

THE SECOND GREAT BETRAYAL

Czechoslovakia 1938, Kurdistan 2019

If Neville Chamberlain, the betrayer of Czechoslovakia, is remembered as a pathetic figure, how will history recall Donald Trump, asks **James R. Russell**.

WHEN Hitler invaded the demilitarised Rhineland in March 1936, he held his breath: France at that stage could have easily wiped out his army and ended his regime. He gambled successfully on the complacency and cowardice of the Western democracies and continued his military buildup unopposed. Two years later, when Hitler demanded the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, Germany was far more powerful, and confronting its aggression would have required real sacrifice. Britain and France betrayed and abandoned Czechoslovakia to the Nazis, and from that point on, no force on earth could stop Hitler till the Red Army did, at Stalingrad in 1943. The cost of the war in human lives and the destruction of the fruits of human labour, is still incalculable and beyond the grasp of imagination. One cannot help but recall the betrayal of the Czechs in the context of Donald Trump's betrayal of the Kurds, as the Middle East descends into the maelstrom now.

In 1938 the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, characterised Czechoslovakia as a faraway country about which we know nothing. Ignorance often attends cowards and fools; but let us dispel it. Before World War I, the Czechs and Slovaks, speakers of Western Slavic languages, were subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; after that war Thomas Masaryk, a man of mixed Czech and Slovak parentage who had lived and studied in the United States, forged a democratic state founded on the principles of the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Masaryk created a fund to support refugee Russian scholars and artists. In the late 1930s, Czechoslovakia was the only liberal, pluralistic democracy in Central and Eastern Europe.

When Chamberlain and Daladier crawled to Hitler's feet in Munich in 1938, the Czechs were not invited to the negotiations – to the sellout. Moreover, Britain and France warned the Czechs not to try to defend themselves. They had been ready to fight: on the far side of the Vltava river from the centre of Prague there is a hospital they built then in preparation for treating casualties. (I bought a



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (left) with US President Donald Trump during a meeting on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan, in June 2019.

Photo: Presidential Press Service/Pool Photo via AP

little tin of tiger balm there seven years ago.) The Czech army and the Škoda munitions works were ready. But their hands were tied. Chamberlain returned to England boasting that he had secured "peace in our time". Hitler marched in.

Through the 1930s the Soviet Union had been calling for collective security against Nazi Germany. When the fascist general Franco started a civil war, with the active help of Germany and Italy, to destroy the Spanish republic, the Western democracies including the United States placed an arms embargo on the republic (though Standard Oil of New Jersey fuelled Franco's forces). The Soviet Union was the only country to help Spain, along with the pro-Communist International Brigades. The Canadian and American branch, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, included many Jewish volunteers who knew that if fascism could be stopped in Spain, it could be turned back everywhere. But the republic was outnumbered and outgunned, and it fell.

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Stalin told the Czechs that the Red Army would help them if they asked for help. But Hitler, now demanding the entire country, threatened that his Luftwaffe would bomb Prague to rubble if the Czechs resisted. They were scared and the Soviet leader was cautious: it was no secret that in the West many saw Hitler as a useful tool against the hated USSR, and German propaganda against "Judeo-Bolshevism" nurtured this fantasy. In March 1939 the Germans occupied Prague, and Hitler ate breakfast in the castle overlooking the idyllic spot that Masaryk had given to the United States for its embassy. On the anniversary of that day I stood with my friend and pupil Jan Vihan at the palace gates, looking at the Stars and Stripes waving over our embassy, and a street musician who had entertained at Jan and Zuzka's wedding played a movement of Dvorak's New World symphony. The president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel of blessed memory, was probably in his office in the

castle at that moment. Maybe he even heard the music. But more on him later.

Within a few months Hitler invaded Poland and general war broke out. Churchill had warned Chamberlain, "You were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour, and you will have war."

During the war, escaped Polish and Czech pilots were crucial to the RAF during the Battle of Britain, but the British still warned the Czech government in exile that it had to do more to advance the war effort, so a team led by two young officers, a Czech and a Slovak, Kubiš and Gabčík, assassinated Reinhard Heydrich, the architect of the Holocaust and the satrap of Hitler's enslaved Bohemia and Moravia (the Czech lands). After the operation they sheltered in the Orthodox church of Sts. Cyril and Methodius – the inventors of the Cyrillic alphabet in which we write the Old Slavonic and Russian languages – and died in its crypt. Jan and I made a pilgrimage there: the feeling of their heroism and the

sorrow of their loss will never leave me.

But it was an early spring day in Prague, chilly yet full of promise and new life. The Czech and Slovak republics were free. Havel, who as a musician and dissident writer and thinker had suffered repression after the Prague Spring of 1968, was serving as president, and his guests at the castle included His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Beat poets, and grizzled Sixties rock musicians. Havel was a humanist, a scholar, and a statesman. The Czechs were betrayed, but they have prevailed. "Pravda vitezi – Truth prevails," is the motto of the Czech Republic; but must it always take so long, and be so costly in life and suffering?

No country is faraway anymore, and there is never a justification to know nothing. We know about Czechoslovakia now. We will always celebrate people like Havel, and Masaryk, and Kubiš and Gabčík, Alexander Dubček, while Neville Chamberlain's name will forever be synonymous with disgrace and the appeasement of evil.

The hired terrorists of Erdogan's invasion force – Turkey's Einsatzgruppen – murdered a young woman named Heyrin Khalaf. She was a Kurdish politician, educated in many languages, an articulate and cultivated human being working for democracy, pluralism, and social and economic progress in Syrian Kurdistan. We will never know what she might have become, the good she might have done. Kurdistan's potential Vaclav Havel was slaughtered by thugs by the side of a dusty road. Responsibility for her horrible, untimely death rests not only with Turkey, a genocidal rogue state, but with the author of the second great betrayal of modern times, the one that made the invasion possible.

Karl Marx wrote that history indeed repeats itself, but as farce. If Neville Chamberlain, the betrayer of Czechoslovakia, is remembered as a pathetic figure, how will history recall Donald Trump, this blustering, vulgar, imbecilic, megalomaniac buffoon? He has betrayed not only the brave Kurdish allies of the US and the millions of helpless civilians they can no longer defend from Turkish aggression, but the American soldiers who have fought and died alongside them. He has betrayed Christians who reposed their hope and trust in him to defend their beleaguered co-religionists in the Middle East. He has betrayed those of us who hoped for a change from the cynical machine politics of the deep state establishment. He has delivered Syria into the bloody hands of Assad. He has imperilled all our allies in the region, including Israel. Even if this repetition of the great betrayal is a farce, it is too sanguinary for the world to allow it to last long. Never mind great, the only way to make America decent again is to impeach this scoundrel, convict him, eject him from office, and restore the tarnished honour of the United States.

TIMES OF ISRAEL

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Members of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, heading to the Turkey-Syria border.

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