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“Peace for Our Time”: Past and Present Receptions of Neville Chamberlain’s Speech and the Munich Agreement

Abstract

This paper covers British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's role in the Munich Agreement, as well as his September 30th speech in London, and explains how Chamberlain's attempt to negotiate "peace" with Hitler was received by the public. This paper examines three major newspapers: The London Times, The Manchester Guardian, and The New York Times, to see whether the press interpreted Chamberlain's negotiation with Hitler as a success or a failure. The paper also builds off of the newspapers' coverage to explain how Chamberlain and his policy of appeasement have been perceived through present-day.

Keywords

Neville Chamberlain, Munich Agreement, peace

Disciplines

European History | History | Journalism Studies

Comments

Written for HIST 300: Historical Methods.

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On September 30, 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain emerged from his plane, grinning at the loud cheers of the crowd assembled nearby.¹ He and French Premier Édouard Daladier had signed an agreement in Munich, Germany, with two infamous dictators: Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini.² In addressing the crowd, Chamberlain decided to show off his recent triumph, declaring, “Here is the paper that bears his [Hitler’s] name upon it as well as mine.” He held up the fluttering paper and was greeted once more with cheers.³ Later, at 10 Downing Street, he declared that he had “brought peace with honour,” adding, “I believe it is peace for our time.”⁴ The Munich Agreement and Chamberlain’s speech elicited mixed receptions from the public. *The London Times* remained overwhelmingly optimistic about Chamberlain’s success in preventing war while *The Manchester Guardian* and *The New York Times* featured the agreement in a negative light. But when Hitler invaded Poland in September of 1939, it was clear that Chamberlain’s peace was short-lived. While many continue to regard Chamberlain as a failure and criticize his speech and the Munich Agreement, some historians have re-evaluated Chamberlain’s reputation and have interpreted his role in a more sympathetic light.

The Munich Agreement was signed in hopes of averting war against Germany. By September 1938, Hitler had already made “aggressive moves” to expand Germany’s territory.⁵

¹“Peace Four Power Conference (1938),” YouTube video, 1:50-2:10, posted by British Pathé on April 13, 2014, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0uOsPbSKPo>

²“As to the Munich Agreement Hug the Facts.” *World Affairs* 101, no. 4 (1938): 209, www.jstor.org/stable/20663172.

³“Peace Four Power Conference (1938),” YouTube video, 2:38-3:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0uOsPbSKPo>.

⁴“Neville Chamberlain’s ‘Peace for Our Time’ Speech,” EuroDocs, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, https://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Neville_Chamberlain%27s_%22Peace_For_Our_Time%22_speech

⁵Milan Hauner, “Did Hitler Want a World Dominion?” *Journal of Contemporary History* 13, no. 1 (1978): 23, www.jstor.org/stable/260090.

Two years earlier, despite the terms agreed upon in the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler marched his soldiers into the Rhineland, putting German forces in close proximity to “France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.”⁶ Earlier in 1938, Hitler put Austria under his control (in a move known as the Anschluss) and gained more territory and power.⁷ Now Hitler intended to take the Czechoslovakian area known as the Sudetenland, which, like Austria, counted a multitude of German inhabitants.⁸ If Hitler could take control of Czechoslovakia, he could secure more “lebensraum” or “living space,” for the German people and try to suppress and remove the country’s original inhabitants.⁹

Favoring a policy of appeasement, Chamberlain believed that he and other leaders could negotiate a diplomatic agreement with Hitler on the fate of Czechoslovakia. He decided to seek a negotiation with Hitler over the Sudetenland as “control over British policy” soon fell to Chamberlain rather than Parliament.¹⁰ According to Frank McDonough, a few months before September of 1938, a representative from a group of “German ‘moderates’” met with Chamberlain in London and tried to convince him that Hitler had his eye on Czechoslovakia, as well as France and Russia. But Chamberlain did not pay much attention to the representative because Chamberlain feared that “open threats of force” against Hitler “would hasten the outbreak of war.”¹¹ In July, Chamberlain had sent Lord Runciman to discuss a solution with Sudetenland residents, but by early September, Chamberlain had shifted away from finding “an

⁶“World History in March--March 7, 1936: Hitler Reoccupies the Rhineland” *Ohio History Connection*, uploaded March 8, 2017, <https://www.ohiohistory.org/learn/education-and-outreach/in-your-classroom/teachers-toolbox/march-2017/hitler-reoccupies-the-rhineland>.

⁷Milan Hauner, "Did Hitler Want a World," 23.

⁸“How Did Hitler Happen?” The National World War Two Museum, New Orleans, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/how-did-hitler-happen>.

⁹Hauner, "Did Hitler Want a World," 23.

¹⁰ Frank McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement, and the British Road to War* (Manchester University Press, 1998), 62, accessed via Google Books.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 62.

internal solution” in the Sudetenland and had decided to talk with Hitler.¹² In a speech on September 12, Hitler had worsened the shaky circumstances by urging Germans in the Sudetenland to “revolt.”¹³ Chamberlain met with Hitler several times before a final agreement. There was some back-and-forth between Chamberlain, Hitler, and the French, especially as Hitler tacked on more conditions in order for him to agree to a settlement.¹⁴ Czechoslovakia would not give in to Hitler’s new terms and “ordered a general mobilization” of its military, and France followed suit with “a partial mobilization.”¹⁵ Chamberlain’s representative warned Hitler that France and Britain would take action to protect Czechoslovakia, to which Hitler appeared unfazed. However, on September 29, in Munich, Germany, Chamberlain, the French Premier Daladier, Hitler, and Mussolini signed an agreement.¹⁶ The Munich Agreement gave Hitler control of the Sudetenland, allowing him to send his soldiers into the region from October 1 through October 10. This move would be supervised by “an International Commission.”¹⁷ In their eagerness to close the agreement, the four leaders kept the Czechoslovakian representatives out of the room in which they signed the final pact.¹⁸

When Chamberlain returned to England on September 30, he met by “an unprecedented reception.”¹⁹ Buoyed by his success, Chamberlain decided to read aloud another document that he and Hitler had signed, supporting Chamberlain’s idea that Hitler was “anxious for British

¹²Ibid., 61-62

¹³ “As to the Munich Agreement” 204.

¹⁴ McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement*, 65-69.

¹⁵ “Munich Agreement: 1938,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, updated January 7, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Munich-Agreement>.

¹⁶ McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement*, 65-69.

¹⁷ “As to the Munich Agreement,” 209.

¹⁸ “Munich Agreement: 1938,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Munich-Agreement>.

¹⁹ “As to the Munich Agreement,” 209.

friendship” and peace.²⁰ It was this document that Chamberlain raised in the air for the crowd to see. Chamberlain read that the recent agreement demonstrated “the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again,” to which the crowd exploded in loud cheers.²¹ Furthermore, Britain and Germany would rely on “the method of consultation,” meaning diplomatic talks with one another, to settle disputes. Chamberlain concluded that he and Hitler would work together to “remove possible sources of difference” and ensure “the peace of Europe.” With that, Chamberlain smiled and as he exited to his car, a member of the crowd cried for “three cheers for Chamberlain!” and the crowd saluted Chamberlain with “Hip hip, hooray!” three times.²² It looked as though the British people had thrown in their support, especially as “Chamberlain dolls and sugar umbrellas” (Chamberlain was associated with carrying umbrellas) “were offered for sale.”²³

Britons who read *The London Times* would have felt inclined to agree that the Munich Agreement and Chamberlain’s efforts had been a success, as the paper featured a fair number of articles praising Chamberlain. On October 6, the paper published a letter written by several British Conservatives—the same party as Chamberlain—who thanked Chamberlain for “keeping our country out of war” and admired “his courage and determination” in securing negotiations.²⁴ Two days later, other groups chimed in their thanks to the prime minister. The Cobden Club

²⁰McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement*, 72.

²¹“Peace Four Power Conference (1938),” YouTube video, 2:00-4:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0uOsPbSKPo>.

²² “Neville Chamberlain’s ‘Peace for Our Time’ Speech,” EuroDocs, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, https://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Neville_Chamberlain%27s_%22Peace_For_Our_Time%22_speech; “Peace Four Power Conference (1938),” YouTube video, 2:00-4:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0uOsPbSKPo>.

²³ Roger Eatwell, “Munich, Public Opinion, and Popular Front,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, no. 4 (1971): 122, accessed April 20, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/259689.

²⁴“East London Support For Mr. Chamberlain,” *The Times*, Oct. 6, 1938, p. 9, The Times Digital Archive, accessed April 20, 2020.

expressed “joy” that “our own country and Europe have been saved from the overwhelming calamity of another war,” and a group of Masons applauded Chamberlain’s “untiring efforts to maintain peace.”²⁵ On October 7, it was noted that “the Corporation of London” showed its admiration for Chamberlain by “offer[ing] the honorary freedom of the City.”²⁶ The following day, a gramophone company advertised the “historic words” of Chamberlain’s speech on September 27, as well as his address on September 30 when he returned from Munich. Anyone who bought the record could relive the historic moment as they listened to “the happy result achieved” by Chamberlain. *The Times* maintained its optimistic view of Chamberlain’s efforts because the Munich Agreement and Chamberlain’s professions of belief in long-term peace gave the public a “sense of relief,” as the gramophone advertisement correctly noted.²⁷

A common appeal made to Chamberlain was to save another young generation from destruction. One of the most intriguing letters of gratitude came from a group of schoolboys. The boys feared that they would be “the first victims” if war erupted for several years, as young men would be sent first to the front lines. The boys noted that there were “many millions of the youth” across “the world,” reminding Chamberlain that if he made the decision to go to war, another generation would be forced to pay the costly price.²⁸ A bishop also praised Chamberlain, calling him “the benefactor of the world” and that Chamberlain’s critics were “war-mongers.” The bishop defended his support of Chamberlain, claiming that he and others “felt a very proper

²⁵“Cobden Club Appeal,” *The Times*, Oct. 8, 1938, p. 7, The Times Digital Archive, accessed April 20, 2020; “Untiring Efforts,” *The Times*, Oct. 8, 1938, p. 7, The Times Digital Archive, accessed April 20, 2020.

²⁶“City of London and Mr. Chamberlain: Honorary Freedom to be Offered,” *The Times*, Oct.7, 1938, p. 8, The Times Digital Archive, accessed April 20, 2020.

²⁷“Historic Words,” *The Times*, Oct.8, 1938, p. 10, The Times Digital Archive, accessed April 20, 2020.

²⁸“Schoolboys' Thanks To Mr. Chamberlain,” *The Times*, Oct. 8, 1938, p. 7, The Times Digital Archive, accessed April 20, 2020.

reluctance of sending young men of this country” to war, especially as there were no personal feelings of “ill-will” between British men and “their German and Italian contemporaries.”²⁹ The bishop saw no justifiable reason to go to war—rather, he argued, the British people had no personal animosity towards Germany or Italy. The bishop believed the British people had nothing to gain but everything to lose by going to war. Another bishop put it more bluntly and wrote that “war with modern weapons is criminal lunacy,” because of the potentially high cost of life.³⁰ The British did not want to lose many of their sons, as well as young husbands and fathers, to another world war.

However, even before the Munich Agreement was signed, it appeared that “a sizeable body of [public] opinion was critical of Neville Chamberlain’s foreign policy.”³¹ But in the time leading up to the agreement, the British press was largely discouraged from printing negative views that could disrupt the ongoing negotiations with Hitler.³² According to Guy Hodgson, *The Times* also leaned “largely pro-German in the 1930s” and backed Chamberlain because its editor “was a friend of Stanley Baldwin and Chamberlain and a strong supporter of appeasement,” which explains why so many of the paper’s articles praised Chamberlain.³³

Another British newspaper, *The Manchester Guardian*, posted unfavorable views of Germany and the Munich Agreement. On October 1, the paper bluntly stated that “the Munich agreement gives Hitler everything he wants (to begin with).” It did not matter that Hitler won

²⁹“Debt to Prime Minister: “Benefactor of the World,” *The Times*, Nov. 22, 1938, p. 11, The Times Digital Archive, accessed April 20, 2020.

³⁰Edwin James Palmer, "The Meaning of Munich," *The Times*, Nov.8, 1938, p. 10, The Times Digital Archive, accessed April 20, 2020.

³¹Anthony Adamthwaite, "The British Government and the Media, 1937-1938," *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 2 (1983): 281, www.jstor.org/stable/260388.

³²*Ibid.*, 281-282.

³³Guy Hodgson, “Sir Nevile Henderson, Appeasement and the Press,” *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 2007): 321, accessed online through EBSCO Academic Search Premier, doi:10.1080/14616700601148952; *Ibid.*, 329.

Czechoslovakia through a diplomatic agreement—it remained an “invasion.” Czechoslovakia would fall into Hitler’s full control, as the agreed upon “elections and plebiscites” in Czechoslovakia would be “manipulated.”³⁴ A letter to the editor expressed anger that Chamberlain had circumvented Parliament in his haste to secure the agreement. This writer argued that the British and French had led Czechoslovakia leaders astray. Once the Czechoslovakian leaders had accepted the terms, the British and French suddenly seemed to “withdraw their promises, destroy their guarantees, and leave the aggressor in charge.” Chamberlain’s foreign policy showed that the British government was willing to defend “dictatorship in Europe,” the writer concluded.³⁵ “Democracy to-day is weaker than it was last week,” another letter writer cried. The writer shook his finger at Britain and the other “once-called democratic countries,” condemning them in that “you are running away and have no ground on which you are prepared to make a stand.”³⁶ Another writer questioned what solid evidence Chamberlain had behind his statement that he had “brought us ‘peace for our time.’” “It would be desperate indeed,” the writer continued, “if this much-vaunted “peace for our time” were to be a cringing peace, a peace gained by throwing sop”—weakened countries like Czechoslovakia—“to the dictators.”³⁷ Finally, another letter writer criticized Chamberlain because Chamberlain seemed to suggest that “even if the Munich Agreement was a defeat for

³⁴“Hitler’s New Powers: Czechoslovakia at His Mercy,” *The Manchester Guardian*, Oct. 1, 1938, from “The Munich Agreement-Archive September 1938,” The Guardian archive blog, posted Sept. 21, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/from-the-archive-blog/2018/sep/21/munich-chamberlain-hitler-appeasement-1938>.

³⁵ Hugh Quigley, “Letters on the Munich Agreement: Britain’s “Fascist Grand Council,” *The Manchester Guardian (1901-1959)*, Oct. 5, 1938, p. 10, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian, accessed April 20, 2020.

³⁶T. Wigley, “Letters on the Munich Agreement: The Democratic Powers on the Run,” *The Manchester Guardian (1901-1959)*, Oct. 5, 1938, p. 10, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian, accessed April 20, 2020.

³⁷ “For Our Time?” *The Manchester Guardian (1901-1959)*, Oct. 3, 1938, p. 8, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian, accessed April 20, 2020.

this country, no one ought to say so in public.” It was better to maintain “patriotic silence.” But the writer pointed out that it was not like a “democratic system” to try to censor free speech. The writer also noted that *The Times* seemed to defend censorship of free speech if it went against Chamberlain’s foreign policy.³⁸ Hodgson observed that *The Manchester Guardian* had been much more “critical” of Hitler earlier than other newspapers. The paper took on a more negative tone as its horrified editor learned of “Jewish and Christian persecutions and the concentration camps,” stories that other newspapers “shied away from” printing. Its negative coverage prompted Hitler to ban the paper.³⁹

The New York Times agreed with many of the points that *The Manchester Guardian* writers had made and emphasized the uncertainty ahead. The paper remarked that the cheering crowd that greeted Chamberlain in London “cared only that he had brought ‘peace,’” happy that “bombs were not falling on their little houses.” The paper noted that “most of Mr. Chamberlain’s welcomers seemed to be women,” and added that they “probably had not read the terms of the Munich Agreement but who remembered the last war” and its costs. The paper suggested that these “hysterical” women were only happy that their sons and husbands had been spared from war and that anyone who read the agreement would have seen its faults and concluded that the peace was only temporary. The paper concluded that “for in spite of the ‘desire of our two peoples to never go to war with one another again,’ [quoting Chamberlain] every Briton now knows where the real danger to his country lies.” The uncertainty remained, as the paper noted that “workmen still were digging trenches by torchlight to give government employe[e]s refuges

³⁸G. C. Field, “Fouling Our Own Nests, Patriotic Silence” *The Manchester Guardian* (1901-1959), Nov. 4, 1938, p. 20, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Guardian, accessed April 20, 2020.

³⁹Hodgson, “Sir Nevile Henderson, Appeasement and the Press,” 331.

in case bombing planes should come” from Germany.⁴⁰ On October 9, the paper captured the uncertainty with a map of Europe marked by ten questions. Questions included “Can Czechoslovakia survive?” and “Can the German march to the east be halted?” The paper described how a powerless Czechoslovakian people, “its spirit all but broken, watched German troops” and military vehicles come into the country. The paper painted a sad picture of the abandoned Czechoslovakian people while the British people were busy “rejoicing” for their own safety. “Recalling what Hitler had written in ‘Mein Kampf,’ men found it hard to believe” that Hitler would not try to take hold of other countries, the paper correctly observed. There did not appear to be strong faith in Chamberlain’s declaration of peace, as the paper recorded that “a great air-raid drill was held in London” recently. It seemed that Chamberlain himself was uncertain about the peace, as he “urged Britain to look to her arms,” keeping military options at the ready.⁴¹ Very few appeared to believe that peace could last for very long.

Once Britain entered the war in 1939, the Munich Agreement looked like a failure in foreign policy and Chamberlain’s dramatic speech about peace appeared laughable in hindsight. The negative perception of Chamberlain has persisted through present day. According to Nick Smart, Chamberlain did not give Hitler the appearance that “Britain meant business.” He mistakenly thought that “Hitler would respond positively” if “more concessions” were made, as seen in his negotiations at Munich. Chamberlain refused to listen to the Foreign Office and others who warned him that Hitler’s “word could not be trusted,” and he hesitated to use intimidation to push Hitler “into a corner.” Smart concluded that Chamberlain “was no analyst”

⁴⁰Ferdinand Kuhn Jr., “Peace with Honor, Says Chamberlain,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 1, 1938, p. 1 and 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed April 20, 2020.

⁴¹“The News of the Week in Review: The New Europe,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 9, 1938, p. 71, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed April 20, 2020.

and operated more on “instinct.”⁴² Dominic D. P. Johnson also argued that “Chamberlain held positive illusions about Hitler’s intentions,” which prompted him to set off on a “dogged pursuit of an unlikely peace.”⁴³ Johnson added that after Munich, Chamberlain defended his appeasement “in spite of mounting evidence” that showed Hitler was not deterred and that “the bulk of the historical evidence” has indicated that the policy was somewhat “unrealistic.”⁴⁴

Other historians argued that Chamberlain has been wrongly condemned for his role in the Munich Agreement, as well as his speech upon his return to London afterwards. Robert J. Beck declared that the characterization of Chamberlain as an “umbrella-toting utopian” was unfair.⁴⁵ Beck acknowledged “Chamberlain’s naivete” but also pointed out that the situation was more complex than other historians have realized.⁴⁶ President Franklin D. Roosevelt told Chamberlain that the United States would not intervene if war broke out in September of 1938, and Chamberlain feared the possibility that Germany and Japan would team up against Britain.⁴⁷ It was also unclear whether Chamberlain could count on the “support of the entire [British] Empire.”⁴⁸ Questioning whether he had enough support, Chamberlain hesitated to make any move that would bring Britain into war. Stephen Rock cited similar reasoning for why Chamberlain did not abandon his appeasement policy. As seen in several of the newspaper articles, Rock observed that “memories of the First World War [were] still fresh,” reminding the

⁴²Nick Smart, “Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement,” *History Review*, no. 65 (December 2009): 20–25, accessed on Academic Search Premier on April 28, 2020.

⁴³Dominic D. P. Johnson, “The Munich Crisis” in *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions*, 86 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), accessed through JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvk12rcg.6.

⁴⁴Ibid., 93.

⁴⁵Robert J. Beck, “Munich’s Lessons Reconsidered,” *International Security* 14, no. 2 (1989): 169, www.jstor.org/stable/2538858.

⁴⁶Ibid., 170.

⁴⁷Ibid., 175-178.

⁴⁸Ibid., 174.

fearful public of the mass slaughter that had resulted years earlier.⁴⁹ Rock stated that appeasement had worked with “Britain’s enemies in the past” and added that the British government did not yet have a “clear” idea of “Germany’s objectives” for the future.⁵⁰ Rock agreed with Chamberlain’s critics, however, that the greatest problem with Chamberlain’s appeasement policy was that it “was dominated by wishful thinking,” and that Hitler could see resolutions like the Munich Agreement as “signs of weakness.”⁵¹

Chamberlain saw the Munich Agreement as proof that “conciliation and diplomacy” were “the best weapons to prevent war.”⁵² Some historians have harshly judged Chamberlain for his erroneous prediction that he had brought “peace for our time” and they have argued that he failed in his approach to appease Hitler. Other historians have raised arguments that showed Chamberlain had no other policy to follow under the complex situation. In the end, Chamberlain gave the British people temporary peace of mind rather than the long-enduring peace that they wanted.

⁴⁹Stephen R. Rock, “British Appeasement of Germany” in *Appeasement in International Politics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 51, accessed via ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵⁰Ibid., 52.

⁵¹Ibid., 65; Ibid., 67.

⁵²McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement*, 72.

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