CHAPTER 8

The Munich Agreement and the Second Republic, 1938–1939

The generational change of the Czechoslovak leadership due to World War II was rung in already in 1937–1938 by a number of natural deaths of prominent Czechoslovak intellectuals and politicians. In January 1937, the prominent conservative Czech historian Josef Pekař passed away. In April, a leading Czech literary critic and Social Democratic champion of Czech-German understanding, František Xaver Šalda died. A few weeks later ND-Party leader Karel Kramář and Mukacheve's “miracle rabbi” Hayim Shapira passed away. Czech-Jewish leader Augustin Stein, who had been instrumental in the “sanitation” or destruction of old Josefov and the foundation of Prague's Jewish Museum,1 followed suit in August.

The most dramatic of the funerals, however, was that of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who had died at his countryseat, Château Lány near Prague, on September 14, 1937. His body was presented to the public at the Lány village, where some 60,000 people from the surrounding area came to pay their last respects, and then again at Prague Castle, with another 500,000–700,000 mourners catching a final glimpse of their legendary leader. Masaryk was laid to rest next to his wife Charlotte's grave in Lány cemetery. Before his death, he reportedly stated that he thought this was a good time for him to leave this world.2

In January 1938, Masaryk's old foe of the Hilsner Trial and long-time mayor of Prague Karel Baxa breathed his last. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, two veteran, if comparably moderate irredentist leaders died immediately prior to the Munich Agreement. Slovakia's Father Andrej Hlinka passed away on August 16 and would never see his ‘independent’ Slovakia which emerged only a few months later. Prague's Jewish-born, German minority activist Professor Heinrich Rauchberg died on September 29, 1938—the very day of the catastrophe.3

1 Wein, Slavic Jerusalem, 36–39.
3 On Rauchberg's role, see e.g. Shumsky, “Historiography, Nationalism and Bi-Nationalism”; on Rauchberg's Jewish background and Protestant baptism Bertrand Wägenbaur (relative of Rauchberg), e-mail to author, March 12, 2010.
Czechoslovakia's international diplomatic isolation and fatal strategic encirclement that would peak with the Munich Agreement already began with the Nazi German-Polish treaty of 1934. The Austrian Republic started moving into the fascist aegis between 1934 and 1936, and in February 1938, Romania turned into a fascist-style dictatorship. In March 1938, Austria landed in Hitler's hands through the Anschluss. In August 1938, only weeks before the Munich Conference, Hungary signed a pact with Nazi Germany, and in early September 1938, Budapest and Warsaw agreed to coordinate their policies towards Prague.

Czechoslovakia's irredentist minorities, first and foremost the German-speaking Henlein Party, used this new international constellation to push their own demands in Prague. In Ronald M. Smelser's evaluation, the Henlein Party was a hodgepodge that combined authoritarian and democratic structures, political and social functions, and outward strength with inner weakness. It was kept alive mainly by Nazi Germany. The Henlein Party started being systematically 'Nazified' in February 1935, i.e. shortly prior to its landslide election victory in the German-speaking belt, when Berlin gave it three million crowns for the campaign. Thereafter, the party continuously received propaganda material, monthly budgets, and additional funds for election campaigns from the Nazi German Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Finance, the German National Bank, etc. Simultaneously, the original leadership around Konrad Henlein was weakened, and outright Nazis like Karl Hermann Frank began staffing central positions, handing over control of the party to their patrons in Berlin. In 1935–1937, Henlein still tried to play out Berlin against Prague, but on November 19, 1937, he crossed the Rubicon of high treason, submitting a memorandum to Hitler about the Nazi annexation of the whole of the Bohemian lands.

The Henlein Party received a boost by the Austrian Anschluss, which sent a political shockwave through Czechoslovakia's other German-speaking parties. The Henlein Party used the momentum to absorb the Czechoslovak German-speaking Agrarian and Catholic parties, doubling its membership to roughly one million—over one third of the German-speaking, adult population of

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