

## Some Lessons from History

By Don Sutherland

On March 14, 1938, the U.S. Chargé in France in France cabled back to U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull of his meeting with Czechoslovakia's Ambassador to France, Štefan Osuský. He wrote:

*Osuský said that the real problem is the following: for the first time in recent history Germany finds no other large power in a position to contest the German drive for domination of Central Europe Italy having sold out her position for Ethiopia. The only country which stands in the way is a small country, Czechoslovakia. Hitler has been trying in every way to persuade Czechoslovakia to drop her alliances with Russia and France and go over to the German camp. This the Czechoslovak Government has refused to do seeing clearly what would be in store eventually for Czechoslovakia. Hitler is therefore now determined to isolate Czechoslovakia, to neutralize her and then to use Czechoslovakia as a bridge across which would flow the expansion of German force throughout Central and Eastern Europe to the Black Sea.*

This historical account echoes through recent events. Prior to Russia's launching its war against Ukraine, Russia demanded that NATO pull out of Eastern Europe and that Ukraine be permanently barred from joining NATO. Doing so would have increased the prospect that Ukraine would ultimately be swept into Russia's orbit and, once that happened, unable to escape from the influence of its giant authoritarian neighbor.

On April 28, 1938, the U.S. Ambassador to Germany informed Secretary of State Hull:

*The German press has been building up day by day the Czechoslovak situation. Each day the facts and arguments used tend to show the unbearable plight of the Sudeten Germans, the justification of the demands of Henlein and that the only conceivable reason for the refusal of Henlein's suggestions would be hostility to Germany. As a result the public mind is prepared for almost any eventuality, even perhaps for action similar to that which happened in Austria.*

A similar situation was underway in Russia's unfree press. Indeed, back on December 9, 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared, "We see and know what is happening in Donbas... It certainly looks like genocide."

On September 30, 1938, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, French Premier Edouard Daladier, and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain signed the Munich Pact that allowed Germany to annex Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain hailed the accord, proclaiming that it had secured "Peace for our time." "Our time," it turned out, was very short-lived. On March 15, 1939, Germany seized the rest of Czechoslovakia.

Three general lessons:

1. History "rhymes," because human nature remains relatively constant despite the passage of time. Human nature is a product of human evolution;

2. Aggressors use similar playbooks. They exploit perceived weakness (or lack of will to resist them), they push propaganda to preemptively rationalize their aggression; and,

3. Accommodation or appeasement provides only temporary respite from aggression while increasing the risks of subsequent aggression. Aggressors pocket their gains, calculate that they were made possible from weakness, and then push on afterward.

Specific issues relevant to Ukraine:

1. The free world needs to maintain its support for Ukraine until Ukraine prevails against Russian aggression;

2. The free world must not insist on terms that allow Russia to make gains from its latest war. Territorial gains or constraints on Ukraine's sovereignty must not be accepted;

3. Accommodations, even if rationalized on grounds of ending the war faster than would otherwise be the case or sparing Putin of humiliation, would lay the foundation for future Russian aggression;

4. Peace terms must entail Ukraine's regaining its full territory, including Crimea. They must allow Ukraine full exercise of its sovereignty, including the choice to pursue EU and/or NATO membership. Russia must act according to bedrock principles of international law; and,

5. Sanctions relief on Russia should be tied to concrete performance. Russian promises, alone, should not be sufficient to bring about relief.

Ignoring history, overlooking Putin's imperial designs, and making decisions based on best-case outcomes or unrealized hopes can only lead to tragedy. Lasting peace will require Ukraine's victory, terms consistent with international law, and sustained deterrence of future Russian aggression.