

The Outbreak of War



Young children from the East End setting out with belongings, gas mask box and name label, for an evacuation destination unknown to them, and often too to their teachers and parents. In the first few days of the war one and a half million children and helpers were evacuated from British cities. Many would be back by Christmas 1939, only to be sent away again in September 1940.

That day I was told that my cousin Alan was coming to collect me in his car to take me down to my uncle in Tunbridge Wells. I presumed it was for the weekend as usual, and I was excited – my cousins were all much older. But I had been made to take my gas mask, and only after a couple of days did it gradually dawn on me that I wouldn't be going home.

The seeds of another war were sown with the ending of World War I. The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 required Germany to give up territory, to reduce its armed forces drastically – from over 13 million men to 100,000, to 24 ships and no submarines or air force at all – and to pay war reparations. These amounted to 132 billion marks, nearly £300bn in today's money. The British government opposed such a huge sum, keen to regain Germany as a trading partner – and a buffer against Bolshevik Russia – but the Americans, and the French, who wanted to ensure that Germany was never again a threat, won the day. The British economist John Maynard Keynes regarded the total sum as excessively harsh, and deemed the Versailles treaty a 'Carthaginian peace', referring to the systematic humiliation and ultimately total obliteration of ancient Rome's deadly Mediterranean rivals. However, some modern historians are less critical of the financial terms, saying Germany was well able to pay.

The inevitable consequence, as it seems now, was that Germany felt belittled and harshly treated. Within a few years Germans were suffering unprecedented and catastrophic levels of inflation. Much of their industrial capacity was in the Rhineland, which remained under French occupation for 15 years, and in the 1920s Germany provided fertile conditions for a far-right takeover under Adolf Hitler in 1933. An astonishingly rapid re-armament began in earnest in 1935. In March 1938 the Germans marched into Austria ahead of a plebiscite on a projected union, or 'Anschluss', with Germany, which Hitler feared he might lose. In October the largely German-speaking area of Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland was annexed, with the resigned acceptance of Britain, France and the USA, and to the annoyance of the Soviet Union.

Arguments have raged ever since over the policy of 'appeasement' by the Western powers. The prevailing post-war view was that it was disastrous, and had simply encouraged Hitler to look beyond his initial desire to win back the territory lost at the Treaty of Versailles. It has to be remembered, though, that public and political opinion, shocked by the loss of life and destruction of World War I, had been strongly against any action that was likely to provoke another war on the same scale. This led to a highly influential pacifist movement. The debilitating Depression of the early 1930s had moreover hampered Britain's belated re-armament in response to Germany's. Some have argued that Chamberlain bought valuable time at Munich – from where he'd returned on 30 September waving the infamous 'Peace in our Time' letter – to mobilise our defences. Winston Churchill, speaking from the Conservative government backbenches where he'd languished for the previous ten years, was in no doubt, writing: 'England has been offered a choice between war and shame. She has chosen shame, and will get war.' This is what he said with typical rhetoric in the Commons during the debate on the Munich Agreement:

This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first fore-taste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless, by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour, we arise again and take our stand for freedom as in the olden time.