

NEVILLE CHAMBERLIN AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE "POLITICS OF APPRECIATION"

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Abstract

This article analyzes the content, main directions, and international consequences of the "appeasement policy" pursued by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in the 1930s. The appeasement policy aimed to reduce the risk of war by avoiding decisive action against the aggressive actions of German leader Adolf Hitler, opting instead for compromise. The article highlights the Munich Agreement, the occupation of the Sudetenland, and how this policy was directly linked to the outbreak of the Second World War. Throughout the analysis, both the positive and negative aspects of the policy are considered in a balanced manner, with Chamberlain's decisions evaluated within the historical context. The article includes a scholarly approach and independent conclusions on this relevant topic in historiography.

Keywords: Neville Chamberlain, appeasement policy, Munich Agreement, Hitler, British foreign policy, German aggression, Second World War, diplomatic compromise, international security.

Introduction

The 1930s of the 20th century are characterized by political instability, economic hardship, and the looming threat of a new global conflict. Although the Versailles peace system established after the First World War temporarily restored the balance of political power in Europe, the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany and the start of their revisionist policies disrupted this equilibrium. In such a complex geopolitical environment, the "appeasement policy" pursued by the British government, particularly under Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, holds a significant place in the history of international diplomacy.

The core of the appeasement policy was to prevent a large-scale war by offering certain concessions to aggressive states, especially Germany, through a moderate approach. Chamberlain sincerely believed that peace could be maintained through this policy; however, this approach is widely regarded as one that further encouraged Hitler's aggressive actions. The signing of the Munich Agreement (1938), the division of Czechoslovakian territories, and the inability to prevent the attack on Poland were among the main outcomes of this policy.

This article analyzes Neville Chamberlain's foreign policy decisions, the practical expression of the appeasement policy, and its role as a contributing factor to the outbreak of the Second World War. Additionally, the positive and negative aspects of this policy will be studied from a historiographical perspective. The findings will also shed light on the relevance of the lessons from this historical period for contemporary international politics.



The policy of appeasing an aggressor consists in resolving international disputes, artificially provoked by the aggressor state, and settling conflicts by conceding positions and issues considered secondary or insignificant—according to the proponents of this doctrine—to the side pursuing aggressive policies.

The term is most commonly used to describe the foreign policy of the British government under Neville Chamberlain, as well as under Baldwin and MacDonald, toward Nazi Germany and — to some extent — Fascist Italy during the period of 1933 to 1939, with particular emphasis on the years 1937 to 1939.

This policy led to the eventual collapse of the Versailles system, the failure of the League of Nations, and the breakdown of the collective security framework. It also caused a radical shift in the balance of power in Europe, weakened the geopolitical positions of Britain and France, and significantly strengthened those of Germany and Italy.

Having emerged victorious from the First World War, the former Entente allies — Great Britain, France, and Italy — gained full freedom of action in Europe. The geopolitical landscape of the continent was largely shaped by the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The treaty imposed strict limitations on the German Republic, including the loss of several territories and significant economic weakening. These measures led to growing social and political tensions within Germany, the rise of revanchist sentiments, and the increasing popularity of radical political parties.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire ceased to exist, having been divided into several relatively small independent states.

In one of the Entente countries, the Russian Empire, the First World War led first to the February Revolution, followed by the October Revolution and a civil war, resulting in the Bolsheviks coming to power. In accordance with the well-known declared plans of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) to export the world revolution to all countries, the capitalist states justifiably viewed the Bolsheviks as ideologically hostile and did not consider the Soviet leadership a legitimate partner in shaping European policy. By signing a separate peace treaty with Germany, Russia also lost its opportunity to participate in the postwar redistribution of spoils. Furthermore, during the civil war that broke out on its territory, its former Entente allies launched a military intervention.

After the First World War, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and was subsequently partitioned.

In Italy, there was a prevailing opinion that the compensations received by the country for its participation in the military actions on the side of the Entente were insufficient.

Thus, three of the five leading European powers were dissatisfied with the outcomes of the Versailles Treaty. Moreover, in Europe, numerous contentious issues arose among the new states that emerged after the war, related to mutual territorial claims, as well as economic, political, social, and ideological disagreements.

Attempts to appease Germany were made as early as the 1920s. The first steps in this direction were taken by British Prime Minister Lloyd George. He decided to convene a new, truly peaceful conference, in which all parties — the USA, Germany, Soviet Russia, and the European allies — should participate. Lloyd George's initiative was supported by the French Prime Minister at the time, Aristide Briand. Both the Russians and the Germans attended the conference, but both sides harbored well-founded suspicions that they were being set against each other. The Germans were



to be offered the opportunity to join in the exploitation of Russia, while the Russians were urged to present Germany with the bill. Instead, representatives of the two countries secretly met in Rapallo and agreed not to oppose each other. The Rapallo Treaty disrupted the plans of the organizers of the Genoa Conference and became scandalously infamous. At the time, the Bolsheviks were considered outcasts, so the treaty's conclusion with them was viewed as treachery by the Germans. Later, when Germany took on the role of the world's villain, the dishonesty of the Rapallo Treaty was criticized, this time by the Russians.

By adopting the "appeasement policy" before the Second World War, the democratic Western states (particularly Great Britain and France) hoped that through concessions and compromises, they could stop the aggressor. Thus, Great Britain and France, turning a blind eye to the aggression of Germany, the USSR, Italy, and Poland (only condemning them verbally), hoped that the ambitions of the aggressors would be satisfied at the expense of weaker states (such as Austria and Czechoslovakia). Also, at the turn of 1937–1938, the British government circles discussed the issue of colonial compensations for Germany through the division of Belgian and Portuguese territories (the return of territories taken from Germany by the Versailles Treaty was deemed "undesirable" in 1936 by the Plymouth Committee and faced opposition from the mandatory dominions). However, the stipulation to provide Britain with the maximum number of colonial concessions in these territories and make the maximum concessions in European politics did not satisfy Adolf Hitler, and he rejected the project with such dubious benefits.

After the signing of the Munich Agreement, Soviet intelligence reported to Stalin that the policy of appeasing Hitler was ineffective, and that concessions only encouraged the aggressor to take further action.

In March 1939, Germany occupied Czechoslovakia, transforming Bohemia into the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia" and Slovakia (a formally independent state) into a satellite and ally of Germany. Hitler then made claims against Poland — initially demanding an extraterritorial land route to East Prussia, and later calling for a referendum on the status of the "Polish Corridor." According to Hitler's version, the referendum was to involve people who had lived in the territory before November 1918. After Britain and France provided guarantees of Poland's independence, it became increasingly clear that war between Germany and these states was highly likely.

Conclusions

In conclusion, Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement remains one of the most debated and consequential diplomatic strategies of the 20th century. While his intentions were rooted in the desire to prevent another devastating conflict after the horrors of the First World War, the policy inadvertently contributed to the escalation of aggression, ultimately leading to the outbreak of the Second World War. The Munich Agreement of 1938, which allowed Hitler to annex parts of Czechoslovakia, stands as the most glaring example of the failures of appeasement, revealing the danger of compromising with expansionist powers at the expense of weaker nations.

Chamberlain's belief that appeasement could buy time for Britain and France to prepare for war was a short-sighted strategy, one that underestimated Hitler's ambitions and overestimated his willingness to be satisfied with limited territorial gains. The concessions made to Germany only emboldened the Nazis, reinforcing the belief that they could achieve their goals through force and intimidation without facing significant opposition from the Western powers.



Furthermore, the policy of appeasement reflected deeper issues within British and French foreign policy at the time, including a lack of unity among European powers, economic difficulties, and a general reluctance to confront the emerging Nazi threat. The inability of Britain and France to take decisive action earlier, whether through collective security measures or stronger diplomatic pressures, allowed Germany to gain both territory and influence, further destabilizing Europe.

From a historiographical standpoint, the policy of appeasement is often seen as a cautionary tale. The differing interpretations of its effectiveness — with some arguing that it delayed war and others asserting that it merely postponed the inevitable — contribute to the ongoing debate about the best strategies for dealing with aggressive regimes. However, the ultimate lesson of the appeasement policy is clear: appeasing aggressors does not secure peace; rather, it emboldens them to pursue more extreme actions.

The repercussions of this policy continue to resonate in contemporary international relations, especially in the context of dealing with emerging threats and authoritarian regimes. The experience of the 1930s serves as a reminder of the need for vigilance, collective action, and a clear understanding that peace cannot be achieved by making concessions to those who seek to undermine it.

Thus, while Neville Chamberlain's appeasement strategy was intended to prevent war, its long-term consequences were tragic. The lessons learned from this period of history are invaluable for modern diplomacy, underscoring the importance of standing firm in the face of aggression and ensuring that peace is not pursued at the cost of compromising core values of sovereignty and international stability.

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