

Soldier's Diary Entries on the Takeover of the Sudetenland (1938)

Abstract

Following the First World War, the Peace of Paris divided the former Austro-Hungarian Empire into a number of smaller nations based on common nationality, including an independent Czechoslovak state, consisting of the lands of the Bohemian kingdom and areas belonging to the Kingdom of Hungary. The creation of this new state meant the separation from Germany of German-speaking people now living in the westernmost regions of Czechoslovakia, particularly the Sudetenland. To nationalists in Germany – notably the Pan-Germanists who called for the amalgamation of all German-speaking peoples into a single Greater Reich – this separation of Sudeten Germans from their cultural roots was unacceptable. It became a principle matter of policy for the Pan-Germanists – and after 1933 the Nazi regime – to advocate for the annexation of the Sudetenland to Germany. With the Anschluss (annexation) of Austria in March 1938, Adolf Hitler began immediately calling for the annexation of the Sudetenland, prompting the Sudeten Crisis. A hastily negotiated (and infamous) settlement granted Germany the Sudetenland, which Germany later used as justification to occupy the rest of Czechoslovakia in March of 1939. In this source, Herbert Wetzig, a German Soldier recounts in dairy form his experiences crossing over into the Sudetenland during the annexation.

Source

October 10, 1938

The sun has not risen yet. It is foggy. Soon the company starts to march. Singing, we march through the village, via Lauterbach to Mittelwalde. There are already all kinds of people there, especially supporters of the battle. The locals welcome us joyfully and already begin to throw flowers. Behind Mittelwalde the battalion gathers. Behind us on the horizon clouds of smoke rise on the ridges. Probably the last destructions of the departing Czechs.

And then the great march towards the border begins. We are supposed to cross it at twelve o'clock. More and more people are standing along the way, and from kilometer to kilometer the enthusiasm grows. The music arrives and the flag is brought to the front. As we get closer and closer to the border, the area becomes more and more mountainous. We must be there soon. Here comes the last German village, behind which we stop once again and also eat. Then it goes further uphill until finally the German customs house appears. At 12:45 we have reached the border and the historic moment has come for us.

The last stretch was damn fast, because as a result of the long marching column there were large gaps between the individual units all of a sudden, which were getting larger and larger and now had to be caught up again. With their rifles slung over their shoulders, they marched for several kilometers, and if necessary, they trotted. Here at the border, too, a lot of people had gathered to greet us enthusiastically. With our rifles at the ready, we march past the general.

Shortly after the border, the war zone begins, as far as it was determined as such, bunker to bunker, wire entanglements in rough quantities. To the left and right of the roads are blasted barriers, alternately placed at about 40 meters on each side of the road. The roads themselves are in unbelievably bad condition. Tared roads hardly exist. This, of course, makes itself felt on the soles of our feet. It won't be long before we feel every sharp stone, thousands of which lie on the surface.

Everywhere on the streets and corners people are standing now, waving to us joyfully. But we march on and on. In Grulich, the first town behind the border, an enthusiastic reception. With our rifles ready, we pass the general again. Densely crowded, the people stand on the market square, barely hearing the music due to the people's shouts of salvation. This is not just empty enthusiasm, this is true joy. Joy such as none of us has ever experienced, and it makes us feel so different. Something indescribable passes through us. Perhaps it is the satisfaction of being able to help these brothers and sisters of ours. And all this is repeated in every village, in every town. Endless villages and ever-increasing jubilation. They want to give us all they have. And those who have nothing give us flowers, flowers, and more flowers. Hundreds of cigarettes fly into the rows, cookies, rolls and sandwiches, plus beer, wine, and juice. We don't know where to leave it all, and after all, we still have quite a bit of walking to do today. Everything is German and in indescribable joy. And then we leave Grulich behind us. The weather is wonderful. The sun is shining, it also wants to contribute its share. [...]

The road stretches back and forth, on which the mighty army column marches without interruption. Artillery and infantry, horses and men, an endless procession. And in addition, the sun shines above everything, illuminating the white houses of the towns and villages to the farthest distance. But many are already too broken to take in this wonderful picture. They only see it, but they do not take it in. Now in the forest a steep path winds ever higher. Again and again, someone says: "We must have reached the top soon!" In the east the full moon rises in the starry sky. And as the sun disappeared in the sky, so have the German people disappeared around us. Off the path stand single groups, tightly packed together in the shade of the trees. They do not call out to us and they do not wave. They can hardly speak German. They are Czechs. We are still in Czech territory. Not a soul to be seen.

Hour after hour we continue. Before Landskron we stop once again. Those good at parading go to the front of the line, because in Landskron there is a speech by the general. We are all completely enthusiastic, yet hardly anyone can stand anymore. And then we have reached the town. It is ten o'clock. Swastika flags are hanging from all the houses, we are in a German town again. We line up on the market square. We report to the general, and then there is a short greeting by the mayor and the local party official [*Ortsgruppenleiter*]. Then our general greets the liberated Sudeten Germans. We are only half-listening, for we have trouble standing. But then the jubilation of the population begins, who are crowded around the market square. There is no end to it, and silence must first be ordered so that we can carry out our drill. Another march then takes us back to the main road. And a new enthusiasm sets in. The streets are full of people. They must have been waiting for a long time. Yes, a very long time. But now the time has come, now they can wave at us, and the children take us by the hand and run with us.

Source of the German original text: Aufzeichnungen aus dem Tagebuch des Wehrmachtssoldaten Herbert Wetzig (1914-1942) aus Friedland/Nieder-Lausitz, Deutsches Historisches Museum, <https://www.dhm.de/lemo/zeitzeugen/herbert-wetzig-der-einmarsch-ins-sudetenland-1938.html>

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