Taking Flight: How the Czechoslovak Squadrons in the British Royal Air Force Legitimized Early Czechoslovak Government-In-Exile Efforts in Britain (1939–1940)

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Photograph taken by author

Introduction

In Dr. Edvard Beneš' 1940 speech "Our Struggle for the Liberation of the Republic" delivered to the State Council in London, the Tribute to Fallen Soldiers section concludes with the simple line "I especially pay tribute to all our fallen airmen." As a whole, the speech places weight on both soldiers and politicians as the backbone of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile which was based out of London during the Second World War.[1] In particular it highlights the prominence of airmen, who served in the Czechoslovak squadrons of the Royal British Air Force, and whose existence as an early and capable fighting force legitimized the political movement to recognize a Czechoslovak Provisional Government. The squadrons, although formed under a degree of political pressure from exiled Czechoslovak politicians, were established by the British more out of convenience and the spirit of Allied unity than a genuine need for a separate fighting entity, but regardless proved to be invaluable to the Czechoslovak case for governmental recognition. The Czechoslovak government-in-exile movement and the Czechoslovak Squadrons of the R.A.F. were linked so that neither could have existed in the forms that they did without the other.

The origins of both the Czechoslovak squadrons and the government-in-exile movement lie in the prelude to WWII. On September 30th, 1938, Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, negotiated the Munich Agreement with the leaders of Germany, France and Italy to permit the German annexation of the Sudetenland, a region of western Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovak officials were not consulted nor present for its creation, eventually accepting it after both military and diplomatic pressure. Chamberlain hoped that this decision would appease Nazi Germany's desire for a larger German homeland, and prevent another war on the scale of the First World War.

[1] All translations made while writing this paper are mine, and all errors are mine alone. Edvard Beneš, Printed Speech "Náš Boj O Osvobození Republiky: Řeč při Zahájení Prací Státní Rady" (11 December 1940), Folder 2, Box 3, Czechoslovak resistance in exile (1939–1945) LIS/3, Karl Lisicky Collection (1915–1948) at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) Library, University of London. [hereafter known as LIS]

Internal British Foreign Office documents suggest that many viewed Czechoslovakia as an "artificial creation" of the previous conflict and maintaining its unity at risk of war was inadvisable—a position Chamberlain ended up agreeing with.[2] Even before Munich Agreement negotiations began, Czechoslovakia was aware of its tenuous position, particularly in the form of the rising German threat. Germany made it no secret that it desired to incorporate the Sudetenland, which was inhabited by a mixture of ethnic Germans and Czechs, into itself, and in response the Czechs began an accelerating campaign of military mobilization and defense buildup. As early as 1935, Czechoslovakia fortified and created a heavily armed western border with Germany, and began to increase its military spending. In 1938, after the Austrian annexation, this truly accelerated, with a partial mobilization of the military on May 21st. Part of these preparations included truly heavy investment in the Czechoslovak Air Force. According to the 1938 Annual Report on Czechoslovakia by the British Foreign Office, on January 1st of that year it was a "good but small force" of somewhat outdated aircraft—but just nine months later by the end of September it grew by about 40%, added state-of-the-art bombers to its forces and was fully mobilized and war-ready.[3]

Many of these Czechoslovak pilots fled their country after its complete annexation in March of 1939, which split the nation into the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (the Czech portion of Czechoslovakia) and the Nazi client state of the Slovak Republic. They mostly fled through Poland into France where they served as foreign fighters in the French Foreign Legion until France too fell to the Nazis in 1940.[4]

In fact, Britain—and London specifically—emerged as the location of the future Czechoslovak government-in-exile led by Edvard Beneš, which had been operating out of

[2] Vít Smetana, *In the Shadow of Munich: British Policy towards Czechoslovakia from the Endorsement to the Renunciation of the Munich Agreement (1938–1942)*. (Karolinum Press, 2014), 44.
[3] Annual Report on Czechoslovakia (1938), Czechoslovakia: annual reports, 1936–1968 FO 470/13, British National Archives at Kew.
[4] Alan Brown, "The Czechoslovak Air Force in Britain, 1940–1945," PhD diss., University of Southampton, 1998, https://www-proquest-com.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/dissertations-theses/czechoslovak-air-force-britain-1940-1945-bl/docview/898767016/se-2.

France until its fall. It was a staunchly anti-fascist group of politicians, with the explicit goal of overturning the Munich Agreement and regaining control over the homeland. Although they were recognized by the British and French governments as a National Committee relatively quickly, the political situation of their home country and their unusual position as an aspiring government-in-exile presented some challenges in recognition in France and later in the United Kingdom. In particular, less than a week after the Munich Agreement, Edvard Beneš resigned as President of the Republic and had gone into self-imposed exile, which put the Czechoslovaks in a different position than the many other countries and leaders seeking recognition in exile in London (like Poland, Norway, the Free French, the Netherlands, etc.), because all of their governments fled intact—with no formal resignations. Considering also that the Czechoslovak National Committee had little control over what was going on in their former territory—and that the country itself had been split in two—there were serious doubts about its legitimacy as a true government-in-exile. For this reason, it was of utmost importance to Beneš and the other politicians to have a stake in the creation and control of a military force allied with the British.

This government-in-exile would prove to have a mixed relationship with the British, but would be particularly politically interested in the creation and use of Czechoslovak Royal Air Force Squadrons. The RAF created the 310, 311 and 312 Czechoslovak Squadrons for Czechoslovak airmen starting in July of 1940. On one hand, the RAF likely created the squadrons because of the concentrated arrivals of capable airmen and because they served as symbols of Allied unity.[5] On the other hand, they likely continued to exist due to the persistence of Edvard Beneš and what would become the government-in-exile, which insisted on its citizens being able to fight on the front lines of the war and garner prestige and influence for the group as a governing force.

For the Czechoslovak politicians, having an independent military fighting in WWII was a priority because of the legitimacy it would lend them. An important note is that the

[5] Ibid.

R.A.F. squadrons were not operationally independent, and due to their size, never became independent. However, this did not stop the Czechoslovak exiles from repeatedly and unsuccessfully pushing for it, and fighting for on-paper independence and the symbols that came with it during the establishment of these squadrons. From the British perspective, privately the Czechoslovak airmen were considered very skilled, but perhaps not a military necessity, and they viewed it to be easier if they were kept functionally as normal R.A.F. pilots. However, due to a mix of wanting to maintain cohesion amongst allies and the residual impacts of the Munich agreement, they allowed for a measure of on-paper independence.

I. Historiography and Methods

By far the most thorough previous scholarship on this topic is the work of Alan Brown in his PhD dissertation, "The Czechoslovak Air Force in Britain, 1940–1945" and subsequent book, *Airmen in Exile: The Allied Air Forces in the Second World War*. I hope that my work will serve as an expansion on it. He has a Beneš-focused view of the operations of the government-in-exile, and in his own words, “The central thesis is that the Czechoslovak Air Force in Britain was first and last a political tool to be used by the governments of both nations; first by the British as a means of international propaganda; then by the Czechoslovaks as a means of gaining prestige and influence while in exile; and last by the British again as a foil to the Soviets.” He aims to demonstrate that it was the arrival of the Czechoslovak troops and air crews which forced the British hand to legitimize a form of Czechoslovak government-in-exile and not some kind of sentimental compensation for Munich. He also details the Czechoslovak government-in-exile’s quest for an independent fighting force, which was a source of perpetual friction between the two allies. While he mentions the on-paper independence of the Czechoslovak fighting forces, he does not have it as the focus of his work, which is something I plan to explore further. I have, however, not found his claim of the British using the Czechoslovak forces as “international propaganda”

to be as prominent as he suggests, and will be analyzing their motivations for creating the squadrons as more circumstantial, and with a more military-focused lens.

In Milan Hauner's chapter of *Exile In and From Czechoslovakia During the 1930s and 1940s*, "Beginnings of the Czechoslovak Government in Exile 1939–1941," he asserts that the government-in-exile's politics and actions were dominated by its president Edvard Beneš, who he paints as a controversial figure. Nevertheless, he acknowledges him as a skilled and relentless politician who spent the time between the Munich Agreement and the war championing the idea of Czechoslovak continuity—that Czechoslovakia was a nation that still existed, and would form a government and legitimate fighting force in the event of an outbreak of war in Europe. His evidence comes in the form of Beneš' personal communications and political statements. Hauner asserts that Beneš' organization of the evacuation of Czech politicians and troops from France, particularly the transfer of the small but efficient Czech air force to the RAF, was an astute tactic that led to recognition of a Provisional Czechoslovak Government-in-exile shortly after, with him as the head. I expand on his work by incorporating larger political themes outside of just Beneš' goals, like the interplay between them and the British government's aims.

I have modeled my own research methods largely after Alan Brown's for his dissertation, with the caveat of only accessing sources in the United Kingdom. Therefore, my paper is told largely from the point of view of the British—both in what they were internally considering, and what they thought of Czechoslovak efforts. Most of the records that I accessed are held in the British National Archives at Kew. For obtaining a military administrative perspective, seeing as the Czechoslovak squadrons were at the command of British forces, I used the AIR archive, which contains the records of the Air Ministry, Royal Air Force and Air Historical Branch. For larger political and international relations insight, I used the records of the British Foreign Office, known as the FO Archive, also at Kew, which contains internal communications about foreign policy decisions on the British's part, but also records of communications between the British and Czechoslovak politicians in

London. This archive contains both debates over political recognition of the Czechoslovaks, and the discussions surrounding the creation of the RAF squadrons and reveals how these two movements were intertwined. I supplemented this work with time at the Karl Lisicky Collection at the University of College London's School of Slavic and Eastern European Studies' Library, to gain more of a Czech perspective as to why the Squadrons were initially established. Lisicky was the Counsellor of the Czechoslovak Embassy in London during this time and a longtime member of the Czechoslovak foreign service, and therefore has documents relating to both British-Czechoslovak relations and internal Czechoslovak developments.

II. Squadron Development and Motivations

After the occupation and splitting of Czechoslovakia at the behest of the Germans, most of the airmen who fled the country ended up in France, usually via Poland. This was either by using Poland as simply the pathway to France to join the Foreign Legion, or occasionally through arrival with the Polish forces after the invasion of Poland and the start of the war. In either case, France was a logical destination for both soldiers and politicians seeking to resist Nazi efforts outside of Czechoslovakia, because it was both an ideological ally in antifascist fighting and an ally politically of Czechoslovakia courtesy of The Franco-Czechoslovak Treaty of Mutual Assistance of 1925.[6] The French were initially not particularly receptive to the political or military efforts of the Czechoslovaks, but by December of 1939 they, along with Britain, recognized a Czechoslovak National Committee (or the Czechoslovak National Liberation Committee) as a body that could participate in treaties in its own right, but not as the government of Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak National Committee was comprised of various self-exiled politicians who congregated in France and headed by the former president of Czechoslovakia, Edvard Beneš, with the explicit goals of being recognized as a full government-in-exile and the re-formation of an

[6] Ibid., 15.

independent, unified Czechoslovakia. In early 1940, optimism ran high among the Czechoslovaks that a small independent air force and an army would be created in France, as an accompanying force to the National Committee—and to a certain extent it was. In agreement with the French and British governments, the Czechoslovak National Committee began sending out recruitment letters for the formation of an "Independent Czechoslovak Army in France," calling citizens from across the globe to enlist in France to show that "Czechoslovakia has not perished."[7] By May of 1940, an agreement was signed by the French Government and Czechoslovak National Committee that established an independent fighting force, but it was mostly regarded as "window dressing" by all parties and forces effectively remained part of the French Foreign Legion.[8] However, it is very possible that these Czechoslovak military forces simply never got the chance to grow into fully independent units because of the Nazi invasion of France nearly immediately after, in mid-May.

When it became clear that France was falling, the National Committee fled to Britain, who at that point was seen as the last standing Allied nation. Britain had previously taken little interest in having either Czechoslovak political or military forces on its own soil, instead opting to keep them as allies under France's direction, but was now forced to consider receiving both. Once in London, Beneš and the National Committee immediately put pressure on the British to evacuate Czechoslovak troops alongside the French and Polish ones, who had already been granted permission to constitute on British soil. Their success, particularly in evacuating much of the small but experienced force of airmen, can be seen as the first political and military maneuver that eventually led to the recognition of Beneš and the National Committee as a full government-in-exile.

[7] Recruitment Letter, The Czechoslovak National Committee (date unknown), Folder E3, Box 11, Czechoslovak resistance in exile (1939–1945) LIS/3/3/11.; Has not [yet] perished is a common patriotic phrase found across Central and Eastern Europe, and at the time was found in the Polish national anthem and some pan-Slavic songs.
[8] Brown, "The Czechoslovak Air Force in Britain, 1940–1945," 18.

The airmen were the first seed of Czechoslovak military forces constituted on British soil, and because of their experienced nature were quickly made into squadrons in the Royal Air Force under British command. The first formal squadron in the Royal Air Force, the 310 fighter squadron, was created on July 10th, 1940. Two more squadrons, the 311 bomber squadron and the 312 fighter squadrons, followed in the coming months, even prior to the signing of a military agreement in October between the British and what would be, by then, the Czechoslovak Provisional Government.[9] The motivations for creating these RAF squadrons were quite different for the Czechoslovaks and the British, but tellingly both were strong enough to have them fighting even before the existence of an official agreement or even a more thoroughly recognized government-in-exile to tie them to.

For the Czechoslovak political exiles, having a "legitimate" military power actively fighting in the war was an integral part of their strategy to legitimize their claim as representatives of Czechoslovakia, but also in the fight for a post-war independent Czechoslovakia. This theme of legitimacy dominates the life and creation of the air force squadrons and the entirety of Czechoslovak resistance efforts outside of the homeland. In in the University of College London's School of Slavoic and Eastern European Studies' Library, the Lisicky Archive has select copies of Beneš' speeches throughout the war, which consistently stress the military's very concrete role in the effort to recreate an independent and unified Czechoslovakia post-war, rather than it being a situation of pure political effort. In the speech "Vojáci československé Republiky!" (Soldiers of the Czechoslovak Republic), delivered while in London, Beneš states "In this war, a nation that will not fight will not be free. We must fight here, and we will fight at home in a given moment. Without an army here [Britain] and without resistance at home, the nation would remain in chains and you would not return."[10] As a relatively experienced fighting force already, the Czechoslovak airmen evacuated from France were seen by the politicians as critical to the Czechoslovak

[9] Ibid., 30.
[10] Dr. Edvard Beneš, Speech "Vojáci československé Republiky!" (1940), Folder D2, Box 11, Czechoslovak resistance in exile (1939–1945), LIS 3/3/2.

liberation effort within Britain in every sense—militarily, and politically as a unit tied to the National Committee. By the time of the formal military agreement concerning Czechoslovak forces, they were still the foremost fighting units of Czechoslovaks in Britain, evidenced by the fact that their section is notably twice as long and more fleshed out than the portion of the agreement pertaining to all other military forces.[11]

On the other end of this agreement, the British Government did not see the formation of Czechoslovak R.A.F. squadrons as a priority until hundreds of airmen were evacuated to their doorstep. Prior to the fall of France, the Air Ministry, which oversaw the R.A.F., had internally debated bringing a selection of Czechoslovak airmen over to Britain to incorporate into existing British squadrons. One of the most vocal proponents of the plan, Group-Captain Frank Beaumont, the former British Air Attache to Prague, argued that the airmen would be valuable as long-distance bombers and reconnaissance pilots over their homeland, and that given the fact that many had been trained both in their homeland and in France as pilots, it would be a shame to waste such quality personnel.[12] This was, however, not the majority view in either the Air Ministry or in foreign relations, due to doubts about the Czech's true capabilities and a preference to keep the shakily constituted National Committee at an arms distance, so these proposals never came to fruition. Upon the arrival of the evacuated airmen though, they were swiftly put to use and squadrons created due to a mix of factors. For one, the force was already somewhat experienced, and air power was as more important than ever before due to the early stages of the Battle of Britain. Perhaps most importantly, Britain saw itself as the final bastion of Allied forces in Western Europe and sought to maintain a sense of Allied unity and morale. Even Beaumont's earlier proposal opens by indicating that it should be considered because Polish forces were already being constituted in Britain under the R.A.F. with permission of the French, and he sees no reason

[11] Agreement Between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Provisional Czechoslovak Government Concerning the Czechoslovak Armed Forces (25 October 1940) [AIR 2/5162], Correspondence of the Air Ministry (AIR 2), Records of the Air Ministry, Royal Air Force and Air Historical Branch, at the British National Archives at Kew.
[12] Frank Beaumont, Statement by Group Captain Beaumont "Use of Czech Personnel in the R.A.F." (July 1940), AIR 2/5153.

to exclude the similarly allied Czechoslovaks from such an arrangement. For the British, creating the Czechoslovak squadrons was a case of circumstance and convenience, with hopes that they would strengthen an image of allied unity during a harsh loss.

III. Contributions to further recognition

According to Beneš' memoirs, the period surrounding the fall of France was the start of a second push for a government-in-exile, as the arrival of military forces gave these conversations a new and firmer legal and practical basis.[13] At this time, he was recognized only as the head of the Czechoslovak National Committee, which, while recognized as a "governing body," was not seen as a true government. Even prior to the recognition of the National Committee, Beneš and his allies pushed for recognition as a full government-in-exile, but Allied forces remained hesitant to do so.

Within the British Foreign Office, further recognition as even a Provisional government-in-exile, a status which would not acknowledge the body as the future leadership of a reconstituted nation or give it full diplomatic recognition, was controversial.[14] An internal memo on July 1st, 1940 outlines that some of the major hesitancies were a lack of unity among former Czechoslovak citizens abroad, especially former Slovak separatists, fears of alienating nearby countries such as Poland and Hungary that had previous claims to Czechoslovak territory, and an overall wariness to commit to reinstating pre-war borders in Central Europe.[15] Although not mentioned in that particular memo, within his memoirs Beneš acknowledges another major obstacle to the recognition of any sort of Czechoslovak government-in-exile in the form of legal continuity. He asserts that the Czechoslovak state never legally ceased to exist because all actions after the Munich

[13] Edvard Beneš, *Memoirs: From Munich to New War and New Victory.* Translated by Godfrey Lias. Allen & Unwin, 1954.
[14] Memorandum on the Status of the Provisional Czechoslovak Government (1940), File 1320/12, Status of Provisional Czechoslovak Government, Political Departments: Correspondence from 1906 to 1966 (FO 371), Foreign Office Archive at the British National Archives at Kew (FO), FO 371/26394.
[15] Memorandum on the Recognition of a Czecho-Slovak Provisional Government (1 July 1940), File C 7464/2/12, Recognition of Czecho-Slovak National Committee and other political matters, Czechoslovak Confidential, FO 371/24289. See also Michael Dockrill, "The Foreign Office, Dr Eduard Benes and the Czechoslovak Government-in-Exile 1939–41," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 6, no. 3 (1995): 701–18.

agreement, such his resignation and the creation of Slovakia, were unconstitutional and performed under duress.[16] In a push by Beneš and the National Committee, a series of letters was written to Edward Wood—better known as Viscount Halifax—the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, from July 9th to July 18th, and by July 21st, 1940, the hesitancies were overcome, and the Czechoslovak Provisional Government was recognized by the British.[17]

A strong factor in pushing internal Foreign Office debates towards more recognition of a Provisional Government appears to be military-focused reasoning, especially as plans for Czechoslovak fighting forces coalesced. In particular, the British saw a functional unit of airmen as an early possibility, and a relationship between the political forces and military ones needed to be hammered out. In a summary of a phone call with Dr. Beneš from June 21st 1940, William Strang, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, asserts that with the fall of France, there would be "in this country large numbers of Czech soldiers and airmen, together with an increased number of political refugees" and that Beneš would likely "be in a better position to negotiate with His Majesty's Government as to the future organization of the Czechoslovak armed forces in the country" if a Provisional Government could be constituted. This is because Beneš believed the National Committee lacked sufficient power.[18] This document reveals how the arrival of airmen and military forces more broadly was directly linked to the push to recognize a Provisional Government, both in the eyes of the Czech Politicians, and increasingly for the British Foreign Office. Furthermore, on the same day, an internal letter written by Frank Roberts, argues rather explicitly in favor of recognizing a provisional government due to the military capability and utility of the Czechoslovaks. He opens by noting that the Czechs have strong motivation to fight the

[16] Edvard Beneš, *Memoirs: From Munich to New War and New Victory*, trans. Godfrey Lias. (Allen & Unwin, 1954), 106.
[17] Smetana, *In the Shadow of Munich*, 194.
[18] William Strang, Summary of a phone call from Dr. Beneš, (21 June 1940), File C 7645, Recognition of Czecho-Slovak National Committee and other political matters, Czechoslovak Confidential, FO 371/24289.

Germans, and that "any encouragement we can give to the Czechs might, therefore, prove of first-class utility to ourselves." He further asks:

> Since the war, the Czech exiles have been fighting beside the Allies and have organized, I believe, a far from contemptible air contingent… On these grounds, but particularly on that of our own needs, is there not now a strong case for recognising the Czechs as our Allies and for recognising Dr. Benes as head of a Czechoslovak Government?[19]

It appears that within the Foreign Office, there was rising support for a Provisional Government, not only because of the imminent arrival of Czechoslovak political and military forces, but also because of the utility of the forces, particularly the airmen, in the Allied war effort. Even the aforementioned July 1st memo, which expressed hesitancies over creating a Provisional Government, acknowledges that due to logistical challenges of relocating the headquarters of the Czechoslovak National Committee, several thousand troops, and hundreds of pilots, "there should therefore be an advantage in having in this country a Czecho-Slovak Provisional Government with the necessary authority to control the Czecho-Slovak soldiers and airmen and other civilian refugees." It even suggested that if "Dr. Benes were assured of further recognition, he would no longer have much difficulty in securing the necessary unity among the Czech and Slovak emigres."[20] Although the Provisional Government never had full authority to control Czechoslovak military forces, as they were enlisted in and commanded by the British Army and Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserves, the prospect of it appears to have been under real consideration, and in reality the Provisional Government ended up with on-paper and symbolic control of these forces.

This military justification for recognizing a Provisional Government and a desire for formal allies in the war effort is even seen in the public announcement of the Provisional Government. The Provisional Government status was confirmed privately in a letter between Lord Halifax and Beneš on July 21st, with the conditions that the British would not commit themselves to any particular Czechoslovak borders upon the end of the war, and that Provisional Government was to be the representative of the Czech and Slovak people,

[19] Frank Kenyon Roberts, Letter (21 June 1940), FO 371/24289.
[20] Memorandum on the Recognition of a Czecho-Slovak Provisional Government.

rather than a full representative of pre-war Czechoslovakia. Precise jurisdiction over Czechoslovak armed forces was left to be ironed out with a later agreement. This was followed by the public announcement on July 23rd, and a statement by Winston Churchill in the House of Commons that this Czechoslovak Provisional Government would be in practice treated the same as fully recognized governments-in-exile that represented pre-war nations.[21] The following day, on July 24th, Richard "Rab" Butler, the Foreign Office Spokesperson to the House of Commons and an MP, broadcasted the news to the wider public, presumably on the BBC. In this announcement, the military justification, specifically highlighting airmen, is particularly present, and extends even to why the Czechoslovaks are considered allies and why the Czechoslovak national Committee was recognized in the first place. After announcing the news of Provisional Government status, he states that:

> Since the outbreak of war much work has been done abroad by the Czechoslovak leaders to prepare for the restoration of liberty to their people. The first stage was the formation in France of the Czechoslovak Legion and of Czechoslovak sections of the French Air Force. The British and French Governments recognised the Czechoslovak National Committee last year in order to help those who were organizing these armed forces. These soldiers and pilots showed the greatest courage during the recent fighting in France and... now we have these trained and tried soldiers and pilots in this country and we are proud to have them at our side in this struggle. Czechoslovak pilots have already carried the war in the air back into Germany. We trust that before too long they will pay, not flying visits to Germany, but will take up a permanent residence again in their own freed country.[22]

By this time in late July, he correctly stated that the earliest Czechoslovak military forces which had regrouped on British soil had already joined the war effort – the airmen, both as independent fighters and in the formation of the first R.A.F. squadrons. Although this speech was presumably aimed at the broader British public, and hence stressed a unified and strong war effort above all else, it is telling that the Provisional Government was justified in its creation and lauded as an ally due to early military efforts, mainly in the form of the Czechoslovak airmen and squadrons.

[21] Smetana, *In the Shadow of Munich*, 194–5.
[22] Copy of Broadcast by Mr. Butler (24 July 1940), Recognition of Czecho-Slovak National Committee and other political matters, Czechoslovak Confidential, FO 371/24289.

IV. Pushes for Independence

Soon after its recognition, the Czechoslovak Provisional Government entered into negotiations with the British Foreign Office over the formal creation of ground and air forces on British Soil. In these early efforts, we can see symbolic and contractual pushes for independence and a desire to have a truly independent air force directly under their control.

The final version of the Anglo-Czechoslovak Military Agreement of October 25th, 1940, shines a light on how this desire for independence appears in the creation of the R.A.F. squadrons. The agreement permitted the flying of Czechoslovak flag alongside the British one where airmen are based/trained, requiring that all members of the Czechoslovak squadrons take an oath to both the British Crown and the Czechoslovak Provisional Government, and promised to keep Czechoslovak personnel involved in all hirings and promotions of their airmen and crews and to retain Czechoslovak officers alongside British ones. It also declared the existence of a Czechoslovak Air Force, nominally under the Provisional Government's rule, although the British maintain commanding control, as all squadron personnel are members of the R.A.F. Volunteer Reserves.[23] Furthermore, symbolic independence remains an important theme as highlighted in Minute Sheet – Air Ministry File No. A.139077/40, which concerns the "wearing of metal flying badge by Czechoslovak personnel in R.A.F.V.R.," in which British officers of the R.A.F. Volunteer Reserves, which commanded the Czech Squadrons, took issue with the unauthorized wearing of the metal flying badge of the Czech Air Force that many airmen had been wearing. An Air Ministry Official responds that as per agreement between the British and Czechoslovak governments that the Czechoslovak Squadrons are recognized as part of the armed forces of the Czechoslovak government, and therefore part of the Czechoslovak Air Force, and should be allowed to wear the badge in addition to the R.A.F. uniform. He stated that:

> This arrangement [operation by the R.A.F.V.R.] necessitated a certain sacrifice of pride in national independence on the part of the Czechoslovak authorities,

[23] Agreement between His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom and the Provisional Czechoslovak Government concerning the employment of the Czechoslovak Forces (or The Anglo-Czechoslovak Military Agreement) (25 October 1940), File 5162, AIR/2.

> who, whilst maintaining an independent national army, agreed to such an arrangement for their air force in the common allied interest, and it will be appreciated that I am most anxious to avoid the occurrence of any difficulty..." and, "This badge is one on which they set great store, so great indeed that any intimation that they should remove it would certainly lead to the greatest discontent, at the very least, with consequent adverse effect on morale and efficiency in their war effort. It is perhaps difficult for us, still with our own country in our possession, to realize what value they set on wearing an emblem which signifies to them a national tradition whilst exiled from their country now in enemy hands. You will remember that it was only after the greatest pressure that the Czechoslovak authorities withdrew their insistent demands for a special national cap badge.[24]

Although this letter and orders were controversial even within the Air Ministry, its decision stood. The letter encapsulates the martial politics at play, a struggle for independence on the Czechoslovak's part, and a sympathetic but firm desire for Allied and R.A.F. unity within the British military. In a later minute sheet, officials expressed frustration with the Czechoslovak government-in-exile's repeated requests to form an independent Air Force out of the Czechoslovak Squadrons of the R.A.F.V.R., as the Polish had done. The Air Ministry opted to turn it down because of their small numbers, and in its internal and informal "Memorandum on the Proposed Revision of the Czechoslovak Forces Agreement" it referenced that the Czechoslovak squadrons were a shrinking force, and asserted in a frustrated tone that "we have always recognised the Czechoslovak Air Force as a political necessity; at the same time we cannot but regard it as a military luxury."[25]

V. Conclusion

The Czechoslovak R.A.F. squadrons were truly a political necessity in more ways than one. Because of the airmen's early fighting capabilities and relative experience, they were a powerful justification for the recognition of a Czechoslovak Provisional Government on British soil, and the squadrons and their symbolic independence were regarded as a powerful political tool for legitimizing a future independent Czechoslovakia. With three

[24] Minute Sheet on Wearing of metal flying badge by Czechoslovak personnel in R.A.F.V.R., File No. A.139077/40, AIR 2/10174.
[25] Minute Sheet and Memorandum on the Proposed Revision of the Czechoslovak Forces Agreement (date unknown), AIR 2/5162.

R.A.F. squadrons and an army battalion in place, alongside the building up of governmental structures, a full Czechoslovak Government-in-exile was recognized by the British on July 18th, 1941, something that would have been nearly unthinkable just two years prior.

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