

# THE 'ARMY OF LORDS'

## THE INDEPENDENT CZECHOSLOVAK BRIGADE, 1940-45

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The Czechoslovak land forces that reorganised in Britain during the dangerous summer of 1940 were in part the remnants of the Czechoslovak Army eliminated by the [diplomatic vandalism at Munich in September 1938](#). The few who refused to accept defeat managed to escape first to Poland, where they were gently but firmly urged to continue their travels; and then to Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary and the Soviet Union. Others headed west to France, but yet again they were to be disappointed. France, like Poland, had no desire to provoke the Germans by openly accepting military refugees from the Protectorate (of Bohemia and Moravia) for Berlin had declared that all citizens of the former Czech lands to be subjects of the Reich. The French therefore felt inclined to keep everything Czechoslovak at arm's length, even as the Battle of France began in 1940. The air force contingent, numbering about a thousand men, were held back until the last desperate hours when only a small percentage saw action. Similarly, the army group – nearly 11,000 strong – was also hastily sent into action. As France moved towards defeat, so the exiled groups, including Czechoslovak soldiers, converged on western ports in the hope of escaping to Britain.

### **The ambivalent welcome in Britain**

Only 4000 of the known 11,000 Czechoslovak Army personnel had made their escape to Britain. Many Czechoslovaks in France had opted for voluntary demobilisation as they had families or reserved occupations there, while others were repatriated to the Protectorate or Slovakia. Of those who eventually found their way to Britain, by far the largest percentage had come originally from Czechoslovakia and felt no strong ties to France. On their arrival, the Czechoslovaks were located at a holding camp in Cholmondeley Park in Cheshire, but in the eyes of the British leaders, nearly two-thirds of the available men in France had thrown in their lot with the Germans, and this sent every wrong signal imaginable.

That these events dismayed influential men in Whitehall can be seen clearly in the minutes of the War Cabinet of late June 1940. Both military and civilian sections of the government spoke of caution when dealing with the Czechoslovak group, and the Foreign

Secretary Lord Halifax put a fine point on it when he urged that the contingent be given ‘a quick comb-out’ before giving them guns. Two things added substance to these views. In the first place, the Home Office, the Air Ministry, the intelligence services and even the Prime Minister himself, Winston Churchill, had cast doubts upon the fighting spirit or political reliability of Czechoslovak nationals long before they arrived in any great numbers. Second, within days of their arrival at Cholmondeley Park, some five hundred men had been removed or interned for stirring up political and racial trouble at the camp. At a later date, most of them were transferred to the Pioneer Corps, the British Army’s dustbin for problematic individuals. The men were predominantly communists who had fought with the republicans in the Spanish Civil War, but although this proved to be an isolated incident at the camp, it went a long way to reinforce the prejudices held by men of power. As a result, whether it was justified or not, the Czechoslovak Brigade was thereafter earmarked for a quiet life.



There was also a much deeper political dimension to this. [Edvard Beneš](#) (pictured left, *circa* 1942), the former Czechoslovak president, was busily restoring his political fortunes. Taking advantage of the chaos caused by the French collapse, he had been petitioning the Foreign Office on an almost daily basis with the demand for the establishment of a Provisional Czechoslovak Government and for the immediate reconstitution of the army and air force as independent fighting units. This last point was to prove anathema to the Air Ministry, but on the question of political recognition, Lord Halifax swept aside the many earlier objections to involving Beneš in the political process by pointing out that the Czechoslovaks then in the country would have to be looked after ‘whether or not’ Beneš was granted his wishes. But Beneš was not to be satisfied with this. His long-term goal was not only the liberation of the Czechoslovak state, but also the complete erasure of the stain of Munich. To achieve this, he needed to maximise every resource at his disposal, but his position in England was politically precarious. His only option was to increase his prestige and hope that, as the war drew to a close, he might be able to force Czechoslovak matters onto the agenda.

As part of his strategy Beneš sought to obtain fully independent status for the exiled Czechoslovak forces so that they might stand as legitimate representatives of their homeland and with him as Commander-in-Chief. The Air Ministry flatly refused to do this,

arguing that a small air force of some 1,600 men could barely function without the assistance of British ground crew, making independence both impractical and unrealistic. As for the War Office, it had no such objections to the formation of a separate Czechoslovak Army unit. Beneš had thus chosen very sensitive matters over which to do battle, and on the two occasions that he tried to secure independent status for his air force, he was firmly put back in his place by the Air Ministry, the second attempt being far more bitterly contested than the first. To make matters worse, he persisted in trying to ride two horses at once; that is, to have a fully functioning air force and an army group up to strength and capable of taking its place in the line when the time came. His problem was that he only had enough men to achieve one of these aims, not both. Recruitment for the Czechoslovak



forces in exile was sparse indeed. After the initial wave of escapees had been assimilated, attempts to drum up enthusiasm in America came to little, and by 1942 the trickle of new escapees from occupied Europe dwindled to almost nothing. To cover losses in the air, he was forced to draw men from the army group – much against the wishes of his Chief of Staff, General Sergej Ingr – and he was told by both the Secretary of state for Air, Sir Archibald Sinclair, and the new Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, that he should choose which force he wanted to remain active, sacrificing the other for the sake of manpower provision.<sup>2</sup> He refused to make that

choice, therefore for the whole of the war both the army and air force groups were permanently under strength.

### **The development of the Czechoslovak Brigade**

From the first day of the exodus from France, Churchill had insisted that all the European groups be given every assistance in their reorganisation on British soil. From his standpoint, this was primarily an exercise in propaganda directed towards the United States and the Dominions, so he instructed the Chiefs of Staff to furnish him with weekly reports on the allied contingents. A trawl through these summaries reveals that the Czechoslovak Brigade was, by the winter of 1940, fully equipped as an infantry battalion with anti-tank sections

and field gun batteries with a total strength of around 3,000 men. Morale was described in October as 'good and improving', but very soon a secret report was issued to the War Office recommending that both the Polish and Czechoslovak contingents should be kept in Britain 'until such time as the reoccupation of their own countries is feasible and likely to be unopposed'.<sup>3</sup> In the long run this policy had no impact on the Polish, but it significantly shaped Czechoslovak fortunes.

In January 1941, the Brigade received an influential visitor, [Robert Bruce Lockhart](#) (pictured right). He had been appointed by the Foreign Office as political representative to the Provisional Czechoslovak Government. He received this brief because of his close association with Beneš and Czechoslovakia's first president, Tomáš Masaryk in the inter-war years. On Czechoslovak matters he was completely trusted by the Foreign Office. He visited the Brigade at their new home in



Leamington Spa (where a memorial to them stands to this day) in company with Beneš and the Polish leader General Władysław Sikorski. Bruce Lockhart's report of the visit contained the following observations:

The Brigade contains a considerable percentage of bespectacled individuals upon whose frames the modern British battle-dress hung clumsily. It was difficult to distinguish an officer from a private, and I formed the impression that here was democracy on the march, with certain manifest weaknesses and inherent virtues which have already stood the test of a harrowing experience in France. Two themes prevailed: gratitude to, and admiration for, this country and bitterness against France. Several men used the same phrase: 'In France we were treated like dogs – here we are handled as men.' Like all people who have been enslaved for long periods, the Czechoslovaks are well versed in the arts of concealment...but I believe sincerely today that the spirit of the Czechoslovak forces in Britain is good.<sup>4</sup>

This report went directly to Anthony Eden, the new Foreign Secretary, largely upon his insistence that anything connected with the exiled forces which contributed to a reliable impression should be brought to his attention first. Bruce Lockhart was moved to the Political Warfare Executive in 1941 when Philip Nichols became British ambassador to the fully recognised Czechoslovak government, but he was still consulted regularly, though unofficially, by Beneš and Jan Masaryk on diplomatic affairs.

By April 1941, the Brigade had been further visited by various British and Czechoslovak personalities, all of whom had declared the unit to be a fine body of men. Training proceeded throughout the summer, and by the early autumn the British Inspector-General of Allied Contingents, [General Sir George Cory](#), pronounced the Brigade fit and ready for action when the moment arrived. But what action, and when? That much was still to be decided. A confidential memorandum circulated within the War Office that October determined that allied groups from the west might conceivably be utilised in a general assault on occupied Europe, leading inevitably to the liberation of their own countries, but groups from the east should either be fully integrated into the invasion of France or, given the new circumstances of Soviet entry into the war, be prepared for a transfer to the eastern front.

But these were not the practical considerations when 1942 arrived. The reports reaching Churchill had become quarterly by this time, and all parties acknowledged that the Brigade was significantly under strength and likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. In London, Beneš was under considerable pressure to transfer more men to the air force, mainly as ground crew assistants, but still he remained adamant. For some time there had been a group of Czechoslovaks in the Middle East, men who had been trained and organised as an anti-aircraft battery. This unit had served with distinction in the defence of Tobruk, and it was suggested to Beneš that they be brought to Britain to address the acute manpower shortages. Reluctantly, he concurred. Further reinforcements came from the less fanatical communist sympathisers who had been interned in 1940. Realising now that the Soviet Union was in need of urgent help, many volunteered for service with the Brigade again. About 150 men were released from the Pioneers and re-enlisted. This clearly demonstrates how flawed Beneš' manpower policy was at its core. A couple of years before, those same men who re-joined the Brigade in 1942 were political outcasts; now the President they had so roundly condemned needed every man he could get.<sup>5</sup>

As the war entered its middle years, and still no prospect of a European offensive was in sight, both the British and the Czechoslovak authorities recognised that the Brigade could not be deployed as an infantry unit and function effectively in the field. The solution was to reorganise the group into an armoured brigade that required fewer men to be up to strength. By the middle of 1942, the total strength of the group was 700 officers and 2,670 other ranks, but nearly 400 of the officers – mainly older men who were nearing

demobilisation age – undertook general duties with the ranks. This gave, on paper at least, a healthier ratio of officers to men, roughly 1 to 9. As the reorganisation plan matured into 1943, the War Office admitted that even then the group would still be under strength. The full complement of a British armoured brigade at this time was 352 officers and 4,542 other ranks, whereas the Czechoslovaks could only muster 490 officers and 2,395 men – 39 percent too many officers and 47 percent too few other ranks. It was agreed that some further manipulation might reduce the officer strength, but there was simply no hope of doubling the numbers in the ranks. This meant that they would always be short of a full field battalion. A further injection of men from the Pioneers would help matters, but in no way could they meet the full war establishment. The Czechoslovaks felt the lack of recruits far more keenly than the other exile armies.

The conversion to an armoured brigade began in June 1943. Equipment was slow to arrive at first, but a Chiefs of Staff report declared that all ranks were ‘very pleased’ at the prospect of the new role for the Czechoslovak Army. At roughly the same time, a deployment policy had been finally agreed, more relevant now that the initial planning for Operation *Overlord* was under way. A directive stated that the Brigade would not be used on the initial amphibious assaults, ‘but they will retained in general reserve and employed as an armoured formation in a later phase of the operation.’<sup>6</sup> This satisfied Beneš who wanted to return home with an experienced army group as the core of his future rearmament policies; and it suited the British who for political reasons did not want the Brigade rendered unfit for operations through rapid attrition. This was the eventual distillation of a series of meetings conducted at the end of 1942 between representatives of the British and Czechoslovak governments. In December 1942, Philip Nichols informed the Foreign Office that the Brigade should be ‘blooded’ in battle ‘since they could never hold up their heads in Prague unless they have been in actual combat with the Germans’. He accepted that some of the men had been involved in the retreat from France, but that they would receive no welcome in their own country until and unless they fought the Germans in the later stages of the war:

The dilemma is plain. The Brigade must go into action but it must not be decimated. If it was to be put in the forefront of the battle, it might well lose half its effectives, with the result that Beneš and his government would be reduced to the use of something under 2,000 men. It seems to follow that the future employment...must be regarded largely from the political as

opposed to the military angle; that the method of its employment is in fact a political rather than a military question. [The Brigade] should play its part, but should not be called upon to make heavy sacrifices.

Nichols further claimed that he had mentioned all of this to the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, who 'entirely agreed'.<sup>7</sup>

### **Into action: the Siege of Dunkirk**

As 1944 began and D-Day approached, the re-named Independent Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade was fully equipped with Cromwell tanks and stood ready to play its part when called upon to do so. Some surplus officers had been posted to the Soviet Union to replace casualties within the 3,000-strong Czechoslovak infantry brigade fighting on the eastern front, and the release of the men from the Middle East had brought the Armoured Brigade close to its operational establishment. As the prospect of real action drew near after four long years of enforced idleness, Beneš visited the Brigade on the eve of their departure for France. He reminded them that the British had been their hosts and their friends, but also that the Red Army would receive them with honour. It was stirring stuff, but Beneš was unaware as to what his army would actually be doing in France and his desire for a glorious entry into Prague was to be bitterly disappointed.

The reconnaissance party for the Brigade arrived in France on 27 August 1944 to liaise with other allied commanders and prepare the assembly points for the full contingent. By this time, the breakout from the beachheads after *Overlord* was gaining momentum. The Brigade's strength was now 238 officers and 3,936 other ranks – still a little light, but capable of functioning as an effective fighting unit if the circumstances were right. After arriving in France, the Armoured Brigade moved south to the Falaise area for further training. On 24 September, a meeting between General Ingr and the British liaison officer, determined that no first line reinforcements were available. British war establishments for reinforcements were generally fixed at 10 percent, but with the Brigade already under strength and the likelihood being remote of any liberated men stepping forward for service, it was clear that they could withstand scarcely any casualties at all. Nine days later they received their battle orders. They were to proceed north to Dunkirk to join other allied regiments and contain a [substantial German garrison](#) which had dug itself in. The enemy numbers were estimated at 15,000 men of all ranks, and though strictly a job for an infantry

brigade, the Czechs were told that this would be 'an excellent way of giving them their initial battle experience'.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, there was a ray of hope concerning potential recruitment with the liberation of several thousand Czechs and Slovaks from occupied France, mostly those who had elected to stay behind in 1940. Their numbers were placed at between 4,000-5,000 civilians plus another 1000 prisoners-of-war. In theory at least, this could have made up the Brigade's shortfall and provided plenty of replacements, but there were no screening or training facilities in France, so the decision was taken to send volunteer recruits back to England pending further action. The British acted quickly, and by November 1944 there were over 900 Czechoslovaks listed as being in basic training.

The Czechoslovak Brigade moved to the outskirts of Dunkirk on 6 October 1944 under the command of [Major-General Alois Liška](#), and it would sit outside the town until the end of the war with little to do but wait upon events. The Germans had strong fortifications. Much of the landscape was flooded, and their defences lay behind the flooded area across a perimeter line of some 21 miles. Around 17,000 civilians had been voluntarily evacuated and on the first night of the investment the Germans attempted a breakout, forcing the Czechs back. Within 48 hours the positions had been re-taken, but the episode became the general pattern for weeks and then months. According to a report filed by the liaison officer, an air of permanence took hold and at the Brigade headquarters they gave lunches, dinners and received guests. The liaison officer even complained that 'gin and whisky levels ran low in the first few days of the month.'<sup>9</sup> The same officer also reported that the Germans remained in control of the anti-aircraft positions and as a consequence several British and American aircraft had been brought down because they were unaware that Dunkirk was still in enemy hands. He noted also that the French government had table several complaints at the destruction and potential danger to the 665 French nationals who had refused to leave the town back in October 1944. When Czechoslovakia itself was on the point of liberation, the Brigade stepped up the bombardment in an attempt to force the Germans to surrender. Heavy air attacks were also scheduled, but still the garrison refused to capitulate.

### **The Independent Brigade at the close of the war**

With General Omar Bradley's 12<sup>th</sup> American Army Group preparing a final thrust into western Czechoslovakia, most of the Brigade hoped for a sudden change of orders to head

east at all speed, but the orders never came. The British liaison officer noted that morale dipped alarmingly. Beneš was also becoming impatient and instructed General Ingr to petition the British authorities for a more active role for the Brigade, only to be told that it would be too difficult to find a replacement unit. Nichols, the ambassador, reported to Eden in early April 1945 that it was politically desirable for the Brigade to have some part in the liberation of their homeland. After all, it was magnificently equipped and fully up to strength at last thanks to the new recruits from France. 'When asked what part they played in the victories in the west', he wrote, it would be hard to reply that, with their equipment, all they had done was sit outside Dunkirk.' A few days later, he urged Eden to at least send a token force to the east.<sup>10</sup>

Then came news of a major reshuffle in the Czechoslovak High Command. Beneš, perhaps demonstrating to the Soviets that he could install men with knowledge of Red Army methods into positions of power, replaced many of his western commanders with officers who had seen service in the east, Ingr being amongst the casualties. The alarm bells sounded in Whitehall. There were already intense discussions in progress regarding the repatriation of the Czechoslovak Air Force into the Soviet zone, and now it became apparent that unless swift action was taken, the entire Czechoslovak land forces may fall under Soviet influence before the men even got out of France. The 'token force' idea was then presented to General Eisenhower who immediately agreed, and early in May a small group of 150 men with sent with all haste to join up with Bradley's army as they crossed into northern Bohemia. A few days later on 9 May, the German Dunkirk garrison surrendered to the commander of the Czechoslovak Independent Armoured Brigade.<sup>11</sup>

Within days the Brigade was sent to the Czech lands. Its first task was to relieve the American forces around Plzeň, clearing the area of renegade Germans who were looting, but what the Brigade wanted most of all was to march into Prague. That pleasure was denied them for a while because the British and Americans were keen to obtain Soviet permission first, but on 30 May the whole force paraded triumphantly through the city before withdrawing to the north. By June the Brigade was re-named the First Armoured Corps and given a Soviet organisational structure. Demobilisation of men over 40 years of age began in July and formal application to release the Brigade from the overall command of American forces was made by Beneš, now returned to Prague. He was already under

extreme pressure to permit the re-equipping of the force by the Red Army, and one-by-one his remaining western commanders were replaced or dislodged by pro-Soviet officers.

In August 1945, the *Manchester Guardian* ran an article by a Czech officer who warned of a deteriorating political situation in his country. On a happier note, he praised the people of Britain for their courage and kindness and his own countrymen for the hero's welcome they had given him and his comrades. 'They called us "the Intellectual Brigade" or "the Army of Lords"', he wrote, 'partly because we were so well fed and turned out, and partly because we never stopped talking about England.'<sup>12</sup> It was this willingness to talk freely and positively about their British experience that hastened the extinction of the Brigade as an independent unit. In October 1945, Philip Nichols reported to the new British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, that since the return of the force to home territory it had been 'a valuable instrument of pro-British propaganda', adding that their discipline and appearance stood starkly in contrast to that of their countrymen who had seen service in the east. The Brigade, said Nichols, demonstrated 'the superior civilisation of the West, but a couple of sentences later he was lamenting the fact that it would now soon merge into the larger background of the Czechoslovak Army. Nichols even suspected that the Beneš government welcomed such a development, quite possibly because they were embarrassed by what the ambassador called 'this inconvenient advertisement' for the western alliance.<sup>13</sup> Thus by the end of 1945 the Czechoslovak Independent Armoured Brigade ceased to exist as a discrete entity. Many of the men who had been with the unit since the dark days of 1940 were facing an uncertain future and, for more than a few, eventual imprisonment simply because of their links to the West.

## **Conclusion**

It would be impossible to write that the Czechoslovak Brigade had forged a glorious history during its time in exile. The Czechoslovak soldiers in the west sustained casualties in France, some in the Middle East, and over 600 in the Siege of Dunkirk, but the allied policy of keeping them far from the front line had limited their operational experience. There is evidence to suggest that Beneš and his commanders wanted it that way. He was well aware that he faced a dangerous and possibly revolutionary situation when he returned to Prague. Moreover, he made it clear time and again that he wanted an experienced, well trained corps of army and air personnel ready to call upon in a crisis, or as the base for the

reconstruction of the national defences. The communists were equally aware of this, which is why they worked to undermine the Brigade.

In the final analysis, the Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade and Air Force were beacons of hope for the oppressed at home, and symbols of the reconciliation between the British and Czechoslovakia, a way of demonstrating that Munich was a shabby crime and should be written off as a political mistake. The Brigade was also so small in number that in a major battle they would have risked effective destruction as a viable operational military formation. Neither Beneš nor the British authorities could contemplate such a disaster for political reasons if nothing else. Thus they were never given the chance to show what they were really capable of achieving in military terms, but they certainly would have risen to the occasion had the opportunity been presented to them.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *Exile Armies*, (eds) Matthew Bennett and Paul Latawski (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

<sup>2</sup> Members of the Provisional Czechoslovak Government, *circa* 1942: (Foreground, standing, right-to-left) Jan Masaryk, Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia; Air Vice Marshal Karel Janoušek, Commanding Officer of the Czechoslovak Air Force; General Sergěj Ingr, Minister of National Defence and Commander-in-Chief of Czechoslovak Forces. Source: [Imperial War Museum](#).

<sup>3</sup> Inspector-General's summary, 29 November 1940, United Kingdom National Archives (UKNA) WO 193/32.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Lockhart to Eden, 7 February 1941, UKNA FO 371/26376.

<sup>5</sup> An exception to this rule were Sudeten Germans, a few hundred of whom volunteered at various stages to serve with the Czechoslovak forces. All of them were refused unless they possessed some essential technical skills. It is also worth noting that the British assessment of the men interned after the Cholmondeley Park disturbances was very positive. The Inspector-General described them as 'very good material' except for 15 or 20 'bad sorts'. He would have happily enlisted them into the British Army had that been politically acceptable. See: Minutes of Army Council 14 September 1940, UKNA WO 163/48.

<sup>6</sup> War Office Directive, 21 July 1943, UKNA 193/32.

<sup>7</sup> Nichols to Frank Roberts, 8 December 1942, UKNA FO 371/30855.

<sup>8</sup> Allied Liaison, 24 September 1944, UKNA WO 171/175.

<sup>9</sup> Report of the Siege of Dunkirk, undated but probably June 1945, UKNA WO 205/1233.

<sup>10</sup> Nichols to Eden, 2 April 1944 and 18 April 1944, UKNA FO 371/47139.

<sup>11</sup> Report by Captain G.H.Stephenson, UKNA FO 1063/38.

<sup>12</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 7 August 1945, UKNA FO 371/47091.

<sup>13</sup> Nichols to Bevin, 12 October 1945, UKNA FO 371/47093.