

MUNICH SIXTY YEARS LATER

Sixty years ago this week British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain boarded a plane for a historic flight to the German city of Munich. Waiting impatiently for his arrival was Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler. The two leaders were meeting to discuss the crisis in relations between Germany and Czechoslovakia, a crisis that threatened to erupt into war. The peace of Europe, and the world, hung in the balance.

The core of the dispute between Germany and Czechoslovakia concerned the Czech-held border region known as the Sudetenland. Forming an ideal strategic barrier against German aggression, the semi-mountainous Sudetenland had been given to the new Czech state in 1919 by the victorious Allied powers - despite the fact that it was populated mainly by Germans. Hitler, who came to power in 1933, said that his only desire was to unite all Germans within the boundaries of a single German state, fulfilling the ideal of national self-determination. It was a rationale that Hitler used with great success when he sent German troops to re-militarise the Rhineland region of Germany in 1936 – an area that a previous German government had promised to leave demilitarised as a testament of German good will. Hitler made similar claims when his troops marched into German-speaking Austria in March 1938. Following the Anschluss, or forced union with Austria, Hitler demanded that Czechoslovakia cede the Sudetenland to Germany, or face war. Hysterical mass Nazi rallies threatened immediate invasion while Nazi agents in the Sudetenland stirred up discontent among the German-speaking population.

By the time Chamberlain's flight left London on the 29 September war seemed imminent. The British Royal Navy had mobilised, while France, Germany and Czechoslovakia were all marshalling troops along their respective frontiers. Air raid shelters were set up in London, and gas masks distributed in schools. Chamberlain's meeting with Hitler was a last ditch gamble at saving the peace.

It was a gamble that paid off, at least in the short term. On the 30 September, Hitler and Chamberlain announced an agreement designed to preserve the peace. The Sudetenland would be turned over to Germany. In return Hitler promised to leave Czechoslovakia alone. Chamberlain returned to a rapturous welcome in London. Speaking to the crowds he confidently proclaimed that he had achieved 'peace in our time'.

With the benefit of hindsight we now know that nothing could have been further from the truth. Despite what he said, Hitler cared not a whit for national self-determination. His real objective was to crush Czechoslovakia, France's strongest East European ally in a lightning campaign. He would then defeat France prior to his major goal, an attack on Poland and the USSR. His ultimate objective was the attainment of Lebensraum, or living space for the German people. Far from rejoicing in his bloodless triumph at Munich, Hitler was enraged. He felt that he had been cheated from his war by that wily Englishman, Neville Chamberlain. Following Munich, Hitler turned his sights on Poland, alleging mistreatment of Germans living in Poland. Within eleven months of the Munich conference Europe was at war.

Munich is also seen as the high point of the British policy of appeasement, with which Chamberlain is most closely identified. Today appeasement is considered a dirty word and politicians will go to almost any lengths to avoid being called an appeaser. Repeatedly over the years we have been told we must not repeat the mistakes of Munich. For these reasons it was necessary to 'stand up' to the USSR during the various confrontations of the Cold War. The need to resist aggression formed an important rationale for the American effort in Vietnam during the 1960s. Most recently, appeals to the memory of Munich helped to justify the war against Iraq in 1991. Kuwait was portrayed as another Czechoslovakia, while Saddam Hussein was conjured up as the next Hitler.

Special contempt has always been reserved for Chamberlain's role in the Munich disaster. Even during the Second World War he was reviled as one of the 'guilty men of Munich'. More recently Chamberlain has been the butt of jokes on both Monty Python and Seinfeld. A new book seriously argues that Chamberlain's true motive at Munich was to provoke a war between Germany and the USSR. I still vividly remember the snarl I received some years ago from the owner of a bed and breakfast establishment in Birmingham (Chamberlain's home town) after casually mentioning that I was interested in Chamberlain's life.

The problem with such views is that they bear almost no relation to the reality of appeasement as uncovered by historians over the past thirty years. The opening of British government archives in 1967 has allowed for a systematic examination of British foreign policy in the 1930s. Many historians have concluded that Chamberlain had good reasons for following a policy aimed at avoiding war with Germany .

It is important to remember that Britain faced not one, but three potential enemies in 1938. Japan menaced British possessions in the Far East and had attacked China in 1937, while Italy threatened the British lifeline in the Mediterranean. The Italians had also invaded and conquered Ethiopia in 1935. Germany posed the most serious threat. The emergence of this 'triple threat' came at a time when British defences had been allowed to run down following victory in the First World War and many years of peace. The Depression had damaged the British economy and ensured that limited funds were available for rearmament. British public opinion was haunted by the memory of the disastrous offensives on the Western front during the First World War. It was assumed (correctly) that the next war would be far worse. The next war would also mean mass aerial bombardment of civilian populations with untold thousands of casualties. Given these sorts of problems, it made sense for the British government to avoid potential confrontations that could not be won. Chamberlain always justified his policy on the grounds that he wanted Britain to hope for the best, while preparing for the worst. He should be judged on those grounds.