

# Appeasement: The Struggle to Avoid War

*The Treaty of Versailles, made in 1919 at the end of the First World War, was intended to make a lasting peace. Many people felt that the Treaty had caused terrible resentment in Germany on which Hitler had been able to play in order to achieve power. The government believed that Hitler and Germany had genuine grievances, but that if these could be met ('appeased') Hitler would be satisfied and become less demanding.*



After the First World War, the map of Europe was re-drawn and several new countries were formed. As a result of this, three million Germans found themselves now living in part of Czechoslovakia. When Adolf Hitler came to power, he wanted to unite all Germans into one nation.

In September 1938 he turned his attention to the three million Germans living in part of Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland. Sudeten Germans began protests and provoked violence from the Czech police. Hitler claimed that 300 Sudeten Germans had been killed. This was not actually the case, but Hitler used it as an excuse to place German troops along the Czech border.

Hitler was open about his refusal to accept many of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Soon after he became Chancellor of Germany in 1933 he began to re-arm the country, breaking the restrictions placed on the German armed forces. In 1936, he sent German troops into the Rhineland and in March 1938 he joined Germany and Austria. Czechoslovakia was the logical next step for his aggression and German Nazis in the Sudetenland were told to stir up the trouble that led to the crisis examined here. Edvard Benes, the leader of Czechoslovakia, was concerned that if Germany was given the Sudetenland, most of the Czech defenses would be handed over to the Germans and they would be left defenseless.

In Munich on September 29, 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain secured an international agreement that Hitler should have the Sudetenland in exchange for Germany making no further demands for land in Europe. Chamberlain said it was "Peace for our time". Hitler said he had 'No more territorial demands to make in Europe.' On October 1, German troops occupied the Sudetenland: Hitler had got what he wanted without firing a shot.



Six months later, in March 1939, German troops took over the rest of Czechoslovakia. Poland seemed to be the next most likely victim of Nazi aggression and Chamberlain made an agreement with the Poles to defend them in Germany invaded. Hitler did not think Britain would go to war over Poland, having failed to do so over Czechoslovakia. He sent his soldiers into Poland in September 1939. The same day, Britain declared war on Germany.

Although people in Britain were relieved that war had been averted, many now wondered if appeasement was the best decision. They did not think it would stop Hitler, but simply delayed the war, rather than prevented it. Even while Chamberlain was signing the Munich Agreement, he was appropriating a huge increase in spending to Britain's armament in preparation for war. He must have known from the situation outlined by the military council that Czechoslovakia was lost, and that war was bound to come.

Chamberlain struggled on as Prime Minister until May 1940 when he resigned and Winston Churchill, a bitter critic of appeasement, took over. Chamberlain died in November 1940; however he continued to be vilified for appeasement in general and for his actions in September 1938 in particular long after his death and the conclusion of the war.