THE BELL OF TREASON

THE 1938 MUNICH AGREEMENT IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London WC1X 9HD
www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 710 4
eISBN 978 1 78283 287 4

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In the boa's gaze

ON SATURDAY, 12 MARCH 1938, the Czechoslovak ambassador in London, Jan Masaryk, called on Lord Halifax, who had recently been appointed foreign secretary. The situation was urgent: as they met, German troops were marching through Austrian territory and towards Vienna. Hitler had finally launched the *Anschluss*, his long-planned annexation of Germany's smaller Alpine neighbour, and in the night his armies had crashed through the German–Austrian border. The European chancelleries were yet to react, and it remained unclear what ramifications the attack might have. That these involved Czechoslovakia, whether as participant in a hypothetical intervention, merely as an interested observer of what went on beyond its southern frontier, or as the target of a further German advance, was not in doubt. Masaryk was concerned that this was only a first step. His hope was to convince his interlocutor to deal with Hitler firmly and ward off any attempts against his own country.

> Halifax: 'I have learnt a lot in the last few days, but I don't want to give up all hope that one day a dialogue will be possible with the Germans.'

Masaryk: 'Once they rule Europe, then yes – until then, only an armed dialogue is possible.'
– You think so?
– I am convinced of it.
– I am new to the job. I only perceived it from a distance before, and even when I went to Berchtesgaden, I did not realise how complicated the situation was, as I do now. I understand, though, that Goering has assured Mastný [the Czechoslovak ambassador in Berlin] that they are not planning anything against Czechoslovakia. What value do you ascribe to that?
– It is momentarily true. Even the boa constrictor, when it has eaten, needs a few weeks of digestion, and today's feast is worthy of Lucullus.
– You are probably right. You said you need some gesture of moral support. I would very much like to help you, but I don't know what I can do.[1]

Halifax was a Conservative peer, Eton- and Oxford-educated, whose long political career had taken in various ministerial posts but whose only overseas stint had been as viceroy of India. He owed his elevation to the desire of his prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, to retain a more direct line of control over foreign policy. His predecessor as foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, had resigned a month before under a cloud, creating a vacancy for a less experienced and therefore more amenable candidate to the post.

Masaryk embodied his small nation's twentieth-century tribulations. The son of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, a founding figure of the republic, Jan had been a headstrong youth. Before the First World War, he had emigrated to the United States, leading a penniless existence. On his return he was drafted into the Habsburg armies, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant and earned a medal of valour. After the Great War, with his father now president of a new Czechoslovakia, Masaryk embarked with fresh energy on a diplomatic career. Thanks to his adventures in the US and a brief marriage to an American woman, he

boasted a 'fantastic command of any and all shades of the English language; of nuance and argot and profanity and slang in either British or American idiom'.[2] Sometimes nicknamed the 'Playboy of the Western World', he could be at once charming, restless, and plain spoken. It is perhaps this last trait that was most apt to appeal to the hesitant but austere, high-Anglican British lord who was his interlocutor.[3]

Czechoslovakia's motto was 'The truth prevails', taken from the fifteenth-century religious martyr Jan Hus. 'The truth prevails, but it can be such a chore,' Masaryk liked to joke.[4] Would it prove a chore to recruit Halifax to the Czechoslovak cause? In November, still in a private capacity, he had visited Berlin and Berchtesgaden. The pretext was a hunting exhibition given in the German capital. Feted by Nazi dignitaries, the future foreign secretary had posed in front of giant pairs of antlers and revelled in the award of the nickname 'Lord Halalifax', after the hunting cry. The visit to Hitler's mountain residence had been more awkward: the Führer, who felt a strong sympathy for animals, had raged about the hunting show and the pastime itself in equal measure and sarcastically proposed to 'spare ourselves all bother and make a comradely expedition to a slaughterhouse'. Behind his back, he called his visitor 'the English Parson'. Yet Halifax had at least been able to convey, privately, the message he was sent to deliver: 'Danzig, Austria, Czechoslovakia [...] we were not necessarily concerned to stand for the status quo as today, but we were concerned to avoid such treatment of them as would be likely to cause trouble. If reasonable settlements could be reached with the free assent and good will of those primarily concerned we certainly had no desire to block.'[5] In other words, after twenty years of stability, the door to frontier revision stood open.

THE CZECHOSLOVAK REPUBLIC was born in the last days of the First World War, as the Habsburg Empire, having sued for peace, was crumbling. On 28 October 1918, a cross-party national council took control and proclaimed independence in Prague. Revolutionary takeovers

followed across the country. Two days later, the same happened in Slovakia, where another group of representatives proclaimed its union with the Czechs in the small town of Turčiansky Svätý Martin. Within a month, the merged councils had established themselves as a provisional parliament and written a constitution. Abroad, a government in exile under the philosopher and politician Tomáš Masaryk and his close associate Edvard Beneš had won Allied backing. By the end of the year, the new parliament had elected Masaryk as the republic's first president.

At first the country depended on the Versailles Treaty for the legitimisation of its borders – in particular the Slovak border, which Hungary had attacked in 1919. By 1938, though, the republic had come to rely on a network of alliances. The lynchpin was a pact with France committing both parties to support the other in the event of a German attack. In 1935, Czechoslovakia had also signed a defence agreement with the Soviet Union, a condition of that treaty being that France had to honour its own obligations before the Soviets became bound to intervene.

Among its immediate neighbours, Czechoslovakia possessed poor relations with both Poland and Hungary. The Poles, though they were fellow French allies, were not benevolent. They felt that Edvard Beneš had successfully played for a better deal at Versailles, grabbing territories (especially the Silesian enclave of Teschen) that should have been theirs. Added to this crime, Czechoslovakia was guilty of hosting the liberal critics of Józef Beck, Poland's authoritarian leader. Hungary, meanwhile, considered itself to have been even more badly despoiled by the peace of Versailles. It possessed a large irredentist community in Slovakia, and it had never ceased to favour a restoration of the Habsburg Empire.

The second set of Czechoslovak alliances, known as the Little Entente, united Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. Originating in 1920, this bound the three states to come to each other's aid in case of Hungarian aggression. The value of this arrangement to the Czechoslovaks was that it guarded against the emergence of a south-eastern front

that would have made fighting Germany far more difficult. By 1938, the Little Entente was not as solid as it had once been: a change of ruler had recently helped Yugoslavia, under the regent Prince Paul and the right-wing premier Milan Stojadinović, mend fences with the Germans and Italians.[6] Nevertheless, it remained quite alive as a diplomatic bloc, its members conferred together regularly, and both Romania and Yugoslavia would reiterate multiple times that year their intention to intervene on the side of the Czechoslovaks in a conflict.

Czechoslovakia was otherwise united, beyond formal diplomatic ties, to Britain and France through a host of ideological, economic, and cultural bonds. The republic embraced democratic norms, practices, and values in a part of Europe from which they had well-nigh disappeared. It played an active role at the League of Nations and, even if the League had lost some of its lustre, Czechoslovakia was committed to the collective security ideals to which the French and British publics remained attached. In 1935–6, Beneš had even assumed the important role of president of the League's assembly, the debating chamber composed of the member states' delegates.

British and French companies were significant investors in the republic. 'Great Britain and France possessed by far the greatest share of direct foreign investment in Czechoslovakia, holding between them more than half of the total,' by one calculation.[7] British companies participated in the mining and metallurgy industries, in textiles, glass, and banking. French direct investment was prominent in engineering, steel, and sugar refining. Unilever produced most of the country's vegetable oils, alongside other food products.[8] Prudential and British Overseas Bank were direct investors in the Czech Union Bank, and Société Générale in the Prague Credit Bank. ICI, alongside fertiliser plants, owned the largest share in Explosia, the Czechoslovak explosives manufacturer, alongside French and other investors. The London Rothschilds owned a majority in the Vítkovice steelworks, providing them with special ties to the British defence company Vickers. Even more significantly, the French firm Schneider-Creusot held major stakes in the Ostrava-Karviná mines

and steel plants and in the Škoda works, Czechoslovakia's prime armaments concern and one of the largest in Europe.[9]

The Czechoslovak army, finally, had from its inception enjoyed close ties to the French officer corps. A cadre of forty-five officers under General Maurice Pellé had swooped into Prague in 1919 with the mission to help train and organise the Czechoslovak army.[10] In the 1930s, the Czechoslovak high command had developed its own doctrine and plans, but a French military mission remained in Prague, and grand strategy was still agreed and shared with Paris. Many Czechoslovak soldiers and officers had originally transferred over from the Austrian imperial army, but a large contingent also came from the legion, the group of combatants who, as liberated war prisoners, had joined and fought on the Allied side in the First World War. Prague's Castle guard, which was manned by legionaries, still wore the uniforms of the armies in which it had fought in the Great War: 'pale blue of French *poilu*, with a floppy, dark blue beret; grey green of Italy, with a felt hat upturned at one side; khaki, and a flat-topped forage cap of Imperial Russia'.[11]

As to Germany, in the 1920s and early 30s it had actually been one of Czechoslovakia's friendlier neighbours. Under the Weimar Republic, it was a fellow democracy and it had no claims on Czechoslovakia, which had not been carved out of German territory. Ever since his rise to power, however, Hitler and the controlled Nazi press had only had harsh words. Czechoslovakia was a Soviet and a French ally and it was militarily the strongest state in central Europe. The republic, industrialised and well armed, formed an obstacle to Hitler's expansion plans. Its Little Entente stood in the way of a German drive into the southeast, with its agricultural base and Romanian oil. In November 1937, Hitler had summoned a group of his top military and foreign-policy staff and told them he planned to wage war on Austria and Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia was to be destroyed. The details remained to be fleshed out, but the prize was *Lebensraum*, German living space, as well as food for 'five or six million', after at least two million Czechs had been resettled to Siberia or Volhynia, a marshy area in Poland.[12]

IN A PORTRAYAL by the *Daily Express* reporter Sydney Morrell, the men in Prague had the best tailors in Europe, and the women wore silk stockings. One could buy tomato juice from America and breakfast foods from England. Behind Hradčany, the Castle area, there were modern blocks with tennis courts on which young men and women played, 'leaping figures of white'. At Barrandov, one found 'the finest open air restaurant in Europe, with a swimming pool in what was once a stone quarry', but the city was famous for its pubs, Czech and Dalmatian, Hungarian and Serbian, where gypsies played music or bands various folk songs. On Wenceslas Square, Prague's answer to the Champs Elysées, newspapers piled high surrounded the stalls. Slovak women 'in peasant dress, some of them wearing flounced skirts that came just below the knee', sat on little stools, selling embroidered blouses and hand-made dolls or 'cheeses made from sheep's milk, shaped like a swan's egg and about as large, brown from the smoke of the cottage chimney where they had been hung'. There were also banana sellers, selling a banana for a crown, among other peddlers.[13]

The founder of the surrealist movement, the French poet André Breton, had called Prague the magical capital of Europe. Contemporary photographs show Wenceslas Square filled with motorcars, bright neon signs and glass fronts shining alongside the flowery mouldings and female busts of neo-renaissance and art nouveau buildings. The Czechoslovak capital radiated, in the 1930s, the same eclectic charm as it does today. The squat but pure lines of Charles Bridge already enchanted visiting artists and tourists, even if a bus line ran across it. So did the variegated fantasy of the Old Town Square, its town hall still intact at the time, or the Hebrew clock whose hands run anti-clockwise, then still standing in an area inhabited by numerous Jews.

Prague was not the Czech lands, let alone Czechoslovakia, yet Morrell's description was apt for mixing novelty and tradition. Czechoslovakia in the interwar period was at once a central European Ruritania and one of the most advanced countries in the world. The Czech lands were a little over 50 per cent urbanised, comparable to France and

even Germany. Prague counted close to one million inhabitants and Bratislava around 150,000, but Slovakia was predominantly rural.[14] In the east, Ruthenia, a small mountainous region that was a patchwork of linguistic and national identities, remained rustic and remote.

This was the era of the Czechoslovak functionalist architectural style, with its pure, flat, whitewashed façades, its sharp angles and use of glass, often in the shape of long 'ribbon' windows. The movement had inspired Bauhaus and Le Corbusier. Though the boom had affected numerous other towns, Prague's modernist showpieces included Jaromír Krejcar's Olympic department store, a glass-fronted edifice 'whose upper floors recall the decks of an ocean liner', and Josef Fuchs and Oldřich Tyl's Trade Fair Palace ('Veletřní palác'), the first building to be endowed with a multi-storey, sky-lit atrium.[15] Nationally, rates of car ownership stood somewhere between the central European and the higher western levels; on offer were the locally made Pragas and Škodas, and the sleek, air-cooled Tatra sedans.[16] More than a million Czechoslovaks possessed radio sets, and they were offered a choice of thousands of different press periodicals, alongside movies filmed at the Barrandov studios.[17]

To Hitler, meanwhile, the country was more than an economic prize or a strategic way-station, or even a neighbour bothersome for a dynamism that was antithetical to his own models – Hitler having, after all, closed down the Bauhaus school of architecture. Czechoslovakia was also an ideological antagonist that provided a haven to his political opponents and the refugees from his purges.

Kurt Grossmann was the secretary of the German League for Human Rights and an essayist, as well as being a First World War veteran. The morning after the Reichstag fire – the incident Hitler took as an excuse, shortly after taking power, for eliminating the communists and Social-Democrats – a friendly call warned him not to go by his office, in Berlin, or even to stay home for too long. Grossmann fled to a café and, an hour later and based on a random conversation with an acquaintance, he decided to head for Prague. He waited for

a suitcase and 200 Reichsmarks to be brought to him, then took the noon train out. At the border, the German guards almost detained him, but his limited means seemed a guarantee of return, he had a valid passport, and there was no visa requirement for Czechoslovakia. That same afternoon, he emerged on the platform of the Masaryk train station in central Prague, his new home.[18] Grossmann was merely one of the first among many men and women who would be taking, often in hair-raising circumstances, the road out of the Reich.

In the 1930s, Czechoslovakia had acted as the first port of call for a great number of the 150,000 people who fled Hitler's terror. Though most moved on – to France, Britain, the USA, Palestine, and as far afield as Latin America – around 10,000 remained and Czechoslovakia was long their second-largest country of exile.[19] Czechoslovakia had a liberal refugee policy which included granting passports to those who had none. It did not prosecute people for crossing the border illegally, and asylum-seekers could apply for residence permits that were almost always granted (with exceptions for individuals who were deemed a security risk, often communists).[20] It was geographically close to Germany, but it was also more tolerant of political activity than other neighbouring states such as Switzerland or the Netherlands.[21]

Safe in Czechoslovakia, German exiles kept the flame of the opposition to Hitler's regime alive, maintaining resistance networks inside the Reich and informing the world at large of the nature of the Nazi regime. Since most resistance actions consisted of smuggling pamphlets and news into the Reich or helping fellow victims escape, the border was vital. The German Social-Democrats and their organisation, named the SoPaDe (for *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland*), operated from Czechoslovakia until 1938. Its leaders included Hans Vogel, the party's erstwhile chairman in Germany, Otto Wels, another ex-MP and key member, and the journalist and MP Friedrich Stampfer. With its political leadership in Prague, the SoPaDe ran a network of secretariats in the provinces which, from there, extended its tendrils into the Reich.[22] During the 1936 Olympics, it produced a 'tourist guide' to

the Reich showing a map of its concentration camps and prisons.[23] It also published such periodicals as *Sopade Informationen* and *Der Neue Vorwärts* – at its peak, Czechoslovakia would be hosting no fewer than sixty German publications in exile.[24]

Not all of Germany's political refugees were Social-Democrats: German emigration was quite diverse, and it also included communists, Catholics, liberals, pacifists, traditional right-wing conservatives and nationalists, and Lutheran religious protestors.[25] Kurt Grossmann tells the story of how he ran across a certain Bernhard Weiss one day, in a Prague hotel. Weiss had been a high-level police chief in Berlin and he was a political liberal, but he was also a Jew and the Nazis had always maligned him. While on a trip to Hamburg, he had by chance heard the news of his own flight, on the radio. Though he was warned not to go home, Weiss managed to outwit a platoon of brownshirts to gather a few of his belongings, in Berlin. He then took a train to Prague via Munich. On the Munich night train, though, chance had it that he was put in a compartment with none other than Ernst Röhm, the leader of the SA! (Röhm failed to recognise him ...)[26]

Former political antagonists from all sides mixed and came across each other in the German cafés of Czechoslovakia. In Prague it was chiefly the Continental, which Kafka had once patronised, and where one 'devoured newspapers, had conversations, prophesied Hitler's end, eagerly seized on the news, and met newcomers'.[27] In Brno it was the Biber, the Esplanade, or the Grand Hotel, where doctors, industrialists, and journalists also congregated. The Bavarian poet and novelist Oskar Maria Graf enthused over Brno's charm, its cottages and gardens surrounding a well-appointed town: 'There reigned a democratic urbanity in everything. [...] A considerable share of the Czech intelligentsia, the highly educated Jewish community, the very liberal and emigrant-friendly authorities, the two socialist parties and various left-wing groups – all stood together with us against the swastika-bearing menace. [...] Oh, sweet Brno of my good and lucky years, how often I yearn for you as for a piece of my true homeland.'[28]

So wide was the political spectrum spanned by German exile society that among those prophesising the end of Hitler and thundering against him was in fact a former Nazi boss, Otto Strasser. Strasser, who considered his own brand of national-socialism to be the authentic brand, ran a Black Front from Czechoslovakia, where he had landed after an undercover stint in Austria. He maintained contact with his sympathisers in Germany, published pamphlets, and later printed a newspaper entitled *Deutscher Revolution*. The press was fascinated by him, and within a few days he was on familiar terms with most Czech and German journalists. He was also friendly with 'a number of leading Czechoslovak political figures', including the leader of the German-speaking Social-Democrats, Wenzel Jaksch.[29]

Yet Strasser's activities placed him on the Gestapo's wanted list. In 1933, in Prague, two men had shown up at his flat claiming to be local police. They asked for his identification, then searched his rooms and took his revolver. Dr Otto Baumann, as he was calling himself, just managed to fool them that time. He noticed that the car waiting outside had the wrong plates: black on white numbers, not the Czechoslovak white on black. A piece of cotton soaked in chloroform had been dropped in the gutter.[30] Later, hoping to strike back at his opponents, Strasser set up a dissident radio station, complete with its own transmitter into Germany, in the riverside village of Slapy. Despite living under a false name and staying on friendly terms with law enforcement, this was another close escape. After several days of scouting, Gestapo agents raided the place at the end of January 1938. Strasser escaped once again, but his radio engineer and operator, Rudolf Formis, had no such luck and was shot dead.[31]

Not for nothing did Goebbels call the German exiles 'corpses on holiday'.[32] Perhaps the highest-profile assassination was that of the philosopher and writer Theodor Lessing, in Marienbad in 1933, but there were many others, plus numerous attempts at abduction or entrapment. The Czech police foiled a plot to eliminate the German Social-Democrat leader Otto Wels.[33] The Gestapo sent a certain Hans

Zirker to pose as a fellow Social-Democrat and assassinate Grossmann, another prominent SoPaDe member named Lorentz, and Strasser.[34] Gestapo agents sometimes masqueraded as refugees or operated under threats to relatives in Germany. The dissident organisations responded by sending their own people back across the border, or by assisting the Czechoslovak secret service in its information-gathering.[35]

Most German refugees did not partake in such glamorous or dangerous experiences. Only a minority of the exiles were journalists or party activists; most were simple, often uneducated workers, often young.[36] Though they could count on various assistance organisations, Czech, Jewish, or democratic German, their life was sometimes wrapped in 'the grey mantel of need'.[37] Heinz Kühn, a young Rhineland exile who would later become a senior West German politician, lived for a long time in a flat on the second floor of a modern rental house in the Prague suburb of Zabiehlice, sharing with seven other young refugees. He received basic pocket money and lunched at a free soup kitchen downtown. Though he was theoretically not allowed to work, he did shifts at a coal delivery firm and wrote articles for a German publication. This afforded him such small luxuries as trips to the cinema Urania, which showed films in German and was a good place to meet local German girls.[38]

Czechoslovakia was enjoying an artistic golden age. In 1935, André Breton had come to Prague to lecture to a packed audience on 'The surrealist situation of the object'. His hosts were the poet Vítězslav Nezval and the art critic Karel Teige, joined by the Paris-based painter Josef Šíma and the Czech surrealist artists Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen (Marie Čermínová).[39] Cubism had enjoyed widespread artistic popularity in Czechoslovakia and would continue to do so in the 1930s, even as surrealism and the more strictly native-born poetism flowered. In literature, this was the age of Karel Čapek – best known internationally for his invention of the robot as part of a 1920 science-fiction play entitled *Rosum's Universal Robots* – of Eduard Bass, Jozef Cíger-Hronský, and Karel Poláček. In the German language, the 1920s and 30s had witnessed

the publication of Franz Kafka's novels by Max Brod, an accomplished writer in his own right. Musically, the republic had seen the last years of Leoš Janáček and the first of Bohuslav Martinů.

On the popular scene, jazz, both in imported and native versions, was taking its first steps in Czechoslovakia's theatres and clubs. Likewise the genre of the satirical revue. In late 1937, the actor–scriptwriter team of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich premiered a play titled *Fat Barbara*: a parody featuring a mythical dictatorial country called Yberland that was looking for an excuse to expand into the smaller, neighbouring Eidam.[40] The Liberated Theatre, originally a stage for avant-garde plays, had begun under the Voskovec–Werich impulse to produce revues mixing jazz, gags, and intellectual humour, then moved into political plays in the 1930s. Though it poked fun at political institutions and politics in general, in Nazism it found an obvious target. Its songs were often taken up by the public, played on the radio, and repeated by word of mouth, helping propagate a mood of irreverence towards the country's totalitarian neighbour.

Hitler's partisans knew what they were doing when they slashed the canvases of a contemporary art exhibition in Ústí nad Labem.[41] Czechoslovak modernity was in its own conception a manifestation of the country's democratic values. Just as the colourful and bold contemporary art of the West would come to embody, during the Cold War, its carefree diversity in opposition to the staid and stifling Soviet intellectual climate, so did Czechoslovakia and its culture stand for a merry freedom against the Reich's 'racially pure' art and its brutally enforced norms. In March 1938, the opera *Julietta* by Martinů would premiere at the Prague national theatre: it was a roaring success, and it played for many nights to an enthusiastic audience.[42] What the Prague public cheered for nights on end, though, was not just Martinů's score; it was the opera's cosmopolitan and progressive associations; it was a liberal spirit that, under pressure from the Reich, proclaimed as best it could its defiance.

Likewise, finally, the refugees who possibly mattered most were the

small group of German writers and artists in flight: they were the ones who could thumb their nose at the Nazis and get public attention for it. In Czechoslovakia, they found a country where books were not burnt and their works not banned. Perhaps the best known of the German exiles, strangely enough, was someone who had assumed Czechoslovak nationality but did not live there: Thomas Mann, the Nobel prize-winning author of *The Magic Mountain* and *Buddenbrooks*. Stripped of his German citizenship, Mann had been offered a Czechoslovak passport in a move endorsed by Masaryk and Beneš themselves. Mann had visited his new country in 1937, and he would defend Czechoslovakia from afar after moving to the US in May 1938.[43]

Prominent exiled German artists on the Prague scene included Helmut Herzfeld, also known as John Heartfield, and Oskar Kokoschka. Kokoschka, who would eventually move to England, was an expressionist known for haunted canvases that were nevertheless packed with colour. Other than a number of memorable Prague landscapes, he would paint a famed self-portrait as a 'degenerate artist'.[44] Heartfield, originally a member of the Dada movement, was celebrated for his photomontages, which often carried a political message. He was a feature of a major caricature exhibition at the Mánes Gallery in 1934, alongside such international celebrities as Jean Cocteau and Otto Dix. Typical Heartfield photomontages showed a woman crucified on a swastika, or a tiny Hitler with an outsize head watering an oak whose acorns were giant artillery shells. The show was violently condemned in Germany, and it was the object of official protests from Italy and Poland. This did not prevent the Mánes from having a re-run in 1937, with both Kokoschka and Heartfield as its stars.[45] Alongside these worthies, finally, were a host of minor artists and illustrators, such as the contributors to the satirical journal *Simplicissimus*. A cross between a literary journal and *Punch*, this was revived in Czechoslovakia under various names such as *Simplicus* and *Simpl* in initiatives that were calculated to keep the Nazis, across the border, in a state of constant exasperation.[46]