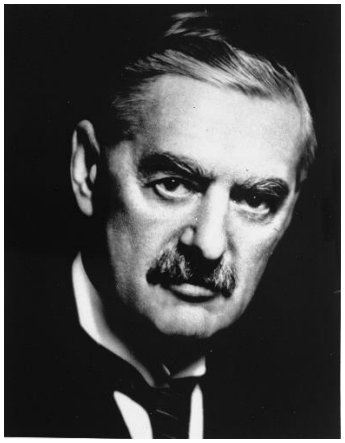
Why did Chamberlain pursue a policy of appeasement prior to 1939?



The policy of appeasement followed by successive British governments during the 1930s was integral to both British Foreign and Domestic policy; appeasement continued the international attempts for disarmament throughout the 1930s that Britain supported. This lack of confrontation against Germany's breeches of the Treaty of Versailles, the settlement of the first world war, was an important influence on British economic, social, political and military thinking and at the heart of appeasement was the controversial the treaty . It was seen by the Germans to be punitive and nationally embarrassing with its conditions of loss of territory, restrictions on military development and punitive financial reparations. The American administration of Woodrow Wilson wanted a more positive, conciliatory approach to rebuild Germany, whereas the French government of Clemenceau wanted its conditions to be even more stringent, to break up the German state so that Germany could never fight another war like World War One. Ultimately, the harsh conditions of the Treaty of Versailles encouraged German nationalism and the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s.

Economically Britain was not in a good position in the early thirties, still suffering from the effects of the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and a flawed return to the Gold Standard; Britain's exports were expensive and there was widespread unemployment. Socially, according to public opinion, the British public were not ready to support or fight another war with Germany. Militarily, Britain was not ready either and did not start to rearm until he mid 1930s; subsequently behind the advances and rearmament that Germany made in breach of the Treaty of Versailles. Politically, the 1930s had been turbulent with three general elections and changes of British government; Chamberlain was a relatively inexperienced Prime Minister in 1938 having only been in the role for eighteen months. Although Chamberlain is credited with the ultimate failure of appeasement at his negotiations with Hitler at the Munich conference of 1938 and his assurance of "Peace in our time", appeasement had been a British policy throughout the 1930's. There were many influences, not a single reason, why Chamberlain pursued a policy of appeasement prior to 1939.

The 1930s were a turbulent period for British government. There were three general elections and four prime ministers between 1929 and 1940. The 1929 Labour government of Ramsey MacDonald was a minority government which only lasted two years. MacDonald was then at the head of the 1931 National Government which lasted until 1935 when Conservative Stanley Baldwin became Prime Minister of another National Government. This Conservative administration remained in power through the second world war, with Neville Chamberlain becoming Prime Minister in 1937 and then with Winston Churchill leading the wartime coalition from 1940.

Much has been written about Chamberlain's personality and policy of appeasement, most of it detrimental, from the orthodox point of view and the revisionists. Whatever his shortcomings as a Prime Minister he had a good record on domestic policies. After he was made Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1932; he is credited with getting the economy moving after the Great Depression. To make Britain more competitive he left the Gold Standard immediately making British exports 15% cheaper. Additionally, he imposed sanctions on overseas imports and promoted imports from the Empire. Significantly he cut the War debt, which was crippling government resources, by reducing the returns on bonds from 5% to 3.5%.

An alternative to appeasement could have been for Britain to become isolationist, withdrawing from European affairs, but this was discredited by the mid-1930s[1] and before Chamberlain became Prime Minister. Chamberlains' appeasement objectives were generally accepted to be to avoid war, preserve the British system, preserve the Conservative Party and try to restrict the influence of the Nazis and Axis alliances by negotiation rather than confrontation but he is criticised for self-interest versus national interest.

Some of the criticisms were scathing attacks on Chamberlain personally "shrewd, ignorant and self-opinionated with the capacity to deceive both himself and others"[2] was typical. Even worse was the accusation of "Surrender to blackmail [which] is always damnable because it sets a higher value upon mere self-protection than upon principles. Such appeasement is justly condemned because it is felt to be an act of treason against all we stand for—the purchase of life at the expense of those ultimate ends of which the pursuit alone makes life worth living"[3]. It is argued that when Chamberlain was balancing the principles of protecting his own party and the best national interests, going to war would not benefit either in 1938. The "Munichmen" have been criticised for their "ineptness and incapacity, [and] almost criminal negligence in their appointed tasks of protecting the national security"[4].

An alternative to appeasement for Chamberlain could have been a show of strength against Germany with an alliance with Russia, and possibly France, a "Grand Alliance"[5]. Instead, this was rejected because of deep-seated anti-communism throughout the 1930s fueled by events such as 1926 General Strike and the rise of post revolution Russia and a confusion in the Conservative mind between preserving their class interests and the national interest.

In the 1930s the British public did not want another war, so soon after the end of the Great War. Public opinion suggested that the prime motivator for appeasement was not a desire for peace as much as a fear of war[6]. They were enthusiastic about Chamberlain's promise of "Peace in our time". He was greeted like a hero by crowds in the streets on his return from Munich. When holding up his piece of paper signed by himself and Hitler he said "My good friends, this is the second time there has come back from Germany to Downing Street peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Now I recommend you go home, and sleep quietly in your beds". Unusually, there was an endorsement from the King. "After the magnificent efforts of the Prime Minister in the cause of peace it is my fervent hope that a new era of friendship and prosperity may be dawning among the peoples of the world"[7].



However, this popular support dwindled after the war had started, when it was going badly for Britain. There were a number of books written criticising Chamberlain and appeasement. Aster introduces "Guilty

[1] Stedman, AD 2011, Alternatives to Appeasement: Neville Chamberlain and Hitler's Germany, I. B. Tauris & Company, p16
[2] Namier, 1948, Diplomatic Prelude, 1938–1939, as cited in Aster, 2008, Appeasement: Before and after Revisionism, p448.
[3] Wheeler-Bennett, 1966, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy, as cited in Aster, 2008, Appeasement: Before and after Revisionism, p448.
[4] George, 1965, The Warped Vision: British Foreign Policy, 1933–1939 as cited in Aster, 2008, Appeasement: Before and after Revisionism p449
[5] IBID
[6] Lewis, 1990, A Climate for Appeasement, p233
[7] Faber, 2008, Munich: The 1938 Appeasement Crisis, p420

Men" written by "Cato" published on 5th July 1940, which was probably the most influential. These were the dark days, between the disaster at Dunkirk and the success Battle of Britain, when Britain stood isolated against the Germans. This criticism would have been controversial at this delicate time, Cato called the Munich negotiators "The Guilty Men", but it was widely endorsed by all sides of British politics from the anti-appeasement right wing as well as Liberals and left-wing internationalists.

"Cato" was a group of three journalists with a broad set of backgrounds who were employed by Lord Beaverbrook. The three journalists were Michael Foot, Frank Owen and Peter Howard. Frank Owen was a former Liberal MP, Peter Howard was a conservative supporter and Michael Foot became leader of the Labour Party in opposition to Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s; he was a pacifist and a strong supporter of CND. Beaverbrook on the other hand, owned the Dailly Express, was a supporter of the Conservative Party and as an MP was made Minister for Aircraft Production in 1940 in Churchill's wartime government. As Beaverbrook supported the policy of appeasement, the three journalist who wrote "Guilty Men" had to remain anonymous, so used the pen name "Cato".

"Guilty Men" heavily attacked British foreign policy through the 1930s and it shared the responsibility between the Ramsey MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain administrations. This polemic became a huge best seller and was reprinted twenty times by October 1940. Cato claimed that British Foreign policy was poor post World War One; criticising successive governments for building trade whilst failing in their responsibilities to prepare for a war in the face of German and Japanese expansionism.

But special criticism was levelled at Chamberlain and his government in the events running up to Munich. Cato argued that they didn't keep the British public informed about the important issue of German attitudes to redressing the Treaty of Versailles; they underestimated the dynamism and popular support of Nazism; they didn't stop the creation of a modern Luftwaffe in direct contravention of the Treaty of Versailles; and they didn't start British rearmament until too late in the face of German breaches of the Treaty of Versailles.

It was suggested that Chamberlain manipulated the Press, that in the 1930s an "incestuous relationship" had developed between Whitehall and the press, with the government attempting to subvert editorial independence "If a democracy can be defined as a healthy continuing clash of opinion, then the Chamberlain government, through its control of the press, certainly succeeded in subverting democracy during the years 1937 to 1940"[8] . Essentially Cato claimed that successive governments had been too passive to German breaches of the Treaty of Versailles, they had let Germany "get away with it" and Chamberlain negotiated badly at Munich making concessions to Germany without any in return. Their most famous quote is "let the guilty men retire, then, of their own volition, and so make an essential contribution to the victory upon which we are all implacably resolved".

These criticisms underline that appeasement had been a policy well before Chamberlain became Prime Minister but a change of course could have been politically damaging for the Conservative party according to public opinion. Chamberlain was continuing the policy of previous administrations; however, he became the figure most associated with its failure There was a heated, three day, Commons debate on the Munich Agreement beginning on 3rd October, in it the First Lord of the Admiralty, Duff Cooper resigned, and Churchill spoke against the pact, but no Conservative voted against the government but there were approximately thirty abstentions, including Churchill, Cooper and future Conservative prime ministers Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, ensuring that the Conservative government remained united[9].

Away from domestic issues and criticism, in the aftermath of World War One, there were a number of international conferences to promote disarmament between the major military powers, that Britain supported. They were ambitious and well-meaning but because of all the vested interests of the delegate countries these conferences achieved little. Broadly, the conference objectives were to try to minimise risks of the outbreak of another war and to keep all the parties talking, rather than getting into conflict. This talking and setting the new rules around arms control is not the same as appeasement, but appeasement can be seen as a continuation of the attempts of a post World War One peace process.

[8] Cockett, 1989, Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement and the Manipulation of the Press as cited in Aster, 2008, Appeasement: Before and after Revisionism p458

[9] https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1938/oct/06/policy-of-his-majestys-government

Additionally, following the Treaty of Versailles; in January 1920, the League of Nations was created. Article 8 of the League of Nations Covenant stated that "the members of the League recognise that the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations". There were thirty-two member countries but significantly these didn't include Russia or the USA[10].

The Naval Conferences of Washington in 1921, Geneva in 1927 and London in 1930 were mainly concerned with the control of the sizes and composition of the navies of the USA, Britain, and Japan in an effort to avoid a repeat of naval arms race in the run up to War One. Importantly, these conferences excluded the defeated World War One nations and Russia[11].

Between these conferences, in 1928, there was the Pact of Paris Peace Conference, known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact. This idealistic agreement was probably the most ambitious of these inter war peacekeeping attempts. Eventually most countries signed the Pact, including Germany, agreeing to renounce war as an instrument of national policy and to settle all international disputes by peaceful means[12]. It was more generally criticised because of its unachievable high moral principles, its inability to influence members foreign policy but specifically that it remained open to individual countries for its interpretation. Subsequently it did not have any teeth to enforce its objectives, but the terms of the pact remained and they were the original legal terms for Nazi prosecutions at the Nuremburg war crimes trials in 1946[13].

Finally in 1932 the League of Nations invited its member countries and any remaining countries with an interest in European disarmament, including both Germany and Japan to the Geneva Disarmament conference. As with the Briand-Kellogg Pact, the objectives were ambitious, attempting to differentiate between offensive and defensive weapons. Not surprisingly, there was widespread disagreement on definitions of weapons, which also included personnel and technology. For example, the British historian Sir Basil Liddell Hart, was present at the conference and he thought that tanks, could be both offensive and defensive and so could not be classified. Winston Churchill, on the other hand, disagreed, arguing that the offensive capabilities of tanks outweighed their defensive capabilities[14]. Amid disagreements and confusion Germany and Japan withdrew from the conference in 1933 which should have been a warning sign that both countries would pursue aggression and expansionism. Hitler had come to power in 1933 and he also withdrew Germany from the League of Nations. The effectiveness of the League of Nations was questionable. The European powers and the League of Nations should have been prepared for breaches of the Treaty of Versailles, but the policy of appeasement let the creation of the Luftwaffe and the 1938 Anschluss go unchecked. The conference dissolved in 1934 and the period of appeasement began.

Chamberlain condemned the Anschluss in the House of Commons, but Britain did not support the Austrians even though they requested help from Britain. In the Commons, Chamberlain said "It is perfectly evident now that force is the only argument Germany understands and that "collective security" cannot offer any prospect of preventing such events until it can show a visible force of overwhelming strength backed by the determination to use it. ... Heaven knows I don't want to get back to alliances but if Germany continues to behave as she has done lately, she may drive us to it"[15]. Chamberlain could not be seen as a pacifist in his avoidance of conflict because, as Chancellor, in the mid-1930s he started the rearmament programme which reset Britain as a war economy, but he was criticised by some for being too late. He was far more pragmatic, because he knew that, even with the limited rearmament, in 1938 Britain was not in a favourable position to fight a war, being far behind German preparations, particularly of an air force. By trying to make an agreement at Munich he could be seen to be buying time for Britain to prepare.

A Grand Alliance with Russia in the 1930s might have restricted German breaches of the Treaty of Versailles but this would have been difficult for several reasons. Firstly, Russia had not been included in the disarmament movement and was not a member of the League of Nations, so it would have been difficult to

[10] https://www.ungeneva.org/
[11] www.britannica.com
[12] https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kbpact.asp
[13] www.britannica.com
[14] Borg, M. T, 1992, "Reducing Offensive Capabilities - the Attempt of 1932". *Journal of Peace Research*, p149
[15] Self, Robert, 2006, Neville Chamberlain: A Biography, P294

come in from the cold. Secondly, there was the fear of the spread of communism to Britain, and particularly this fear within the Conservative Party. Additionally, if Chamberlain had taken Britain into a war in 1938, against popular public opinion, he knew it would have been potentially catastrophic for the Conservative party at the ballot box.

Chamberlain has been held responsible for the failure of appeasement and for the Munich agreement going so wrong but the breaches of Treaty of Versailles were not tackled by any of the European powers. Chamberlain can be seen to have pursued Appeasement to avoid war in the short term but also to buy Britain time to rearm in the longer run but ultimately it cost him his job as Prime Minister, replaced by Winston Churchill, a Cabinet "hawk". Additionally he was balancing public opinion and the perceived threat of communism whilst needing to keep the Conservative party in power. Described as vain and egotistical, it is questionable if he thought had all the answers, motivated to be hailed as the man who successfully kept Hitler in check, negotiating peace rather than another World War. High level negotiations are always tricky. Chamberlain trusted the word of Hitler but arguably he did not have a chance against Hitler's dishonesty and his determination to have a European war eventually. History suggests that Chamberlain was out of his depth.



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