

# The Big Question: Was Neville Chamberlain really the failure portrayed

[Michael McCarthy](#) Wednesday 19 August 2009 23:00 BST

## Why are we asking this now?

Because the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War is coming up (it falls on September 3) and Chamberlain, Britain's bloodhound-faced, moustachioed, wing-collared, broly-carrying Prime Minister at its outset, has become entrenched in popular legend as the man who fatally failed to stand up to Hitler in the approach to hostilities.

## What did Chamberlain do?

A year before war was finally declared over Germany's invasion of Poland, general European hostilities nearly broke out over Hitler's wish to seize part of Czechoslovakia (the Sudetenland, a region which contained many German-speaking Czechs). In a vast blaze of publicity, the like of which had never been seen before, Chamberlain flew to Germany three times in September 1938 to stave off the conflict, and eventually, in a final meeting in Munich at the end of the month, succeeded. He got Hitler to sign a friendship agreement with Britain and flew back to wave it before cheering crowds on the Tarmac of Heston Airport (the Heathrow of those days) while declaring he had secured "peace in our time".

## But wasn't that a good thing?

Not if you were a Czech. Chamberlain's plan was simple – to keep Hitler from causing trouble for Britain by giving him what he wanted – in this case, the Sudetenland (which six months later became all of Czechoslovakia). He and the French Prime Minister, Edouard Daladier,

persuaded the Czechs not to make a fuss while a big chunk of their country was given away to one of history's vilest figures. Chamberlain had a name for his policy: appeasement. In his mind it seemed like a rational way of avoiding conflict. But the word has come to stand for cowardice of the basest kind, for a craven inability to stand up to bullies. Appeasement now seems dreadful, and it wasn't even any use – a year later, war came anyway. The term and Chamberlain's name have become virtually synonymous.

### **Is that a fair historical verdict?**

Maybe. Maybe not. Historical verdicts are rarely the whole truth, are they? To see Neville Chamberlain as exemplifying appeasement and nothing else, to see him merely as the historical epitome of spinelessness, ignores two other factors. One is his earlier political career, and what he had done with it. The other is the question of whether or not, in September 1938, he had any choice but to act as he did.

### **What was interesting about Chamberlain's earlier career?**

In many ways, it had been a monument to social reform – Conservative though he was. Chamberlain came from a famous political dynasty in Birmingham: his father, Joseph ("Joe") Chamberlain was Lord Mayor of the city and one of Britain's leading Liberal politicians in the late 19th century (though he later allied himself with the Conservatives over the issue of Home Rule for Ireland); his half-brother, Austen Chamberlain, rose to become Conservative party leader and Chancellor of the Exchequer (though never Premier). Although Neville Chamberlain himself was also Birmingham's Lord Mayor, he entered national politics late, in 1918, at the age of 49; but, by 1922 he was Minister of Health, a position he held twice over the succeeding years and used especially to bring in a raft of measures to promote social housing (which have now of course been entirely forgotten). He was far from being a typical Tory.

## **But what about appeasement? What do you mean, he might have had no choice?**

We easily forget what a completely intractable problem the rise of Hitler presented other European states with in the 1930s. Just how were they to deal with a man controlling Europe's most militarised and warlike nation, who had an implacable will to dominate the whole continent? In the event, Hitler was only to be stopped by history's most titanic war, which may have cost 25 million lives in Russia alone. But who would choose such a solution? Memories were only too fresh of the Great War, the First World War of 1914-18 in which a whole generation was slaughtered. Furthermore, there was a terror of a new weapon: the bomber aircraft. In 1938, the Committee of Imperial Defence told Chamberlain that a German bomber offensive launched against Britain would result in half a million civilian deaths within the first three weeks. The armed forces felt Britain was not ready for conflict militarily. The general public – you and me, 70 years ago – were terrified of war, and as desperate to avoid it as Chamberlain himself was. You can argue that doing anything to put it off was, as he believed, a rational choice. Certainly, when he stood on the Tarmac at Heston waving the piece of paper bearing Hitler's signature, he was regarded as a national hero. Only a few voices, such as that of Winston Churchill, denounced appeasement as the sell-out it was. You and me were silent.

## **So why is Chamberlain now so reviled?**

The answer, really, is because of his naivety. He was naïve in thinking that Hitler would keep his promise to make no more territorial grabs – der Führer gobbled up the rest of Czechoslovakia a mere six months later, and then turned to Poland, and even appeasement could not stop him then. But Chamberlain made a great parade of his naïve belief in Hitler's goodwill. The three eve-of-destruction flights he made to Germany were a wholly new event in international politics – the first shuttle diplomacy, if you like. He had never been on a plane before in his life, but he saw, quite rightly,

that this remarkable *démarche* would capture the public imagination, and he basked in the brief hero status it gave him. Yet the momentum of hope and expectation it engendered was so enormous that the disenchantment was all the greater when within 12 months the hope was shown to be hollow. And there was one other area where he failed disastrously – at least in the verdict of history.

### **What was that?**

He lost the rhetoric battle. He might have had to do what he did, but his words carry a shameful echo. He spoke of poor Czechoslovakia as "a far away country of which we know nothing". He said he had achieved "peace in our time". He hadn't. Contrast that with Churchill, whose great achievement in the Second World War was his rhetoric. Whenever Churchill intervened directly in the conduct of military affairs, as he frequently did, the results were disastrous. But we have forgotten that. What we remember is *We Shall Fight Them On The Beaches*. We remember *Never Has So Much Been Owed By So Many To So Few*. We remember *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat*. And with Neville Chamberlain, we remember *Peace In Our Time* (not).

### **Did Chamberlain have any choice but to appease Hitler in September 1938?**

**Yes...**

- \* He should have seen then that appeasement would not stop such a power-mad dictator
- \* A resolute show of force (with the French) might have persuaded Hitler to pull back
- \* His actions convinced Hitler of Britain's weakness and encouraged him in further demands

**No...**

\* There seemed to be no other option if full-scale war with a resurgent Germany was to be avoided

\* Britain's military forces were not ready for war anyway and the government feared a bombing campaign

\* Chamberlain was reflecting widespread public opinion at the time which wanted peace

More about:

[Czech Republic](#)

[German Politics](#)

[Germany](#)

[Heathrow Airport](#)

 [Reuse content](#)