



Appeasement

By Jeff Spoden

The failed attempts to appease Adolf Hitler in the lead up to World War II have become a historical punchline. They had some serious consequences.

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Introduction

The dictionary defines appeasement as the attempt to bring about a state of peace, quiet, ease, or calm. In history, however, the word usually refers to the unsuccessful effort by British prime minister Neville Chamberlain to keep Adolf Hitler from starting World War II. Today, this historical example of appeasement is used by anyone who favors confrontation over negotiation. They cite Chamberlain as a weak leader who was fooled by Hitler. Many believe that if Chamberlain had taken a tough approach from the beginning, the war might have been avoided.



Neville Chamberlain holds up the Munich Agreement, signed by himself and Adolf Hitler in 1938. As he read the contents of the agreement, the crowd cheered him. Public domain.

It is true that Prime Minister Chamberlain, and his forerunner, Stanley Baldwin, did little to stop German aggression after 1935. The massacre of the First World War was still fresh in people's minds. There weren't many leaders or citizens in Britain or France who were willing to risk yet another devastating war with Germany. At the same time, there were many Brits who believed that the Treaty of Versailles had been unfair to Germany. They believed that Hitler's violations of the treaty—such as building Germany's military up and moving troops into the Rhineland, which was supposed to be free of soldiers—were justified. Many even believed that fascism was preferable to the sort of communism being pioneered in Stalin's Soviet Union. So, in the mid-1930s, appeasement was a very popular policy. Making nice with Hitler made sense to millions of Europeans. The hope was that agreeing to limited German expansion would satisfy him.

Chronology of Appeasement

But Hitler continued to violate the Treaty of Versailles. He began invading Germany's neighbors. People in Britain and France grew concerned, and many condemned German expansion. Still, the British and French governments took no serious action. Here's a chart of each German aggression and the British and French appeasement that followed:

Table 1: Chronology of Appeasement

| When | German Action | British and French Appeasement |
|---------------------|--|---|
| 1935 | Publicly announced that Germany would rebuild its military. | There is little response, and many in Britain and France praise the action. |
| 1936 | Sent troops into the Rhineland, a demilitarized zone between Germany and France/Belgium. | France lodged a complaint with the League of Nations. Britain said that it was not in a position to back France in a conflict with Germany. |
| March 1938 | The <i>Anschluss</i> , or “unification” of Germany and Austria. Hitler demanded that Austrian Nazis be put in power or Germany would invade. These Nazis “invited” German forces in, held an election, and 99.7% of voters chose to unify the two countries. | The reactions in Britain and France were mild. Chamberlain said: “The hard fact is that nothing could have arrested [stopped] what has actually happened in Austria unless this country and other countries had been prepared to use force.” |
| April 1938 | Nazis in the Sudetenland, a part of Czechoslovakia with many Germans, demanded autonomy from the Czech government. Hitler claimed that these people were being brutalized and sent 750,000 troops to the German/Czech border. | Britain sent a representative to Prague and convinced the Czech government to grant autonomy to the Sudetenland Nazis. |
| August 1938 | German generals sent a letter to Britain claiming that they were going to initiate a coup against Hitler, but they wanted a guarantee that Britain would fight if Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia. | Chamberlain ignored the letter, believing that Britain and Nazi Germany were “the two pillars of European peace and buttresses against communism.” |
| September 1938 | Hitler demanded that the Sudetenland not only become independent of Czechoslovakia, but that it be absorbed into Germany. | Chamberlain believed that defending the Sudetenland would require the invasion of Germany, which neither Britain nor France wanted to do. He agreed to Hitler’s demand and told the Czech government that it must give Germany any territory with a German majority. |
| Late September 1938 | Hitler demanded that Czechoslovakia cede (give up) lands to Germany or face invasion. He agreed to meet with the leaders of Britain, France, and Italy. | Britain and France informed the Czech government that it must give the Sudetenland to Germany immediately or stand alone. The Munich Agreement was signed, officially giving the Sudetenland to Germany. A peace treaty was also signed between Germany and Britain. Chamberlain returned home and announced he had secured “peace for our time.” |
| August 1939 | Hitler told his commanders something to the effect of, “Our enemies have leaders who are below the average. No personalities. No masters, no men of action... Our enemies are small fry. I saw them in Munich.” | Chamberlain basically replies, “I know you are, but what am I?” and Edouard Daladier, prime minister of France, offers something like, “I’m rubber, you’re glue. What you say bounces off me and sticks to you.” ¹ |
| September 1939 | Germany invades Poland. | Britain and France both declare war on Germany and the most awful war in human history begins. |

¹ Not their exact words, but you get the idea!



[Voting ballot from Austria in April 1938.](#) Translation: "Referendum and Greater German Parliament; Ballot; Do you agree with the reunification of Austria with the German Reich (empire) that was enacted on 13 March 1938 and do you vote for the party of our leader; Adolf Hitler?; Yes; No". Public domain.

Chamberlain in the Rearview Mirror

Looking back now, it seems obvious that appeasement was a bad strategy. For many, Chamberlain is a punchline—a weak leader who allowed the spread of Nazism across Europe. But at the time, this was far from obvious. Until the war started, many French and British citizens wanted their leaders to do anything and everything to keep them out of another war. They hoped that, if they gave Hitler what he wanted, he would be satisfied and they might avoid war. When Germany invaded Poland, however, many realized that conflict was likely. At that point, the public started to judge Chamberlain's appeasement harshly. Interestingly, Winston Churchill, a chief critic of appeasement in 1939, had actually been supportive of it until 1938, at least in terms of dealing with Italy and Japan.

Neville Chamberlain has come down through popular history as the weak leader whom Hitler fooled. Appeasement was favored by a large majority in Europe until late 1939. However, it has come to represent a policy of failure.



[Winston Churchill gives the "V" for victory sign in 1942.](#) Public domain.

The Specter of Appeasement

Since the end of World War II, some politicians have even used Chamberlain's failed appeasement to justify conflict and war. Some have connected serious diplomacy with Chamberlain and his foolish capitulation (giving in) to Hitler. Some examples:

U.S. President Harry Truman, writing about his decision to go to war in Korea in 1950:

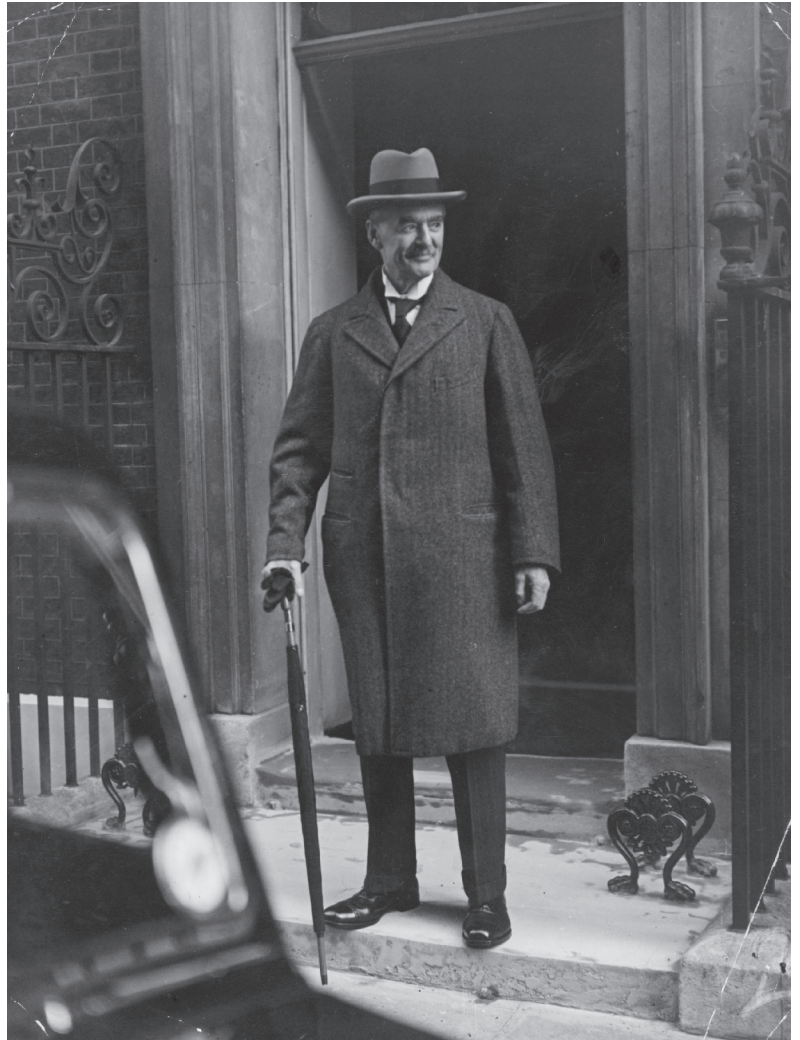
I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act, it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen and twenty years earlier.... If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on a second world war.

U.S. President Lyndon Johnson spoke about Vietnam. He implied that America would stand up to Ho Chi Minh and the Vietcong army in a way that Chamberlain had not stood up to Hitler and the Nazi government. Since Chamberlain was frequently photographed carrying an umbrella, Johnson was quoted as stating: "We're not going to have any men with any umbrellas."

Margaret Thatcher was prime minister of England from 1979 to 1990. She responded to a critic of Britain's involvement in the first Iraq war by recalling: "I seem to hear the stench of appeasement in here. A rather nauseating stench of appeasement." Writing for the *Los Angeles Times* just before the first Gulf War, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, German author, poet, and editor, said:

"I would like to demonstrate that talk of Saddam Hussein as an heir to Hitler is no journalistic metaphor, no propagandistic exaggeration, but rather goes to the heart of the matter. We do not do justice to the "Fuhrer" of Iraq if we underestimate his dangerousness, if we portray him only as a traditional despot or a modern dictator."

But this stop-the-next-Hitler way of thinking also has its critics. Using Hitler and appeasement to justify war certainly grabs one's attention and emotions. Still, it's seen by many as a misleading, even reckless, comparison. None of the modern "villains" being equated to Hitler are anywhere near as harmful as he was, at least in the above examples. Critics say that playing the Hitler card over and over again is deceptive and dangerous. The worry is that it downplays the real threat Germany posed to the world. The comparison also acts to justify wars that may



British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain leaving number ten Downing Street for Germany where he intends to hold peace talks concerning the Czech crisis with Adolf Hitler. © Getty Images.

not need fighting. For example, the quotes above made Saddam Hussein out to be the next Adolf Hitler. In fact, his country couldn't win an eight-year war with its neighbor Iran, let alone pose a threat to the entire world. The relative power of Iraq's army was a fraction of 1930s Germany. There was little evidence to suggest that Hussein would use that power beyond his immediate neighbors. But once he was "Hitlerized" into a madman bent on world domination, anyone looking for alternatives to war was called a modern-day Chamberlain. This thinking helped launch two questionable wars.

Conclusion

It seems that as long as there are conflicts between nations, Neville Chamberlain will remain the great historical wimp. He seems doomed to be resurrected by those who use his story to stoke fears and justify conflict. But more recently, many historians have tried to salvage his legacy. They want to put his actions in context. Perhaps this historical project to show Chamberlain in better light can help spark real debate about the significant differences between negotiation and appeasement. Maybe we can learn more about what was happening in Europe during the 1930s and the lessons we can learn from Chamberlain's failure.

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Jeff Spoden is a retired social studies teacher, having been in the classroom for 33 years. He taught US history, world history, sociology, international relations, and history of American popular music. He loves music, film, travel, the Golden State Warriors, and the number 32.

Image Credits

Cover: Neville Chamberlain seen here at Heston Airport after returning from his summit meeting with the German Chancellor Adolf Hitler in Munich. Prime Minister Chamberlain holds a paper signed by Hitler and himself and declares to the waiting crowd "Peace in our time" 3rd October 1938. © Photo by Daily Mirror/Mirrorpix/Mirrorpix via Getty Images

Neville Chamberlain holds up the Munich Agreement, signed by himself and Adolf Hitler in 1938. As he read the contents of the agreement, the crowd cheered him. Public domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MunichAgreement.jpg>

Voting ballot from Austria in April 1938. Translation: "Referendum and Greater German Parliament; Ballot; Do you agree with the reunification of Austria with the German Reich (empire) that was enacted on 13 March 1938 and do you vote for the party of our leader; Adolf Hitler?; Yes; No". Public domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stimmzettel-Anschluss.jpg>

Winston Churchill gives the "V" for victory sign in 1942. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Winston_Churchill_cigar_in_mouth_gives_his_famous_%27V%27_for_victory_sign_during_a_visit_to_Bradford,_4_December_1942._H25966.jpg

British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain leaving number ten Downing Street for Germany where he intends to hold peace talks concerning the Czech crisis with Adolf Hitler. © David Savill/Topical Press Agency/Getty Images.



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