

THE MUNICH AGREEMENT (1938) AND THE COMMENTS OF ROMANIAN ATTACHÉS IN WESTERN CAPITALS

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Abstract: The article regards the Munich Conference (September 1938) during which the representatives of the four great western powers – Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy – sacrificed the integrity of Czechoslovakia on the altar of what the advocates of the “appeasement policy” called “the cause of peace.” In this context, the behaviour of the Romanian diplomats towards Czechoslovakia is revealed in the documents from the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and also in the memoirs written by great personalities of those times, who decided upon the course of events. The above-mentioned article pays attention to the reports and intelligence forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by diplomatic attachés in London and other Western capitals.

Keywords: the Munich Agreement, Gheorghe Iliescu, Vasile Grigorcea, Radu Florescu, Ion Lugoșianu

1. The Munich Agreement – “the climax” of the appeasement policy promoted by London and Paris

Between 1936-1938, Germany engineered a *concealment* of its objectives and this orientation was met with *indulgence* in London and Paris, the general result translating into the annexation of Austria, then of the Sudeten area of Czechoslovakia and, in the end, the abolishment of free state of Czechoslovakia and the enslavement (economic, political, military) of other peoples.¹

As regards Czechoslovakia, the pretext was the alleged oppression of the German population in the Sudeten area exercised by the authorities in Prague; the removal of this oppression fell on the Third Reich, which assumed responsibility for the fate of the Germans living in other countries, first and foremost the neighbouring ones. Inspired and supported by Berlin, the Nazi organisation called “The Sūdetenland” would ferment and move from one provocation to the next against the Czechoslovakian state.²

On 26 September 1938, Hitler gave a vituperating speech in the Sports Palace in Nurnberg, setting himself up as the spokesman for the German people. He claimed the Reich’s foreign policy aimed the development of the German nation and not the “oppression” of other peoples, or “their annexation.”³ Referring to the Sudeten area (Sudetenland), inhabited by approximately 3,200,000 ethnic Germans, Hitler claimed that “It is our last

¹ Marusia Cîrstea, Gheorghe Buzatu, *Europa în balanța forțelor*, vol. I, 1919-1939, Editura Mica Valahie, București, 2007, pp. 57-69.

² Constantin Vlad, *Istoria diplomației. Secolul XX*, Editura Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2014, p. 125.

³ Apud Prof.univ.dr. Viorica Moisuc, *România și criza cehoslovacă. Documente. Septembrie 1938*, Editura Adevărul Holding, București, 2010, p. 674.

territorial demand in Europe, one we are not prepared to relinquish.”⁴ On 27 September 1938, the *Foreign Office* cabled the British ambassador in Berlin the offer made to Hitler to occupy Czechoslovakian territories in Ager and Asch on 1 October, and for an international committee to meet in order to delimitate the new frontiers following Germany’s occupation of the other claimed areas.⁵ Hitler opposed the project and informed Chamberlain that Germany would call a general mobilisation. Any chance of peace seemed excluded. On the morning of 28 September, Chamberlain attempted a last maneuver; he sent a message to Hitler and Mussolini, suggesting a reunion of the French, English, Italian and Czechoslovakian heads of governments.⁶ Hitler accepted the proposal on condition Czechoslovakia were not invited.

Commenting on the actions of the Germans, Vasile Grigorcea, Romania’s minister in London, highlighted (on 26 September 1938) that “Hitler demands the retrocession by 1 October of an area comprising not only the territories inhabited by a German majority of over 50%, but also important territories with a Czech majority, including communication nodes of the greatest importance. Apart from these, he also demands the establishment of a region where plebiscite could be held under international control, but under special circumstances, which would allow the Sudetes in the ceded area to take part in the plebiscite without any conditioning, so that an unequivocal German majority could be obtained.”⁷ In the context of this political crisis in Central Europe, the stance of the two great allies of Czechoslovakia, France and Great Britain, can be defined/ observed clearly. Thus, while the *Foreign Office*’s lack of interests in the political evolutions east of the Rhine had been asserted since 1925 (the Locarno agreements), France was involved in a series of treaties as well as bi- and multilateral agreements stipulating clear obligations for its involvement in supporting Czechoslovakia in case of unprovoked German aggression.⁸ To that end, French diplomacy was faced with a tough test because of the duplicitous position adopted by Great Britain in its relations with the countries in Central and Eastern Europe⁹. The British and French ambassadors in Prague advised the Czechoslovakian government to seek an understanding with Henlein. On 17 May 1938 negotiations began between Henlein and the government in Prague. At the same time, the great majority of the English and the French media released harsh criticism against Czechoslovakia. The “Daily Mail” published an article entitled *The Czechs do not interest us*, which stated, among other things, that “Czechoslovakia does not carry any interest for us. If France wants to fry her fingers there, it is her own business.”¹⁰ To prevent armed conflict – as Hitler had threatened during a speech on 12 September 1938, in Nurnberg – the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, “glorious strategist” of the *policy of appeasement* towards

⁴*Ibidem*.

⁵*Ibidem*, p. 708.

⁶ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *Istoria relațiilor internaționale. 1919-1947*, vol. I, Editura Științelor Sociale și Politice, București, 2006, p. 170.

⁷ Apud Prof.univ.dr. Viorica Moisuc, *op. cit.*, p. 630.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 20, 630-632.

⁹See Martin Thomas, *France and Czechoslovak Crisis*, in *The Munich Crisis, 1938. Prelude to World War II*, edited by Igor Lukes, Erik Goldstein, Frank Cass, London, 1999, pp. 122-159; Vít Smetana, *In the Shadow of Munich. British policy towards Czechoslovakia from the endorsement to the renunciation of the Munich Agreement (1938-1942)*, Karolinum Press, Charles University, 2008, pp. 97-99.

¹⁰ Zorin Zamfir, *Istoria universală contemporană*, Editura Oscar Print, București, 2003, p. 155; Valentin Ciorbea, *Din istoria secolului XX (1918-1939)*, vol. 1, Editura Ex Ponto, Constanța, 2006, pp. 420-424.

fascist states, made three humiliating pilgrimages to Germany, first to Berchtesgaden, on 15 September 1938, then to Godesberg on 22 September 1938 and, finally to Munich on 29/30 September 1938¹¹ and this is how, “from one capitulation to another, he eventually ceded to all of Hitler’s claims during the night of 29 to 30 September 1938, together with the French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier and in the presence of Mussolini.”¹² Romanian diplomat Radu Florescu made a brilliant analysis of Great Britain’s foreign policy in a confidential report entitled *On the English policy following the Munich Agreement*¹³, emphasising that it differed from that of other European states in that “The British Empire, being a community of interests so widely scattered on the surface of the globe, her actions and reactions are naturally different from those of a country with limited and compact geographical interests.”¹⁴ That is the reason why “No British head of Government and no Parliament would ever be able to engage the entire Empire in defending local interests, knowing that by doing so they would endanger much bigger interests.”¹⁵ However, continued Radu Florescu, “a vital interest for the Empire is the geographic and military connection between England and a continental power. England’s gendarme for Europe is France, so whoever attacked France would weaken England’s military bridgehead on the Continent.”¹⁶ Taking these interests into consideration, England, with France alongside, unwilling to engage in a war that was detrimental to them, will sacrifice the integrity of Czechoslovakia on the altar of what the supporters of the “appeasement policy” called “the cause of peace.”¹⁷ “The impression of an unfavourable moment prevails in the explanations given by the Government-inspired media. Added to this, the belief that the revision of the Czechoslovakian borders avoided the immediate invasion of German armies in the European South-east, which was impossible to defend in due time by the Bohemian fortifications left isolated following Austria’s annexation and Poland’s defection. Chamberlain’s invitation to Mussolini to come to Munich in order to stave German pressure confirms Italy’s role in Central Europe, as well as the difficulty of reaching a solution in the absence of its agreement.”¹⁸ Hence, Munich marked the beginning of a change in the course of British foreign policy so that any conflict “that may arise outside England’s vital areas could be contained to prevent war.”¹⁹

Munich certainly closed a stage in the international political life and opened another – one in which political reasoning was gradually being replaced by brutal force. According to Henry Kissinger, Munich represented “*the climax*” of the appeasement policy promoted by

¹¹ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-170.

¹² F.-G. Dreyfus, A. Jourcin, P. Thibault, P. Milza, *Istoria universală*, vol. 3, *Evoluția lumii contemporane*, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2006, p. 430.

¹³ Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe al României, București (The Archives of the Romanian Foreign Ministry, Bucharest, hereinafter: A.M.A.E.), fond 71 România, vol. 262, ff. 196-219.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ M.P. Renouvin, *Les relations franco-anglaises, 1935-1939. Esquisse provisoire*, in vol. *Les relations franco-britanniques de 1935 à 1939*, Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1975, pp. 39-45.

¹⁸ A.M.A.E., fond 71 România, vol. 262, ff. 199-200.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

London and Paris and, moreover, it put an end to *the balance of forces in Europe* as it had been established through the Treaties of Peace in 1919-1920.²⁰

2. The position of Romanian diplomats on the matter of the Munich Agreement

The Munich Agreement compelled all states to re-examine the results of their former policy and re-evaluate the resulting ratio of forces, in order to decipher, as far as possible, the prospective evolution of the international situation.

During all this time, Romania would support Czechoslovakia on multiple levels and in various ways and, to that effect, as early as May 1938, the Romanian foreign minister, N. Petrescu-Comnen, declared to the German minister in Bucharest, Wilhelm Fabricius, that “nothing of what endangers the existence of Czechoslovakia will leave us unmoved.”²¹ Romanian diplomacy will be very active in Paris, London, Berlin, Rome, Warsaw, Budapest and other places, in defending Czechoslovakia. After the Munich Agreement, Minister Grigore Gafencu reiterated that the main lines of development in Romania’s foreign policy were: “real and good-faith cooperation between nations”; “peace, which needs to be re-established”; “close ties with the bigger and smaller countries of the continent”; “the strengthening of existing alliances.”²²

Romania’s attitude on the “Munich arrangement” can also be inferred from a document in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs referring to the meeting – on 15 November 1938 – between Minister N.P. Comnen and Lord Halifax. On this occasion, the Romanian minister specified: “Romania did not want to take any advantage of the break-up of the Czechoslovakian state. Although the Romanian government was requested by a number of Slovakian political parties to claim a mandate over Slovakia, the Romanians never entertained the thought of acting on these requests. The same happened with Rhutenia, where we do have a considerable Romanian minority. It would have been deeply immoral and unpolitical to take part in the division of the body of a good and loyal ally. The catastrophe that hit Czechoslovakia created intense confusion among the country’s intelligence and, at the same time, a serious economic imbalance. In order to provide reassurance and suppress the interested propaganda of various outside factors, Czechoslovakia’s International Status should have been *final* and settled as soon as possible in the spirit of the Munich Agreement. At the same time, Czechoslovakia should have been provided with financial assistance to enable it to maintain its independence. This *independence* was a *vital necessity* for Romania and simultaneously, it posed great interest for the western Great Powers. The Great Powers, if I may be honest, have assumed a threefold responsibility to Czechoslovakia: political, juridical and moral. Through the assurances given on 19 September last year, England and France were issuing a categorical proclamation to Czechoslovakia that, if she accepts the suggestions made in Prague and decides in favour of the requested sacrifice, they are ready to assure Czechoslovakia of its future borders. On account of these assurances, Czechoslovakia

²⁰ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomația*, traducere de Mircea Ștefancu și Radu Paraschivescu, Editura All, București, 2007, pp. 274-275.

²¹ Apud Constantin Vlad, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

²² *Istoria Românilor*, vol. VIII, *România Întregită (1918-1940)*, coord. Ioan Scurtu, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2003, p. 517.

accepted the principle of the sacrifices it was requested to make. Once reunited in Munich, the Great Powers were not satisfied with regulating the German-Czech dispute, but also made decisions concerning the Hungarian and Polish demands. These decisions were followed by the well-known protocols, by which the four States pledged their guarantee, as soon as Czechoslovakia would accept the adopted decisions regarding the three disputed borders. Given the above-mentioned facts, Czechoslovakia may rightfully claim it would never have accepted the enforced massive amputations if it hadn't twice received the solemn assurance that its future territorial status would be guaranteed by the four Great Powers."²³

3. The consequences of the Munich Agreement in the comments of Romanian attachés to European capitals

In Munich it was accepted that Czechoslovakia should be broken up. All Czechoslovakian regions with over 50% German population were to be ceded to Germany. The signed Quadripartite Agreement envisaged the transfer to Germany of 28291 km² with 3683082 inhabitants. After Munich, the German government endeavoured to enforce the federalisation of the Czechoslovakian state in order to achieve its subsequent dissolution and full occupation.²⁴

Referring to Germany's policy towards Czechoslovakia (on 6 October 1938), the Romanian military attaché in Berlin, Lieutenant-Colonel Titus Gârbea²⁵, emphasised that "German victory in Central Europe, though straightforward, goes beyond the simple adjoining of three million Sudetens. It is now being exploited through the concentric Polish-Hungarian action and through an undermining action meant to lead to a separation between Bohemia and Slovakia, and possibly to a common Polish-Hungarian frontier in Subcarpathian Russia."²⁶ The Romanian diplomat went on to ask: "*Now that Germany has slain Czechoslovakia, where will it channel its efforts?*" In answering this question, Titus Gârbea highlighted that "the entire German political, economic and strategic structure is designed for an effort in Central Europe, heading East"²⁷ and "This political trend may not primarily target conquest, annexation or takeover, but rather: political and economic influence or alliance; adherence to racist ideology; political subjection or economic dependence; strengthening and ascension of the German element scattered throughout the east and south-east Europe."²⁸ Nevertheless, Romania's envoy to Berlin continued, "This new direction does not exclude new territorial demands on the part of the Germans; the matter of the Corridor, of Danzig, the Memel territory, that of the three million Germans in Switzerland are still on the agenda. According

²³ A.M.AE., fond 71 Anglia, vol. 40, ff. 117-121.

²⁴ Alexandru Oșca, *România în sistemul relațiilor internaționale contemporane*, partea I, 1917-1939, Editura C.T.E.A., București, 2006, p. 207.

²⁵ Silviu Miloiu, *Generalul Titus Gârbea. Memorial și însemnări zilnice*, vol. I, Editura Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2011, pp. 14-30.

²⁶ Alesandru Dușu, Lenuța Nicolescu, Alexandru Oșca, *Atașajii militari transmit... (1938-1944)*, Editura Europa Nova, București, 2001, p. 35.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

to the political framework, today Germany has the necessary organisation and force to bring any of these matters to the forefront in a short time.”²⁹

Particularly interesting comments about Germany’s policy towards Czechoslovakia were made by the Romanian attaché in Prague, Ion Lugoșianu, who highlighted on 8 February 1939 that “The predominant problem of Czechoslovakian politics is to reconcile the need to maintain the State’s political and economic independence with the essential fact of the Reich’s vicinity and pressures. The German demands are high and the Germans appear to be tough, but so far they have stated matters progressively and rather tactfully. During Chvalkowski’s three visits to Germany since October, only matters of principle were analysed and not concrete details. Relations that were very strenuous in October are gradually becoming normal. After Chvalkowski’s last journey to Berlin in January, the situation is the following: The anti-Semitic issue dominates the Reich’s relations with Czechoslovakia. Strange as it may seem, during the 6 hours of talks with the Czechoslovakian Minister of Foreign Affairs, both Hitler and von Ribbentrop spoke about the need to exterminate the Jews in Europe in extremely vicious terms for most of the time. The Jews are the cause of the hostility against Germany in France, England and America. After the exclusion of the Jews from European life, international politics may return to normal. German-Czechoslovakian reports may also improve following the settlement of this matter in Czechoslovakia, so much so that in Berlin Chvalkowski’s interlocutors allowed him to perceive the likelihood of certain territorial retrocession. The securing of Czechoslovakian borders is in fact conditioned by the settlement of the anti-Semitic problem.

Secondly, the Germans are interested in a sensible settlement of the German minority matter and the purging of the old regime’s people from the Czechoslovakian political life. The solutions achieved in the above-mentioned matters are meant to serve as precedents for German politics, according to the leading circles here, in the other Danube countries. [...]

In conclusion, Chvalkowski believes that if matters are settled in due time, relations with the Reich may become tolerable and the country’s autonomy may be safeguarded in a great measure. He was never spoken of a customs or monetary union. He was not requested to leave the League, to join the Anti-Komintern Pact or conclude any political alliance with Germany; today, it is only a favourable neutrality and supplies that are requested from Czechoslovakia.

The Czechoslovakian government is in consent about the need to follow this policy. It is made difficult by the state’s federal regime to some extent and public opinion does not always understand it, although they realise it is unavoidable while, on the other hand, French politics is no longer regarded with hostility or bitterness. [...] During his talks with Hitler and von Ribbentrop, Chvalkowski had the impression the Fuhrer had slowed the rhythm of the anti-communist policy, being convinced that the Soviets march towards unequivocal disintegration. In the following months, the forefront of European policy will be occupied by the attempt to attain a south-Mediterranean Western Munich.”³⁰

²⁹*Ibidem*, p. 37.

³⁰ A.M.A.E., fond Cehoslovacia, vol. 41, ff. 332-336.

The Munich Agreement destabilised domestic political life in Czechoslovakia. On 5 October 1938 President Edvard Beneš resigned and on 30 November he was replaced by Emil Hácha, who issued a new constitutional law which defined “Slovakia as an autonomous part of the Czechoslovakian republic, power being divided between Bratislava and Prague.”³¹ In the meantime, contacts between the Slovakian leaders and the German government members increased, encouraging, slowly but surely, the proclamation of Slovakia’s independence on 14 March 1939. On the same day, President Hácha was called to Berlin and informed that Czechoslovakian provinces were to become part of the Reich. On 15 March, German troops crossed the frontier established in Munich and so Czechoslovakia ceased to exist as an independent state³².

Analysing and commenting on these developments, Titus Gârbea concluded: “1 – Judging from the course of events and the intelligence we were able to obtain, we gather that despite the swiftness of the operation, the occupation of Czechoslovakia was planned and is not an unexpected improvisation. The planning was done at the level of international and national politics and in the military sphere; 2 – I strongly believe this occupation is preliminary to certain important operations which may be carried out.

In the context of the restrictions on the of the diplomatic corps’ circulation, in the avalanche of deceit and lies, in the present turbid situation, it is very difficult to make more certain deductions, but there are two more likely hypotheses of what is to happen: a – Germany may profit from the substantial increase in its war potential by occupying Czechoslovakia and, together with Italy, may generate the conflagration by defining its claims. However, the introduction of the newly captured armament requires a few months (two-three months). In this case, the totalitarian powers’ line of operation may be the Mediterranean Sea, considered the most sensitive region for France and England. Blitz operations are possible in Spain and England. Blitz operations are possible in Spain and the Spanish Morocco for Gibraltar and Libya, for the Suez, followed by the occupation of Northern Africa, which is the main objective; b – the second hypothesis is that Germany may continue the consolidation towards the East by organising Central Europe and developing its <<living space>> leaving the outbreak of the war at the decision of Western powers.”³³

Captain Gheorghe Iliescu, military attaché in London, also emphasised in his comment on the Munich Agreement: “The concluded agreement is disgraceful to England, who permitted that a smaller nation be enforced conditions which may only have been applied to an enemy shamefully defeated in war; [also] The (English) government’s intention to give the Reich a free hand in Central and Eastern Europe is mistaken, because, once strengthened by the infusion of the smaller European countries, Germany will become invincible in 2-3 years and will impose humiliating conditions upon England, who will be forced to accept them; the

³¹ Valentin Ciorbea, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 302.

³² Gheorghe Onișoru, *Istoria lumii contemporane. De la revoluția bolșevică până în zilele noastre (1917-2015)*, Editura Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2015, pp. 47-49; A.J.P. Taylor, *Originile celui de-al doilea război mondial*, traducere și note de Lucian Leuștean, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1999, pp. 123-148; Elena Mannová, coord., *Scurtă istorie a Slovaciei*, traducere din limba slovacă și indice de Eva Mârza și Radu Mârza, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2011.

³³ Alesandru Duțu, Lenuța Nicolescu, Alexandru Oșca, *Atașaii militari transmit... (1938-1944)*, pp. 50-51.

Munich Agreement – Gheorghe Iliescu went on, – showed that all treaties value no less than the paper they are written on; the Munich Agreement – Gheorghe Iliescu ended his comment – is a lesson for all countries – especially for the smaller ones – to mistrust the promises made by bigger countries and rely solely on their own moral, economic and particularly military strengths.”³⁴

Analysing the new international relations, Romanian diplomat Alexandru Cretzianu concluded: “Czechoslovakia’s experience – though the country profited from a well-compound network of mutual assistance pacts – shows that today no country can rely absolutely on Pacts, Treaties and Guarantees – however perfect they may be – and international agreements – however solemn.”³⁵

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³⁴ Alesandru Duțu, Lenuța Nicolescu, Alexandru Oșca, Andrei Nicolescu, *Atașatii militari transmit... (1938-1939)*, vol. III, Editura Europa Nova, București, 2003, pp. 76, 77.

³⁵ A.M.A.E., fond 71 România, vol. 7, f. 153.

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