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### Voices of the Munich Pact

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## ‘VOICES OF THE MUNICH PACT’\*

Munich, like Vietnam, has become a metonym. If ‘Vietnam’ is now shorthand for the misconceived cause, obdurately pursued to deadly effect, ‘Munich’ has come to connote shameful betrayal, weakness and capitulation.<sup>1</sup> In popular consciousness, Munich has visually endured as a text: the small sheet (sign of a signified, the graphemes of *not* keeping one’s word) waved by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain at Heston airport on his return from the conference on 30 September 1938 (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1

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\* This article is dedicated to Daphne Perry and her family. I would like to thank Robert Franklin, Jennifer Fisher and Willy Maley for their comments on earlier drafts.

<sup>1</sup> In this article, there is no attempt to delimit the meaning of the word ‘Munich’ in any instance.

<sup>2</sup> From “Munich Agreement,” <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/2WWmunich.htm>. The scenes at Heston were televised live: the one and only appearance of a Prime Minister on television before the Second World War (“Political Television 1936 – 1955,” <http://www.election.demon.co.uk/pt1.html>). The piece of paper was reproduced in the *Times* (“Mr. Chamberlain’s Work,” *Times*, 1 October 1938, 14) and now resides in the Public Record Office, Kew. This edition of the *Times* also carried photographs of Heston, Chamberlain at Buckingham Palace with his wife and the King and Queen and at the window of 10 Downing Street (“Enthusiastic Welcome for Mr. Chamberlain,” *Times*, 1 October 1938, 7; “The King and Mr. Chamberlain at Buckingham Palace,” *Times*, 1 October 1938, 16; “Group at the Palace,” *Times*, 1 October 1938, 12). *Times* readers could purchase the Buckingham Palace picture as a ‘photogravure plate suitable for framing’ for 1s. 1½ d. (“The King and Mr. Chamberlain at Buckingham Palace”).

Later dismissed by Hitler as a ‘scrap of paper’,<sup>3</sup> what Chamberlain held in his right hand was not, in fact, a copy of the Four Power Accord concluded by Britain, France, Germany and Italy at Munich, but of the Anglo-German Agreement, hastily signed at the end of the conference and later hailed by the Prime Minister from the window of 10 Downing Street. ‘This is the second time that there has come back from Germany to Downing Street peace with honour,’ Chamberlain told the cheering crowds, ‘I believe it is peace for our time’.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this essay is to ‘read’ the scrap of paper, to unpick the metonym by showing how ‘Munich’ can be understood as a textual event in negotiation with other texts, past, future and contemporary.<sup>5</sup> This will be a process of listening to ‘voices’: some screaming, some politely arguing, others charged with emotion, still others murmuring behind the scenes. Some of these voices can still literally be heard, downloadable from the internet:<sup>6</sup> at the time, the crisis itself unfolded as an aural experience, an ‘anxious / Listening to bulletins / From distant, measured voices’ as Louis MacNeice expressed it in his long poetic rumination on the events of September to December 1938, *Autumn Journal*.<sup>7</sup> The model is akin to Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, though more real and less theorised: not so much a conversation, fugue or even an antiphony, but a multi-volume cacophony of ad hoc responses, deliberate mishearings, shoutings down – a diplomatic *Totentanz*. These are the verbal equivalents of Michel de

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<sup>3</sup> “The Czech Crisis of 1938,” [http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/czechoslovakia\\_1938.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/czechoslovakia_1938.htm). “Scrap of paper” was first used derisively of a treaty obligation by German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg (1856-1921) in response to British protests before the First World War that she was treaty-bound to assist Belgium (Hubert Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, trans. Ida Šindelková and Edgar P. Young (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939), 85. Ripka described France’s failure to honour her obligations under the Treaty of Locarno to Czechoslovakia as ‘scrap of paper diplomacy’. Duff Cooper, who resigned over Munich, also called the Anglo-German Agreement ‘that miserable scrap of paper’ (Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), 247).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in the *Times* (“Flowers at No. 10,” *Times*, 1 October 1938, 14); and in the *Guardian* on 1 October 1938 (R. H. Haigh, D. S. Morris, and A. R. Peters, eds. *The Guardian Book of Munich* (Aldershot: Wildwood House, 1988), 232). Chamberlain’s words are often misquoted as ‘peace in our time’.

<sup>5</sup> As Chamberlain hinted, ‘peace with honour’ was intertextual, repeating the words of Disraeli on his return from the Congress of Berlin in 1878 (a historical analogy picked up by the *Times* (“Ovation in London,” *Times*, 1 October 1938, 12) and the *New York Times* (“Chamberlain Flies to Consult Hitler,” *New York Times*, 15 September 1938, 3).

<sup>6</sup> “The Munich Crisis,” <http://www.otr.com/munich.html>.

<sup>7</sup> MacNeice, Louis, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 36.

Certeau's everyday 'tactics', the age-old ruses and piecemeal subterfuges which, with makeshift creativity, make possible the quotidian task of getting by.<sup>8</sup>

The main speakers in this essay are British, Czech, American and German: Neville Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, Duff Cooper, Storm Jameson, Edouard Beneš, Hubert Ripka, Dorothy Thompson, Helen Kirkpatrick, Edgar Mowrer and Adolf Hitler. Their discourses reveal that, in the course of events leading up to the signature of the Accord, politics became a matter of style and style became political. More specifically, a confrontation arose between a way of speaking associated by some with certain 'civilised' values and another way which was the destruction of those values. Shrieking, ranting, nostalgic, elegiac, prophetic, calm, reasoning, strong, emotional, temperate: all these modulations sounded in a flurry of textual exchanges. 'Telegrams, phone-calls, messages by air came after one another without ceasing,' is how one diplomat experienced it.<sup>9</sup> Louis MacNeice summed it up as 'conferences, adjournments, ultimatums / flights in the air, castles in the air'.<sup>10</sup> The atmosphere was reactive, an anti-dialogue, a diplomatic game of spillikins in which each participant waited for another to move.

If Munich was contemporaneously experienced as a jangling proliferation of texts, it also 'speaks' diachronically. Indeed, in attempting to demarcate the Crisis, it is difficult to know where to start – or to stop. Munich 'talked' to events which came long after it. Vietnam was called Richard Nixon's Munich after George McGovern's trip to Hanoi; Jeane Kirkpatrick played the Munich card to justify Ronald Reagan's 'intervention' in Nicaragua; and, most recently, the failure of Munich-style appeasement has been cited in support of the Bush / Blair invasion of Iraq, most notably by Donald Rumsfeld.<sup>11</sup> (In a key article in the *Guardian*, Matt Seaton asked a dozen leading historians on both sides of the Atlantic whether the Crisis of 1938 was a 'plausible parallel' for Iraq – eleven, including Linda Colley, Simon

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<sup>8</sup> Certeau, Michel de, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California, 1984), xix, xi, xiv.

<sup>9</sup> W. C. F. von Rheinbaben, "Berlino," in *Quattro Giorni. Storia Di Una Crisa Europea*, ed. Michael, Lord Killanin (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1938), 177.

<sup>10</sup> MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> See Richard Bernstein, "The German Question," *New York Times*, 2 May 2004.

Schama, Eric Hobsbawm, Avi Shlaim, Paul Kennedy, Michael Burleigh and Norman Davies, replied that it was not.)<sup>12</sup> Textual and historical exchanges in the opposite direction include Sir Edward Grey's diplomacy in the run-up to the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles, the Spanish Civil War and the Austrian Anschluss – Shiela Grant Duff even begins her analysis of the crisis with the fourteenth-century Hussites.<sup>13</sup> The opening of Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*, set in August 1938, recalls in elegiac mood the brilliant summer of 1914:

Close and slow, summer is ending in Hampshire,  
 Ebbing away down ramps of shaven lawn where close  
 -clipped yew  
 Insulates the lives of retired generals and admirals.<sup>14</sup>

'It has happened before,' MacNeice continues, 'just like this before, we must be dreaming.'<sup>15</sup> The historiographical corollary is that the crisis must be seen, synchronically and diachronically, as a discursive profusion: what is proposed here, therefore, is a textualised model of history. To explore that profusion in detail, this essay now tunes in to the varied voices of the Munich Pact.

Events were dominated by the raised voice of Adolf Hitler. 'Hitler yells on the wireless,' wrote MacNeice, implying that the Führer was 'received' as an unceasing, undifferentiated barrage of noise.<sup>16</sup> In two key speeches – at Nuremberg and at the Berlin Sportspalast – Hitler's loud volume and emotive vocabulary stirred up the crowd, which responded with equal frenzy ('thunderous cheers and shouts of "victory hail",' according to

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<sup>12</sup> Matt Seaton, "Blast from the Past," *Guardian*, 19 February 2003. Only one of those polled, the right-wing historian Andrew Roberts, claimed that 'were the west not to act and Saddam eventually to build nuclear bombs, he would have more destructive capacity even than did Hitler'.

<sup>13</sup> Grant Duff, *Europe and the Czechs*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, 22.

<sup>16</sup> MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, 30.

the *Times*).<sup>17</sup> This effect itself then became a negotiating card: concessions on the Sudetenland were impossible, Hitler said, because of the expectations he had created in the German people (expectations reinforced by the equally vehement German media and the speeches of other leading Nazis).<sup>18</sup> In diplomatic exchanges, too, his explosive temperament and shouted responses created in his interlocutors a perceptible fear of sparking his temper. Appeasement in this sense was not so much a political strategy as an alternative, quieter way of speaking: lullaby-like, a kind of hushing.

The speech Hitler made at the Nuremberg Rally on 12 September 1938 was aimed at gaining discursive-political dominance of the geopolitical situation. ‘Herr Beneš indulges in tactics,’ Hitler claimed, ‘he speaks, he organises negotiations. This cannot go on. This is not a matter of phrases but of right.’<sup>19</sup> The speech was closely monitored by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Sir Nevile Henderson, British ambassador to Berlin, advised:

He [Hitler] is in a condition of extreme nervous tension which he was unable to relax even when addressing his Hitler Youth. His abnormality seemed to me greater than ever.<sup>20</sup>

‘Driven by megalomania inspired by military force which he has built up etc., he may have crossed the border-line of insanity,’ Henderson suggested to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax.<sup>21</sup> Worldwide, the press also reported the speech, in every case remarking on the stentorian delivery. The *Times* called it ‘violent in tone’, full of ‘extravagant language’.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Herr Hitler’s Speech,’ *Times*, 13 September 1938, 7.

<sup>18</sup> ‘I do feel that it is necessary to recognised the difficulty for a man in that position to take back such emphatic declarations as he has already made amidst the enthusiastic cheers of his supporters,’ empathised Neville Chamberlain in his speech to the Commons on 3 October 1938 (Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, col. 47).

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in the *Guardian*, 13 September 1938, 11 (Haigh, *The Guardian Book of Munich*, 101).

<sup>20</sup> E. L. Woodward and Rohan Butler, eds. *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939. Third Series. Vol II. 1938* (London: HMSO, 1949), 296.

<sup>21</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 299.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Herr Hitler’s Speech,’ *Times*, 13 September 1938, 12; *Times*, 13 September 1938, 13.



The *Guardian* referred to its ‘angry tone’, ‘bitter references’, ‘strident and aggressive tones’ and ‘fiery tones’.<sup>23</sup> The *New York Herald Tribune* observed:

Millions listened to a single voice shouting its rounded, grandiose, essentially meaningless phrases throughout the world. By turns sarcastic, solemn, and shrill, delivered against the roaring background of cadenced ‘Sieg Heils’ – for all the world like the mindless roars of an American football crowd – it sounded unbelievably sinister and violent.<sup>24</sup>

The Czech press’s reactions were conveyed to the German Foreign Ministry by its Chargé d’Affaires in Prague: ‘menacing words’ (*Prager Tageblatt*), ‘threatening in tone’ (*Narodni Osvobozeni*), ‘impudent strong words’ (*A-Zet*), ‘threatens and insults’ (*Lidove Noviny*).<sup>25</sup> The speech at the Berlin Sportpalast on the evening of 26 September 1938 was similar in tone and similarly received. At around 7 p.m., Henderson wired Halifax that it was a ‘very violent hour. He [Hitler] is clearly determined to make [a] great passionate speech tonight and was most impatient’. The Führer was filled with ‘intense emotion and frequent references to tonight’s speech’.<sup>26</sup> Czech journalist Hubert Ripka described it as ‘a violent and intimidating discourse’.<sup>27</sup> But a German commentator, Baron W. C. F. von Rheinbaben, diplomat, former secretary of state and member of the Reichstag, noted:

No German is capable of describing and expressing better the sentiments and thoughts of the people at that moment [...] every sentence came from the spirit of the people.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> 13 September 1938 11, 14 (Haigh, 101, 103).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in the *Guardian*, 14 September 1938, 13 (Haigh, *The Guardian Book of Munich*, 114).

<sup>25</sup> John W. Wheeler-Bennett et al, eds. *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945. Series D (1937-1945) Vol II Germany and Czechoslovakia 1937-1938* (London: HMSO, 1950), 753.

<sup>26</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 552.

<sup>27</sup> Hubert Ripka, “Praga,” in *Quattro Giorni. Storia Di Una Crisa Europea*, ed. Michael, Lord Killanin (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1938), 104.

<sup>28</sup> Rheinbaben, “Berlino,” 164.

The reaction of the crowd, Rheinbaben argued, was not so much frenzy as ‘massive enthusiasm and agreement’.<sup>29</sup> The inflammatory nature of Hitler’s language in these two speeches was matched by the German press and wireless. Describing it as ‘raucous’, a Times editorial on 24 September 1938 commented:

What might at least have been hoped was that Dr. Goebbels, who is at his Führer’s side, should have been instructed to modify the tone of the German Press, and, not less, of the German wireless, which even at this hour, with an almost incredible lack of a sense of decency, continue to pour out their venom of threat and invective.<sup>30</sup>

But at Bad Godesberg, Hitler himself characterised his demagogic oratory as ‘plain speaking’. A memo by a German official records the Führer saying that ‘the whole German nation expected energetic action and plain speaking from him’.<sup>31</sup> It was a mistake to assume that his Nuremberg speech was merely a set of ‘empty phrases’.<sup>32</sup> In conference, according to FCO notes, Hitler aligned himself with British ‘control’. The temper of the Sudeten German refugees was rising ‘to fever heat’, he said. These people could not be expected to view the problem with the same equanimity as Mr. Chamberlain and himself in the Conference Room.<sup>33</sup> But, as the Führer spoke, his voice changed. ‘Hitler had begun his remarks in comparatively moderate tones,’ wrote the journalist G. J. George, ‘but the more he said, the quicker his words came, the louder his voice [...] he does not [...] choose his words like a diplomat.<sup>34</sup> It is his habit to say exactly what he thinks.’<sup>35</sup> A fissure began to appear between Hitler’s claim to ‘equanimity’ and the agitated nature of his language. British gentlemen

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<sup>29</sup> Rheinbaben, “Berlino,” 168.

<sup>30</sup> “Facing the Issue,” *Times*, 24 September 1938, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, 788.

<sup>32</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, 794.

<sup>33</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 467.

<sup>34</sup> For an account of *tnesis*, see <<http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>>.

<sup>35</sup> G. I. George. *They Betrayed Czechoslovakia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, November 1938), 70. George also noted at Berchtesgaden that ‘Hitler’s words, as ever, flowed from his lips in a torrent’ (45). It is not known how George knew this, as the only other person present with Hitler and Chamberlain on both occasions was the German interpreter, Dr. Schmidt.

naturally regarded the Czech question in a purely objective way, he said.<sup>36</sup> For Germany, on the other hand, it was a problem which stirred the country's emotions deeply.<sup>37</sup> If the Prime Minister would only imagine Britain's being 'enslaved by an inferior people, then his blood would surely boil just like that of the Germans in the case of Czechoslovakia'.<sup>38</sup> Sir Horace Wilson's notes of his conversation with Hitler on the Godesberg Memorandum also record the Führer's mercurial tone. Hitler interrupted 'to vociferate in staccato accents that the problem must be solved forthwith without any delay'.<sup>39</sup> According to Wilson, he made 'gestures and exclamations of disgust and impatience', 'angry interjection[s]', and ejaculations of 'Incredible! Amazing!'<sup>40</sup> When Wilson remarked that the Memorandum had profoundly shocked the British public, Hitler interrupted again to say that 'in that event it was no use talking any more.'<sup>41</sup>

To borrow a rhetorical term, Hitler's language was *tmetic*, cutting through dialogue by means of ejaculation, interjection and interruption. It was also a closing-down of linguistic exchange: as Wilson's last recorded observation reveals, Hitler was anti-talk. He both shouted down and refused to discuss. In his resignation speech in the Commons, Duff Cooper reflected that the government was always saying that Hitler mustn't be 'irritated'. 'It seems to me,' he continued, 'that Herr Hitler never makes a speech save under the influence of considerable irritation [...] the communication of a solemn fact would have produced a sobering effect'.<sup>42</sup> Cooper underlines here that Hitler's voice was a political factor – and the response it provoked also had significant political consequences.

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<sup>36</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, 900.

<sup>37</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, 900.

<sup>38</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, 795.

<sup>39</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 554.

<sup>40</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 555, 556.

<sup>41</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 554. Rheinbaben commented that the Memorandum was not an ultimatum 'but the energetic intonation in which a great and powerful Empire solemnly reassures three and a half million Germans beyond its boundaries that in reclaiming their rights they will not be alone' (Rheinbaben, "Berlino," 165).

<sup>42</sup> Hansard 1937-9, vol. 339, col. 33.

Across the aural spectrum from Hitler's ranting were the voices of the Czechs. The historian Joseph Frederick Zacek reveals that the terms 'Mnichované' ('Munichites') and 'Mnichovanství' ('Munichism') are pejorative, but Czech views are still not well known – for linguistic as well as political reasons. The Czechs themselves, however, 'have done an immense amount of talking' about 'the Munich Trauma'.<sup>43</sup> Much of the country's writing on the subject has been produced by Marxist historians, with Beneš painted in the 1950s as bourgeois 'devil-in-chief' for handing over the country to Hitler and ignoring Soviet offers of help.<sup>44</sup> This view was relaxed somewhat in the '60s as the former President came to be seen as more of a tragic figure.<sup>45</sup> In 1973, the year that a treaty normalised relations between Czechoslovakia and West Germany, a colour documentary film, *Dny zrady* (*Days of Betrayal*), was released.<sup>46</sup> The Marxist historian Václav Král criticised its portrayal of Beneš: 'it is indispensable that [Beneš be judged] soberly, temperately, tactfully, and decently.'<sup>47</sup> In the last thirty years, there has been a spurt of fictional and poetic treatments of the crisis: Marie Majerová, *Cesta blesku* (*Path of the Lightning*) and *Sedm hrobů* (*Seven Graves*); František Halas, *Torso naděje* (*Torso of Hope*); V. Nezval, *Historický obraz* (*Historical Image*); S. K. Neumann and F. Jungmann, eds., *Československý podzim: Výbor z poezie 1938* (*Czech Autumn: A Selection of Poetry 1938*); F. Valouch, ed., *Česká poezie v období Mnichova* (*Czech Poetry of the Munich Period*); Věra Holá et al, eds., *Mnichov: Vzpomínková kronika* (*Munich: A Chronicle of Memoirs*); and František Kubka, *Mnichov* (*Munich*).<sup>48</sup> 'No writer [...] has the power to describe the terror and the pain that went through the Czech lands after Munich' wrote the historian Jan Křen.<sup>49</sup> The Czech response was overwhelmingly one of grief, bewilderment and shame. But stylistically, what emerges again and again in accounts

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<sup>43</sup> Joseph Frederick Zacek, "The Czechoslovak View," in *Reappraising the Munich Pact: Continental Perspectives*, ed. Maya Latynski (Washington and Baltimore: Woodrow Wilson Center Press / Johns Hopkins UP, 1992), 47.

<sup>44</sup> Zacek, "The Czechoslovak View," 50, 48.

<sup>45</sup> Zacek, "The Czechoslovak View," 50.

<sup>46</sup> Zacek, "The Czechoslovak View," 54.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Zacek, "The Czechoslovak View," 54.

<sup>48</sup> Zacek, "The Czechoslovak View," 48.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Zacek, "The Czechoslovak View," 48.

of the country's reaction to the crisis is *control*: carefully modulated tones, patient argument, calm language.

Czech feeling was evident, if moderated, in public utterances during the crisis. One of the key voices was Hubert Ripka, diplomatic correspondent of *Lidove Noviny*, friend of Jan Masaryk and in close contact with President Beneš: a Certeausque figure who operated tactically behind the scenes. In 1939, Ripka published *Munich: Before and After*, but his most immediate response to the crisis is contained in an essay, 'Praga', collected by Michael, Lord Killanin, in *Quattro Giorni: Storia di una Crisi Europea* (1938). Ripka observed that when the Czechs heard of the Anglo-French proposals on 19 September, 'M. Osuský was not the only one whose voice broke with emotion and whose eyes were filled with tears'.<sup>50</sup> The proposals were finally accepted on 21 September but the official communiqué made clear that it was 'with feelings of grief' ('des sentiments de douleur' in the French original).<sup>51</sup> The Soviet ambassador to Czechoslovakia reported in a telegram to the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs that 'astounding scenes are taking place in Prague [...] The crowds are singing the national anthem and are literally weeping'.<sup>52</sup> Alexander Henderson, representative of the *Daily Herald* in Prague and editorially responsible for the news service owned by the Czechoslovak government,<sup>53</sup> recalled that, at the *Prager Presse* offices, 'a dry, hard-headed journalist [...] was almost in tears'.<sup>54</sup> Ripka described it as 'desperate grief': 'men with iron nerves broke down in utter despair'.<sup>55</sup> Broadcasting after Munich, Prime Minister Syrový said that the Czechs accepted the Agreement 'with bleeding hearts'. This was 'the bitterest moment of his life'.<sup>56</sup> His speech was followed by the Czech national anthem, 'the plaintive mournful "Kde Domov Můj"'.<sup>57</sup> On Friday 1 October, as though a

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<sup>50</sup> Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 447.

<sup>52</sup> V. F. Klochko, et al, eds, *New Documents on the History of Munich* (Prague: The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Czechoslovak Republic, The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Orbis, 1951), 10.

<sup>53</sup> Alexander Henderson, *Eyewitness in Czechoslovakia* (London: George Harrap, 1939), 6.

<sup>54</sup> Henderson, *Eyewitness in Czechoslovakia*, 205.

<sup>55</sup> Ripka, "Praga," 84; Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, 104.

<sup>56</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 641.

<sup>57</sup> Griffin, 136.

national figure had died, all theatres in Prague closed, concerts were cancelled, no bands played in cafés and radio stations only broadcast the half-hourly news bulletins.<sup>58</sup>

But despite the evident grief, the Czechs insisted – prided themselves – on emotional restraint. Speaking on the wireless after Syrový, the Commander-in-Chief of the Czech Army appealed to the people ‘not to be led by sentiment’.<sup>59</sup> The *New York Times* specifically contrasted Czech behaviour with the frenzy of Hitler’s Nuremberg speech:

The self-control and calm nerves that have characterised the Czech attitude ever since the Austrian invasion started this crisis were maintained throughout this very critical day.<sup>60</sup>

The *Times* reported that in response to rioting by the Sudeten Nazis, the Czech police ‘behaved with extraordinary patience and restraint’.<sup>61</sup> ‘Love and trust in justice give us a kind of icy calm,’ said the poet, Josef Hora on 20 September, ‘hundreds of thousands of our young people are growing up, and their presence gives us the strength to be calm. They sing our national anthem with different intonation, more wisely, more seriously, with more endurance than us.’<sup>62</sup> Mobilisation on 23 September was done with ‘no fuss. Everything was businesslike, quick’.<sup>63</sup> Mothers, quietly crying, blessed their sons and with simple, moving words exhorted them not to be frightened.<sup>64</sup> Author and playwright Karel Čapek, writing in *Lidove Noviny* on 25 September described it thus: ‘quietly, quickly, the men go [...] all impassive, calm, without alarm. It is as though they are simply going to work.’<sup>65</sup> Ripka emphasises it again and again: ‘in no place was there any trace of the usual bellicose hysteria,

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<sup>58</sup> Henderson, *Eyewitness in Czechoslovakia*, 230.

<sup>59</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 641.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Sudetens Excited, Czechs Are Firm’, 14.

<sup>61</sup> ‘In Prague,’ *Times*, 17 September 1938, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Ripka, ‘Praga,’ 118.

<sup>63</sup> Joan Griffin and Jonathan Griffin, *Lost Liberty? The Ordeal of the Czechs and the Future of Freedom* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939), 85.

<sup>64</sup> Ripka, ‘Praga,’ 93.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Ripka, ‘Praga,’ 94-5.

in no place was the usual howl of fanatical nationalism or the hatred of racism [...] The people followed developments with noteworthy calm and exemplary sang-froid.’<sup>66</sup>

Even when the news that the Anglo-French proposals had been accepted was broken to the populace, ‘there was no violence, no stone-throwing or fighting’, just a ‘quiet, slow movement of people’.<sup>67</sup> The Agrarian party paper, *Večer*, called for ‘calm, iron calm and careful order! Nerves like steel cables!’<sup>68</sup> ‘Each one of us Czechs will always be proud of these our people,’ said Ripka, ‘because they acted with a full sense of dignity in the most terrible moments when desperation was unleashed [...] the grief was too deep to be profaned by a hysterical rage.’<sup>69</sup> The letter from Jan Masaryk to Chamberlain and Halifax rejecting the Godesberg Memorandum used national forbearance to justify the country’s political stance on the ultimatum:

The Czech people have shown a unique discipline and self-restraint in the last few weeks regardless of the unbelievably coarse and vulgar campaign of the controlled German press and radio against Czechoslovakia and its leaders, especially M. Beneš.<sup>70</sup>

In the following days, there was in the country, Ripka noted, ‘exceptional calm’.<sup>71</sup> Syrový, in his post-Munich broadcast, though expressing the strongest feelings, appealed to everyone ‘to maintain a perfect equilibrium between thought and action’.<sup>72</sup> The Czech Prime Minister, according to Alexander Henderson, ‘spoke tersely, with the dry firmness of a soldier’.<sup>73</sup> His words were heeded. ‘The streets of Prague were full of sobbing crowds,’ recorded Ripka, ‘groaning without end. [...] But all the same the crowd was disciplined, it felt instinctively

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<sup>66</sup> Ripka, “Praga,” 95, 98.

<sup>67</sup> Henderson, *Eyewitness in Czechoslovakia*, 207.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, 102.

<sup>69</sup> Ripka, “Praga,” 85

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, 161-2.

<sup>71</sup> Ripka, “Praga,” 101.

<sup>72</sup> Ripka, “Praga,” 116.

<sup>73</sup> Henderson, *Eyewitness in Czechoslovakia*, 208.

that in these tragic hours dissidence and anarchy must not insinuate themselves between the lines of the Czech people.’<sup>74</sup>

Such emotional restraint was, in particular, personified in the Czech President Edouard Beneš. The FCO official who presented the Anglo-French proposals to him reported to Halifax that Beneš had been ‘greatly moved and agitated’. Nevertheless, he spoke ‘with self-control’.<sup>75</sup> His words were ‘dry’ according to G. J. George: ‘he aim[ed] at convincing by force of argument rather than by persuasive tactics’.<sup>76</sup> Hubert Ripka recorded that, when the decision was made to accept the proposals, Beneš ‘could only with the greatest difficulty conceal [...] his overwhelming despair. In a voice which could scarcely be heard, he said to us, “we have been disgracefully betrayed.”’<sup>77</sup> Broadcasting on 22 September, the President told the people:

I am watching every development calmly and without fear [...] Let us be patient then, and wait, with our strength unweakened and undisturbed by internal conflict [...] or by excitement and passion. [...] I see things clearly and I have my plan. [...] Be calm and manly in this crisis. [...] Let us preserve our mental equilibrium. Today we need it more than ever before.<sup>78</sup>

Speaking again on the radio after his resignation on 5 October, Beneš reminded the nation: ‘with composure and with calm, we confront our fate’.<sup>79</sup>

For the Czechs, composure – Hora’s ‘different intonation’ – was not just instinctive. It was also a political tactic, deployed in the belief that calmness and reasonableness would win international friends and face down Hitlerian tirades. The tactic went deeper than stylistic difference. Beneš, wrote Ripka, categorically refused to turn his back on France [in favour of soliciting help from the Soviet Union] because he was convinced not only of the

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<sup>74</sup> Ripka, “Praga,” 117.

<sup>75</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 416.

<sup>76</sup> George, *They Betrayed Czechoslovakia*, 60.

<sup>77</sup> Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, 105.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, 111-12.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, 237.



material strength of the western democracies, but also of their ‘ethical’ superiority.<sup>80</sup> Restraint and rationality ‘spoke’ to those ethics, which were essentially those of civilised people. It is a point emphasised by the socialist writer Storm Jameson in her 1940 novel, *Europe to Let*. What incendiary National Socialism threatened to destroy, and must therefore be countered by, she intimated, was nothing less than western civilisation.

For the British, or, at least, for Neville Chamberlain, Czechoslovakia was, famously, ‘a faraway country of whom we know nothing’.<sup>81</sup> ‘How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is,’ said the Prime Minister, whose reluctance to go to war (the result of his First World War experiences) amounted virtually to a phobia,<sup>82</sup> ‘that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here’ because of a quarrel in that remote place.<sup>83</sup> This sense of geographical distance was recapitulated in the stylistic ‘distance’, or detachment, which characterised the government’s policy of appeasement. This was not Czech composure but British understatement or diffidence (even indifference: the *Daily Mail* commented ‘Czechoslovakia is not of the remotest concern to us’, under the headline ‘Czechs Not Our Business’).<sup>84</sup> At Heston airport, before flying to Berchtesgaden, Chamberlain spoke in a ‘clipped, unemotional voice’<sup>85</sup> (though on his return from Munich, ‘a new lightness’ was observed about the Prime Minister. ‘He was not tense’ and ‘his words [...] were casual this time, and not so measured.’)<sup>86</sup>

It was perceived by many that the British voice would prove a steadying influence. The *Times*’ Berlin correspondent reported that the Germans hoped that the conference at Berchtesgaden would be ‘conducted on the British side in a spirit of “realism”’.<sup>87</sup> Their hopes

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<sup>80</sup> Ripka, “Praga,” 80.

<sup>81</sup> Broadcast of 27 September 1938, quoted in *Peace for Our Time? An up-to-Date Summary of the Gravest Crisis of Modern Times :: Speeches of the Leaders* (Manchester and London: The Policy-Holder Journal Co., 1938), 22. This is often misquoted as ‘of which we know nothing’.

<sup>82</sup> ‘I am a man of peace to the depths of my soul,’ he told the nation (*Peace for Our Time?*, 22).

<sup>83</sup> *Peace for Our Time?*, 22.

<sup>84</sup> 6 May 1936; quoted in Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1963), 123.

<sup>85</sup> *Guardian*, 16 September 1938 9 (Haigh, *The Guardian Book of Munich*, 124).

<sup>86</sup> *Guardian*, 1 October 1938 14 (Haigh, *The Guardian Book of Munich*, 230).

<sup>87</sup> “The British Mission,” *Times*, 16 September 1938, 11.

were apparently realised: Sir Horace Wilson of the FCO noted at Berchtesgaden that ‘Schmidt, the interpreter, who is probably a good judge of Hitler, said “What impressed Hitler most was Mr. Chamberlain’s directness and clarity of thought and speech; he likes that.”’<sup>88</sup> A farcical incongruity of styles is evoked by the FCO documents of the meeting:

Herr Hitler made gestures and exclamations of disgust and impatience. [...] Sir Horace Wilson said that he must emphasise again that the Prime Minister fully appreciated Herr Hitler’s feelings and his insistence on speed, but the fact was that it was the way in which the proposals were to be carried out which had shocked and roused British opinion.<sup>89</sup>

Tactful FCO-speak here is not only comical but actually gives the impression of an anti-dialogue in which the problem of communication is not simply that of two foreign languages. As Duff Cooper acidly remarked, Hitler was told at Berchtesgaden that Britain was prepared to fight ‘through the mouth of a distinguished English civil servant. [...] We know that a message delivered strictly according to instructions with at least three qualifying clauses was not likely to produce on him [...] the effect that was desired’.<sup>90</sup> The *Times* itself was congratulated by readers on the tone of its coverage of events. One Algernon Cecil of Bryanston Square SW1, conflating ‘objectivity’ with ‘lack of emotion’, wrote commending ‘the objectivity with which you have treated the crisis’: ‘that objectivity, rather than more emotional or nervous reactions, may well be anticipating the “verdict of history”’.<sup>91</sup> A Sydney King-Farlow of Concarneau agreed: ‘we have a reputation for keeping our heads in times of crisis [...] we can rely on our Press to set an example of prudent restraint’.<sup>92</sup> Carefully-moderated tones were therefore equated with a steady-as-she-goes political approach.

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<sup>88</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 353.

<sup>89</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 555.

<sup>90</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, cols. 33-4.

<sup>91</sup> “Opinion on the Crisis,” *Times*, 24 September 1938, 11.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Opinion on the Crisis’, 12.

Negotiation was Chamberlain's preferred tactic. He presented himself as a mediator,<sup>93</sup> thereby laying claim to a disinterested position which allowed maximum detachment. But Alexander Henderson argues that Prague's acceptance of the Anglo-French proposals was hardly achieved by 'mediation': 'in language that was far from diplomatic, with much stamping and banging on the table, Dr. Beneš was bullied into surrender.'<sup>94</sup> By 1963, A. J. P. Taylor could write that Munich was 'a triumph for all that was best and most enlightened in British life,'<sup>95</sup> realigning honour from its association with Czech dignity to conflate it with Chamberlainesque diplomacy. This diplomacy, negotiation, reasonableness was the quiet murmur, the 'word in your ear', amongst the other voices of the Munich Pact. The lasting aural image, indeed, is of a mouth with no sound coming out: the British Prime Minister yawning visibly as the Czechs were informed of their losses at Munich.<sup>96</sup>

But Chamberlain's was not the only British voice of the Munich Pact. 'To English ears, the name of Czechoslovakia sounds outlandish,' Winston Churchill told the Commons on 14 March 1938, 'but still they are a virile people, they have their rights.'<sup>97</sup> A faraway country then, Churchill agreed, but one of whom Britain might want to know rather more. The Churchillian growl sounded throughout the crisis, advocating plain speaking, the case for re-armament and the advantages of involving the Soviet Union.<sup>98</sup> 'It is most necessary that nations should declare plainly where they stand,' he told the House of Commons on 14 March

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<sup>93</sup> Woodward, *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, 471.

<sup>94</sup> Henderson, *Eyewitness in Czechoslovakia*, 204.

<sup>95</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), 189.

<sup>96</sup> The yawn was recorded by Hubert Masařík, one of the Czechs left sitting outside the conference chamber at Munich (Griffin, *Lost Liberty?*, 133); see also Ripka, *Munich: Before and After*, 226.

<sup>97</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 333, col. 96.

<sup>98</sup> The U. S. S. R., indeed, shared his enthusiasm for telling it like it is. To Beneš' question, 'will the U. S. S. R. render immediate and effective aid [...] if France remains loyal [...] and also renders aid?', the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs replied twice in the clearest terms: 'an affirmative answer', 'the Government replies Yes, instantly and effectively' (Klochko, *New Documents on the History of Munich*, 90, 91). 'Only the representative of a government with a clear conscience and clean hands in the sphere of fulfilment of international obligations can speak as I do,' said the Foreign Minister, reversing the link between policy and plain speaking (Klochko, *New Documents on the History of Munich*, 115). Soviet aid was rejected, according to Ripka, because it would have resulted in 'an ideological war against communism', causing France and Britain to support Germany (Ripka, "Praga," 81): another example of the preservation of 'western civilisation' as central to Czech thinking.

1938.<sup>99</sup> (A correspondent to the *Times* made the same point: ‘I am sorry to have to write in this strain, but the times and *The Times* call for plain speaking.’)<sup>100</sup> Churchill’s praise for Chamberlain’s announcement of the Austrian Anschluss was a piece of literary criticism. Since the war, he said in Parliament, he could not remember hearing ‘a statement so momentous, so expressed in language of rigid restraint but giving the feeling of iron determination behind it.’<sup>101</sup> As the Prime Minister’s ‘iron determination’ appeared to buckle, Churchill responded with Certeau-esque tactics. ‘My contacts with Her Majesty’s Government became more frequent and intimate with the mounting of the crisis,’ he later recalled:<sup>102</sup> evoking an impression of subtle interventions and attempts at persuasion. He was ‘highly agitated’, according to his biographer, Roy Jenkins, ‘trying to exercise an influence [...] which he did not really possess’: though he had full access to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, they took no notice of his advice.<sup>103</sup> Duff Cooper found him in ‘a state of great excitement [...] violent in his denunciations of the Prime Minister.’<sup>104</sup> The outcome of Munich actually affected Churchill’s voice. Colin Coote, later *Daily Telegraph* editor, wrote of him being ‘in a towering rage and a deepening gloom. [...] One could always tell when he was deeply moved, because a minor defect to his palate gave an echoing timbre to his voice. On this occasion it was not an echo, but a supersonic boom.’<sup>105</sup> From the failure of plain speaking, then, came a noise that seemed to break the sound barrier.

Plain speaking was the issue over which Duff Cooper himself resigned as First Lord of the Admiralty. Cooper opened his resignation speech in the Commons by describing his sense of emotional remoteness from the cheering crowds who hailed Chamberlain at Downing Street. ‘There is no greater feeling of loneliness than to be in a crowd of happy, cheering people,’ he said, ‘and to feel that there is no occasion for oneself for gaiety or for

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<sup>99</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 333, col. 94.

<sup>100</sup> “Letter to the Editor” *Times*, 13 September 1938, 8.

<sup>101</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 333, col. 93.

<sup>102</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War. Volume One. The Gathering Storm* (London: The Reprint Society, 1950), 257.

<sup>103</sup> Roy Jenkins, *Churchill* (London: Pan Books, 2002), 524, 525.

<sup>104</sup> Duff Cooper, *Old Men Forget*, 232.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Jenkins, *Churchill*, 526.

cheering.<sup>106</sup> Cooper's emotional isolation contrasted with his interventionist politics. Again, these were embodied in a plea for 'unequivocal' language.<sup>107</sup> In foreign relations, he noted, he had always believed the most important thing was 'to make your policy plain to other countries, to let them know where you stand and what in certain circumstances you are prepared to do.'<sup>108</sup> He was even more specific about the kind of utterance which the circumstances demanded. Guarded speech was 'not the language which the dictators understand':

Together with new methods and a new morality they have introduced a new vocabulary into Europe [...] They talk a new language, the language of the headlines of the tabloid Press, and such guarded diplomatic and reserved utterances as were made by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer mean nothing to the mentality of Herr Hitler or Signor Mussolini.<sup>109</sup>

'A new vocabulary', 'a new language': this conjures up an anti-dialogue of the untranslatable. He had been advocating mobilisation of the fleet, Cooper continued, because he 'had thought that this was the kind of language which would be easier for Herr Hitler to understand than the guarded language of diplomacy or the conditional clauses of the Civil Service.'<sup>110</sup> Hitler's was the discourse of 'bluff, blather and blackmail.'<sup>111</sup> A 'deep difference' had opened up between himself and the Prime Minister, Cooper concluded: 'the Prime Minister has believed in addressing Herr Hitler through the language of sweet reasonableness. I have believed that he was more open to the language of the mailed fist.'<sup>112</sup> Language (or, at least, language-as-metaphor) therefore lay at the heart of Cooper's attitude to Munich. But, it is important to note, the voices of the Munich pact were not simply those of sweet reasonableness, incendiary

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<sup>106</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, col. 29.

<sup>107</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, col. 33.

<sup>108</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, col. 30.

<sup>109</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, cols. 32-3.

<sup>110</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, col. 34.

<sup>111</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, col. 39.

<sup>112</sup> Hansard 1937-38, vol. 339, col. 34.

blather, disciplined restraint and plain speaking. Cooper and Churchill introduced another, signifier-less, tongue: action without words.

‘A nation which has adopted neutrality as a religion has no right to an opinion on certain questions of the day,’ thinks the narrator, Esk, when an American journalist begins to criticise the Czechs in Storm Jameson’s anti-Munich novel, *Europe to Let* (1940).<sup>113</sup> Non-intervention does not only equate with silence in this view, but must be confined to it. The American voices of the Munich Pact vary between the strident and the tentative. The former call with increasing volume for involvement. The latter are less audible: lower-pitched and hesitant.

Dorothy Thompson was the first American correspondent to be expelled from Nazi Germany. She was described by Helen Kirkpatrick as ‘an exceptionally well-informed journalist’<sup>114</sup> and by the war correspondent Martha Gellhorn as ‘terribly tough’.<sup>115</sup> On 1 October 1938, Thompson made an NBC radio broadcast in which she excoriated the ‘fantastic piece of paper’ that was Munich.<sup>116</sup> The Accord had been reached by four men who did not understand each other’s language. Thompson ended with a redefinition: ‘it is not peace – but the initiation of a terrific world crisis.’ Another American journalist whose voice resonated was Edgar Ansel Mowrer, Berlin correspondent of the *Chicago Daily News* and author of an anti-German Penguin Special, *Germany Puts the Clock Back* (reprinted five times between December 1937 and April 1938). In Paris, Storm Jameson had lunch with Mowrer and Kirkpatrick, who gave her their opinion that the democracies were not moving fast enough against Hitler. When Mowrer informed her that, ‘you [Britain] threw away your last chance to trip up Master Hitler two years ago,’ Jameson felt ‘a sudden uprush of fury,’<sup>117</sup> irritated by Mowrer’s apparently hypocritical failure to criticise American neutrality. Mowrer’s views on

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<sup>113</sup> Storm Jameson, *Europe to Let* (London: Macmillan, 1940), 69.

<sup>114</sup> Helen Paull Kirkpatrick, *This Terrible Peace* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1939), 32.

<sup>115</sup> Caroline Moorehead, *Martha Gellhorn: A Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2003), 247.

<sup>116</sup> Broadcast by Dorothy Thompson 1 October 1938.

<sup>117</sup> Storm Jameson, *Journey from the North. The Autobiography of Storm Jameson. Volume I* (London: Virago, 1964), 304, 366.

Britain and France again centre on politico-stylistics. Czechoslovakia, he wrote, had been betrayed ‘by Englishmen’s deliberate reflection; by Frenchmen in an hour of panic.’ A kind of discursive screen had been erected, a ‘shelter’ of ‘specious explanations’. Chamberlain and Daladier had not handed over the Sudetens to Germany because they were ‘oppressed’, but ‘because Hitler shouted and banged on the table’. Neither would stand up to a ‘blustering dictator’.<sup>118</sup>

Mowrer’s views were shared by his colleague Helen Kirkpatrick, correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, the *Chicago Daily News* and the *New York Post*. In her autobiography, Storm Jameson records a similar reaction to that provoked in her by Mowrer when Kirkpatrick says:

The time has come for your government to send another questionnaire to Berlin. It should run: Now that we have given you Czechoslovakia, how can we help you to (a) Poland (b) anything else you want? Which bit of the Empire would you like first?<sup>119</sup>

At this, Jameson feels ‘insane rage’, no longer wanting to listen to the American Kirkpatrick’s voice.<sup>120</sup> Kirkpatrick’s book on the lead-up to war, *This Terrible Peace*, was published in 1939. It opens with her credentials: ‘an American journalist resident in England for more than a year’.<sup>121</sup> While British journalists must write their stories ‘from the point of view held by the newspaper’, she explains, in writing for American papers, ‘one must give as objective and factual an account as possible.’<sup>122</sup> Already, then, a battle of styles is announced. The book goes on to give a number of reasons why the United States might be suspicious of British motives: Eden’s resignation; inadequate defences; the failure to end the Sino-Japanese War; the failure to act over Abyssinia; the old ‘balance of power’ game; the ‘Cliveden Set’s’ ‘peace at any percent’.<sup>123</sup> All these, Kirkpatrick states, make American correspondents

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<sup>118</sup> Mowrer, v, vii, xi.

<sup>119</sup> Jameson, *Journey from the North*, 407.

<sup>120</sup> Jameson, *Journey from the North*, 407, 406.

<sup>121</sup> Kirkpatrick, *This Terrible Peace*, 9.

<sup>122</sup> Kirkpatrick, *This Terrible Peace*, 22.

<sup>123</sup> Kirkpatrick, *This Terrible Peace*, 15-41.

‘extremely sceptical’ that Britain will save Czechoslovakia.<sup>124</sup> But she does not make a strong case for American intervention, except to note the ‘tremendous interest in European affairs displayed by people who had previously seemed scarcely aware of the existence of lands outside America.’<sup>125</sup> This is contrasted with the British people who had no ‘real grasp of the course of events and their implications, or possessed the vitality required to alter them.’<sup>126</sup> Kirkpatrick’s anti-British sentiment is repeated in Martha Gellhorn’s ‘The Lord Will Provide For England’, a withering attack on complacency. But it is notable in Kirkpatrick’s case that American public and governmental opinion are treated carefully. This was a moment for tactical persuasion, rather than loud cries for help.

The domestic climate in the United States was dominated by isolationism. The Neutrality Acts were in force and the public was, as Barbara Reardon Farnham puts it, at best sceptical, at worst hostile to intervention in European affairs.<sup>127</sup> The aural situation was one of uneasy silence, a silence that included the Chief Executive, as the *New York Times* reported on 16 September 1938 under the headline ‘Roosevelt Alert, Silent on Crisis’:

So grave did the President consider the situation that he cancelled tomorrow’s press conference, for fear that any comment he might make there might be misinterpreted.<sup>128</sup>

The silence was controlled and therefore suspenseful, in the paper’s words, ‘an obvious effort to present an appearance of calm’.<sup>129</sup> The day before this article in the *New York Times*, Roosevelt had written in a note to Ambassador William Philips:

You are right in saying that we are an unemotional people over here in the sense that we do not easily lose our heads, but if we get the idea that the future of our form of

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<sup>124</sup> Kirkpatrick, *This Terrible Peace*, 95.

<sup>125</sup> Kirkpatrick, *This Terrible Peace*, 27.

<sup>126</sup> Kirkpatrick, *This Terrible Peace*, 40.

<sup>127</sup> Barbara Reardon Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis. A Study of Political Decision-Making* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), 3.

<sup>128</sup> “Roosevelt Alert, Silent on Crisis,” *New York Times*, 16 September 1938, 3.

<sup>129</sup> “Roosevelt Calls Cabinet Meeting,” *New York Times*, 27 September 1938, 1.



government is threatened by a coalition of European dictators, we might wade in with everything we have to give.<sup>130</sup>

Emotion is the basis of Farnham's political analysis of Roosevelt's conduct during Munich. Comparing analytical, intuitive and motivational decision-making, she notes that the last aims to preserve emotional well-being and tends to result in the outcome which produces the least stress on the decision-makers involved.<sup>131</sup> Farnham discerns two phases in Roosevelt's response to the gathering crisis: from 13-22 September a distinct disinclination to intervene, followed by, from 23-30 September, a growing urge to involvement. What marked the turning-point was FDR's strong emotional reaction to Bad Godesberg.<sup>132</sup> On 24 September, he began drafting a message to Hitler, eventually sent at 1 a.m. on 26 September. Careful not to agitate isolationists, the text stated that the U.S. 'eschewed political entanglement' but nonetheless appealed for the crisis to be resolved by 'reason' rather than 'force'.<sup>133</sup> The next watershed was Chamberlain's radio broadcast on 27 September. Roosevelt told Arthur Murray that the Cabinet had listened to it together. His account of it makes plain his appreciation of the differing modes of discourse:

When it was finished I looked round the table and there were tears in the eyes of at least four members of the Cabinet, and I felt that way myself. I had listened to Hitler on the Monday [26 September at the Berlin Sportspalast], and so had most of my Cabinet. The contrast between the two just bit into us – the shouting and violence of Hitler, and the roars, through their teeth, of his audience of 'Krieg, krieg,' and then, the quiet, beautiful statement of Chamberlain's.<sup>134</sup>

Chamberlain's 'faraway country' speech, therefore, had the paradoxical effect of prompting intervention on the part of Roosevelt, albeit tentative intervention. A second message was

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<sup>130</sup> Quoted in Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis*, 102-3.

<sup>131</sup> Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis*, 14-15.

<sup>132</sup> Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis*, 124.

<sup>133</sup> 'Roosevelt Appeals to Hitler and Benes to Negotiate', 4.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis*, 115.

sent to Hitler at 10.18 p.m. on 27 September, reiterating that the United States had no ‘political involvement in Europe’ but urged the continuation of negotiations at a neutral spot. Americans, said Roosevelt, demanded that ‘the voice of their government be raised again and yet again to avert and to avoid war.’<sup>135</sup>

Farnham argues that, by 25 September, Roosevelt had ‘re-framed’ the decision over whether to speak or not, re-casting the possible European war as a loss to the United States.<sup>136</sup> As a result, he became a ‘stake-holder’, emotionally and therefore politically, switching from a passive to an active stance. In a rich evocation of the textual bustle that was Munich, Farnham writes of the President being inundated with ‘affect-laden communications’ of ‘increasing vividness, extremity and frequency’.<sup>137</sup> ‘Strong emotion, then,’ she concludes, ‘apparently lay behind Roosevelt’s transformation from a detached observer of the crisis to a sort of participant.’<sup>138</sup> The participation – the sending of the two messages – took the form of textual intervention. Roosevelt called it the government’s voice being raised ‘again and yet again’. But the official American voice of the Munich Pact was relatively low-pitched, at least in comparison to its critics.

It is clear that the different timbres of Munich’s voices were audible to contemporary listeners. Again and again, British, American, Czech and German commentators remarked the differences in pitch and tone that were apparent, differences which went beyond stylistics and became, essentially, political. In Britain, reaction to Munich was varied. Chamberlain was greeted by cheering crowds on his return (one Sir Francis Joseph offered the North Staffordshire Royal Infirmary £1,000 to endow a bed in his name),<sup>139</sup> but those on the Left were fiercely critical. The *Guardian* reported that the National Unemployed Workers Union

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<sup>135</sup> “Roosevelt Appeals Again to Hitler as Hope Wanes,” *New York Times*, 28 September 1938, 1; “Text of President Roosevelt’s Plea,” *New York Times*, 28 September 1938, 9.

<sup>136</sup> Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis*, 123. Farnham argues that seeing Europe ‘rushing to war’ was a time of ‘great emotion’ in America, and makes the intriguing suggestion that this accounted for the panicked reaction to Orson Welles’ broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* (30 October 1938) (Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis*, 124).

<sup>137</sup> Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis*, 124, 126.

<sup>138</sup> Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis*, 126.

<sup>139</sup> “Mr. Chamberlain’s Work,” *Times*, 1 October 1938, 14.

had delivered a protest at Chamberlain's 'coming to terms with Nazi Germany'<sup>140</sup> and the Labour Research Department issued a pamphlet claiming that the appeasement relied 'on a precarious friendship with avowed aggressors and treaty-breakers'.<sup>141</sup> 'Glory to God for Munich,' wrote Louis MacNeice:

And stocks go up and wrecks  
Are salved and politicians' reputations  
Go up like Jack-on-the-Beanstalk; only the Czechs  
Go down without fighting.<sup>142</sup>

As Storm Jameson more enigmatically put it, 'a vast no-man's land separates truth from the rhetoric composed in anguish and good faith by people used to handling words.'<sup>143</sup>

'History never repeats itself, so anyone looking for parallels between the present situation and past events is likely to be disappointed. Not that there has been any shortage of such parallels drawn in the past few weeks by politicians seeking to encourage their supporters or discredit their opponents,' remarked the historian, Richard Evans, when asked whether, in his professional opinion, Munich gave comfort to the anti-appeasers supporting the Bush-Blair 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>144</sup> The disparities between Nazi Germany and Saddam Hussein's Iraq suggest, compellingly, that he is right. Nonetheless, Munich refuses to be silenced. When war is proposed or protested, it calls down the decades – or rather, its many voices do, audible to us still.

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<sup>140</sup> 1 October 1938 14 (Haigh, 232).

<sup>141</sup> *Peace for Our Time?*, 54.

<sup>142</sup> MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, 36.

<sup>143</sup> Jameson, *Journey from the North*, 411.

<sup>144</sup> In Matt Seaton, "Blast from the Past."

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