NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN AND APPEASEMENT

Nick Smart scrutinises Chamberlain's foreign policy and the historiography of appeasement.

Right: Neville Chamberlain, posing for the camera during a 'constitutional' in St James's Park.

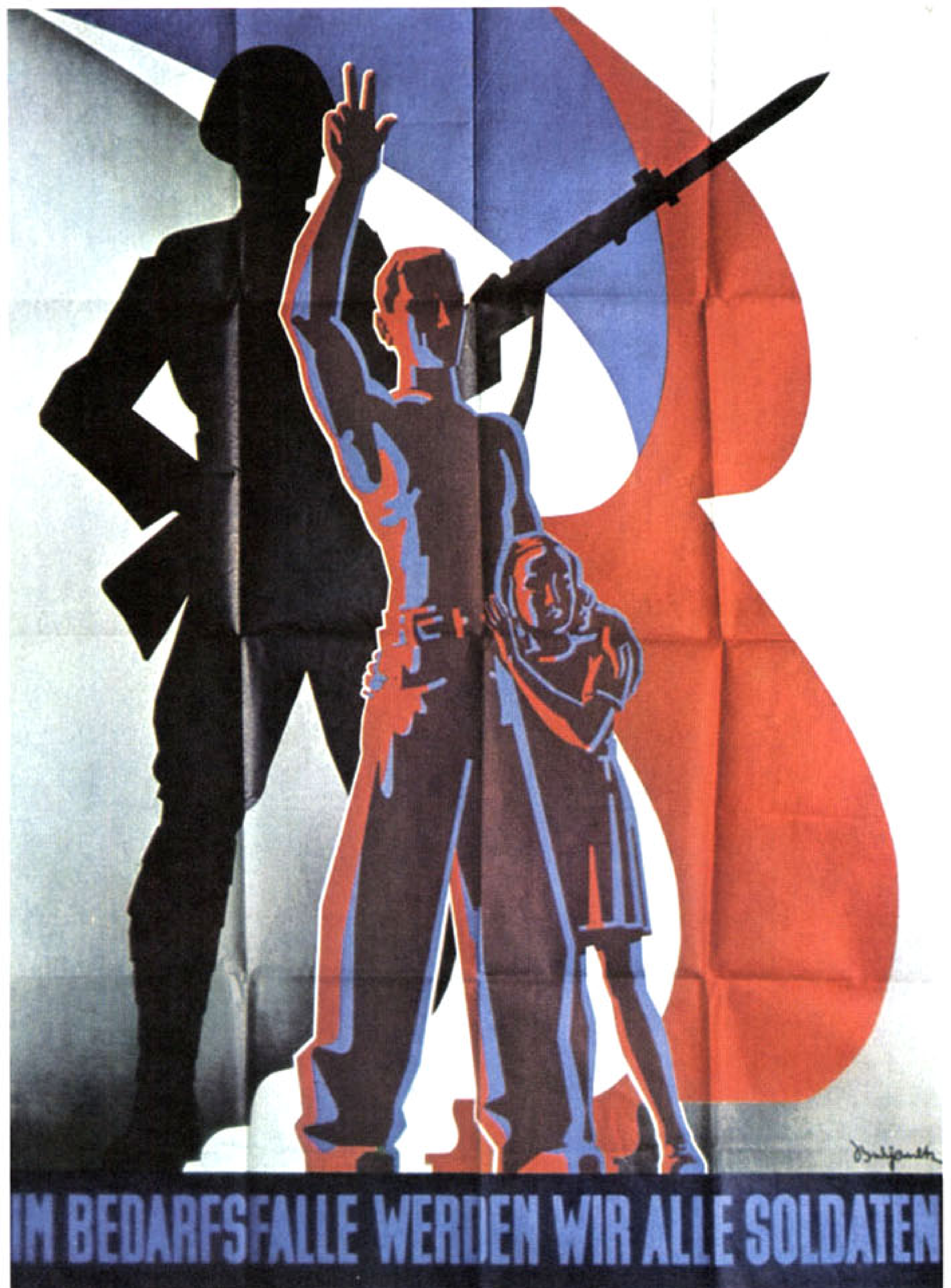
Chamberlain's Centrality

Appeasement, the word can be found in any dictionary. It is a noun form of the verb to *appease*, which means to placate or pacify, and is a perfectly good word for the not ignoble, and certainly not un-Christian, desire to avoid conflict through resolving grievances. To appease is to seek peaceful solutions to problems, whether arising among individuals or in relations between states. In diplomatic terms, blessed, we might think, is the appeaser

There was a time in Britain, over the winter of 1938-39, when appeasement was not merely the name ascribed to a particular approach to foreign policy but one which a sycophantic press deemed so successful as to be truly blessed. The ideal and the actual appeared, momentarily, to blend. Images of Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, hailed as the peacemaker, flickered across cinema screens the world over. His dramatic and heroic intervention at the end of September 1938 had, it was said at the time, averted European war over that 'faraway country', Czechoslovakia. He had travelled to Munich and in acceding to Hitler's demands there had reached what he thought was an all-important agreement based on 'the desire of our two peoples never to go to war again'. The saga of his peace-seeking mission attested not merely to his stamina but also, apparently, to the soundness of his policy. That 'general European settlement' Chamberlain had been aiming at seemed within his grasp: the product of his patient non-provocative appeasement. In the months that followed he continued to believe, whatever the doubts of others, that with Hitler's appetite satiated he could be trusted to make no further territorial demands in Europe. Accordingly he proclaimed 'peace for our time', won a

massive confidence vote in the House of Commons, thought about a general election, and got cabinet ministers up to deliver speeches full of references to a future golden age.

It didn't last, of course. Hitler, his appetite whetted, was hungry for more and, moreover, thought the British and French leaders too spineless to stop him. Within six months of the Munich agreement German troops were tramping through Prague, and in less than a year came the invasion of Poland. There were awkward hesitations and angry exchanges in the Commons before Neville Chamberlain, still prime minister, announced over the wireless that Britain was at war with Germany. Telling MPs that everything he had worked for had 'crashed into ruins', he was left reflecting that the policy of appeasement – which he had made his own and pursued with such relentless confidence – had failed. Munich was now a bitter memory. That which he thought he had achieved in September 1938 was revealed as illusory; not even useful as a stratagem of delay. Besides, having concluded a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, Hitler was in a stronger strategic position in 1939 than a year previously. Poland, Britain's *casus belli*, lay further away even than Czechoslovakia, and was clearly doomed. Hitler may not have got the war he wanted in 1939, but in committing the fatal mistake of taking the German dictator at his word and persuading himself that the man could be trusted, Neville Chamberlain realised that the world could see he had been taken for a chump. It was a bitter pill to swallow.



Above: A poster asserting the independence of Czechoslovakia. The caption reads: 'We'll all become soldiers if necessary'. The cession of the Sudetenland, arranged at the Munich conference in September 1938, left the rest of the country vulnerable. German troops entered Bohemia and Moravia on 15 March 1939.

Appeasement quickly became a dirty word in the English-speaking political lexicon – constituting, alongside Neville Chamberlain's name and the place-name Munich, a kind of unholy trinity, an object-lesson in dishonourable failure. When, in later years, the actions of such disagreeable foreign potentates as Nasser, Saddam Hussein and General Galtieri were viewed through the prism of Munich and deemed Hitler-like, the stock-in-trade reaction of freedom-loving British and American politicians was to deliver finger-wagging lectures on how it does not do to appease dictators. Quite whether the lessons of history are generally applicable is dubious, but certainly when parallels with Munich are drawn, vigilance is proclaimed as watchword and appeasement is ruled out. Nobody wants to be cast in Neville Chamberlain mode.

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A Wider Perspective?

There is undoubtedly a degree of unfairness. Neville Chamberlain, after all, did not invent appeasement. As a policy it was something he inherited and he was by no means the only exponent. Plenty of contemporaries who criticised him afterwards for seeking to appease the dictators had practised or advocated various forms of appeasement in their time

A scene from the Munich conference, showing Göring, Chamberlain, Mussolini, Hitler and Daladier.

Nevertheless it is to his name that the word has stuck, so much so that the policy's hallmark bad points (compounded of naïve wishful-thinking and bucketfuls of blinkered conceit) are ascribed to him personally – as if to say that he was not merely the walking embodiment of a particular policy, but the personification of a state of mind, an effete feebleness that, it is often said, affected British governing politicians in the inter-war years.

This image of an enfeebled, decaying British political élite which had lost its self-confidence and sense of purpose, is an important part of the historiography of appeasement. It has inspired all sorts of inquiries into how 'people who mattered' in 1930s Britain, whether in Oxford common rooms, at country-house weekends, or inhabiting the editorial office of *The Times*, contributed to what is labelled 'the climate of appeasement'. In this way a context is provided for Neville Chamberlain's actions, emphasising a broad hinterland of positive support for the policy he so energetically carried out. But the 'climate of appeasement' literature also serves another important function. It sets apart the figure who, whatever else can be said of him, lacked neither self-confidence nor a sense of Britain's historical purpose. This was Churchill.

Winston's Roles

It was Winston Churchill who, with 'Demosthenic eloquence', condemned the Munich agreement and what he saw as the groundless optimism that underlay appeasement. In legend, if not quite in fact, it is he who did most to resist the smug short-sightedness that permeated establishment circles in which a fear of communism outweighed any desire to combat the more vulgar excesses of the Nazi regime. He is also credited with being almost alone in recognising Hitler's evil intent and understanding the timeless essentials of British foreign policy requirements. A backbench MP at the time of Neville Chamberlain's return from Munich, he nevertheless led the country for most of the war years. Having the leisure afterwards to write his history of that conflict, he won hands-down the historical debate on what ought to have been done as regards facing the dictators.

Churchill emerged as the national saviour in the early summer of 1940; his replacement of Neville Chamberlain as prime minister being seldom described in terms other than that of an eleventh-hour reprieve. With the nation supposedly welcoming the change with a 'sigh of relief', Churchill took his walk with destiny; his defiant refusal to surrender to Hitler's 'new Dark Age' being commemorated as deliverance and duly celebrated. There are plenty of statues and memorials of him, whereas none has been erected in Neville Chamberlain's memory.

During the war, and after, Churchill maintained that the Second World War was unnecessary, that it need not, indeed should not, have been allowed to happen. A more robust approach to foreign affairs that did not pander to dictators and avoided the dishonour of Munich would, he maintained, have outfaced Hitler. What is more, he affirmed in what seemed a plausible counter-factual, the German people, once they saw their leader rebuffed, would have come to their senses, shaken off Hitler's hypnotic spell and thrown him over. In this way Churchill damned appeasement in general and Neville Chamberlain in particular for, in effect, allowing the war to happen.

Part of the Churchillian legend constructed immediately after he became prime minister was that while he, the hero, had been consigned to the wilderness throughout the 1930s, those in government sought cravenly to establish a rapport with the European dictators. Actually Churchill had tended to over-

look Mussolini's various delinquencies in the 1930s, but he was able to state that the appeasers' habitual siding with the strong against the weak and then claiming that the demands of the strong were just, appalled him. Germany he recognised as a power, and powers, he appreciated, tended to bully smaller neighbours. But he regarded a Germany growing so strong so quickly as a threat not merely to the stability of Europe but to British interests. In tearing up disarmament restrictions, remilitarising the demilitarised Rhineland, completing his *Anschluss* with Austria and going on to absorb the strategically important German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia, the Sudetenland, Hitler was, Churchill believed, going too far. Moreover it was as though appeasement did not so much allow as actively encourage this rapid accretion of German strength.

Instead of flying to Germany and giving Hitler all he wanted, Neville Chamberlain, Churchill maintained, should have been talking-up Britain's rearmament, rattling the national sabre and taking every step necessary, including alliance with the Soviet Union, to contain Germany. If all this could have been done in the name of the League of Nations, so much, Churchill thought, the better.

> **"Decision-makers were oppressed with a sense of national and imperial vulnerability"**

Revisionism

This Churchillian recipe for resistance formed the basis of the traditional, and highly condemnatory, thesis on appeasement. No other view was possible as long as the great man remained alive, and it was only after his death that, in haphazard and always contested manner, revisionist versions of the history of appeasement began to emerge. These, broadly speaking, maintain that for all manner of reasons appeasement was the rational course for British decision-makers to adopt in the inter-war years. Memories of the insensate slaughter on the western front during the Great War instilled, we read, a widespread reaction against any form of repeating the continental commitment. A feeling that Germany had been hard-done by at Versailles, and that treaty revision should be more accommodating to German sensibilities was also, we are told, prevalent among shapers of public opinion. Moreover to a generation brought up 'in the shadow of the bomber', there was nothing so precious as avoiding another war that could not be other than catastrophic in its consequences. In Britain's 'pacific democracy' a policy of appeasement, aimed at conciliation instead of threat, that sought to understand and help to fruition the ambitions of aggrieved 'have not' powers, seemed progressive and sensible. Appeasement also promised to relieve a hard-pressed economy from the burden of armaments expenditure, and high-profile summit diplomacy seemed preferable to a spiralling arms race and entangling alliances with doubtful continental allies.

Britain in the inter-war years, it is now recognised, had not the means to fulfil a world power role. Those in positions of authority might not have said as much, but they felt it to be so. It was one thing for the chiefs of staff to identify Germany as the major adversary power, but their blunt warning that Britain could not fight Italy, Germany and Japan simultaneously put a premium on diplomacy. Decision-makers were oppressed with a sense of national and imperial vulnerability. Hence appeasement – as much an attitude or reflex as a specific approach to diplomacy – has been deemed appropriate for what Britain was in the 1920s and 1930s, a power in decline.

> **"Chamberlain is charged by some for vainly thinking he could treat with Hitler, and praised by others for being brave and clear-sighted about what he wanted to achieve"**

Need for a New Approach

If the above, broadly speaking, sets out the traditional condemnatory verdict on appeasement and introduces the more common revisionist apologia, it has to be said that debate, though fierce, has tended to follow lines that have become predictable, even ossified. The two hostile camps are well-entrenched and ground is tenaciously fought over. Those of the appeasement-was-deeply-flawed persuasion, who claim it as an anomalous, even un-English policy, neither offer nor accept quarter from those who maintain that, given the times and the country's circumstances, an appeasing stance was so wholly appropriate that any other means of dealing with the dictators would have been odd, or at least unusual. In this way Neville Chamberlain is charged by some for vainly thinking he could treat with Hitler, and praised by others for being brave and clear-sighted about what he wanted to achieve. Similarly while Neville Chamberlain's military ignorance is paraded by critics, supporters argue that in matters strategic he had formed a better and more comprehensive appreciation of Britain's strengths and weaknesses than the self-styled warfare expert, Winston Churchill.

With positions thus fixed it is rare to encounter arguments that are not either wholly condemnatory of appeasement or fully sympathetic towards Neville Chamberlain's tireless efforts to preserve peace over the first two years of his premiership. It is unusual, and certainly not fashionable, to seek to break away from the binary divide so as to arrive at a composite position. With appeasement so tightly aligned with Neville Chamberlain's name, and with the narrative climaxing at Munich, no one has tried to separate the elements to the extent of arguing that, for example, by the time he became prime minister, in May 1937, his foreign policy inheritance was already so set in the appeasing groove that, given the dangers of war breaking out, it was right for him to take such a vigorous lead in diplomacy and act as his own foreign secretary. By the same token, the rigid identification of Neville Chamberlain as personification

Above: Hitler is greeted by a local girl on 19 October 1938, during a stage-managed entry into the Sudetenland.

of appeasement smothers the idea that the policy might have been, in broad terms, a sound approach to foreign affairs but that he was a bad practitioner of it.

Chamberlain's Failings

To argue that appeasement was strategically appropriate in the conditions of the middle and late 1930s, but that Neville Chamberlain's performance as appeaser was tactically inept is not to say that, with a different figure at the helm, there would have been no Czech crisis or that 'peace for our time' would have prevailed. The point being made is not some Churchill-type counter-factual 'What if ...?', but that Neville Chamberlain's brand of appeasement was not the only version available, and indeed that, with greater finesse and common sense, a firmer, more persuasive and more purposeful Anglo-French anti-German front could have been mounted. Moreover while it probably was necessary, or merely sensible, to make concessions to Hitler for as long as his demands were couched in the language of 'self-determination', Neville Chamberlain was wrong to persist in the belief that Hitler would respond positively to yet more concessions. The 'wretched business' of Munich may have been necessary, as Halifax put it. But what was missing was the thus-far-but-no-further certainty that, after the March 1939 Prague coup and Polish guarantee, Britain had now declared a continental commitment and meant to honour it. His inability to deliver the clear message to Hitler that he had reached the limit and that no further demands were acceptable, was Neville Chamberlain's greatest diplomatic failure.

His persistent belief that Hitler should not be pressurised or backed into a corner, when those around him had concluded that the German dictator's word could not be trusted, was also a grave error. There was no one on hand to question Neville Chamberlain's considerable but quite unwarranted confidence in the efficacy of his own personal negotiating touch. Why it should have fallen to a sedentary 69-year-old to formulate 'plan Z' in secret, then dramatise it and make three flights to Germany in less than a fortnight to parley with Hitler, remains a puzzling diplomatic initiative. The odd home-fixture might have been a useful equaliser. Equally, getting the French in on the act as Daladier, his French opposite number, had wished, might have offered greater leverage and struck a sweeter *entente* unity note. Cold-shouldering the French and maintaining it was the Czechs and not Hitler who constituted the problem, Neville Chamberlain allowed his love of the limelight and instinct for the unconventional to determine his policy. Having invested heavily in summit diplomacy, and being quite seduced by the popping-flash-bulbs and cheering crowds that went with his foreign trips, he was incapable of tactical manoeuvre once Hitler started misbehaving. Deliberately cutting himself off from such advice as the Foreign Office had to offer, he failed utterly to convey to the dictators the impression Halifax wished to present: that Britain meant business.

For Neville Chamberlain, despite appearances to the contrary, was no analyst. Throughout his political career his approach to issues was instinctive. Unencumbered by any systematic process of thinking, it was his not infrequent hunches and 'scintillations' that set his thoughts on a particular course. His instinct, fuelled by the Italian ambassador Grandi, that Mussolini wanted to be friends, suckered him along the path of continuing to seek a *rapprochement* with *Il Duce* long after the value of such a link had diminished to nothingness. Despite the *Anschluss* rendering British friendship with Fascist Italy strategically and diplomatically

redundant, Neville Chamberlain, in the face of French protests, still pressed ahead with his away-fixture summitry and, umbrella in hand, got very excited about his visit to Rome in January 1939.

Unorthodox as diplomat, Neville Chamberlain was no less subject to his 'scintillations' in defence matters. His embrace of air-power as the key to warfare in the future was modern-sounding, but it was built on a series of ill-informed hunches. He had, it is true, come round to the view earlier than most of his colleagues that rearmament was necessary, and had also, in his typically brisk fashion, set about securing it. Indeed, in terms of headline spending figures, Neville Chamberlain played his part in ensuring Britain was not unprepared for war in 1939. But in becoming air-minded, more or less instinctively, and in working out value-for-money rearmament measures some time before he became prime minister, Neville Chamberlain made several disastrous strategic choices.

A subscriber to what today would be called deterrence theory, Neville Chamberlain thought that provided Britain possessed a sizeable fleet of bombing aircraft, no enemy would dare unleash its air force on London for fear of retaliation. But this was about as far as his strategic thinking went. At a time when expert opinion was coming round to the view that the bomber would not, after all, always get through and that fighter defence was a better investment, his views on deterrence did not shift. This, perhaps, was permissible in a non-expert. What was not was that in his acquired air-mindedness he broadcast Britain's military isolationism. While ever-larger allocations of the defence budget were devoted, or so he thought, to rendering the country immune from air attack, Neville Chamberlain strode the world stage and made no effort to court, befriend or even appease, would-be continental allies. As far as he was concerned they were militarily on their own. Moreover his rearmament programme left the army so starved of resources that, as late as the spring of 1939, French observers were still referring to it as a 'parade ground army'.

The fatal consequence of neglecting the army lay in the way it affected relations with Britain's only palpable continental ally, France, and in the manner in which that neglect impacted on French strategic thinking. Unlike his Francophile half-brother Austen, Neville Chamberlain did not like the French. He thought their lavatories smelly and the people sexually degenerate. But in allowing his prejudice to influence his policy-making, he aroused French suspicions that if war with Germany should come, the British would leave them in the lurch. If the British proposed to effect a blockade from a distance and keep their bombers in reserve, it would be left to the French to pay the butcher's bill of warfare on land. It was hardly surprising that they quailed at the prospect. Yet Neville Chamberlain cared not a jot for French sensibilities. Thinking it wise to, as he put it, 'keep everyone guessing', he made no undertakings about military assistance to France and no suggestion until very late on about staff-talks. Whereas to many of his colleagues the appeasing had to stop at Munich, Chamberlain even sent his speeches to the German dictator so as to underline his own continuing conciliatory stance.

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Conclusion

There was an appropriateness about appeasement as British decision-makers' first foreign policy of choice during the 1930s. Economic vulnerability and strategic over-stretch made it so. There were simply too many potential enemies in too many parts of the world for a bolder, more Churchillian approach to foreign affairs to have been realistic What gave appeasement such a bad name in later years was, in part, Churchill's unchallenged ability to slant the narrative in the direction he favoured, but also Neville Chamberlain's equivocating, inconsistent and, at times, downright contradictory stewardship of foreign affairs during a large part of his brief premiership.

Had Chamberlain played his hand better, in the sense of being less prone to dash off to Germany, had he given up on Mussolini after the Anschluss, had the consequences of his military thinking been less isolationist, had he been more positive in his overtures towards France, and, above all, had he delivered clearer messages to Hitler about British intent, appeasement might even have worked. This does not mean there would have been no German invasion of Poland or that a European war would have been easily prevented. What it does mean is that British foreign policy in the mid and late 1930s would have been much easier to defend, at the time and after, along the lines that it was better to have tried and failed to appease the dictators' legitimate grievances than not to have tried at all.

Issues to Debate

- Why has appeasement excited so much historical controversy?
- In what respects was appeasement an appropriate policy for Britain to pursue in May 1937?
- What legitimate criticisms may be made of Chamberlain's conduct of foreign affairs before September 1939?

Further Reading

John Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1989); David Dutton, *Neville Chamberlain* (Arnold, 2001); R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (Macmillan, 1994); Robert Self *Neville Chamberlain* (Ashgate, 2006).

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