

Towards the end of 1938 Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, along with the French Prime Minister, Mussolini and Hitler, signed an agreement that allowed Germany to incorporate a significant section of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland, into the Germany Reich. Representatives of the Czech government were not even in the room when the agreement was signed.

At the airport Chamberlain declared:

'This morning I had another meeting with the German Chancellor, Herr Hitler. Here is the paper which bears his name upon it as well as my own. Some of you, perhaps, have already heard what it contains, I would just like to read it to you: We, the German Fuhrer and Chancellor and the British Prime Minister have had a further meeting today, and are agreed in recognising that the question of Anglo-German relations is of the first importance for the two countries and for Europe. We regard the agreement signed last night and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again. We are resolved that the method of consultation shall be the method adopted to deal with any questions that may concern our two countries, and we are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible causes of difference, and thus contribute to assure the peace of Europe.'

For Chamberlain the agreement was apparently a great success for his policy of Appeasement (a policy which involved making concessions to Hitler, in the hope of avoiding war). The outbreak of the Second World War totally discredited the policy of Appeasement, and very quickly destroyed Chamberlain's reputation. Many explanations of Chamberlain's actions have focused on personal failings, in particular his limited understanding of foreign affairs.

*Is this enough? Does this approach explain why cheering crowds lined the road back to London from the airport, when Chamberlain arrived? What were people thinking? Can we know?*



NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN - (1869-1940). English statesman. Prime Minister Chamberlain, upon his return to England on September 30, 1938. / Credit: The Granger Collection / Universal Images Group / Copyright © The Granger Collection / For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit [www.britannica.co.uk/trial](http://www.britannica.co.uk/trial)

### Tasks:

Read the sources carefully and answer the questions provided.

1. Sources 5-7 are works of fiction. Can such material be used as an historical source? Do they enhance our view of public attitudes/concerns in the 1930s?
2. Taken together, do the sources modify the common view that Chamberlain was a foolish old man?
3. Do the sources enhance your understanding of the fears that people had in 1930s Britain of what a new war might mean? Explain your answer.

**Source 1: Speech by Stanley Baldwin, leader of the Conservative party 1922 - 1937.**

Up to the time of the last War civilians were exempt from the worst perils of war. They suffered sometimes from hunger, sometimes from the loss of sons and relatives serving in the Army. But now, in addition to this, they suffered from the constant fear not only of being killed themselves, but, what is perhaps worse for a man, of seeing his wife and children killed from the air. These feelings exist among the ordinary people throughout the whole of the civilized world, but I doubt if many of those who have that fear realise one or two things with reference to the cause of that fear.

I think it is well also for the man in the street to realize that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through. The only defence is offence, which means that you will have to kill women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves.

- a) What do you think would be the impact of this speech, made in the House of Commons, but widely reported, on a British audience in the early 1930s?

**Source 2: J. B. S. Haldane, *A.R.P.* (1938) Haldane was a Cambridge-based scientist. ARP stands for Air Raid Protection. Here Haldane is describing what he thought would happen at the beginning of any future war.**

We may therefore expect an attack by successive waves of several hundred aeroplanes which could drop their bombs simultaneously. A bombing aeroplane can carry a load which varies from half a ton upwards. But we may take 1.5 tons as an average. Thus a squadron of 270 planes could drop 400 tons of bombs, or nearly double the total weight dropped in Britain during the whole of the last war, in half a minute. This would probably kill about 8,000 people and wound some 15,000. And this could be repeated several times a day, provided the enemy were willing to stand the heavy losses of aeroplanes involved. In fact the 'knock-out blow' might kill 50,000 to 100,000 Londoners.

Source 3: Beverley Nichols, *Cry Havoc*.

*(First published, July 1933; second impression, July 1933; third impression, August 1933; fourth impression, October 1933; fifth impression, November 1933; sixth impression, January 1934; seventh impression, September 1934; eighth impression, February 1935; re-issued in Florin Books, July 1935; reprinted, July 1935; reprinted, December 1935; reprinted, June 1936).*

In the most recent Defence of London Air Manoeuvres, out of a total of 250 aeroplanes which took part in a night attack on London, only sixteen were even discovered by searchlights let alone shot down. And it must be remembered that even this meagre proportion was arrived at when the defensive parties were on the alert and prepared for any emergency.

Even if the defensive forces of London were trebled, i.e. even if one in every five of an attacking air force were brought to the ground, what hope would the population of London have? If the hostile air fleet consisted of only 250 aeroplanes, 200 would be left free to carry on their work of destruction.

Professor Haldane says that 1,000 aeroplanes would be needed to cause a really efficient holocaust. Nearly every other expert puts the number at 100, or lower. And this is an occasion where I find myself reluctantly on the side of the big battalions.

There is a mass of expert corroboration on my desk at this moment. Turning up the first paper my hand touches, I find a statement by the Earl of Halsbury, K.C, who was formerly Assistant Inspector of High Explosives, and who has made a study of modern gas warfare. Here it is:

*'Mustard gas is the most deadly of known gases. In an area, say, Richmond to Barking, and from Finchley to Streatham, an effective lethal dose would be only forty-two tons. In twelve hours every man woman and child in that area might fail to live.'*

Since one RAF bomber can now carry two tons of bombs, twenty planes could do this work very easily. More evidence? Very well. It was recently stated by General Crozier in The Times, that:

*'During the Great War 380 tons of bombs were dropped in and around London. That quantity could now be delivered in less than 12 hours.'*

- b) Nichols was born in 1898, and had served in a non-combat unit during the First World War. What is significant about this extract, and supporting information, to this topic?

Source 4: Published in the *Mass Observation collection Britain (1939)*, Penguin Special. These short extracts were collected during the Munich Crisis of 1938.

Wife and mother, 42: *'I have been collecting poisons for some time with guile and cunning. I have sufficient to give self, husband and all the children a lethal dose. I can remember the last war. I don't want to live through another or the children either. I shan't tell them, I shall just do it.'*

Man of 45: *'...I'd rather see my two boys dead. I'd poison them if I thought it was coming.'*

Woman of 50: *'I'd rather see my girl, who is my only one, killed outright than suffer it.'*

Woman of 33, two children: *'I want to see my children dead before I am if there is to be a war, and I'll see that they are if they bomb here.'*

Woman of 35: *'I'd rather see the men dead by any means than to think of them lying blown to bits...'*

- c) 'Mass Observation' was an independent body that conducted survey among the general public. Do the extracts tell you anything about British perceptions of a future war?

Source 5: Graham Greene, *The Confidential Agent (1939)*

A pale winter sun shone, and the scarlet buses stood motionless all down Oxford Street: there was a traffic block. What a mark, he thought, for enemy planes. It was always about this time that they came over. But the sky was empty - or nearly empty. One winking glittering little plane turned and dived on the pale clear sky, drawing in puffy clouds, a slogan: 'Keep Warm with Ovo'.

Source 6: George Orwell, *Coming Up For Air (1939)*.

The train was running along an embankment. A little below us you could see the roofs of the houses stretching on and on, the little red roofs where the bombs are going to drop, a bit lighted up at this moment because a ray of sunshine was catching them. Funny how we keep thinking about bombs. Of course there's no question that it's coming soon. You can tell how close it is by the cheer-up stuff they're talking about in the newspapers. I was reading a piece in the News Chronicle the other day where it said that bombing planes can't do any damage nowadays. The anti-aircraft guns have got so good that the bomber has to stay at twenty thousand feet. The chap thinks, you notice, that if an aeroplane's high enough the bombs don't reach the ground.

**Source 7: Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1930).**

On a splintered stump in the biggest battlefield in the history of the world, Adam sat down and read a letter from Nina. It had arrived early the day before, but in the intensive fighting which followed he had not had a spare minute in which to open it.

*Doubting Hall,  
Aylesbury.*

*Dearest Adam*

*I wonder how you are. It is difficult to know what is happening because the papers say such odd things. Van. Has got a divine job making up all the war news, and he invented a lovely story about you the other day, how you'd saved hundreds of people's lives, and there's what they call a popular agitation saying why haven't you got the V.C. so probably you will have by now, isn't it amusing?*

*Ginger and I are very well. Ginger has a job in an office in Whitehall and wears a grand sort of uniform, and, my dear, I'm going to have a baby, isn't it too awful? But Ginger has quite made up his mind it's his, and is as pleased as anything, so that's all right. He's quite forgiven you about last Christmas, and say anyway you're doing your bit now, and in war time one lets bygones be bygones.*

*'Doubting is in hospital, did you know? Papa shows his film to the wounded and they adore it. I saw Mr. Benfleet, and he said how awful it was when one had given all one's life in the cause of culture to see everything swept away, and he's doing very well with his "Sword Unsheathed" series of war poets.*

*There's a new Government order that we have to sleep in gas masks because of the bombs, but no one does. They've put Archie in prison as an undesirable alien. Ginger saw to that, he's terrific about spies. I'm sick such a lot because of this baby, but everyone says it's patriotic to have babies in war time.*

*Lots of love, my angel, take care of your dear self  
N.*

He put it back in its envelope and buttoned it into his breast pocket. Then he took out a pipe, filled it and began to smoke. The scene all around him was one of unrelieved desolation; a great expanse of mud in which every visible object was burnt or broken. Sounds of firing thundered from beyond the horizon, and somewhere above the grey clouds there were aeroplanes. He had had no sleep for thirty-six hours. It was growing dark.

Presently he became aware of a figure approaching, painfully picking his way among the strands of barbed wire which strayed across the ground like drifting cobweb; a soldier clearly. As he came nearer Adam tightened his grip about his Huxdane-Halley bomb (for the dissemination of leprosy germs), and in this posture of mutual suspicion they met. Through the dusk Adam recognised the uniform of an English staff officer. He put the bomb back in his pocket and saluted.

The newcomer lowered his liquid-fire projector and raised his gas mask.