

Winston Churchill's
Wilderness Years

Growling In The Wilderness

President Obama's push to make a deal with Iran, permitting them to become nuclear, reminded some of the appeasement policies of Neville Chamberlain toward Adolf Hitler. And after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke on the matter before the US Congress, several political commentators called his speech "Churchillian." The reference was to Winston Churchill—and specifically to his "wilderness years," the years from 1929 to 1939 when he was out of power but composed some of his most eloquent and stirring speeches in the desperate attempt to awaken a sleeping world to the growing Nazi menace. The story of those years is a cautionary tale for our times.

He was the lone voice warning of
Nazi evil in a world that did not
want to hear about it

- By Yaakov Astor

September 30, 1938. A *British Airways* plane with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain aboard lands at Heston Aerodrome, an airfield west of London. A sizable crowd of reporters and admirers awaits the leader of the British Empire, who has just returned from Munich, Germany, anxious to hear what he has to say.

Was he able to negotiate a treaty with Hitler? The answer hinges on the promise Britain and her allies had made to Czechoslovakia, to protect her if threatened. The only apparent way to avoid war with Hitler is to renege on that promise, in effect allowing Nazi Germany to occupy the western part of Czechoslovakia without firing a shot.

Chamberlain disembarks with an unmistakable smile on his face and is escorted a few feet away where a bevy of microphones await. He eases forward, settles in front of a hushed crowd and tells them the good news:

The settlement of the Czechoslovakian problem, which has now been achieved is, in my view, only the prelude to a larger settlement in which all Europe may find peace [cheers]. This morning I had another talk with the German Chancellor, Herr Hitler, and here is the paper [Chamberlain waves a piece of paper and people cheer loudly] which bears his name upon it, as well as mine.

In other words, he has achieved what everyone hoped: an agreement with Hitler that avoids war, albeit at the cost of Czechoslovakia's sovereignty.

Chamberlain concludes his speech to a cacophony of cheers, "hurras" and "hear hears." People inch forward to shake his hand. Someone shouts, "Three cheers for Chamberlain," and everyone joins in as the PM smiles wider than ever and alights to a waiting car.

Later that day, he stands outside 10 Downing Street—headquarters of the British government and the official office of the prime minister—and again reads from the document. This time he adds a concluding



British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain showing the Anglo-German Declaration to a crowd at Heston Aerodrome on September 30, 1938.



Chamberlain smiling as he shakes hands with Hitler in Munich, September 30, 1938, after signing the agreement which allowed the Nazi dictator to take over parts of Czechoslovakia without firing a shot.

statement that more clearly than ever expresses what he believes he has achieved:

My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British prime minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honor. I believe it is peace for our time. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Go home and get a nice quiet sleep.

The line "Peace for our time" dominated the next day's headlines. One could almost hear the collective sigh of relief throughout Great Britain.

One person, however, was not relieved—Winston Churchill. Rising to speak before a

packed House of Commons a few days later, he didn't mince words:

I will begin by saying what everybody would like to ignore or forget but which must nevertheless be stated—namely that we have sustained a total and unmitigated defeat....

The utmost my Right Honorable Friend, the Prime Minister [Neville Chamberlain], has been able to secure by all his immense exertions... [many members of the House interrupt Churchill at this point and shout, "Peace! Peace! He's achieved peace!"] the utmost he has been able to gain for Czechoslovakia in the matters which were in dispute has been that the German dictator, instead of snatching the victuals from the table, has been content to have them served to him course by course....

[For] you will find that in a period of time... measured only by months, Czechoslovakia will be engulfed in the Nazi regime.... Her frontier forces are already in German hands, something France and Britain will bitterly regret when Herr Hitler chooses to look westward.

Silent, mournful, abandoned, broken, Czechoslovakia recedes into the darkness.... [That] is the most grievous consequence of what we have done and of what we have left undone in the last five years—five years of futile good intentions, five years of eager search for the line of least resistance, five years of uninterrupted retreat of British power, five years of neglect of our air defenses....

[The British people should] know that we have sustained a defeat without a war.... They should know that we have passed an awful milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged, and that these terrible words have been pronounced against the Western democracies: "Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting [quoting sefer Daniel, 5:26, predicting the downfall of the Babylonian Empire]."

And do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the

reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year—unless by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigor, we arise again and take our stand for freedom....

When Churchill finished and took his seat there was a tangible silence. Even the supporters of Neville Chamberlain sat reflective and morose.



Papers loudly and proudly announce Chamberlain's claim of "Peace for our time."



Hitler drives through the crowd in Cheb—a city in the Sudetenland that the British conceded to the Nazi dictator as part of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. October 1938.