

Crowhurst, Patrick: *Hitler and Czechoslovakia in World War II. Domination and Retaliation*. London: I.B. Tauris 2013. ISBN: 978-1-78076-110-7; 352 S.

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The history of East Central European countries has been widely rediscovered as a source of historical interest and inspiration after the collapse of Communism. This rediscovery particularly holds true for the history of Czechoslovakia in the era of the Second World War. There were numerous reasons for the outbreak of World War II, but because Czechoslovakia as a topic ties the broad fabric of historical narratives about the failure of the interwar international system, and the challenges and constraints of British and German foreign policies, makes the subject particularly popular in the English language historiography.

So far, research has primarily focused on the international history of the Munich Agreement, the problems surrounding the Czechoslovak exiles in Britain and France, and the expulsion of Germans at the end of the war from the Sudetenland. Only very few analyses have surfaced from the pen of English language historians, which were able to make use of Czech or Slovak primary sources. Patrick Crowhurst has now presented this highly welcome volume that seeks to deliver an up-to-date account of Czechoslovakia in the era of the Second World War and to highlight the darker side of German occupation.

The book demonstrates with reference to Bohemia and Moravia, Slovakia and Ruthenia just how pragmatic Hitler and German policy-makers were in the interest of realpolitik, and insists upon the centrality of economic exploitation to our understanding of German-Czechoslovak relationship during World War II. This is a persuasive argument, not least in seeking to understand Germany's efforts not only to enforce the prosecution of Jews, and the politically unreliable, but also to exploit the resources and economy of the Protectorate for the war effort. The writer contends that both the absorption of the Sudetenland and the Czech lands were more crucial

for the Nazi war machine (from as early as October 1938) than it has been previously understood by historians, and claims that the takeover of armament factories and raw materials significantly accelerated German capabilities. This argument is backed up with the analysis of numerous tables and statistics, which significantly helps understanding the complexity of the topic.

The book is chronologically and thematically organized and deals with the aftermath of the Munich Agreement in Bohemia and Moravia, the era between Munich and the final destruction of Czechoslovakia, the problem of refugees (both in Germany and the Czech lands), forced labour, the political organization of the Protectorate, and its economic exploitation by Nazi Germany during the war.

The value of this work lies primarily in its contribution to the history of the Protectorate during the Second World War, something that so far has not been available in English language. The breadth and depth of research is seriously impressive, and it is the language skills facilitating the extensive use of European archives and document collections, which really renders this book distinctive. Moreover, the author, for the first time in the English language, also analyses some of the most recent Czech and Slovak language secondary sources. However, there is a surprising absence of well-known English language secondary material relevant to the history of Czechoslovakia<sup>1</sup>; and similarly the references to Hungary are dated or selective.<sup>2</sup>

Introduction starts in medias res, and the reader is left guessing about the aims, focus

<sup>1</sup> See particularly: Mark Cornwall, The rise and fall of a 'special relationship'?: Britain and Czechoslovakia, 1930-1948, in: Brian Brivati / Harriet Jones (eds.), What Difference did the War Make?, Leicester 1993, p. 130-150; Andrea Orzoff, Battle for the Castle. The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914-1948, New York 2011; Vít Smetana, In the Shadow of Munich: British Policy towards Czechoslovakia from the Endorsement to the Renunciation of the Munich Agreement (1938-1942), Prague 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See also: Valerian Bystricky, Slovakia from the Munich Conference to the declaration of independence, in: Mikulás Teich et al (eds.), Slovakia in History, Cambridge 2011, p. 157-174; Edward Chászár, Decision in Vienna. The Czechoslovak-Hungarian border dispute of 1938, Bratislava 1978.

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and methodology of the book. It contains an important and useful background about the interwar history of Czechoslovakia, but lacks the use of some of the most influential works about international history.

The book has taken an international history approach in analysing the road to Munich, and offers further intriguing evidence to the history of the Sudeten crisis, such as the British-Czechoslovak arms production co-operation, and the attempted sales of arms to the British Army after the Munich Agreement. These however are not integrated well to the general argument, and it is not persuasive how the author views their importance in the grand strategy of great powers, or in the history of Czechoslovakia manoeuvring between Berlin and the West.

There is an impressive amount of analysis about the Hungarian angle of the Czechoslovak crisis. Quite unduly, this problem has received very little attention in the English language historiography, although, as Patrick Crowhurst has demonstrated, it had very strong implications for the security of Czechoslovakia, for German foreign policy, and in general for the stability of East Central Europe. Serious research in this field has so far been hindered by language barriers, and this problem, although evidently unintentionally, also had an impact on the analysis here. The author uses British and German primary and secondary sources and secondary analysis in the Czech and the Slovak language, but the latter is bristled with judgment about Hungary's role in the crisis to a great extent. This resulted in claims that the First Vienna Award, the arbitrary decision of Germany and Italy of the Hungarian-Slovak territorial dispute in November 1938, was the instrument of Hitler in his wider conspiracy to destroy Czechoslovakia. The use of Hungarian primary sources or at least the inclusion of the English language secondary analysis about Hungary's role in the Czechoslovak crisis could have helped overcome this constraint.<sup>3</sup>

The part on the economic and political consequences of the Munich Agreement, the First Vienna Award and the final absorption of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 into the Reich is particularly useful. The direction of com-

parative analysis is beneficial, all the more so as it does not only consider their consequences for Czechoslovakia only, but for the economies of Germany, Poland and Hungary alike. However, the lack of using Hungarian sources resulted in claims that likened the Polish and Hungarian occupation of Czechoslovak territories to the political and racial prosecutions and economic exploitation committed by Germany. Recent analysis makes such claims untenable.<sup>4</sup>

Another implicit contribution of the book is the part where the author elaborates on the developments of early March 1939, leading up to the final fall of the state. The sources Crowhurst refers to finally dispel the anachronistic myth of the historiography that overstated the surprise the German occupation of Prague caused in London and Paris.

Peter Crowhurst's study amply proves that the history of the Czech lands in the era of World War II provides opportunities to more substantially understand the broader history of Central Europe and international relations. The history of the occupation of the Czech lands and the suffering of their people during the war should take its deserved place in the narrative of the Second World War.

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<sup>3</sup> Particularly: András D. Bán, *Hungarian-British Diplomacy 1938–1941, the attempt to maintain relations*, London 2004; Gábor Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe, 1918–1933*, Oxford 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Gergely Sallai, *Az első bécsi döntés*, Budapest 2002.