

Chapter 2

Munich: Anatomy of A Crisis

September 28, 1938, “Black Wednesday,” dawned on a frightened Europe. Since the spring Adolf Hitler had spoken often about the Sudetenland, the western part of Czechoslovakia. Many of the 3 million German-speaking people who lived there had complained that they were being badly mistreated by the Czechs and Slovaks. Cooperating closely with Sudeten Nazis, Hitler at first simply demanded that the Czechs give the German-speakers within their borders self-government. Then, he upped the ante. If the Czechs did not hand the Sudetenland to him by October 1, 1938, he would order his well-armed and trained soldiers to attack Czechoslovakia, destroy its army, and seize the Sudetenland.



Germany’s demand quickly reverberated throughout the European continent. Many countries, tied down by various commitments and alliances, pondered whether – and how – to respond to Hitler’s latest threat. France had signed a treaty to defend the Czechs and Britain had a treaty with France; the USSR had promised to defend Czechoslovakia against a German attack. Britain, in particular, found itself in an awkward position. To back the French and their Czech allies would almost guarantee the outbreak of an unpredictable and potentially ruinous continental war; yet to refrain from confronting Hitler over the Sudetenland would mean victory for the Germans. In an effort to avert the frightening possibilities, a group of European leaders converged at Munich

Background to the Crisis

The clash between Germany and Czechoslovakia over the Sudetenland had its origins in the Versailles Treaty of 1919. For 300 years, both the Czech and Slovak peoples had lived under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During World War I, many Czech and Slovak nationalists fought with the Allies against Austria-Hungary. Thus, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up by the Allies

at Versailles, Eduard Benes was there to make sure that the Czech and Slovak peoples were rewarded with their own country.

Benes wanted the new state of Czechoslovakia to be as independent as possible. Thus, to provide Czechoslovakia with access to the Danube River trade route, Benes insisted that stretches of Hungary be added to his new country in the south. Czechoslovakian industry's fuel demands were met by claiming Polish coal mines to the north. Because Czechoslovakia needed a defensible Western frontier, Benes arranged for the annexation of the German-speaking Sudeten Mountain region.

The 3,000,000 Sudetenlanders, 15 percent of the Czechoslovak population, had expressed unhappiness with their situation since the 1920's. Once the dominant group in Austria-Hungary, they did not like their minority status and felt the government favored the Czechs and Slovaks. At first, their complaints were ineffective because the Sudeten Germans gave their support to many different political parties. With the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany in 1933, however, the Sudeten Germany Party (SDP) began to use Nazi finances, methods, and ideology to unite the majority of German-speakers in the region. Konrad Henlein, a gymnastics instructor, led the SDP in its campaign against the Czech government. His Karlsbad Program called for self-government for German-speakers and all other minorities, abandonment of all Czechoslovak defense treaties, and Czech cooperation with Germany. President Benes refused to negotiate with Henlein and tried to suppress SDP propaganda and activities, claiming they were a threat to the existence of Czechoslovakia.

Hitler Intervenes

In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler wrote about his hatred of the Versailles Treaty and his ambition to unite all Germans under his leadership. Indeed, many statesmen agreed that Germany was unfairly treated at Versailles and were sympathetic to Nazi complaints about the division of former German land among other nations. Upon coming to power in Germany, Hitler embarked on an ambitious program to re-arm Germany and to overturn the Versailles Treaty. In 1936, his troops illegally marched into the demilitarized Rhineland province of Germany on the French border. In March 1938, he sent the German army into Austria to force the holding of an election on German-Austrian unification. This election, administered by Nazi officials, finalized the Anschluss, Austria's inclusion in the Third Reich. Then, in May 1938, Hitler began to demand that Czechoslovakia accept the SDP's Karlsbad Program or face German intervention. In September, Hitler increased the severity of the crisis by telling Premier Benes that he no longer trusted the Czechoslovak government's intentions. Now, as protector of the German people, he told Benes to turn the Sudetenland over to Germany or face the consequences.

Facing a German deadline of October 1, 1938, Benes agreed to grant limited self-rule to the Sudetenland. His government, however, refused to comply with German conditions: that Czechoslovakia hand the Sudetenland over to the Reich and drop all its treaties with powers hostile to Germany. Benes noted that Hitler's mistreatment of German Jews gave him little moral right to criticize Czech policy toward the minority Sudetenlanders.

Fearful of German expansion, the USSR promised the Czechs its support. Because Poland and Romania refused to permit the Red Army to cross their territory, however, that support could only come from the Soviet air force. France had to face the possibility of going to war with Germany with no hope of directly aiding its Czech ally six hundred miles away. Failure to back up Czechoslovakia would cause France to lose the lynchpin of its anti-German alliance system in Eastern Europe.

The French would certainly not consider war with Germany without the backing of their British allies. Yet this meant that Britain might be dragged into a war over Czechoslovakia, a country with which

it had neither political nor trade ties. Thus, as the Germany Army mobilized on September 28, the British military was on alert, civilians dug air raid shelters, and children were evacuated from London. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain expressed the nation's fearfulness and sense of unreality in a radio address that began: "how horrible, how fantastic, how incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing."

Preparations for Munich

Then Mussolini proposed a last-minute conference in Munich in which Hitler, Daladier of France, and Chamberlain of Britain were to meet on September 29 to try to solve the crisis. Conspicuously excluded were Stalin of the USSR and Czech President Benes. At the conference, the position of Britain was of key importance. France's backing of Czechoslovakia in a war against Germany essentially hinged on maintenance of the Anglo-French alliance. The instructions of the British delegation, therefore, would, in effect, determine the results of the conference.

Two schools of strategic thought debated these instructions. Chamberlain, a Manchester businessman before he went into politics, believed he could come to terms with Hitler. His appeasement faction would advise the delegation to avoid war by persuading the Czechs to give the Sudetenland, which after all was German, to Germany. Chamberlain argued that President Benes had already agreed to most of the SDP's and Germany's terms. Furthermore, Hitler promised that the Sudetenland would be his "last territorial demand in Europe." Sacrificing Czechoslovakia, it seemed, would prevent a major European war.

The son of an aristocratic family and ex-commander of the Navy, Winston Churchill headed the stand-fast faction. He wanted the delegation to offer full backing to France and urged Czechoslovakia to stand up to Germany. Hitler's actions over the past five years indicated that war with Germany was inevitable. By backing Czechoslovakia now, Churchill argued, Britain had the advantage of fighting for a good cause, with willing allies.

Appeasement vs. Standing Fast

In deciding which set of instructions to give the Munich delegation, British statesmen had to consider the strategic situation in Europe. In terms of raw strength, opposing sides would appear to be about equal. Czechoslovakia had an army of 30 divisions (one division had approximately 10,000 soldiers), an advanced weapons industry in the Sudetenland (the Skoda works), and a 1500-plane air force. France could field 100 divisions behind its fortified border (the Maginot Line) with Germany. Because of geography, however, none of these troops would be able to directly reinforce the Czechs. Britain could immediately promise France no more than 150 planes, two non-motorized divisions, and the support of the Royal Navy. Against this force, Germany could convene a standing army of 40 divisions, the most modern and well-equipped in Europe, with triple that number of reserves. Because of the distrust of Poland and Romania, which would not permit Red Army troops to cross their territories, the best the USSR could offer Benes was the use of 1,000 Soviet planes.

The strategic importance of Czechoslovakia to Britain hinged on more than military statistics. While the British government had no traditional relationship or ties with Czechoslovakia, the British armed forces were responsible for defending both Britain and its worldwide empire. France was Britain's main ally against Germany and the fortifications in the Sudeten Mountains of Czechoslovakia were the key strong point in the French alliance system opposing Germany in the east. Indeed, the German Army General Staff estimated that it would take three months to smash these fortifications.

British, French, and German statesmen all believed that the USSR was capable of trying to cause a war in Western Europe that would lead to widespread communist revolution. Likewise, statesmen feared that once the Red Army entered central Europe, it would never leave. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was eager to make a defensive alliance to limit German expansionism. If the allies allowed Hitler to take Czechoslovakia, there was no certainty that Stalin would not make his own best deal with Hitler, which would allow Germany to attack France.

For Appeasement

However much we may sympathize with a small nation confronted by a big and powerful neighbor, we cannot in all circumstances undertake to involve the whole British Empire in a war simply on her account. If we have to fight, it must be on a larger issue than that.¹

Prime Minister Chamberlain

For Standing Fast

There is a price at which peace of any kind can generally be preserved. For the most militant aggressor will hardly resort to actual war, if he can secure his most outrageous aims by mere threat... To buy off the bully by giving in to his demands leaves might still triumphant over right... To some of us peace so secured seems more immoral than war.² G.M. Gathorne-Hardy

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Identify or define and tell the importance to this chapter of each of the following:

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|----------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a. "Black Wednesday" | g. Anschluss | m. 30 divisions |
| b. Versailles Treaty | h. October 1, 1938 | n. Maginot Line |
| c. Eduard Benes | i. "digging trenches" | o. wide-spread communist revolution |
| d. Sudetenland | j. Neville Chamberlain | p. USSR-German alliance |
| e. Konrad Henlein | k. last territorial demand | |
| f. Karlsbad Program | l. Winston Churchill | |

2. Describe the issue creating conflict between Germany and Czechoslovakia

3. Prepare a case with at least three different arguments for the British delegation at the Munich Conference to appease Hitler by giving him the Sudetenland, or stand fast at the risk of World War II.

¹ Francis L. Loewenheim, *Peace or Appeasement* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 56.

² G.M. Gathorne-Hardy, *A Short History of International Affairs 1920-1934* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 342.

Epilogue: Aftermath of Appeasement

The advocates of appeasement made British policy at the Four-Power Conference in Munich. The French and British delegations did indeed agree to the annexation of the Sudetenland by Germany. In exchange for this gift, Hitler promised that this was his last territorial demand in Europe. He also signed a treaty with Chamberlain in which he pledged to remove possible sources of differences and thus contribute to assure the peace of Europe. On his return to Britain, Chamberlain was met at the airport by cheering crowds. Waving this agreement, he claimed to have brought back from Germany "peace in our times."

The stand-fast faction in Britain was bitterly disappointed. "There is no merit in putting off a war for a year," wrote Churchill, "if, when it comes, it is a far worse war or one much harder to win." He contended that in appeasing Hitler, Britain had allowed Germany to re-arm, gain air superiority, build the Siegfried line in the Rhineland, unify with Austria, and now take over the strategic Sudetenland. By 1938 the balance of power, Churchill pointed out, had been allowed to tip in Germany's favor.

The Czechs were given no choice in the matter. They were told to pull their forces out of the Sudetenland, which was promptly occupied by German troops. Overnight, Czechoslovakia lost 15 percent of its land area, 20 percent of its population, and 75 percent of its industry. No sooner had Hitler's troops taken control of the Sudeten fortifications than Hungary and Poland grabbed the choice pieces of Czechoslovakia that they desired. Within months, Czechoslovakia was reduced to a chaotic and defenseless state, one-half its original size. Motivated by a desire to reverse the deteriorating conditions in Czechoslovakia – or so he claimed – Hitler extended German control over the rest of the country in March 1939. Thus, six months after the Munich Four-Power Conference deprived it of its defensible borders, Czechoslovakia ceased to exist.

Soon after Hitler began to complain about the conditions of the people who spoke German in western Poland. Humiliated by Hitler's untrustworthy behavior, Chamberlain quickly signed an unconditional defense treaty with Poland. But on August 23, 1939, Hitler and Stalin signed a non-aggression pact that secretly made plans to divide Poland between them and allowed the Soviets to grab Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as well as Finland. The stage had been set for the beginning of World War II which began with Germany's invasion of Poland eight days later.