



Chamberlain and Hitler, 1938

What was Chamberlain trying to do?

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Introduction

After World War I, the map of Europe was re-drawn and several new countries were formed. As a result of this, three million Germans found themselves now living in part of Czechoslovakia. When Adolf Hitler came to power, he wanted to unite all Germans into one nation. In September 1938 he turned his attention to the three million Germans living in part of Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland. Sudeten Germans began protests and provoked violence from the Czech police. Hitler claimed that 300 Sudeten Germans had been killed. This was not actually the case, but Hitler used it as an excuse to place German troops along the Czech border.

During this situation, the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, flew to meet Hitler at his private mountain retreat in Berchtesgaden in an attempt to resolve the crisis. Three of the documents here are extracts from Chamberlain's own record of the meeting. The other two documents are useful evidence of the kind of advice Chamberlain was getting at home in Britain.

Tasks

Look at Source 1 a, b & c

1. This is an extract from a letter from Nevile Henderson, British Ambassador in Germany, September 6th, 1938.
 - a) Do you think the German people were nervous about the outcome of the Sudetenland talks? What makes you think that?
 - b) What do you think that Nevile Henderson means when he says that "Benés will never go far enough till he is made to do so"?
 - c) What did Nevile Henderson want the British press to do about Hitler?
 - d) What do you think Henderson's opinion was of Hitler?
 - e) How might Henderson's view affect what Chamberlain did when he met Hitler?

Look at Source 2 a, b & c

2. This is an extract from the Minutes of the conversation between Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler at Berchtesgaden
 - a) a) Write a summary of this part of the meeting by adding one sentence to each of these three starters:
 - Hitler said: "...
 - Chamberlain queried: "...
 - Hitler replied: ".....
 - b) What threat does Hitler make here?
 - c) How does Chamberlain respond?
 - d) What does Chamberlain suggest to Hitler?

- e) Sudetenland was part of Czechoslovakia. No Czech representative was present at this meeting. Did Chamberlain have the right to make this offer?
- f) Hitler was capable of being charming, of lying and of bullying. Find examples of all three of these aspects of his personality in Sources 1a, 1b and 1c.

Look at Source 3

3. This is the conclusion of a note from General Ismay to the British Cabinet sent on September 20th, 1938, marked "Secret". Ismay was Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence.
 - a) What does General Ismay, writing in September 1938, assume will happen to Czechoslovakia? (Remember that at this time Czechoslovakia was still an independent country which included the Sudetenland.)
 - b) What effect does he think the German conquest of Czechoslovakia will have on German military strength?
 - c) Does he recommend that Britain should fight Germany now, or later?
 - d) What are his reasons?
 - e) How might General Ismay's views affect what Chamberlain did when he met Hitler later, at Munich on September 29th?.
4. Use the sources above as well as any other knowledge you may have about the situation in the Sudetenland to answer the following:
 - a) "Chamberlain's appeasement policy made war more likely because Hitler thought he could get away with anything."
 - b) "Chamberlain's appeasement policy bought a valuable year for Britain to get ready for the war which was bound to come."
 - c) "Chamberlain believed that Hitler was a man of his word."
 - d) "The decision to give the Sudetenland to Germany let down the Czech people."

What are the arguments for and against each of the following statements about appeasement? Which one do you think is the most accurate? Give reasons for your choice.

Background

The Treaty of Versailles, made in 1919 at the end of the First World War, was intended to make a lasting peace. Many people felt that the Treaty had caused terrible resentment in Germany on which Hitler had been able to play in order to achieve power. The government believed that Hitler and Germany had genuine grievances, but that if these could be met ("appeased") Hitler would be satisfied and become less demanding.

Hitler was open about his refusal to accept many of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Soon after he became Chancellor of Germany in 1933 he began to re-arm the country, breaking the restrictions placed on the German armed forces. In 1936, he sent German troops into the Rhineland and in March 1938 he joined Germany and

Austria. Czechoslovakia was the logical next step for his aggression and German Nazis in the Sudetenland were told to stir up the trouble that led to the crisis examined here. Edvard Benes, the leader of Czechoslovakia was concerned that if Germany was given the Sudetenland, most of the Czech defences would be handed over to the Germans and they would be left defenceless.

Chamberlain's flight to Berchtesgaden was followed by another to Godesberg a week later and then another to Munich on September 29th. At Munich, Chamberlain got an international agreement that Hitler should have the Sudetenland in exchange for Germany making no further demands for land in Europe. Chamberlain said it was "Peace in our time". Hitler said he had "No more territorial demands to make in Europe." On October 1st German troops occupied the Sudetenland: Hitler had got what he wanted without firing a shot.

Although people in Britain were relieved that war had been averted, many now wondered if appeasement was the best decision. They did not think it would stop Hitler, and simply delayed the war, rather than prevented it. Even while Chamberlain was signing the Munich Agreement, he was agreeing a huge increase in spending to increase Britain's armament in preparation for war. He must have known from the situation outlined to him by General Ismay, that Czechoslovakia was lost, that war was bound to come.

Six months later, in March 1939, German troops took over the rest of Czechoslovakia. Poland seemed to be the next most likely victim of Nazi aggression and Chamberlain made an agreement with the Poles to defend them if Germany invaded. Hitler did not think Britain would go to war over Poland, having failed to do so over Czechoslovakia. He sent his soldiers into Poland in September 1939. The same day, Britain declared war on Germany.

Chamberlain struggled on as Prime Minister until May 1940 when he resigned and Winston Churchill, a bitter critic of appeasement, took over. Chamberlain died in November 1940, however he continued to be vilified for appeasement in general and for his actions in September 1938 in particular, long after his death and the conclusion of the war.

Teachers Notes

Students can use the sources provided to build up a picture of both Chamberlain and Hitler's character. Chamberlain's account of his meeting with Hitler forms the centre of this enquiry and reveals how Hitler argues forcefully, then angrily, then reasonably again to gain maximum effect.

Students could add up the criticisms which could be levelled at Chamberlain, from naivety in his view of Hitler, to national self-centredness in his failure to consult with his allies and his readiness to sacrifice the Czechs.

Time and the opening of documents that were secret at the time, add different perspectives to this issue. Chamberlain was of the generation which survived but was deeply revolted by the First World War. Is it unfair of us to criticise him for mis-judging

Hitler? Students could try to construct the case for Chamberlain. Is this the same as a case for appeasement?

Sources

Image : CN 11/6 - Neville Chamberlain in France

Source 1 : FO 371/21737 - Letter from Nevile Henderson, the German Ambassador

Source 2a, b & c : FO 371/21738 - Chamberlains notes from his meeting with Hitler.

Source 3 : CAB 21/544 - Report by General Ismay on the potential outcomes if Czechoslovakia is given to the Germans.

Schemes of Work

Hot war, cold war why did the major twentieth-century conflicts affect so many people?

Key Stage 3, Unit 18.

Source 1 : Extract from a letter from Neville Henderson, British Ambassador in Germany, September 6th, 1938 (FO 371/21737)

14 SEP 1938
It is no exaggeration to say that the world is awaiting with anxiety the message which Hitler has to deliver at Nuremberg. He cannot get out of delivering it: that must be realised. The anxiety is no less great in Germany ^{than elsewhere}. And dictators can & must speak more clearly than the leaders of a democracy. That is why I have been ^{pressing} those last weeks for a clarification ^{before Nuremberg} of the situation at Prague. Bees will never go far enough till he is made to do so: & the whole of the Carlsbad points is better than any ^{he is likely to get} terms later, war or no war.

I suppose the chances of Hitler coming out at Nuremberg with what will amount to peace or what will amount to war (thunder there is sure to be) are about 50-50. I opt for the former. If I am right I do wish it might be possible to get at any rate the Times, Courser, Beaverbrook Press to write up Hitler as the apostle of Peace. It will be terribly shortsighted if this is not done. (cannot the News Dept. help?)

...
We make a great mistake

when our Press persists in abusing him. Let it abuse his evil advisers but give him a chance of being a good boy. If our object is to achieve results that is the only line to take. If our only satisfaction is to slang him, then we must abandon hope of ever getting results.

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{Camrose was the owner of the Daily Telegraph at the time.}

Source 2 : Extracts from the Minute of the conversation between Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler at Berchtesgaden (FO 371/21738)

He said that he had from his youth been obsessed with the racial theory and he felt that Germans were one, but he had drawn a distinction between the possible and the impossible and he recognises that there are places where Germans are where it is impossible to bring them into the Reich; but where they are on the frontier it is a different matter, and he is himself concerned with ten millions of Germans, three millions of whom are in Czechoslovakia. He felt therefore that those Germans should come into the Reich. They wanted to and he was determined that they should come in.

It was impossible that Czechoslovakia should remain like a spearhead in the side of Germany.

So I said "Hold on a minute; there is one point on which I want to be clear and I will explain why: you say that the three million Sudeten Germans must be included in the Reich; would you be satisfied with that and is there nothing more that you want? I ask because there are many people who think that is not all; that you wish to dismember Czechoslovakia."

He then launched into a long speech; he was out for a racial unity and he did not want a lot of Czechs, all he wanted was Sudeten Germans.

I was then going onto some further questions on the subject when he said: "But all this seems to be academic; I want to get down to realities. Three hundred Sudetens have been killed and things of that kind cannot go on; the thing has got to be settled at once: I am determined to settle it: I do not care whether there is a world war or not: I am determined to settle it and to settle it soon and I am prepared to risk a world war rather than allow this to drag on."

To that I replied: "If the Fuehrer is determined to settle this matter by force without waiting even for a discussion between ourselves to take place, ~~what~~ did he let me come here for? I have wasted my time."

But I could give him my personal opinion, which was that on principle I had nothing to say against the separation of the Sudeten Germans from the rest of Czechoslovakia, provided that the practical difficulties could be overcome.

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Source 3 : Conclusion of Note from General Ismay to the British Cabinet sent on September 20th, 1938 (CAB 21/544)

15. The broad conclusions of this Note may be summarized as follows:-

- (a) A German absorption of Czechoslovakia will enhance her military prestige, increase her war potential, and probably enable her to dispose of stronger land forces against France and ourselves than she can do at present.
- (b) So far as air power is concerned, Germany may be able to maintain her lead over the Franco-British Air Forces in air striking power. On the other hand, it is open to us, provided that we make the necessary effort,

to catch her up, or at least greatly reduce her lead, in the matter of defence (both active and passive) against air attack. By so doing we shall have heavily insured ourselves against the greatest danger to which we are at present exposed; indeed by substantially reducing Germany's only chance of a rapid decision, we shall have provided a strong deterrent against her making the attempt.

- (c) It follows, therefore, that, from the military point of view, time is in our favour, and that, if war with Germany has to come, it would be better to fight her in say 6-12 months' time, than to accept the present challenge.

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