

# THE CZECHOSLOVAK ARMED FORCES IN BRITAIN: 1940-1945

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From the beginning, the Czechoslovak army and air contingents that served in Britain suffered from significant disadvantages when compared to other European allies from the occupied states. Militarily, they were much inferior in numbers to the Polish and the French; and politically, they were answerable to a regime that had few friends in British diplomatic circles, whose attitudes ranged from cold tolerance to blunt hostility. But this is not to suggest that the officers and men of the Czechoslovak armed forces were influenced directly by these factors; rather, the evidence clearly demonstrates that very few Czechoslovak personnel had any accurate knowledge of the military and political difficulties that overshadowed their service in Britain. The object of this paper, therefore, is to throw light upon these two problems in an attempt to portray the émigré experience in Britain in its full context.

The soldiers and airmen of Czechoslovakia arrived in Britain in the summer of 1940, the great majority of them having been caught up in the headlong flight from the continent that preceded the collapse of France. The naval operations *Aerial* and *Cycle* seldom receive a mention in the histories of that year – most of the limelight being reserved for the earlier Dunkirk evacuations and the Battle of Britain – yet both accounted for the rescue of enormous numbers of men from the embattled beaches across the Channel.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Dunkirk, which mainly involved British and French troops, *Aerial* and *Cycle* rescued remaining British personnel plus the numerous allied contingents that had fought the rear-guard action against the Germans. Various ships under allied flags, operating under the command of the Admiralty, collected groups of men from ports all along the French coast, and among them were 4000 or so Czechoslovaks.

Yet even while these dramatic events were unfolding, British politicians were expressing concern over this indiscriminate policy of evacuation. In his capacity of Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden said in the War Cabinet of 19 June that, although he was prepared 'to take off any Czechoslovak troops who wished to leave', he would 'much prefer

to embark Polish troops'.<sup>3</sup> These comments bear close examination, for to a considerable extent they reflected the attitudes of the Czechoslovaks. In the first place, Eden spoke of those men 'who wished to leave', which begs the question, why should they not? In fact, Eden was well aware that a substantial number of the personnel in France had chosen voluntary demobilisation into the hands of the occupying power. Full two-thirds of the 12,000 men who were in France at the start of the German assault in May 1940, some of whom were Slovaks with families and jobs in France, accepted French and German offers of peaceful surrender. Many took advantage of promises of safe conduct back to the Protectorate (of Bohemia and Moravia) on condition that they spread defeatist propaganda.<sup>4</sup> Of those who decided to rejoin the fight in Britain, by far the largest proportion consisted of officers and regular service personnel who had escaped from the Protectorate in March 1939 when the territories had been initially overrun. In the eyes of the War Cabinet, however, too many stayed on the continent, confirming the general view that the Czechoslovak armed forces were not wholly dedicated to the common cause.

Two uncomfortable precedents also added weight to the arguments of those who cast doubts upon the quality of the incoming forces. In January 1940, the British Home Office and the Foreign Office agreed to lend support to a recruitment drive aimed at Czechoslovak citizens who were refugees in Britain. Opinions were aired to the effect that too many of those eligible for military service had 'subversive tendencies', and a spokesman for the Home Office declared that he was 'anxious to get rid of as many Czech and Slovak refugees as possible'.<sup>5</sup> The subsequent series of recruitment rallies failed to produce results that even the most optimistic observer could have construed as demonstrating the will to prevail, for little more than 10 percent of the entire group sailed for France. Furthermore, a later report strongly suggested that many of the potential volunteers had been approached by agitators, 'a great many of whom seemed definitely opposed to the allied war effort'.<sup>6</sup>

Also, in May 1940, representations to the Air Ministry were made by the Czechoslovak Air Attaché in London, Josef Kalla. He proposed that a specialist Czechoslovak bomber unit be formed in Britain from crews then standing idle in France, emphasising their excellent knowledge of their home geography and the advantages this would bring when raids were targeted at enemy locations in the Protectorate. The idea was rejected immediately by the Director of Intelligence, Archibald Boyle, who wrote 'I doubt very much

if this is worth pursuing. We don't know (1) if there are any pilots worthy of the name and if they are available; (2) their integrity (I am doubtful of many Czechs)'.<sup>7</sup> After some hurried attempts to assure him of the integrity of the men, and an impassioned plea by a former British Air Attaché to Prague, Boyle eventually passed the matter to his superiors. Before a decision could be taken, however, the French collapse had begun and the Czechoslovak servicemen began to arrive in Britain, uninvited – and at some senior levels – unwelcome also.

Eden's other point, that he would give priority to Polish personnel, also bears upon the situation in which the Czechoslovaks found themselves. The Polish were full allies by official treaty, whereas the Czechoslovaks were not (and never would be).<sup>8</sup> Even so, this Polish 'alliance', though it existed on paper, was not necessarily an alliance of spirit. Two thousand Polish air personnel had been stationed in Britain shortly before the war began, but the defeat of France meant that many thousands more would soon arrive. These men received glorious public tributes from the politicians; but again, deep in the closeted world of the Air Ministry, few words of praise were forthcoming.

A new directorate to co-ordinate the allied air forces had been established under the leadership of Air Commodore Sir Charles Medhurst, but in July 1940 he wrote to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff and complained bitterly about the Polish influx: 'I have been reliably informed that [the senior Polish Air Force officers] are completely useless and are only out to line their pockets filling cushy jobs.'<sup>9</sup> Medhurst had been warned that the Polish would seek to establish a completely independent air arm, and this he was determined to avoid if he possibly could. He was destined to fail, but in the short term he at least managed to limit new squadron formation to ensure that 'the unskilled and inferior material' did not find its way into the Royal Air Force. Thus both the Polish and the Czechoslovaks had bitter critics at the level of command and control, and even Sir Hugh Dowding, at the height of the Battle of Britain, was prepared if necessary to disband British fighter squadrons to avoid replacing losses with Czech or Polish pilots.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore the atmosphere which greeted the east European air crews, the Czechoslovaks in particular, was not as cordial as the image-makers would have had everyone believe. To be sure, the public fêted both as heroes and gallant allies, which they most certainly were, but in private there were serious doubts as to the military spirit and proficiency of the incoming servicemen from the east. Furthermore, serious disturbances

within the Czechoslovak Army served to reinforce the prejudices of those who saw it as infested with makeweights and communist agitators. The troubles at Cholmondeley Park are well documented elsewhere, and though the matter was considered at the level of the War Cabinet, less sanitised observations were passed across military desks.<sup>11</sup> One especially thorough report produced by an MI5 officer known only as 'Lieutenant X', was sent to the Foreign Office rather excitedly by Medhurst. The impression given was that the Czechoslovak Army as reconstituted in England was 'full of sedition...a rabble...rotten to the core'. The post-disorder purge of the dangerous influences had restored a degree of uniformity of outlook, but under no circumstances should the force be left unwatched, either by the Czechoslovak authorities themselves or, indeed, by the British security services.<sup>12</sup> Much of this report was rejected by the Foreign Office – J.G.Ward was of the opinion that the author was 'violently prejudiced' – whereas Frank Roberts (Central Department at the Foreign Office) accepted the general observations but condemned the interpretation that the Czechoslovak Army was intrinsically rotten. He argued in return that both the air and land forces each had their fair share of malcontents, but this had less to do with lack of moral fibre than a simple dislike of the political establishment that they were expected to serve.<sup>13</sup>

Either way, by the end of 1940 the overall impression of the Czechoslovak armed forces was, in the eyes of some senior British officers at least, a deeply flawed force riddled with intrigue, insubordination, dissatisfaction and dangerous politics. It mattered little to the critics that 310 and 312 Czechoslovak fighter squadrons had distinguished themselves in the Battle of Britain and had sustained fatalities in the fight for the common cause. Both the Air Ministry and the War Office contented themselves in the knowledge that they had fulfilled the instructions of the Prime Minister, for it was Churchill who had swept all discrimination aside and demanded that the service personnel rescued in the summer, of whatever nationality, be swiftly formed into fighting units. In mid-July, he had written to the Chiefs of Staff and made them aware of his wishes:

Mere questions of administrative convenience must not be allowed to stand in the way of this policy of the State. It is most necessary to give to the war which Great Britain is waging single-handed the broad international character which will add greatly to our strength and prestige. To this Churchill added: 'I hope I may receive assurances that this policy is being wholeheartedly pursued.'<sup>14</sup>

Obviously enough, Churchill was fishing for American support, for he knew that most of the incoming nationalities were well represented in the United States. As propaganda tools, all of the exiled forces were worth the trouble to accommodate and equip, even if most of the land forces stationed in Britain were not going to be active for quite some time. He also demanded weekly reports on the progress of the contingents, and although these were later downgraded to monthly and then quarterly intervals, he made sure that the service departments knew that he was watching them closely.

The assimilation of each contingent threw up its own peculiar difficulties, both political and military, but the problem with the Czechoslovaks was the question of political leadership and responsibility for their actions. The British had already secured total operational control of all the foreign contingents, and the smaller air units, such as the Czechoslovaks and the Belgians, had been forcibly incorporated into the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR). The argument for this policy rested upon the British insistence that their numbers were too small to form fully independent air units, and in itself this argument was entirely sustainable. A hidden benefit, however, was that this fragmentation of the smaller contingents allowed the British to put them into RAF uniform under RAF commanding officers, and have them serve under RAF military law, thereby weakening the political ties with the governments-in-exile. Members of certain groups, the Polish and the French for example, had initially been drafted into the RAFVR and then released upon the formation of fully independent national forces, but it remained the firm policy of the Air Ministry whenever possible to avoid granting independence throughout the entire war.

The reason for this intransigence lay in the desire of the British to steer clear of political entanglements that might result in supporting independent forces of high profile, particularly the air forces. By granting independent status, the British felt they were tacitly supporting not only the right of the international group concerned with liberating their homeland, but also whatever political programme its representatives might choose to disseminate abroad. This caused considerable problems when it came to the Free French and the Polish. Their desires to have their own independent forces were rather forced on the British, but no such pressure would be tolerated from the Czechoslovaks. The army contingent was named the 'Independent Czechoslovak Brigade' not because it enjoyed genuine independence, but because this name satisfied certain aspirations within the political community to which it owed its allegiance. But the brigade did little but prepare for

action; there was no land war in which it could be deployed until Operation *Overlord* in 1944, and even then its activities were restricted.<sup>15</sup> This gesture of 'independence' for the army therefore cost the British nothing, but the air force was another matter. For here was a *fighting* unit in every sense of the word, and it featured high on the list of positive propaganda items broadcast to the occupied territories. Czechoslovak politics were complicated indeed, and it did not suit the British to have themselves too closely associated with the programme of Dr Edvard Beneš, the pre-war president and political leader in exile.

Thus it was the intention of the British to limit the degree of military freedom if it lay within their power to do so. In the case of the Czechoslovaks, the reason was intimately connected with the political relations between the two countries. Ever since the collapse of the old republic and the resignation of Beneš after the Munich Crisis, the British had fought shy of giving him any political legitimacy. Certainly the French did not want to do so, and the British followed the lead of their ally. The spirit of appeasement cast a long shadow indeed, well into 1940. The British had recognised a Czechoslovak National Committee, then based in France, as early as 20 December 1939. This chimed with Neville Chamberlain's declaration that one of the British war aims would be to see 'the Czechoslovak *people* freed from foreign domination.'<sup>16</sup> In the desperately pedantic world of Czechoslovak politics at the time, the lack of the plural for 'people' might have implied a British commitment to a unified liberation – literally the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, and Slovakia – made much more complicated by the declaration of the First Slovak Republic on 14 March 1939 which promptly became a client state of Nazi Germany. The lack of the 's' was noticed by the Foreign Office who ensured that all future communiques promised the liberation of the Czechoslovak *peoples*. The reason for this is that the British did not want to align themselves with a policy that might be unworkable. As Frank Roberts expressed it: 'We are not at all sure that when the time comes the Czechs and Slovaks might wish to be reunited in a single State.'<sup>17</sup> Thus it can be appreciated why the British were uneasy about political and military connections that might involve them in such delicate issues.

Matters were therefore very complicated in 1939, and they grew more tangled still when the first wave of evacuees arrived in the summer of 1940. Beneš had been angling for the creation of a Provisional Czechoslovak Government with himself at its head, but the British had steadfastly refused, raising all manner of obstacles, the most intractable of which

focused upon the apparent inability of Beneš to secure political unity between the various factions squabbling within and without his National Committee. Unless such unity could be guaranteed, the British argued, there could be no representative government of any kind. In fact, the recognition of the National Committee in the first place stemmed from a British desire 'to resist pressure to recognise a provisional government'.<sup>18</sup> The British therefore had no intention of going one inch further than they needed to go, but the arrival of the troops and airmen changed all that.

In the War Cabinet of 3 July 1940, the Foreign Secretary presented a revised assessment of the Czechoslovak position.<sup>19</sup> With admirable dexterity, Lord Halifax massaged the previous arguments against recognition out of existence by claiming, with some justification, that the countries who might have objected to any suggestion that Czechoslovakia might be reconstituted after the war were either moving closer to the Axis camp or had been knocked out of the war already. This meant that the sensibilities of France, Poland and Hungary could be disregarded. The issue of unity was now to be ignored; it would be impossible to play host to such a volatile group of politicians and expect them to settle their differences before any representation could take place, and any future attempts by the British to secure unity would be confined to urging Beneš to reach some kind of workable accord with his political opponents.

But the key to the new circumstances, and indeed Halifax's altered stance on the entire question, lay in the unavoidable fact that several thousand members of the Czechoslovak armed forces had now arrived in England. As Halifax made clear, these personnel would have to be looked after 'whether or not' His Majesty's Government granted recognition to Beneš and his committee. As far as the military aspects were concerned – the accommodating, arming, training and deployment of the men – all of these would automatically be the responsibility of the British service departments. But general discipline and political authority were more problematic, and it would be greatly in HMG's favour if such thorny issues could be delivered to the door of Doctor Beneš. Besides, as Halifax concluded, if Britain chose not to support the exiles, 'the possibility exists that...the Czechs and Slovaks may look solely to the USSR for salvation.'<sup>20</sup> Halifax recommended granting the Beneš 'Government' provisional status only, with further recognition dependent on the demonstration of political unity. So the British did no favours for the Czechoslovaks, and certainly did not grant them political legitimacy (even in a temporary

form) because they appreciated the merits of Beneš as a national leader, or even because of the abilities of his colleagues to manage Czechoslovak affairs, but simply because the prevailing circumstances in that desperate summer made the decision much less onerous than before, and it was far better to have Beneš within the allied sphere of influence than without. This illustrates that Beneš was not seen as a 'friend' of the British government, but more as a tolerated associate.<sup>21</sup>

But this is not to suggest that the British were prepared to devolve anything more than the bare minimum of authority to the Czechoslovak forces. Matters such as military discipline remained firmly in British hands. Concern had been expressed in parliament and the various service departments about the differing military codes that the exiles had brought with them, and in the broad sweep of things each national contingent would be subject to the relevant British codes unless special considerations applied. Furthermore, severe punishments could not be administered if a similar offence would attract a lesser penalty under British law, and even then only with the concurrence of the home authorities. This might at first appear to be unwarranted interference in the exiles' affairs, but in fact such a policy acted as a protective screen for the servicemen. In the case of the Czechoslovaks there were several instances when the Air Ministry intervened to protest against disciplinary decisions against individuals, and on one occasion a senior British air officer accused the Czechoslovak military authorities of using 'Gestapo tactics; that is, tactics against which Great Britain is fighting.'<sup>22</sup> The point at issue was not whether the Czechoslovaks were entitled to discipline their men as they saw fit, but whether the offender had committed a genuine military crime or a political one. Many of the men who served with the army and air units through the war had no great love for Beneš or his politics, and though they were prepared to accept him as the *de facto* leader for the duration of the conflict, disputes between rival factions were common. A direct result of this was the tendency of some Czechoslovak officers to interpret any dissent whatsoever as a threat to the stability of the entire group; stability which was, as we have seen, fragile to begin with. Such were the pressures upon Beneš to present a united front both to the British and the Czech Resistance at home, that his officers and representatives often became heavy-handed, humiliating men before their peers for relatively minor transgressions. By maintaining a watchful eye on the disciplinary affairs of the

Czechoslovaks, the British were therefore acting as the guardians of the right of the individual to fair treatment.<sup>23</sup>

All of these difficulties, however, remained invisible to the general public. It should be kept firmly in mind that the various criticisms directed at the Czechoslovak military forces were never reduced to criticising the individuals who served bravely and steadfastly for the cause in which they believed. Both the War Office and the Air Ministry came to hold the Czechoslovak soldier and airman in high regard, and though sometimes they had cause to doubt the political motives of some senior officers, such doubts were expressed at one time or another about commanders within all of the allied contingents. By 1942, when the invasion scare was over and Churchill's much sought after 'Grand Alliance' was in place, the officers and men of the Czechoslovak military settled down to take their places in the allied order of battle, purged of unsuitable elements and, in the case of the Air Force, having collected an admirable array of medals for valour and distinguished service.

It is all too easy to forget that there was always a human dimension to the exile experience, far removed from the flags pinned to campaign maps and the stenographed minutes of innumerable meetings. Hardly any of the 5000 or so Czechoslovak warriors had ever been to Britain, and though they were given food and pocket money on their arrival in 1940, provision for their general welfare was slow to be established. For example, an absolute tenet of the assimilation policy was that all of the men should learn English, and the burden fell wholly upon the British Council to ensure that the teaching programme was delivered effectively and economically. The service departments had to agree to bear the cost of language training, but on more than one occasion it was necessary for the Council to chase money it was owed and sometimes to meet costs from its own limited funds.<sup>24</sup>

Both the War Office and the Air Ministry had their own agenda in regard to English language training. The former had issued instructions to the British Council informing them that 'any cultural or educational work amongst the allied armies' was not required 'on anything more than a trivial scale'.<sup>25</sup> This caused anxiety and despair within the army group, and it condemned the men to learn what English they could through contact with British officers and the general public. The Air Ministry saw things differently, for it required the aircrews to be brought up to a standard of operational English as soon as possible because, without the ability to communicate in the air, the contingent was never likely to reach maximum efficiency. To this end, the Ministry produced its own training manual complete

with essential phrases that every allied airmen should know, including 'FA' (Football Association), 'PBI' (Poor Bloody Infantry), 'in the drink' (ditched into the sea) and 'out for a duck' (a cricketing term meaning bowled out for no runs; or in air slang, shot down with no recorded successes.) Quite how 'football association' would arise in radio traffic during a dog fight was never explained.

Overall, the British Council laboured against numerous obstacles to make life in exile at least a tolerable experience, but its efforts to teach the men English were only partially successful; a result, perhaps, of the limitations placed upon its expenditure by the service departments. By January 1942, the average levels of English language proficiency within the air squadrons stood at 58% (roughly equivalent to intermediate level today.)<sup>26</sup> In the main, an allied servicemen learned most of his English through contact with native speakers, and the British Council advised all of the allied governments to urge each man to seize every opportunity to practise his English, especially when on leave or when stationed near British towns or villages. In short, with regard to education and social provision, the service departments did *something* for the allied forces, but not much. Furthermore, it fell upon the Council to assist with the organisation of the various clubs and associations that offered 'a taste of home' for each allied nationality. More often than not, this assistance extended to subsidising the clubs; and in the case of the Polish and Czechoslovaks, this support accounted for virtually all of the running costs, neither exiled government contributing more than 'odd amounts only'.<sup>27</sup>

By 1942, most of the allied personnel who had arrived in Britain during the hectic summer of 1940 had become accustomed to life in exile. A few had married British women; many more had forged permanent friendships. The Czechoslovaks found their welcome extended throughout the war; indeed, their popularity actually increased, whereas the Polish found British hospitality was wearing thin by 1945.<sup>28</sup> Yet, behind the apparent stability of the Czechoslovak position in Britain, the political intrigues continued unabated, both in their complexity and in the impact they made upon the ruling echelon in the British military. One of the most harmful was the renewed question of independence raised again by Beneš and his senior commanders in 1942. By promoting a policy that they could not hope to bring to fruition, they irritated the Air Ministry and gave rise to ugly sentiments which, had they become common knowledge, would have irreparably damaged the Anglo-Czechoslovak relationship.

We have seen earlier how the British were determined to keep the Czechoslovak air contingent firmly within the RAFVR 'for reasons of administrative convenience', though in practice this meant keeping at arm's length any political entanglements which might prove embarrassing at the war's end.<sup>29</sup> Karel Janoušek, the Inspector of the Air Force, was liked and trusted by his British colleagues and more than anyone else was best placed to know what could be achieved in terms of reorganisation, future operations, and the general administration of the small air contingent. Yet in 1942 he found himself arguing desperately against the proposal of independence, which he knew would not work, and in so doing he made political enemies that – very possibly – led to him subsequently serving eleven years in a communist prison as 'an enemy of the people'.

To understand why the air force occupied such a pivotal position in the political calculations of the Czechoslovaks, one must embrace the military context of the time. First, the Army, though well trained and loyal, was also relatively inactive at this stage of the war. It was being prepared for combat, but no one knew when and where the moment would arrive. Second, the air force has secured a reputation as a fighting force and played a major part in the propaganda broadcasts to the occupied territories. If Beneš could persuade the British government to grant his air force independent status with its own high command, this would signal to the homeland that the Czechoslovaks were on a par with the Polish and could treat them equally as fully fledged allies. This would automatically enhance Beneš' prestige and increase his chances of a smooth restoration of power at the moment of liberation.

What triggered this resurgence of an old idea is difficult to ascertain. It could have been the involvement of the air squadrons in the Dieppe Raid of 1942, perhaps inspiring a determination to achieve greater prestige and recognition, or it could have been part of Beneš' political programme, by this time turning east towards the Soviet Union. Also, Reinhard Heydrich had been assassinated in June 1942 by British-trained Czech operatives, and the Munich Agreement had been repudiated in the House of Commons by Anthony Eden in August, so perhaps Beneš and his commanders felt more confident of success at this time than they had done in 1940. But whatever the reasons, Beneš informed his Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk in October 1942 of his decision to press the British to grant full independence to the Czechoslovak Air Force. To that end, he and his senior officers drafted a new agreement that embodied the concept, and this was submitted to the British.

The files in the Prague archives (VHA) show Janoušek fighting against every clause, slowly pulling the project to pieces, emphasising that nothing had substantially changed since 1940 and that it was an impossible task to change the British attitude.<sup>30</sup> Time and again he was overruled, and in early 1943 the Air Ministry had received the proposals. Each clause, each article was ruthlessly dismantled and rejected, exactly as Janoušek had predicted. But the most revealing result of the exercise – and it should come as no surprise to learn that the Czechs came away with nothing for their efforts – was the caustic reaction it provoked from the Air Ministry. In an addendum to the critique of the independence proposals, the Air Ministry saw fit to describe the Czechoslovak Air Force as ‘a political necessity [and a] military luxury’. While drawing attention to the complete absurdity of granting independent status to such a small force (three fighter squadrons and one bomber squadron, all of which were maintained by largely British ground crew), it laid bare opinions that were clearly held by some senior RAF commanders, accusing the Czechoslovaks of suffering from ‘a very exaggerated inferiority complex’, and stating that although the air contingent had been treated ‘sympathetically and generously’ by the RAF, it had obviously not been enough to satisfy the political representatives in London. The Air Ministry drew the blunt conclusion that the whole exercise had been politically motivated, adding ‘Perhaps we have been too kind to the Czechs, but then we have had Munich thrown in our face.’<sup>31</sup>

This document has subsequently caused much ill feeling within the veterans’ community, but it is there in the archives to be read all the same. It would also seem to have been ignored by some Czech and Slovak historians working with other material from the same file. Even so, we catch here the merest glimpse of the British-Czechoslovak military relationship at the senior level, and there can be no doubt that similar opinions were held by some British officials right through to the end of the war. As late as November 1944, when the Czechoslovak Government asked permission to transfer the air units to the east in support of the Slovak Rising, the Air Ministry was sorely tempted ‘to be rid of the commitment’ by handing over the air force *in toto* to the Russians. In the event, the request for transfer was refused, partly because of the impossible position regarding supply and maintenance, and partly because combat on the Eastern Front would have been potentially disastrous for such a small group.<sup>32</sup>

If all of the history of the British-Czechoslovak military relationship seems to be little more than a catalogue of distrust and contempt, the greatest irony of all was reserved for

the time when the squadrons returned home. The Independent Brigade was already there, having seen action on the continent and entered Czechoslovakia as liberators with Patton's US Third Army. For the air force, though, events were not to be so clear cut or glorious. Requests from Beneš to transfer them to the homeland began almost as soon as the war in Europe ceased, but from the outset the British were obsessed with obtaining Soviet permission. Throughout the midsummer of 1945, they persistently harangued Beneš to supply them with conclusive Russian agreement to the move, seemingly oblivious to the fact that for Beneš to make such a request to the Red Army commanders would have signalled his weakness at a time when he was most in need of strong allies in the West.

Various indications of Soviet agreement trickled into Whitehall through June and July, while simultaneously the British received ever-darker reports of communist activity within the Czechoslovak forces. Very soon, they became aware that the Czechoslovak Army was being overwhelmed by Soviet influence, and they became frantic that the air force would also succumb, thereby depriving the British of a foothold in the East. Arrangements were made to supply the air force with new equipment and RAF technical staff, but it became increasingly clear that the new order in Eastern Europe was wrenching control of the plucky little air contingent from the Western grasp. Oddly, when Soviet permission for the transfer did materialise, the British refused to believe it, but by then it was too late anyway. The files in London show how the British laboured to secure a new military agreement against impossible odds as one-by-one the pro-Western commanders were removed from power – Janoušek was amongst their number – and were replaced by officers who had long declared their sympathies for communism. In the end, after a half-hearted mission to London failed to re-forge the bonds, the Czechoslovak Air Force slipped away from the West's embrace, followed by the whole country in the *coup d'état* of 1948.<sup>33</sup>

The story of the Czechoslovak forces in Britain was always one of two dimensions: the public face, which almost without exception was warm and welcoming towards men who had fought for their country with a courage unsurpassed by any other nation' and the private, cloistered view in Whitehall and the service departments, who for reasons rooted in prejudice and ignorance extended their political vendetta with Edvard Beneš to include, unfairly, the officers and men under his nominal command. For the British, the Czechoslovak forces were in large part an exercise in international propaganda, a way of signalling to the world that the Munich disgrace had been renounced, as well as the hope

that such an act of diplomatic vandalism could be obscured by keeping a Czechoslovak national force on British soil and permitting it a share of the war. For the Czechoslovak officers and other ranks, this opportunity was seized with no bitterness, for nearly all of them relished the chance to hit back against the invaders of their country. For Beneš, however, it was a chance to regain his prestige and his presidency, and he manipulated both his army and air force to serve these aims, treating neither with the genuine respect they deserved. Thus there were three agendas, and not one of them was satisfied in whole.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> First published in *Europe in Exile* (eds) Martin Conway and José Gotovitch, Berghahn Books, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The total number rescued has been calculated at 163,225. (Gilbert M, *Second World War* (London, 1990: p106) An Admiralty report on operations *Aerial* and *Cycle* appears in the UK National Archives (UKNA) in file ADM 1/104481.

<sup>3</sup> 19 June 1940, UKNA CAB 65/7.

<sup>4</sup> See Nemeč J, *The crisis of the Czechoslovak Army in England in the second half of 1940*; and Kordina Z, 'Those months in France' in *On All Fronts: Czechoslovaks in World War II* (ed. L M White, Boulder 1991, pp83-94 and 23-40; 'Report on the conditions in France' and 'Summary of the Czechoslovak action in France', both in the Vojensky Historicky Archiv (VHA), Prague. MNO 5/810/1940; MNO 5/931/1940.

<sup>5</sup> E.N.Cooper at the Inter-Departmental meeting of 26 January 1940. UKNA FO 371/24365.

<sup>6</sup> E.N.Cooper, reporting the evidence of Sir Malcom Delevingne, 11 June 1940, UKNA FO 371/2436.

<sup>7</sup> Boyle to Wing Commander C.Porri, 2 June 1940, UKNA AIR 2/5153.

<sup>8</sup> This fact caused a few problems within the Foreign Office. Since no formal alliance existed, it became necessary to find a phrase that satisfied all the diplomatic criteria without committing the British to treating the Czechoslovaks as a legal allied entity. The phrase chosen, after much deliberation, was 'allied to the cause of His Majesty'.

<sup>9</sup> Medhurst to Sholto-Douglas, 3 July 1940, UKNA AIR 2/5153. Medhurst was later highly decorated by both the Polish and Czechoslovak authorities.

<sup>10</sup> Air Ministry Conference, 14 July 1940, UKNA AIR 8/370; Sholto-Douglas to Air Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, 28 July 1940; DCAS to VCAS, 29 July 1940; ERPC Conference, 3 August 1940, UKNA AIR 2/5196. It should be noted that Dowding specified Polish and Czechoslovak pilots, offering no objection to the replacement of losses with French, Belgian or Dutch pilots.

<sup>11</sup> Briefly stated, in July 1940 several hundred men from the Czechoslovak army contingent were held responsible for 'certain disorders' at the holding camp in Cheshire. Ultimately, these individuals were transferred to the Pioneer Corps, the British Army's universal dumping ground for malcontents and trouble makers. Various interpretations of these events may be found, ranging from the defence of genuine protests against anti-Semitism within the group to charges of deliberate political agitation by communist veterans of the Spanish Civil war. See War Cabinet, 26 July 1940, UKNA CAB 65/7; War Diaries of the Military Mission to Czechoslovak Land Forces, 22 August 1940, UKNA WO 178/21; Nemeč J: 'The Crisis...' pp86-89; Liskutín M: *Challenge in the Air*, London, 1985 pp66-69; Kulka E: 'Jews in the Czechoslovak Armed Forces during World War II in *The Jews of Czechoslovakia* (eds Dagan A et al, New York and Philadelphia, 1984 pp371-376. Most of those self-professed communists who were detained applied for re-enlistment after the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941.

<sup>12</sup> Report on the French and Czechoslovak forces in the UK, circa mid-September 1940, UKNA C8512/1419/62.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* It is worth noting in passing that the Czechoslovak Air Force also faced a near mutiny in the autumn of 1940, forcing Beneš to dismiss several officers to placate the rebels.

<sup>14</sup> Prime Minister to Chiefs-of-Staff via General Ismay, 12 July 1940, UKNA AIR 8/370.

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to deprecate the actions of the Middle East Czechoslovak contingent that fought in the defence of Tobruk. These men were later withdrawn from that theatre of operations and relocated to Britain to bring the Independent Brigade up to strength.

<sup>16</sup> 6 December 1939, UKNA FO 371/24287(70); FO 371/24288(60).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* Frank Roberts GCMG GCVO (1907-1998) worked under William Strang in the Central Department of the Foreign Office from 1940 to 1943, thereafter becoming Chargé d'Affaires to the Czechoslovak Provisional Government.

<sup>18</sup> Minute from Alexander Cadogan to the Central Dept, 29 June 1940, UKNA FO 371/24288.

<sup>19</sup> UKNA CAB 67/7, WP(G)40(168).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Provisional status also exercised the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk's wry humour. He often signed his letters 'Provisionally yours', and had been known to ask if the Czechoslovak airmen killed in the Battle of Britain were 'provisionally dead.' Zeman Z: *The Masaryks*, London, 1976, p183.

<sup>22</sup> Air Vice Marshal Alfred Collier to Lt.Col Josef Kalla, 9 January 1941, VHA MNO 13/67/1941. The dispute in question involved an individual who had refused to fly with 311 (Czechoslovak) Bomber Squadron over occupied territory, although he had volunteered for fighter duties. Given that a front line fighter pilot's life expectancy at this stage of the war was a little over two weeks, this seems to indicate that the man was no coward. Even so, he was convicted of this very offence and sentenced to be stripped of rank, dressed in khaki and not RAF blue, and confined to menial labouring duties. The British complained bitterly that it was not RAF practice 'to conduct demotions in such a theatrical manner.'

<sup>23</sup> Ironically, in the face of mass dissent, Beneš was forced to capitulate. In July and August 1940, 450 officers and men of the air contingent tabled a list of complaints that centred on the recent actions in France and the new conditions in England. Within a few days, senior officers were warning of 'a complete collapse of discipline' if certain named officers – one of them being the Commander-in-Chief and Inspector-General of the Air Force, Brigadier-General Slezák – were not removed from their commands. Beneš complied to prevent his Air Force from total disintegration as a viable unit. Slezák was later restored to power by the communists in 1945. Brown A: *The Czechoslovak Air Force in Britain, 1940-1945*, PhD Diss, University of Southampton 1988, pp68-76.

<sup>24</sup> One example concerns the initial bill presented to the Air Ministry for teaching fees accrued between September 1940 and December of that year. After repeated letters and invoices, the British Council eventually received the sum of £2,110 a year later. Put into context, the amount represents the approximate annual salary of a British Air Vice-Marshal. Internal correspondence, British Council, UKNA BW/2/231.

<sup>25</sup> Internal correspondence, 28 January 1941, UKNA BW/2/229. It was admitted by the Council that this attitude was causing considerable resentment amongst the allied governments, but since they would otherwise be expected to foot the bill, the Council had no choice but to comply.

<sup>26</sup> Results of examinations conducted by the Czechoslovak Air Inspectorate, VHA, CsL VB 131/C1-3/1/76. The full range of scores varied from %5 to 95%, and prompted complaints to the Air Ministry that not enough was being done to maximise language efficiency.

<sup>27</sup> Estimates of expenditure, 17 November 1942, UKNA BW/108/1.

<sup>28</sup> See A. Zamoyski's excellent work *The Forgotten Few*, London, 1995, for examples.

<sup>29</sup> Internal Air Ministry memorandum, 21 July 1940, UKNA AIR 2/5162.

<sup>30</sup> For a complete examination of this incident, see Brown A, *The Czechoslovak Air Force in Britain, 1940-1945*, pp124-147.

<sup>31</sup> Air Ministry circular, circa June 1943, UKNA AIR 2/5162.

<sup>32</sup> See Brown A, *The Czechoslovak Air Force in Britain, 1940-1945*, pp149-158.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* pp159-175 and pp182-194.