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### **The deadlock in Soviet-Czechoslovak military relations and Beneš's perception of the Red Army purge of 1937**

With the end of half-a-century-long discussion of Beneš's alleged role in "Tukhachevsky affair" the field is freed for an impartial investigation of the complexity of issues related to this important crossroad on the way to the Munich catastrophe. Various research strategies, including diplomatic history and net assessment studies<sup>1</sup>, could be employed for examining the multiple impact of the Red Army purge upon the development of European crisis in 1937-1939.

The purpose of this research essay is to examine, by applying a phenomenological approach, President Beneš's perception of the outbreak of the Soviet military purge in June 1937. A reconstruction of Edvard Beneš's views is important for comprehending his statesmanship and the motives of Czechoslovakia's actions in the fateful year of 1938; such reconstruction also brings us closer to *Zeitgeist* that overshadowed rational political analysis. On the other hand, to understand Beneš's assessments and apprehensions one needs to address issues of practical concern that formed his political agenda in the preceding years with a special reference to Soviet-Czechoslovak relations. Hence the scope of this essay, based partly upon evidence from Russian, US and British archives\* .

Soviet-Czechoslovak *rapprochement* was a culmination of the persistent efforts on the part of Masarik-Beneš diplomacy to win the sympathies of the USSR, to convince the Bolsheviks that Russian interests were compatible with preserving the European peace and supporting collective security. From 1922, Minister Beneš kept repeating that Czechoslovakia wished her relations with Russia to be similar to those with France. At the turn of decades, Minister Beneš bluntly told the Soviet envoy that the present Moscow policy was a menace to peace, and the Soviets had to change its attitude to the countries of the Little Entente. He offered support and asked for it. "I will tell you directly, -- give us what France gives us and we will immediately redirect ourselves in your favor

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<sup>1</sup> On the latter, see W. Murray and A. R. Millett (eds). *Calculations: Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II*. N. Y. etc: The Free Press, 1992.

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[*pereorientiruemsia v vashu storonu*]. France gives us guarantees against the German conquest, be it peaceful or war, does not matter. Give us this guarantee, and we will be yours”<sup>2</sup>.

The situation changed in Spring 1933, when Moscow refused to render its further support for German revisionism. Soon an unprecedented intimacy prevailed in Soviet-Czechoslovak relations, and the initiative for military cooperation between came from the Czechoslovak side as early as 1933-1934. After the conclusion of mutual assistance pact and air convention in May 1935 the expectations for highly effective strategic cooperation with the Russians reached their climax in Prague. President Beneš was excited by the assurances the War Commissar Voroshilov made at their meeting in Peterhoff in June 1935<sup>3</sup>. The Soviet military chiefs whom Beneš met during his visit to Russia made an excellent impression upon him: “*Ce gens n’ont pas peur de l’Allemagne*”<sup>4</sup>. However, despite the highly publicized visit to Prague by the Soviet delegation headed by Shaposhnikov in September 1935 and the invitations to the Red Army maneuvers in 1935 and 1936 extended to the *MON*, the Czechoslovak political and military circles had few reasons for satisfaction. By 1937, Soviet purchases of Czech weapons, whatever was the temptation of the Red Army Staff, were limited to specimens of mountain artillery and optics. Exchanges of officers were rare and accomplished on strictly individual basis with the requests being submitted for Stalin’s personal approval and Czechoslovak representatives having been not given with access to secret matters. “Reserve” and “coldness” were the words used by the leaders of the Czechoslovak army to define the behavior of their Soviet counterparts. While the chief of Air Force Gen. Fajfr visited the USSR in May 1935, the return visit of his equal, Alksnis, was repeatedly delayed. In 1936, Uborevich and Jakir, Commanders of the Kiev and Byelorussian Military districts, came to Czechoslovakia for cure, not military talks (Uborevich had a brief meeting with Gen. Husarek). Soviet military attache Šnitman, the Czech officers complained to his successor later, had exhibited arrogance. According to a memoir source, Tukhachevski treated Gen. Luža, the Czech military representative at the 1936 maneuvers in Byelorussia, with utter mistrust<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> [Zapis’ besedy Aroseva s Beneshem, Prague, Dec. 17, 1930], *polpred’s* journal, Russian Foreign Policy Archive (AVP MID FR): 010/1/5/95, p.63; see also *ibid*: 010/2/14/255, p. 31. The immediate effect of these efforts was that Foreign Commissar Maxim Litvinov called him “the most insincere and most mendacious of bourgeois ministers, and in regard to our *polpreds* his mendacity reaches Herculean pillars” (Litvinov to Stalin, copies to Politburo members, Apr. 8, 1931, *ibid*: 010/2/14/257, p.2).

<sup>3</sup> Although it was understood that no *formal* military convention should be negotiated between Moscow and Prague until France ratified her pact with the USSR, Beneš had reasons for jubilation as Voroshilov assured him that the Red Army would be ready to render Czechoslovakia its assistance whatever might be the difficulties with Poland and Romania (Naggiar à Laval, Prague, 19 juin 1935, Document diplomatiques français 1932-1939 (DDF), 1<sup>re</sup> sér. T. XI. P. 137; R. Kvaček. *Nad Evropou zataženo*. Praha, 1966. S. 131-132; Alexandrovkii to Litvinov, July 1, 1935, AVP MID FR: 05/15/111/101, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Alphand à Laval, Moscou, 11 juin 1935, DDF. 1<sup>re</sup> sér. T. XI. P. 70.

<sup>5</sup> The above is largely a summary of the archival data employed in my early study: “Chekhoslovakia v politike Moskvu (1932-1936)”, part III, in *Rossia XXI*, 1997. No. 1-2. P. 65-72. See also the case of Col. Hrubíš, June-July 1936, Russian State Military Archive (RGVA): 9/29/285/150-155.

Simultaneously, the Soviets refusal to recognize Romania's sovereignty of Bessarabia led the Soviet-Romanian negotiations on the mutual assistance agreement up a blind alley. From the military point of view, Romanian participation in a mutual assistance scheme was a *sine qua non* for providing a liaison between Soviet and Czechoslovak forces. The Russian hints that in time of need Romanian sovereignty would be simply violated made no practical sense, if set against the conditions of the terrain. Even with Bucarest's assent, all interested parties knew too well, "troops passage [would be] a strategic problem"<sup>6</sup>. Even establishing a regular air communication between Kiev and Prague that demanded landing on Romanian airfields turned out to be insoluble task. Calmness and neglect that Moscow displayed in the face of the difficulties that, if not overcome in advance, left little chance for any strategic coordination between Russia and her ally in Central Europe, caused anxiety in the Soviet mission in Prague, more attentive to the Czechoslovak concerns<sup>7</sup>. For the Czechoslovak high command its relations with the Russians remained "*un point d'interrogation*"<sup>8</sup>.

In summer 1936, several months after the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the Soviets suggested, for the first time, to discuss the strategic problems of Soviet-Czechoslovak cooperation. In late September the Politburo instructed the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (!) to raise the question of practical contacts between the two armies. However, when several weeks later attache Dastich approached Marshal Yegorov, Chief of the Soviet General Staff, he was told that Moscow was happy with the existing level of cooperation, and that before extending it to strategic issues the political negotiations between Prague and Moscow would be necessary<sup>9</sup>. Diplomatically, the arising deadlock might have been partly explained by the evasiveness of the French Army Staff to enter into similar negotiations with the Soviet. However, the USSR's own interests should have made her develop practical schemes of cooperation with Czechoslovakia, her only loyal partner. We lack reliable evidence on how President Beneš and other Czechoslovak leaders explained the Soviet reluctance, if not outright refusal, to discuss issues of strategic cooperation. One could speculate that the deadlock in Soviet-Czechoslovak military relations (ironically accentuated by vehement German allegations that Czechoslovakia had become a Soviet airbase in central Europe) was not of irrelevance for the Beneš's decision later in 1936 to sound Berlin on the possibilities of the

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<sup>6</sup> Zpráva J. Šeby, Bukurešt', 20. března 1936, Československá zahraniční politika v roce 1936, sv. 1, Praha: Karolinum, 2003, s. 271. For details on Romania's military predicament, see M. Hauner. „The Quest for the Romanian Corridor: The Soviet Union, Romania and Czechoslovakia During the Sudeten Crisis of 1938”, *Mythos München*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2002, p. 49-60.

<sup>7</sup> See Alexandrovsky to Yezhov (Secretary of the Party Central Committee), March 31, 1936, AVP MID RF: 010/11/77/118, p.28-30.

<sup>8</sup> De Lacroix à Delbos, Prague, 1 juil. 1936, DDF, 2<sup>ème</sup> sér., t II, p. 579 (communication of M. Hodza).

<sup>9</sup> Pavlů to Krofta, Moscow, Nov. 9, 1936, Dokumenty i materialy po istorii sovetsko-chekhoslovatskikh otnosheniy, t. 3, Moscow: Nauka, 1978, s. 285. No record of this meeting from a Russian side was found in the declassified collections at the Russian military archive.

compromise settlement. In any case, if the British could maintain in cold blood that the “Soviet policy [was] to run with the hare and to hunt with the hounds”<sup>10</sup>, for the Czechs deciphering the sources of this duplicity was a key element in their policy-making.

To accomplish this task, the Hrad had several means, of which meaningful information provided by authoritative Soviet figures, Stalin and Litvinov, might have been of primary importance. The inspirer of the Soviet collective security policy, Litvinov often played the card of the inner resistance to his efforts. There is little doubt that opposition in the Kremlin quarters to Litvinov’s line was genuine<sup>11</sup>. Nor is the reason to suggest that Litvinov deliberately overstated the fragility of the anti-German political base and delicacy of his personal position in Moscow, though sometimes he went very far in using this argument to his ends. When debating with E. Beneš and R. Massigli of the French Foreign Ministry the precise conditions for the USSR to join the League of Nations in August 1934, Litvinov explained his uncompromising attitude in the blunt terms: “*Vous ne rendez pas compte que je ne rentre pas en Russie avec un succès incontestable, je serai mis au mur*”<sup>12</sup>. The Czechoslovak leaders were too agreeable partners to be the main objects of Litvinov’s “tactic of sincerity”, but they were privy to his warning through various channels.

While *Narkom* Litvinov limited himself to general references to “isolationists”, and was cautious in specifying the opposition to the USSR’s alignment with the democratic nations, among European experts it was widely understood “to be a party at Moscow which would be prepared to bring about a détente in Soviet-German relations for the sake of a free hand elsewhere” and that the base for that “party” is the Russian military leaders<sup>13</sup>. To close the ring, Litvinov forewarned his foreign partners that the Reichwehr were “always ready to make a bargain with the Soviet Union”. Still he clung to the statement that the Soviet Government “did not allow their military... to interfere with foreign affairs”.<sup>14</sup> What if it would be no longer able to exercise this control?

Stalin, at least on one notable occasion, was even more explicit. In March 1935, Anthony Eden, Lord Privy Seal with the responsibility for the League of Nations affairs, was the first Western minister to visit the Kremlin during his trip to Central-Eastern Europe. Upon talks at the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, Eden was received by Stalin who surprised his guest not so much as by displaying sympathy for German arguments as by clear reference to the possible political

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<sup>10</sup> Chilston to Simon, Moscow, Nov. 28, 1934, Documents on British Foreign Policy (DBFP). 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., vol. XII, p. 266.

<sup>11</sup> See S. Dullin. *Les hommes d’influences. Les ambassadeurs de Staline en Europe 1930-1939*. Paris: Payot, 2001, esp. p. 172-177.

<sup>12</sup> De Lacroix à Delbos, Prague, 3 juil. 1937, DDF, 2<sup>-ème</sup> sér, t. VI, p. 297.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum by Vansittart, FO, Febr. 21, 1935, DBFP. 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., vol. XII, p. 560. This paper (which represented an agreed statement of the views of Northern, Central and Far Eastern Departments) mentioned Voroshilov, a titular chief of the Red Army, as the “believed” leader of pro-German party.

<sup>14</sup> Chilston to Simon, Moscow, March 30, 1935 (Record of Anglo-Soviet Conversations, March 28-29, 1935), DBFP, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., vol. XII, p. 779, 790.

implications of the Soviet-German contact. “Strange people in Berlin” offered the USSR credits, went “Stalin’s signal”, and then spread rumors that Tukhachevskii, Vice-Commissar of War had had a secret meeting with Goering and “had pressed upon the latter some anti-French scheme”<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, “this was a strange report”, the more so since at this very moment “Pravda” published a violently anti-German article, signed by Tuchachevskii (and co-authored by Stalin)<sup>16</sup>. The only plausible motive for Stalin’s unbidden *dementi* of non-existent rumors might be his desire to deliver Tukhachevskii as the major figure to the international game “Who is the best Soviet friend of Germany”. Very impressed, Eden undoubtedly mentioned this episode in his conversations with President Beneš as he arrived to Prague several days later<sup>17</sup>.

Of additional importance was the intelligence information flow that went from (or through) Prague to Moscow. While the cooperation between Czechoslovak and Soviet military intelligence seem to have been limited to the sphere of German operational plans, army and paramilitary formations (with a particular stress upon new military equipment)<sup>18</sup>, there is no reason to believe that other activities, notably by the *INO GUGB NKVD*, the Soviet political intelligence abroad, did not find an echo in Prague or other Soviet interests were not pursued in contacts with the Czechs. In Fall 1935, three extensive reports on the international situation and the Red Army were sent from Prague by Soviet diplomatic pouch.

The most important of these reports, prepared by “a well-known Russian politician who played a big role under the Czar and Provisional governments” listed two kinds of opposition to the Stalin line. First, while the right opposition was no longer able to influence events in Russia, the real danger for the regime now came from the variegated groups “on the left”. The aims of these opposition groups greatly differed, but, devoted to the idea of world revolution, they are united in their hatred to the Stalin’s patriotic policy of reconciliation with the Russian people and their acceptance of conspiratorial and terrorist methods. The second tendency was represented by Russian conspirators who preserved deeply hidden contacts with the Reichswehr. “Using them, the German high command is able to push the known buttons, and there will be an explosion in the Kremlin that will totally displace the existing regime and open the way to those political and military elements, with whom the [anti-Soviet] coalition, Germany in particular, will easily come to

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<sup>15</sup> Zapis’ besedy Stalina i Molotova s Eden’om, March 29, 1935, Dokumenty vneshney politiki SSSR, t. 18, s. 246; Chilston to Simon, Moscow, March 30, 1935, DBFP, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser., vol. XII, p. 768.

<sup>16</sup> Lord Avon. *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators*. L., 1962, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> The fact that this incident is missing in the Czechoslovak records of Beneš-Eden meeting that were provided to the Soviet mission in Prague, of course, proves nothing.

<sup>18</sup> A summary of new Russian publications on this subject see V.M. Lur’ie and V. Ia Kochik. *GRU: dela i liudi*. St.Petersburg: Neva – Olma, 2003, s. 63-64.

agreement”<sup>19</sup>. Although the provenance of this report remains unclear, the very fact that this “*agenturnyi material*” was placed among routine papers of the NKID’s Second Western Department strongly suggests that it was provided by Czechoslovak, not Soviet, intelligence and then transmitted to the Russians through an intermediary at the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry (possibly, Jaroslav Papoušek)<sup>20</sup>. We can also assume that this significant study were reported to came to President Beneš’ and he personally authorized its communication to the Soviet mission<sup>21</sup>.

The third immediate source of the Czech apprehensions over the solidity of the Soviet regime and directions of its foreign policy were rumors dissipated by the German agencies, keen on winning Western sympathies for Hitler and sowing doubts in the future Soviet course<sup>22</sup>. At the beginning of 1937 all three trends of information suggesting to the Hrad a pro-German conspiracy in the Soviet army came close to merging: at the Moscow show trial in January 1937 Tukhachevskii’s name was mentioned in the context that suggested Vice-Commissar’s possible complicity<sup>23</sup>; Czechoslovak government received reports on Berlin’s secret dealing with Moscow; new wave of rumours on the imminent German-Soviet *rapprochement* reached its high point in April 1937. At a meeting with Alexandrovskii, the Soviet minister in Prague, President sounded him on the issue<sup>24</sup> (after that Moscow instructed Alexandrovski to assure K. Krofta that these rumors were unfounded and there would be no changes in the Russian foreign policy<sup>25</sup>). Two weeks later a large-scale military purge had begun in the USSR, rendering plans for the tripartite Soviet-Czech-French talks no longer feasible.

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<sup>19</sup> DAL’NEREK. Tsentr B. *Koalitsia protiv SSSR*, AVP MID RF: 0138/12/26a/26. P. 1, 5-6 (a copy of this report is also kept in the re-classified files of the RGVA). In the description of the second scenario the author referred to views of the “Polish political and military circles”.

<sup>20</sup> This hypothesis is supported by the note of the Head of Soviet military intelligence Semion Uritskii concerning an analytical survey “La puissance militaire de l’URSS” received from the Soviet diplomatic mission in Prague by the same pouch: “This material was passed by the French to the Czechs (according to the Czechs), and the latter passed it to us” (Uritskii to Voroshilov, Dec. 12, 1935, RGVA: 33987/3/740, p. 116 (copy at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Volkogonov collection/21/172)).

<sup>21</sup> This (and possibly others) pre-1937 incident might have justified in Beneš’s mind his later claim that he had passed documents on the Tukhachevsky conspiracy to Moscow (and thus indirectly led to numerous stories, starting with W. S. Churshill’s memoirs, on Beneš’s role in the fall of Tukhachevsky).

<sup>22</sup> On the Karl Wittig’s alleged role in misinforming Beneš, see “Spravka o proverke obvineniy” (1964), *Voенno-istoricheskiiy arkhiv*, 2, 1997, s. 16-19.

<sup>23</sup> As early as February 11 Bohdan Pavlů telegraphed from Moscow unconfirmed rumors that Tukhachevsky had been arrested (I. Lukes. *Czechoslovakia Between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Beneš in the 1930s*. N.Y., Oxford: UP, 1996. P. 108).

<sup>24</sup> See Zapis’ besedy Alexandrovskogo z Benešem on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1937 (Prague, July 4, 1937). To my knowledge, only selected parts of Alexandrovskii’s reports of July 4 and Dec. 24, 1937 have been published in Czech (M. Polišínská and R. Kvaček “Beneš a případ Tukhačevskij”, *Mezinàrodní politika*, 8, 1991, s. 28-29, from the copies passed by Russian Foreign Ministry to Archives of Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry at the end of 1980s,) and in Russian (*Vestnik MIDa*, 1989, No. 8; *Voенno-istoricheskiiy arkhiv*, 2, 1997; *Krasnaya zvezda*, 30. 11. 2002 (with a reference to the Presidential Archive)). Copies of these reports made for Voroshilov are preserved in the RGVA, photocopies taken from this source are available at the Library of Congress Manuscript Division (the Volkogonov collection, cont. 14, file 182).

<sup>25</sup> See Monicault à Delbos, Prague, s.d. [after 21] avril 1937, DDF, 2<sup>-ème</sup> sér, t. VI, p. 599.

The general reaction of the diplomatic corps and political quarters in Europe to the spectacular revelation that military-fascist conspiracy in the Red Army had been disclosed and its leaders, including Tukhachevskii and three military district commanders, were found guilty of high treason, was that of utter disbelief. Interpretations differed, but Prague stood alone among capitals of Europe in openly expressing her satisfaction over the positive outcome of the conflict in Moscow.

On June 21, 1937, nine days after the news on the military-fascist conspiracy in the Red Army had been broken, Foreign Minister Kamil Krofta informed the British minister in Prague that “he had some confirmation the accusations against the executed Russian military leaders might be justified”. He referred to a German intermediary who had mentioned in January that they in Germany had been expected “the establishment of a more Nationalist Government with whom Germany could get on better terms”. On the same day, Prime Minister Milan Hodža added to Newton that the rivalry between Voroshilov and his deputy Tukhachevski “who wished to make the army independent of the party control” might plausibly explain the crisis in the Red Army<sup>26</sup>. Most probably, the matter was discussed with President Beneš in the middle of June and a common Czechoslovak attitude to the Tukhachevskii affair was adopted.

This may explain the close similarities between these communications and statements the President made to Alexandrovskii on July 3, 1937. Alexandrovskii’s record, tinged with haughtiness in regard to the statesman whom Alexandrovskii at one moment defined as “*vseevropejskii meschanin*”, gives an impression of Beneš’s willingness to accommodate himself to the changed situation, the willingness bordering on enthusiastic compliance with the last Moscow wishes. Beneš indeed was relieved and advanced his own reasons why Tukhachevskii and other conspirators had to be destroyed. The matter looks different, if Alexandrovskii’s record when confronted with the Beneš pronouncements to the French envoy at their “*réunion intime*” two days earlier<sup>27</sup>.

The diplomatic narratives by de Lacroix and Alexandrovskii coincide in the main points. In no way was Beneš surprised by the last events in Russia, these were “*en quelque sorte normaux*” and he expected them to happen for a long time (“*davno ikh ozhidal*”). The basic tension of the Soviet policy over the last years was caused by the competing ways to secure the national interests of the USSR. First method, considered logical and even honorable was to save Russia from the coming war through cooperation with European dictatorships, particularly Germany, offering her a free hand in the West. Since unleashing a new imperialist war offered a chance for the world revolution, this option could not but look quite legitimate for a military party in Moscow both from national and revolutionary viewpoint. Another approach was represented by the Stalinist regime

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<sup>26</sup> Newton’s telegram, June 21, 1937, Public Record Office: FO/371/21104/N3287.

<sup>27</sup> De Lacroix à Delbos, Prague, 3 juil. 1937, p.296-297.

that had put its stakes upon cooperation with democratic nations and the League of Nations as the best means to prevent the new war. These foreign policy orientations also represented a tendency for the independence of the army, fraught with Bonapartist excesses, and a “Stalinized democracy” which provided for peaceful development at home. The clash between two tendencies was imminent and delivering a mortal blow to the opposition to Stalin was justified. Shot generals were neither spies nor foreign agents as claimed by the Soviet propaganda, they, however, were conspirators who envisaged overthrowing the existing regime. Sound moral judgement of these events had to be based upon the fact that Russia (or at least Moscow) “continued to live in the era of revolution”, and in revolutionary periods repression represents a normal method of dealing with opponents.

Beneš’s conceptualization of the Tukhachevskii affairs may be considered partly consistent with the diverse body of evidence available to him at that time. However, one should have rather low opinion of Beneš’s intellectual abilities and qualities of statesmanship to assume that the communication received from Wittig via Hoffmann, Trautmansdorf via Mastny and Thyssen via Preiss in the beginning of 1937, or even Beneš’s attentive awareness of rumors on the possibility of imminent reversal of Soviet policy were sufficient to make him so joyfully receive the bloody news from Moscow. On the other hand, although information from these and other sources might have fortified Beneš in his analytical findings, as we know now, it did not lead to any serious moves on his part in the first half of 1937, not to speak of communicating the “plot” reports to Stalin<sup>28</sup>.

As suggested above, Beneš’s apprehensions were based upon first-hand knowledge and independent analysis of the Soviet behavior and politics (that represented much wider subject than merely a rupture of Czech-German contacts at the turn of 1937, though rationalization of this incident also played its role). Of primary importance in this respect was ambiguity of Russian policy *vis-à-vis* Czechoslovakia upon the conclusion of the mutual assistance pact. In no other sphere this “double-dealing” (if one borrows a term from Soviet vocabulary of 1937) was so evident as in Soviet-Czechoslovak political-military relations. During 1935-1936 the Soviets sent contradictory signals to their Czechoslovak counterparts. On the one hand, Stalin’s close associates, Voroshilov and Litvinov, made the bold assurances that the Red Army would be ready to render its ally the decisive support, even if that meant marching through Poland or Romania. In practice, the responsible Soviet agencies, primarily military, played down those promises and were growingly unapproachable. Given the agreeable mood in which the Czechoslovaks offered closer cooperation, the two-year experience was probably conceived in Prague as stemming from the inner struggle in

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<sup>28</sup> Of some, though marginal, interest is the fact that Pavel Sudoplatov from the *INO GUGB NKVD* definitely denied that the President of Czechoslovakia played any role in the fall of Tukhachevsky, despite his tendency to implicate Western political and public figures, including Beneš (P. Sudoplatov. *Spetsoperatsii: Lubianka i Kreml’ 1930-1950*. Moscow.: Olma-press, 1997, p. 137-140).



Moscow, if not from the virtual sabotage by anti-Stalin and pro-German military plotters. The uncertainty in Soviet attitude regarding talks on strategic coordination between the Staffs in the second half of 1936 might well be explained by the Czechoslovak leaders as arising from the political circumstances of the Moscow trial of August 1936 and first arrests of military commanders.

Whatever diplomatic explanations, with a particular reference to the French evasiveness, could be, the USSR's own interests demanded either active strategic cooperation with the Czechs or coming to terms with Germany. Beneš was ready to consider "natural" for the Soviets to take any of these two options, but the lasting inconsistency of Soviet behavior left him only one step from accepting Stalin's suggestions that a real political conflict had been developing in high quarters. After all, by pinning the guilt of indecision upon top-level "enemies of the people", the Kremlin leaders tacitly admitted it had been existing over the last years.

The major inner weakness of Beneš's conceptualization of the Tukhachevskii affair seems to be a notion of the USSR simultaneously going through a revolution and remaining under Stalin's firm control. To recognize that the Soviet terror of late 30-s was a "controllable revolution" (the phenomenon most known from the Chinese experience in 1966-1969) implied admitting Stalin had been and was the real master of the situation. Therefore, the main threat of Soviet foreign policy reorientation toward "isolationism" remained. This, further, implied the military conspirators were not so central for the outcome of the Russian (and European) drama as Beneš's observations to Alexandrovskii in early July 1937 might have suggested.

The development of Beneš' views can be traced with the help of another, under-appreciated source -- the influential treatment of the "Tukhachevski affair" that appeared in the *Foreign Affairs* in October 1937. In an interview with George F. Kennan, who had returned from the Moscow Embassy to serve at the Division of European Affairs, a leading American Sovietologist, Professor Bruce Hopper of the Harvard University revealed that the origins of this study, published over the pseudonym of "Balticus". A good deal of the *Foreign Affairs* article was written by Bruce Hopper himself; "with respect to the shootings of the Red Army generals" his information came from Russian circles in Paris and "from circles close to the Czechoslovak Government".

According to Hopper, "the concluding paragraphs of the article had been written entirely by Benes"<sup>29</sup>. Although expressing his views through press articles was not unusual for the President<sup>30</sup>,

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<sup>29</sup> Memorandum by Kennan, Jan. 8, 1938, National Archives and Record Administration: SD/861.00/11747. Given George Kennan's reputation as a staunch opponent of the "pro-Soviet" Ambassador Davies, it is worth mentioning that he largely agreed with the interpretation advanced by Beneš and his colleagues. "It is evident, Kennan concluded, that higher Red Army circles and a number of Communist intellectuals like Radek did not approve the anti-German policies of Litvinov, and it seems to be fairly well established that they did attempt... to make thier views known to the German Army circles and to retain a certain measure of sympathy and support in Germany for the event they might some day come into power in Russia".

cooperation with an influential American traveler demonstrates the significance Benes attributed to changing the dominant Western perception of the Soviet politics. The analysis of the “Balticus” article indicates that Benes himself penned two following paragraphs<sup>31</sup>:

Up to the moment of Hitler’s advent in Germany there was room in Soviet Russia for some differences of opinion as to the most advantageous foreign policy to follow. But after the Nazis took power it became plain that democratic and Fascist governments were not equally dangerous to Soviet Russia. Those who had urged that the German Communists be instructed to make trouble for the German Republic by helping the Nazis, on the theory that in the ensuing chaos the Communists would seize power in Germany, had been proven wrong. To urge that kind of adventurous foreign policy no longer represented a tolerable divergence of opinion. *Peace had to be saved for the Soviet Russia.* Fascism had to be checked before it became a preponderant force in the world; Communism is to be developed at home, not fought abroad. Yet the group that can roughly be labeled as Trotskyite continued to hold some of their former ideas. *They favored making peace* with Germany, perhaps with Japan, as the most promising means of keeping Russia at peace. Germany and Japan would then be free to turn their attention to their other neighbors; and if wars were perchance to ensue, so much the better – Soviet Russia would remain aloof, and international Communism might profit in the ensuing social chaos. Against this view Stalin and Litvinov set themselves strongly. *They favored maintaining peace* for Russia by joining the collective system, by working with the democratic countries in the League of Nations. The sort of difference of opinion which in 1929 had led simply to the expulsion of Trotsky rather than to his execution, led in 1936 to the execution of those who still pursued some of his policies. Stalin brushed aside Lenin’s warning not to fall into the Jacobin error of “mutual extermination”. His dictatorship had come to the logical conclusion of all dictatorships: any difference of opinion is treason.

Outside these two ideological groups, or rather as an adjunct to one of them, was the military clique headed by Tukhachevsky. These officers were intent on creating a Red Army free from party control; they were partisans of the policy of making terms with Germany; *it seems that* went further and plotted with the Reichswehr; at all events – and it was enough – they were rivals of Stalin and would-be-inheritors of his power. Tukhachevsky thought that he could make himself the Bonaparte of the revolution. He met a dictatorial will more ruthless than his own.

This concise assessment is interesting in many respects. It shows that by early Fall 1937 Beneš no longer considered the situation in Russia within “revolutionary” framework that hitherto provided the ground for moral excuse of the purges. Jacobinian language of the regime became for Beneš a “historic present”, used to distort the accomplished fact that the Stalin dictatorship had finished the Russian revolution. “Tukhachevsky plot” clearly lost to Beneš its centrality, he even

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<sup>30</sup> On Beneš’s articles published anonymously in “Prager Presse” and “Národní politika” in the second half of 1936, see I. Dejmek. “Korrespondence Kamila Krofty s Edvardem Benešem”. Část II (1927-1938), *Sborník archivních prací*, 1998, 48, č. 2, s. 198.

came to doubt, if the Soviet military leaders had really had connections with their German counterparts. If so, there were serious reasons to expound the executions of the military leaders in other terms than power struggle and clash of the two ruthless wills. While conceding this point to his previous observations, Beneš was obviously hesitant if the Tukhachevsky group still had to be associated with the “ideological” tendency described above.

Now it was competing foreign policy orientations that again worried him most -- and led to the contradictory assertion. On the one hand, Beneš believed that from 1933 it had become “plain” for reasonable mind that Russia’s interest made her a natural partner of the democratic nations, leaving no room for legitimate differences of views on the political course to follow. Still, he portrayed the opposition to the Stalin-Litvinov policy not so much as a vestige of the Rapallo/Trotskyite tradition but rather as a realistic reaction to new international challenges. Although the dreams of world revolution played their part, the so-called “Trotskyites”, Beneš told his audience, recognized the primacy of peace for Soviet Russia just as the ruling regime did. Accepting this perspective one should even wonder, if Stalin’s foes had not been the staunchest partisans of peace for Russia. That implied the Soviet purges provided for Czechoslovakia no guarantee against the reversal of the Moscow policy. And here Beneš stopped.

Most probably, the aim of President’s willing cooperation with a Harvard Professor was to send the double message to the Western capitals – the Stalin regime is no more monstrous than other dictatorships, the need to keep Soviet Russia from taking an alternative road to peace remains. Beneš might not clearly understand the logic of Stalin’s non-traditional dictatorship, its totalitarian ability to assimilate rival ideas, to embrace all imaginable ideological tendencies and to merge them into a practical policy guided by the political expediency and imperious instincts. But he came closer to this apprehension than he himself might be willing to admit: instilling optimism in Czechoslovakia partners on the East and on the West over opportunities for collective security had become the order of the day<sup>32</sup>. That this task proved to be beyond one’s power is a matter of common knowledge.

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<sup>31</sup> Balticus, “The Russian Mystery: Behind the Tuchachevsky Plot”, *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 1937, p. 63 (my italics).

<sup>32</sup> Very indicative in this respect is the record of Beneš’s conversations with the Soviet envoy at the end of 1937. The President started with reporting his efforts “to take the USSR under protection” from France and England since they were assessing internal situation in the USSR and her international role “rather pessimistically”. Then Beneš demanded explanations of the continuation of the purges and interviewed Alexandrovsky on this subject for almost an hour. The last part of the conversation was devoted to briefing the Soviet minister on the “brilliant results” of Delbos’ visits to Warsaw, Belgrade and Bucarest (*Zapis’ besedy Alexandrovskogo z Benešem on Dec. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1937 (Prague, Dec. 24<sup>th</sup> 1937)*, Library of Congress Manuscript Division (the Volkogonov collection, cont. 14, file 182 (photocopy)).

More overtly, when discussing with the French envoy the outcomes of the repression in the Red Army, K. Krofta tried to persuade him that “*c’était l’intérêt de la France comme de la Tchécoslovaquie de dire que la Russie est forte*” (De Lacroix à Paul-Boncour, Prague, 21 mars 1938, DDF, 2<sup>ème</sup> sér, t. IX, p. 8).