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Lesson 19

Munich: Peace in Our Time

Objective

- To develop an understanding of the reasons why Europeans believed that the doctrine of appeasement would avoid a new war

Notes to the Teacher

France came to the peace conference at Versailles with one aim: to punish Germany for its aggression. France accomplished its goal. The loss of the African and Pacific colonies, a severe limitation on German military forces, and heavy gold indemnities reduced Germany to a shadow of its former self. Additional financial losses, which resulted from the worldwide Great Depression, plunged Germany further into despair.

Over centuries, the boundaries of European states changed regularly. The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires had molded multiple ethnic groups under a single flag, often using force to maintain peace. At Versailles, one of the actions of the victors was to create two artificial states: Yugoslavia, which was composed of small kingdoms in the Balkans that for centuries had been under the control of the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman Empires, and Czechoslovakia, which joined into a single state Slovakia and Bohemia, both of which had been controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The mix in Yugoslavia was very volatile. Roman Catholics in Croatia and Orthodox Christians and Muslims in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro had been traditional enemies for centuries. Russia looked upon itself as the traditional protector of the Slavs living in the Balkans.

The western portion of Czechoslovakia, called Sudetenland, was home to thousands of ethnic Germans. Ethnic Germans also resided in Poland, Denmark, Hungary, and along Germany's border with France. When Adolf Hitler took power in 1933, he promised to create a "greater" Germany by combining the countries of Germany and Austria, and to return lands and citizens lost to Germany as a result of Versailles, and he turned his attention to Czechoslovakia and Austria.

Many citizens of Europe believed that the Germans had been treated badly after the First World War and had genuine grievances, that needed to be addressed. When Germany began demanding the return of lands taken as a result of the treaty, European leaders shuddered at the thought of another war so quickly on the heels of World War I. Neville Chamberlain, Great Britain's Conservative Prime Minister attempted to forestall another war by promoting a foreign policy of appeasement.

In February 1938, the chancellor of Austria, Kurt von Schuschnigg, and Hitler met at Berchtesgarden, where Hitler demanded concessions for the Austrian Nazi Party. Schuschnigg refused and resigned as chancellor, which was exactly what Hitler wanted. Schuschnigg's replacement, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, promptly allowed the German army to occupy Austria and united the country with Germany. This Anschluss had been forbidden under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and European leaders encouraged the League of Nations to enforce the treaty. Unfortunately, the League was powerless to stop Hitler. Soon he demanded the return of Sudetenland to German control, and Great Britain supported this action.

On September 29, 1938, Hitler, Chamberlain, Eduard Daladier, the prime minister of France, and Benito Mussolini, the Fascist dictator of Italy, met and signed the Munich Agreement, which gave Sudetenland to Germany. The president of Czechoslovakia, Eduard Benes, and the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, had not been invited to participate in the agreement. Benes was simply ordered to abide by it and was informed that Great Britain was not willing to go to war over the issue of Sudetenland. Hitler demanded that Stalin be excluded in an attempt to keep the three Western powers from joining with the Soviets against him. Hitler promised not to make any further territorial demands in Europe.

The Munich Agreement was popular with most Europeans. They believed that the treaty had prevented another war with Germany. However, critics quickly attacked the agreement, pointing out that Hitler could not be

trusted and that there was nothing to stop Germany from seizing additional lands. Their arguments were to be prophetic. In March 1939, the German army moved into and seized the rest of Czechoslovakia in direct violation of the Munich Agreement.

In this lesson, students read and discuss the Munich Agreement as a class activity. They read and determine the main ideas in an individually assigned document excerpt that deals with the Munich crisis. Students summarize and share the main ideas with the class, and then, using the information from all the excerpts, write an editorial either in support of or in opposition to the principle of appeasement. Note that **Handout 33** is to be assigned as homework prior to the first class session.

Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 33**. Have students read it for homework.
2. Explain that the greatest fear held by most Europeans was that the continent would be plunged into another devastating war. Many refused to believe or failed to realize the threat presented by Nazi Germany. Stress that many Europeans believed that the Versailles Peace Treaty was unfair to the Germans. Many believed that demands for return of the Sudetenland, a territory occupied by ethnic Germans that was located within the borders of the newly created Czechoslovakia, was justified. Stress that Czechoslovakia was not consulted when the Munich Agreement was reached, just as the areas that were joined together to form the country were not consulted at Versailles. Using the following questions, discuss the main points of the agreement.
 - Who was to be evacuated? (*all non-Germans*)
 - Who was to handle the evacuation? (*the United Kingdom, France, and Italy*)
 - Why do you think a plebiscite needed to be held? (*The territories were to be given a choice about joining Germany.*)
 - When was the evacuation to take place? (*six months from the date of the plebiscite*)

3. Distribute **Handout 34**, and assign one excerpt to each student. In a small class several excerpts might be assigned to each student. In a larger class, pairs of students might be assigned one or more excerpts. Have students determine the main idea for their excerpt. Remind them that they will share the main ideas with other students. Review responses.

Suggested Responses:

Document 1—*Appeasement was not an act in the spirit of the Covenant of the League of Nations and rewarded saber rattling and aggression.*

Document 2—*British Foreign policy was to protect British interests, maintain peace in Europe, and have friendly relations with other nations.*

Document 3—*It was possible to peacefully transfer power from the Czechs to Germany. This transfer was the end of German territorial claims in Europe.*

Document 4—*The Czechoslovakian government was unable to keep the peace, and Germany had to step in to protect the interests of Germans living within the country.*

Document 5—*German troops had seized Bohemia and Moravia to disarm terror gangs, protect the people, and restore order prior to the installation of a new German-led government.*

Document 6—*Before, Germany had occupied Czechoslovakian territory in which a large percentage of the population were of German ethnicity; now Germany was occupying territory that was Czech, resulting in an international disturbance.*

Document 7—*Peace has been accomplished, and there will be no war in Europe.*

Document 8—*If Great Britain had told Hitler to stay out of Czechoslovakia and backed it with force, Germany would probably have backed down. But war was not what the British people wanted.*

Document 9—*Appeasement encouraged people around the world to believe that Great Britain would back down in the face of aggression.*

Document 10—*Some reports supported the idea that Hitler planned to occupy the rest of Czechoslovakia, but British diplomats in Berlin believed that he would be satisfied with the Sudetenland.*

Document 11—*There was a need to consult the French before any decision was made. There will never be peace in Europe as long as Nazism exists.*

Document 12—*Germany believed that Great Britain would not respond to aggression. The only answer to German aggression was full mobilization. Great Britain needed to come to the aid of the Czechs because it was the honorable thing to do. War after Czechoslovakia was occupied by Germany would be dishonorable.*

Document 13—*France had failed to support her ally against German aggression, and appeasement encouraged France to take this course.*

Document 14—*Fear struck the Jewish community as German occupiers imposed laws which seized Jewish funds, ordered Jews to stop practicing law, and imprisoned agitators and opposition figures. Jews began to demand the right to emigrate to other countries.*

Document 15—*Only leftists openly opposed appeasement. Conservative members of Parliament abstained from voting rather than openly oppose the government and give Germany the idea that the British government was weak. Appeasement was supported by the majority of the British people, who feared another war.*

4. To conclude, have students use the information from all the excerpts to write an editorial either in support of or in opposition to the principle of appeasement. Have student share their editorials.

The Munich Agreement

Directions: Read the document below, and be prepared for class discussion.

Agreement Reached on 29 September 1938 between Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy

Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy, taking into consideration the agreement, which has been already reached in principle for the cession to Germany of the Sudeten German territory, have agreed on the following terms and conditions governing the said cession and the measures consequent thereon, and by this agreement they each hold themselves responsible for the steps necessary to secure its fulfillment:

1. The evacuation will begin on October 1st.
2. The United Kingdom, France, and Italy agree that the evacuation of the territory shall be completed by October 10th without any existing installations having been destroyed, and that the Czechoslovak Government will be held responsible for carrying out the evacuation without damage to the said installations. . . .
5. The international commission referred to in paragraph 3 [Germany, United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Czechoslovakia] will determine the territories in which a plebiscite is to be held. These territories will be occupied by international bodies until the plebiscite has been completed. The same commission will fix the conditions in which the plebiscite is to be held, taking as a basis the conditions of the Saar plebiscite. The commission will also fix a date, not later than the end of November, on which the plebiscite will be held. . . .
7. There will be a right of option into and out of the transferred territories, the option to be exercised within six months from the date of this agreement. A German-Czechoslovak commission shall determine the details of the option, consider ways of facilitating the transfer of the population and settle questions of principle arising out of the said transfer.

Avoiding the Inevitable

Directions: Read the assigned excerpt, and summarize the main ideas. Be prepared to share your summary with the class.

Document 1

To avoid a problematic war today and receive in return a certain and large-scale war tomorrow—moreover, at the price of assuaging the appetites of insatiable aggressors and of the destruction or mutilation of sovereign States—is not to act in the spirit of the Covenant of the League of Nations. To grant bonuses for sabre-rattling and recourse to arms for the solution of international problems—in other words, to reward and encourage aggressive super-imperialism—is not to act in the spirit of the Briand-Kellogg Pact.

—Maxim Litinov

Document 2

On a former occasion I described [English] foreign policy as being based upon three principles—first upon the protection of British interests . . . secondly on the maintenance of peace, and, as far as we can influence it, the settlement of differences by peaceful means and not by force; and thirdly the promotion of friendly relations with other nations who are willing to reciprocate our friendly feelings and who will keep those rules of international conduct with which there can be neither security nor stability. . . .

—Neville Chamberlain

Document 3

. . . [I]f only time were allowed, it ought to be possible for the arrangement for transferring the territory that the Czech Government has agreed to give to Germany to be settled by agreement under conditions which would assure fair treatment to the population concerned. . . .

. . . Herr Hitler feels that he must champion other Germans, and [has expressed] his indignation that grievances have not been met before this. . . . [A]fter this Sudeten German question is settled, that is the end of Germany's territorial claims in Europe.

—Neville Chamberlain

Document 4

For a millennium the territories of Bohemia and Moravia belonged to the living space (*Lebensraum*) of the German people. Violence and stupidity (*Unverstand*) tore them arbitrarily from their ancient historic setting and at last through their inclusion in the artificial construction of Czechoslovakia created a hotbed of continual unrest. . . . For the Czechoslovak State and its authorities had not been able to organize on a reasonable basis the common life of the groups of people arbitrarily united within it. . . . The Czechoslovak State has thus proved its inability to live its own internal life and in consequence has now in fact fallen into dissolution.

But the German Reich cannot tolerate permanent disturbances in these territories which are of such decisive importance, alike for its own calm and security, as well as for the general welfare and the general peace.

Sooner or later the Power which through its history and its geographical position is most intimately interested and affected would be bound to suffer the most serious consequences. It is therefore but to obey the dictate of self-preservation if the German Reich is resolved decisively to intervene in order to restore the foundations of a reasonable Central European order and to issue such regulations as are the natural result of such a decision, for through the history of its millennial past the Reich has already proved that thanks to the greatness and also to the characteristics of the German people it alone is qualified to solve these problems. . . .

—Adolf Hitler

Document 5

Czechoslovakia has ceased to exist. . . . Hourly the number of oppressed and persecuted people crying for help is increasing. . . .

In order definitely to remove this menace to peace and to create the conditions for a necessary new order in this living space, I have today resolved to allow German troops to march into Bohemia and Moravia. They will disarm the terror gangs and the Czech forces supporting them, and protect the lives of all who are menaced. Thus they will lay the foundations for introducing a fundamental reordering of affairs which will be in accordance with a thousand-year history and will satisfy the practical needs of the German and Czech peoples.

—Adolf Hitler

Document 6

. . . Hitherto the German Government in extending the area of their military control have defended their action by the contention that they were only incorporating in the Reich neighboring masses of people of German race. Now for the first time they are effecting a military occupation of territory inhabited by people with whom they have no racial connection. These events cannot fail to be a cause of disturbance to the international situation. . . .

—Neville Chamberlain

Document 7

Be glad in your hearts. Give thanks to your God. People of Britain, your children are safe. Your husbands and your sons will not march to war. Peace is a victory for all mankind. If we must have a victor, let us choose Chamberlain. For the Prime Minister's conquests are mighty and enduring—millions of happy homes and hearts relieved of their burden. To him the laurels. And now let us go back to our own affairs. We have had enough of those menaces, conjured up from the Continent to confuse us.

—Editorial in *The Daily Express*

Document 8

I have little doubt that if we had then told Hitler bluntly to go back, his power for future and larger mischief would have been broken. But, leaving entirely aside the French, there was no section of British public opinion that would not have been directly opposed to such action in 1936. To go to war with Germany for walking into their own backyard, which was how the British people saw it, at a time moreover when you were actually discussing with them the dates and conditions of their right to

resume occupation, was not the sort of thing people could understand. So that moment which, I would guess, offered the last effective chance of securing peace without war, went by.

—Lord Halifax

Document 9

I do not believe that we can make progress in European appeasement if we allow the impression to gain currency abroad that we yield to constant pressure. I am certain in my own mind that progress depends above all on the temper of the nation, and that temper must find expression in a firm spirit. This spirit I am confident is there. Not to give voice it is I believe neither fair to this country nor to the world.

—Anthony Eden

Document 10

On the one hand, reports are daily received in great numbers, . . . [declaring] positively that Herr Hitler has made up his mind to attack Czechoslovakia and then to proceed further East. He is convinced that the operation can be effected so rapidly that it will be all over before France or Great Britain could move.

On the other hand, Your Majesty's representative in Berlin has steadily maintained that Herr Hitler has not yet made up his mind to violence. He means to have a solution soon—this month—and if that solution, which must be satisfactory to himself, can be obtained peacefully, well and good. If not, he is ready to march.

—Neville Chamberlain

Document 11

. . . I thought we must have further time for discussion and that it would be better to take no decision until discussions with the French had taken place, lest they should be in a position to say that we had sold the pass without ever consulting them. . . .

. . . If I thought surrender would bring lasting peace I should be in favor of surrender, but I did not believe there would ever be peace in Europe so long as Nazism ruled in Germany. . . .

—Duff Cooper

Document 12

. . . I protested against this. I said that from what the Prime Minister had told us it appeared to me that the Germans were still convinced that under no circumstances would we fight, that there still existed one method, and one method only of persuading them to the contrary, and that was by instantly declaring full mobilisation. I said that I was sure that popular opinion would eventually compel us to go to the assistance of the Czechs; that hitherto we had been faced with the unpleasant alternatives of peace with dishonour or war. I now saw a third possibility, namely war with dishonour, by which I meant being kicked into the war by the boot of public opinion when those for whom we were fighting had already been defeated. . . .

—Duff Cooper

Document 13

For the French Government to leave her faithful ally Czechoslovakia to her fate was a melancholy lapse from which flowed terrible consequences. Not only wise and fair policy, but chivalry, honour, and sympathy for a small threatened people made an overwhelming concentration. Great Britain, who would certainly have fought if bound by treaty obligations, was nevertheless now deeply involved, and it must be recorded with regret that the British Government not only acquiesced but encouraged the French Government in a fatal course.

—Winston Churchill

Document 14

Prague, a sorrowing Prague, yesterday had its first day of German rule—a day in which the Czechs learned of the details of their subjection to Germany, and in which the Germans began their measures against the Jews and against those people who have “opened their mouths too wide.” Prague’s streets were jammed with silent pedestrians wandering about, looking out of the corners of their eyes at German soldiers carrying guns, at armoured cars, and at other military precautions. Some Czechs were seen turning up their noses at the Germans. Germans were everywhere. Bridges were occupied by troops and each bridge-head had a heavy machine-gun mounted on a tripod and pointing to the sky. Every twenty yards along the pavement two machine-guns were mounted facing each other.

Suicides have begun. The fears of the Jews grow. The funds of the Jewish community have been seized, stopping Jewish relief work. The Prague Bar Council has ordered all its “non-Aryan” members to stop practicing at once. The organisation for Jewish emigration has been closed. Hundreds of people stood outside the British Consulate shouting: “We want to get away!” This is only the beginning. According to an official spokesman of the German Foreign Office in Berlin last night, the Gestapo (secret police) will have rounded up hundreds of “harmful characters” within the next few days. So far about fifty to a hundred men have been put in local gaols. “There are certain centers of resistance which need to be cleaned up,” said the spokesman. “Also some people open their mouths too wide. Some of them neglected to get out in time. They may total several hundred thousand before we are through. Remember that Prague was a breeding-place for opposition to National Socialism.” The head of the Gestapo in Prague is reported to have been more definite: “We have ten thousand arrests to carry out.” Already, say Reuter’s correspondents, everyone seems to have an acquaintance who has disappeared.

—*The Manchester Guardian*

Document 15

All the press welcomed the Munich agreement as preferable to war with the solitary exception of Reynolds News, a Left-wing Socialist Sunday newspaper of small circulation (and, of course, the Communist Daily Worker). Duff Cooper, first lord of the admiralty, resigned and declared that Great Britain should have gone to war, not to save Czechoslovakia, but to prevent one country dominating the continent “by brute force.” No one else took this line in the prolonged Commons debate (3–6 October 1938). Many lamented British humiliation and weakness. All acquiesced. Some thirty

Conservatives abstained when Labour divided the house against the motion approving the Munich agreement; none voted against the government. The overwhelming majority of ordinary people, according to contemporary estimates, approved of what Chamberlain had done.

—A. J. P. Taylor

Sources: *Europe in Review: Readings and Sources since 1500*, ed. George L. Mosse (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964); *Aspects of Western Civilization: Problems and Sources in History*, vol. 2, ed. Perry M. Rogers (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1988); "Munich Agreement," *Spartacus Educational*, <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/2WWmunich.htm>> (8 July 2005); and "Appeasement," *Spartacus Educational*, <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/2WWappeasement.htm>> (8 July 2005).