the south. In February of 1938 Faucher reported that, while the heavy fortifications in the Moravska-Ostrava salient along the Silesian frontier were nearing completion, those on the southern edge of the Moravian Gate would not be complete until 1941.<sup>61</sup> Yet, aside from mentioning that the Czechoslovaks were accelerating work on the networks along the former Austrian border, he did not analyse how the vulnerability of this new frontier would affect the strategic situation.<sup>62</sup>

Even the strongest Czechoslovak defensive systems were not comparable to the Maginot Line. German General Alfred Jodl afterward compared the one to a rowboat, the other to battleship.<sup>63</sup> Excepting the heavily fortified region near Glatz, nowhere did German planners consider Czechoslovak defences strong enough to prevent a breakthrough. Indeed, the *Wehrmacht* concluded that these systems were inadequate, and that Czechoslovak resistance would have been shortlived, a few weeks at most.<sup>64</sup>

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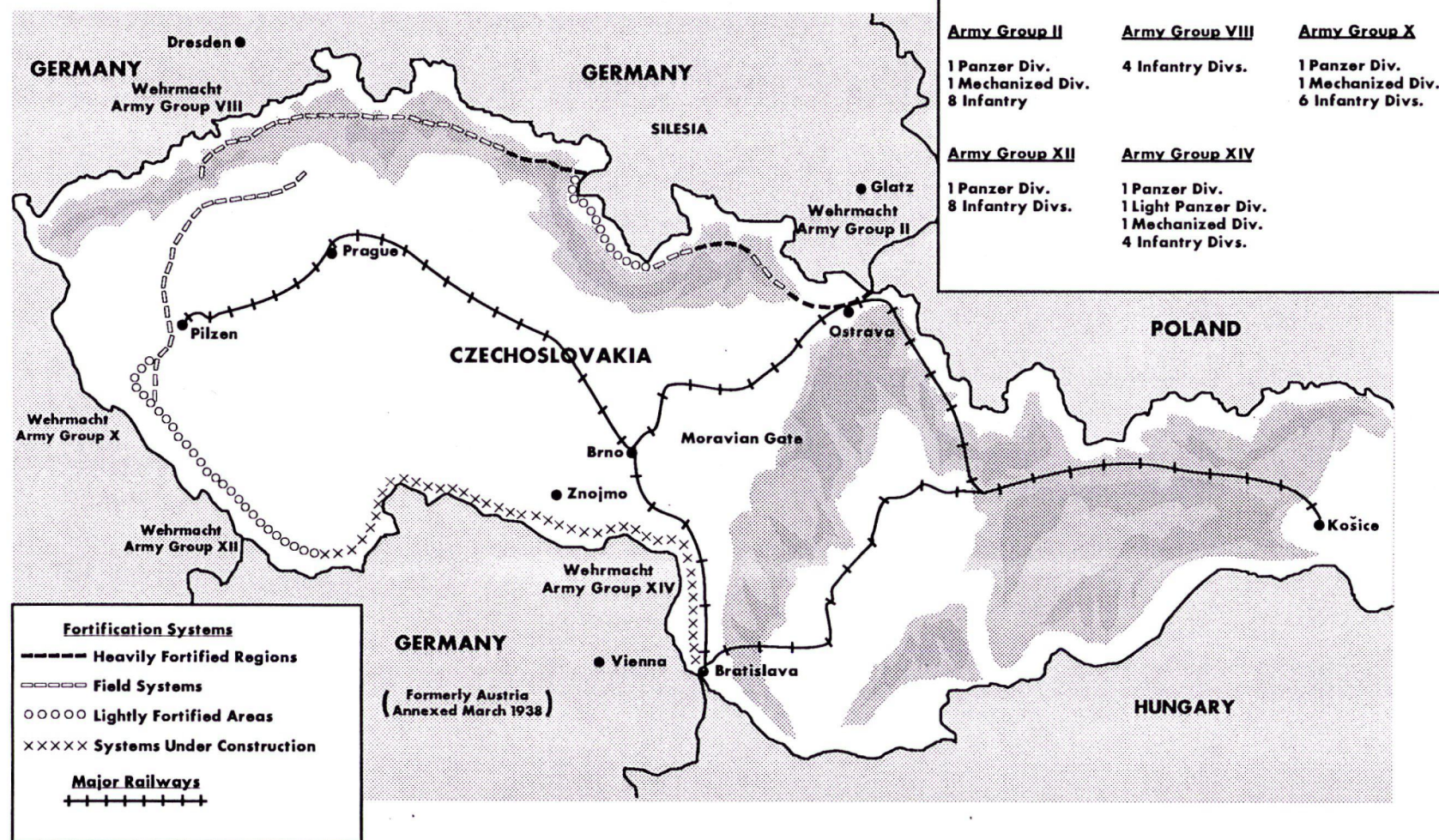
<sup>61</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, "Tchécoslovaquie - Fortifications permanente," 9 février 1938.

<sup>62</sup> See SHAT 7n3097, "Note sur la Tchécoslovaquie et l'Anschluss," 23 mars 1938, and the "Compte-rendu de situation," 14 juin 1938.

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Zorach, "Czechoslovakia's Fortifications:," p. 82.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* This evidence contradicts the testimony of various German generals at the postwar Nuremberg trial. This testimony is used as evidence in much of the historiography. On balance, however, the detailed and contemporaneous

# CZECHOSLOVAKIA 1938



Nor were these the only problems with Général Faucher's assessment of the looming military confrontation between Prague and Berlin. In contrast to the 2e bureau, he downplayed the possible effect of various minorities on the fighting effectiveness of the Czechoslovak army. Czechs constituted only 51% of the army; the remainder were Slovaks, Ruthenes, Magyars, Poles, Hungarians and Germans. When addressing the minority question, Faucher stressed that 70% of its effectives were Slavs, and cited the example of the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War. He argued that "L'Autriche-Hongrie était entrée en guerre en 1914 dans des conditions beaucoup plus défavorables au point de vue des nationalités. ... Cependent l'armee autrichienne ne s'est pas disloquée tout de suite."<sup>65</sup>

Faucher's analysis was not entirely wrong, but it was misleading. The performance of the army of Emperor Francis Joseph varied according to the enemy. In his study of the Austro-Hungarian army, Gunther Rothenburg has remarked that against the despised Italians "soldiers of almost all nationalities (even Czechs and Slovaks if they were well led) fought well."<sup>66</sup> However,

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*Wehrmacht* reports are much more convincing than the notoriously unreliable Nuremberg testimonials. Historians who have used these testimonials as evidence include, among others, Noguères, Munich: The Phoney Peace, p. 374, Rothschild, East-central Europe Between the Wars, p. 131, Rothstein, The Munich Conspiracy, p. 198, Taylor, Munich: The Price of Peace, p. 984, Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy, p. 13, 138, 333.

<sup>65</sup> SHAT, 7n3097, "L'Armée Tchecoslovaque au début de 1938," 22 mars 1938. See also 7n 3096, 8 mars 1937 and Faucher's testimony in the Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1200.

<sup>66</sup> Gunther E. Rothenburg, The Army of Francis Joseph, (Indiana: 1976), p. 187.

against the Russians, Czechs and Slovaks deserted with regularity, often *en masse*, to the ranks of their brother Slavs. Moreover, during the breakup of the Empire the army fragmented. In fact, ethnic groups of Czech and German soldiers clashed in the Sudetenland as early as the spring of 1918.<sup>67</sup>

By downplaying the minority question, Faucher obscured the problem of the German soldiers who constituted 21% of the Czechoslovak army. Ironically, the example of the Austro-Hungarian army actually validates the assessment of the 2e bureau. Faucher admitted that "la minorité allemande, qui fournit 1/5 du contingent et dont le loyalisme est souvent douteux," and that "Je crois qu'une partie de ces soldats seraient restés fidèles, mais le plus grand nombre auraient sans doute causé des désagréments." However, Faucher did not analyze how this might compromise national defence.<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps the most influential of all Faucher's estimates was his evaluation of the air situation. Unfortunately, this was also the most unreliable of all of his analyses. Faucher repeatedly emphasized the potential value of Czechoslovak air power. Hubert Ripka has cited Faucher's claim that "Czechoslovakia was like a huge aerodrome projecting into the very heart of Germany. It needed only a few minutes for her aeroplanes to reach Berlin, Vienna, Dresden,

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 196, 221.

<sup>68</sup> SHAT, 7n3096, 8 mars 1937, Rapport fait au nom de la commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1200. David Vital also downplays the minority question in Czechoslovak national defence. See "Czechoslovakia and the Powers," p. 200.

Braslaw, the principal industrial centres of east Germany."<sup>69</sup> The potential value of these airfields, however, depended on whether or not there would be anything left of them after war broke out. German domination of the skies was almost certain to destroy Czechoslovakia's airfields before they could be used in any bombing raids.

Of more importance to the historiographical debate, however, are Faucher's estimates of Czechoslovak air power. At the parliamentary enquiry he estimated this to be 1000 to 1500 planes.<sup>70</sup> Aside from being extremely vague, this figure is completely unsubstantiated by any documentary evidence.<sup>71</sup> Yet historians have incorporated it into their assessments of the strategic balance. Henri Noguères, for example, cites Faucher that the Czech air force was "quite remarkably powerful," more powerful, in fact, than the French air force. The only evidence to support this contention, however, is Faucher's estimate to the commission of enquiry. When evaluating the strategic balance, Anthony Adamthwaite puts Czechoslovak first-line strength at 500 to 600 planes, but provides no reference indicating where he obtained these

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<sup>69</sup> Ripka, Munich: Before and After, p. 296.

<sup>70</sup> Rapport fait au nom de commission: documents et témoignages, p. 1210.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Before the commission of enquiry Faucher admitted that, because he had been unable to obtain the information from Vincennes, his estimates were based on memory. It is unclear whether or not he intended this figure to represent all aircraft, civilian and military, in Czechoslovakia during the crisis.

figures.<sup>72</sup> The actual size of the Czechoslovak Air Force remains a mystery. Perhaps the most reliable available figures are those that the military mission sent to Paris in late 1937, which estimated its total strength to be approximately 660 planes, of which about 270, primarily fighters, could be considered of first-line quality.<sup>73</sup> These figures roughly correspond to the estimates of the 2e bureau, which suggests that French military intelligence was accurate in evaluating the air balance between Germany and Czechoslovakia. The disparity between this figure and the figure Faucher gave to the parliamentary commission, however, remains unexplained. The use of the latter estimate by historians has distorted the military situation in 1938.

Complementing Faucher's assessments are those of the British military attaché to Belgrade, Brigadier General H.C.T. Stronge. Both Faucher and Stronge are often cited by historians who argue that Czechoslovakia was much stronger than either Paris or London cared to admit in 1938.<sup>74</sup> In 1975 Stronge argued that the Britain and France should have gone to war in September of 1938 as "the balance of strategic advantage lay almost entirely

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<sup>72</sup> Adamthwaite, France and the Coming of the Second World War, p. 242. David Vital puts the size of the Czechoslovak air force at 1200, with 600 to 700 of these of first line quality. He does not cite his source and admits in a footnote that "details cannot be entirely accurate". See "Czechoslovakia and the Powers," pp. 200, 219.

<sup>73</sup> SHAT, 7n3096, 4 novembre 1937.

<sup>74</sup> See Adamthwaite, "Le facteur militaire," p. 70, Murray, The Change in the European Balance of Power, pp. 223, 229, 231.



with the Czechs."<sup>75</sup> The Czechoslovaks could have held out because their fortifications were solid; several German Generals were unsure of victory; German superiority would have become irrelevant as the campaign lengthened into the winter months; the Germans had lost the advantage of surprise; and, finally, Czechoslovak morale was high as they were fighting for their lives.

Like those of Général Faucher, General Stronge's arguments are seriously flawed. That German Generals were unsure of victory could have no bearing on decisions taken in Paris. Several German Generals were also unsure of victory in 1940. His assertion that German air and armour would be a waning asset is pointless unless one can illustrate that Czechoslovakia could have survived into the winter months. Stronge, like Faucher, makes no mention of the strategic consequences of the *Anschluss*. In fact, Stronge never inspected the fortifications in the south or the southwest. He explained that "As there would not be time to cover the whole area of the fortifications I selected certain sectors which seemed to me of crucial importance, between a point in the line northwest of Prague far to the northeast."<sup>76</sup> Stronge inspected only Czechoslovakia's strongest points, and ignored its weakest ones. His point regarding Czechoslovakian morale is sound, but this alone could not have countered German armour and air superiority.

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<sup>75</sup> Stronge, "The Czechoslovak Army and the Munich Crisis:" p. 165. Stronge begins by submitting that, in his opinion, "Britain and France played a deplorable part in the rape of Czechoslovakia."

<sup>76</sup> Stronge, "The Czechoslovak Army and the Munich Crisis," p. 169.

Above all, General Stronge's views of 1975 differed from those of 1938. During the crisis, his views on the state of Czechoslovak defences were qualified. Like Faucher, Stronge was reluctant to predict how long Czechoslovakia could hold out, emphasized the state of Czechoslovak morale, and provided less than precise estimates. In March he predicted that morale in the Czechoslovak army was high and "... they may render a good account of themselves."<sup>77</sup> In September, "... It all depends on their morale. If that gives way, the war cannot last more than a week or two. If it holds, it may drag on for months."<sup>78</sup> Not exactly an unequivocal vote of confidence in the balance of strategic advantage. On 6 April Stronge reported that "My most abiding impression is that, where I had expected to find a comparatively weak line in an advanced state of preparation, I found in fact a very strong one far from ready."<sup>79</sup> He also doubted that the defensive networks along the old Austrian border could hold the Germans for "more than quite a temporary period, a matter of a day or two."<sup>80</sup> How Stronge was able to evaluate the strength of fortifications he had not inspected remains a mystery. One possible explanation is that he was advised by Général Faucher. Stronge subsequently

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<sup>77</sup> DBFP, 3rd series, v. II, #1148.

<sup>78</sup> The quotation is from DBFP, 3rd series, Vol. II, #794, 3 September 1938. For Stronge's other assessments see

<sup>79</sup> PRO, FO 371/21715 C2805/1941/18, 29 March 1938.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Murray, The Change in the European Balance of Power, p. 223.



admitted that he depended on Faucher for information during the crisis.<sup>81</sup>

As tension mounted between Prague and Berlin near the end of April, Léon Noël, now French Minister in Prague, was sent to Czechoslovakia to analyze the situation. In contrast to Faucher and Stronge, Noël's assessment acknowledged that "Depuis l'Anschluss, la position militaire du pays s'est singulièrement aggravée" and that

... la <<ligne Maginot>> tchèque, commencée il y a deux ans; actuellement elle ne couvre qu'une faible partie de la frontière du nord. Ailleurs, ... il n'y a que quelques ouvrages de campagne et, le plus souvent, pas de fortifications du tout.<sup>82</sup>

Noël was sympathetic to the Czechoslovaks, yet his estimation was a realistic assessment of the military situation. His analysis concurred with that of the French military attaché in Vienna who submitted that "Il est certain que, vue d'ici, la Tchécoslovaquie paraît être dans une situation désespérée."<sup>83</sup> In Rome, Mussolini expected Czechoslovakia to be "liquidated" before France could intervene to any effect.<sup>84</sup> As Antoine Marès has noted, "au printemps 1938, dans toutes les capitales d'Europe, l'on était persuadé que la

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<sup>81</sup> Stronge, "The Czechoslovak Army and the Munich Crisis," p. 167.

<sup>82</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. IX, #256.

<sup>83</sup> DDF, 2e série, v. IX, #191.

<sup>84</sup> Galeazzo Ciano, Ciano's Diary, Malcolm Muggeridge (ed.), (London: 1952), p. 164.

Tchécoslovaquie allait tomber comme un fruit mûr."<sup>85</sup> Faucher was truly isolated in Prague.

Général Faucher's personal integrity was beyond reproach. However, his perspective on the balance of power in 1938 was seriously limited by his pro-Czech sentiments and his narrow view of the military situation. In fact, it was not based in reality. Unaware that France could not provide any immediate aid to Czechoslovakia, he continually stressed the importance of French support. Hence, although he did not know it, his arguments were counterproductive. That Faucher lost his objectivity after being assigned to Prague for almost continuously for nearly twenty years is not surprising.<sup>86</sup> What is inadmissible is the unquestioning acceptance of his point of view by many historians. By adopting Faucher's perspective and ignoring that of Paris, they have committed a fundamental error which has flawed their appreciations of the strategic situation in 1938 as well as their interpretations of French policy during the Munich crisis.

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<sup>85</sup> Antoine Marès, "Les attachés militaires en Europe centrale et la notion de puissance en 1938," Revue historique des armées, (1983) p. 70.

<sup>86</sup> Piotr Wandycz has remarked that "It is interesting that French diplomats and soldiers in missions in east-central Europe were often influenced by the country in which they operated." France and her Eastern Allies, p. 89.

## **Conclusion**

Speaking in the Chamber of Deputies in the late 1930s, Paul Reynaud reminded his colleagues of France's obligations as a European power, "By definition, a Great Power must be able to intervene beyond her frontiers."<sup>1</sup> In 1938 France retained the commitments of a major power, but not the resources to fulfil them. A major criticism of French policy has been that it did not recognize this reality and disengage itself from eastern Europe before German eastward expansion exposed French weaknesses. However, without its eastern allies France would have been left in an equally frightening position: weakened as a great power; isolated before an ever-more powerful Germany; and forced to rely exclusively on the circumscribed commitments given by England and Italy at Locarno.

During the interwar period, France owed its status in Europe less to its

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Military Intelligence Reports: France, vol. XI, 19 June 1936, p. 7.

economic or military potential than to its alliance system to the east. Paris hoped that the combination of French, Czechoslovak and Polish resources would offset Germany's industrial and demographic superiority. Yet French policy was unable to overcome the formidable obstacles which prevented the establishment of an effective alliance bloc. Consequently, by 1938 the European balance of power once again favoured Germany. France, however, was loath to relinquish what was left of its eastern system. These alliances remained a valuable asset to French diplomacy. They allowed Paris to deal with the major international states as an equal, which made it easier to safeguard national interests. Relinquishing the alliance with Czechoslovakia would have reduced France's status to that of a secondary power - a supplicant, for example, in relations with Britain. This was prudent. The alliance with Czechoslovakia gave Daladier something to bargain with when he journeyed to London in April of 1938. He knew that France could never risk war with Germany without a guarantee of full British support. However, by alarming the English with a facade of confidence, Daladier was able to obtain this guarantee.

For Daladier, Munich was a policy of expediency - he had no illusions that the peace of Europe had been saved. Accordingly, his efforts to improve relations with Germany in late 1938 and early 1939 were undertaken in conjunction with a massive rearmament program. At Munich, France had gained a respite in order to gather its energies for the coming struggle. The

achieved toward the end of 1938 and into 1939 allowed France to quadruple the percentage of the national income invested in rearmament compared to 1937. In fact, in 1939 the French economy produced more modern fighters and over twice as many modern tanks as Germany.<sup>2</sup> Measures taken by Paul Reynaud, Finance Minister in Daladier's Cabinet from September 1938 to May 1940, succeeded in attracting considerable investment back to France. As a result, when war broke out, French gold reserves dwarfed those of Germany, a fact that seemed to bode well for the coming total war.<sup>3</sup>

All of this meant that France was able to go to war in 1939 with a confidence that would have been inconceivable in September of 1938. These successes have been overlooked in many assessments of the strategic situation in Europe in 1938-1939.<sup>4</sup> In reality, the balance of power was more favourable for France in 1939 than it had been in 1938. Britain was firmly committed to fight with France, and both the economy and air force were stronger than they had been a year before.

The key to this shift was the military alliance with Britain which France had received in exchange for abandoning Czechoslovakia. Yet the place of

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Frankenstein, "A propos des aspects financiers du réarmement français, 1935-1939," Revue Historique de la deuxième guerre mondiale, 26, 102, (avril: 1976), pp. 3, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Bouvier & Robert Frank, "Sur la perception de la puissance économique en France pendant les années 1930," in La Puissance en Europe 1938-1940, p. 180.

<sup>4</sup> Most notably in Murray's The Change in the European Balance of Power.

Britain in French strategy has been misunderstood. France did not surrender control over its foreign policy to London in 1938. Rather it attached supreme importance to reviving the *Entente Cordiale*: facing Germany without a major ally had been the nightmare of French diplomats and strategists since 1871. Searching for evidence of lassitude, many interpretations have failed to note the distinction between a foreign policy which was determined to secure British support and one which surrendered to drift. Pertinax (André Geraud) is an excellent example. Writing in the shadow of the war in 1944, he bitterly condemned Daladier for cooperating with the British during the Sudetenland Crisis, arguing that the "Bull of Vaucluse" had instead been a lamb, led to slaughter by Chamberlain at Munich.<sup>5</sup> Before the war, however, Geraud had been much more favourably disposed toward Anglo-French cooperation, noting that "The alliance with Britain is the one element in French security which inspires a relatively abiding confidence. ... For more than thirty years every single French cabinet has rightly declared that agreement with England must be the cornerstone of French policy."<sup>6</sup> Geraud's drastic change of heart can be attributed to the effect of 1940 on most Frenchmen. During the Vichy period and after the liberation, efforts to ascribe blame to those responsible for the Fall of France generated a series of inquisitorial investigations into the causes of the

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<sup>5</sup> Pertinax, The Gravediggers of France, (New York: 1944).

<sup>6</sup> André Geraud, "What England means to France," Foreign Affairs, (January: 1939), pp. 369-370.

débâcle. The historiography of this period has reflected this trend. Munich has become a touchstone of sorts for those "more inclined to lay blame than seek understanding."<sup>7</sup>

In Général Faucher, historians found a contemporary who had voiced their *post hoc* judgements. As a result, his views have become firmly entrenched in the historiography of the Munich crisis. Yet Faucher's perspective was also suspect. In 1938 France and Germany were no longer the powers they had been when he had left Paris for Prague in 1919. The balance of power had changed dramatically. Faucher did not understand this. He had lost touch with the problems France faced during the 1920s and 1930s. He failed to comprehend that France could not prevent a German *Drang nach Osten* from overrunning Czechoslovakia. For him, the integrity of Czechoslovakia and the honour of France were of first importance. In Paris, national survival took precedence over both Czechoslovak sovereignty and individual conceptions of national honour. Had it not been for the extraordinary privileges Faucher enjoyed in Prague, the mission would likely have been withdrawn long before 1938. Thus Faucher remained in Czechoslovakia despite his ignorance of the true nature of French strategy, and his assessments reflected his limited and biased perspective. Given his refusal to provide his superiors with intelligence on the military situation in Czechoslovakia, Faucher was in no

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Alexander, "The Fall of France, 1940," Journal of Strategic Studies, 13, 1, (1990), p. 17.

position to criticize French policy.

The Munich agreement reflected France's perception of the European power balance. The French eastern alliances were constructed in the 1920s to meet French security concerns of that decade. The collapse of Czarist Russia had deprived Paris of its ally to the east of Germany. During the 1920s the French feared German revisionism in the west aimed at overthrowing the Versailles settlements over the Rhineland or the Saarland. The French eastern system was designed to replace the Russian alliance, to provide at least the threat of a second front along Germany's lightly defended eastern frontier. This point is too often ignored or dismissed in the historiography.

During the 1930s the focus of German revisionism shifted eastward. Moreover, German military power increased relative to France until, by 1936, Germany possessed clear superiority. To counter this threat, French military strategy assumed a decidedly defensive configuration. The alternative, an arms race with Germany, was out of the question for France during the 1930s. Hence French strategy reflected domestic conditions during this period, and not, as has so often been alleged, a defeatist mentality. To understand the French response to the Nazi military threat, one must look further into the social and political environment which prevailed in France during this period. To argue that the inspiration of French policy was the decay of some moral fibre is convenient but overly simplistic. This is also the case with the use of morally charged terms such as *décadence* to describe French foreign and defence



policy during the 1930s.

In sum, the changing status of Czechoslovakia in French strategy was an indication of the waning of French power in the interwar years. During the 1920s Czechoslovakia was the linchpin of a French eastern system which composed an effective deterrent to German revisionism. By 1938, however, German resurgence had combined with French decline to leave the eastern system in ruins. As a result, territorial defence and British military support were became absolutely necessary to French security in case of war with Germany. It is wrong, however, to conclude from all of this that the French were caught up in drift and defeatism during the late 1930s. France was a power in decline during this period. Internal and external pressures limited its freedom of action, destroying any possibility of saving Czechoslovakia from German aggression. This is not evidence of *décadence*. It is instead a reflection of the strategic balance in Europe in 1938 and the restrictions that it imposed on French decision makers during the Munich Crisis.

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