

Operation Uproot

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How Czechoslovakia, alone among the countries overrun by the Nazis, succeeded in evacuating an intelligence organization to operate in exile.

OPERATION UPROOT

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As Hitler's forces occupied one after another of the countries of Europe from 1939 through 1941, refugee officials from many of them assembled in London and formed governments in exile or liberation organs which tried among other things to organize intelligence activities. They were handicapped in this by having lost all the assets--agents, files, communications--of their pre-occupation intelligence organizations. They had to start from scratch, and with almost exclusively amateur staff personnel. Those that achieved a measure of success--most notably the Norwegians and the Free French--owed it to British help, geographical proximity, relative ease of communication, and effective resistance movements in their countries.

The exception was Czechoslovak intelligence. We were the first of the European services to operate from London, and the only one to have maintained a continuity of professional staff, of established field stations, and of agents active in Germany and elsewhere.

We had had the advantage of ample warning that the Nazis were going to move in, and we therefore had time to prepare ourselves for eventual

evacuation. The indications grew progressively more definite. Beginning in 1935 German espionage increased continuously until it far exceeded peacetime needs. In 1938 the Austrian Anschluss half encircled Czechoslovakia on the south and exposed to enemy attack our most vulnerable border, that with lower Austria. The growing restlessness of the Sudeten German population finally took the form of open rebellion inspired and financed by the Nazis, and this led at the end of September 1938 to the Munich agreement and the loss of the Sudeten German territory. On 1 March 1939 I received hard information from a well-placed and reliable agent that Bohemia and Moravia were to be occupied on 15 March and Slovakia made a German protectorate-- the end of the Czechoslovak state.

Precautionary Measures

During this period of increasingly evident danger, modifications were made in the organizational structure of Czechoslovak intelligence to ready it for war and any eventualities of the situation. One of the principles of self-protection for an intelligence organization is decentralization. Naturally, there has to be a center to direct and control operations, but its dimensions should be limited to the practical minimum. The concentration of too many intelligence personnel in one place, gives the enemy an opportunity to identify them. This is bad enough in peacetime: enemy identification can do serious damage if the headquarters intelligence officer is engaged in an operation and has direct contact with a source of information, and it can do even more if he should be sent to the field. But from the viewpoint of possible enemy occupation of the country its effects could be disastrous. Therefore everything having to do with clandestine operations that could be separated had to be detached from the headquarters and put under deep cover outside.

Another matter closely connected with organizational cover is enforcement of the ancient basic principles of security: that every intelligence officer should know only what he needs to know for the fulfillment of his task, nothing less, but nothing more; that every individual operational file should include a list of persons who know about it; that operational personnel should be indoctrinated by extreme

measures against divulging secrets to wives, friends, or relatives; that case officers should write all operational papers personally, not entrust this to a female secretary; etc., etc. Everyone knows these ABC's of intelligence security and knows how often they are violated. In peacetime the violations can damage intelligence operations and the security of the country, but when enemy attack and occupation are imminent, sins against security committed in the past could bring calamity.

As the German-Czechoslovak crisis reached its climax, the discipline of our service had been tightened up in these respects, and its basic organization had become the following:

In Prague was the headquarters, the Second Department of the General Staff. Here in full strength were sections not involved in operational matters—sections for research and analysis, military attaches, technical support, codes and ciphers, finance, administration, legal affairs, and archives. But the headquarters operational section, that charged with the planning, direction, and control of clandestine operations, was numerically very small. Officers responsible for mounting and conducting operations were detached from headquarters and kept under strict cover in various places scattered around the country.

There were three regional field stations—at Prague in Bohemia, Brno in Moravia, and Banska Bystrica in Slovakia, with corresponding operational spheres. Each field station directed and controlled such outposts in its territory as were required by geographic considerations and operational needs; these are indicated on the map below. The cover of the field personnel was really deep, carefully prepared, and continuously controlled. Contact between the field stations and the Prague headquarters was also under strict cover.

Apart from these home intelligence bases there were bases abroad-- Zurich in Switzerland, The Hague in Holland, Copenhagen in Denmark, Warsaw in Poland, and Stockholm in Sweden. In addition to mounting and conducting their own operations, they maintained communication with important agents who for security reasons could not be handled from Czechoslovak territory. Moreover, they were assigned stand-by communications with other important agents in case of need. These foreign bases played a major role in enabling us to continue our work

from abroad after the occupation of the country.

We never entrusted our military attachés with clandestine operational tasks; we expected from them information gathered only by legal, diplomatically acceptable means. They were not intelligence professionals and were totally inexperienced in operational matters, and in the countries of potential enemies they were under strict observation. By eliminating them from the operational field we avoided the frictions with the Foreign Ministry which trouble many other countries' intelligence services. For the same reason we never used our embassies and legations as cover for our personnel.

From the administrative point of view, the management of such a decentralized and deeply covered structure in peacetime presented certain difficulties, but its advantages security-wise far outweighed these. Moreover, the service could now easily adapt itself to almost any turn that Czechoslovakia's delicate situation in Central Europe might take, and the transition to a wartime organization would be relatively simple.

Since 1937 we had had reliable documentary information on the Wehrmacht's plan in case of war against the French-Czechoslovak coalition. The Wehrmacht's basic idea was to stay on the defensive against France and concentrate all its might against Czechoslovakia in order to overrun the country as quickly as possible. The Czechoslovak counter-plan was to hold Bohemia as long as possible but if the pressure became irresistible to evacuate and concentrate all defensive effort in Moravia, hoping to hold there until the outbreak of an anticipated general European conflagration should divert the enemy forces.

Under this plan the core of our intelligence was to be evacuated to Slovakia. A detailed scheme for the evacuation was elaborated, including a chapter on establishing a stay-behind net. Realistically, we had to anticipate losing the majority of minor agents, but our most important agents would not have been affected seriously by such an evacuation; they could have continued their production through our bases abroad or through channels prepared and tested for these circumstances.

After the Germans occupied Austria my doubts about whether France would intervene in case of German attack on us began to grow. In our daily contacts with the French there were ominous indications that she

would not. The failure of France to come to our aid would mean the complete isolation of our country and inescapable defeat and occupation. Unfortunately, I was unable to persuade my superiors to take seriously this eventuality and the problems arising from it. They refused to believe that France would not fulfill her treaty obligations and kept their hopes tied to a European conflagration in which even Soviet Russia would be involved.

I was therefore forced to make new plans and preparations for the intelligence service without the knowledge or approval of my superiors. I conceived my plan absolutely alone, not sharing it with anyone, even among my closest colleagues. Then came the culmination of the Sudeten crisis and the Munich dictate. It was clear to me that the Munich arrangement was only temporary, that German occupation of the whole country was only a matter of time. I had to utilize the weeks left to me as fully as possible.

The circumstances under which I had to make my preparations were most difficult. President Benes, on whom I could have relied, resigned and left the country. He was replaced by the figurehead Hacha, under whom a new government was formed to "create new relations" with Germany. One of the first orders I received from this government was to stop any intelligence activities against Germany. Collaboration blossomed everywhere. The morale of the population sank to unbelievable depths. No one trusted anybody. My position as head of intelligence fell into jeopardy, and I had to bribe the Minister of National Defense to keep my post. I even received both direct and indirect offers from the German Abwehr to collaborate with them. My personal safety and that of my close associates was in great danger.

I had already decided to go abroad and continue intelligence activities against Germany. I was convinced that war was near and that my service's operational potential, even though weakened in transplantation, would be of value to the common anti-Nazi effort. The problems to be solved were where to go, whom and what to take with me, what arrangements to make with the operational net, and what to do with staff personnel left in the country.

Theoretically there were three possible places to go. But France, after Munich, was out of the question; Soviet Russia was not to my liking politically; and that left England. We had no formal alliance with the English but collaborated closely in the intelligence field. Through these

contacts I began negotiations.

If you want to undertake intelligence activities abroad when your own country is on the verge of occupation by the enemy and you don't have the backing of your own government, you need money. Without money you would become a mere agent of the foreign organization with which you work. This problem, however, had fortunately been solved for me in advance. When our bases abroad were established it was anticipated that in case of war communication with them could become difficult or even impossible, and considerable sums of money in good foreign currency were therefore deposited in safe places to be put at the disposal of the bases on my order. Nearly a million British pounds was originally banked in Zurrich, Paris, The Hague, Stockholm, and Riga. When the Russians were about to take over Latvia that in Riga was transferred to Stockholm. I now concentrated all this money in London except the Paris deposit, which was used in the evacuation of Czechs from Nazi-threatened Poland. Personnel and operational arrangements remained to be made.

Staff Personnel. I decided not to leave the country until the last moment, when the act of German occupation had begun or was obviously imminent. It was still only my own estimate that the Germans would go on to occupy the whole of Czechoslovakia, and I did not want to act prematurely; besides, I had many, many things to do before leaving. The departure would therefore have to be by plane. There were 12 seats in the plane that was available to me, so I could take only eleven persons. Who they should be was a very difficult choice; I had hundreds of able and devoted co-workers. After long and painful deliberation I dropped all personal and sentimental considerations and made a strictly objective choice based on two criteria--who would be most useful in the work abroad, and who knew too much about our agent nets. These would be asked, in the last hours before departure, to come along.

The rest would have to be left behind. Some of the operational personnel were advised to escape from the country by whatever means they could. Some did and joined me later in London. Several score of others I managed to place in civil affairs ministries--Agriculture, Posts, and Transportation--with antedated appointment papers. Personnel not involved in operational matters I considered relatively safe. (In the event these arrangements worked out satisfactorily. For our activities in London I had a sufficient number of experts; and those that stayed in Czechoslovakia on the whole did fairly well. Some were put into

concentration camps, not because of their intelligence connections, but because they became involved in underground activities. Only two, who had been members of an analytic group, perished. The Gestapo would not believe that they had had nothing to do with operations and tortured them into suicide.)

Agents. In such a crisis you have to expect to lose many of your agents. You lose them by defection, because nobody likes to work for the losing side. You lose them by arrest, because some of them are sure to be listed by enemy counterintelligence for arrest in case of imminent war. But these are for the most part low-level agents, and in the light of the coming German occupation I was not interested in the kind of information they could produce. My main concern was important agents too thoroughly compromised to dare defect or stop collaborating with us. I put all my efforts into saving as many as I could of these. It was mainly a matter of providing for communication, not a simple thing under the circumstances but not impossible. We succeeded in arranging continued communication with about fifteen important sources, the principal assets with which we could begin to operate in England. (We later had difficulties when Poland, Denmark, and Holland were occupied by the Germans and our bases there canceled out, but by then we were already established firmly elsewhere and were able to continue our work quite effectively.)

Stay-behind net. As a matter of routine, I took care of establishing several nuclei of informants with whom we would make contact after the German occupation. These people were selected, of course, not only with a view to their potential but also in consideration of security; none of them had previously been connected with any intelligence work. (These nuclei were later supplemented by various underground organizations. For at least three years of the war they were able to provide much information important for the Allied cause.)

While I was making these feverish preparations and arrangements in early 1939, Der Tag was approaching. The whole atmosphere reflected the fact that what was left of the Czechoslovak state was completely at the mercy of Berlin. Preparations for a radical reduction of the Czechoslovak army were in full swing, the Slovakian crisis was mounting, the Jewish question raised its head, and the economic situation was deteriorating rapidly. In the highest governmental circles complete helplessness reigned; everyone was trying to guess what the Germans would want them to do about everything. There was practically no one

to whom to turn for advice. The numbers and the activities of Nazi collaborators were increasing every day. In this environment I had moments of doubt whether I would be able to execute my plans.

On the first of March I received my information that the occupation of the country was scheduled by the Germans for 15 March. There was no doubt about the authenticity of the report: it included the identity and battle order of the German armies to be used, the names of their commanding generals, the routes and timetable of the advance. Serious resistance on the part of the Czechoslovak army was not anticipated. Slovakia was to become an independent state under German protection. I immediately informed the government. They did not believe me, or they did not want to. I was forbidden to disseminate such an alarming report. I therefore had to do by myself what I had planned, without help from anyone and even against the instruction of my government--which I could not consider a true government acting in the interests of the people.

My first concern was the intelligence archives, which without doubt would be of the greatest interest to the German Abwehr and the Gestapo. The most important and most needed part of the operational material had already been sorted out and packed for shipment abroad. It had to be transferred to the British embassy, from where it could be pouched to London. This was a very delicate operation because it had to be kept secret not only from our own people but from the German spies who were now swarming about the neighborhood of the General Staff building. We managed this successfully.

The rest of the files had to be destroyed. This was no problem at the field stations and their outposts, because under their strict cover they were out of reach of observation by unauthorized persons. But the massive archives stored in the General Staff building could not be disposed of secretly, and I was unable to get permission to do it from my superiors. It was only at the very end, when they were at last convinced that the occupation was imminent, that they gave their consent. Then we managed to burn everything in special furnaces we had constructed for the purpose, finishing the job on 15 March only a few hours before my departure.

The material destroyed included the official code in which we communicated with the military attachés--it was known to too many people about whose behavior under occupation conditions I could not

be sure--and all other codes except those we were using with our bases abroad and the agents we were going to keep. (Even these we changed shortly after our arrival in London.) Similarly we destroyed any operational equipment which could be of much benefit to the Germans, saving to take with us only a few things that incorporated innovations in intelligence techniques--some radio transmitter components and samples of invisible ink. The rest we left as it was; the total destruction of everything was not feasible under the circumstances.

Meanwhile I had seen to firm arrangements for the flight to London. It was agreed that the plane, a Dutch one, would be on the airfield from 14 March on, prepared to take off whenever I was ready. I wanted to leave only when it was firmly established that the German armies had entered Czechoslovak territory: I did not want to give the impression that I was deserting or running away from danger, but to make clear that this was a necessary evacuation of personnel whose capture would be of value to the enemy. I was convinced that my action was morally right, and this conviction was strengthened when the government issued orders not to resist the advancing Germans, not to destroy anything, and to be friendly to the invaders. That was not a government I felt obliged to obey.

During the last days I found time to get into contact with friends in other ministries whom I trusted and inform them of the coming occupation. Some of them who in their official positions were engaged in anti-German activities were able to escape from the country, and others could at least destroy material which would compromise them in German eyes.

On the afternoon of 14 March I called one by one the persons whom I had selected to accompany me, told them about my plan, and asked them if they were willing to come. All of them agreed promptly. They gave me their word of honor that they would tell no one, not even their families, and that they would not leave the building without my permission. All kept their word. At 5:30 the following morning, when the reports came that German troops had crossed our borders at several points, we all left for the airfield. The plane took off at six o'clock.

Reflections

I have always considered this evacuation from Czechoslovakia in 1939 an intelligence operation and a successful one. We succeeded in organizing in England an intelligence group that started work even before the war and continued to the end of it. It is not boasting to say that this group made an effective contribution to the Allied effort even when the war became a gigantic world affair. That was the purpose of the evacuation operation.

If an intelligence organization leaves the country like this and starts to work abroad without a government, without a political center to which it is subordinated, it falls into great danger of becoming mercenary, and there is inevitably bound to be a moral decline. We were lucky in that soon after our arrival in London President Benes came there from the United States, and his provisional Czechoslovak government was recognized by the Allies immediately after the outbreak of war. That gave to our activities a political, legal, and moral background.

From the counterintelligence point of view also everything went well. No information fell into enemy hands that would benefit him. No persons except the two I have mentioned suffered because of their connections with my organization.

I have pointed out that we were extraordinarily lucky that early warning gave me time to prepare for the extreme eventuality. But I had also an extraordinary handicap: during the most critical period of preparation the country had a government collaborating with the enemy and inimical to my designs. It was from this that the greatest danger and most of my worries came. In the final days before 15 March 1939 my hair grew grey.

In the end the results justified the action. There had been painful decisions, anxious moments, and risks involved; but in such a situation you have to take risks. I would not do it differently if I had it to do over again.