WAR OF
The wait for the outcome of the Munich Conference and the looming spectre of another war hung over Britain in 1938. Its impact was deeply felt. Julie V. Gottlieb
After the annexation of Austria in March 1938, Hitler set his sights on the Sudetenland. This part of the newly formed Czechoslovakia had a majority German-speaking population. Hitler’s territorial ambitions threatened to propel Europe into another world war. Both the democracies and the dictatorships, as well as their respective populations, were materially and psychologically unprepared and ill-equipped for another total war. It was feared that this would be a war in which ‘the bomber will always get through’, making little distinction between civilian and soldier.

The British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain personified both the policy and the sensibility of appeasement, ready to make concessions to Germany to avoid war. In an act of personally courageous statesmanship, in the eyes of many, Chamberlain paid three visits to Hitler in a span of two weeks, the third on 29-30 September for the Four Powers Conference (Germany, Britain, Italy and France), where the Munich Agreement and the fate of Czechoslovakia was sealed. The Agreement, betraying and dismembering Czechoslovakia for the sake of what turned out to be only temporary peace, and Chamberlain’s triumphant return to London, when he declared his achievement as ‘peace for our time’, are some of the most memorable and memorably disconcerting moments in modern history.

This is a familiar story most often told from the point of view of the great and ‘guilty’ men who acted in the unfolding drama. But what about the masses? The anxiety, relief and shame of what was immediately dubbed the Munich Crisis had a profound impact on every stratum of the population. These weeks, and especially the four days from 25 September, saw a population in hand-wringing, edge-of-their-seats suspense, waiting to hear if it would be peace or war.

The Crisis received blanket coverage at the time and it has been the subject of intense debate and controversy among historians, politicians and scholars of international relations ever since. Insofar as the British public has been considered, it has been through the ways in which their leaders perceived the popular mood and sought to manufacture and manipulate it. However, the Munich Crisis had a profound effect on individuals and on the public collectively.

Dramatic unfolding

The emotionally transformative impact of the Munich Crisis was reinforced by the way it unfolded like a tragic-heroic drama, its theatricality and Shakespearian qualities scripted by the main protagonists themselves. Days after, on 2 October, Chamberlain wrote to his sister and confidant Hilda:

For me, I confess that it seemed only too possible that all the prayers of all the peoples of the world including Germany herself might break against the fanatical obstinacy of one man. I daresay Annie [his wife] has told you or will tell you of the birth of the last desperate snatch at the last tuft of grass on the very verge of the precipice. That the news of the deliverance should come to me in the very act of closing my speech in the House was a piece of drama that no work of fiction ever surpassed. The events of the next 48 hours entail terrific physical and mental exertions.

Following this moment of deliverance, as Chamberlain boarded the plane en route to Munich, he quoted Hotspur in Henry V: ‘Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety.’ Chamberlain’s heart-racing experience of the Munich Conference was experienced, at one remove but no less intensely, by millions.

While the dramatic unfolding of the Crisis was acted out by leading statesmen, almost everyone felt anxiety, tension and bewilderment followed either by cathartic relief or profound shame (or a confusing
“How well that faith in Mr. Chamberlain has been justified! His firmness of spirit and gentleness of heart have raised humanity to a new level.

“Refusing to bow to fatigue, refusing to give way to discouragement, refusing to be intimidated by opposition or ridicule, he went relentlessly on until his spirit stood alone between the waiting armies of the two sides.”

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Previous spread: ‘The Masked Council’, members of Broadstairs Council conduct a gas drill, 29 November 1938.

Neville Chamberlain waves to spectators in Germany on his way to the Four Powers Conference, 28 September 1938.
combination of the two). ‘That terrible waiting for a Yes or No, with nerves torn to shreds, was like those moments in July 1914 all over again,’ Stefan Zweig recalled. Although a Jewish writer in exile in London from his native Austria – which had been annexed by Hitler only months before – even Zweig was overcome with relief and admitted that ‘everyone who lived through those three days in England felt that they were wonderful while they lasted’.

As the war veteran, classical scholar and crisis diarist F.L. Lucas put it: ‘The Crisis seems to have filled the world with nervous breakdowns. Or perhaps the Crisis itself was only one more nervous break-down of a world driven by the killing pace of modern life and competition into ever acuter neurasthenia.’

Indeed, because the September Crisis was all-consuming, in turn, the popular enthusiasm played its part in either emboldening or enervating the main protagonists. While Chamberlain took the scenes of public adulation and the flood of more than 20,000 ‘Crisis letters’ of thanks as validation of his actions, Hitler was infuriated by Chamberlain’s popularity, especially among subjects of the Third Reich. Similarly, Mussolini was unpleasantly surprised by the Italian people’s elation that war had been averted, these sentiments so completely at odds with the essential militarism of the Fascist creed.

The French prime minister Edouard Daladier, on the other hand, although mobbed by adoring crowds when he returned to Paris from Munich, muttered ‘Ah les cons! S’ils savaient’ (Ah, the fools! If only they knew).

The heavy panic
How did the people themselves experience the tense months that proved to be the last moments of a precarious peace? How did it feel to live through the Munich Crisis and, alternatively, how did it feel to want to die because of the oppressive ‘war fear’ and spiralling levels of private and public anxiety?

The impact of the Munich Crisis did not discriminate between rich and poor, women and men, the powerful and the disenfranchised, the young and the old, or city folk, suburbanites and rural dwellers. Literary and confessional sources have preserved the physical and visceral reactions to the Crisis. In his Autumn Journal, the poet Louis MacNeice’s lines convey how talk of ‘Hodza, Henlein, Hitler’ caused ‘The heavy panic that cramps the lungs and presses/The collar down the spine.’ In her memoir, Light of Common Day (1959), Diana Cooper, celebrated actress and wife of Duff Cooper, who resigned as First Lord of the Admiralty because of his opposition to the Munich Agreement, wrote of how the Crisis brought on severe mental disturbance: ‘My own condition was deteriorating fast. Fear did more harm to my physique than to my morale. Sleep was murdered for ever. My heart quaked, yet I must appear valiant. My hands shook, so work must be found to steady them. Always a pessimist, I could imagine nothing worse than what must happen perhaps tomorrow – war, death, London utterly demolished, frantic crowds stampeding, famine and disease ...’

As Cooper’s symptoms and her internalisation of the international emergency suggest, the weeks of the Munich Crisis and its aftermath were not only the last phase of an impossible peace. They were a war of nerves. The strategising, trickery and behaviour under pressure of politicians, diplomats and propaganda chiefs were likened to a hyper-intense waiting game, a high-stakes game of poker, in which they gambled with the fate of the peoples of Europe. This was a period of suspense and the exacerbation of nervous disorder and mental illness.

Different sources, and ones not much referred to so far in appeasement scholarship, reveal the true state of the nation and of collective feeling. Press reporting of the crowd unwittingly preserved a history from below, although it was the new techniques of polling and social surveys that documented the
popular response to international events. Only established in 1937, the British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO) or British Gallup’s polls revealed the impact of political crisis on people’s lives. Also founded in 1937, Mass-Observation’s dedicated study of the Crisis was part of its innovative ‘anthropology of ourselves’ – social scientific surveying, which captured the response of working-class and local communities to the Munich Agreement.

The psychological and emotional repercussions were also collected and analysed by a new branch of psychiatric and medical clinicians. These were medical psychologists influenced by Sigmund Freud, who had himself arrived in London as a refugee in June 1938. The British psychoanalyst Edward Glover studied the collective response to the Crisis and concluded: ‘The general populace … celebrated their temporary relief from anxiety in an almost hysterical outburst when Chamberlain returned with “peace in our time”’. Glover argued that this was not necessarily an indication of widespread antiwar feeling, or of pacifism per se, but rather sudden relief from the anxiety of impending war.

**Accessories of appeasement**

In addition, material culture – the stuff of history and the history of stuff – can be excavated profitably to unearth a social history of the Crisis. The production and consumption of so many objects related to the Munich Agreement confirm Chamberlain’s popularity and celebrity at home and abroad. Women, seen as representing a ‘peace bloc’ of the electorate and thus assumed to be instinctive appeasers, were even more swept up in the Chamberlain frenzy as conspicuous consumers of the accessories of appeasement.

One eloquent example of the female support for appeasement is that of a particular Christmas card for 1938, as in most cases it would have been the lady of the house who carried out the ritual of dispatching season’s greetings. The card carried the motto ‘Peace on earth and goodwill to men’ and showed the photograph taken on 30 September of George VI and Queen Elizabeth with Mr and Mrs Chamberlain greeting the crowds from the balcony of Buckingham Palace – Chamberlain’s first stop after landing at Heston airport was Buckingham Palace. In fact, the staging of this display was unprecedented and controversial; in posing with the Chamberlains, the king was essentially providing a royal endorsement to the Munich Agreement. ‘Clever to bring in both Crown and Deity as Conservative election-agents,’ wrote F.L. Lucas.

Women were also the target market for a wide range of gimmicky appeasement trinkets, ranging from Chamberlain dolls to ‘Chamberlain: The Man of Peace’ commemorative plates, cups and tankards, and umbrella-themed jewellery, fabric patterns, clocks, toys and confectionery.

**Mass-marketed masks**

There were many objects, most material but one in particular ethereal, that seemed to encapsulate the Crisis. In the spring of 1939 readers of the *Manchester Guardian* were asked to select articles to be interred as memorials in Waterloo Bridge. The top three ‘topical’ items were, first, a gas mask or ‘a baby’s gas mask’, second, Mr Chamberlain’s umbrella and, third, a torn treaty.
Above: crowds applaud Chamberlain at the window of 10 Downing Street following his return from Munich, 30 September 1938.

Left: Neville Chamberlain and Annie Chamberlain with George VI and Queen Elizabeth, 30 September 1938.
The first two have a number of things in common. Both the gas mask and the umbrella are functional and practical; they are both mechanical devices that serve to shield and to protect, defensive rather than aggressive. Both reinforce the narrative of the British war as a defensive war. The umbrella was the must-have accessory for women and a marker of status for men of a certain class and standing – and it served as protection from the foul British climate. The gas mask was the essential protection against a modern warfare that did not discriminate between soldier and civilian.

Indeed, the premier's umbrella was widely represented, refashioned and commodified, much sought-after and venerated. It rapidly became an object of curiosity, a figure of fun, as well as a lightning rod for derision. In a Freudian analysis, Glover diagnosed ‘the totemistic reactions to Mr Chamberlain’s umbrella’ during the Crisis. In the cartoons of anti-appeaser David Low, Chamberlain was never represented without his umbrella and Low even came to draw him as an umbrella. The national and international obsession with Chamberlain’s umbrella started in the summer of 1938 and to this day the architect of appeasement’s reputation is tightly wound up with his signature accessory.

Macabre and ridiculous

Certainly the gas mask figured just as prominently as a practical object and as a symbol of the Munich Crisis. It is material, real and tangible, but its purpose is as protection against an element that is unseen and ethereal (but can be smelled). As it happened, the government-issued civilian gas masks would never be used for their intended function. The much-anticipated and nightmarishly imagined gas war inflicted on the British Home Front never materialised.

The gas mask very quickly became the reigning symbol of the Crisis and a shorthand for the civilian experience of war preparations. In fact, the first of the four climactic days of the Crisis, 25 September, was dubbed ‘Gas Mask Sunday’, the day most families collected this item of first-line Home-Front defence. The ritual of mother and children collecting their gas masks was poignantly described by the fictional Mrs Miniver (penned by Jan Struther) in *The Times*: ‘Finally, in another room, there were the masks themselves, stacked close, covering the floor like a growth of black fungus. They took what had been ordered for them – four medium size, two small – and filed out into the street.’ While her children respond with a mix of adventure-seeking and apprehension, Mrs Miniver herself sees both the macabre and the ridiculous in the gas masks.

In September, 38 million gas masks were distributed to the civilian population. Although Germany had signed the 1925 Geneva Protocol promising that it would not employ poison gas, most people expected Hitler would use chemical weapons.

The widespread terror about an aerial war
was one of the main reasons that so many felt overwhelming relief at the Munich Agreement, even as it entailed the betrayal of the Czechs. One Mass-Observation respondent, M.E. Grant, described how: 'Friday: Early morning. Peace declared, what a relief for everyone, and what a triumph for Mr Chamberlain and Herr Hitler ...' One school teacher told me that the children were very disappointed that there was no war, they were quite enjoying the excitement and were anxious to try out their gas masks.' Already on 1 October 1938, one pro-Chamberlain journalist writing for the Aberdeen Press and Journal explained that what he would most remember about the morning after the night before was that 'when I came down to breakfast yesterday morning, the family gas masks in the hall looked hopelessly out of date. They belonged to another world'.

At first nearly everyone carried the masks in their distinctive cardboard boxes. On 6 September 1938, a survey of passers-by on Westminster Bridge showed that 71 per cent of men and 76 per cent of women had their masks with them. But on 9 November 1938, the figure had dropped to 24 per cent of men and 39 per cent of women. (By December 20,000 masks had been handed in to London Transport’s Lost Property Office.)

Weapons of mass protection
One more thing that the umbrella and gas mask had in common was that both were imaginatively repurposed and marketed. Necessity is truly the mother of invention and, at the Institute of Patentees exhibition in May 1939 there were many prototypes for wartime precautions on display. These included a folding gas-proof room, anti-gas perambulator, a combined respirator and gas-proof suit and an umbrella with a shooting-stick attachment that, said the Manchester Guardian, 'may have interest for Mr Chamberlain when he next goes to Munich'.

There was, however, more to these objects than the instances of popular acceptance of the gas mask and positive and playful associations between Chamberlain and his umbrella. Both gas mask and umbrella became weaponised and were used as objects of protest and to express dissent. A good example of this is when Sir John Anderson, then minister in charge of civil defence, addressed a National Service Rally in St Andrew’s Hall in Glasgow. Stormy scenes occurred outside the hall, with over 1,000 demonstrators carrying slogan-inscribed umbrellas, imitation air raid shelters and banners. One protester inside the hall threw a gas mask in front of the principal speaker, shouting: 'We want real protection.' Both umbrella and gas mask were deemed, and rightly so, inadequate protection against modern diplomacy and modern warfare.

As early as 1934 Helena Swanwick, the feminist and pacifist journalist, had exposed the inadequacy of gas masks and the political purpose to which they were placed. In Frankenstein and His Monster: Aviation for World Service, Swanwick wrote:

*It is impossible to believe that any of the Governments which, like Germany, Poland, and Yugoslavia, are said to be organising distribution of gas-masks, holding gas-drills, construction of gas-proof shelters, can have any belief at all in the efficacy of such measures in face of a serious assault ... Governments must be perfectly aware of the futility of all this gas-mask nonsense, and we are driven to the unpleasant conclusion that they want to work their peoples up to such a state of ‘nerves’ which will make them uncritically obedient to any alarmist summons.*

Swanwick’s warnings were indeed prophetic, as much in the subjective as in the collective sense. She committed suicide on 16 November 1939, this fatal decision reached because she could not bear to live through another world war.

This, then, brings us to one of the most tragic appearances of gas masks, as they
figured in cases of suicide. Already in the Penguin Special, 
*Britain by Mass-Observation* (1939), Harrisson and Madge, two of Mass-Observation’s founders, were trying to define what ‘crisis’ meant, its etymology, as well as its various psychological symptoms. The Crisis was a national one, but it also had private and personal ramifications and one of the saddest phenomena to encounter is a series of Crisis-triggered suicides. In countless reports of coroners’ proceedings, the war scare was identified as the cause of suicide, while another recurring presence was gas and gas masks.

**A people’s crisis**

Suicide by gas poisoning had been steadily on the increase over the preceding three decades and, as such, we should not be unduly surprised by its frequency, especially in the home and often by women who put an end to it all by putting their heads in the oven, in what was, after all, that not so liberating room of their own, the kitchen. The greater access to gas appliances, however, and the publicity surrounding cases of suicide by gas poisoning meant that this was coming to be the most employed suicide method by 1938.

The international crisis was blamed for the suicide of a Suffolk horticulturist, Roger Notcutt, 36, of Woodbridge. The inquest revealed that, after helping to assemble gas masks at an Air Raid Precaution (ARP) centre, he called at home and then disappeared. He was later found by a search party, having shot himself. Notcutt’s role in assembling the gas masks set this personal tragedy in motion.

In another case, after listening to Hitler’s speech in German on 26 September and then going to collect his gas mask straight after, William Neatham Rumbell, a 27-year-old sales clerk of St John’s Crescent, Brixton, cried out ‘Well, that means war,’ and gassed himself in his room. The coroner’s verdict was that the man was suffering from extreme anxiety neurosis brought to a head by recent events.

The international crisis, worry about air raids and anxiety around the ‘kiddies’ gas masks’ was the explanation given for the suicide of Mrs Violet Dixon, aged 31, of Chelmsford. For this young mother the rumoured inadequacy of the gas mask to protect her children was the trigger, leading her to turn on the gas cooker to kill herself.

In 1942 police were trying to identify a human skeleton found in Sidmouth Wood, in Richmond Park, London. The inquest found it had probably been there well over a year and that the circumstances suggested suicide. Found near the remains were a bowler hat, shoes, particles of a grey suit, four bottles containing a grey fluid and a civilian gas mask. The situation of the gas mask reminds us how it had become an essential personal item, as well as an item that embodied people’s worst fears.

These suicides, triggered by the fear of war, are the most heartrending casualties of a war of nerves that preceded and precipitated the Second World War. It reminds us that, while the Munich Crisis was a crisis managed by politicians and magnified by the media, it was also internalised by the masses, not least by the most vulnerable in society. We are accustomed to approaching the Second World War from social and cultural perspectives and it is vital that these angles and insights are unmasked as we mark the 80th anniversary of what was clearly a ‘People’s Crisis’.

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**Further reading**

- Daniel Hucker *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France* (Routledge, 2011)
- Susan Grayzel *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge, 2012)
- Frank McDonough *Hitler, Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Cambridge, 2002)

‘Low’s Topical Budget’, cartoon by David Low in the *Evening Standard*, 12 November 1938.