



**“The whole lot, Czechs, Magyars, Poles, Jugos, Roumanians, should be put in a bag and shaken up and then handed over to a decent Briton to administer.”**

## **A Contribution on the British Perception of Czech-German Relations in Czechoslovakia to 1933**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

On 28 October 1918, the “Czechoslovak National Committee’s Proclamation of the Independence of the Czechoslovak State” was issued, formally declaring the establishment of a new state. At the end of November 1918 the first Czechoslovak President, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (TGM), sailed to Great Britain to meet with leading British politicians on the future borders of the new state, although the peace conference which was to determine the Czechoslovak borders did not begin until 18 January 1919. TGM thought that London, alongside France, would play an important role in shaping the new state of affairs in Central Europe.<sup>1</sup>

The establishment of the Czechoslovak state at the end of October 1918 was a reality, which British politicians, or rather diplomats at the Foreign Office, would have to learn to work with. One illustration of this is an article entitled *All Bohemia for the Czechs* which stated that the representatives of the peace treaty had promised Karel Kramář and the future state the whole of historical Bohemia. William Tyrrell at the Foreign Office responded to this by asking whether that meant that the matter of the German areas in the north and west of Bohemia had now been definitively settled; he considered this to be of fundamental importance, and events were soon to prove him right.<sup>2</sup> In mid-November 1918 in the Revolutionary National Assembly, the first Czechoslovak Prime Minister declared that the new state would not restrict its German citizens in any way in their cultural and language rights, but he also added that the state would be a Czech one. His declaration clearly reflected the mood at the time. According to his words, the new state should be a state of Czechs and Slovaks; other citizens were to have the status of national minorities and should be awarded

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1 Cf. J. DEJMEK, *Nenaplněné naděje. Politické a diplomatické vztahy Československa a Velké Británie (1918–1938)*, Praha 2003, pp. 15–16. Cf. also A. SUPPAN, *Hitler — Beneš — Tito. Konflikt, Krieg und Völkermord in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa. Teil 1*, Wien 2014, p. 334.

2 The National Archives, London-Kew (hereinafter TNA), Foreign Office (hereinafter FO) 371/3136, Registry No. 186232, f. 370.

proportionate rights.<sup>3</sup> British politics would have to acquaint itself with this stance of Czechoslovak politicians and subsequently respond to it in an adequate manner.

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In early November 1918, British Minister in Switzerland, Sir Horace Rumbold, supplied detailed information to Foreign Secretary, Sir Arthur James Balfour, on the opinions of Czechoslovak leaders on important issues within Central Europe; this information was based on a report on discussions in Geneva between representatives of the domestic and foreign resistance, which future Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš had sent to Rumbold.<sup>4</sup> The very first sentence gave a clear signal of changes in the political map of Central Europe: *“The Czecho-Slovak state considers itself as a sovereign and independent state whose capital is Prague. It does not recognise any connection whatsoever with the Austrian monarchy.”*<sup>5</sup> Beneš’s report had stated that the Czech and Slovak people could not imagine their further existence under the “sceptre” of the Habsburg dynasty. The document continued with a requirement that the historical border of the Kingdom of Bohemia be kept to, to which it would be necessary to add the territory of the former Kingdom of Hungary where Slovaks lived. There was also important information regarding the nature of the new state. The country was to be Czech in nature, but with Germans enjoying extensive freedoms.<sup>6</sup>

Rumbold’s information for Arthur Balfour represented a summary of the emerging Czechoslovak political programme, specifically expressing the line of thinking of TGM and Edvard Beneš — to have good relations with all, in particular the South Slavs; not to allow an alliance between German-Austria and Germany, to confront any Hungarian revisionism and to contribute to creating a stable and peaceful Central Europe. This last point in particular was likely of most interest to British politicians. The collapse of Austria-Hungary, if an imperfect formation, threatened to engulf the Central European region in chaos, which might have a negative impact on stabilising the whole continent following the war, putting the triggering of normal economic development under threat, something London perceived as fundamental. Furthermore, after signing the armistice with Austria (11 November 1918), the British Government made clear that *“it could not be directly engaged in Central or South Eastern Europe”*.<sup>7</sup>

At this time, British diplomats saw a fundamental dispute in Central Europe in the perception of the dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy and the establishment of

3 P. VYŠNÝ, *The Runciman Mission to Czechoslovakia, 1938: Prelude to Munich*, Basingstoke 2003, p. 4.

4 The *“broad lines for the future approach and new state, [...]”* were agreed at a meeting of representatives of the domestic and foreign resistance. O. KONRÁD, *Nevyvážené vztahy. Československo a Rakousko 1918–1933*, Praha 2012, p. 55.

5 TNA, FO 371/3136, Registry No. 193197, Sir H. Rumbold to Mr. A. Balfour, November 7, 1918, f. 386.

6 Ibidem.

7 DEJMEK, p. 18. There was an exception to this however, which at the time was Vienna, where Jindřich Dejmek claims there were traces of interest in Central European affairs. Ibidem, p. 19.



new states from its ruins. While representatives of German-Austria thought it would be possible to create an essentially non-viable state formation from part of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown with a majority German population and then join it to Germany, the Czechoslovak political elite, however, rejected this, and this demonstrated how events turned out for four separatist states at the turn of 1918/1919. The Treaty of Saint-Germain in September 1919 brought a definitive end to Austrian hopes.

Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Beneš decided to respond to the activities of the German-Austrian Government, and with this in mind he visited British Ambassador in Paris, Edward Stanley, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby. The Czechoslovak Foreign Minister was naturally aware of the fragility of the post-war situation; the peace conference had not yet begun and thus its outcome was logically unforeseeable, and at the same time the positions of Paris and London were of great importance and should ideally concur. As such, he responded by contacting the Foreign Secretary through Lord Derby. He began his memorandum by stating that Mr Bauer and Mr Renner's Government (Karl Renner was Chancellor from 1918 to 1920) was demanding a plebiscite which would determine the border between Czechoslovakia and German-Austria. Beneš wanted to draw Balfour's attention to the following points: in his opinion, the problem of Czech Germans had appeared overnight, or rather Foreign Minister Otto Bauer was exploiting it artificially; the Czech German population had apparently "*peacefully accepted their integration into the Czechoslovak state*"; the German-Austrian Government had in contrast focused solely on provoking and discrediting Prague in recent weeks in the eyes of the Allied Powers.<sup>8</sup> The second part of Beneš's memorandum was his defence of the existence of the new state, and an attack on Vienna's policy.<sup>9</sup> It also proposed the adoption of certain measures which would, in his opinion, calm the situation. He did not neglect to add that the Czechoslovak Government was the only partner in Central Europe which would be able to restore order in its territory, which was one of the Allies' fundamental arguments for supporting Prague. Already in the memorandum, Beneš proposed that the victorious powers recognise the Czech border as it was for its historic lands (Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia). He cleverly supported his claim by referring to their loyal and real support of Allied actions during the war, which had claimed the lives of many Czech and Slovak legionaries.<sup>10</sup>

Foreign Office, whose officials could not have known the Central European region in detail, nor its nature following the end of the war, accepted all reports with reserve, and essentially proposed waiting for the peace conference to begin, which was to deal with it all. The end of the First World War and the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy brought about the redrawing of the political and state maps of the Central European region. Great Britain, as one of the main victors of the war, had to respond to the prevailing situation. The tradition and established scheme of British political elites' foreign policy considerations came face to face with a new political constellation. Austria-Hungary, which had been a stable factor in Central Europe for many years, if often imperfect in London's eyes, had collapsed and a new approach

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8 TNA, FO 371/3136, December 20, 1918, f. 486.

9 Ibidem, f. 487.

10 Ibidem, ff. 487–488.



to the region had to be found. One of the successor states was Czechoslovakia, which immediately following its establishment faced disintegration attempts by four separatist formations; by the turn of 1918/1919, however, the problem had been solved.<sup>11</sup> Its representatives (TGM and Edvard Beneš in particular) had claimed from the very beginning that the new state needed natural borders and that it would provide its German population with appropriate rights; whether and how these were appropriate became a subject of contention over almost the whole duration of the First Czechoslovak Republic.<sup>12</sup>

A key problem which British diplomats had to deal with at the turn of 1918/1919 was setting up the Czechoslovak borders, specifically the struggle for the right to self-determination, which the German population had decided to take on,<sup>13</sup> considering themselves to have become a part of the nascent Czechoslovakia against their will. Various representatives of the emerging German minority in the Czechoslovak Republic contacted British politicians, informing them of their stance and justifying their objection to the current status.

Rudolf Lodgman von Auen, governor of the province of Deutschböhmen, and Robert Freissler, governor of the province of Sudetenland, contacted the British delegation at the peace conference (specifically its secretary, Sir William Tyrrell) in mid-February 1919 through George Herron. They listed their demands in a long memorandum in whose introduction they correctly stated that roughly 3.5 million Germans would be incorporated into a state in which about 6 million Czechs resided. They went on to state that there were a number of reasons to reject the inclusion of lands with a majority German population into Czechoslovakia. In the face of American President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, they considered it unacceptable to refer to the historical borders in creating state borders, and especially so when this did not apply for Slovakia. In forming Czechoslovakia, the historical borders principle could not be applied in its eastern section, but rather an ethnic principle instead. *"The conduct of the Czechs since the collapse of Austria appears to have destroyed the last prospect of an understanding,"* the memorandum authors wrote, going on to say that German schools were closing, the language rights of Germans were being suppressed, and more.<sup>14</sup> Lodgman von Auen and Freissler also rejected the political structure of the Czechoslovak state, which they perceived as a continuation of the dualism from the period prior to 1914, but now with the Czech and Slovak nation governing. *"For that reason there is a great danger that this State situated in the heart of Europe must become a centre of unrest and discord and an 'Irredenta' will extend from all boundary-territories to all neighbouring states, a hearth of contagion will be created for the*

11 SUPPAN, pp. 347–348.

12 Two monographs have recently been published which look at the issue of national minorities in interwar Czechoslovakia. A. TÓTH — L. NOVOTNÝ — M. STEHLÍK, *Národnostní menšiny v Československu 1918–1938. Od státu národního ke státu národnostnímu?*, Praha 2012; J. KUKLÍK — J. NĚMEČEK, *Od národního státu ke státu národnosti? Národnostní statut a snahy o řešení menšinové otázky v Československu v roce 1938*, Praha 2013.

13 In time, the expression Sudeten Germans caught on, replacing the previously used Czech, Moravian and Silesian Germans. TÓTH — NOVOTNÝ — STEHLÍK, pp. 32–34.

14 TNA, FO 608/5/16, Registry No. 2946, February 27, 1919, ff. 443–444.



further peace of Europe,” they predicted of the new republic’s future.<sup>15</sup> Later, during the 1930s, Czechoslovakia would find itself in a position where certain groups would accuse it of similar things again.

The memorandum from both provincial governors naturally rejected the idea of German border regions joining Czechoslovakia, and it appealed to the British representative at the peace conference for his assistance. Their stance was not without basis, as it was undoubtedly true that a section of the new state’s population rejected it and did not want to be a part of it, and British diplomats admitted as such, which was an important factor in formulating their positions; they did not have enough relevant information on the life of “Germans in Bohemia”.<sup>16</sup>

As such, they needed data from other sources. In April 1919, a report from Prague was received by the Foreign Office from Cecil Gosling,<sup>17</sup> who was forwarding a telegram from Vienna from Sir Thomas Montgomery-Cunninghame,<sup>18</sup> whom London had sent to Austria prior to the end of 1918 and whom Jindřich Dejmek describes as someone who “viewed Bohemia in particular with marked disapproval, and sympathised with the Pan-German Movement,” and he attempted to get his superiors to support some form of co-operation with the new successor states.<sup>19</sup> According to the telegram, published in *Prager Tagblatt*, Montgomery-Cunninghame spoke of the possible “neutralisation” of the German parts of Bohemia in a discussion with Lodgman von Auen, essentially its de facto independence, which he was prepared to present in Paris.<sup>20</sup> Cecil Gosling contacted the counsel at the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry, Bedřich Štěpánek, asking him to deny these rumours and express his regret that such information was appearing in the local press.<sup>21</sup> It was true that Montgomery-Cunninghame was not an advocate of the new state, but there was an immediate denial of the inappropriate information, which while it did avoid undesirable consequences, did not contribute to a clear position for British diplomacy in regard to the German areas of Czechoslovakia.

15 Ibidem, f. 448. Finally, the memorandum’s authors also spoke of the economic problems which the current situation would bring about. Ibidem, ff. 450–453.

16 TNA, FO 608/5/16, Registry No. 2946, February 17, 1919, f. 439.

17 He was named temporary Chargé d’Affairs in Prague in January 1919; he moved from Gothenburg. Legation official Robert Hamilton Bruce Lockhart described him as a kind man who, however, was disappointed by his placement in Czechoslovakia. “It was quite clear that he sympathised with ‘the blacks’, as we called the old feudal aristocrats,” added Lockhart. R. H. BRUCE LOCKHART, *Ústup ze slávy*, Praha 1935, p. 56.

18 Sir Thomas Andrew Alexander Montgomery-Cuninghame of Corsehill, 10th Baronet (1877–1945). He was the British Military Representative to Austria (1919–1920) and British Military Attaché in Vienna (1920–1923).

19 DEJMEK, p. 19. His opinions of Czechoslovakia, however, did not resonate with leaders at the Foreign Office. Ibidem.

20 TNA, FO 608/5/16, Registry No. 7514, April 17, 1919, f. 457.

21 Ibidem. According to Gosling, Montgomery-Cunninghame was only responsible for military matters. The Czechoslovak Foreign Minister took appropriate measures against the *Prager Tagblatt* editor, reprimanding him and informing him that if they printed similar rumours in future, they would face serious consequences. TNA, FO 608/5/16, Registry No. 9106, May 5, 1919, f. 462.



One can say, then, that in the first half of 1919 when the final peace treaties had not yet been signed for Czechoslovakia, Austrian German politicians were attempting to get British support for some form of alliance with Austria, or later with Germany, but certainly not a connection with the Czechoslovak Republic, following the failure of their secessionist attempts at the end of 1918. To a certain extent, British diplomats were finding their feet in regard to the new situation which had arisen in Central Europe, and even though some such as Thomas Montgomery-Cunninghame, were pursuing the independence of the German areas of Bohemia, the Foreign Office's official policy rejected this and followed its own line in Paris. This was seen as early as in February 1919 when Britain's technical delegate at the peace conference recommended the British mission leaders recognise the future borders of Austria, writing in regard to Czechoslovakia that: *"It is recommended that the present administrative boundaries of Bohemia and Moravia be maintained. The Czech claims for exceeding this administrative boundary at Gmünd and Themenau do not merit support."* He justified this recommendation saying that the benefits of the current administrative border outweighed the disadvantages of the secession of the large German minority.<sup>22</sup> This solved one of British diplomacy's major problems in terms of its policy in Central Europe. Prague was to receive London's support in its demands on border determination, and although some of its claims were rejected, overall it represented a success for Czechoslovak diplomacy. In his despatch for Arthur Balfour, Edvard Beneš repeated his argument from the end of 1918 that Czechoslovakia was the only power in Central Europe which was able to restore and maintain order.

On 19 June 1919, Edvard Beneš contacted influential British diplomat Sir Eyre Crowe,<sup>23</sup> in order to lay out certain facts about the actual status of the German minority within the Czechoslovak Republic; this was in response to the material which the peace conference had received from Karl Renner.<sup>24</sup> The Czechoslovak Foreign Minister first of all denied that there was any purely German region in the Czech lands, and subsequently described to Crowe the proposal he was sending and left it entirely up to him whether to submit it to the appropriate people as part of the peace conference discussions; it was clear to him that London's support would be necessary for the definitive ratification of the Czechoslovak borders.<sup>25</sup> He focused in particular on TGM's declaration regarding Czech and Moravian Germans, from which Beneš claimed it was clear that members of the largest minority had expressed their satisfaction with the proposed solution to their status within the nascent Czechoslovakia.<sup>26</sup> The documents enclosed provided full support for the idea of the new state,

22 TNA, FO 608/5/19, Registry No. 1645, February 8, 1919, f. 494. In May, Arthur Balfour was able to state in a telegram to Lord Curzon that the top representatives at the peace conference were looking at the proposed borders and had no reservations about them. TNA, FO 608/5/19, Registry No. 9829, May 13, 1919, f. 506.

23 Eyre Crowe (1864–1925), the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office between 1920 and 1925.

24 Beneš was unable to prevent representatives of the German minority in Czechoslovakia from taking places within the Austrian delegation. DEJMEK, p. 25.

25 TNA, FO 608/6/7, Registry No. 14183, le 19 Juin 1919, f. 440.

26 Cf. TNA, FO 608/6/7, Registry No. 14183, le 19 Juin 1919, ff. 444–449.



and showed according to Czechoslovak Foreign Minister that the minority had nothing to complain about.

In autumn 1919, once the Treaties of Versailles and Saint-Germain-en-Laye had established the Czechoslovak border,<sup>27</sup> representatives of the German sides were forced to change their stance and express their willingness to hold discussions with the Czechoslovak Government. In particular, they demanded the co-operation of minorities in making the constitution. Now, however, it was no longer about reaching out to the new state, but rather a last resort. The Czechoslovak Government rejected this, stating that the parliament would first have to ratify basic laws, and only then would an election be able to take place with the participation of minorities. They referred to the “right of revolution” which was behind the genesis of the new legislature.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, British diplomacy, whose representatives had finally affirmed the current Czechoslovak border at peace negotiations, had closed one chapter in post-war developments. Now London was focusing on other issues. For Czechoslovakia, however, this did not mean that the young republic had won in terms of being assured of Great Britain’s support, or specifically its interest in ensuring events in Central Europe did not threaten Czechoslovakia. British engagement had its limits, and its diplomatic representatives in Vienna and Budapest were sending the Foreign Office reports documenting the unfair approach of Czechoslovak bodies towards minorities. Last but not least, one needs to note that there were individuals in the Foreign Office who had a critical view of the Republic’s existence, and whose opinions would always have to be taken into account. As such, Prague had to be prepared for an atmosphere which was far from an unqualified support of its minority policy. On the other hand, it should be noted that despite some diplomats’ certain detachment, the First Czechoslovak Republic was taken as a given, and the approach of official British diplomacy confirmed its consent to the borders, being aware of the necessity of a strong Czechoslovakia acting as a stabilising factor in Central Europe under the prevailing circumstances. In September 1919, George Clerk (1874–1951) became the new and first ever British Minister in Prague; he arrived for his new role and submitted his credentials in early 1920.<sup>29</sup>

The definitive confirmation of the Czechoslovak borders came with the peace treaty with Hungary signed on 4 June 1920 in Trianon, which also finalised the borders of states in Central Europe. From a British diplomacy perspective, this meant the end to the creation of a new political order formed after the collapse of Austria-Hun-

27 There was still as yet no peace treaty with Hungary. Nevertheless, Sudeten German deputies had to leave the Austrian Parliament. SUPPAN, pp. 359–360.

28 R. PETRÁŠ, *Menšiny v meziválečném Československu. Právní postavení národnostních menšin v první Československé republice a jejich mezinárodněprávní ochrana*, Praha 2009, p. 180. Another important aspect of minorities’ non-participation in the creation of the constitution and the Language Act was the fact that at the end of 1919 the state’s principal laws were essentially ready and any discussion of them with minority representatives would delay their ratification.

29 For more on his role and actions, see G. PROTHEROE, *Sir George Clerk and the Struggle for British Influence in Central Europe, 1919–26*, in: *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2001, pp. 39–64; G. PROTHEROE, *Watching and Observing: Sir George Clerk in Central Europe 1919–1926*, London 1999.



gary. As such, in his report of July 1920 on events in Czechoslovakia in May, new Minister George Clerk was able to confirm political developments had taken place in a standard manner in regard to Cieszyn Silesia, Slovakia and the position of German Social Democrats who refused to take part in the activities of the German Parliamentary Association (*der Deutsche parlamentarische Verband*).<sup>30</sup>

At the beginning of the 1920s, the reports of Minister Clerk and other British diplomats in Prague had settled down into providing updates on the occasional clashes or disagreements between the majority Czech (Czechoslovak) nation and the German minority,<sup>31</sup> but these were essentially routine with the Minister acknowledging some legitimate objections of the largest minority, but adding on the other hand that they too could do more towards reconciliation, that the Czechoslovak Government was acting within the constraints set by the Minority Treaty, and that problems generally occur any time a constitutional change this large occurs.<sup>32</sup> One should also note, however, that George Clerk held a certain level of disdain towards the successor states, something not in contradiction to a particular school of thinking within the Foreign Office, something expressed, e.g., in 1923: “*The whole lot, Czechs, Magyars, Poles, Jugos, Roumanians, should be put in a bag and shaken up and then handed over to a decent Briton to administer.*”<sup>33</sup> While this undoubtedly unorthodox opinion revealed a certain level of contempt from the British diplomat, on the other hand it demonstrated his perception of the new order in Central Europe. London had decorous relations with Prague, respected the Czechoslovak state as a given, and George Clerk respected TGM and later also Edvard Beneš, but Britain’s perception of itself as a great power and its foreign policy’s traditional approach meant that it was unable to acknowledge Czechoslovakia as an equal partner such as France, or Germany after it joined the League of Nations in 1926, were.<sup>34</sup>

30 TNA, FO 371/4721, C 1968/1968/12, Clerk to Curzon, July 16, 1920, f. 4.

31 See, e.g. TNA, FO 371/5822, C 8978/739/12, Sir G. Clerk to Earl Curzon, April 29, 1921, f. 24; *ibidem*, C 16029/739/12, Sir G. Clerk to the Marquess Curzon of Kedleston, July 30, 1921, f. 90, in which the Minister incomprehensibly notes the solidarity and unwillingness of the German opposition to take part in governing. In the 1920s, Britain considered Czechoslovakia a rationally managed state “*with enlightened leaders headed by Tomáš Masaryk*”. DEJMEK, p. 311.

32 The Minister saw the only problem in Czechoslovak approach to the German minority in the execution of land reform. In June 1921, for example, he wrote to Foreign Secretary Curzon: “*Nobody, not even a landowner, questions the right of the State to take over landed property from its present possessors, if such is considered to be in the general interest, but there is much legitimate complaint over the methods actually adopted*” [land reforms — author’s note]. TNA, FO 371/5824, C 13721/1239/12, Sir G. Clerk to Earl Curzon, June 24, 1921, f. 89.

33 M. CORNWALL, *A Fluctuating Barometer: British Diplomatic Views of the Czech-German Relationship in Czechoslovakia, 1918–1938*, in: E. SCHMIDT-HARTMANN — S. B. WINTERS (Eds.), *Großbritannien, die USA und die böhmischen Länder 1848–1938*, München 1991, p. 315, footnote 7.

34 From 1924, London focused, or rather was forced to focus, on a more active policy in regards to collective security. Germany played a greater role following the signing of the Locarno (Rhineland Guarantee) Pact in October 1925. Cf. more in detail L. NOVOTNÝ — R. KODET, *Velká Británie a konference v Locarnu: Příspěvek ke studiu kolektivní bezpečnosti ve 20. letech 20. století*, Plzeň 2013, pp. 50–53, 79–197.



The early parliamentary election, which was considered in summer 1925 and took place on 15 November 1925 and which transformed the balance of power in Czechoslovak politics, appeared to be a turning point in terms of the relationship between Czechs and Germans in Czechoslovakia and potential German political activism. Before the election took place, George Clerk had said a number of times that the German minority needed to finally accept the current situation and become a loyal opposition and he thought they should listen to people such as Bruno Kafka.<sup>35</sup> He also criticised the single-nationality government which appeared to show signs of discord and which was only sustained by its inability (here a mutual inability) to make an agreement with part of the German political spectrum.<sup>36</sup> The British Minister did not understand why the German political parties did not unite before the election to create a single candidate which he thought would give them a greater opportunity for electoral success, as he wrote to Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain.<sup>37</sup> Clerk perceived the single candidate list option as a simple step which only required the agreement of the political parties. The spectrum of German political parties in the First Czechoslovak Republic, however, prevented such a situation from occurring; although a joint candidate for two parties was possible, as confirmed by some candidate lists in interwar Czechoslovakia.

In mid-1926, an unprecedented situation occurred, with Czech and German agrarians finding common ground, something the British Legation in Prague noted. George Clerk was able to inform Austen Chamberlain that the socialist parties had launched an intense campaign which had even led to street demonstrations.<sup>38</sup> Although he did not directly say it, his report suggests that this was a unique opportunity for political groupings to form who shared similar politics. The Legation reaffirmed this opinion a month later when it informed the Foreign Office of the Farmers' League (*Bund der Landwirte*) congress, in which words were spoken which confirmed growing co-operation with Czech agrarians and gave the party leadership free reign in further negotiations. Charles Dodd wrote that Franz Spina's speech was truly statesmanlike, adding that it gave hope to all friends of Czechoslovakia and that an opportunity to begin a new era in the country's history was emerging.<sup>39</sup> In October 1926, two German

35 Kafka was a politician from the German Democratic Liberal Party (*Deutsche demokratische Freiheitspartei*), which as early as 1923 was considering political activism. TÓTH — NOVOTNÝ — STEHLÍK, p. 58.

36 CORNWALL, p. 318. In June 1925, George Clerk spoke to TGM, who confirmed to him that the German minority lacked a true political leader who would be able to bring the Germans into Government. The President added that Franz Křeppek did not speak Czech well, and Bruno Kafka was a Jew whom some Germans would never respect. TNA, FO 371/10674, C 8043/256/12, Sir G. Clerk to Mr. Austen Chamberlain, June 11, 1925, p. 2.

37 TNA, FO 371/10675, C 13944/256/12, Sir G. Clerk to Mr. Austen Chamberlain, October 26, 1925, f. 79. The Minister wrote that following the conference in Locarno, there were new constraints for minorities in all states, adding that the best advice for the German minority in Czechoslovakia was: "God helps those that help themselves." Ibidem.

38 Cf. TNA, FO 371/11227, C 7008/83/12, Sir G. Clerk to Sir Austen Chamberlain, June 16, 1926, ff. 44-45.

39 TNA, FO 371/11227, C 8579/83/12, Mr. Dodd to Sir Austen Chamberlain, July 27, 1926, f. 67. He also added that it was building on the atmosphere at Locarno. Ibidem.

Ministers joined the Czechoslovak cabinet; Franz Spina as Minister of Public Works and Robert Mayr-Harting as Minister of Justice.

The atmosphere at Locarno, with Berlin forced to accept the prevailing state of affairs, if only regarding its borders with France and Belgium, also meant a transformation in the Foreign Office's perception of Central Europe. British politicians made it clear to the Czechoslovak delegation in the Swiss town that London was not going to guarantee the Czechoslovak-German or Polish-German borders, something which only confirmed its unwillingness to engage in the region any more than the situation required.<sup>40</sup> This was also expressed symbolically in the replacement of the British Minister in Prague. George Clerk left in November 1926 for his new position in Constantinople, where he held the office of Ambassador until 1933. Both the Czech and German press gave a positive assessment of his time in Prague, and as he left he praised Czechoslovak politicians for the great progress which had been made since the country was established in 1918, and said Czechoslovakia was a factor for stability in Central Europe. Clerk's successor, Sir Ronald Macleay (he was Minister from 1927 to 1930) was an experienced diplomat, but he lacked any experience in Central Europe or indeed Continental Europe in general,<sup>41</sup> and according to Jonathan Zorach his naming was an expression of the relative unimportance of Prague in the eyes of the Foreign Office. He is of the opinion that Czechoslovak-British relations were cordial at the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, but were damaged by mistrust between the two countries when two incidents occurred.<sup>42</sup>

The second half of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s is considered by some to be a period when British-Czechoslovak relations lacked dynamism, with the Foreign Office focused on other regions and other countries in Central Europe.<sup>43</sup> Once German Ministers had joined the Czechoslovak Government, politicians in London concluded that this step had definitively dealt with the German minority's situation. They maintained this approach over the whole period Ronald Macleay was Minister, when first German agrarians and Christian Socials were involved in the Government, followed by German Social Democrats in 1929. According to Mark Cornwall, the new Minister had the same positive view of the Czechoslovak Republic as Clerk had had, but lacked a friendly relationship with the President. His reports also suited the Foreign Office's line, with the head of the Foreign Office's Central Department, Orme Sargent, even speaking of Czechoslovakia as "*an unimportant country*".<sup>44</sup> It is true that there was less Czech-German antagonism since most voters of the largest minority supported

40 DEJMEK, p. 149; NOVOTNÝ — KODET, pp. 184–185.

41 He was Minister in Argentina between 1920 and 1922, and in China between 1922 and 1926. In 1930 he returned to Argentina for three years as Ambassador.

42 J. ZORACH, *The British View of the Czechs in the Era before the Munich Crisis*, in: *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 1979, p. 58; on incidents see pp. 58–60, with the second concerning the British Legation's Secretary Kenneth Gurney. "From the time that George Clerk left the legation in 1926, his successors had showed a strong distaste for the voluble Beneš, the 'Littler Jack Horner' of European politics and for the 'lumpy' and 'bourgeois' Czechs." Z. STEINER, *The Triumph of the Dark. European International History 1933–1939*, Oxford 2011, p. 364.

43 ZORACH, p. 60.

44 CORNWALL, p. 320.



a policy of activism and co-operation with Czechoslovak parties while negativist parties were suffering losses.<sup>45</sup>

Gradually, very slowly and almost invisibly to begin with, the opinion began to be expressed within the German minority that activism was not bringing a solution to their problems, whether in terms of the language issue, minority education or other matters.<sup>46</sup> As the 1930s approached, an external factor occurred which complicated Czech-German relations and resulted in their radicalisation, moving them onto another level with growing conflicts and precipitous political developments — the global economic crisis which also affected Great Britain, logically weakening its attempts at foreign policy engagement in national minorities within Czechoslovakia and at the same time focusing it on domestic economic problems. Following his arrival in Prague, the new British Minister, Sir Joseph Addison,<sup>47</sup> someone who would in later years accuse the Czechoslovak Government and Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš in particular of improvident policies towards the Sudeten Germans, spoke of the deteriorating position of the German minority, very soon after taking up his position sending an “*indictment against alleged breaches of the minority obligations in St. Germain by ‘Czech’ authorities*” to London.<sup>48</sup> To begin with, the Foreign Office took a somewhat cautious approach to his reports, but as the reports continued over the years, they could not help but affect officials at the Foreign Office, contributing somewhat to the shaping of British foreign policy in the region.

## CONCLUSION

When the Great War ended, the old European order also ceased to exist. New states appeared, and in contrast some old established monarchies were extinguished, including Austria-Hungary. The reports of British diplomats state the fact of the the establishment of the Czechoslovak state, a new reality which the Foreign Office was going to have to learn to work with. As such, it received any reports from Central Europe with reserve and was inclined to conclude that it would be best to wait for the outcome of the peace conference in Paris. At the same time, British diplomats ac-

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45 E. WISKEMANN, *Czechs & Germans: A Study of the Struggle in the Historic Provinces of Bohemia and Moravia*, London 1967, p. 132.

46 In May 1929, Ronald Macleay was still able to assert that the German population in Czechoslovakia had almost nothing to complain about. Cf. TNA, FO 371/13579, C 3559/119/12, Macleay to Chamberlain, May 16, 1929, ff. 176–178.

47 He was Minister from 1930–1936. During the 1920s, he had served at the Embassy in Berlin, and this had affected his opinions. He soon gave the impression in his new role that the Sudeten Germans’ poor situation was the fault of Prague. CORNWALL, p. 321. His anti-Czech stance was not unique amongst Britain’s diplomats; the feeling “*that Germany had been punished too severely after the First World War*” became ever-stronger during the 1920s in Great Britain. V. SMETANA, *Old Wine in New Bottles? British Policy towards Czechoslovakia, 1938–1939 and 1947–1948*, in: M. CORNWALL — R. J. W. EVANS (Eds.), *Czechoslovakia in a Nationalist and Fascist Europe 1918–1948*, Oxford 2007, p. 145.

48 DEJMEK, p. 186. As yet, his superiors rejected his opinions and did not take them into account.

knowledge that they would have to rely on co-operation with France in the region, and as a result indirectly supported French claims and demands.

Although certain British diplomats (Thomas Montgomery-Cunninghame) supported German regions' endeavours to break away, London's official foreign policy rejected this, and in as early as February British delegates in Paris were advised to recognise the current administrative borders of the nascent Czechoslovakia. At the start of the 1920s, the British diplomatic mission in Prague also settled in its position and the first Minister, George Clerk, provided unbiased information on Czech-German coexistence within Czechoslovakia, and partially acknowledged that both sides were right (he understood some of the Germans' objections), but on the other hand he clearly recognised the new state and perceived its minorities policy as very accommodating, and respecting international obligations.

An important moment in Czech-German relations occurred in October 1926 when two German Ministers joined the Czechoslovak Government, with even the British Legation remarking on the qualitative shift in relations between both ethnicities; there was also a "blunting" of Czech-German antagonism. Of no less importance was the atmosphere at Locarno, when Germany's position improved and London made it clear that it had no interest in the fate of states in Central Europe. The fall in Prague's importance for the Foreign Office was also expressed in the change in the post of Minister, with Ronald Macleay having no experience of Central Europe. The early 1930s and the emerging economic crisis transformed the domestic political climate in the First Czechoslovak Republic, which in the eyes of the British Legation, specifically Joseph Addison, caused a deterioration in the status of the largest minority in the country. Thus the third British Minister shortly after taking up his post came to the conclusion that Czechoslovak officials were breaching the Minority Treaty and were not doing enough for the wellbeing of its German population, and that this did not bode well for the future.

**"THE WHOLE LOT, CZECHS, MAGYARS, POLES, JUGOS, ROUMANIANS,  
SHOULD BE PUT IN A BAG AND SHAKEN UP AND THEN HANDED OVER  
TO A DECENT BRITON TO ADMINISTER." A CONTRIBUTION  
ON THE BRITISH PERCEPTION OF CZECH-GERMAN RELATIONS  
IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA TO 1933**

**ABSTRACT**

The study uses unpublished sources from the National Archives in London and scientific literature to analyse the British Legation in Prague's perception of Czech-German relations in Czechoslovakia up to 1933. After some initial fumbling caused by a lack of knowledge of the Central European region following the collapse of Austria-Hungary, responsible officials in London decided to wait for the outcome of the peace conference in Paris. At the same time, British diplomats acknowledged that they would have to rely on co-operation with France in the region, and as a result indirectly supported French claims and demands; once the peace conference had ended, however, Great Britain focused on its own issues and the affairs of its empire. At the start of the 1920s, the British diplomatic mission in Prague also settled in its position and the first Minister, George Clerk, provided unbiased information on Czech-German coexistence within Czechoslovakia, and partially acknowledged that both sides were right (he understood some of the Germans' objections), but on the other hand he clearly recognised the new state and perceived its minorities policy as very accommodating, and respect-





ing international obligations. Following the calm period of the 1920s when even the British Legation in Prague remarked on the qualitative shift in relations between both ethnicities, the beginning of the 1930s arrived alongside the economic crisis, which transformed the domestic political situation within the First Czechoslovak Republic. According to British Minister, Joseph Addison, the position of the largest minority in the country had deteriorated, something he thought was due to the fact that Czechoslovak officials were breaching the Minority Treaty and were not doing enough for the wellbeing of its German population, and that this did not bode well for the future.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Czechoslovakia; Great Britain; Sudeten Germans; National Minorities

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