

# What's the context? 30 September 1938: The Munich Agreement

77 years ago, [Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain](#) flew back from Munich after two days of tense discussions with the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler.

He had reached an agreement setting out a timetable and terms for the Nazi takeover of the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland. And he had persuaded Hitler to sign a piece of paper stating that the two men were resolved to 'continue our efforts to remove possible sources of difference and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe'.

In a groundbreaking episode of 'shuttle diplomacy', on his third visit to Germany in as many weeks Chamberlain felt he had achieved his objectives: instead of an immediate Nazi occupation of the Sudetenland (as threatened until a few days earlier), there was to be a phased occupation of the German-speaking areas; and there was to be no general European war—yet. Neville Chamberlain arrives at Munich, 29 September 1938.

## The reality of the Munich Agreement

Within a year, Czechoslovakia had been entirely overrun by Germany, and Britain was at war with Germany.

'Munich' became, and remains, a byword for shameful failure to stand up to dictators. Yet Chamberlain had been cheered by Germans in the streets of Munich; cheered when he returned to London on 30

September, declaiming from the Buckingham Palace balcony that 'I believe it is peace for our time' (a statement he immediately regretted).

At 7.30 p.m. the Chancellor of the Exchequer opened the Cabinet meeting by expressing on his colleagues' behalf 'their profound admiration for the unparalleled efforts' Chamberlain had made and for what he had achieved. Ministers were, Sir John Simon said, 'proud to be associated with the Prime Minister as his colleagues at this time'.

**Even Duff Cooper, whose uneasiness with Munich led him to resign as First Lord of the Admiralty, recognized that Chamberlain had done better than expected.**

**Munich was not an isolated crisis, but the latest episode in a five-year standoff in which Hitler made and broke successive promises and agreements in his bid to dominate central and eastern Europe, while the British government pursued a policy of neither saying it would, or would not fight, while buying time for rearmament.**

**The international context**

**Many books have been written on all this, and indeed on Munich itself. But on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it is worth taking a look at how the crisis looked elsewhere in the world in 1938: for the international context was crucial.**

**And when we look at how the Munich crisis was viewed around the world – in Washington, Paris, Rome, in Tokyo and Moscow, as well as in London and Berlin – things not only look rather more complex, but also surprisingly contemporary.**

**United States**

**A Democratic President faced fierce Republican opposition in both domestic and foreign policy. Roosevelt's New Deal program of social and economic measures to bring the US out of recession led to accusations that he was both a communist and a fascist (for giving government too much power).**

**When he authorized a rearmament program, it was branded a diversion from domestic failure. The only thing most agreed on was keeping America out of European wars.**

**Soviet Union**

**Stalin convinced he faced a global imperialist and Trotskyist conspiracy, believed the British and French wanted to give Hitler what he wanted in central and Eastern Europe and lure him into attacking Russia. Munich seemed proof of this. Stalin had had so many of his secret agents executed that his foreign intelligence was much reduced. Nor did the reports from the Cambridge Five disabuse Stalin of his delusions: they could not imagine that a year later he would sign a pact with Hitler.**

Stalin's paranoid fantasies were quite alien to Chamberlain and his colleagues, who worried, needlessly at this point, about Soviet expansionist intentions.

### **Japan**

Japan was also allied to Germany and Italy, and had been engaged on a brutal and destructive war against China since 1937. Britain looked the biggest potential obstacle to Japanese domination of East Asia.

By 1938 the Chinese situation seemed desperate. Chiang Kai-shek's pleas for help were received sympathetically in London but rejected in fear of Japanese reprisals, especially against Hong Kong.

Like Roosevelt, Chamberlain worried about the possibility of fighting a war on two fronts, and having to divert precious naval resources to the Far East. The British government knew that the Chinese were 'fighting the battle of Western Nations in the Far East' but felt they could not help. To Japan, Munich showed the British as reluctant to fight.

### **Germany**

Germany, as in Japan, Britain was seen as the biggest obstacle to Hitler's plans. He did not want to fight Britain at all if possible, and in any case not yet. But, as British intelligence reports made clear, he had made up his mind what he wanted and was determined to get it.

Chamberlain's journeys to Germany threatened not only to disrupt his plans but also to steal his thunder. Nevertheless, Hitler was well aware that the Munich agreement provided the best chance of achieving his aims without an early war. Chamberlain's 'piece of paper' meant little to Hitler, but it did delay the inevitable. There is no room to include every country that took a keen interest in the outcome of the Munich crisis. But this selection shows that the picture was not uncomplicated.

Twenty years after the end of the First World War, politicians of all nationalities were very reluctant to contemplate the destruction and loss of life that another general war would entail, and were willing to go to considerable lengths to avoid it. At Munich, this was Chamberlain's aim.

It had been made clear to him that the Dominions did not consider Czechoslovakia worth a European war; the League of Nations expressed disapproval of German actions but offered no hope of

**practical assistance. The bottom line was: did the British people want to go to war for the Sudetenland? His answer was 'no': and while there were certainly differences between Chamberlain and his colleagues, and indeed with the Foreign Office who had no real hope that Hitler would settle for a peaceful future, very few were prepared to answer 'yes' in 1938. Munich was the logical conclusion. And while in hindsight the inaction of the international community in the face of dictators' aggression and brutality may seem culpable, more recent history continues to demonstrate that such situations and decisions are never straightforward.**

**Answer the following questions based on the reading. *Use a separate sheet of paper***

- 1. What were the terms Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler agreed to in regards to land in Czechoslovakia?**
- 2. What was Chamberlain's aim for the Munich Conference? What did he want to accomplish during his negotiations with Hitler?**
- 3. What was the reality of the Munich Pact?**
- 4. What were the world views about the Munich crisis concerning:**
  - a. The United States**
  - b. The Soviet Union**
  - c. Japan**
  - d. Germany**