Storming the Eagle's Nest

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Preface

Everybody knows the Alps. Nobody knows how Europe's playground became its battlefield.

From the Fall of France in June 1940 to Hitler's suicide in April 1945, the swastika flew from the peaks of the Haute-Savoie in the western Alps to the passes above Ljubljana in the east – excepting only neutral Switzerland. The Alps as much as Berlin were the heart of the Third Reich. 'Yes,' Hitler declared of his headquarters in the Bavarian Alps, 'I have a close link to this mountain. Much was done there, came about and ended there; those were the best times of my life . . . My great plans were forged there.'

In 1940, Mussolini's troops pitched battle with the French on the Franco-Italian Alpine border, skiing resorts all over the Alps were turned into training centres for mountain warfare, and Switzerland prepared to be invaded. Soon, concentration camps were seeded in the Alpine valleys, Gauleiters were installed in the resorts, and secret rocket factories established. Later, in the Southern Alps of Switzerland, St Moritz and Zermatt welcomed escaping Allied PoWs, whilst further north Berne grew fat on looted Nazi gold, and guards turned away Jewish refugees at the country's borders.

Yet as the war progressed, the occupied Alps became the cradle of resistance to totalitarian rule. Backed by Churchill's brainchild, the Special Operations Executive and its US equivalent, the Office for Strategic Services, the mountain terrain spawned the French maquis and the Italian and Yugoslav partisans. From Slovenia to the Savoie, ski-runs became battlegrounds, the upper

and lower stations of téléphériques fell to opposing forces, and atrocities were committed with Mausers, bowie knives, mortars and grenades where once winter sports enthusiasts sipped glühwein. In the spring of 1945, with the Red Army nearing Berlin, Goebbels propagated the myth of the Reich's Alpine Redoubt. Here, Hitler and his diehards would supposedly hold out for years. Eisenhower's armies were diverted south away from the German capital, leaving the city open to Stalin. After the Führer's death the Allies discovered hoards of looted Nazi treasures, banknotes and bullion secreted in the Bavarian and Austrian Alps.

I was attracted to this story partly because it had only been told tangentially and parenthetically before in broader studies of the European war; partly because of the paradox of fascism engulfing such a potent symbol of freedom as the Alps; and partly because of the richness of the personalities it involves, its sheer human drama.

Adolf Hitler, the Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring, the SS mastermind Heinrich Himmler and the prototypical spin doctor Joseph Goebbels are familiar enough; less so are the Nazis' leader in Switzerland Wilhelm Gustloff, the Alpine concentration camp commandant Obersturmführer Otto Reimer, and the perpetrator of the Glières tragedy, Waffen-SS Sturmbannführer Joseph Darnand. Similarly, the figures of Churchill, Roosevelt and Eisenhower are complemented by the Swiss general Henri Guisan who stepped in where his country's politicians feared to tread, the model for James Bond, Conrad O'Brien-ffrench, the German spy Fritz Kolbe, the hundreds of charismatic Frenchmen who rose above the country's 1940 fall – one of whom rejoiced in the fanciful name of Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie – and the US spymaster and Don Juan, Allen Welsh Dulles. There are also those with two faces: Josip Broz aka Marshal Tito, the 'good Nazi' Albert Speer, and France's Charles de Gaulle. The General was the man who accepted such large quantities of Anglo-American blood and treasure – resulting in the freeing of his own country – with such admirably regal disdain. 'La France, c'est moi!'

There were also the everyday people of the Alps drawn by the vortex of fascism into the denouncements, betrayals and atrocities that rendered them inhuman: the agents, above all, of the Holocaust. These were countered by tales of courage, heroism and self-sacrifice, of the ordinary people doing extraordinary things that characterises conflict wherever and whenever it occurs.

For the Alps, the years under the swastika really were both the best and the worst of times. This is the story that – for the first time – this book tells.

Burnham Overy Staithe,
March 2013

PART ONE

ONE

Plan Z

From this surrender at Berchtesgaden, all else followed.

WILLIAM L. SHIRER, *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*

I

On 14 September 1938 an Englishman was getting ready to leave London for the Alps.

There was nothing unusual in this as such, for the English, as well as other Europeans and North Americans, had been seeking adventures in the Alps for more than two hundred years. First as Grand Tourists en route to the classical remains of Italy and Greece; then as 'scientific travellers', trying to unravel puzzles like the movement of glaciers and the impact of altitude on human physiology; later, in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, as artists. The Romantic poets – Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth – had defined Romanticism in their response to the Alps; J. M. W. Turner and Caspar David Friedrich did likewise in paint; Mary Shelley had created *Frankenstein* on the shores of Lake Geneva. In their wake came the mountaineers who were the first to actually climb the high peaks of Europe's great mountain range: from Mont Blanc in the west, the Matterhorn and the Monte Rosa towering above Zermatt, the famous trio of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau in the Bernese Alps high above the Swiss capital of Berne, to the Piz Bernina, the Ortler and the Grossglockner in the east. In the second half of the nineteenth century the clean, dry Alpine air was identified as a palliative and even a cure for tuberculosis. Sufferers from a disease at the time widespread flocked to the mountains for the 'Alpine cure'. Amongst them were Thomas Mann, A. J. A. Symons,

Robert Louis Stevenson and the wife of Arthur Conan Doyle, her husband in train. With the coming of the railways, the travel entrepreneurs Thomas Cook and Henry Lunn introduced tourism to the summer Alps. In the early years of the twentieth century, Henry's son Arnold for the first time brought skaters, toboganers and skiers to the Alps in winter, hitherto closed season. By the outbreak of the First World War a handful of remote villages had won worldwide fame as Alpine holiday resorts. Amongst them were Chamonix, Cortina d'Ampezzo, Davos, Grindelwald, Kitzbühel, St Anton, St Moritz, Wengen and Zermatt. After the war skiing established itself as a major international sport, and in 1936 the Bavarian resort of Garmisch-Partenkirchen joined the winners' circle as the venue for the Winter Olympics. In an age defined by industrialisation, the Alps had become the playground of Europe. Here the upper and – later – the middle classes escaped from their dark satanic mills to a purer, older and less material world.

For Switzerland in particular at the heart of the Alps, the English had an affection based on shared liberal constitutional principles and a tradition of personal freedom. Charles Dickens, writing to Walter Savage Landor at the height of the vogue for European revolutions in 1848, declared of the Swiss: 'They are a thorn in the side of the European despots, and a good and wholesome people to live near Jesuit-ridden kings on the brighter side of the mountains. My hat shall ever be ready to be thrown up, and my glove ever ready to be thrown down for Switzerland!'[1] Yet the appeal of the Alps ran deeper. In an age that was beginning to question the conventional tenets of Christianity, thinkers like John Ruskin seized upon the Alps as a visible expression of the work of a deity. The Alps were 'the best image the world can give of Paradise'.[2] This was echoed in 1878 by Mark Twain:

> I met dozens of people, imaginative and unimaginative, cultivated and uncultivated, who had come from far countries and roamed through the Swiss Alps year after year – they could not explain why. They had come first, they said, out of idle curiosity, because everybody talked about it; they had come since because they could not help it, and they

> should keep on coming, while they lived, for the same reason; they had tried to break their chains and stay away, but it was futile; now they had no desire to break them. Others came nearer formulating what they felt; they said they could find perfect rest and peace nowhere else when they were troubled; all frets and worries and chafings sank to sleep in the presence of the benignant serenity of the Alps. The Great Spirit of the Mountain breathed his own peace upon their hurt minds and sore hearts, and healed them; they could not think base thoughts or do mean and sordid things here, before the visible throne of God.[3]

Switzerland, though often taken as a byword for the whole eight-hundred-mile range, was of course buttressed to the west by the massif forming the border with France that included Mont Blanc, the greatest peak in western Europe; to the east and south by those ranges that formed the frontiers with and between Austria, Italy, Germany and – in 1938 – Yugoslavia.

Here, in the 1930s, dark forces were at work. It was true that Switzerland was still a democratic state whose permanent neutrality had been reaffirmed at Versailles in 1919; true that France, under Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, was the democratic Third Republic. But Yugoslavia under the regent Prince Paul was riven by vicious rivalry between its constituent parts, the Banovinas; the de facto dictator King Alexander had been assassinated in 1934. Italy had fallen under the shadow of Fascism as early as 1922 under the leadership of Benito Mussolini – dubbed by his Chief of General Staff Pietro Badoglio 'Dictator Number One'. Free speech, freedom of association and political opposition had been abjured. Austria became a fascistic state on the Italian model after the end of the First Republic in 1933 and the accession of Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss. Germany, the southern province of which was largely Alpine, had become a totalitarian state after Adolf Hitler became chancellor in 1933 – for Badoglio 'Dictator Number Two'. The Bavarian capital of Munich was the ideological centre of Nazism, the Hauptstadt der Bewegung, and the first of the concentration camps was opened in the Munich suburb of Dachau on 22 March 1933. A year later came Hitler's purge of Ernst Röhm, the leader of the Nazis' militia, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*, storm battalion), and his confederates at

the Alpine resort of Wiessee. This was the 'Night of the Long Knives' on 30 June 1934. Wiessee lies between Munich and the Tyrolean capital of Innsbruck. For Winston Churchill, at the time out of office and languishing as a backbencher in the House of Commons, it was also the road to Damascus:

This massacre . . . showed that the new Master of Germany would stop at nothing, and that conditions in Germany bore no resemblance to those of a civilised State. A Dictatorship based upon terror and reeking with blood had confronted the world. Anti-Semitism was ferocious and brazen, and the concentration-camp system was already in full operation for all obnoxious or politically dissident classes. I was deeply affected by the episode, and the whole process of German rearmament, of which there was now overwhelming evidence, seemed to me invested with a ruthless, lurid tinge. It glittered and it glared.[4]

Even the mountains themselves saw trouble. As a surrogate for war, they were exploited for the purposes of national vainglory. The conquest of Alpine peaks became less a sporting achievement than an expression of Aryan 'racial' pride. The most notorious case was the north face (Nordwand) of the Eiger, in Switzerland's Bernese Oberland. Wall was the right word for a 5,900-foot face much of which was angled at 85 degrees, some overhanging, the climb bedevilled with ice, snow and rockfall. In 1935 two young German climbers, Karl Mehringer and Max Sedlmeyer, froze to death in an attempt on the face. In 1936 another group of Austrian and German climbers made an assault that left four of them dead. In July 1938 the wall was finally beaten by an Austro-German team. Their leader was Heinrich Harrer, later to win fame for *Seven Years in Tibet*. The four were given heroes' welcomes by Hitler as heralds of the New Germany.

This was the shadow under which the 'visible throne of God' had fallen by 1938. It was to Munich that the Englishman was heading.

He had been advised that September can be a wonderful month in Bavaria, but that it is often wet. An umbrella was as likely to be as useful as a panama. He was a dressy man who so affected

stuffy Edwardian costume that he was nicknamed by some of his colleagues 'the coroner'. As to getting to the German Alps, he chose to fly. Commercial aviation was a sickly child of the years after the First World War, and the height of the Alps – in places they rose to 15,000 feet – challenged the early passenger aircraft. The first commercial flights between England and Switzerland were established in 1923 and by the summer of 1938 the enthusiasm of the English for Alpine pleasures justified two flights a day to both Basel and Zurich. Still, flying was far from commonplace and the Englishman had taken nothing other than a joyride before. A train would have taken him from London to the Alps in a day and a half. Time, though, was of the essence.

He called his adventure 'Plan Z'. He wrote to his sisters Ida and Hilda melodramatically: 'If it comes off it would go far beyond the present crisis and might prove the opportunity to bring about a complete change in the international situation.'[5] The news of the plan was broken on the evening of 14 September 1938 at a banquet attended by one of his contemporaries, Sir Henry 'Chips' Channon. Ecstatically, the diarist recorded: 'It is one of the finest, most inspiring acts of all history. The company rose to their feet electrified, as all the world must be, and drank his health. History must be ransacked to find a parallel.'[6] The Poet Laureate John Masefield was moved to write a poem on the mission published in *The Times*.

The Englishman, bearing his umbrella, was duly cheered by crowds en route to the airport at Heston in west London. His party took off at 8.36 a.m. in a ten-seat Lockheed Electra. Four hours later on his arrival in Munich he was met by a gaggle of German diplomats. They were the German Ambassador to the Court of St James's, Dr Herbert von Dirksen, and his superior the foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. This was a man vilified by Dirksen himself as an 'unwholesome, half-comical figure'. An open car took the party from the airfield to Munich station. A special train on which Ribbentrop presided over a lunch took the group ninety miles south from Munich to their final destination of Berchtesgaden.

This was a picturesque little resort of a few thousand souls, nestling at 1,500 feet in the south-eastern Bavarian Alps. Its quiet streets were cobbled, its houses painted with Luftmalerei frescos in the traditional Bavarian style, and it was surrounded by the high mountains that lift the human heart. The Untersberg lay to the north, the Kehlstein to the east, and to the south soared the Watzmann – at almost 9,000 feet the third-highest peak in Germany. There was skiing in the long winter and in the summer mountain hiking in the surrounding mountains and at the Königssee to the south. At the newly enlarged station at Berchtesgaden the party was met by a black Mercedes and whisked the few hundred yards to the Berchtesgadener Hof, the resort's principal hotel. Here the delegates were allowed just half an hour's respite before being collected once again and driven across the River Ache a mile uphill to a mountain plateau: Obersalzberg. Their host stood awaiting them on the steps of a mountain chalet called without much originality the Berghof.

The Englishman was the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. He observed of his host, 'His hair is brown, not black, his eyes blue, his expression rather disagreeable, especially in repose and altogether he looks entirely undistinguished.'[7] These were Chamberlain's first impressions of Adolf Hitler, chancellor of Germany and leader of the Third Reich. Muhammad had come to the mountain.

2

Berchtesgaden might have seemed an odd choice. Hitler's new Chancellery in Berlin was a more obvious venue for the sort of meeting that Chamberlain's parliamentary colleague Winston Churchill would later dub a 'summit'. In practice, the palace in Vossstrasse – constructed quite literally regardless of cost – was at present unfinished. In any case, Hitler, like Mark Twain, drew inspiration from the Alps. It was in Berchtesgaden that legend placed Barbarossa. There in the Untersberg overlooking Berchtesgaden lay the medieval German Kaiser in an enchanted sleep, awaiting the day on which he would awake to bring Germany

back to its golden age. Barbarossa was a Teutonic King Arthur and a secular messiah. Wagner, Hitler's favourite composer, had popularised the myth in the Ring Cycle, and the Führer had identified himself with it. 'You see the Untersberg over there,' he once remarked in conversation at the Berghof. 'It is no accident that I chose my residence opposite it.'[8]

Hitler had first visited Berchtesgaden with his sister Paula in April 1923. This was a few months before the failed putsch in Munich, the first milestone of his political career. After his release from Landsberg prison in 1925 – a spell that had been the upshot of the putsch – the politician spent two years living in the Deutsches Haus in Berchtesgaden. Displaying the sensibilities of the failed artist that he was, Hitler described this as 'a countryside of indescribable beauty'.[9] Here he wrote the second volume of his prospectus for the Third Reich, *Mein Kampf*. In 1928 he first rented and then bought Haus Wachenfeld. This was a small chalet situated on the Obersalzberg plateau halfway up the Kehlstein, across the valley from Berchtesgaden. Two years after Hitler became chancellor in January 1933, the Haus Wachenfeld was considerably enlarged by the architect Alois Delgado. A terrace was added to the front and the roof was raised to provide an additional floor. Garages and storage rooms were created in the basement, above which was a large conference room with a huge picture window – twenty-five feet by twelve – opening onto the Alps of Berchtesgadener Land. On the second floor were Hitler's study, bedroom and living room, and several rooms for guests; above were a further fifteen rooms. The Berghof was garnished with the most expensive materials, including marble from Carrara and the Untersberg itself. It was Hitler's Camp David, his Chequers, his dacha – or in Churchill's case, his Chartwell.

Soon the Berghof became the centre of a Nazi settlement. Hitler's acolytes – Reichsleiter Martin Bormann, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, Reichsleiter Joseph Goebbels and the architect cum arms and war production minister Albert Speer – had chalets within call of the Führer. For Hitler's fiftieth birthday

in 1939 a lofty retreat known as the Kehlsteinhaus – dubbed 'the Eagle's Nest' by the French ambassador to Germany, André François-Poncet – was constructed by Bormann at the 6,017-foot peak of the Kehlstein. An SS barracks, guest hotel and assorted subsidiary buildings created a community that would eventually number 4,000. Obersalzberg had its own kindergarten, school, swimming pool, theatre and fire station. Guards were provided by the SS (Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler's Schutzstaffel) and the Reichssicherheitsdienst (RSD, Reich Security Service). Their members preferred service at Obersalzberg to elsewhere. The local girls were much attracted to uniforms. Although Hitler also had houses in Munich and Berlin, it was the Berghof that he regarded as his real home. On 17 January 1942 he declared, 'There are so many links between the Obersalzberg and me. So many things were born there and brought to fruition there. I've spent up there the finest hours of my life. It's there that all my great projects were conceived and ripened.'[10]

It was fitting, then, that on 19 November 1937 came a meeting there that ushered in Neville Chamberlain's Alpine mission. This was Hitler's encounter with Lord Viscount Halifax, former Viceroy of India and shortly to replace Anthony Eden as Britain's foreign secretary. Halifax was a traditional representative of England's ruling classes. He leavened inherited wealth, a country estate, Eton and Oxford with a predilection for field sports and High Anglicanism. The latter inspired Churchill's punning nickname, 'the Holy Fox'. Under the cloak of attending one of Luftwaffe chief Hermann Göring's garish hunting parties – shooting foxes in Pomerania – Halifax had been dispatched by Chamberlain to the Berghof. There in the Alps he was to establish better relations with a renascent Germany, and to attempt to reconcile Hitler's ambitions for the Third Reich with the interests of a country that in 1937 remained a world power, her empire largely intact.

Hitler was of course an adherent of racial theories about the supremacy of the 'Aryan' people that demanded the reunification

of the German-speaking 'Volk' of Europe into the Reich. The result would be a Grossdeutsches Reich – Greater German Reich. The difficulty in this modest proposal was that such a plan required existing national borders to be torn up. The Alpine republic of Austria was predominantly German-speaking; so too was the Sudeten area of Czechoslovakia – with some 3 million German speakers; so too some 400,000 residents of the Baltic city of Danzig in Poland; so too the majority of the citizens of Switzerland. Hitler was also looking further east for Lebensraum – living space – for his people. Given the experience of France, Great Britain and the United States in the First World War, the Versailles Treaty specifically proscribed the unification or Anschluss of Germany and Austria; it established Danzig as a 'Free City' under League of Nations control; it created the new state of Czechoslovakia. It was Germany's ambitions to rearrange these affairs that Halifax was to explore with Hitler in the Alps.

The meeting at Berchtesgaden nearly began with misfortune. Arriving at the Berghof, the gangling Halifax mistook the 5' 8" Hitler for a footman, and was on the point of handing the Führer his hat and coat. Happily the gaffe was avoided by a member of the diplomatic corps standing on his tiptoes urging in the Viscount's ear, 'Der Führer! Der Führer!' Thereafter Hitler had very much his own way. He rehearsed the injustices of Versailles and the partiality of the British press. He protested – apparently without irony – that 'Germany sets great store by good relations with all her neighbours'. Halifax reciprocated by playing what amounted to the opening card of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement. He made it clear that Britain was prepared to contemplate reinterpretations of Versailles on the questions of Danzig, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Providing, of course, such alterations came through 'peaceful evolution' rather than 'methods . . . which might cause far-reaching disturbances'. For Hitler this opened a prospect – a mountain path, a Wanderweg – to the high sunlit uplands of a Grossdeutsches Reich. Everything seemed possible. Thus Halifax at Berchtesgaden – in the words of his most recent biographer Andrew Roberts – 'let Hitler see

his chance'.[11] The Führer then relaxed and took it upon himself to advise the former Viceroy of India on the problem of the national aspirations of the subcontinent. 'Shoot Gandhi,' he proposed.

3

On his return to England, Halifax reported on the meeting to the British Cabinet that 'He would expect beaver-like persistence in pressing their claims in central Europe, but not in a form to give others cause – or probably occasion – to interfere.'[12] For his part, Hitler dismissed Halifax as 'the English parson', sacked a couple of generals – Blomberg and Fritsch – who amongst other lapses he felt lacked an appetite for war, consolidated his hold over the armed forces, and on 20 February 1937 made an inflammatory speech at the Reichstag dismissive of British concerns. According to Winston Churchill, Hitler now 'regarded Britain as a frightened, flabby old woman, who at worst would only bluster, and was, anyhow, incapable of making war'.[13]

On 12 March 1938 Hitler duly invaded Austria, replacing the nationalist chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg with the Nazi Arthur Seyss-Inquart. This was Anschluss, as forbidden by Versailles. The American war correspondent William L. Shirer was in the Austrian capital, covering the story for Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) radio. The thirty-four-year-old Chicago-born Shirer was one of the 'Murrow's boys', CBS journalists hired by the legendary Ed Murrow. He has much to tell us of the first months of the Nazis in the Alps, not least in his classic account of the era, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*:

I had emerged from the subway at the Karlsplatz to find myself engulfed in a shouting, hysterical Nazi mob which was sweeping towards the Inner City. These contorted faces I had seen before, at the Nuremberg party rallies. They were yelling, 'Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler! Hang Schuschnigg! Hang Schussnigg!'[14]

When Versailles brought the curtain down on the old Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was joked that the rump republic of Austria comprised an imperial city and a handful of Alpine

valleys. Amongst the vestiges of the empire were the two western Alpine provinces of the Vorarlberg and Tyrol. They hinged on the Tyrolean capital of Innsbruck, the gateway to Italy. Together, the provinces boasted two resorts with international reputations: St Anton am Arlberg, close to the border with Switzerland, and Kitzbühel, the medieval Tyrolean town patronised by the Duke of Windsor in his earlier days as the playboy Prince of Wales. With Anschluss, these resorts became the southern outposts of the Third Reich, their streets decked in swastikas and their chalets cleared of political opponents, the disabled, gypsies and Jews alike. The Gestapo soon moved in.

As the French and the British, the guarantors of Versailles, did little but wring their hands at this turn of events, Hitler matured his plan for the invasion of Czechoslovakia. This was a scheme much more practicable via neighbouring Austria than from Germany. In late May 1938 the shooting by a Czech official of two Sudeten farmers precipitated the Czech crisis. It bubbled throughout the summer, stoked by pronouncements from both the British and the French in favour of redrawing the Czech border to the benefit of Germany. At the annual Nazi rally in Nuremberg on 12 September 1938, Hitler declared, ‘I have stated that the Reich would not tolerate any further oppression of these three and a half million Germans, and I would ask the statesmen of foreign countries to be convinced that this is no mere form of words.’

On 13 September the Czech government under Edvard Beneš was obliged to declare martial law; the Czechs themselves, France and Britain mobilised. Europe seemed closer to a general war than at any time since 1918. Chamberlain, feeling – with his gift for cliché – that desperate times called for desperate measures, unveiled Plan Z to Foreign Secretary Halifax. Conceived by the Director of the Conservative Research Department Sir Joseph Ball, this was in the days long before ‘shuttle diplomacy’, G8 and G20 conferences, and long before the world’s leaders met on anything other than a very occasional basis – normally at the League of Nations in Geneva. The plan, according to the Prime

Minister, 'was so unconventional and daring it fairly took his [Halifax's] breath away'.[15]

4

At the time Chamberlain was almost seventy, and had been Prime Minster since May 1937. He was part of a political dynasty: the son of the Cabinet minister Joseph Chamberlain and half-brother of Austen Chamberlain. His premiership was defined by the European crisis brought about by the Depression and the rise of fascism, and in fathering the policy of appeasement he was the counterpoint to Churchill, who summarised his rival's position: 'The Prime Minister wished to get on good terms with the European dictators, and believed that conciliation and the avoidance of anything likely to offend them was the best method.'[16] For Lloyd George, Chamberlain would have made 'a good mayor of Birmingham in an off year'; it was also said that he 'looked at Foreign Policy through the wrong end of a municipal drainpipe'.

Chamberlain's Berchtesgaden party comprised himself, a senior civil servant and adviser, Sir Horace Wilson, the British ambassador to the Reich, Sir Nevile Henderson, and a secretary. Foreign Secretary Halifax had been left in London because his presence – in terms of protocol – would demand that of his counterpart Joachim von Ribbentrop at the meeting with Hitler. The former wine salesman was not regarded by the British as a constructive contributor to debate. Halifax had remarked that he was 'so stupid, so shallow, so self-centred and self-satisfied, so totally devoid of intellectual capacity that he never seems to take in what is said to him'.[17] Collected at the Berchtesgadener Hof, the British party was driven fifteen minutes through the rain up to the Berghof. There they were greeted by an eighty-man black-uniformed SS guard of honour and, at the bottom of the flight of steps leading up to the chalet's terrace, by Hitler himself. The Führer was flanked by Generaloberst Wilhelm Keitel, resplendent in field grey. Here was a symbol of Germany's renewed military prowess. Chamberlain was clutching his hat and umbrella, but

did not try to give them to the Führer. The party then entered the Berghof. Traudl Junge, Hitler's secretary at Obersalzberg, remembered:

The place had a strange, indefinable quality that put you on your guard and filled you with odd apprehensions. The only comfortable room was the library on the first floor, which in the old house had been Hitler's private sitting room. It was rustically furnished, with beer mugs placed here and there for decoration. The books at everybody's disposal were of no great interest: world classics that nobody seemed to have read, travel atlases, a large dictionary, albums and drawings, and of course copies of *Mein Kampf* bound in gold and morocco leather.[18]

Tea was served in the reception room with its great window looking across to the Untersberg. Hitler had a limited gift for small talk. The preliminary conversation concerned the room, the splendours of the view – marred by the rain – and the idea of the Führer visiting England. Chamberlain's priggish eye was caught by the paintings of nude women scattered around the chalet, and he raised the subject with the Cabinet on his return to England. The Prime Minister and the chancellor then removed themselves with the Führer's interpreter, Dr Paul Schmidt, to the study upstairs in which Hitler had entertained Halifax the previous year. The room, Chamberlain later complained, was bare of ornament. 'There was not even a clock, only a stove, a small table with two bottles of mineral water (which he didn't offer me), three chairs and a sofa.'[19]

Hitler's approach with Chamberlain was much the same as with Halifax: a litany of the injustices served on Germany and a complementary catalogue of demands. As Schmidt recorded, Hitler declared that he 'did not wish that any doubts should arise as to his absolute determination not to tolerate any longer that a small second-rate country should treat the mighty thousand-year-old German Reich as something inferior . . . he would be sorry if a world war should arise from this problem . . . [but] he would face any war, even world war, for this'. He worked himself into a lather. Such, indeed, was the Führer's tenor that the Prime Minister asked him why he had agreed to the visit if

he was so determined to take action – most immediately against Czechoslovakia. 'I soon saw', wrote Chamberlain to his sisters, 'that the situation was much more critical than I had anticipated. I knew that his troops and tanks and guns and planes were ready to pounce, and only awaiting his word, and it was clear that rapid decisions must be taken if the situation was to be saved.' Hitler's precise formulation, in the words of the debonair Sir Nevile Henderson – twiddling his thumbs downstairs as the rain and darkness fell – was that 'the only terms on which he could agree to a peaceful solution were on the basis of the acceptance of the principal of self-determination'.[20]

This Chamberlain provisionally accepted. Because the results of a plebiscite in the Sudetenland were a foregone conclusion, he went considerably further than Halifax. He effectively told Hitler that Britain was prepared to see the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain concluded by agreeing to seek consent to this concession from the British Cabinet, the French and – last and least – the Czech government itself.

Business concluded, dinner was served. The British party was joined by some of Hitler's neighbours in Obersalzberg: the convicted murderer Reichsleiter Martin Bormann and his wife Gerda, Margarete, the wife of the Reich's architect Albert Speer, and Hitler's mistress Eva Braun. This was an honour for the Prime Minister. Braun was normally kept under wraps – indeed confined to her room – when dignitaries were visiting the Berghof. It was pitch-dark before Chamberlain got back to the Berchtesgadener Hof, and close to midnight before his short report to the Cabinet in England had been drafted, enciphered and telegraphed.

As Hitler reflected on another occasion, 'Those rainy days at Berchtesgaden, what a blessing they were! No violent exercise, no excursions, no sunbaths – a little repose! There's nothing lovelier in the world than a mountain landscape.'[21] How fortunate that Chamberlain had brought his umbrella.

5

The Prime Minister flew back from the Alps the next day well satisfied with his efforts, and with another meeting with the Führer in his diary. 'It was impossible', he reported, 'not to be impressed by the power of the man . . . his objectives were strictly limited . . . when he had included the Sudeten Germans in the Reich he would be satisfied.' All in all, he was a man with whom Chamberlain felt 'I can do business'.[22]

The Prime Minister still needed the Cabinet's endorsement of his proposals. He also required the support of the French, who, following the reoccupation of the Rhineland on the Franco-German border in March 1936, had every reason to fear Hitler's expansionist policies. There were also the Czechs. Reporting the matter in the American *News Chronicle*, the paper's European correspondent related that the elevator operator in the paper's New York headquarters had asked, 'Mr. Waithman, can you tell me why Britain should have any right to give Czechoslovakia to Hitler?'[23] The French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier saw no such difficulty, perhaps because France had a pact of mutual support with Czechoslovakia that she was ambivalent about honouring. The Czech leader Eduard Beneš saw little alternative to the Anglo-French proposals, however unpalatable.

Returning to the Rhineland resort of Bad Godesberg on 21 September 1938, Chamberlain expected to be congratulated by the Führer for achieving the compliance of the French and the Czechs. On the morning of 22 September he was somewhat surprised to hear from the Nazi leader that the proposal was no longer sufficient. Now the Sudetenland was to be handed over on 1 October, to be transferred directly to German troops, without due process, a commission, and the normal paraphernalia of bureaucracy. For the British that was enough.

Chamberlain flew back to England and the country prepared for war. The fleet was mobilised, the public issued with gas masks, and air-raid trenches dug in Hyde Park. On 27 September, Chamberlain famously told the nation, 'How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying

on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing.' On 28 September, the US ambassador to Britain, Joseph P. Kennedy, reported to the US State Department that 'failing acceptance of the German ultimatum by 2:00 p.m. today, Germany may attack Czechoslovakia tomorrow'.[24] The French army mobilised and 1.5 million Czech soldiers manned the border with Germany. In Switzerland all the roads leading into the country from her neighbours were mined.

That evening it fell to the Prime Minister to update the House of Commons on the crisis. As Chamberlain was reaching the climax of an hour-long speech chronicling these events, he was handed a note. He read it in silence. He then turned again to the benches of the Commons, both to his own followers and to the opposition. In response to a proposal from Mussolini, he announced, Hitler had agreed to postpone German mobilisation for twenty-four hours and to meet Chamberlain himself, Mussolini and Daladier in Munich. The Commons broke into uproar. The huge crowds assembled outside in Parliament Square wept with relief. A telegram arrived from the White House in Washington. It was worded simply, 'Good man! Franklin D. Roosevelt.' It took only hours to agree the formal dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain, moreover, induced Hitler to sign a flimsy piece of paper declaring that Germany and Britain would never again engage in war. On his return to Heston he pulled this out of his pocket and told the crowds, 'Here is a paper that bears his name. It is peace for our time.'

This was Munich, but it would be better named Berchtesgaden. For it was at the Berghof that the Rubicon had been crossed. Here Chamberlain had embraced the belief that the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia could satisfy Hitler's demands. Thereafter, the dominoes fell. In Berchtesgaden the fate of Europe, and with it the Alps, was sealed. Hitler not unreasonably concluded that France and England would not stand in the way of his ambitions in eastern Europe. As Shirer summarised, 'From this surrender at Berchtesgaden, all else followed.'[25]

6

Having achieved his ambitions in Czechoslovakia, Hitler turned to the Polish question. An agreement created by Halifax for France and England to support Poland should she be invaded was regarded by Hitler as a dead letter. The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between the Reich and the Soviet Union signed on 23 August 1939 negated his concern of fighting a war on two fronts: Zweifrontkrieg. At dawn on Friday 1 September 1939 German troops invaded Poland.

Cicely Williams's family was on holiday in Zermatt, the Swiss resort catapulted into international fame by the tragedy that followed the first ascent of the Matterhorn by the Englishman Edward Whymper in 1865.

> On Friday morning we wandered down to the station to get a paper – an excited little crowd was gathered round the kiosk. We got a copy of *La Suisse* and on the front page in thick black type we read a proclamation by the British Consul in Berne ordering all British tourists to leave by the night train – the last to leave Switzerland for the coast. This was a command that could not be ignored.[26]

Two days later, Chamberlain was forced to take to the airwaves once more to recant the bargain struck a year earlier in the Berchtesgadener Alps. The Anglo-French ultimatum to Hitler had been ignored. At 11.15 a.m. on 3 September Chamberlain told the nation:

> This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by 11.00 a.m. that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.

This was the ultimate result of Chamberlain's trip to the Alps. The speech was the epitaph of appeasement and the epitaph of Plan Z. Europe was at war, and with Europe the Alps.

The Alps of Germany, Austria and Italy were already in thrall to fascism. Those to the east in Yugoslavia and to the west in

France now fell under the shadow of the Reich. As to Switzerland, the Alpinist Arnold Lunn – the son of Henry Lunn, who had done so much to create Swiss tourism – commented on the prospect with perhaps understandable partiality: 'Second only to the supreme horror of Hitler's evil face gloating over conquered London from the balcony of Buckingham Palace was the possibility that the swastika might fly from the roofs of Berne.'[27] For Lunn and many other lovers of the Alps, possibility was becoming probability. Certainty loomed. Cicely Williams recalled, 'On Sunday morning, September 3rd 1939, shortly after eleven o'clock, the general mobilisation call sounded in Zermatt.'