

CZECHO-SLOVAKIA.

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§LORD SNELL

My Lords, I beg to ask the noble Viscount the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs if he can make any statement on the situation in Czecho-Slovakia.

§THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS (VISCOUNT HALIFAX)

My Lords, on March 10 last the President of the Czecho-Slovak Republic dismissed certain members of the Slovak Government, including the Prime Minister, Dr. Tiso, on the ground that certain factors in the Slovak Government had not been showing sufficient resistance to subversive activity and that the federal interests of the State were thereby threatened. On March 11 a new Slovak Government was appointed under the Presidency of M. Sidor, the former Slovak representative in the Central Government at Prague. Dr. Tiso appealed to Herr Hitler and received an official invitation to go to Berlin. He had an interview with Herr Hitler on March 13, after which he returned to Bratislava to attend a special session of the Slovak Diet which had been called for the morning of March 14. At the conclusion of this session the independence of Slovakia was proclaimed with the approval of the Diet. A new Slovak Government was constituted under Dr. Tiso, including M. Sidor.

Yesterday afternoon the President of the Czecho-Slovak Republic and the Foreign Minister left for Berlin. They had an interview with Herr Hitler and Herr von Ribbentrop, at the conclusion of which a signed communiqué was issued. This communiqué stated that the serious situation which had arisen as a result of the events of the past week on what was hitherto Czecho-Slovak territory had been closely and frankly examined. Both sides gave expression to their mutual conviction that the aim of all efforts in this part of Central Europe should be the safeguarding of calm, order and peace. The Czecho-Slovak President declared that in order to serve this purpose and in order to secure final pacification, he placed the destiny of

the Czech people and country with confidence in the hands of the German Reich. Herr Hitler accepted this declaration and expressed his determination to take the Czech people under the protection of the German Reich, and to guarantee to it an autonomous development of its national life in accordance with its peculiar characteristics.

The occupation of Bohemia by German military forces began at 6 a.m. this morning. The Czech people have been ordered by their Government not to offer resistance. The President of the Czecho-Slovak Republic is returning to Prague. Herr Hitler issued an order to the German armed forces this morning to the effect that German military detachments would cross the frontier of the Czech territory in order to assume impartial control of the safety of the lives and property of all inhabitants of the country. Every German soldier was to regard himself not as a foe but as a representative of the German Government, to restore a tolerable order. Where opposition was offered to the march, it was to be broken down at once by all available methods. The armed forces were to bear in mind that they were treading on Czech soil as the representatives of Great Germany. Meanwhile on March 14, as a result of incidents on the frontier between Ruthenia and Hungary, Hungarian troops crossed the border and occupied a Czech village. Thereafter the Hungarian Government sent an ultimatum to Prague demanding among other things the withdrawal of Czech troops from Ruthenia, the release of Hungarian prisoners, and freedom for persons of Hungarian nationality and race in Ruthenia to arm and to organise. This ultimatum expired this morning, but I have not yet received official reports of the way in which the situation is developing.

It will no doubt be asked how these events affect the guarantee which was described by Sir Thomas Inskip in the following words on October 4 last: The question has been raised whether our guarantee to Czecho-Slovakia is already in operation. The House will realise that the formal treaty of guarantee has yet to be drawn up and completed in the normal way, and, as the Foreign Secretary has stated in another place, there are some matters which must await settlement between the Governments concerned. Until that has been done, ²¹⁶technically the guarantee cannot be said to be in

force. His Majesty's Government, however, feel under a moral obligation to Czecho-Slovakia to treat the guarantee as being now in force. In the event, therefore, of an act of unprovoked aggression against Czecho-Slovakia, His Majesty's Government would certainly feel bound to take all steps in their power to see that the integrity of Czecho-Slovakia is preserved. Only recently His Majesty's Government endeavoured to achieve an agreement with the other Governments represented at Munich upon the scope and terms of such a guarantee, but up to the present they have been unable to reach any such agreement.

In our opinion the situation was radically altered as soon as the Slovak Diet declared the independence of Slovakia. The effect of this declaration was to put an end by internal disruption to the State whose frontiers we had proposed to guarantee, and accordingly the condition of affairs described by Sir Thomas Inskip, which was always regarded by us as being only of a transitory nature, has now ceased to exist and **His Majesty's Government cannot accordingly hold themselves any longer bound by this obligation.**

As regards the financial assistance to the former Government of Czecho-Slovakia, which was authorised by the Act of Parliament passed last month, the position, so far as I have been able to ascertain, is as follows:—Section I of the Act provided that the Treasury should repay to the Bank of England the £10,000,000 which had been placed at the disposal of the National Bank of Czecho-Slovakia, and that has been done. The amount that has been withdrawn by Czecho-Slovakia since this advance was first made available—last October—is £3,250,000. The balance of £6,750,000 has not been drawn upon but remains with the Bank of England. The scheme as originally devised between ourselves, the French Government, and the former Czecho-Slovak Government included the issue by the last-named Government of a loan on the London market by means of which the assistance given to that Government, so far as it took the form of loan, would be repaid. In the new circumstances, when it would appear that the Government of Czecho-Slovakia has ceased to exist and the territory for which that Government was formerly responsible has been divided, it

would seem impossible at present to say how the scheme can be [217](#)carried through, and steps have been taken to request the Bank of England to make further payments out of the balance of £10,000,000 until the situation has been cleared up and definite conclusions reached. I may say that I have no reason to suppose that the £3,250,000 already drawn has not been applied in accordance with the arrangements made by us, and a substantial portion of the sum has been directly devoted to the assistance of refugees.

In the meantime, having regard to the effect on general conditions in Europe that these events are bound to exert, His Majesty's Government feel the present moment to be inappropriate for the proposed visit of the President of the Board of Trade and Secretary of the Department of Overseas Trade, which has accordingly been postponed. The German Government has been so informed.

To a large extent the information I have given the House is based on Press reports and, while there is little reason to think that the general effect is not as I have described it to be, final judgment on all the circumstances should await further confirmation. I do not want to make any specific charges as to breach of faith, but I cannot admit that anything of the kind that has now taken place was in our minds at the time of Munich or was in any way contemplated. The Munich Agreement constituted a settlement, accepted by the Four Powers and Czecho-Slovakia of the Czecho-Slovak question. It provided for the fixation of the future frontiers of Czecho-Slovakia (which has been effected) and laid down the limits of the German occupation which the German Government accepted. They have now, without so far as I know any communication with the other three signatories of the Munich Agreement, sent their troops beyond the frontier there laid down. Even though it may now be claimed that what has taken place has occurred with the acquiescence of the Czech Government, I cannot but regard it as inconsistent with the spirit of the Munich Agreement.

There is a further point which I cannot omit to mention. Hitherto the Reich Government, in extending the area of their military control, have defended their action by the contention that they were

only incorporating in the Reich neighbouring masses of people of German race.²¹⁸ Now for the first time they are effecting a military occupation of territory inhabited by people with whom they have no racial connection. These events cannot fail to be a cause of disturbance to the international situation. They are bound to administer a shock to confidence; all the more regrettable since confidence was beginning to revive and to offer the prospect of concrete measures which would be of general benefit. Unless there is some material change in the situation as it now appears, there must inevitably be a postponement of these measures.

§LORD SNELL

My Lords, it is perhaps inadvisable that your Lordships should discuss at this stage the momentous statement which has been made by the noble Viscount the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, but my noble friends and myself would like to reserve the right, if we see occasion, to inaugurate a debate on the matter at an early date.

THE MARQUESS OF CREWE

My Lords, I thoroughly agree with what has fallen from the noble Lord who leads the Opposition, that this is by no means the moment to discuss what he accurately described as the momentous statement, the very frank statement, that has been made by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. I only hope that the discussion, which has to await some further development, will not be long postponed, because I think it is important that it should take place as soon as possible.