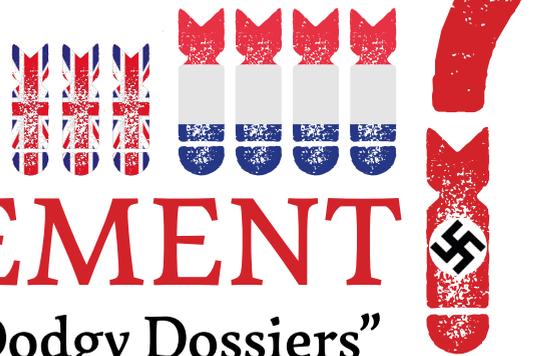


# THE CASE FOR APPEASEMENT

## Munich & the 1938 “Dodgy Dossiers”



In early 1938, with Hitler aggressively pursuing his expansionist agenda, Neville Chamberlain called for an in-depth assessment of Germany’s bombing capability. **GREG BAUGHEN**, author of *The Rise of the Bomber*, digs further into the archives to reveal how the resulting reports may have presented a misleading case for appeasement at Munich 80 years ago

**S**OME 15 YEARS ago, in 2003, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, used what transpired to be suspect information on Saddam Hussein’s ability to deploy weapons of mass destruction to justify an invasion of Iraq; 65 years before that, two more “dodgy dossiers”, with assessments of German weapons of mass destruction, played a part in making sure Britain did *not* go to war.

### GATHERING WAR CLOUDS

In the spring and summer of 1938, Europe was on the brink of war. Hitler was demanding the annexation of the Sudetenland border region of Czechoslovakia, a region largely populated by ethnic Germans. France was pledged to come to the aid of Czechoslovakia if attacked, and Britain felt it would be obliged to join France if it came to war. The Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, asked his three Chiefs of Staff for an assessment of Britain’s military strength and the country’s prospects in a war with Germany.

It was the age of the bomber. Future wars were envisaged much the same as a future generation would view a nuclear conflict. In the same speech in which Stanley Baldwin had warned the nation that “the bomber would always get through”, he also predicted that the next great war would see the end of European civilisation.<sup>1</sup>

Nations and politicians alike were gripped by fear of what the bomber might do. In April 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, 45 tons of bombs dropped on Guernica reportedly killed 1,700 civilians and injured another 800. It was a stark demonstration of the destruction bombers could wreak, and moved the Archbishop of Canterbury to coin the phrase “weapons of mass destruction”. The exaggerated death toll (still tragically high, but probably less than 300) seemed to justify the grim apocalyptic talk of the time. It also seemed to confirm British Air Ministry predictions that each ton of bombs dropped would inflict 50 casualties.

The idea that the bomber, with the explosive, chemical and bacteriological weapons it could carry, might bring about the end of civilisation was based more on imagination than hard evidence, but nobody wanted to put the matter to the test. The fear the bomber provoked ensured it became a fearsome diplomatic weapon. Foreign policy and negotiating positions were determined by the strength of bomber forces. Politicians wanted the security that came with the ability to retaliate, and Chamberlain was no exception. However, the



dossiers his Chiefs of Staff drew up did not provide the reassurance he wanted. But how accurate were they?

### THE FIRST DOSSIER

With the benefit of hindsight we now know that in 1938 the German High Command knew that the Luftwaffe was not capable of launching an effective attack on the UK from bases in Germany. *General Hellmuth Felmy* had been asked to assess what the Luftwaffe would be capable of in a war with Britain, and he reported that a successful aerial assault would only be possible from captured airfields in the Netherlands and Belgium.<sup>2</sup> Yet in September 1938, with German forces massing on the Czech frontier, Chamberlain was told that from bases in Germany, the Luftwaffe could drop up to 600 tons of bombs on Britain every day, and would be able to maintain this for at least two months.

At 50 casualties per ton (one-third fatalities), this meant 600,000 dead and 1.2 million seriously injured. As it turned out, two years later during the first two months of the Blitz, with bombers flying every night from airfields just the other side of the Channel, the Luftwaffe managed a daily average of less than 200 tons. How could the Air Ministry have got it so wrong?

Working out how many tons a bomber force can drop is not straightforward. Generally, the

**ABOVE RIGHT** *Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister on Stanley Baldwin’s retirement in May 1937. Often regarded in a negative light as an appeaser of Hitler, he was nevertheless steely in his dealings with the Führer, and in the wake of Munich said that “we should relax no particle of effort until our deficiencies are made good”.*