

Germany to Czechoslovakia, 24-9-1938

Following Austria's *Anschluss* (see ultimatum Germany to Austria, 11-3-1938) Germany's Chancellor Adolf Hitler set his sights on Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Sudetenland – with a population of somewhere between 800,000 and 1 million inhabitants – was host to a large German speaking minority.¹ Sovereignty over Sudetenland had been allocated to Czechoslovakia in the Versailles Treaty. Nearly two decades later Hitler intended for Sudetenland to secede from Czechoslovakia and join Germany. For many years Hitler had been speaking openly about his intentions. The situation grew increasingly tense, however, throughout 1938. In May the movement of German forces close to the Czechoslovak border prompted the partial mobilisation of over 180,000 Czechoslovak reserve forces. Even if the German movements turned out to be exercises rather than preparations for an invasion, Great Britain warned Germany not to invade Czechoslovakia.² In early September the Czechoslovak government agreed in principle to self determination for Sudetenland. It also agreed that France and Great Britain would act on her behalf as interlocutors with Germany.³ The following week Hitler, in his Nuremberg speech, warned the government of Czechoslovakia of serious consequences if it did not follow up on its promises of self determination for Sudetenland.⁴ The British Prime Minister Chamberlain then requested to meet with Hitler. Hitler and Chamberlain met at Berchtesgaden on 15 September. Here Hitler demanded the German annexation of Sudetenland territory. In return Germany would not invade Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain took Hitler's demands to the Czechoslovak government. The latter consulted with the British and French governments and received British and French assurances of military support in case of German aggression. It then gave its consent on 21 September.⁵ Hitler and Chamberlain reconvened at Godesberg on 22 September.⁶ Czechoslovakia meanwhile felt so threatened that it decided to mobilise its forces on the evening of 23 September.⁷ At Godesberg in the early hours of 24 September 1938 Hitler presented the British Prime Minister Chamberlain with the Godesberg Memorandum for transmission to the Czechoslovak Government. The Memorandum contained a series of demands much stronger than agreed upon in Berchtesgaden. It amounted to an ultimatum in that it stipulated a series of demands (the full evacuation of Sudetenland by Czechoslovakia leaving behind everything of value), added a threat of military force (invasion), and included a time limit for compliance (28 September). Chamberlain expressed his exasperation exclaiming 'this is an ultimatum' which was denied by Hitler. Hitler then postponed the deadline to 1 October.⁸ Chamberlain agreed to take the terms of the *Memorandum* to the Czechoslovak foreign minister who received them on 24 September at 6:30 p.m. The next day the Czechoslovak Government reported to the Great Britain that

It is a de facto ultimatum of the sort usually presented to a vanquished nation and not a proposition to a sovereign State which has shown the greatest possible readiness to make sacrifices for the appeasement of Europe [...] My Government wish me to declare in all solemnity that Herr Hitler's demands in their present form are absolutely and unconditionally unacceptable to my Government. Against these new and cruel demands my

¹ Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 387-449. esp.: 401-404; 437-47.

² Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 99-100.

³ David Vital, 'Czechoslovakia and the Powers, September 1938', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 4 (1 October 1966): 40.

⁴ 'Herr Hitler's Speech of September 12, 1938', *Bulletin of International News* 15, no. 19 (24 September 1938): 806-7. See also Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 108-10.

⁵ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 439-46; esp. 443.

⁶ Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 112.

⁷ Igor Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Benes in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 235-38.

⁸ Lukes, 238.

Government feel bound to make their utmost resistance, and we shall do so, God helping. The nation of St. Wenceslas, John Hus and Thomas Masaryk will not be a nation of slaves. We rely upon the two great Western democracies, whose wishes we have followed against our own judgment, to stand by us in our hour of trial.⁹

This was the official reply of the Czech Government. The next day the British government communicated the Czechoslovak rejection of the ultimatum to Germany. France meanwhile had ordered the mobilisation of its forces. Great Britain followed with the partial mobilisation of the British fleet on 27 September.¹⁰ The Czechoslovak and the Soviet government kept in close contact throughout the crisis. Great Britain and France continued consultations in London but also held lines of communications open with Hitler in an attempt to forestall war. Hitler, upon receiving the reply on 26 September, this time from a British diplomat, restated his terms and demanded a positive response before 2 p.m. 28 September, declaring that otherwise war would follow.¹¹ Hitler also stressed his intent to annex Sudetenland in his Sportpalast speech on the evening of that day.¹² On 27 September, Chamberlain once more attempted to convince Hitler to choose a peaceful settlement. Through Italy's involvement, it was decided to convene at Munich with the governments of France and Italy to discuss a solution.¹³ The government of Great Britain told the Czechoslovak government that if Czechoslovakia would not comply with Hitler's terms, it:

Must result in Bohemia being overrun and nothing that any Power can do will prevent this fate for your own country and people and this remains true whatever may be the ultimate issue of a possible world war. His Majesty's Government cannot take the responsibility of advising you what you should do but they consider that this information should be in your hands at once.¹⁴

Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were not invited to the conference. The government of the United States decided to stay on the sidelines.¹⁵ The solution agreed upon at Munich, from 29-30 September, laid down the cession of the Sudetenland within ten days, under international supervision.¹⁶ Chamberlain upon his return to Great Britain, defended the agreement as marking a great success in the relations between Germany and Great Britain as it symbolized 'the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.'¹⁷ He solemnly declared there will be 'peace for our time'.¹⁸ Without any help forthcoming either from the French or the British government or from the Soviet Union, and after considerable international pressure, the Czechoslovak government decided to comply, reasoning that 'it is necessary to preserve the nation, and that any other decision is to-day impossible.' It also declared 'its protest against the decisions which were taken unilaterally and without our participation.'¹⁹ Or in the words of French foreign minister they did so 'with the

⁹ Lukes, 239.

¹⁰ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 449.

¹¹ Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler*, 243.

¹² Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 451.

¹³ Weinberg, 455.

¹⁴ Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 138.

¹⁵ Melvin Small and Otto Feinstein, *Appeasing Fascism: Articles from the Wayne State University Conference on Munich After Fifty Years* (University Press of America, 1991), 66.

¹⁶ 'The Avalon Project : Munich Pact 9/29/38', accessed 10 August 2015, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/munich1.asp>.

¹⁷ *Neville Chamberlain Returns from Germany with the Munich Agreement*, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SetNFqcaYeA>.

¹⁸ BBC, '1938: "Peace for Our Time" - Chamberlain', *BBC*, 17 September 2003, sec. 30, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/30/newsid_3115000/3115476.stm.

¹⁹ Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 446.

highest self-abnegation, and in a spirit to which we must pay tribute.²⁰ President Beneš resigned the next week. Hitler had received what he wanted without firing a single shot.²¹

²⁰ Government of France, 'The French Yellow Book', 1939.

²¹ 'UK Cabinet Meeting Minutes - CAB/23/95' (National Archives, 30 September 1938), <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-23-95-cc-47-38-11.pdf>; Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 121–22.