

A Whiff of Munich: Ben Wallace Got It Right

Ben Wallace, who is emerging in this crisis as a statesman of note, is under fire for saying there is a whiff of Munich around the current Ukraine crisis. His reference to rushing to Moscow, as if to Munich in 1938, to stave off war and beg a compromise, might be seen as offensive, and notably to our NATO allies, who he appears to be suggesting are as naïve as those who trusted Germany. Moreover, he seemed to be comparing Ukraine to Czechoslovakia, partitioned in 1939 between Nazi Germany and the Nazi client-state of Slovakia.

However offensive, there are instructive parallels. Just as the Munich agreement was agreed over the heads of the Czechs, so Macron and others appear interested in a grand bargain with Putin over the heads of the Ukrainians.

Today, there is a lack of will or capacity to be firmer in deterrence, as well as the naïve view of some Western statesmen that they apparently understand Putin and can deal with him. The parallels with 1938 bear consideration. Brandon Lewis tried to backtrack on Sunday, arguing that Wallace was only talking about a misplaced mood of optimism. Wallace is doubtless under pressure to say the same, but he is right to warn both public and allies that decisions made or not made today have consequences not only now, but also for many years.

‘Taking the long view, it unquestionable that what the British Empire has most reason to fear in the future is a Russo-German combination.’ The General Staff Report of July 1919 got it right. German military training under Weimar owed much to Soviet support and Hitler was able to smash Poland in 1939 and western opponents in 1940 because of his pact with Stalin. Reviving the Soviet Union geopolitically, as Putin wants, is a threat to any understanding of Europe as a continent of democratic states and Czechoslovakia in 1938 is Ukraine today.

In practice, as in 1939, some suggest a pact delimiting geographical spheres of influence, today those defined by NATO membership. That approach augurs poorly for those democratic societies that are not members, and for any understanding of international relations based on the deterrence of aggression.

The idea that Ukraine is a threat to Russia whether or not a member of NATO rests in a paranoia that will not be readily quelled. After Ukraine why not overthrow the Caucasus republics, absorb Moldova and destabilise the Baltics?

There is a testing of resolve, and Wallace is correct to point out that compromise in such a context is hazardous. The echoes of Appeasement may offend Russia, but what else can it expect with its large-scale intimidation of neighbours and desire to destroy their independence?