

A Reassessment of the Munich Agreement

Written by Clinton Ervin

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CLINTON ERVIN, MAR 26 2016

This paper will examine the 1938 Munich Agreement between Hitler's Germany and Britain and France which ceded the German-speaking area of Czechoslovakia (the Sudetenland) to Germany. Ostensibly, the Allied Powers determined that Nazi Germany was not a threat and could be placated by surrendering to its demands. Winston Churchill states that, "both the Prime Minister (Chamberlain) and Lord Runciman (British diplomat) were convinced that only the cession of the Sudeten areas to Germany would dissuade Hitler from ordering the invasion of Czechoslovakia." (Churchill 1948, 300-01) This diplomatic strategy came to be known as appeasement – political or material concession to an enemy in order to avoid conflict. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain famously declared that he had achieved: "Peace in our time," but that boast proved to be direly inaccurate as Hitler invaded Poland the following year. The Agreement came to be regarded as one of the most disastrous deals in the history of diplomacy and a missed opportunity to stop German aggression before the onset of World War II. The threat analysis conducted by the Allies leading to this disastrous decision will be the focus of this paper.

Lauded as the savior of the world at the time of Munich, he (Chamberlain) was heavily criticized from all directions when German tanks rolled into Prague just six months later. According to Andrew Stedman, Chamberlain came to be characterized as one of the men who allowed Britain to reach its lowest political, military, and moral ebb- a naïve leader who was duped by Hitler and failed to prepare his people sufficiently for the horror which confronted them. (Stedman 2011, 1-2) When his peculiar circumstances are examined however, does Chamberlain still appear as impotent?

The reemergence of the term "appeasement" in regard to the West's policy toward the Iranian nuclear program and even more specifically the recent deal with Iran makes this a particularly appropriate time to reexamine the Munich Agreement of 1938. In retrospect this pact is widely regarded as a policy failure of the part of the Allies of the highest possible proportion. In the view of some, a perfect opportunity to halt the Nazi advance before it truly started was squandered. Ever since the post-war examination and assessment of the chain of events leading to World War II, governments have strove not to "appease" dictators, which is now regarded-not as avoiding conflict as Chamberlain had hoped-but further empowering aggressive action. U.S. Presidents have cited the failure of appeasement in 1938 in deciding to go to war in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq in 1990 and 2003, as well as in many presidential campaigns. (Ripsman & Levy 2008, 148) The word itself has become so reviled it could not be seriously considered as a diplomatic strategy. J. David Singer states, "The emotional symbolism of appeasement has such a grip on the political mentality of the West that anything with even the faintest odor of appeasement is rejected with remarkable vigor." (Small 1991, 2)

The significance today of reassessing the 1938 Munich Agreement lies in the frequent uses of the terms "Munich" and "Appeasement" with regard to the Iranian nuclear program. Hitler was prepared to use war in 1938 and did so in 1939 as an instrument of national policy, realizing the famous dictum by Carl von Clausewitz: "War is the continuation of policy by other means". Hitler disregarded previous pledges made, as he did against the USSR in 1941, proving that his pledges were lies told in order to buy time. Based on their statements regarding their national sovereignty and expected regional role, a parallel argument can be made with respect to Iranian pledges of peaceful use of nuclear power. In order for the sanctions to be lifted, Iran has negotiated limitations on its nuclear program. The Allies, in this case the U.S. and its regional partners, reason that they can appease Iran into not rushing forward into the small fraternity of nuclear-armed states, or at least buy time with inspections of Iranian nuclear facilities and

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the threat of the reinstatement of sanctions. While some military action, taken in lieu of appeasement since 1938 has been overreaction, the similarities between Hitler's Germany in 1938 and present day Iran are striking. This analogy has been made frequently by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, for example stating in 2006: "Its 1938 and Iran is Germany." (Netanyahu 2006)

This paper's research question is: What factors led Neville Chamberlain to his fateful threat analysis, and what lessons learned from this case study can be applied today? The focus here is not on the analysis created by the intelligence analyst but on the intelligence customer's (the policymaker's) use of intelligence. Chamberlain's strategy of appeasement has been traditionally interpreted as, "naiveté, failed diplomacy, and even the politics of cowardice," (Ripsman & Levy, 149) but a reexamination of British and French threat analysis and tools of statecraft is necessary to shed light on the use of appeasement as a policy to deal with threats. Also, considering the frequent citation of appeasement by policymakers, can this analogy be used correctly today? Khong states that policymakers often use analogies poorly, and that, "there is something about the psychology of analogical reasoning that makes it difficult, though not impossible, to use historical analogies properly in foreign affairs." (Khong 1992, 13)

Methodology

This paper uses a comparative historical methodology for assessing the most likely reasons appeasement was chosen as the response to Hitler's demands in September 1938 and the applicability of that case to more recent international diplomatic crises, specifically the West's response to the Iranian nuclear program. Comparative historical research has several limitations as a tool for predictive analysis. Due to the incomplete nature of historical data, the limited number of case studies utilized, and the complexity of human decision-making, cause and effects comparisons are difficult to predict.

James Mahoney, one of the current leading figures in historical comparative research, identifies several of these in his book *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*. Mahoney highlights key issues such as how micro-level studies can be incorporated into the macro level field of historical comparative research, issues ripe for historical comparative research that continue to remain overlooked, such as law, and the issue of whether historical comparative research should be approached as a science or approached as a history

Stephen R. Rock describes his methodology in *Appeasement in International Politics* as "structured, focused comparison." (Rock 2000, 16) Using this technique, the researcher conducts a detailed examination of a small number of cases, asking the same questions in each case, and identifying crucial similarities and differences. This paper employs the same techniques, although even fewer cases are studied here than in Rock's research. The goal is the same though; why did Chamberlain choose to appease Hitler in 1938, and is there any applicability of the failure of that appeasement to the case of the Iranian nuclear program today? Rock states that, "comparative methodologies often cannot provide conclusive empirical verification of theoretical propositions," (ibid) and that conclusion is even more applicable using this very limited research. This paper will not claim to be decisive with regard to theoretical generalizations, only to examine the unique characteristics of a specific case and at best be "highly enlightening and strongly persuasive." (ibid, 17)

Yuen Foong Khong's *Analogies at War* is a historical comparative study of policymakers' applications of historical analogies. Khong discusses the uses and misuses of the Munich analogy, as well as the lessons of Korea and Dien Bien Phu, to the U.S. decision to intervene in Vietnam in 1965. Khong's analysis, like that in this paper, seeks to answer whether or not the lessons of Munich can be validly applied today. Is the application of the Munich analogy, "overly broad and categorical, and ultimately shallow," as Khong demonstrates it was in the Lyndon Johnson Administration? (Khong 1992, 187) Khong further argues that policymakers use analogies not merely to justify their actions but at a deeper level, use them to perform specific cognitive and information-processing tasks essential to decision-making. Comparative historical methodology has proven that analogies are mostly improperly applied. In their analysis of international crises from 1989 to 1973, Glenn Snyder and Paul Diesing conclude, "(Robert) Jervis hypothesis that statesmen *usually* draw incorrect or over-generalized inferences from historical analogies is strongly confirmed." (Snyder & Diesing 1977, 321)

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The phenomenon of comparative reasoning in international relations is not an exact science. Khong states: "Though interesting, the findings of cognitive social psychology are not easy to apply to real-world political situations." (Khong 1992, 32) The stigma against appeasement has caused policymakers to misuse it as an applicable historical analogy in decision-making. Analysts must not oversimplify the use of historical analogies either; there is no foolproof formula for the application of historical analogies, such as "NEVER appease a dictator, it ALWAYS results in encouraging the dictator to further demands." The commonly applied lesson of Munich, however, is just such as absolute conclusion. Rock states, "there exists in the United States a widespread belief in a kind of iron law: if appeasement, then World War III" (Rock 2000, 3). Khong further demonstrates that decision-makers are most likely to use historical analogies when generational experience and personal experience reinforce one another (Khong 1992, 33). Thus, anyone concerned with foreign policy in the aftermath of World War II will likely disavow the use of appeasement, particularly those in the British or French government. The overuse of the Munich appeasement analogy makes perfect sense based on the human tendency to rely on knowledge structures such as analogies to make sense of their environment.

In this case, the variables are: the dependent variable: aggressor state/leader using appeasement for gain/followed by even greater aggression, and the independent variables: sacrifice made to aggressor and actual ambitions of the aggressor/demander. The hypothesis is: If a ruthlessly ambitious belligerent state is appeased, then it will only be further emboldened to more aggression. The unknown though is whether or not the state being appeased is only acting in reasonable self-interest and will be satisfied by the appeasement or is simply bluffing the appeaser into concession without conflict. Hitler's ambition has been proven; Iran's can only be assessed.

Literature Review

The literature on the failure of the Munich Agreement to check Hitler's ambition began to appear almost immediately, with the fall of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. Following the defeat of Hitler's Germany, the most widely accepted texts were published, including J.W. Wheeler-Bennett's *Munich: Prologue To Tragedy*, in 1948. The rush to blame appeasement for the war was immediate; "Historians, with a clear memory of events and no access to government archives passed instant historical judgements." (McDonough 1998, 2) Wheeler-Bennett lambasted appeasement as a policy of delusion, championed by an ineffective leader who failed to challenge the morality of Hitler's demands. Memoirs from political and military leaders also appeared, most notably from Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, who explained "how easily the tragedy of the Second World War could have been prevented." (Churchill 1948, 17)

Revisionism of the completely negative perception of appeasement began in 1961, with A.J.P. Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War*, who argued that, "Chamberlain's policy of appeasement was a logical and realistic choice in the circumstances." According to Taylor, the Munich Agreement was a "triumph for all that was best and enlightened in British life," as it solved a German grievance and aimed to prevent war. Other revisionists, such as David Dilks in the 1980s suggest that concentration on Chamberlain's incompetence obscured more important factors and that decision-makers had become prisoners of circumstance. Chamberlain now became more sympathetic, "not a deluded politician but a complex character with a sharp mind who weighed up all the possibilities and took detailed political and military advice before pursuing foreign policy." (McDonough 1998, 5) Dilks and Taylor argue that appeasement was a reasonable response to Hitler's challenge to the Treaty of Versailles, by peaceful means to satisfy Germany and reach a new settlement of European grievances.

More recently, Keith Middlemass has challenged revisionism. He criticizes appeasement, not as immoral, but a failure due to "deluded thinking, poor planning, and poor timing" based on illusory comprehension of Hitler's war aims. (ibid, 6) Alistair Parker's landmark 1993 study combines older points of view with insights from the revisionists-"the beginnings of a post-revisionist interpretation." (ibid) Parker argues that appeasement was not necessitated by economic and military weakness but was skillfully chosen by Chamberlain. Parker, explaining Chamberlain's use of appeasement rather than simply condemning it, argues that Chamberlain pursued appeasement with "obstinacy," (ibid) rejecting expert advice. Parker echoes Churchill, who declared: "Mr. Chamberlain was now in complete control of British foreign policy...one man and one man only conducted our affairs. He did not shrink either from the responsibility which he incurred, or from the personal exertions required" (Churchill 1948, 298-9)

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Most recently, Frank McDonough's study examines British foreign policy and appeasement within British politics and society in the inter-war years. His stated goal is to, "attempt to show why the policy provoked such passion and opposition." (McDonough 1998, 8) He assesses both the causes and effects of appeasement on British society. Andrew David Stedman's 2011 work, *Alternatives to Appeasement: Neville Chamberlain and Hitler's Germany*, examines the particular circumstances of Chamberlain at the time of the agreement. He seeks a complete overarching synthesis in order to analyze the origins, nature, and viability of the various alternatives to appeasement. (Stedman 2011, viii) This paper contributes to the literature by providing a brief synthesis of the reasons appeasement was chosen as response to the threat in 1938 and its application to a threat today. The intelligence analyst (and hopefully the policymaker) should correctly apply lessons learned.

Data Analysis

After reviewing statements made by the principals in the Munich Agreement, as well as analysis done by scholars both in the immediate aftermath of World War II and more recently, several factors clearly emerge as the primary reasons for the appeasement of Germany at Munich, rather than a hard line stance taken by Britain and France. Two practical factors which influenced Neville Chamberlain primarily were the British public's rejection of the notion of war and rearmament and the memory of the costs of WWI in lives and financial ruin. Secondly, German war aims were not yet clear; allowing both the British and French to assume Hitler would keep his word on further territorial expansion. Third, the presence of moderates in Germany at that time allowed Britain and France some hope that German aggression could be mitigated. Finally, and of great significance, The British did not regard either the Soviet Union or U.S. as reliable allies. With regard to the USSR, research suggests that not only did Britain and France not consider it a reliable ally against Germany; many regarded Stalin's Soviet Union as a greater threat than Hitler's Germany. In retrospect, in Britain in 1938, the policy of appeasing Germany made the most sense. It would have been surprising had its leaders acted otherwise. The anti-appeaser's arguments, such as Churchill's, proved prophetic, but judged through the prism of the prevailing wisdom of 1938, their arguments stood little chance of prevailing.

Many in British politics, including Neville Chamberlain, as well as probably the majority of the British public were eager to pacify Germany rather than begin a rearmament campaign in the face of German aggression and looming war. George Peden in *British Rearmament and the Treasury 1932-39*, suggests that Treasury caution over rearmament derived from a concern that a rapid and intensive buildup would both divert resources away from investment in productive industry and exhaust Britain's reserve of gold and dollars. They argued that it would take at least three years to defeat Germany, and that the "profligacy" being urged on the government by Churchill and the hawks around him would leave Britain unable to survive that long. (Newton 1996, 2)

Rearmament and a steadfast refusal to capitulate to Hitler's demands were unpopular with both the public in Britain and its Dominions, who favored isolationism along with the United States. The British knew that they were unprepared, militarily or economically, and with the horrors of World War I still fresh in their minds, a new war in Central Europe, "was a reality few in Britain were prepared to contemplate." (Rock 2000, 51)

The British (and for that matter, the French, Americans, and Soviets) did not comprehend the German threat and its ultimate war aims. Hitler justified expansion based on enemies around him. The British and others even justified Hitler's claims due to the strict terms of the Peace Agreement of 1919. Many decision-makers concluded that Hitler only desired to recover land lost following World War I and unite German-speaking peoples. British ambassador Neville Henderson opined that once these aspirations were fulfilled (regarded by many outside Germany as legitimate desires for self-determination) Germany would "settle down" and become "territorially contented." (ibid, 52)

The British and French were counting on Hitler keeping his word, and their ability to respond if he did not. However, in retrospect, neither was well-positioned to respond to German aggression. Appeasement made sense with the caveat that, if evidence emerged that it was not working, it would be exchanged more a more deterrent posture. It also follows, then, that Britain would have to rearm and maintain readiness, which it did not. It is the conclusion of this research that this shortcoming is dangerously analogous to the Iran deal today. American leaders such as President

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Obama and presumptive Democratic nominee Hilary Clinton propose to respond quickly with sanctions if Iran violates conditions. The President declared: "If Iran violates the agreement over the next decade, all the sanctions can snap back into place." (Obama 2015) In my assessment, Iran is counting on that to not occur or be ineffective-or too late to prevent nuclear armament. Probably the best reason Hitler's aggression was not considered an immediate threat and appeasement was chosen as a strategy was the Allies' illusory assessment of Hitler. J. L. Richardson states: "The fundamental reason for the failure of appeasement was that Hitler's goals lay far beyond the limits of reasonable accommodation that the appeasers were prepared to contemplate." (Rock 2000, 49)

Neville Chamberlain simply failed to comprehend the extent of Adolf Hitler's ambition and thus accurately predict his course of action. On meeting Hitler on Sept. 16, 1938, Chamberlain reported: "In spite of the hardness and ruthlessness I saw in his face, I got the impression that *here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word.*" (italics Churchill's) (Churchill 1948, 300) Chamberlain had been strongly impressed after meeting with Hitler that, "he was in a fighting mood," and his cabinet simultaneously concluded that the French had no fight in them. The British thus concluded that, "there could, therefore, be no question of resistance to Hitler's demands upon the Czech state." (ibid, 301)

Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, among other things, was designed to appeal to German moderates and undermine belligerent expansionist policy in Germany. The moderates, it was believed, cultivated good relations with Western Europe, and if appeased with good commercial and financial benefits to alleviate the harsh terms of 1919, "a conciliatory policy might well succeed." (Rock 2000, 53) This argument is congruent with the "guilt complex" that Germany was treated unfairly in the Treaty of Versailles, and that, "if the more forceful demands of Hitler for treaty revision were met forthwith, Germany might not still be lost as a constructive force in the general policy of Europe." (Wheeler-Bennett 1948, 231-2) Therefore, British threat analysis hinged on the willingness of the aggressor to be pacified.

Many in the British government believed that the United States could not be trusted as an ally as the country had declined to join the League of Nations and had retreated into its habitual isolationism. Although the nation as a whole may have trended isolationist at the time, President Roosevelt proposed a working committee of nations coming up with a document covering the essential principles of international conduct. Chamberlain, however rejected this idea on the grounds that Britain and France were already dealing with Germany and Italy directly. Chamberlain preferred a "gentlemen's agreement" (with Hitler) if appeasement were to be achieved." (Wheeler-Bennett 1948, 270-1)

Both the British and French, as well as all political parties within, held a deep distrust of the USSR and a conviction that the Soviets wished for a general European war which would result in the collapse of capitalism. (Wheeler-Bennett 1948, 388-9) The Soviets had committed, along with France to the defense of Czechoslovakia, yet they were not a party to the Munich Agreement. Instead of being considered an ally against Germany, many in Britain and France viewed Soviets as a greater threat than Hitler. Playing a dangerous bet, the British and French saw an opportunity to exhaust both the Nazi and Communist forces. "The prospect of Hitler defeating Stalin, and greatly weakening himself in the process, was not unwelcome." (Wheeler, 296) Chamberlain wrote in his diary, March 26, 1939:

I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia. I have no belief whatever in her ability to maintain an effective offensive, even if she wanted to. And I distrust her motives which seem to me to have little connection with our ideas of liberty, and to be concerned with only getting everyone else by the ears. (ibid, 389) This view was held even more strongly in France than Britain and was known in both Berlin and Moscow, where it enabled Hitler's plan for the first stages of *lebensraum* and "convinced Stalin of the impossibility of attempting to continue cooperation with the Western democracies." (ibid, 296) Assessing British strategy, German foreign minister von Ribbentrop advised the Fuhrer: "You need never fear Britain until you hear of her talking Russia as an ally. Then it means she is really going to war." (ibid, 388)

Conclusion

Referencing Santayana's famous dictum that, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,"

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many national decision-makers embraced the so-called Munich analogy, whose primary lesson was: concessions to a hostile state could not succeed in preventing war. Instead of buying peace, the lesson of Munich was, according to Stephen R. Rock, that the policy of appeasement only made conflict more likely by emboldening the aggressor and encouraging him to put forth ever increasing demands. (Rock 2000, 2) Restated, the desire for peace at all costs against an ambitious enemy is folly. Churchill declared in 1938: "Many of us, even outside cabinet circles, had the sensation that (French foreign minister George) Bonnet represented the quintessence of defeatism, and that all his careful verbal maneuvers had the aim of peace at any price. At all costs he wished to avoid having to fulfil the solemn, precise, and so recently renewed obligations of France to go to war with Czechoslovakia." (Churchill 1948, 301) The former and future British Prime Minister succinctly contrasted what occurred with what should have: "The British and French cabinets at this time presented a front of two overripe melons crushed together; whereas what was needed was a gleam of steel." (ibid)

This paper's research question asked what factors led to the choice of appeasement in 1938 and what lessons can be applied to the Iranian nuclear problem today? The rationale that Hitler could be satiated by gaining the Sudetenland proved to be delusional, thus Chamberlain's threat analysis proved to be the same. Synthesizing the relevant literature on appeasement, the specific reasons Chamberlain chose it as a response, the failure of the strategy against Hitler, and the similarities between Hitler's regime and the Iranian regime today, this study concludes that the lessons of the failure of Munich can be correctly applied today. Studies such as Khong's prove that the lessons of Munich are not applicable in every diplomatic crisis-as has often been the case, but the historical analogy does apply in some instances.

In spite of this conclusion, this specific case study also asserts that the wholesale application of the "Munich lesson" to every foreign policy crisis is incorrect. Stephen R. Rock declares that, although the total rejection of appeasement as a diplomatic tool, "is deeply ingrained in the American consciousness, there is surprisingly little evidence to support it." No systematic analyses of appeasement cases exist, and there is no evidence to conclude that concessions never work and that it is impossible to satisfy a disgruntled nation or leader. "Not every statesman is a Hitler or even a Stalin. Not every state that makes demands has unlimited ambitions." (Rock 2000, 5) An example of this is Anthony Eden's misplaced comparison of Nasser in Egypt in the Suez Crisis in 1956 to Hitler. (Khong 1992, 34)

This paper's goal is to analyze the British response to the threat of German expansion and relate it to the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program today. There appears to be an eerie similarity between the ambitions of both regimes. J.L. Richardson declares: "The fundamental reason for the failure of appeasement was that Hitler's goals lay far beyond the limits of reasonable accommodation that the appeasers were prepared to contemplate," (Rock 2000, 49) and based on the Tehran regime's statements and prior actions, the P5+1 may be guilty of similar naiveté today. This study asserts that leaders today are naïve and deluded, much as Chamberlain was, to fail to assess that appeasing Iran will not lead to its developing nuclear weapons. Based on Iran's words and actions since its 1979 revolution, this research concludes that the Munich analogy is applicable.

Psychological strategies utilized by both the Nazis and the Iranians present an interesting parallel. Both seek to shift the blame to the accuser in order to justify their own belligerence. In the immediate aftermath of Munich, Hitler claimed to seek only peace, and appealed to Chamberlain to circumvent the "war-mongers" in Britain (Churchill, Eden, and Duff Cooper) who, if in power, "would immediately begin a new world war." (Wheeler-Bennett 1948, 295) Recently, the commander of Iran's ground forces stated that the U.S., "planned and carried out the events of 9/11 to justify their presence in western Asia, with a goal of ruling it." (Khan 2015) Iran consistently claims Israel and the U.S. to be the aggressors, with its role simply defending itself against the stronger opponent. Likewise, Iran's UN ambassador, in July of this year responded to American accusations: "Feckless and reckless acts of the United States in our region for so many years are the root of the many challenges that we are now facing in our neighborhood." (Klein 2015)

It is impossible to make absolute conclusions with regard to the use of appeasement as a diplomatic tool. The particular circumstances of each case will dictate its utility. However, the words of Winston Churchill seem most appropriate as a guide: "(decision-makers') first duty is to deal with other nations as to avoid strife and war and to

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eschew aggression...but the safety of the state, the lives and freedom of their fellow countrymen ...make it right and imperative...that the use of force should not be excluded. There is no merit in putting off a war for a year if, when it comes, it is a far worse war or one much harder to win." (Churchill 1948, 320) Benjamin Netanyahu echoed this maxim in his address to the U.S. Congress: "If anyone thinks this deal kicks the can down the road, think again. When we get down that road, we'll face a much more dangerous Iran, a Middle East littered with nuclear bombs, and a countdown to a potential nuclear nightmare." (Netanyahu 2015)

One last item: Another similarity between the Munich Crisis of 1938 and the Western struggle with Iran's nuclear program today is similar sloganeering, such as the slogan "No to War, Yes to Diplomacy" This implies those are the only two choices. One must agree to appeasement (the Iran deal) or necessarily want war with Iran. This is, of course, a deliberate false choice designed to label and castigate those who advocate against appeasement as "warmongers" (Hitler's words). This type of manipulation must be refuted with an argument featuring a range of alternatives and potential consequences.

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