Reviews

'My God, they have given us everything'

Ann Shukman, *44 Days in Prague: The Runciman Mission and the Race to Save Europe* (C. Hurst & Co., 2024)
Review by Mark Stephens

At a moment when the world might be on the brink of war again, Ann Shukman has brought us a newly minted, meticulously researched book about one of the most extraordinary peace initiatives in history: the Runciman mission to Prague in August 1938.

In great haste, Neville Chamberlain had set up the mission to find a way of reconciling the huge minority of Sudeten Germans principally in Bohemia with the Slavs of Czechoslovakia (three million out of a population of 14.8 million) and he had called upon Lord Walter Runciman, Ann Shukman's grandfather, to head it up. Many hoped that, if the mission could prevent a German invasion of Czechoslovakia, then a long-term, far-reaching peace could be worked out.

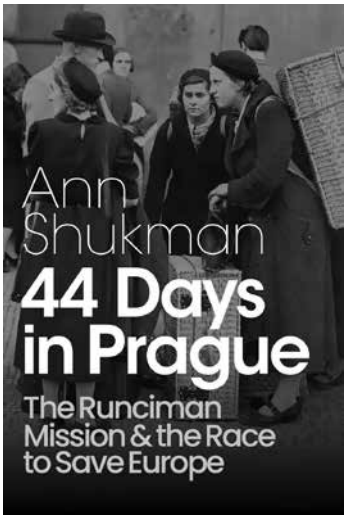
Chamberlain's appointment of Runciman was remarkable. Aged 67, Runciman had retired from active politics and, since 1937, had been a member of the House of Lords – he had been president of the Board of Trade more than twenty years earlier under Asquith. Most remarkable of all, Chamberlain hardly gave Runciman any terms of reference. As Runciman announced to the world's press on his arrival in Prague: 'I come as an independent person, acting on no instructions.' Less remarkable but still significant, Runciman was a Liberal National and Chamberlain was a Conservative, having broken away from Lloyd George's Liberals in 1931.

For a brief moment in August 1938, the eyes of the world were focused on this small band of English nationals (five men and two women), as the world believed that, if the Sudeten Germans and the Czechs could be reconciled, then there would be no war. The mission set up their office in the Alcron Hotel in Prague and for forty-four days, as the title of the book suggests, they laboured to bring peace to Central Europe.

Ann Shukman with forensic care and real style has pieced together this extraordinary story and the attention she has paid to the retelling of it is reinforced in the forty-six pages of fascinating notes, which support and amplify the main text. Ann has also drawn upon a great deal of new material, principally from Hilda Runciman (Runciman's wife and Ann's grandmother), who was with her husband throughout the mission, but also from Margaret Fairweather (Runciman's daughter), and his son Leslie Runciman, both of whom came to visit and left records.

Ann Shukman has divided the book mainly into segments of days: Day One to Day Four, for example. She weaves an extraordinary story connecting the narrative of hard work with social activities which included visits to castles, partridge shoots, bridge with a cardinal, and concerts. It makes for a fascinating tale.

By the mid-point of the mission – three weeks in – Runciman had put all the building blocks in place for an agreement between the Sudeten Germans and the Czech government: he had helped reestablish the negotiating committee of the six leading political parties in Czechoslovakia. He had persuaded Prime Minister Milan Hodza to take the chair. He had seen all who 'mattered' (Runciman's word). He had persuaded President Edvard



Benes to make significant concessions. Subsequently, one of the Sudeten leaders exclaimed: 'My God, they have given us everything'.

It was also at this mid-point that my father, David Stephens, joined the hard-pressed mission – probably tipped off by the Foreign Office, when he was in the Sudetenland, studying one of the largest German minorities in central Europe. On his first day as a member of the mission, 1 September, Runciman passed my father a note – presumably he was responsible for taking the notes – confirming that Konrad Henlein, the leader of the Sudeten German Party, had agreed to go and see Hitler to seek Hitler's endorsement of the continuation of the mission's negotiations. My father kept it in an envelope in his photograph album, so important did he view it at the time. Ann quotes it in full and acknowledges its unlikely source!

This was a pivotal moment for the mission because Runciman had refused to go and see Hitler himself, in spite of several requests to do so from Chamberlain. Ann goes into detail as to why. Runciman believed it would compromise his position as an independent mediator. Failure would lead to Britain having to come to Czechoslovakia's aid in the event of war. It was not part of his brief, in his view, to negotiate with Germany. So Henlein's willingness to carry the 'good' news about the 'progress' of the talks to Hitler represented the mission's high point of hope for peace.

The meeting between Hitler and Henlein led nowhere. Hitler urged Henlein to make more demands above and beyond what the Czechs could possibly concede. The Nazis stirred up the local German population to stage more violent demonstrations and the press in Germany issued false reports of the number of Germans killed. Not long afterwards, Henlein together with other SdP leaders fled to Germany. Within ten days the mission's optimism had turned to despair and by 16 September the mission's raison d'être had evaporated. Two days later the members of the mission returned to London.

It was a heartbreaking outcome. Runciman's vision was of a Czechoslovakia run by a set of cantons like Switzerland with those areas of Czechoslovakia whose population was 80 per cent German or more becoming self-governing (not annexed) with the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia intact. But the Runciman Report – the 'White Paper' – proposed that all areas with 50 per cent or more Germans should be ceded to Germany. Worse still, the report was only sent to Chamberlain not to Benes, the president of Czechoslovakia, and understandably the Czechs felt that 'the fate of the country' was 'decided behind their backs'. On his return to England Runciman suffered a breakdown.

This is an important book, full of new information, which shows a comprehensive picture of what was happening behind the scenes and should be required reading for the increasing numbers of those studying International Relations. It shows up the divisions between husband and wife (Runciman and his wife Hilda), between members of the mission, between members of the Sudeten German Party, between Whitehall and the mission in a way that we are unlikely to see again because now so little is recorded for fear of the consequences.

Yet, in spite of the many differences, the book also shows how very close to a settlement the Sudeten Germans and the Czechs had come through the mission's mediation. Indeed, the Sudeten Germans and the Czechs had, in effect, reached an agreement (the Fourth Plan) which in the

eyes of Runciman was the mission's sole purpose.

The book has some shortcomings. It needs a map that shows where the German population lived. It needs some explanation as to why there appears to be no regular communication with the French with whom Czechoslovakia had a non-aggression pact.

I wish, too, that it had included the mention in my father's notebook, on 14 September (four days before they left), to the Jewish delegation asking for 'quite special protection' if a 'negotiated settlement was arrived at'.

Otherwise, *44 Days in Prague* is a triumph: so very personal and so full of integrity, sparing nobody wherever the research led. ■

Mark Stephens is the author of *Ernest Bevin: Unskilled Labourer and World Statesman* (Spa Books, 1985). He is the eldest son of Sir David Stephens, Ecclesiastical and Crown Appointments Secretary to two Prime Ministers, Clerk of the Parliaments 1963–74 and member of the Runciman Mission.

Mill's North Star

Helen McCabe, *John Stuart Mill, Socialist* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021)
Review by Ian Packer

The title of this thoughtful and powerfully argued book will be a surprise to most readers of this journal. Because, of course, the Victorian thinker, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), is best known as a key figure in the history of liberalism. His book, *On Liberty* (1859), is often thought of as a foundation stone of Anglo-American liberalism for its robust defence of the liberty of the individual against the claims of both State and society. Famously, Mill declared that the individual's liberty should only be curtailed in order to 'prevent harm to others'. Since the late nineteenth century, Mill has been regularly invoked by British Liberals to support their views and their party. Indeed, so central is his place in Liberal Democrats' sense of their identity that each incoming president of the party is presented with a copy of *On Liberty*.

Helen McCabe does not dispute that Mill was a liberal. Her argument is that he was also a socialist and that the socialist aspects of his thought were central to his view of society and how society should develop. This approach is not as startling as it might seem at first sight. Mill was not only a passionate advocate of individual liberty; he was also a fierce critic of how nineteenth-century capitalism operated. He believed the economic system of his time was excellent at creating wealth, but also that it was wasteful, put constraints on the liberty of many individuals, was inherently unjust in its distribution of material rewards, promoted economic growth at the expense of all other factors, and produced antagonistic relationships between different social groups and individuals. This kind of analysis led Sidney Webb, the founder of Fabianism, to believe that Mill's writings pointed the way forward to the development of socialism; while Friedrich Hayek, one of Margaret Thatcher's favourite economists and author of the *Road to Serfdom* (1944), was so repelled by aspects of Mill's writings on the economy that he suggested Mill was more responsible than anybody else for converting British intellectuals to socialism.

Moreover, the question of whether Mill himself can be thought of as a socialist, rather than someone who just influenced later thinkers in this direction, has been the subject of a good deal of recent academic debate. The starting point for McCabe is Mill's declaration in