

Lukáš Novotný
 Konrad Henlein's Visits to London.
 The Contribution on the Internationalisation
 of the Sudeten German Issue
 in the Second Half of the 1930s

NOVOTNÝ, Lukáš, PhD; ass. prof., Department of Historical Sciences, Faculty of Arts, University of West Bohemia, Pilsen, Sedláčkova 31, 306 14, Pilsen, Czech Republic; novoluk@khv.zcu.cz.

Konrad Henlein's Visits to London. The Contribution on the Internationalisation of the Sudeten German Issue in the Second Half of the 1930s

Zgodovinski časopis (Historical Review), Ljubljana 72/2018 (157), No. 1-2, pp. 214–230, 50 notes

Language Sn. (En., Sn., En.)

This study uses unpublished sources of British and Czech provenance to analyse a number of visits made by Sudeten German Party leader, Konrad Henlein, to London which occurred between 1935 and 1938. It is shown that he managed to present the ever-more pressing Sudeten German issue in a manner which helped to create the image of a challenging life for the German minority in Czechoslovakia.

Keywords: Sudeten German Party; Czechoslovakia; Konrad Henlein; Foreign Office; the 1930s, German minority

NOVOTNÝ, Lukáš, dr., doc., Zahodnočeška univerza Plzen, Filozofska fakulteta, Oddelek za zgodovinske vede, Sedláčkova 31, 306 14, Pilsen, Češka republika; novoluk@khv.zcu.cz.

Obiski Londona Konrada Henleina. O internacionalizaciji vprašanja sudetskih Nemcev v drugi polovici tridesetih let dvajsetega stoletja.

Zgodovinski časopis, Ljubljana 72/2018 (157), št. 1-4, str. 214–230, cit. 50

1.01 izvorni znanstveni članek: jezik Sn. (En., Sn., En.)

Na podlagi doslej neobjavljenih britanskih in čeških virov prispevek analizira niz obiskov Londona Konrada Henleina, vodje Stranke sudetskih Nemcev, v letih 1935 do 1938. V prispevku je prikazano, da mu je uspelo predstaviti pereče vprašanje sudetskih Nemcev, s čimer je pripomogel k ustvarjanju podobe, ki prikazuje težko življenje nemške manjšine na Češkoslovaškem.

Ključne besede: Stranka sudetskih Nemcev, Češkoslovaška, Konrad Henlein, Ministrstvo za zunanje zadeve, 30. leta 20. stoletja, nemška manjšina

Introduction

Czechoslovakia, a new so-called successor state which had been established on October 28, 1918 and whose definitive borders were confirmed by the peace treaties concluded in Versailles, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and Trianon, found itself in a complicated position inherited from its predecessor, the Habsburg Monarchy – specifically the diverse multiethnic composition of its population. Almost a third of the population rejected their new homeland and could not easily identify with it; these were mainly Germans, Hungarians and Poles who had become citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic through events they had been unable to influence. The remaining two-thirds (Czechs and Slovaks) in contrast were euphoric and celebrated the country's creation as something they had desired for hundreds of years. Under these circumstances, it was almost impossible for these two groups to agree on the principles and working of “their” state.

Due to the different nationalities which made up the First Czechoslovak Republic, it is no surprise that ethnic minorities, their integration within the working of the state and issues regarding the approach of public and regional authorities to representatives of ethnic minorities, their relations and identification with the new state were all crucial issues which the country had to confront. In this regard, it was not particularly different from Austria-Hungary where nationality issues had been amongst the most important aspects of domestic policy developments. The question was whether the new and significantly smaller state would be able to confront this problem, specifically whether it would be able to find a way to address the issue in the best possible way based on building a modern civil society with significant individual rights.

While historians consider the 1920s, especially its second half, as a period of calm backed by political stability and based on economic growth, the end of the decade and the beginning of the 1930s represented a major and in many regards fateful turnaround. The economic crisis which arrived in Europe from the United States of America did not arouse great alarm in Czechoslovakia to begin with. But from mid-1931, the country entered the second phase of the crisis which was much more destructive, and which did not reach a peak until 1933. The third and final stage of the economic crisis in Czechoslovakia occurred between March 1933 and spring 1934, when the Czechoslovak economy moved into a phase of prolonged depression. Political developments naturally went hand in hand with

economic developments. Following the initial negativism of the German minority expressed in its rejection of the Czechoslovak State as an entity which had been formed against its will and in which they felt they had no space, in 1926 two German political parties joined the Czechoslovak Government, and although this was mainly a political calculation (farming tariffs and *congrua portio*), the very fact the government was of mixed nationality represented the start of a new stage in Czech-German relations for many.

The arrival of the second phase of the economic crisis in particular began gradually to affect the stance of the First Czechoslovak Republic's largest minority towards the country. The idea began to take root amongst its representatives, very slowly and almost invisibly at first, that political activism would not bring about a solution to its problems, whether regarding language, minority school system or other matters. In January 1933, Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany and although his appointment to the office initially had only a partial direct impact on the change in dynamics of Czech-German relations, the new Nazi regime in Germany was a factor which could not be ignored in future regarding the German minority in Czechoslovakia.

Konrad Henlein's¹ first major impact in the Czechoslovak domestic polity occurred at the beginning of October 1933 when he became the leader of a new political movement – the Sudeten German Home Front (Sudetendeutsche Heimatfront; SHF). This new formation did not have a clear political programme and its only objective was to unify all Sudeten Germans.² Almost two years later before the parliamentary elections in Czechoslovakia (May 1935), SHF was renamed the Sudeten German Party (Sudetendeutsche Partei, SdP),³ which despite winning the election in terms of votes cast, ended up with the second largest mandate in terms of numbers elected due to the way the electoral code in Czechoslovakia worked.

This study endeavours to answer the following questions – why did Henlein travel to London, what did he expect from his visits, did the visits serve their purpose, and why did the British officials receive him?

¹ Konrad Henlein (1898–1945), was a leading Sudeten German politician in Czechoslovakia. His father was German, his mother Czech. He was involved in the Turner movement from the 1920s and in 1925 he moved to Aš, where he took on a paid role as a Turner gymnastics teacher. Three years later, he became a member of the Turner council of the German Turner Union (Deutscher Turnverband, DTV). His influence in DTV grew, and in 1931 he was promoted to become the union's head of gymnastics. Two years later, he was the key figure behind the Sudeten German Home Front.

² SHF, however, decided to take a different path than National Socialism. It was ready to recognise the Czechoslovak Republic and clearly formulated its objectives – the spiritual development of Sudeten Germans and emphasis on traditional orders, etc. Cf. Cornwall, *The Devil's Wall*, pp. 159–162; Česar, Černý, Bohumil, *Politika německých buržoazních*, pp. 196–202; Tóth, Novotný, Stehlik, *Národnostní menšiny v Československu*, pp. 64–66; Luh, *Der deutsche Turnverband*, pp. 199–216.

³ SHF was a political movement and as such could not put itself up for election to parliament. The new party made careful preparations for the election and it had plenty of money from Sudeten German businessmen and Germany. More in detail cf. Kučera, Jaroslav, *Mezi Wilhelmstraße a Thunovskou*, p. 392.

I.

In December 1935, Konrad Henlein's second visit to London took place (the first occurred in August but was preparatory in nature⁴).⁵ It was centred on a lecture in Chatham House where Henlein presented himself as the leader of a loyal opposition party in the Czechoslovak Republic⁶ and strongly denied that the SdP had any relations with Berlin.⁷ He held a meeting with Lord James Richard Stanhope, who held the post of the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs from 1934 to 1936 (from 1935 to 1936 he shared this role with Lord Cranborn⁸), the Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Orme Sargent, and Sir John Clifford Norton (Private Secretary to Sir Robert Vansittart from 1930 to 1937) on December 10, in which Henlein gave the impression of a serious politician. A memorandum was produced following the meeting in which the author, Clifford Norton, could not hide his sympathies for the SdP leader, highlighting his two years of work and condemning the "Czech oligarchy" which had deliberately pitted the German parties against

⁴ Dejmek, *Britská diplomacie*, p. 166. The Counsellor of the German Legation in Prague, Otto von Stein, mentioned Henlein's visit. He thought that some circles in London were "against the oppression of the German minority in Czechoslovakia [...]." Dolezel, Dolezel, *Deutsche Gesandtschaftsberichte aus Prag*, pp. 289–290. Cf. PA AA Berlin, Tschechoslowakei, R 73842, Prag, 21. 8. 1935, E643723. Malcolm Graham Christie, who worked for the intelligence service and who was also an agent for the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Sir Robert Vansittart, helped him prepare for the visit. As such, leading SdP figures were copying Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš in taking their problem beyond their borders, first to Italy and Austria, "before fixing their gaze on Great Britain." Orzoff, *Battle for the Castle*, p. 175. About the effort to publicize the Sudeten cause cf. Cornwall, *The Devil's Wall*, pp. 190–191. Heinz Rutha "stressed" on 10 November "that Britain had become the predominant European power [...]." *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁵ The SdP leader did not visit London just four times as claims Paul Vyšný, for example, but rather at least five times; in August and December 1935, July 1936, October 1937, and May 1938. Vyšný, *The Runciman Mission*, pp. 8, 20, note 30.

⁶ Henlein's lecture was "loyal, full of goodwill and understanding, faith in a peaceful resolution of the Sudeten German issue." Biman, Malř, *Kariéra učitele tělocviku*, p. 129. A copy of Henlein's talk remains in the SdP collection in the National Archives in Prague in both German and English, incorrectly stated as dating to 1936, unfortunately without any further specifications. On page 13 of the German version (and page 17 of the English version), however, Henlein discusses the elections of "May this year," i.e. 1935. In his introduction, the SdP leader gives an historic overview of Czech-German relations from the 19th century and complains very diplomatically of the German minority being kept out in the cold (e.g. their non-participation in the approval of the constitution and the Language Act of early 1920), rejected the policies of activist parties and promoted a dialogue between the different nationalities in Czechoslovakia. Cf. NA Praha, f. SdP, kt. 2, sg. Konrad Henlein (řeči a projevy), 1936, 3.

⁷ *Völkischer Beobachter* also criticised some of his statements, writing that rejecting relations with Germany only played to the lies about Berlin's alleged meddling in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs. To conclude, the article's author states that the SdP leader has no experience of commenting on foreign policy. TNA, London, FO 371/19493, R 7521/234/12, Phipps to Vansittart, December 12, 1935, ff. 269–270. Cf. also Robbins, *Konrad Henlein*, p. 683.

⁸ Robert Arthur James Gascoyne-Cecil, 5th Marquess of Salisbury (1893–1972), known as Viscount Cranborne from 1903 to 1947.

each other.⁹ In his own words, Henlein said that he saw the success of his party in a general feeling of resistance to the pressure from Czechoslovak authorities placed on the SdP, the continuing economic crisis and its course in the German-speaking areas and in the failure of previous political activism. Norton further stated that the SdP leader's objective was, "one of conciliation and co-operation within the limits of the present Czechoslovak State and within the framework of the present Czechoslovak constitution, and he has, contrary to rumours spread by his governmental opponents, no connections or affiliations with the German Nazi party."¹⁰ The memorandum's author, however, could not have known that the Sudeten German Party had received money from the Third Reich for its election campaign, otherwise he would not have written such a manifest falsehood.

The document continues with a criticism of the policy of the Foreign Minister and future second Czechoslovak President, Edvard Beneš, who it claimed hoped that unless the SdP's promises were met very soon then it would naturally implode just as fast as in the year in which it had formed, then as the SHF. As reasons for his visit to London, Henlein gave a desire to study how British institutions work, an endeavour to inform the British public on the objectives of his policies and last but not least, but what in fact was Norton's conjecture, the desire to put pressure on the (still) Czechoslovak Foreign Minister that the SdP was a real political force which had to be taken account of.¹¹ The change of climate in the Foreign Office also occurred at the very top. Robert Vansittart recommended to the designated Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, that he informally advise Beneš or his successor to attempt to retrieve the poor trend of Czech-German relations.¹² These empty words meant nothing less than the application of gentle pressure to come to an agreement with the German minority. Orme Sargent also informed the British Minister in Czechoslovakia, Joseph Addison, of Konrad Henlein's visit to London, adding that he essentially could write nothing more than that detailed by John Clifford Norton, but that he would be interested in Addison's opinion of how far the SdP leader could be trusted. The Czech Deputy Minister in London, Vilém Černý, had told him that Henlein was "as slippery as an eel" and you couldn't believe anything he said.¹³

⁹ TNA London, FO 371/19493, R 7511/234/12, Minute by John Clifford Norton, December 10, 1935, f. 260.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 261.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 262. The author of the material, an official of the Southern Department of the Foreign Office, also heard Henlein's lecture in Chatham House and noted that the SdP leader was a moderate and quiet man. Henlein's speech began with an excursion through history on the establishment of Czechoslovakia, and the SdP leader even stated that errors were made by both parties. But the government in Prague had failed to meet its obligations from the Minority Treaty and implement it within its legislature, said Henlein, adding that although members of the German minority were tolerated, they were not respected. He then moved on to define the role of his party, which he saw in being a moderator between Czechoslovakia and Germany, rejecting the suspicion that the Sudeten German Party had become an offshoot of the German Nazi party, and lying when he denied receipt of financial support from Berlin. Cf. *ibid.*, ff. 263–264.

¹² 'Van' said he would try the same with Jan Masaryk. TNA London, FO 371/19493, R 7511/234/12, December 16, 1935, f. 259.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Sargent to Addison, December 12, 1935, ff. 265–266.

Henlein's visit in London in December was an important milestone in terms of the Foreign Office and British Legation in Prague's perception of Czech-German relations.¹⁴ The SdP leader's performance had succeeded in creating the impression that he was a direct and honest politician who simply wanted an agreement with the Czechoslovak Government on the basis of Czechoslovak law, and that the party had no links with Berlin; commentary in *Völkischer Beobachter* even stated that because of his party, Henlein was trying to impress the Czechoslovak authorities. If before British authorities both in Prague and London had written in neutral terms of the Sudeten German Party and had perceived Henlein as an average politician, now their flow of thoughts began to turn in a direction dangerous to Czechoslovakia in assessing Henlein as a serious man who was striving for national reconciliation despite the disapproval of officials and who spoke for himself, not Adolf Hitler. Somewhat oddly, the Czechoslovak diplomacy did not perceive Henlein's second visit to London as particularly dangerous at the time.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Italo-Abyssinian War dominated bilateral Anglo-Czechoslovak relations during this period.¹⁶

II.

Henlein's third visit to London occurred in July 1936. Here, the leader of the Sudeten Germans met the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Robert Vansittart, making "a most favourable impression" on him. Henlein appeared

¹⁴ Cf. Cornwall, *A Leap*, p. 138.

¹⁵ This was also influenced by the fact that the Czechoslovak Minister in London, Jan Masaryk, was staying in Czechoslovakia in December 1935, where presidential elections were taking place. Jindřich Dejmek also writes of a certain underestimation of the effect of Henlein's visits to London. Apparently Minister Jan Masaryk reassured his superiors even after Henlein's second visit to the British capital (December 1935) that "Henlein's visit has not damaged us politically, but rather has helped us in many areas [...]." Dejmek, *Velká Británie*, p. 537. Even in a periodical report for August to December 1935, Masaryk had to state that Henlein had acted moderately and had rejected contact with Germany. Cf. AMZV Praha, PZ Londýn, 1935, periodická zpráva No. III, 10. 2. 1936, pp. 85–87.

¹⁶ The Austrian Legation had noticed an interesting fact in Henlein's relations with Czechoslovakia – pre-election promises could not be met under the prevailing circumstances, and as such the hopes of the SdP leader and those around him could only be placed "in foreign policy circumstances alone." The report's author added that the Italian-Abyssinian events demonstrated the option of using a similar approach, which should have been a warning for Czechoslovakia. OeStA/AdR/AAng/ÖVB 1893–1945, Prag, Gesandtschaft, 1919–1938, kt. 38, Berichte, Weisungen 1935 (VIII–XII), Zl. 457/Pol, Prag, am 20. 9. 1935. Minister in London Masaryk logically enough noted that British interest in Czechoslovakia could not be assumed unless it involved the country's primary interests, but he then immediately added: "On the other hand, many groups in England consider it their duty to work hard to look after national minorities in all those states which appeared after the war and which are also persecuted, where complaints from these minorities are heard, and especially amongst those groups who are not particularly favourably disposed to these new countries these often find a willing ear." AMZV Praha, PZ Londýn, 1935, periodická zpráva no. III, 10. 2. 1936, p. 85.

to the British diplomat to be a moderate, honest, and prescient man.¹⁷ The Sudeten German leader informed the Permanent Under-Secretary of the poor economic situation in the Czech border region and acknowledged that part of the problems were the result of the global crisis under way at the time. He also, however, added, “that much of what they [Sudeten Germans – author’s note] are suffering now is quite unnecessary [...]”.¹⁸ Henlein did not neglect to inform Vansittart what he undoubtedly knew the British diplomat wanted to hear when he declared that Sudetan Germans were not, and he believed never had been, “German subjects, nor did they ever wish to be. [...] They had no desire whatever to join Nazi Germany, but they would certainly be driven in this direction if the present state of affairs lasted very much longer.”¹⁹ The Permanent Under-Secretary was of the opinion following his discussion with Henlein that the Sudetan German leader represented a moderate option compared to the Nazis, and promised him support in the SdP’s negotiations with the Czechoslovak Government. In his discussions with Vansittart, Henlein did not surprise in any regard. He acted as a moderate representative of a large ethnic minority which the Czechoslovak Government was persecuting. He even termed himself a defender and main representative “of the movement for reconciliation with the Czechoslovak Government.”²⁰

According to Eden, Robert Vansittart concluded his memorandum with the claim that Henlein, “is speaking the truth, but I have no doubt whatever that he is speaking what he believes to be the truth.”²¹ Although Jindřich Dejmek considers the conclusion of the experienced Permanent Under-Secretary to be surprising and shocking,²² it should be noted that this was the first meeting of both men together,

¹⁷ The meeting took place on July 20, 1936 and Anthony Eden informed the British Legation in Prague of its occurrence a week later. Cf. TNA London, FO 371/20374, R 4395/32/12, Mr. Eden to Sir J. Addison, Foreign Office, July 27, 1936, f. 25. The Counsellor of the German Legation in Prague, Otto von Stein, also informed Berlin of the meeting, writing the discussion took three hours and that Henlein was aware of Vansittart’s pro-French and reserved towards the German stance. ‘Van’ revealed to the SdP leader that he was quite well informed of the Sudeten German problem and that the British Government was ready to advise and assist Sudeten Germany. Král, *Die Deutschen*, p. 107. PA AA Berlin, Tschechoslowakei, R 103652 (Rassenfrage, Nationalitätenfrage, Fremdvölker), Prag, den 21. 7. 1936, ff. 72–75. Two days later, an article was published in *The Times* entitled *Czech German Claims. Herr Henlein’s Visit to London*, which spoke of Henlein as the leader of the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia, something which was not entirely true as he merely led their largest political entity. The article’s author stated that the largest minority wanted to remain within Czechoslovakia, but that the Republic should adopt a Swiss model. *The Times*, July 23, 1936.

¹⁸ TNA London, FO 371/20374, R 4395/32/12, Record of an Interview between Sir. R. Vansittart and Herr Konrad Henlein, July 27, 1936, f. 25.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. Henlein told Vansittart that members of his party were already seeking tangible results. If the Czechoslovak Government was unable to show a reasonable and accommodating face, then he would have to face his “his people” with empty hands, and “they would then throw him over.” And at that moment, it was possible that Germany would intervene, added the Sudeten German leader. Ibid., p. 2.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Dejmek, *Nenaplněné naděje*, p. 319.

and especially that almost all the information Vansittart had and had received on the Sudeten German problem came either directly from the British Legation in Prague, or from relevant officials in the Foreign Office. Czechoslovakia and its favourable policy towards the Sudeten German minority was not amongst any of these sources; and so the Permanent Under-Secretary's opinions were influenced as such.²³ Above all, 'Van' preferred so that developments in Central Europe could occur peacefully.

A few days later, another representative of the Sudeten Germans – Heinz Rutha²⁴ – had the opportunity to speak to another high-level Foreign Office official (Robert Arthur James Gascoyne-Cecil). He repeated, like Henlein, that the situation in Czechoslovakia was serious and declared “that the position of the German minority was progressively deteriorating.” Rutha added that the solution to the current desperate situation was a federal system, as existed in Switzerland.²⁵

Rutha's and in particular Henlein's third visit to London in July 1936 differed significantly from his previous stay at the end of 1935. Whilst on earlier occasions the Czechoslovak diplomacy had not undertaken any official steps (furthermore, Minister Masaryk had been staying in Prague at the time), the situation had changed in summer 1936 – Geneva had received a complaint about the Czechoslovak Government,²⁶ Henlein was received by Robert Vansittart, and Jan Masaryk had to explain his government's position in a letter to the Permanent Under-Secretary.²⁷ The Foreign Office found itself in a paradoxical situation in summer 1936; the fact that its high-level officials had provided an audience to SdP representatives

²³ This was confirmed, for example, by the Czechoslovak Minister in Berlin, Vojtěch Mastný, who had an opportunity to speak to Vansittart on August 10, 1936. The Permanent Under-Secretary of State “strongly advised us to improve our relations with the Sudeten Germans, clearly influenced by the idea that our Germans suffer injustice,” wrote Mastný. Cf. Mastný, *Vzpomínky diplomata*, p. 65. Some, however, think that 'Van' was drifting ever further from the government in his opinion on formulating policy towards Central Europe. “Many Cabinet members believed that British insistence on guarantees for Eastern Europe would only anger Hitler and thus put an end to any chance for a European settlement.” Roi, *Sir Robert Vansittart*, p. 207.

²⁴ In May 1935, Henlein “appointed him as his unofficial ‘foreign minister.’” Cornwall, *A Leap*, p. 138; cf. Cornwall, *The Devil's Wall*, p. 182.

²⁵ The meeting took place on July 23, 1936. Cf. TNA London, FO 371/20374, R 4460/32/12, Mr. Eden to Sir J. Addison, Foreign Office, August 5, 1936, f. 51. At its conclusion, Rutha tried to ascertain what the position of His Majesty's Government was regarding the complaint currently lodged in Geneva. Ibidem. Cf. also Cornwall, *The Devil's Wall*, p. 200.

²⁶ This related to the so-called Machník Decree. In fact, this involved a call to 18 companies from the National Defence Ministry, headed by František Machník and which conditioned the awarding of government contracts on the nationality composition of these companies. More in detail cf. Novotný, *The Machník Decree*, pp. 39–50.

²⁷ He wrote to Prague, however, that Henlein was received by unimportant MPs. He termed Henlein's lunch with Robert Vansittart an unfortunate fact for Czechoslovakia, with the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office declaring that the SdP leader was partially right and that the Czechoslovak Government could do more regarding its German minority. Cf. AMZV Praha, PZ Londýn, 1936, běžná zpráva no. 12, 24. 7. 1936, pp. 1–2. A few days later, Masaryk protested against London's interference in Czechoslovakia's internal affairs on behalf of the Czechoslovak Government. Vansittart replied only that a private lunch could not be considered interference in the sovereign rights of another country. Ibid., běžná zpráva no. 13, 29. 7. 1936, p. 1.

essentially contributed to a position which they had tried to avoid for a long time – the internationalisation of the Sudeten German issue.²⁸

Eden's report in which he informed Minister Addison of Rutha's visit to London, also included information on Robert Vansittart's meeting with Jan Masaryk which occurred on July 28, 1936. The Permanent Under-Secretary informed the Czechoslovak Minister that when Konrad Henlein came to visit him, "he had talked no politics at all, but only of his economic difficulties and those of his supporters."²⁹

Through his meeting at the Foreign Office, Masaryk naturally attempted to dilute the outcome of Henlein's and Rutha's visits to the British capital, and in his subsequent letter to the Permanent Under-Secretary of State to elucidate the further steps of the Czechoslovak Government regarding the German minority. He informed him that the best solution to the current situation had to be the co-operation of both parties "without any *arrière-pensée*." The Czechoslovak Minister then targeted his arguments, because according to Britain's official declaration, they had not spoken with Henlein about political matters except on economic issues.³⁰ Masaryk warned in the next section of his letter to the British diplomat that Henlein and his colleagues were not as moderate in their opinions when they spoke with their compatriots. The Minister also warned against their plans, which were in no way friendly towards the Czechoslovak Republic. Masaryk expressed his fears that, "the opinion is being circulated in England and abroad that Great Britain is ready to fight Mr. Henlein's battle in Geneva [...]."³¹ In the conclusion to his letter, Masaryk expresses his conviction that a solution to the Sudeten German issue would also depend on Germany's willingness to agree on fundamental European issues with France and Russia. He noted that it was only in this way that war could be avoided.³² If Masaryk thought that he had at least partially corrected the positive position of the Foreign Office regarding the Sudeten German leaders, he was "deceiving himself and his superiors."³³ For a large section of the Foreign Office, there was already a decisive reason to place pressure on the Czechoslovak Government.

²⁸ The Czechoslovak Minister in Berlin, Vojtěch Mastný, was also aware of this, noting that the Sudeten German problem had moved from being a "minority domestic issue [...] to a European problem." He was of the opinion that Great Britain had lost interest in maintaining the status quo in Central Europe. Mastný, *Vzpomínky diplomata*, p. 64.

²⁹ TNA London, FO 371/20374, R 4460/32/12, Mr. Eden to Sir J. Addison, Foreign Office, August 5, 1936, f. 51. On the basis of Addison's previous information, Anthony Eden had come to the conclusion that the truth was more on the side of the Sudeten Germans. It was his opinion that His Majesty's Government should be careful in giving advice infringing on the internal affairs of foreign states. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁰ TNA London, FO 371/20374, R 4705/32/12, Czechoslovak Minister (Letter), July 28, 1936, ff. 74–74A.

³¹ *Ibid.*, f. 76. Masaryk also feared British public opinion, which considered Czechoslovakia an outpost of Communism and Bolshevism within Europe. One well-known French journalist had apparently called the Minister and informed him that the British delegation in Geneva were going to support the Sudeten German complaint. *Ibidem*.

³² *Ibid.*, f. 77.

³³ Dejmek, *Nenaplněné naděje*, p. 320.

III.

The dangerously accelerating situation from Great Britain's perspective in regard to Czech-German relations became the subject of Konrad Henlein's fourth visit to London in mid-October 1937 and his subsequent debate with Robert Vansittart.³⁴ Both men met up over dinner and had the opportunity to speak together for roughly three hours. The Permanent Under-Secretary repeated that the SdP leader was, "a decent, honest and moderate, or anyhow relatively moderate, man." Henlein gave a more angry impression according to 'Van' than when the two men had last seen each other, and he immediately complained to the British diplomat that the situation had deteriorated for the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia, and that 90 percent of them wished to be joined to Germany immediately.³⁵

In the discussion, Henlein further suggested that in one way or another the remaining two options meant a war which Great Britain would be involved in. He repeated that he was ready to pursue the peaceful coexistence of Czechs and Germans, but he criticised the Czechoslovak Government's poor efforts at contributing towards an understanding between both nationalities. Vansittart noted during the discussion that the SdP leader praised Hodža for his realistic approach to the German issue and rejected the efforts of President Beneš and Foreign Minister Krofta.³⁶

Once again, Henlein managed to give the impression of being a moderate and reasonable politician who wanted to achieve agreement with Czechoslovak leaders in his discussion with the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office.³⁷ Once again, the opposite was true. At the time of the discussion, the SdP leader no longer supported an agreement; he proved this a month later with his "Report to the Führer and Reich Chancellor on Current Questions of German Policy in the Czechoslovak Republic"³⁸ where he clearly espoused the above mentioned third option he discussed with 'Van', i.e. the Sudeten German area joining Germany. Henlein also managed to instil an atmosphere of fear of possible Europe-wide conflict amongst the high level ranks within Foreign Office, with the responsibility for its potential outbreak assigned to the government in Prague because it did not want to come to an agreement, or specifically it did too little to strive for one. And it was this impression which intensified not just for Vansittart, but also for the leadership of

³⁴ According to information from the German Embassy in London, Henlein spoke in front of a selected group of around 25 people. PA AA Berlin, Tschechoslowakei, R 103656, London, den 14. 10. 1937, f. 149.

³⁵ TNA London, FO 371/21131, R 6982/188/12, Foreign Office Memorandum, October 18, 1937, f. 83. According to Henlein, there were three options for the future of the Sudeten German areas – autonomy within Czechoslovakia, autonomy within Germany and joining Germany. Naturally, the SdP leader informed Vansittart that he was ready to work for the first option. Although Jan Masaryk reported to Prague "that Henlein was not particularly successful in London, this opinion was really more of a wish." Kvaček, *Obtížné spojení*, p. 21.

³⁶ TNA London, FO 371/21131, R 6982/188/12, Foreign Office Memorandum, October 18, 1937, ff. 84–85.

³⁷ PA AA Berlin, Tschechoslowakei, R 103656, London, den 9. November 1937, f. 191.

³⁸ Cf. *Akten zur deutschen*, pp. 40–51.

the British Legation in Prague – the Czechoslovak Government must do more to achieve an understanding with the Sudeten Germans.³⁹

IV.

Konrad Henlein's final visit to London took place in the middle of May 1938, and according to the British Minister in Czechoslovakia, Basil Newton, this aroused greater attention from the Czechoslovak press and politicians, with some even expressing the opinion that it was the British Government itself which had invited the SdP leader. "Official circles too were not wholly happy about the affair," added the Minister.⁴⁰ He then admitted he had first heard of the visit in the afternoon on May 12 and proposed that Henlein's visit be presented as an opportunity to provide him with valuable and suitable advice in regard to the Czechoslovak problem.⁴¹ An official of the Foreign Office, Frank Kenyon Roberts, noted that Permanent Under-Secretary of State Alexander Cadogan had met with Jan Masaryk on May 13 and informed him that Konrad Henlein had not travelled to London at the Foreign Office's invitation, and that it was a surprise for the whole Foreign Office.⁴²

During this visit, Henlein met with Archibald Sinclair,⁴³ leader of the Liberal Party, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly with Winston Churchill, who wrote to Foreign Secretary Halifax⁴⁴ about the meeting, also informing him that he subsequently met Jan Masaryk too, to whom he claimed he said nothing which would go beyond Prime Minister Chamberlain's March declaration.⁴⁵ The SdP leader's meeting with the above British politicians began with Henlein's declaration that his party was not receiving any

³⁹ Kvaček, *Obtížně spojenectví*, pp. 21–22.

⁴⁰ TNA London, FO 371/21719, C 4317/1941/18, Telegram from Mr. Newton, May 14, 1938, f. 62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* It was his opinion that the Foreign Office should make the circumstances of Henlein's visit clear to Czechoslovak Minister Masaryk. *Ibidem.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, May 16, 1938, f. 61. Similar information was received by British Dominions, who were informed by London that the visit had not taken place on the basis of an invitation from the British Government. Cf. TNA London, FO 371/21719, C 4376/1941/18, May 16, 1938, f. 94. Alexander Cadogan also referred to the private nature of Henlein's visit to Jan Masaryk. TNA London, FO 371/21719, C 4378/1941/18, May 13, 1938, f. 102.

⁴³ Archibald Henry Macdonald Sinclair, 1st Viscount Thurso (1890–1970), Leader of the Liberal Party, 1935–1945.

⁴⁴ Edward Frederick Lindley Wood (1881–1959).

⁴⁵ TNA London, FO 371/21719, C 4386/1941/18, Churchill to Halifax, May 15, 1938, f. 113. Churchill himself was willing to recognise Henlein's requests for a reasonable solution to the problem of the Sudeten Germans within Czechoslovakia. Dutton, *Neville Chamberlain*, pp. 112–113. This regarded Prime Minister Chamberlain's speech made in the House of Commons on March 24, 1938 in which he presented the cabinet's position on recent events in Europe and also gave a number of important facts regarding Czechoslovakia. The Prime Minister declared that the Anschluss Österreichs had created a new situation in Central Europe and that the main task now was to return to an atmosphere of trust and the rule of international law. He then rejected any special assistance for Czechoslovakia. More in detail cf. Novotný, *Britské vyslanectví v Praze*, pp. 164–165.

instructions from Berlin, something which was an evident lie. He further informed those present that the situation in Czechoslovakia had become intolerable, and in return he was assured that the British Government supported his efforts to improve the lives of Sudeten Germans. The minutes of the meeting continue by stating that the SdP leader thought that Prague had to realise that the time of the nation state had ended, and the time had now come for all nationalities to be equal.⁴⁶ Konrad Henlein then outlined the three options for future developments which he saw as possible – 1) some form of autonomy for Sudeten Germans within the Czechoslovak State; 2) a plebiscite likely leading to annexation into the Third Reich; 3) war. The document stated that Henlein himself would make a final attempt to achieve option one, but he had to act quickly because his compatriots were impatient and preferred joining Germany. The SdP leader also complained that he had still not met with any representative of the Czechoslovak Government and no meeting had taken place with him on the subject of the National Statute.⁴⁷

Basil Newton in Prague was also informed of Henlein's meeting with Churchill and Sinclair. The first section of the telegram summarised the above described points of discussion, but in the next section the British Minister in Prague was told of Robert Vansittart's opinion, who had also met with the SdP leader⁴⁸ and who in line with the other high level Foreign Office representatives supported a quick agreement at the price of a concentration on domestic Czechoslovak problems (SdP complaints), putting foreign policy perspectives on the back burner. The Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the British Government then told Henlein that the advocacy of Nazi views could come up against insurmountable obstacles in a democratic state, and advised him not to insist on demanding reparations for damages suffered in the party's opinion since 1918. The SdP leader allegedly acknowledged Vansittart's advice and apparently acted reasonably, although he did reiterate time constraints and his ever more difficult position.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ TNA London, FO 371/21719, C 4386/1941/18, Note on the Conversations between Mr. Churchill, Sir Archibald Sinclair and Herr Henlein, undated, f. 114. British politicians, due to their negative relations with Moscow, were naturally interested in Henlein's opinion of the Czechoslovak-Soviet Pact, and this opinion was naturally negative. *Ibid.*, ff. 114–115.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 116. In the event of a plebiscite, Henlein proposed supervision by a great power and the posing of three questions – 1) maintenance of the status quo; 2) autonomy; 3) Anschluss. When Churchill and Sinclair asked him under what conditions agreement could be reached without affecting Czechoslovak territorial integrity, Henlein responded that Prague would have to agree that all political parties could voice their opinions, that local autonomy be applied in all minority areas, that the central parliament in the capital only be responsible for foreign policy, money, defence and communication, that all local government bodies which decide upon local affairs be disbanded and German speaking officials be appointed. *Ibid.*, ff. 116–118. According to the handwritten sentences, Jan Masaryk was to express his consent to these preconditions. *Ibid.*, f. 118.

⁴⁸ Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary expressed agreement with the meeting. Thus 'Van' was not acting on his own initiative. TNA London, PREM 1/265, May 10, 1938, f. 284. For Vansittart's request for the Prime Minister's opinion see *ibid.*, May 9, 1938, ff. 286–289. The Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the British Government explained that refusing to meet the SdP leader would not be prudent, *nota bene*, when they had met regularly previously. He was also ready to warn Henlein of the unreasonableness of the heightened situation in Czechoslovakia and advise him to help calm the situation and meet with Czechoslovak representatives.

⁴⁹ TNA London, FO 371/21719, Telegram to Mr. Newton, May 16, 1938, ff. 120–123. Another telegram from London to Newton operated with the idea that if Henlein's moderation were

Henlein's final trip to the British capital only strengthened the conviction of the Sudeten German Party, and in a sense also Berlin, that Britain would not support Beneš. The London visit convinced the SdP leader that neither the Czechoslovak problem nor the Sudeten German problem were paramount issues for London, its only paramount issue being the effort to maintain peace, either with Czechoslovakia on the map of Europe, or without it. On the basis of his experience in London, Henlein was now sure that London would not send even a single fighter plane to assist Prague in the event of a war between Germany and Czechoslovakia.⁵⁰

to be expressed then his position as leader of the Sudeten German Party would be jeopardised. The author clearly suggested that if he were deposed then the wishes of His Majesty's Government would not be fulfilled. Newton was to advise Edvard Beneš, with whom he was to meet, that Czechoslovakia make the SdP an offer based on the demands made in Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) all the while remaining silent on Vansittart's three points. Again, the necessity for Prague to offer fundamental concessions was stressed. "Any avoidable delay on the part of the Czechoslovak Government would, I fear, give the impression that the Czechoslovak Government were not really in earnest, give time for mischief makers, and Herr Henlein's attitude might be expected to stiffen and the situation in the Sudeten country to deteriorate," warned the telegram's conclusion. *Ibid.*, May 16, 1938, ff. 126–127, quotation f. 127. For Vansittart's summary of the meeting with the SdP leader cf. TNA London, FO 371/21719, C 4505/1941/18, Foreign Office Minute (Sir R. Vansittart), May 16, 1938, ff. 210–217. The Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the British Government clearly stated it would be a shame not to exploit Henlein's initiative which he had come up with in the meeting, and that it was a great opportunity to force him to hold moderate opinions. He then added that he had suggested to him himself that the format of their discussion not exceed its unofficial status (f. 210). Both men dined together with Colonel Malcolm Graham Christie on 13 May, spending about four hours together (f. 211), something which of itself says a lot. At the end of May, Edward Halifax informed Basil Newton of Ernest Kundt's meeting with Milan Hodža, referring here to Henlein's trip to London and the requests he was to make of the Czechoslovak Government on its basis. The Foreign Secretary thought that such postulates represented a reasonable basis for future agreement. "In these circumstances we must leave Dr. Beneš in no doubt that if such a failure to reach an early settlement should result from the unwillingness of the Czechoslovak Government to move along lines that seem reasonable here, this would exercise an immediate and adverse effect upon the interest taken in the problem in this country and upon the sympathy felt for the Czechoslovak Government," added Halifax. TNA London, FO 371/21723, C 5234/1941/18, Telegram to Mr. Newton, May 31, 1938, f. 6. Edvard Beneš, however, made an erroneous assessment of the meeting, declaring according to Přemysl Šámal that "England will stand by us in any case." AKPR, f. KPR, protokol T (tajné), sg. T 139/34, kt. 179, T. 1052/38, record from May 17, 1938. Robert Kvaček writes in relation to the Anschluss Österreichs of Beneš's so-called "optimism without realism", with the president perceiving a number of matters more optimistically than they actually appeared in reality. Kvaček, *Obtížné spojení*, p. 50.

⁵⁰ German Minister in Prague, Ernst Eisenlohr, for example, "declared following Henlein's May visit to London to Hungary's temporary chargé d'affaires in Prague, János Vörösmarty, that certainly nobody wanted a war, but, 'it can easily happen to anyone that they find themselves in one against their will.'" Tóth, Novotný, Stehlík, *Národnostní menšiny*, pp. 419–420. On 22 May, British Ambassador in Paris, Eric Phipps, received a telegram from Alexander Cadogan which clearly stated that Britain would honour its commitments and assist France were Germany to attack it, but it would certainly not help it if the issue of defending Czechoslovakia from German attack were to arise. Cf. TNA London, FO 371/21720, C 4695/1941/18, Telegram to Sir E. Phipps, May 22, 1938, f. 243. The Permanent Under-Secretary added that the current circumstances meant it was not possible for Czechoslovakia to defend itself militarily against Germany. Henlein's visit to London had clearly confirmed Britain's stance that something had to be done quickly in Czechoslovakia. Vyšný, *The Runciman Mission*, p. 57.

Conclusion

Konrad Henlein's visits to London represent an interesting phenomenon in the internationalisation of the Sudeten German problem from 1935. The SdP leader found, superficially somewhat surprisingly, an audience in the British capital which expanded with each of his visits – while in December 1935 he spoke only in Chatham House, in July 1936 he was received by Sir Robert Vansittart, and in May 1938 he met the leader of the Liberal Party, Archibald Sinclair, and then with Winston Churchill; even the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary agreed to his visit. On the other hand, however, neither of them ever received him.

Henlein found a sympathetic environment in London which listened to him carefully, one reason for this being that he said what his co-debaters wanted to hear, and proposed the solution to the Sudeten German problem which they preferred – increasing pressure on the Czechoslovak Government and forging an agreement between Prague and the Sudeten German Party. The SdP leader determined an objective; to give a positive representation of himself and style himself as moderate compared to the Nazis, the assessment of him as a moderate and fair main confirming this, and to present the Sudeten German Party as a reliable and essentially the only real partner for discussions with the Czechoslovak Government; this objective was gradually met. Henlein's next objective was to ascertain the opinion of the British elite on the Sudeten Germans' position as regards Czechoslovakia. One reason for his success in achieving this was that his speeches and pronouncements fell within the British policy concept towards Czechoslovakia which worked from the idea that this issue, marginal from a British interests perspective, should not become a reason for global conflict. Thus, for London Henlein became a man a deal could be made with, a guarantee of the potential to find a solution to the minorities problem in Czechoslovakia. In contrast, Prague was unable to respond adequately to his visits to the British capital, unable to politically neutralise his presentations of his own opinion on the matter; the question remains as to whether this was even possible under the circumstances of the time. Henlein's final visit to London boosted his conviction that Great Britain would abandon Prague.

Sources and literature

Abbreviations

- AAng – Auswärtige Angelegenheiten
 ADAP – Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik
 AdR – Abteilung Archiv der Republik
 AKPR – Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta republiky
 AMZV – Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí České republiky
 DTV – Deutscher Turnverband
 FO – Foreign Office
 KPR – Kancelář prezidenta republiky
 NA – Národní archiv
 OeStA – Österreichisches Staatsarchiv
 ÖVB – Österreichische Vertretungsbehörden im Ausland 1. Republik
 PA AA – Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes
 PREM – Record of the Prime Minister's Office
 PZ – Politické zprávy
 SdP – Sudetendeutsche Partei
 SHF – Sudetendeutsche Heimatfront
 TNA – The National Archives

Sources

- Archiv Kanceláře prezidenta republiky, f. Kancelář prezidenta republiky, protokol T (tajné), sg. T 139/34, kt. 179, T. 1052/38.
 Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí České republiky, Praha, Politické zprávy, Londýn, 1935, 1936.
 Österreichisches Staatsarchiv Wien, Abteilung Archiv der Republik, Auswärtige Angelegenheiten 1918–2005, Österreichische Vertretungsbehörden im Ausland 1. Republik, 1893–1945, Prag, Gesandtschaft, 1919–1938, kt. 38, Berichte, Weisungen 1935 (VIII–XII).
 Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, Tschechoslowakei, R 73842, R 103652, R 103656.
 The National Archives, London, Kew, Foreign Office Papers, 371/19493, 371/20374, 371/21131, 371/21719, 371/21720, 371/21723.
 The National Archives, London, Kew, Record of the Prime Minister's Office, 1/265.

Literature

- Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945. Aus dem Archiv des deutschen Auswärtigen Amtes, Serie D (1937–1945), Deutschland und die Tschechoslowakei (1937–1938), Bd. 2, Baden-Baden: Imprimerie Nationale, 1950.
 Biman, Stanislav, Malíř, Jaroslav, *Kariéra učitele tělocviku*. Ústí nad Labem: Severočeské nakladatelství, 1983.
 César, Jaroslav, Černý, Bohumil, *Politika německých buržoazních stran v Československu v letech 1918–1938. Díl II. (1930–1938)*. Praha: Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd, 1962.
 Cornwall, Mark, 'A Leap into Ice-Cold Water': The Manoeuvres of the Henlein Movement in Czechoslovakia, 1933–1938. Cornwall, Mark, Evans, Robert J. W. (eds.), *Czechoslovakia in a Nationalist and Fascist Europe 1918–1948*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 123–142

- Cornwall, Mark, *The Devil's Wall. The Nationalist Youth Mission of Heinz Rutha*. Cambridge – Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Dejmek, Jindřich, Velká Británie v zahraniční politice Československa 1918–1938. (Náčrt hlavních problémů). Valenta, Jaroslav, Voráček, Emil, Harna, Josef (eds.), *Československo 1918–1938. Osudy demokracie ve střední Evropě*. Praha: Historický ústav, 1999, pp. 526–541.
- Dejmek, Jindřich, Britská diplomacie, Československo a Sudetoněmecká strana. *Moderní dějiny. Sborník k dějinám 19. a 20. století*, 9, 2001, pp. 161–237.
- Dejmek, Jindřich, *Nenaplněné naděje. Politické a diplomatické vztahy Československa a Velké Británie (1918–1938)*. Praha: Karolinum, 2003.
- Dolezel, Heidrun, Dolezel, Stephan (Hrsg.), *Deutsche Gesandtschaftsberichte aus Prag. Innenpolitik und Minderheitenprobleme in der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen republik, Teil IV. Vom Vorabend der Machtergreifung in Deutschland bis zum Rücktritt von President Masaryk 1933–1935*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1991.
- Dutton, David, *Neville Chamberlain*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001.
- Král, Václav (ed.), *Die Deutschen in der Tschechoslowakei 1933–1947*. Praha: Československá akademie věd, 1964.
- Kvaček, Robert, *Obtížné spojení. Politicko-diplomatické vztahy mezi Československem a Francií 1937–1938. I*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, 1989.
- Kučera, Jaroslav, Mezi Wilhelmstraße a Thunovskou. Finanční podpora Německé říše Sudetoněmecké straně v letech 1935–1938. *Český časopis historický*, 2, 1997, pp. 387–410.
- Luh, Andreas, *Der deutsche Turnverband in der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen Republik. Vom völkischen Vereinsbetrieb zur volkspolitischen Bewegung*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1988.
- Mastný, Vojtěch, *Vzpomínky diplomata. Ze vzpomínek a dokumentů československého vyslance. Kubů, Eduard, Luňák, Petr, Novák, Otto* (eds.). Praha: Karolinum, 1997.
- Novotný, Lukáš, The Machník Decree of 1936 and its Perception by the British Legation in Prague and the Foreign Office. *Central European Papers*, 2, 2013, pp. 39–50.
- Novotný, Lukáš, *Britské vyslanectví v Praze, Foreign Office a jejich vnímání česko-německého vztahu v Československu v letech 1933–1938*. Praha: Agentura Pankrác, s.r.o., 2016.
- Orzoff, Andrea, *Battle for the Castle. The Myth of Czechoslovakia in Europe, 1914–1948*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Robbins, Keith G., Konrad Henlein, the Sudeten Question and British Foreign Policy. *The Historical Journal*, 4, 1969, pp. 674–697.
- Roi, Michael L., *Sir Robert Vansittart, the Global Balance of Power and Nazi Germany, 1934–1937*. Diss., University of Toronto 1996.
- Tóth, Andrej, Novotný, Lukáš, Stehlík, Michal, *Národnostní menšiny v Československu 1918–1938. Od státu národního ke státu národnostnímu?*, Praha: FF UK V Praze, Togga, 2012.
- Vyšný, Paul, *The Runciman Mission to Czechoslovakia, 1938. Prelude to Munich*. Basingstoke: AIAA, 2003.

POVZETEK

Obiski Londona Konrada Henleina. O internacionalizaciji vprašanja sudetskih Nemcev v drugi polovici tridesetih let dvajsetega stoletja.

Lukáš Novotný

Češkoslovaška, tako imenovana nova država naslednica, ki je bila ustanovljena 28. oktobra 1918 in katere končne meje so bile potrjene z mirovnimi sporazumi, sklenjenimi v Versaillesu, Saint-Germain-en-Laye in Trianonu, se je zaradi multietnične sestave prebivalstva znašla v zapletenem položaju, ki ga je podedovala od svoje predhodnice, Habsburške monarhije. Skoraj tretjina prebivalstva je zavračala novo domovino in se z njo ni mogla poistovetiti; gre večinoma za Nemce, Madžare in Poljake, ki so zaradi dogodkov, na katere niso imeli vpliva, postali državljani Češkoslovaške republike. Glede na raznolikost narodnosti, ki so sestavljale prvo češkoslovaško republiko, ni presenetljivo, da so etnične manjšine, njihova integracija v delovanje države in vprašanja, povezana s pristopom oblasti do predstavnikov etničnih manjšin, njihov odnos in poistovetenje z novo državo, ključna vprašanja, s katerimi se je država morala soočiti.

Medtem ko dvajseta leta 20. stoletja, še posebej druga polovica, veljajo za mirno obdobje, ki ga je zaznamovala politična stabilnost in gospodarska rast, je konec desetletja in začetek 30. let prinesel velik in v več pogledih usoden preobrat. Gospodarska kriza, ki je prišla v Evropo iz ZDA, sprva ni vzbujala strahu na Češkoslovaškem. Politično dogajanje je bilo seveda povezano z gospodarskim. Nastop druge faze gospodarske krize je postopoma začel vplivati na stališče največje manjšine prve češkoslovaške republike do države.

Konrad Henlein je bil vodilni sudetsko nemški politik na Češkoslovaškem. Prvič je pomembneje vplival na notranjo politiko Češkoslovaške oktobra 1933, ko je postal vodja novega političnega gibanja, Sudetsko nemške domovinske fronte (Sudetendeutsche Heimatfront). Gibanje ni imelo jasnega političnega programa in njegov edini cilj je bila združitev vseh sudetskih Nemcev. Sudetsko nemška domovinska fronta se je skoraj dve leti pred češkoslovaškimi parlamentarnimi volitvami (maja 1935) preimenovala v Sudetsko nemško stranko (Sudetendeutsche Partei), ki je po številu prejetih glasov sicer zmagala na volitvah, a je zaradi češkoslovaškega volilnega zakona dobila drugo največje število mandatov.

Henleinovi obiski Londona (v letih 1935 do 1938) predstavljajo zanimiv pojav pri internacionalizaciji problematike sudetskih Nemcev leta 1935. Vodja Sudetsko nemške stranke je na prvi pogled nekoliko presenetljivo našel sogovornike v britanski prestolnici in njihov krog se je širil z vsakim obiskom – medtem ko je decembra 1933 govoril zgolj v Kraljevem inštitutu za mednarodne zadeve, ga je julija 1936 sprejel sir Robert Vansittart, maja 1938 vodja liberalne stranke Archibald Sinclair in nato Winston Churchill, z obiskom sta se strinjala celo predsednik vlade in minister za zunanje zadeve, a do obiska no prišlo.

Henlein je v Londonu naletel na okolje, ki mi je pazljivo prisluhnilo. Eden od razlogov za to je zagotovo tičal v dejstvu, da je govoril, kar so sogovorniki želeli slišati in predlagal vsečno rešitev za problem sudetskih Nemcev – stopnjevanje pritiska na češkoslovaško vlado in sklenitev dogovora med Prago ter Sudetsko nemško stranko. Vodja Stranke sudetskih Nemcev se je namenil predstaviti v pozitivni luči, veljati za zmernega v primerjavi z nacisti in predstaviti stranko kot zanesljivega in edinega pravega sogovornika v dialogu s češkoslovaško vlado, kar mu je deloma tudi uspelo. Želel se je tudi prepričati o stališču britanske elite do položaja sudetskih Nemcev na Češkoslovaškem. Eden od razlogov za njegov uspeh je, da so se njegovi govori in izjave skladali z britansko politiko glede Češkoslovaške, ki je temeljila na ideji, da to iz britanske perspektive povsem marginalno vprašanje ne bi smelo biti vzrok za globalen konflikt. London je v Henleinu videl človeka, s katerim je bilo mogoče skleniti sporazum, neke vrste zagotovilo, da je mogoče poiskati rešitev za vprašanje problema manjšin na Češkoslovaškem. Praga se ni znala primerno odzvati na njegove obiske britanske prestolnice in politično nevtralizirati njegovih videnj problematike; vprašanje pa je, ali je bilo to v danih okoliščinah sploh mogoče. Henleinov zadnji obisk Londona ga je utrdil v prepričanju, da se bo Velika Britanija odrekla Pragi.