

## The Sudetenland Crisis and the Munich Agreement, September 1938

Anschluss made Hitler much more confident. His growing confidence was putting the peace of Europe in increasing danger.

Unlike the leaders of Britain and France, Eduard Beneš, the leader of Czechoslovakia, was horrified by the Anschluss. He realised that Czechoslovakia would be the next country on Hitler's list for takeover.

### The Sudetenland Crisis

#### Background

The Sudetenland had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1919 when the peace treaty of St Germain became part of the newly created democratic state of Czechoslovakia. The Sudetenland contained many of Czechoslovakia's important raw materials, armaments factories and border defences. However, some 3,200,000 ethnic Germans lived in the area.

By May 1938, Hitler appeared to be prepared to go war with Czechoslovakia in order to break up the country and take the Sudetenland over. Hitler claimed the Sudeten Germans were being mistreated and demanded that self determination, an issue so important when creating the Treaty of Versailles, be applied to them.

However, the Czech leader, Eduard Benes, was prepared to fight. Czechoslovakia had a modern, well trained army and a mutual defence treaty with both France and the USSR; it was also unlikely that Britain would be able to stay neutral in any war over Czechoslovakia. Tension rose in the summer of 1938 and a war over the Sudetenland looked the most likely outcome.

### The Munich Agreement

By September 1938 the Sudeten problem had reached crisis point and events unfolded as follows:



#### 12-13<sup>th</sup> September

Hitler encouraged Konrad Henlein, leader of the Sudeten Nazis, to rebel, and demanded a union with Germany.

When the Czech government declared martial law, Hitler threatens war.



#### 15 September

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, desperate to avoid war, flew to meet Hitler at Berchtesgaden. It appeared that Hitler was willing to negotiate and claimed only parts of the Sudetenland - and even then only if the Sudeten Germans agreed to join Germany in a plebiscite.

Chamberlain thought this was reasonable and seemed convinced that if Hitler got what he wanted, he would at last be satisfied.

At Berchtesgaden, Chamberlain, without consulting Czechoslovakia, promised to give Hitler all the areas where more than 50 % of the population is German. The rest would all be required to take part in the plebiscite. Chamberlain then persuaded France to agree. On 19 September the French and the British put to the Czechs their plans to give Hitler the parts of the Sudetenland that he wanted. With no alternative, the Czech's reluctantly agreed.



### 22-23 September

Chamberlain flew back to meet Hitler at Bad Godesberg to inform him of the decision, but Hitler now increased his demand, insisting that ALL of the Sudetenland be handed over to Germany by 1<sup>st</sup> October.

Chamberlain could not accept these demands and war now seemed to be the most likely outcome.

At first Chamberlain refused to accept Hitler's demands, but then he decided that Czechoslovakia was not one of the 'great issues' which justified war, but just 'a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing'.

Not wanting Italy to be dragged into war, Mussolini organised a conference at Munich. On 29<sup>th</sup> September Chamberlain flew out to Munich to meet once more with Hitler, Mussolini and the French Prime Minister Daladier, to try to come to some sort of compromise over the Sudetenland. Czechoslovakia, and her powerful ally, the USSR were not even invited to the talks. This time Chamberlain gave way and agreed to Hitler's demand for the whole of the Sudetenland.



### 30 September

Chamberlain returned to England with his famous piece of paper to be greeted at the airport by a huge cheering crowd, believing he had sealed 'peace for our time'.

Hitler had risked war to gain the Sudetenland but was right in thinking that the British would not fight. France would not act without British support. The Czechs were free to fight alone, but having no support they chose not to. So peace was preserved once again, but at the cost of losing an important central European ally.

On 1 October 1938 Hitler moved his troops, unopposed into the Sudetenland. In doing so he gained 3 million people, a powerful armaments industry, raw materials and considerable military equipment, all without even firing a shot. However, this was to be the last occasion on which Britain sought to appease Hitler.