

# Neville Chamberlain:

## Villain or Hero?

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Perhaps no other British figure of the twentieth century has been as vilified or as celebrated as Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister from 1937 to 1940. In 1999, a BBC Radio 4 poll of prominent historians, politicians and commentators rated Chamberlain as one of the worst Prime Ministers of the twentieth century. A future Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, even burned him in effigy on Guy Fawkes Night. Yet, while he was alive, crowds cheered him, the House of Commons applauded him, the King and Queen thanked him for his efforts, and the *London Times* wrote: "No conqueror returning from a victory on the battlefield had come adorned with nobler laurels." So which is it: is Chamberlain a villain or a hero?

The people who revile Chamberlain do so because they see him as the one man who could have stopped World War Two before it happened but he failed to do so. By the late 1930s, Adolf Hitler was a menace on the European stage. He had already broken the Treaty of Versailles numerous times by rebuilding the German army, marching troops into the Rhineland, and by annexing Austria into the Third Reich. By September 1938, Hitler had set his eyes on a new target, the Sudentenland, in northern Czechoslovakia. With Europe on the brink of war, Chamberlain flew to Germany not once, not twice, but three times in the space of two weeks to placate Hitler. By the time he left, Chamberlain had handed over the Sudentenland to Germany. By giving in to Hitler, so conventional wisdom goes, Chamberlain only encouraged Hitler's appetite for other lands. This policy of "appeasement" would encourage Hitler to invade Poland one year later and this began the Second World War.



British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain arrives at Munich for the Munich Conference, 29 September 1938.  
*Deutsches Bundesarchiv*



### Chamberlain as Villain:

Critics of Chamberlain argue that he should have gone to war against Hitler in the fall of 1938. Had Britain declared war at that time, then millions of people would have been saved and the Holocaust may never have happened. This argument was put forth by Winston Churchill in his book, *The Gathering Storm*, which was published shortly after the war ended. Had Chamberlain declared war in September 1938, then Hitler would have been forced to fight an alliance made up of Britain, France, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. This would have been an entirely different war than the one fought one year later – and one that Hitler may have lost. The Czechs, with their 35 divisions and mountain fortresses, would have put up a formidable battle against the German Army. As Field Marshal Erich von Manstein later said at the Nuremberg trials: “If war had broken out (in 1938)... there is no doubt whatsoever that, had Czechoslovakia defended herself, we would have been held up by her fortifications, for we did not have the means to break through.” As well, by taking the Sudentenland, and then the rest of Czechoslovakia six months later, Hitler strengthened his Nazi war machine. The historian, Niall Ferguson, points out that Germany “acquired at a stroke 1.5 million rifles, 750 aircraft, 600 tanks, and 2,000 field guns” as well as the important Skoda Munitions Works. Ferguson also reminds us that “more than one in ten of the tanks used by the Germans in their Western offensive of 1940 were Czech built.” William L. Shirer, in his book *The Nightmare Years*, argues that if the Germans attacked

Czechoslovakia in 1938 then “the French army, outnumbering the Germans in the West ten to one, would easily have broken through and occupied the Ruhr, the center of Hitler’s arms industries.. without which the Reich could not long continue fighting.” Therefore, the argument goes, by giving in to Hitler at Munich, Chamberlain deprived the West of a valuable ally who could have helped France and Britain defeat Germany in 1938.

There are, however, some problems with the above scenario. The first problem is that Britain did not have a good reason to declare war on Germany in 1938. The majority of the population of the Sudentenland was of German heritage who did not want to be part of Czechoslovakia. In fact, the

Südeten Germans voted in November 1918 to join German-speaking Austria. When their wishes were ignored and the Sudentenland was incorporated into Czechoslovakia, Tomas Masaryk, the first President of Czechoslovakia, reportedly told the British Foreign Secretary: “We do not want the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia”. On 5 September 1938, the Czech President, Edward Benes, had even agreed to the demands of the Sudenten Nazi Party for self-determination. Chamberlain himself said: “We did not go (to Munich) to decide whether the predominantly German areas in the Sudentenland should be passed over to the German Reich. That had already been decided.” As the historian David Dutton cleverly argues, was Chamberlain supposed to declare



Ethnic Germans in the city of Cheb greeting Hitler with the Nazi salute after he crossed the border into the formerly Czechoslovak Sudentenland in 1938. Deutsches Bundesarchiv

war on Germany “to try to keep more than three million Germans inside the Czech state *against their will?*”

A second problem is that Britain would have found herself alone if she had gone to war in 1938. At a press conference at Hyde Park on 9 September, President Roosevelt told reporters that they were “100% wrong” if they thought the United States would support Great Britain and France in a war against Germany over Czechoslovakia. As well, Canada, Australia and South Africa had all indicated, in no uncertain terms, that they would not support a war to defend Czechoslovakia. “Surely, the world can’t be plunged into the horrors of universal war,” wrote Vincent Massey, the Canadian High Commissioner, “over a few miles of territory or a few days one way or other in a time-table!”

The third problem is that it was not a foregone conclusion that this hypothetical coalition could defeat Germany in 1938. After all, this was the same German army that defeated Poland in three weeks in 1939 and France in four weeks in 1940 with its blitzkrieg attacks. With regards to the Soviet Union, historian Peter Neville has pointed out that Stalin had ordered the execution of over 40,000 officers of the Red Army for treason during the show trials only a year before. As well, the Soviet Union did not share a border with Czechoslovakia, and Poland and Romania were very unlikely to let the Russian army cross their countries to defend her. Therefore, the Soviet Union would most likely have been a nonentity if war had broken out in 1938. Six months before the Munich agreement was signed, Germany had taken over Austria and so this meant that Czechoslovakia was now surrounded on three sides by Germany. On 3 September 1938, Hitler changed the plan to attack Czechoslovakia, codenamed Case Green, so that the main thrust of the German army went through Bohemia rather than the Sudentenland. Historian Williamson Murray writes that: “because of the shape of their country, the Czechs would probably not have lasted much longer than the Poles did in 1939, three weeks at the maximum.” The Germans then would be free to turn westward and attack France through the Ardennes forest. Once they defeated France, then they would have controlled the French airbases along the coast which would have allowed them to bomb Britain.

## Chamberlain as Hero:

In the last twenty five years, many historians such as Patrick Donner, Gerhard Weinberg, Peter Neville and Andrew Crozier have come to the

defence of Neville Chamberlain. They argue that England was not ready for war in 1938, and could very well have been defeated by the Nazi army. By concluding the Munich agreement with Hitler, this bought the British military the time it needed to build the airplanes, construct the radar stations, and train the pilots to save Britain in the summer of 1940 during its “finest hour”.

During the height of the Munich crisis, Lionel Ismay, the Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, wrote a letter to the Cabinet and said 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.” At the same time the Chairman of the Aircraft Manufacturers’ Association sent Chamberlain figures on the country’s aircraft production and he stated that England would be “almost defenceless in the air because of the superiority of the Germans.” General Sir Edmund Ironside wrote in his diary in September 1938 that: “We have not the means of defending ourselves and he [Chamberlain] knows it...We cannot expose ourselves to a German attack. We simply commit suicide if we do.” Therefore, Chamberlain’s agreement with Hitler at Munich accomplished two things: it kept the peace and it bought England time to prepare for war. On 7 November, only five weeks after the Munich agreement was signed, the British cabinet approved Scheme M. This was a major reorientation of British policy which called for an increase in the building of fighter aircraft, especially the Hurricane and the Spitfire. This was also an economical decision as four fighters could be built for the same price as one bomber. When the Battle of Britain began in the summer of 1940, the Royal Air Force had 52 squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes to defend Great Britain from the Luftwaffe. As historian Graham Stewart writes: “When the battle arrived (in August 1940), the strength of Fighter Command was almost ten times that of September 1938.” As Patrick Donner states in his book *Crusade*: “It is impossible to assert that the Battle of Britain could have been won in 1938. It is simply not true.”

The second way that Chamberlain saved the country during the Battle of Britain was by erecting radar stations along England’s coastline. In 1935, Robert Watson-Watt demonstrated the uses of radar to the Air Ministry. It worked by sending out radio signals that bounced off incoming aircraft and then reflected them back to receiving stations. The first station was built at Bawdsey in 1937 and by June 1940 there were 57

radar stations spreading from Scotland to Southampton. With only 700 planes versus the Luftwaffe’s 2,000 fighters and bombers, it was the use of radar that was instrumental in helping the RAF win the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940. From the moment German planes took off from Western Europe, their aircraft were spotted on screens and their courses plotted. The British knew exactly where they were and where they were headed. As Patrick Donner writes: “I reported that for the first time we had sufficient numbers of the scarce wireless electrical mechanics, as well as wireless operators, to enable the radar coastal chain to cope with massive and simultaneous German air attacks. Such sustained attacks began on 8 August. The margin between victory and almost certain defeat was precisely nineteen days, neither more nor less, *and that narrowest of margins was secured for Britain by Neville Chamberlain at Munich.*” Unable to defeat the RAF, and after losing over 1500 airplanes, Hitler finally gave up on his plan of invading Britain.

## “Trapped... By His Own Strategy”

One could also interpret the Munich agreement as a brilliant diplomatic move on Chamberlain’s part. This unique and insightful interpretation was first put forth by the American historian Gerhard Weinberg in 1988 in an article in *Foreign Affairs*. According to Weinberg, Hitler did not want the Sudentenland in 1938, he wanted a *European war*. He wanted this war for various reasons: to provide *Lebensraum* for the German people, to avenge the Treaty of Versailles, and to prove the superiority of the Aryan race. Hitler was only using the demand for the Sudentenland as a pretext for his war to take over all of Europe. By giving Hitler what he demanded, Chamberlain cleverly called his bluff. Hitler was like the child who demands milk from his parents at bedtime hoping that he can go to the refrigerator to get a piece of cake. Chamberlain was like the parent that shows up with the milk, thereby denying the child the opportunity to get the cake. By handing over the Sudentenland, Chamberlain had “trapped (Hitler) ... by his own strategy.” Hitler could not go to war in 1938 after he had been given what he asked for as this would reveal his true ambition of conquering Europe.

Chamberlain also knew that, if Britain were to win a war, she would need the help of the Dominions and the United States, just like she had twenty years before. German historian Hans-Jurgen Schroder quotes Chamberlain as saying that American “sympathy would be of incalculable value if we were once



An Air raid shelter in a London Underground station in London.  
National Archives and Records Administration



St Katharine Docks, 7 September 1940. View along the River Thames towards smoke rising from the London docklands after an air raid.  
National Archives and Records Administration



again involved in a great struggle.” This is why only ten days after implementing Scheme M, Chamberlain signed a trade agreement with the United States on 17 November 1938. Chamberlain told Patrick Donner personally that if Hitler did break the peace agreement, “then the whole world, including the United States, would know where the blame for war lay.” Hitler did just that in March of 1939 when he took over the rest of Czechoslovakia and in September of 1939 when he invaded Poland. Whereas the Dominions refused to fight a morally ambiguous war in 1938, Canada, Australia, and South Africa did not hesitate to support Britain in a morally just war in 1939. When the United States finally joined the war in 1941, Germany faced, in the words of Schroder, a formidable “democratic, transatlantic triumvirate of Britain, the U.S. and Canada.” It would be these three countries that would invade Normandy on D-Day. Chamberlain had laid the cornerstone for this alliance, and ultimately the winning of the Second World War, at Munich.

Chamberlain’s critics castigate him for two things: for betraying Czechoslovakia and for not going to war against Hitler in 1938. In the first place, as we have seen, Chamberlain did not betray Czechoslovakia. The government of Edward Benes had already agreed to Südeten self-determination before Chamberlain even set foot in Germany. Chamberlain went to Munich to work out the details and to make the transition as smoothly as possible. Regarding the second point, Chamberlain’s critics are playing a “What If?” game. They take it for granted that Britain would have won a limited war in 1938, Hitler

would have been overthrown, and the horrors of the Second World War would have been averted. However, it is also just as likely that the opposite might have occurred as well. Without the support of the Dominions, and with its fighter squadrons and radar stations almost nonexistent, Great Britain would have been at the mercy of Germany. Therefore, if Chamberlain has been labelled by some historians as the “Betrayer of Czechoslovakia”, then he has just as much right to being called the “Saviour of the Battle of Britain”. On 28 October 1940, twelve days before his death, Chamberlain wrote his final political testament: “So far as my personal reputation is concerned, I am not in the least disturbed about it.... Without Munich the war would have been lost and the Empire destroyed in 1938.... I should not fear the historians’ verdict.”

### Final Thoughts:

What may be most interesting is not how historians view Chamberlain, but how his main adversary, Adolf Hitler, saw him. According to historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, in February 1945, as Germany lay in ruins and defeat was imminent, Hitler looked back and wondered where had it at all gone wrong? Where had Germany lost the war? The answer: Munich. “We ought to have gone to war in 1938,” he said. “September 1938 would have been the most favourable date... We ought then and there to have settled our disputes by force of arms.” And who did Hitler blame for Germany’s destruction? It was not Churchill, or the American air force, or the Soviet army. Rather, it was that “arch capitalist bourgeois, Chamberlain, with his deceptive umbrella in his hand.”

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