



## MR. BERLE AND THE CZECHS

Washington.

**E**DUARD BENES, president of Czechoslovakia, is coming to Washington to discuss United States-Czech relations with President Roosevelt. At one time, the rumor circulated that the visit had been postponed because Dr. Benes ran into trouble when he applied for an American visa. The gossip took on some weight in view of the unconcealed coolness long displayed by the State Department toward Benes and the Czechoslovak government—a coolness surpassed only by the Department's open refusal to have anything to do with the Free French. Now, however, Col. Vladimir Hurban, Czechoslovak minister to the United States, assures me that Dr. Benes will certainly arrive here in the near future and, while in Washington, will be the guest of the White House.

Originally the trip was scheduled for the early months of 1943. The delay, it is said—unofficially of course—was necessitated by the arrival of the British foreign minister, Anthony Eden, whose simultaneous presence in Washington with Dr. Benes would have placed the Czech president in a secondary position, detracting from the importance of his mission. Be that as it may, the prospect of receiving Benes even at this late date hardly evokes enthusiasm among certain groups within the State Department.

Speculation over the Benes visit has given some credence to a story circulated in the capital and vouched for in reliable quarters, but officially denied by both the Czechoslovak Legation and the Assistant Secretary of State, Adolph A. Berle, Jr. Supposedly, so the insiders say, Mr. Berle received Colonel Hurban and the Czech Information Minister late in November or early in December 1942. At this meeting, Mr. Berle assumed an extremely angry and hostile tone, prompted by Czech protests against the War Department's sponsorship of an Austrian Battalion in the US Army, a battalion in which Archduke Otto Hapsburg was to play a leading role. According to the story going the rounds, Mr. Berle told the Czech representatives that the State Department would not tolerate their meddling in United States affairs, or their interference with the Department's dealings with any other group or nation it chose to favor. In addition, Berle informed Colonel Hurban that the attitude of the Benes government evoked growing displeasure in the State Department, since

Czech policy ran counter to American wishes. Colonel Hurban was urged to inform his government to this effect.

**T**HE implications of these sharp remarks were clear enough. No particular secret has been made in the past of the efforts of certain State Department groups—with which Berle was usually identified—to sponsor postwar plans for a confederation of small states in middle Europe. For its part, the Czech government has insisted on national independence for Czechoslovakia, and also has indicated a genuine willingness to cooperate with the Soviet Union and all other members of the United Nations. In fact, while elements in the Yugoslav and Polish governments-in-exile make no bones of their anti-Soviet bias, the Benes government has exhibited a marked friendliness to the USSR. The Czechs have armed units on the Eastern Front actively fighting the Nazis.

Mr. Berle's remarks were supposedly so insulting that the Czech spokesmen became deeply alarmed. Their concern was somewhat assuaged, the story continues, when Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, learning of the incident, informed Colonel Hurban that Mr. Berle had no authority whatsoever to speak for the Department on such matters of policy, and that Mr. Berle's remarks did not convey the true sentiments of the United States government.

Nevertheless, immediately after this alleged conversation between Colonel Hurban and Berle, the Czech minister left for London to report to his government. He arrived in England late in December and did not return to Washington until the end of February. Soon after he talked to Dr. Benes in London the first intimations were heard here of Dr. Benes' proposed visit to Washington.

**I**N TRYING to run down this story, I called at the Czech Legation. The first secretary, Dr. Vladimir Palic, said that he had never heard of the incident, but urged me to take it up with the minister. Colonel Hurban denied the story flatly. True, he said, Dr. Benes was coming to Washington, but he had encountered no passport difficulties. Colonel Hurban could recall no conversation with Mr. Berle which could have given rise to the unfortunate story. He added that because of Dr. Benes' well known record and his outspoken opin-

ions on controversial subjects, many people naturally opposed his attitude.

Mr. Berle, when I saw him, was no less forthright in his denial. The whole story was "fantastic," he said, except perhaps the implication that the Czechs disliked the Austrian Battalion—as did the State Department, he added—but the Czechs had never registered an official protest. Mr. Berle went on to paraphrase sections of the speech he had delivered the evening before in Reading, Pa.—warning against "the attempt to create in Britain and in the United States fear of Soviet Russia," and stating that "today, the idea of a buffer state is as dead as a dodo."

Mr. Berle was most courteous. However, he did not allow the short interview to end without warning me of his displeasure concerning the story. He again recalled his Reading speech, in which he had accused "meddlers, or loose thinkers, or plain liars" of spreading propaganda inspired by the Nazis that "public officials are not sufficiently friendly to Russia—or else that they are too friendly." He added that stories such as the one I asked about were dangerous because certain people—not himself, Berle indicated—could very well accuse the USSR of wanting to pick a fight with the United States.

Mr. Berle is a slick little man, sharp, nervous, energetic, volatile, and inordinately vain. Now in his middle forties, he still carries over some of the defiant self-assurance of the child prodigy—after all, he entered Harvard College at the age of fourteen. Nor has his brilliance gone unrecognized or unsung. Yet Mr. Berle remains touchy when his actions are challenged or criticized, apt to think his self-vaunted "liberalism" unappreciated. At the risk of incurring his displeasure, it is necessary to repeat the exceedingly well known fact that he has been associated with almost every anti-Soviet intrigue since he entered the State Department in 1938. He has been closely identified with every policy smacking of Munich (including Munich itself) and with outright appeasement.

The policies of the State Department for the past decade have been at best ambivalent. Mr. Berle has favored attitudes leading to deals with such traitors as Darlan, to flirtations with Vichy, to appeasement of Franco in Spain, to support of Mikhailovich, to strengthening the Mannerheim-Ryti clique in Finland, to the shameful provoca-

tion indulged in by Ambassador Standley in Kuibyshev. Not that there is any love lost for Berle among those other State Department dignitaries who have gone along with his policies. Clement Dunn and Brekenridge Long, for example, join with Berle not out of any affection for the bumptious little pedant, whom they consider a far too ambitious and arrogant upstart; they tag along with Berle because of a similar reactionary outlook, and because they agree in their hatred of the Soviet Union. Of all the supporters of an unreconstructed imperialism, Berle has proved the most energetic, the most irrepressible, the most versatile. Moreover, Berle gained a certain amount of support from William C. Bullitt, former ambassador to the USSR and France, bitter foe of the Soviet Union, and an ardent appeaser, who avidly anticipates the time when he would replace Cordell Hull as Secretary of State. Of course, Berle also has his eye on the post of Secretary. But that is a long-range matter. In the interim, Berle decided to use Bullitt—and Bullitt confidently expected to use Berle. The result, for all the jockeying over position, in which Berle probably came out second best, was collaboration in a program smelling strongly of appeasement.

For all the about-face expressed by Berle in the Reading speech, his past record is hardly evidence of any singular devotion to constructive unity. Perhaps it is ungenerous to look a gift horse in the mouth, as Mr. Berle subtly implied during his interview with me, but one speech does not make a foreign policy; and it is a doubtful luxury to hold oneself up as a fool, as Mr. Berle did when he excoriated every idea he has espoused so vehemently for so many years. Perhaps Mr. Berle has actually reformed, perhaps he has taken to heart the advice undoubtedly offered him before he went to Reading. If his conversion is the real thing, it is well to remember the positions Mr. Berle must abandon to convince the many skeptics. Hardly a principle he advocated in the past, hardly an idea he upheld, has forwarded what he described in his speech as the "great structure of a reorganized and peaceful world" resting inevitably on the "four great freedom-loving powers . . . the United States, Great Britain, Russia, and China."

COLONEL HURBAN could not diplomatically be expected to do less than deny the story of Berle's reported attack on the Czech government. Nor was it likely that Berle would be eager to confirm the episode even if it had occurred. I am willing to take the denials at face value. Yet the fact that the rumor was immediately accepted as true only indicates the distrust generally accorded to Mr. Berle and his close associates. Even after dismissing the Berle-Hurban row as complete fiction, the essence of the story remains—that Berle, and with him Bullitt and others of the same

general opinions—have treated the Czechs, valued members of the United Nations, with far less consideration than they have shown to outright fascist enemies; the Finnish government, for example, or the reactionary, anti-Semitic, anti-Soviet cliques which falsely claim to speak for the Polish and Yugoslav people.

Moreover, there is little doubt that Dr. Benes is coming to this country so that the Czechs can discuss relations between their nation and the United States directly with President Roosevelt, and over the heads of the Berle faction. Colonel Hurban, for his part, has experienced rebuffs and insults at the hands of our diplomats. Why is it, for example, that Berle insists on dealing with Milan Hodza, who got his visa through Bullitt in Paris? (Bullitt also obtained visas for the Hapsburgs and for Jan Valtin.) Hodza is a reactionary Slovak, violently anti-Benes, rabidly anti-Soviet. As a member of the Czechoslovak government during the Munich period, he preferred the Munich "settlement" to Soviet support. He came to this country ostensibly for his health, but soon after he reached Hot Springs he was out lecturing for the Slovak League which endorsed the quisling Tiso government in Slovakia. Yet Berle has cultivated this traitor, while he has cold-shouldered Colonel Hurban and Dr. Benes.

There is no doubt of Berle's interest—up to the time he delivered his speech in Reading—in plans to set up a *cordon sanitaire* in middle Europe. His present denials may presage a change, which would be all to the good. But the reasoning he displayed at Reading leaves something to be desired. Berle declared that a *cordon sanitaire* is outdated for military reasons. As he explained it to me, it is a carry-over from the power politics of the Metternich period based on the premise of land warfare, entirely superseded these days by the new conditions of air warfare. Whether this shift in military technique alters the usefulness of buffer states to reaction as sweepingly and as decisively as Mr. Berle suggests, I cannot say. But the Berle faction thinks not only in military terms but in political terms as well. A federation of small weak states on the border of the Soviet Union, dominated by clerical fascists and ultra-reactionaries would very definitely tend to isolate the Soviet Union. Berle has often been closeted with Otto of Austria, Hodza, and many others like them, including the Hungarian fascist Tibor Eckhardt. (The last named was recently exposed by Adam Lapin in the *Daily Worker*, who also revealed that Berle caused the unofficial Committee for Nationality Problems to hire as secretary one Rebecca G. Wellington, who for years served the German, Italian, and Finnish governments.) The confederation idea, to which Berle has devoted so much thought, is without argument a complete negation of everything the United Nations have come

to represent. The reactionary character of any mid-European confederation as envisioned by Berle would make imperative the support of the confederation from the outside. Ultra-imperialists in this country believe that through a confederation the United States could keep an eager finger in the Central European pie.

Not long ago William Bullitt turned up as chairman at a meeting in New York where a certain Coudenhove-Kalergi expounded his threadbare Pan-European plan, another name for a confederation of buffer states with an anti-Soviet orientation and controlled from a distance. The Austrian "philosopher" has been peddling this scheme since the twenties. Suddenly Bullitt associates himself with the idea, and somehow Sumner Welles was persuaded to send greetings to the meeting. The Pan-European formula is nothing better than a blueprint of an anti-Soviet setup.

To the Czechoslovaks, of whom Benes is the recognized leader, Pan-European "theories" have little appeal. They negate the Four Freedoms, the principle of self-determination and integrity for small nations. In the current *American Mercury* magazine, Kingsbury Smith describes what he calls "Our Government's Policy for Postwar Germany." The editors of the *Mercury* add that Smith "consulted authoritative government sources," taken in Washington to mean Berle. Smith hints that certain State Department officials are talking about a middle European confederation. He tells of proposals of "American planners that Germany must be drastically decentralized as a political and economic unit, even to the point of breaking up the country into separate states or regions. . . ." Smith makes clear that this is a State Department plan, not a United Nations plan, to be administered by what he terms "American Gauleiters."

WHEN Benes was in this country in 1939, President Roosevelt received him at Hyde Park, mostly because the State Department fought against an official meeting at the White House. If the Berle faction is as anxious to reform as Berle makes out, it could well start with a change of attitude toward the Czechs. The Berle group could treat Colonel Hurban with a courtesy at least equal to that shown the ministers of governments no longer in existence—Latvia, Lithuania, and Esthonia. Why shouldn't the Czechoslovaks receive the recognition accorded to every other European member of the United Nations—to the Yugoslavs, the Poles, the Dutch, the Greeks? Only the Czechs are limited to the status of a legation; all the other nations have been raised to embassies. Something is wrong when the explanation of this insult is said here to be the Berle crowd's desire to "punish" the Benes government for refusing to take an attitude hostile to the USSR, and for showing so

(Cont'd on p. 30)





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