

Appeasement

On 30 September 1938 Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister landed in London having returned from the Munich Conference. At the airport he held up a piece of paper which he and Adolf Hitler had signed. He said that it was 'peace in our time'. But of course it was not. Did Chamberlain believe what he was saying or was he simply playing for time?

The purpose of this worksheet is to help you understand the Munich Crisis and the reasons why Neville Chamberlain acted the way he did in 1938.

Have a look at these two typical exam questions about the Munich agreement:

- Q1. Why did Neville Chamberlain sign the Munich agreement?
- Q2. How was Hitler able to occupy the Sudetenland in 1938?

So just what was Neville Chamberlain up to? Here are two explanations of Chamberlain's actions, which do you think is the more likely to be accurate? Look back at the sequence of events to give yourself some help. Which do you think is the better answer? Look at the examiner's view.

Shenna -

Chamberlain believed that Hitler could be trusted, when he said that he was not interested in any further conquests he really meant it. Chamberlain was taken in by Hitler at Munich, who had no intention of keeping any of his promises.

Gary -

Chamberlain realised that war was inevitable so he tried to put it off for as long as possible. He knew that Britain was unprepared for war and needed time to build up her defences, particularly the RAF.

The examiner's view.

Did you spot that Shenna thought that Chamberlain trusted Hitler, while Gary thought that he was playing for time. Both of these are good answers, but how can we find out which is more likely to be accurate?

The obvious thing to do is to read what Chamberlain himself had to say. The problem is that he appeared to change his mind. I will show you what I mean. Read these two sources, both are written by Chamberlain himself. In one of them Chamberlain appears to be saying that there was nothing that Britain could do, in the other he appears to be saying that he believed that Hitler could be trusted. Can you work out which is which? What do these sources tell you about Chamberlain's ideas?

Source A -

Chamberlain wrote this in his diary on 20 March 1938"..... nothing that France or we could do could possibly save Czechoslovakia from being overrun by the Germans if they wanted to do so.....I have therefore abandoned any idea of giving guarantees to Czechoslovakia."

Source B -

Chamberlain wrote this in a letter to his sister after meeting Hitler at Berchtesgaden in September 1938"I had established a certain confidence which was my aim...in spite of the hardness and ruthlessness I thought I saw in his face, I got the impression that here was a man who would be relied upon when he had given his word

So what did you make of these two sources? What can we work out about Chamberlain's ideas from them?

The Examiner's View

Did you spot that he seemed to expect trouble in Source A, but appeared to be prepared to trust Hitler in Source B. Why was there a difference do you think?

Did you notice that Source A was written early in the year, this was before Chamberlain had met Hitler, but Source B was written after he met Hitler in September. Could this help you to understand why Chamberlain seems to have changed his mind? Perhaps he changed his mind when he met Hitler face to face. Did you spot that Source A was taken from Chamberlain's diary, while Source B was written in a letter to Chamberlain's sister. Do you think that this could be important? Would you expect Chamberlain to have been expressing his true feelings in his diary or in a letter to his sister, or in both?

Now have a look at this answer written by Reujah, what do you think of it? Look at the examiner's view when you have read it.

Reujah

Chamberlain had obviously been thinking about Czechoslovakia early in the year and he seems to have made his mind up that there was nothing that he could do to defend it against Germany. This is clear from his diary. He was not prepared to get Britain involved in a war that we were not ready for. When Hitler made his demands on 12 September, Chamberlain reacted immediately and went to meet him in Berchtesgaden. He agreed to all of Hitler's demands and the letter to his sister suggests that he believed that he could do a deal with Hitler. He must have thought this or he would not have written to someone so close. The question remains as to what Chamberlain believed after the second and third visits to Germany. In public he appeared to believe that it was 'peace in our time', even though preparations for war were speeded up during the winter of 1938-9. When you look at him after his return to London from Munich, it certainly appears that he really believed that Hitler could be trusted.

Examiner's View

Reujah has looked carefully at the details at the top of the source, used the nature, origin and purpose of the source to help her in her answer, used her own knowledge of the events of September 1938, tried to reach a balanced judgement about the questions after looking at all of the sources.

Happening hints

Always look at the nature of the source, this will give you clues about whether you can believe it. Personal letters and diaries are more likely to be believable than speeches. It does not matter how you explain Chamberlain's actions, as long as you can back up your ideas with facts.

You could easily say that it is impossible to decide why Chamberlain acted the way he did, if you can explain why. Remember not to fall into the trap of saying a source is useless because you believe that the writer was not telling the truth. The two sources written by Chamberlain are very useful to show us how confused he was.