

## Thank You, Neville Chamberlain

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“...however dark may be the clouds which overhang our path, no future generation of English-speaking folks... will doubt that, even at a great cost to ourselves in technical preparation, we were guiltless of the bloodshed, terror and misery which have engulfed so many lands and peoples... Long, hard, and hazardous years lie before us, but at least we entered upon them united and with clean hearts.”

-Winston Churchill, [Eulogy for Neville Chamberlain](#), 12 Nov. 1940.

### Of lessons learned

In every political conflict between the US and a hostile country, American proponents of war bring up Chamberlain and the 1938 Munich Agreement with Adolph Hitler. In their telling, the latest foreign villain corresponds to Hitler, hapless liberals are the incarnation of Chamberlain, and any compromise to avert war is the Munich Agreement. The proposed nuclear agreement with Iran constitutes the most recent [example](#) but unfortunately will not be the last. For each example, critics of militarism point out the differences between the current situation and 1938, but few go to a core problem with the analogy: the conventional lessons drawn from Munich do not even apply to the Munich Agreement itself.

The Munich Agreement was a response to a 1938 crisis in which Hitler threatened war if Czechoslovakia did not cede the border territory of Sudetenland to Germany. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier, representing Czechoslovakia's key allies, met with Hitler in the German city of Munich. It was there, in September 1938, that they announced an agreement in which Czechoslovakia would accept German demands in order to achieve, in Chamberlain's words, "[peace for our time](#)".<sup>1</sup> Czechoslovakian leaders, not invited to the conference, were technically not forced to accept the agreement but had no good options without British and French support. The agreement was followed in short order by Germany conquering the rest of Czechoslovakia (March, 1939), Poland (September, 1939), Denmark and Norway (April, 1940), and Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and France (May, 1940).

The world has learned key lessons from this episode. (1) Placating a bully such as Hitler only indicates weakness, so the way to avert war is to stand firm against the bully. Thus British capitulation emboldened Germany to attack other countries. (2) Failing to go to war at the first opportunity will lead to greater death and destruction later on. If only Britain and France had confronted Hitler in 1938, they could have defeated him without the horror of World War II. (3)

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<sup>1</sup> Often misquoted as "peace *in* our time".

It is inappropriate to apply values supporting peace and fairness when dealing with a criminal who does not care about either. Since Hitler's real goal in Sudetenland was not to help Sudeten Germans but to find a pretext for a war of conquest, satisfying his demands was of no value.

It is time to unlearn all these lessons.

**(1) Firm opposition in the beginning would have stopped Hitler.**

Hitler apparently was not too worried about allied opposition; he was quite irritated with Chamberlain for robbing Germany of a pretext to invade. One only has to look at Hitler's subsequent choices for further disproof of this lesson. When Britain and France threatened war if Poland was attacked, Germany attacked Poland. After they declared war on Germany, Germany attacked France. After they fought and lost in France, Germany attacked Britain, but failed to destroy the British air force, conquer Britain, or make it surrender. What was Hitler's response to this defeat? In June 1941 he invaded Russia.

Relatively ineffectual resistance in 1939-1940 did not convince Hitler to back down, but maybe a more successful defense could. Hitler met such a defense in the battle of Stalingrad. Reaching Stalingrad in 1942 after an unexpectedly hard slog through the Soviet Union, the German army sustained heavy losses from a ferocious Soviet defense. The Soviets then counterattacked and surrounded over 200,000 German soldiers. Rather than allow the troops to break out of the encirclement, Hitler refused to consider retreat of any kind and ordered them to stay where they were. Later, when the surrounded German army had no hope for rescue from other German forces, Hitler urged them to fight to the last man. He even promoted the besieged general to field marshal, reminding him that no German field marshal had ever surrendered. Hitler fought on for his dream of conquest until enemy troops were literally fighting in Berlin. These are not the actions of a man who would have backed down in the face of opposition.

**(2) Chamberlain threw away his last chance to stop Hitler.**

This lesson contains two assumptions. One is that the allies would have been more successful in September 1938 than they actually were in September 1939 when they declared war on Germany. The other one is that they did not have other opportunities to defeat them quickly after September 1938. Both assumptions are dubious.

William Shirer, in his 1960 book *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, gives three reasons why it would have been beneficial to confront Hitler over the Sudetenland. The first was that a cabal of generals did not like what they considered Hitler's risky path of confrontation, and were contemplating a coup against Hitler which might have gone forward if not for Hitler's apparent victory at Munich. It is not clear that they would really have taken action, nor that they would

have been successful if they did act. Hitler was popular in Germany in 1938. Nazi Germany had weathered the Great Depression better than the major democracies, and Hitler had overseen a successful absorption of Austria into the Reich. Hitler survived several assassination attempts later on, when there were much clearer reasons to abandon his program of conquest. It is hard to believe that a setback in Munich would have been the end of Hitler's regime.

Shirer's other two reasons involved military strategy: Germany did not complete its defenses along the French border until 1939, and so in 1938 was vulnerable to an attack from the West. Furthermore, the Sudetenland consisted of mountainous territory with extensive fortifications, so that German generals (unlike Hitler) were genuinely worried about their ability to take the territory by force. Giving it to Germany left Czechoslovakia vulnerable to invasion. Along the same lines, military historians have argued for decades about whether the overall balance of weapons and training moved more in Germany's favor or more in the allies' favor between 1938 and 1939. Churchill [argued](#) in 1938 that a unified response to Hitler that included Russia and other European countries would be able to resist German advances and blockade the German war machine's access to raw material and manufacturing in neighboring countries.

These points might be compelling if we did not know how World War II actually unfolded. The idea that Germany, which managed to conquer most of Europe in a couple of years, could be stopped by fortresses in the small and disunited nation of Czechoslovakia is simply ridiculous. To give just one counterexample, Belgium's supposedly impregnable Fort Eben-Emael was captured in one night by German special forces in May 1940. Similarly, the French were vanquished in under two months, not because of a lack of weapons (in fact they had more tanks than the Germans) but because of bad leadership. Shirer describes the French general command as consisting of old men who depended on obsolete tactics and were traumatized to the point of passivity by the memory of World War I. These were not the men to lead allied forces to invade Germany, remove Hitler, and save Czechoslovakia, no matter how weak the German forts or how strong the Czech ones.

This brings us to the question of whether Munich was the last chance for the allies. In fact, once Britain and France decided they did have to stand up to Hitler, they continued to miss opportunities to stop him. First, they could have made it harder for Germany to attack Poland by forming an alliance with the Soviet Union. They did not do this because of their own (justifiable) antagonism to Stalinist USSR, and because Poland, having just emerged from a century of Russian occupation, would not allow Russian troops on its territory. It was this failure, rather than Munich, which finally convinced Stalin to make a deal with Hitler to carve up Poland together. Then, when Hitler did invade Poland, the allies could have taken advantage of German concentration on the east to attack in the west. Instead, there was nine months of the so-called "phony war" in which the allies did little to directly confront Germany even though they

were officially at war. The allies weren't paralyzed because they relied on appeasement, but both appeasement and the allies' wider paralysis came from the same source.

### **(3) It is a waste of time to appease evil dictators.**

Today "appeasement," has a connotation of abandoning principles in order to placate an aggressor. That's not what it meant in 1938, when the *Times* of London editorialized in favor of appeasing Czechoslovakia's post-Munich needs,<sup>2</sup> and Hitler spoke of *German* appeasement of *British* demands regarding the German navy.<sup>3</sup> "Appeasement" simply meant a policy of peacefully satisfying another country's concerns. The fact that Britain and France tried so hard to appease Germany had important ramifications for the conduct of the war.

We know now that Hitler was a fiend who led Germany on a path of unbelievable destruction, cruelty, and genocide. In 1938, his repressive and militaristic policies and obsessive hatred of Jews was visible, but he had not yet done most of what he is now infamous for. For instance, though he persecuted Jews and incited ethnic hatred from the beginning, even the pogrom known as Kristallnacht did not occur till six weeks after Munich. Several countries in Europe were repressive, including eventual allies Poland and Soviet Russia. Hitler had not openly attacked any countries yet. While he had engaged in many dirty tricks culminating in the absorption of Austria into Germany in March 1938, the fact that hundreds of thousands of cheering people greeted him when he visited Vienna shortly after the union argued against the idea that the union constituted German aggression.

Czechoslovakia was created after World War I from part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The majority population of Sudetenland spoke German, and though they had earlier been citizens of Austria, not Germany, unification with Germany was popular, with a majority of Sudeten Germans voting for the pro-Nazi Sudeten German party.<sup>4</sup> Sudetenland had been awarded to Czechoslovakia not based on any historical considerations but merely to provide more defensible borders to the country. Thus unlike many of Hitler's demands, German calls to annex Sudetenland actually had a rational basis.

The wider context for the Sudetenland crisis was disgust at World War I. Large numbers of people in Britain and France had concluded (correctly) that the war had been a tremendous waste, and that the Versailles Treaty had unfairly burdened Germany with reparations and other limitations. It was irrelevant to Hitler whether Chamberlain was being fairer to the Germans than his predecessors had been at Versailles, but it was *very* relevant to populations in the democracies who might be called on to fight the Germans again.

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<sup>2</sup> *Times* (London), "Munich and After," 3 Oct. 1938, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Times* (London), "Herr Hitler's Speech," 13 Sep. 1938, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *The Economist*, "[The expulsion of Sudeten Germans is still raw](#)," 7 May 2013.

Suppose that Churchill had been prime minister instead of Chamberlain, and that he had told Hitler that Britain and France would go to war to prevent Germany from taking Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. Hitler would then have invaded Czechoslovakia. French and British action against Germany would most likely be about as ineffective as it actually was in 1939-1940, and Hitler would have been able to carry out his original plans to conquer Poland, France, etc. However in this case he could portray these conquests as part of a defensive war against countries trying to prevent Germany from overcoming the legacy of Versailles.

Now think about a British evacuation at Dunkirk under these circumstances. It is likely that many British would say that their leaders had dragged them into yet another pointless war, that they could have avoided the war by just letting the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia join Germany, and that the allies all but deserved their military defeat at the hands of Germany. Americans would be disgusted by another European war over obscure geographical disputes. Instead of Chamberlain resigning in favor of Churchill, we would have Churchill resigning in favor of Chamberlain. Under these circumstances, it is easy to see Britain suing for peace and leaving Germany with a free hand in Europe.

Without Britain, the Soviet Union would have had to face Germany alone. During actual World War II, it was in fact the USSR that engaged the vast majority of the German army, inflicted the majority of casualties, and suffered the most death and destruction. It is possible that the Soviets would have prevailed even without the western democracies. On the other hand, US material aid to the USSR, allied landings in North Africa, Italy, and France, and western strategic bombing all played a role in defeating Germany. It is doubtful that the US would have helped the Soviets if Britain wasn't also fighting Germany, and quite plausible that an isolated USSR would not have defeated Germany.

In the scenario of World War II starting in the Sudetenland, there is a clear path to taking Britain out of the war, preventing US involvement in the war, and allowing Germany to prevail in Europe. In that scenario, western resolve at Munich leads not to averting World War II but to Hitler solidifying control over Europe, finishing the annihilation of European Jews and perhaps completing the annihilation of the Slavs as well.

Today we think of World War II as the ultimate "good" war, a defense against naked aggression and cruelty. A big reason for that view is precisely because appeasement made it crystal clear who the aggressor was and how hard neighboring countries tried to avoid war. Take away appeasement and we would have lost that clarity. Take away that clarity, and democracies such as Britain and the US would have had much more trouble sustaining the great effort needed to defeat the Nazis.

## **New lessons to learn**

A couple of things make the Munich analogy especially dangerous. One is that it portrays any compromise with hostile regimes as an error or even as a sin. Avoiding such compromise can lead to the opposite problem of treating unfriendly nations unfairly. Even a nation with a repressive government may have concerns that deserve consideration. Another problem is that it is easy to link the analogy to a call for an attack. If the world missed a chance to stop Hitler at Munich, maybe the world is missing a chance to stop the next catastrophe by not acting now. The incorrect lessons of Munich are a good way for salesmen for war to pressure governments to attack now under the assumption that tomorrow may be too late. But in making such an attack, it is we, and not the supposedly bad country we are attacking, who become the aggressor.

The failure of the Munich Agreement is especially stinging because of Chamberlain's triumphant return to Britain waving a piece of paper containing Hitler's duplicitous guarantee of peace. Chamberlain's mistake was to believe that satisfying Hitler's more reasonable demands would satisfy Hitler. Churchill had a better understanding of the danger posed by the Nazis. Appeasement of Germany is now seen as not just a failure, but as a very foolish and immoral failure, because of the contrast between those who grasped that Hitler was bent on a program of brutal conquest, and those who thought that war with Germany was a problem that could be solved by sacrificing Czechoslovakia. Rearming and preparing its population for war, as Britain and France belatedly did, was the right course of action in the face of Hitler's threat. Aggressively confronting Hitler before his belligerence was clear to all would probably not have reduced the suffering of World War II and could easily have led to a Nazi victory. Chamberlain's efforts, as Churchill acknowledged in his eulogy, helped the allies form a determined and unified front against Germany.

For this contribution, despite his misreading of Adolph Hitler, we should all say, "Thank you, Neville Chamberlain."