

The Munich Crisis

In March of 1938, Nazi Germany led by Adolph Hitler gave an ultimatum to Chancellor Schuschnigg of Austria to resign and allow a new Chancellor of Germany's choosing to take over or Hitler's troops would march into Austria. With his back against a wall, Schuschnigg did resign and Dr. Arthur Seyss-Inquart, a Nazi puppet, took control. Immediately, he ordered the Austrian army to offer no resistance, and then invited German troops to enter Austria. Hitler achieved his Anschluss - the union of Austria and Germany.

When Austria became a part of Nazi Germany, little Czechoslovakia, a democratic country formed out of the victory of the Western Allies over Germany in the first World War, found itself surrounded on three sides. And though Britain and France had barely reacted to the previous Anschluss, Hitler knew full well he could not invade Czechoslovakia without a reason.

By May 1938, things began to heat up. Rumours were flying around Europe that German troops were massing near the Czech border. For its part, the Czech Republic's reserves were being called up in case it became necessary to defend their homeland. Adolph Hitler travelled to Italy to secure the backing of its Fascist leader, Mussolini, should he invade Czechoslovakia. But finally, Britain, France and Russia began to put some pressure on the Nazi leader. Meanwhile, little Czechoslovakia primarily through the quiet example of its president, Eduard Benes (pronounced Ben-ish), continued to stress moderation and calm. Though he was furious, Hitler backed away, claiming he had no aggressive intentions toward the Czechoslovak Republic.

However, in Berlin on May 28 1938, he told his generals, "It is my unshakable will that Czechoslovakia shall be wiped off the map." He instructed them to develop a plan for completing this by October 1st 1938.

The plan that would bring Europe once again to the brink of war was through the Sudetenland. This tiny section of the Czech Republic lay on the border of Germany. Many of the inhabitants were of German background as the land was at one time part of the German empire. One of the representative parties in Czech parliament was the Heinlein party, which was composed of these Sudeten Germans. Named after the founder and leader of the party, Konrad Heinlein, it would prove, as would Heinlein himself, instrumental in bringing about the destruction of the tiny country.

With training from Himmler's SS troops, many pro-Nazi Sudeten Germans began in late summer to stir up things for the Prague government. Constant terrorist attacks as well as marches and rallies in the Sudetenland kept the Czech militia active. Again, while the government called for calm, that territory was anything but that.

Using these attacks as a front, the German propaganda machine began to cry for justice for these so-called persecuted Germans in Czechoslovakia. It was expected that Britain would once again cede to the wishes of the Fuhrer. In June, Chamberlain spoke "off the record" that Britain favoured turning over the Sudetenland to Germany "in the interest of peace." The League of Nations, it seemed, was dead as they failed to intervene. Chamberlain sent his representative, Lord Runciman, to Czechoslovakia to mediate between that country and the Sudeten Germans. Chamberlain had forced Runciman on the Czechs by warning of dire circumstances if they did not accept his coming. Runciman sought more and more concessions for the Sudeten Germans from the Czech president, Eduard Benes. Benes was rapidly growing tired of the whole affair.

By September 5th 1938, he asked to see the Sudeten German representatives asking them to draw up their demands and that he would accept them. But Hitler knew this would foil his plans. On September 7th 1938, he ordered Heinlein to break off all negotiations. War, it seemed, was on once again.

On the 10th September 1938, Benes broadcast to the world an appeal for calm and peace. Benes asked the Czech people to be "firm and have faith in our state, in its health and its strength, in the indestructible spirit and devotion of its people." Was Benes dreaming? Without a clear declaration of support from Great Britain, nothing was definite. That evening a speech by Goering pointed the way. Goering said of the Czechs "This

miserable pygmy race without culture, no one knows where it came from, is oppressing a cultured people [Sudeten Germans] and behind it is Moscow and the eternal mask of the Jew devil..."

The following Monday evening Hitler gave a speech to the Nazi Congress in Nuremberg. While he ranted against the Czechs and its President Benes, he stopped short of talk of war. Once again, it seemed, crisis had been averted. But a side effect of Hitler's speech [inflamed by the German propaganda machine] caused outbreaks of fighting in the Sudetenland. So much so that by the 14th, Czechoslovakia had declared martial law and was recalling reserves. The BBC reported that Chamberlain sensing the new tension offered to travel to Germany to talk to Hitler. At 6 p.m. Karl Heinlein, the Sudetenland leader gave an ultimatum to Benes: rescind martial law, recall the reserves to their barracks, withdraw the state police from the territory, and accept this by midnight or all negotiations would be called off. Czechoslovakia, he said, would be responsible for "further developments" if they failed to do so. And because Heinlein took his lead from Hitler, the press and others concluded he meant war.

The Czech government rejected the ultimatum and the standoff continued. Late in the day, Chamberlain announced that he would go to Germany to meet with Hitler. Though the Czech's still felt they had things under control, the British government felt they needed to intervene. A war of words continued between Nazi Germany's radio and the Czech Republic shortwave station. Even Hungary, Germany's ally, was perpetuating rumours about events in the Sudetenland which Prague radio refuted. When Chamberlain travelled to Berchtesgaden, he met Hitler at the leader's mountain retreat. The meeting was cordial and Chamberlain and Hitler decided to meet again in a few days in Godesberg. It was feared that the two had agreed that a plebiscite should take place.

September 18th brought a speech from the Premier of Czechoslovakia, Milan Hodza (Hoed-yah). He declared that if Chamberlain and Hitler had agreed upon a plebiscite, it was unacceptable to his country. Hodza implied that if need be Czechoslovakia would go it alone against Hitler. Meanwhile in London, the French Premier Daladier was meeting with Chamberlain to discuss the Czechoslovakian situation. They would agree that a plebiscite must be held. And in Italy, Mussolini was calling for a plebiscite for all the races within Czechoslovakia. The vultures certainly smelled blood.

Monday, the 19th September 1938 was generally quiet. France and Britain had given their proposal for a settlement to the Czechoslovak Government. In a 7:30 pm news broadcast, CBS reporter Edward R. Murrow outlined what it appeared the settlement included:

"Here is a synthesis of the speculation in today's London papers. First, the Sudeten majority districts are to be turned over to Germany. Some newspapers mention that those areas having more than 50% Sudeten's will be turned over. Second, Britain is to take part in an international guarantee of what is left of Czechoslovakia. And third, the Franco-Czech and the Russian-Czech Alliance is to be abandoned."

All the countries were in wait mode to see what the Czech government, and Hitler, would do next.

As Tuesday, the 20th September 1938 dawned, there was still no word from either government. Finally, at approximately 2:45 pm Eastern Standard Time, Maurice Hindus broadcasting for CBS from Prague interrupted his broadcast to announce the Czech communique.

"The Czechoslovak government has handed to the British and French ministers in Prague a note which the government expresses its point of view with regard to the proposal which has been interpreted to it by Great Britain and France. This point of view makes further negotiations possible in the spirit of conciliation, which the Czechoslovak government has always shown."

But the Czech answer proved unsatisfactory to the British and French. They issued a joint declaration that the Czech decision was not acceptable and that Czechoslovakia must deliver unconditional acceptance within 24 hours or bear the consequences of invasion. Meanwhile, the scheduled second meeting between Hitler and Chamberlain, though delayed, was about to begin in Godesberg.

The day before the meeting between Hitler and Chamberlain was held, Maxim Litvinoff, the Soviet Union's Foreign Minister, addressed the League of Nations in Geneva. Litvinoff accused Britain and France of avoiding a problematical war today in return for a larger war later. He declared that the Soviet Union's "War Department is ready immediately to participate in a conference with representatives of the French and Czechoslovakian War Departments to discuss measures appropriate to the moment." Russia, it seemed was ready to meet her obligations with the Czech government. But that would prove futile. By the end of the day, the Czech government announced that they would accept the second ultimatum from Britain and France and surrender the Sudeten territory.

By the time Wednesday 22nd September 1938 began the turmoil was increasing. The previous night there were crowds in the streets of Prague calling for the Czech military government to take control and defend their country from aggression. The crowd denounced France and Britain. And the Czech cabinet presented its resignation to President Benes, who was left with trying to form a new government. Meanwhile, the scheduled meeting between Chamberlain and Hitler got underway. No sooner had it begun than Hitler announced to the Prime Minister that the previous terms were no longer acceptable. Though the British, French and Czechs had all agreed to the secession of land, Hitler now demanded a German military occupation of the Sudetenland by October 1st (which had been his plan all along).

Once more the day ends in turmoil. Benes had chosen Jan Syrový, the heroic Czech general, as his Premier and War Minister. And on the Czech-German border, there was back and forth fighting as Sudeten Germans took over the town of Eger, and then lost it as the Czech military regained control. German troops were reported moving near the border and French troops also moved to protect their province, Alsace. The follow-up meeting between Hitler and Chamberlain was postponed as Chamberlain delivered a letter to the Fuhrer and an answer returned. Russia was making sounds that it would defend Czechoslovakia against both Polish and German aggression. France was making noises that if early movement into the Sudetenland by Germany took place, it would move to protect the Czech Republic. War seemed closer than ever before.

On Saturday 25th September 1938, Chamberlain flew back to London after negotiations with Hitler had broken off. Mussolini declared that Czechoslovakia must give up the Sudetenland by October 1. In Paris, France mobilized its military as a protective measure. Before he left, Hitler delivered a memorandum to Chamberlain for him to present to Czechoslovakia. In effect he demanded immediate control of the Sudetenland, release of all German prisoners, a plebiscite is held without the presence of military troops from either side, or release of all resources within the territory. The brutal occupation he demanded was tempered with the plebiscite offer though it later proved hollow. The world went to bed that night wondering if they would wake up to world war. On the 27th September 1938 Chamberlain took to the airwaves to deplore the way he was treated and the change in Hitler's earlier agreements.

EMERGENCY 1938 Grey Point Battery and Kilroot Battery

On September 26th 1938, the 188th (Antrim) Heavy Battery Royal Artillery (TA) and 188th Antrim (Fortress) Company Royal Engineers (TA) was embodied and ordered to man the defences of Belfast Lough. The order was received at 32 Great Victoria Street about 3.30pm on September 26th 1938. All ranks were ordered to report at the Drill Hall as soon as possible and the Battery concentrated at Grey Point on the night of the 26th and morning of the 27th, proceeding in buses and Lorries. During the night 26th and 27th most of the men (less two detachments on duty in the port) were billeted in the Church Hall (of St. Johns Church, Helens Bay) which is within a quarter of a mile of Grey Point, by arrangement with the Rev. Canon Capsey, the rector.

On September 27th the Left Section under the command of Lieutenants Shearer and Cooke, proceeded in buses and Lorries to Kilroot and the N.C.O.'s and men of the Right Section proceeded to pitch tents at Grey Point.

On Sunday October 2nd 1938 a voluntary service was held at Grey Point by Rev. C.I. Peacocke (Rector of Dundela). As the Emergency became less acute so men were allowed to proceed on leave at 24 hours' notice. A similar service was held at Kilroot by Rev. J. Richardson and Rev. R.J. Wilson.

October 6th, the whole unit returned to Belfast by buses and Lorries, all tentage etc. being returned to Ordnance. The final move was carried out most expeditiously, the transport arrived at Grey Point at about 2.45pm and by 6.10pm the camp was clear. There was practically no sickness during the embodiment and in spite of the unpleasant weather the health and spirits of the troops remained excellent throughout. The Battery was complimented on its mobilization by the General Officer Commanding Northern Ireland District and by the Governor of Northern Ireland.

Over the next few days, events grew critical. Not only had France mobilized and the Soviet Union threatened to help Czechoslovakia, but now Great Britain said it too would step in to stop Germany if France is forced to act. President Roosevelt sent a second cablegram to Hitler stating:

"The question before the world today, Mr Chancellor, is not the question of errors of judgments or of injustices committed in the past, it is the question of the fate of the world today and tomorrow..."

Against such a rising tide, Hitler faltered slightly and offered to meet with France, England, and Italy in Munich. Chamberlain agreed to go calling it a "last effort."

On Thursday, 29th September 1938, the four powers, Germany, England, France and Italy met in Munich to decide the fate of Czechoslovakia. After about eight hours, an agreement was signed. The joint paper in effect still stated that Germany would take over the Sudetenland, but more slowly. Chamberlain who thought he had avoided war announced the "piece of paper" that both he and Hitler signed agreeing that Hitler's desires over Europe would stop with the Sudetenland. Hitler would later demean the agreement as a "scrap of paper." On October 1st 1938, German troops would come in to occupy the most German areas. Then each day additional movements would take place under jurisdiction of the four powers who would determine just how much territory was to be ceded. The less German areas would hold a plebiscite to determine if they want to stay a part of the Reich. Additional settlements were made over claims from Hungary and Poland. Czechoslovakia in effect had been carved up and was much smaller than previously, a much weaker state. Hitler had won.

By March 15th, 1939, through manipulations of the weakened Czech government, Hitler would peacefully occupy all of the country. Later that year, Hitler would invade Poland. Britain and France would declare war on Germany.

After Hitler invaded Poland, Neville Chamberlain announced that England was at war with Germany.

Please see under the heading "Grey Point Fort" on the navigation bar for the audio recording of Neville Chamberlain declaring war on Germany.