

Proposal

Title – A Central European Tragedy: Czechoslovakian Jews and the Munich Agreement

Program of Study – History (M.A.)

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Abstract: In September 1938, Europe's major powers signed off on the Munich Pact, thus granting the Sudetenland region to Nazi Germany. Czechoslovakia, who possessed the Sudetenland prior to the pact, was not invited to the negotiations. A failed attempt at appeasement, Hitler used the agreement to gain a foothold in Central Europe. In the ensuing months, he would occupy the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and one year later invade Poland, thereby starting World War II. Common understanding of the Munich Agreement locates its failure in the fact that it both betrayed the wishes of Czechoslovakia – the country with the most to lose – and fed Hitler's expansionist momentum, ultimately leading to war. This perspective may bear truth, but it is also far too narrow in that it also ignores the pact's more immediate consequences. Namely, the pact brought swift and devastating suffering to Czechoslovakia's Jewish population. The tragedy is compounded when one considers Czechoslovakia's dedication to democratic ideals ever since her conception in 1918. Prior to Munich, Jews in Czechoslovakia possessed full and equal rights as citizens, an incredible feat during a time when most Central European states favored authoritarianism and anti-Semitic legislation. Thus, the Munich Agreement not only brought immeasurable suffering to Czechoslovakian Jews, but it utterly dismantled one of Europe's most impressive democracies. There is a significant historiographical gap regarding the Czechoslovakian Jewish experience, especially as it relates to the Munich Agreement. Scholars tend to focus on the attitudes and actions of more prominent players, such as Germany and Great Britain, and the consequences of Munich are typically tied to the coming war. Even fewer works address America's consideration of 1930s Czechoslovakia and her Jews. Furthermore, there are no recent works that address Czechoslovakia's fair treatment of Jews from 1918 – 1938 – largely the result of the efforts of Czechoslovakia's founder and first president, Tomas Masaryk – and how that makes the impact of Munich all the more devastating. This study is worthwhile for two main reasons. First, little work has been done in this subject area. Pulling from archives containing testimonies of Czechoslovakian Jews, along with primary source research from the period, this study helps fill the historiographical gap. Second, objective examination of the issues pertaining to the Czechoslovakian Jewish experience in the 1930s raises crucial questions. How can nations balance pressing domestic needs with responding to global crises? To what extent should free and democratic societies support threatened democracies abroad? How can political leaders model the values inherent to a nation, and to what expense? Although these questions are not addressed in an explicit manner, this study brings these questions to the forefront of readers' minds. Fresh inquiry drawn from meticulous historical study can go a long way in tempering spirits, promoting reason and patience when confronting contemporary frustrations.