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World War II: London and Berlin Plotted Second "Munich Agreement"

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While trying to identify the guilty of the WW II, historians have always paid attention to the Anglo-Saxon financiers and politicians since their policies had appeased Adolf Hitler and only encouraged the Fascist Germany to go further with expansion.

After invading Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939, Hitler demonstrated he no longer needed approval of his aggressive policies by Chamberlain and Daladier. European countries feared the growing Nazi aggression and showed less confidence in England and France after the countries had failed to provide European security. Thus London and Paris faced risks to lose influence on the continent.

As a rule, most historians who deal with the events of 1939, focus on the Anglo-Franco-Soviet or Soviet-German diplomatic contacts. However, the survey would be incomplete without the analysis of the Anglo-German relations, which were not cut off after Hitler had annexed Czechoslovakia. Moreover, there are plenty of reasons to assume that in spring of 1939 the idea of appeasement- to achieve an agreement with Germany based on the division of spheres of influence- still was supported by many in Great Britain.

The position of the British government was the following: on the one hand, Hitler`s ultimatum on Danzig`s occupation (he made to the Polish government on 21st of March), caused serious concern in London. Prime Minister Chamberlain said if Germany seized Poland`s resources it would undermine the British interests. On the other hand, London was aware it should avoid confrontation with Axis countries. That is why the plan was to go further with the policy of appeasement and at the same time demonstrate an ability to use force when necessary. London agreed that Germany could annex Danzig (also known as the Polish Corridor) but it did not approve Hitler`s plans to occupy the whole Poland. On 31st of March the British government provided guarantees of independence to Warsaw.

It is remarkable that such kind of guarantees given to Poland ans some other European countries did not help them preserve their territorial integrity, which means that their state borders could be changed anytime. Neither the guarantees should be viewed as Great Britain's preparations for a war with Germany. Those were just measures to demonstrate a firm position, which was, in its turn, guided by the policy of appeasement. England and France did not discuss whether they would manage to fulfill the guarantees.

However, the plan failed: guarantees given to Poland did not impress the official Berlin. On 1st of May, 1939, Ribbentrop said that England would betray Poland in case of an armed conflict. The Nazis continued to prepare for the war.

This opinion was shared by some other politicians. For example, the Swedish ambassador to Great Britain B. Prutz also came to a conclusion in late June of 1939 that “in case the relations between Germany and Poland get worse, England and France won`t interfere”.

And this was quite a reasonable conclusion. In spite of active cooperation with the Soviet Union, the British leadership preferred to maintain stable relations with Germany. On 3d of May Chamberlain addressed the government calling to resume Anglo-German economic talks. In its archives, the Foreign Office has a document dated 5th of May: “Memorandum for Lord Halifax”, a kind of an instruction for the British diplomats: “In no way to refuse to help other countries in case their sovereignty is violated by Germany but Great Britain ought to make every effort to satisfy all grounded demands coming from Berlin and prevent Germany’s economic isolation”.

In complete accordance with this instruction, Britain’s Foreign Secretary Edward Halifax during the Anglo-French consultations in Paris called for a solution to the Danzig issue in favor of Germany. A few days later, Chamberlain informed his Cabinet on plans to “discuss all unsettled issues with Germany”. In early July Halifax said the parliament was preparing a statement approving “some revision of the already achieved agreements on Danzig”.

It means that Poland`s territorial integrity could have easily fallen victims to the idea of appeasement policy, which was first declared by Chamberlain and Daladier in Munich in autumn of 1938. The aforementioned memorandum read: “Our country (*Great Britain* -Y.N) must not allow Poland’s ungrounded demands engage us in a war”. In the margins Lord Halifax wrote: “Of course, not!”

As far as the Anglo-Franco-Soviet coalition is concerned, Chamberlain and his team had more than once expressed their disapproval of treating the Soviet Union as a close ally. “I am so skeptical about the Russian aid that I think we could easily do without it”, the British Prime Minister said. In summer of 1939 the British government agreed to take part in three-party negotiations in Moscow but in no way planned to sign any agreements which could impose any obligations on London. Addressing the participants of a military council, Halifax said that the talks with the Soviet Union were not crucial, their aim being just to prevent Moscow from “taking the German side”.

Judging from the correspondence, we can say that the British leaders felt even a kind of disgust towards Russia and its people. British Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Alexander Cadogan once called the Russian diplomats “dirty garbage collectors”. And Vyacheslav Molotov, People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, was characterized as “ignorant and suspicious man, a peasant”, whose hard-line position in the talks deserved criticism from Halifax who called Molotov “insane”.

When we talk about Anglo-German cooperation in late 1930s, we should mention the names of Chamberlain`s closest aides: H. Wilson and R. Hudson. In June and July of 1939 Wilson held several meetings in London with G. Wohltat, one of German high-ranking officials, responsible for the implementation of a 4-year economic plan. Then Wilson repeated what had been said by Halifax: do everything to avoid armed conflicts under Hitler and maintain Anglo-German cooperation.

In July Hudson suggested a plan of German-British economic cooperation and colonial development, including a loan Britain was going to give Germany in exchange for peaceful

foreign policy. The information leaked to the media, and Chamberlain had to comment on the issue at the parliament, where he admitted that Hudson and Wilson had met Wohltat for a few times but that it was their own initiative. The announcement provoked a scandal among the members of the "anti-Munich" coalition and thus made it more difficult for Chamberlain to reach a compromise with Berlin.

Moscow did not take Chamberlain's excuses seriously. Even if we assume that the British Prime Minister told the truth, it is clear anyway that he was not concerned over the outcome of the Anglo-Franco-Soviet talks. Otherwise he would have asked Hudson to resign.

However, we learn about Chamberlain's real opinion from his private correspondence. He wrote that 'economic ideas' Hudson spoke out to Wohltat by that time had been discussed in the government for almost a year. Chamberlain believed that Hitler would understand that Britain displayed serious intentions and that it would prevent him from launching a war.

Historian M. Carley says Chamberlain was annoyed at the incident first of all because of the information leak. In one of his letters to his sister, the prime minister commented on Hudson's initiative: "Currently we have other more reliable channels through which we can continue our cooperation with Germany…My critics think that to achieve any compromise with Berlin without verifying their real intentions would be a catastrophe… But I disagree. Let us better persuade them that their chances to win the war and avoid grave consequences for their economy are very poor. But Germany could deserve our confidence and respect to its interests if it abandoned the idea of hard line policies…"

Speaking about 'new channels' Chamberlain probably meant an industrialist E. Tennant, who served as a secretary of the Anglo-German Society and in July of 1939 was authorized by the prime minister to have a few meetings with Ribbentrop, and Lord Kemsley, Chairman of the 'Allied Newspapers'. Kemsley visited Germany and on 27th of July was allowed to meet Hitler. On his arrival to London, Kemsley reported to the prime minister. He said that in his conversation with the Fuhrer he noted that the British government viewed the Munich Treaty as a guideline for Anglo-German cooperation and that Sir Chamberlain would like to meet Hitler in person. Then the Fuhrer answered he preferred to exchange opinion in written form. But when in early August Chamberlain and Halifax asked the official Berlin for a response, Hitler disavowed what he had told Lord Kemsley and said there was no need to organize the talks. The British parliament also contacted Hering through a Swedish industrialist B. Dalerous, owner of the "Bollinders fabric A/B" firm. That was another channel London used to clear up Germany`s positions.

Having learned about the British plans to achieve a compromise with Berlin and predicted all concessions London could make, Hitler counted on war for he was no longer satisfied with the revision of Polish borders, economic deals and colonial development. Later Ribbentrop said that Hitler believed cooperation with England won`t bring him any good, and if England wanted a war it was better to start it without hesitation.

Actually, Britain focused on agreement with Germany only because it had failed to come to terms with the Soviet Union and because the Anglo-Franco-Soviet talks on a military convention either had brought no progress. And since England did not want to treat the Soviet Union as an equal partner within a suggested coalition against potential aggressors, in August of 1939 Moscow decided to establish cooperation with Germany.

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