

Appeasement and the Munich Crisis

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“In September 1938 France and Britain Had No Alternative But to Submit to Hitler’s Demands”

Introduction

In the evening of 30 September 1938, Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, appeared from the first-floor window of 10 Downing Street to address an expectant crowd. “My good friends,” he began, “for the second time in our history a British prime minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time.” Barely five months later, Hitler tore up the Munich agreement, and half a year after that general war broke out in Europe. The Munich crisis is one of the most controversial episodes of modern times, the negative connotations of appeasement etched in the collective consciousness. The debate over why France and Britain pursued a policy, which turned out to be such an abysmal failure, remains unresolved to this day, more than seventy years later. Beck writes: “In the past half century, few episodes of diplomatic history have attracted as much scholarly attention as the Munich conference.”[1] Britain and France’s decision at Munich was the culmination of their appeasement policy and the historiography of the events of September 1938 remains bound up with the historiography of appeasement more broadly.

British historiography in the early post-1945 period was dominated by the “Guilty Men” thesis, which placed the blame squarely on the personal failings of Chamberlain and a small clique of appeasers around him. They were lambasted for their underestimation of Nazism, their refusal to educate the public about Hitler’s expansionist ambitions, and for their failure to rearm the country. For nearly two decades, this bitter critique of appeasement was adopted “lock, stock, and barrel” by historians.[2] By the mid-1960s a revisionist argument appeared, due in part to a proliferation of new sources, which passed a more sympathetic judgment on the personalities involved. Histories of appeasement stressed instead the military, economic and political constraints that limited diplomatic alternatives in the 1930s. Appeasement was consequently portrayed as the logical and only response. More recently, “post-revisionist” historians have begun to state their case with less certainty, with some reaching the more nuanced conclusion, that while structural constraints were overwhelming, there may have existed alternative courses which could have averted war. Yet it would be a mistake, as Aster points out, to see the historiography of appeasement as a linear projection from orthodoxy to revisionism to counter- or post-revisionism, as revisionists and post-revisionists never uniformly held the field.[3]

This essay is set very much in the revisionist vein in that it sets out some of the major structural constraints, which limited viable alternatives to appeasement in 1938. It has been impractical to consider all the diplomatic options available to Britain and France in a short essay, and thus the assumption is made that the only two outcomes were appeasement or war. In any case, any policy other than conciliation was highly likely to lead to war anyway, given both Hitler’s determination and Czechoslovakia’s resolve. French policy increasingly became of secondary importance to British policy during the Czech crisis. French officials kept up the appearance of support to Czechoslovakia throughout, in an attempt to maintain France’s international image, but they realized that going to war would be catastrophic. France was militarily unprepared for war, it was suffering an acute financial crisis at precisely the wrong moment, and its general strategic situation meant it was likely to end up facing Germany all on its own. This paralysis enabled Britain to take the lead during the crisis and its policy of appeasement provided a convenient shield to conceal French weakness. Britain was similarly averse to war over an issue of no importance to

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its national interests, and for very good reason. Its own army had just begun a process of rearmament, which was restricted to a slow pace by economic restraints that prevented any substantial continental commitment. Safeguarding the Empire, meanwhile, was a huge burden that necessitated a conciliatory foreign policy, as a war over the Sudeten Germans threatened to split the Empire in two.

France and the Czech Crisis

A major factor weighing on the French official mindset was its military unpreparedness for a conflict with Germany. The most glaring weakness was the state of France's air force. A crucial moment for French policy came with the inspection tour of France's air force chief, General Vuillemin, to Germany in August 1938. Overwhelmed by the Luftwaffe units and factories he was shown, Vuillemin remarked that the entire French air force would be destroyed within a fortnight of war, and he became the chief apostle of doom upon his return to France. Germany's air superiority seemed colossal. In late September 1938, the government was advised by its technical experts that German production rates per month stood at 800, compared to 50 in France. Germany was reported to have a total of 6,000 serviceable machines compared to France's 1,500, while out of 500 fighter aircraft, only 20 could compete with the fastest German models.[4] France's air rearmament scheme, 'Plan V', demanded a further 18 months of peace for the air force to catch up. In terms of France's land forces, meanwhile, the army staff insisted that a comparison of frontline divisional capacity between France and Germany would distort the true picture of relative land strengths. General Gauche, head of French military intelligence, stressed the need to acknowledge the Wehrmacht's greater number of armored divisions, speed of mobilization and concentration, and larger manpower reserves, all of which gave it far greater offensive potential.[5] The possibility, always prevalent in French minds, that Czechoslovakia's resistance might crumble within weeks, meant that French ground forces would thus ultimately be faced with a single-handed war against a much stronger German opponent. The composition of British forces, moreover, meant that even if it did join the conflict, the first six months of hostilities would see little meaningful military support beyond its two-divisional field force. Of course, the French, as the British did, overestimated the strength of the German army, and particularly its air force, but as well as its objective military weakness what was important was the *perception* of disparity among the key decision makers.

France's military weakness was compounded by economic problems that climaxed at the highpoint of the Czech crisis. Three elements of France's economic situation are particularly important. First, and most critically, by September 1938 France's economy and financial system were near breaking point. The origins lay in the war scare caused by the 'weekend crisis' in May and by September, the finance ministry concluded that no further domestic loan funding could be raised to continue rearmament, while France was also denied the assurance of additional US or British financial support. The introduction of partial mobilization on 24 September then caused wholesale upheaval in the banking system, as private investors hoarded their money and threatened complete financial collapse. Cancelled subscriptions to defense bonds in the following five days totaled 448 million francs, while major savings banks reported net losses of up to 50 per cent in their overall deposit holdings.[6] This clearly demonstrated the potential consequences of going to war over Czechoslovakia. Even if financial breakdown could be averted, a crisis in rearmament funding seemed bound to occur if a conflict broke out. A second important point was that France lacked decisive land and air force superiority to achieve rapid victory over Germany, which meant that its long-term financial reserves and industrial potential became vitally important. Despite the 'momentary' state of economic crisis in September 1938, the French economy was in a longer-term process of recovery from what the government saw as the previous Popular Front government's economic mistakes. By definition, an economy in the process of recovery would become stronger over time, and thus peace was imperative, a point repeatedly made by Marchandreau, the finance minister, in his daily reports to the premier throughout September.[7] Finally, as the third largest external investor in Czechoslovakia, France had deep economic involvement in the country. A 698 million franc state loan had been finalized in March 1937 and as a key creditor to the Czech government, France had much to lose if the country was attacked.[8]

France's military and economic problems thus offered little hope in a single-handed struggle against Germany, but what about the potential contribution of its allies? Here too, the prospects were bleak to say the least. Young goes as far as saying that France's strategic position by 1938 was "worse than it had been since the darkest days of the First World War." [9] France's alliance system in Eastern Europe, so assiduously cultivated in the 1920s to balance against

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Germany, had been irrevocably debilitated by the Rhineland crisis in 1936. France's failure to react had a devastating psychological impact on its smaller allies, who lost what faith they had in French security. Meeting together after the crisis, the chiefs of staff of the Little Entente concluded that their countries' future security might now require a choice between subservience to Germany or to Russia.[10] Indeed, during 1937-8, France's military attaches posted in Poland, Yugoslavia and Romania generally confirmed that their host governments would not assist the Czechs. Poland, meanwhile, was actively hostile to Czechoslovakia due to the latter's military pact with the Soviet Union, and resisted French attempts since 1936 to diffuse tensions between the two. Regarding the Soviet Union, though conflicting reports were received about its position during the crisis, there were severe doubts about both the Soviet Union's intentions and actual military capacity, both of which were anyway nullified by Polish and Romanian intransigence over the issue transit rights for Soviet forces. On the Western front, the situation had likewise deteriorated. French inaction during the Rhineland crisis had caused Belgium to revoke its military alliance with France and proclaim neutrality, with crucial military consequences. Anglo-French forces were no longer guaranteed transit rights across Belgian territory, while Franco-Belgian coordination, a key element in France's strategy for the defense of her unfortified northern border, was abruptly terminated. Finally, of course, France continued to bemoan the lack of British support, demonstrated by the limited Franco-British defensive coordination and the dismal scale of Britain's continental field force commitment.

Britain and the Czech Crisis

Despite the enormous structural limitations to a firmer French policy towards Germany, France was still bound to Czechoslovakia by its treaty obligations. The British, in contrast, had virtually no strategic interest in Czechoslovakia or the region, which was of far less significance than Western Europe and the Empire. Direct economic and financial interests in the area were comparatively small, and Britain had no treaty obligations to the Czechs. At the same time, because the First World War had been sparked off by conflict there, the British were always naturally aware that their security could be affected in the region, creating what Newman called a paradox in British policy in the Danubian region.[11] Sir John Simon, the foreign secretary, summed up the attitude of most of the government at the time of the Dollfuss assassination in 1934: "Our own policy is quite clear. We must keep out of trouble in Central Europe at all costs. July twenty years ago stands as an awful warning..."[12] As Newman makes clear, the British approach to problems in the area had long been to solve them through its general European policy, which emphasized détente and cooperation among the west European great powers. In this sense, appeasement has to be seen in the long-term continuity of British foreign policy rather than an aberration associated with a weak Chamberlain and his supporters. Schroeder traces British policy at Munich even further back, finding continuity from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[13] Ultimately, Czechoslovakia was a far away place with little direct importance to Britain. The Czech issue for Chamberlain and the British boiled down to the claim of three and a half million Germans to join their kinsfolk in the Reich. It simply remained out of the question for Chamberlain that Britain could be committed to war merely on that account. As he broadcast to the British people on 27 September: "How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing."

Like France, Britain's military situation in 1938 was unpromising, to put it mildly. First, its rearmament effort had been much delayed and was still in a transitory phase. Prior to 1934, the financial restraint of the MacDonald government had prevented even the modest defense programs agreed on in the 1920s from being fully carried out. What could properly be called a rearmament program, therefore, was not begun in the case of the air force until 1935, was extended to the other services only in 1936, and would not come to fruition until at least the end of the decade. The proposals for the air force, for example, described in the 1935 White Paper as "the most urgent and important of our defense requirements," would not be completed until 1939.[14] The implication was that any potential conflict with Germany would have to wait until that time. Vansittart, permanent undersecretary at the Foreign Office, wrote in 1936: "Time is the very material commodity which the Foreign Office is expected to provide in the same way as other departments provide other war material...To the Foreign Office falls therefore the task of holding the situation until at least 1939." [15] The economic factors underlying Britain's military weakness also bear taking into account. Economic and financial constraints continued throughout the 1930s and it was in fact not until 1939 that defense expenditure was clearly aimed at preparation for war, rather than at an increase in peacetime activities.[16] The interaction of economic and military factors is seen most clearly in the major 1937 defense review under Sir Thomas Inskip,

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Minister for Co-ordination of Defence. Inskip's report described economic stability as "a fourth arm in defence...without which purely military efforts would be of no avail." [17] In approving the report, the Cabinet thus decided to keep defense expenditure within limits that would not impair economic stability. Crucially, the report established Britain's military priorities in light of the finance available on the "fourth arm" principle. These were air defense of Britain, protection of trade routes, and imperial defense. Defense of any ally Britain might have in war, for example France, ranked lower than defense of the Empire. The army assumed that field units would not be committed to European campaign at the outset of war and it was decided that even those divisions stationed in Britain should not be equipped immediately for European warfare. This decision was only rescinded in February 1939 and thus until that point Britain was in no position to provide significant land support to France in a war with Germany.

Britain's "imperial overstretch" was a third major structural constraint preventing a tougher line on Germany. This factor was first highlighted by Howard, who argued "the Empire brought Britain no strength in her dealings with Germany. Yet British strength had nevertheless to be dissipated in the Empire's defence." [18] The British Empire had reached its widest extent after WWI and represented a significant defense commitment. Maintaining the Indian army, for instance, was a major burden on British industry and almost a third of Britain's land forces were diverted to India. The Chiefs of Staff warned in 1937: "we cannot foresee the time when our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our trade, territory and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan at the same time..." [19] They repeatedly called for diplomatic action to reduce the number of potential enemies and to gain the support of potential allies, and this weighed strongly on the official British mindset. [20] Another important factor was the changing nature of imperial military ties since WWI. Whereas Britain's declaration of war in 1914 automatically committed the dominions as well, this was now no longer the case given their increased autonomy. The dominions for the most part were staunch supporters of appeasement and made it clear they would not join a war over Czechoslovakia. On 1 September 1938 Chamberlain was told that the South African and Australian governments would not give military support if war broke out. Worse, those dominions that might have fought were so backward they would have diverted valuable equipment and instructors from the British army. Until 1939, for example, the Canadian army did not have a single tank. [21]

Conclusion

The economic, military and strategic constraints outlined here were nothing less than overwhelming and, regardless of whether Germany's capacities were overestimated or France and Britain's underestimated, a daunting objective reality existed. But the above focus on material factors has left out an important element of the story. The leaders and decision-makers of the late 1930s did not operate in a vacuum but were a product of their generation. This was a generation for which the horrors of the Great War twenty years before – that war to end all wars – was still fresh in the memory. In Britain, three million families suffered the direct loss of one of their own. The French had suffered proportionately the most of any participant. The nightmare that it could all happen again was still all too real. Chamberlain was thus lauded as a hero upon his return to London, and Daladier, who felt so humiliated by Munich, returned to a reception no less enthusiastic. A vast proportion of both populations was not prepared to fight a war with Germany, let alone one over a German grievance which many felt was not wholly unjustified. This sentiment dominated not just the mind of the public but also that of the leaders. Even Eden, who famously resigned in opposition to Chamberlain's appeasement, would later write: "Academically speaking there is little dispute that Hitler should have been called to order, if need be forcibly. But nobody was prepared to do it, in this country literally nobody... If Churchill had been Prime Minister, he too would have encountered formidable obstacles, not the least of which was a parliament and public deeply adverse to any prospect of war." [22] Considered in this light, appeasement was an honorable and logical policy. In this light, the surprising thing is not that Britain and France submitted to Hitler's demands, but that there was any serious consideration of going to war at all.

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[6] *Ibid*, p. 139.

[7] *Ibid*, p. 139.

[8] *Ibid*, p. 133.

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