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Czecho-Slovakia

By CAPT. H. G. SCOTT, M.A., LL.B.

CAPT. SCOTT:—Mr. President and gentlemen, you are all painfully aware that in the last days of September the world was brought to the edge of another great war and that that war was averted in the last hours when it looked as if all hope was gone. You are also aware that the immediate cause or pretext for that crisis arose in what is known as the Sudeten Deutsch area of Czecho-Slovakia. Now let me remind you very briefly of recent history with respect to that area. When the peace treaties were made at the close of the great war Czecho Slovakia was brought into existence as the heir of the old kingdom of Bohemia. When the question of frontiers was being determined that Sudeten Deutsch area presented considerable difficulty. The majority of the people were Germans and they intimated that they wished to remain attached to Austria to which they had been attached before the war. Now just look at the map. You will see what is left of the great Austro-Hungarian Empire. If you take that little Sudeten Deutsch area you have a narrow crescent shaped area standing as it were on the tip of the remains of Austria. It was out of the question to leave such an area attached to Austria. It would have had neither economic nor strategic basis for its existence. In fact, what was settled was this, that it should be part of Czecho-Slovakia with the promise from the Czecho-Slovakian government that the Germans of that area would retain local autonomy, the suggestion being that it should follow in a rough sort of way the example of Switzerland, where three nationalities, French, German and Italian, live together quite happily under a system of something like local autonomy. Now one of the sad things of the post war period is that these nations of

Central and Eastern Europe which were recalled to life by the peace treaties after generations of subjection have not easily learned the lesson of toleration. We of the British Empire consider that we have learned that lesson. We should be slow to blame other peoples who have not gone through the painful centuries of experience which we have gone through if perhaps they have not quite mastered that lesson. In any event the Czech government did not fully carry out its undertaking to give local autonomy to the Germans and the Germans suffered thereby a certain amount of annoyance and perhaps one might say a certain amount of harshness. If one may take the Canadian analogy one can imagine the annoyance which would exist in Quebec if almost all of the officials, local police, customs officers and so on were drawn from Ontario and spoke only English. You must not press that analogy, but very roughly that was the basis of the Sudeten Deutsch grievance. Perhaps some of the Czech officials were not as expert as they might have been. A nation which has come out of centuries of subjection is not necessarily expert at the very beginning of its career in governing an alien people. So the Sudeten Deutsch had a grievance. Now what about the other side of the story. It is true that they had a certain amount of grievance but they had a very reasonable fair share in the life of the country. They were allowed their own German newspapers, their own schools, they had full liberty of voicing their grievances. They had the right to take their part as citizens in the life of Czecho-Slovakia; had far better treatment than almost any other minority in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe—ininitely better treatment than the minority in such countries as Russia, Poland and Yugo Slavia, and far better treatment than any dissident minority received in Germany. For Germany to protest to the world about the ill treatment of minorities in Czecho-Slovakia is a grotesque and brazen piece of effrontery. Nevertheless there was a Sudeten Deutsch problem in Europe.

Now let us turn to Germany. You will remember that Germany's collapse at the close of the great war was suc-

ceeded by some years of complete weakness and confusion. Then gradually that very great people,—and whether you like Germans or not they are one of the great peoples of the world,—began to recover, and convalescence set in. Then in 1933, if I am right in my dates, finally came the accession to power of Hitler and the Nazi party, and with that accession to power Germany entered upon a calculated policy of aggression designed to recover her old position in Europe and the world. Step by step Germany has gone forward. She recovered the Rhineland, which from 1918 had been an Allied occupation under the peace treaty, several years before it was due to be returned to her under the treaty. She did so mainly by a well calculated course of whining to Great Britain, and appeals to British generosity, which were successful, and for which we have received not one iota of thanks from Germany. She recovered the Saar, quite properly, by a plebiscite taken in accordance with the Versailles Treaty, and she then began to reach out elsewhere and by other methods. She made at least two attempts to take over Austria and she failed, although in the course of one of those attempts there was carried out the murder of the Austrian Prime Minister and Chancellor, Dr. Dolfuss, a murder which was notified to the world as a German performance when Austria was finally annexed last March, by a solemn service held by the German government in Austria in honor of the men who were put to death for the murder of Dr. Dolfuss. She attempted to extend the line of her frontiers to include Memel, a small port on the Baltic and she was checked and drew back there. Then in 1935 came that event which I think history will count a disaster for the world, and that was the Italian attack on Abyssinia, an attack made in flat defiance of the Italians' treaty obligations and the ordinary dictates of international good faith and morality. The effect of that attack was to split the united front that had existed between Italy, France and Great Britain as a counter poise to Germany and to throw Italy into the arms of Germany. Germany at once seized the opportunity. Before very long Germany made her influence felt everywhere. You will remember that one of the conditions of the peace treaty

was that the Rhineland should remain non-militarized and that German troops were not to occupy the Rhineland. In defiance of her treaty obligations the German troops invaded and occupied the Rhineland.

Now you see the effect of that, gentlemen. As long as the Rhineland was unmilitarized and there was no German troops in it, it was always open to French invasion. That meant that the French had a road open into South Germany, a road, if you will, by which she could reach her allies of Central and Eastern Europe, Poland, Czecho-Slovakia, Roumania and Yugo-Slavia, but with the reoccupation by German troops and the remilitarization of the Rhineland that road was blocked. Then came the next step forward, last March, when Germany, again in defiance of her undertakings and her treaty obligations, invaded and by violence annexed Austria and thereby not only imposed an additional barrier to the French road to her eastern allies but turned the flank of the mountain defences of the little country of Czecho-Slovakia. This northern Czech frontier is mountainous, magnificently fortified and very difficult to storm. The old Austrian frontier is a different story, open rolling country in which the only natural barriers are rivers. The effect of that was, as you can see from the map, that the Germans were around Czecho-Slovakia on three sides and that the doom of that little nation was virtually sealed, in view of the fact that the general opinion with respect to Germany is that her line of advance is likely to be not westward against Great Britain and France, if she can avoid it, but eastward and south through Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary and Roumania out through the Black Sea and up into the Ukraine—something along the lines of the old Germany policy of the drive to the east; it was the line of least resistance. Most people in recent years have believed that that was the line that Germany was going to take and they have proved to be correct. Now in the course of that policy of advance and aggression there has developed in Germany a certain technique which has been applied on more than one occasion, the technique of infiltration, agitation, annexation, in other words the sending of German agents into the territory which was aimed at, to stir up trouble, create

incidents, to provoke and cause bloodshed where desirable, and generally to create the impression that there was a condition of intolerable oppression which justified Germany in intervening to put a stop to it. Czecho-Slovakia became subject to that form of aggression and incidents began to happen in the Sudeten Deutsch areas of Czecho-Slovakia. A certain number of lives were lost; on the whole the balance was against the Czecho-Slovakians; there were more Czechs killed than Germans, not many but sufficient to keep up a condition of alarm and irritation. There were riots and demonstrations of one sort and another and a continual clamor from the German press that the Germans were being ill treated and Germany must intervene to stop it. And so, gentlemen, the summer passed and we began to come near to that always important occasion of the year in Germany, the Nazi rally at Nuremberg in September at which Hitler has made a practice of announcing to the German people some great stroke of policy, some dramatic coup, if he can, and in September I went to Czecho-Slovakia. Now it was obvious, if you keep in mind that German technique of attack that the brunt of the difficulty of dealing with it fell on the Czecho-Slovakian police. It was they who had to prevent these incidents, these little isolated acts of bloodshed, the riots, the demonstrations which were continually being provoked in the Sudeten Deutsch areas, and I therefore obtained authority from the Czech government in Prague to keep in touch with the Czech police in the area and watch what was going on. The first place I went to was Reichenberg, a fairly large city, and when I got there I had a chat with the head of the police administration, an exceedingly capable official, and he told me that the Czech police were in a position of extreme difficulty, that they were facing an active aggressive agitation, and that they were surrounded by a vast majority of Germans amply supplied with arms brought in illegally across the German frontier and that the police were further in this dilemma now that the Czech government in Prague had given strict orders they must avoid bloodshed, knowing perfectly well that bloodshed was what the Germans wanted: And that they must refrain from the use of fire arms, bayonets, swords and revolvers and rely only on the truncheon of the police-

man, not an adequate weapon when dealing with resolute, armed rebels. They obtained word that on a certain day in Reichenberg the Germans planned to bring in about 15,000 men from the district about and hold a great anti-government demonstration in the town square, and if possible hoist the Nazi flag on the town hall. I watched the town square through that day along with one of the Czech police officers, and as the afternoon approached—the demonstrators were expected in the late afternoon—the square became a very interesting place. It was full of Germans who milled around the sides of the square talking and watching for something to come. After a while into the square came 50 Czech police; they were drawn up in a double line. Then came the tramp of horses hooves in the streets and into the square rode a troop of Czech mounted police. They split into half sections and patrolled the square, keeping the Germans to the side walks, keeping the roadways clear. It was exceedingly well done, very quietly, without any shouting or violence, they kept them in their proper place and the Germans made no attempt to launch an attack on the police. Then into the square marched a column of Czecho-Slovakian regular infantry with fixed bayonets who marched through and passed on. After a short interval came three armored cars, quietly, slowly driven through, with machine guns looking from the turrets, and passed on. They were followed by a column of gendarmes, who also passed through and went on. Whenever such columns came through, one could see and hear amongst the Germans in the square and in the coffee houses a little stir of excitement as to what was coming. Each time they realized it was a Czech column, one could hear a little sigh of disappointment, and they settled back to watch for what they wanted. The effect of these columns passing through the square was that without any violence, without any great demonstration, the Czech police managed to let the Germans know that force was ready if they were compelled to use it. At the Czech police headquarters the proclamations of martial law in the district were ready to be posted up. By that means the Czech authorities stopped the demonstration. The Germans, realizing what the position was, sent out the necessary word and as the afternoon wore on it became

clear that the demonstration would not take place, and as darkness came the square began to empty, the Germans slowly dispersed, and there were left only the lights of the lamps shining on the steel helmets of the slowly pacing cavalry and the two lines of Czech police. The Czechs kept the foot police there all night lest the Germans should take advantage of their absence and bring on the demonstration. When morning came it was not the Nazi flag that was flying from the Town Hall but a great black flag that marked the anniversary of the death one year previously of President Mazaryk who had given his life to the bringing back of his country from the dead, who was fortunate that he died before he saw what was to happen in the next few days.

Then I got word that at another little town a few miles off, Warnsdorf, a very serious situation had developed. So I decided to go there. I had two roads to go by, the first that crossed a strip of German territory, and the other, more round about, that followed the frontier inside the Czech frontier. The Czechs thought it was wisest to keep inside the Czech frontier and I took that route. All along the frontier there were shadows of coming war; great piles of barbed wire at stations, newly constructed pill boxes of concrete on grassy slopes and military patrols at stations and tunnels. When I got into this little town the first evening everything was quiet. It was a town with dimly lighted streets, nothing going on, but early the next morning I was awakened by the tramp of feet and I saw a column of Germans passing and I wondered what they were doing at that time of the morning and I discovered they had been taking part in a great German anti-government demonstration through the middle of the night at a little distance from the town. I then got in touch with the Czech police headquarters and in a little room I found the officer commanding in a state of great anxiety. They told me they knew that in that district they were surrounded by approximately 5,000 armed Germans and they were expecting an attack at any moment. Their total forces in the district consisted of 60 men including a few soldiers. They were sending out appeal after appeal by telephone for help and the atmosphere in the room was an atmosphere of extreme gloom. Call after call came in on the phone. Suddenly

the officer in command slapped down his receiver and said he had received word tanks were coming to their help, from a town about 15 miles away and probably would be in Warnsdorf in an hour. Then came another call to say the leaders of the Germans had appealed to the government of the Czechs in Prague to stop the tanks in return for an assurance that the German armed body would be dispersed to their homes. You see the effect of this statement by the Germans, the implied admission that they had organized a small rebel army on Czech soil. The Czech government replied that they had heard that promise three times and it had been broken three times, but apparently they said they would stop the tanks, and the gloom descended on the police headquarters again. Suddenly there came the tramp of feet on the stairs and the door opened and in walked a Czech gendarmerie major. The tanks had arrived, and behind them came four lorry loads of Czech infantry. Their arrival was immediately followed by column after column of Germans who came on into the town square. The square was 100 yards each way and they filled the square. They formed up facing the windows of the Czech town police, and at an upstairs window there appeared a man in a German grey green army uniform who addressed the crowd in a magnificent voice that rang all over the square. His speech was received with roars of cheering both from the German demonstrators and from the townspeople who had gathered and joined in the cheering. All gave the Nazi salute and then they all sang Deutschland Uber Alles. They sang it magnificently and the effect was most impressive.

Now gentlemen, you have heard stories from Germany of the atmosphere of terror and oppression in Czecho-Slavokia amongst these unhappy Germans. What would have happened in Germany if a rebel minority had held a demonstration like that under the eyes of the German police equipped with tanks and infantry and had sung the national anthem of a hostile foreign country. They would not have got through a line before they would have been blasted with machine guns and sent to the concentration camp. You talk about terror! Rubbish! The only terror that existed there was the fear of the little handful of Czech

officers surrounded by that vast majority of Germans. When the demonstration was done the Germans dispersed. An hour later came the Czech answer. Out from the police headquarters came a single police officer with a drummer at his heels. He walked across to the middle of the square and the drummer played a roll on the drum. The Germans took no notice, except for 30 or 40 children who gathered round. He read a proclamation in a quiet voice, saluted ceremoniously and walked back to headquarters. Martial law had been proclaimed. That clipped the claws of the German demonstrators and there was no more gathering in the streets that night. Next morning the shadows of war were more visible. The banks stopped paying out money. At the station were German women and children being sent out of the country into Germany. The Czechs had already sent their women into the country of Czecho-Slovakia.

Then I proceeded to Gablonz and I spent one evening at the headquarters of the Czech National Guard where night after night they kept 300 men ready with arms against a German attack expected in the town. Talking to the Czechs through that evening I got some of their ideas. I asked them how long they thought they could hold out without help. They said, "Well, this is a splendid frontier. We have line after line of fortifications. We think we can hold out a month or six weeks without help." They said that when the Germans invaded Austria they had trouble with respect to their mechanical transport and tanks as the result of sabotage done by disaffected elements in Germany and they thought they would suffer still more if they invaded Czecho-Slovakia. Now most of their information was coming from German communists and radical sources and it may have been entirely unreliable and prejudiced; it may have been wrong. I merely give it you for what it is worth. All of them were quite convinced that if war came, the Russians were coming to their help. This was rather a strange belief, and pathetic. Look at the map. There is a strip of Roumanian and Polish territory separating Russia from Czecho-Slovakia. The Poles had intimated that on no account would they allow the Russians to cross Polish territory. The Czechs were of the opinion that an agree-

ment had been signed between Roumania and Russia to allow the Russians to cross, but even if this had been true the Russians would have had to cross the Carpathian mountains, through which there is only one poor railway and very inadequate roads. Even if the Russians had been brilliantly efficient they could not have brought a large force through that area in time and the Russians are perhaps the most inefficient nation in Europe. The Czechs perhaps thought that the Russians might have been able to come by air, but they believed with great confidence, anyway, that Russia was coming. I think they were entirely mistaken. None of us I think, know what is the truth about Russia but I give you the opinion of one man I talked to in Prague. He, I think, knew perhaps as well as anybody there what the position was and I asked him, "Is this the position, that the Russians are deliberately encouraging the Czechs to defy Germany and so bring on a war into which France and Great Britain will be drawn while the Russians will take no part but from which they will hope to be able to pick up the pieces after European civilization is more or less destroyed?" He said, "That is exactly what I think the Russians are planning." That may have been wrong, entirely wrong. It is impossible to say what the truth of this matter was. You all know what followed a few days later.

Now gentlemen, it was a tremendous tragedy for that little people of Czecho-Slovakia. What should we say about it? We are on tremendously controversial ground now but I think that it is the duty of every British citizen to state his opinion frankly. I may be wrong but here is my opinion. I say that that was a shameful thing that was done at Munich. It was a dreadful dilemma that confronted Mr. Chamberlain, a dreadful dilemma. He had to face the choice of two alternatives. He had to face the possibility of war in which I think he believed, and rightly believed, that the Russians would take no part, that the Czechs would almost certainly be destroyed and that France and Britain would suffer severe loss even if in the end they were victorious. That was one alternative. The other was to abandon the Czechs. Now I do not believe any one of us has any right to condemn Mr. Chamberlain for taking the

choice he did. It was a terrible choice to make. I do not think any of us have the right to say he was wrong to do what he did. But to say that that was a triumph for the cause of peace—oh, gentlemen, it was not that; it was a shameful surrender to the spirit of violence, and bloody handed war. Remember what Chamberlain himself said to the British House of Commons. He said that when he met Hitler he found Hitler was quite prepared if he did not immediately get his way in Czecho-Slovakia to plunge the world into war. He said further that when he met him the second time the demands Hitler presented were such as no nation could be asked to agree to and the British and French governments did not advise the Czechs then to agree. Yet within a few days later the demands were accepted by the French and British governments with a mere delay of 10 days. That is called a triumph for the cause of peace. How did it happen? I think it has happened not through the fault of Mr. Chamberlain alone. We have no right to blame him. Every government of the Empire, every community within the Empire shares the responsibility for that surrender. Every Government of the Empire signed the covenant of the League of Nations. All of us looking at that covenant knew that it meant that small nations were to receive protection and support against aggression. Not one government, not one community within the Empire had taken the necessary precautions to be able to fulfil our obligations up to the measure of our strength, and because of that every citizen of the Empire has a share in the dishonour of that surrender. How come it was received with cheers? I think this was the reason. . . The British people have risen to greatness, and built their Empire, in circumstances of peculiar privilege. We have been spared invasion and most of the horrors of war within our own territory because of one fact, that we have grown up behind the barrier of the sea and behind the shield of the British fleet, and in those last dreadful days of September it was suddenly borne in on the British people that by reason of the coming of the bombing aeroplane the barrier and the shield are gone and there is no longer any sea. In face of the tremendous shock the fact that we had saved ourselves at the expense of others was received with an out-

burst of applause took place for which I think most of us by now are ashamed. Well, gentlemen, there is no peace in Europe; Japan marches on to the conquest of a great Empire in China; in all the world violence is in the saddle, and we in the Empire are facing a tremendous danger that we may have to stand and fight for our lives within a comparatively short period, or be forced to pay blackmail to the international brigands. That has not been the way of the Empire in the past. I hope it will not be the way of the Empire in the future. How are we to meet this danger? Long long ago that old country of Scotland to which so many of us owe our ancestry and of which we are so proud, faced an even greater danger than we are facing today, the danger of the complete extinction and destruction of the Scottish people. In the face of that danger the leaders of Scotland sent out to the man who was at that time the greatest spiritual and temporal ruler in Europe a letter which is one of the most moving documents in the pages of history, far too long to read to you now, but I think the last sentence might perhaps be kept in our minds. We of the British race have many faults and failures. They are glaringly obvious at the present time but it is just possible that in the course of our history there has been some merits and some measure of good which we are entitled at the present moment to reckon on the other side of the count. Because of them we are perhaps entitled to use again the brave words of the old Scottish Parliament of 600 years ago—"We commit our cause to the Supreme King and Judge. We cast our cares upon Him and we do steadily trust that He will inspire our hearts with valor and bring our enemies to naught."