

# Appeasement

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Appeasement is a diplomatic strategy by which a state attempts to conciliate a potential aggressor or rival by making concessions through negotiations. Appeasement was a little-known and seldom commented upon policy before the 1930s. It will, rightly or wrongly, probably always be associated with British prime minister Neville Chamberlain's diplomacy in dealing with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Chamberlain's policy culminated in the Munich Conference of September 1938, often cited as the supreme example of appeasement. It should not be associated exclusively with Chamberlain and Britain, however, as other states practiced appeasement in the face of the threat from Nazi Germany. France participated in the Munich Conference while the USSR signed the notorious Nazi–Soviet Pact of August 1939. In addition, states practiced appeasement well before the advent of the Third Reich, and it has arguably figured in diplomacy since 1945, especially during the Cold War.

Generally speaking, appeasement has a dimly poor reputation. This holds true for members of the informed public who think about such issues in Western democracies, plus individuals in the media, politicians, and many historians. No politician wants to be accused of conducting a foreign policy that can be characterized as “appeasement.” Accusing a political rival of being an “appeaser” is a supreme political insult. Chamberlain has been ridiculed in television shows as varied as *Seinfeld* and *Monty Python*. Appeasement conjures up images

of the worst kind of craven weakness, if not cowardice, in the face of aggression. Even dictionary definitions have been influenced by such perceptions. For example, Webster's *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* typically defined appeasement as an effort “to buy off (an aggressor) by concessions, usually at the sacrifice of principles.” Dictionary definitions prior to 1945 carried no such moral judgments. In mitigation to such harsh judgments, some historians have argued that appeasement was “massively overdetermined” to such an extent that the British government had no viable alternatives to the Nazi challenge in the 1930s (Schroeder 1976: 223–43).

## ORIGINS OF APPEASEMENT

There is no consensus on the origins of appeasement as a policy and there has been no etymological study of the word. In his book *The Roots of Appeasement*, published in 1966, historian Martin Gilbert argued that appeasement could be traced back to the failure of the international system to prevent the outbreak of war in 1914. “Educated people in all walks of life, and of all political beliefs,” according to Gilbert, thought the war was accidental, and that neither Germany nor Britain were to blame exclusively for it. So “appeasement was created by a lack of confidence in the British case, and a resolve never again to drift or fall unwittingly into war” (Gilbert 1966: 9). By contrast, in a 1976 article, historian Paul Kennedy located the origins of appeasement as far back as the 1860s. Kennedy argued that, beginning in 1865 British diplomacy focused on negotiating settlements to resolve international disputes. The British also favored “the concept of the ‘Concert of Europe’ (as opposed

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to the Bismarckian concept of power-blocs) ...” (Kennedy 1976: 200). By the late nineteenth century, the British Empire suffered from “imperial over-stretch” with defense commitments around the globe that were increasingly difficult to meet. The empire’s export–import economy needed peace and stability to function properly. At home demands for domestic reform, including new social programs that had to be financed at the expense of the defense budget, were escalating. All these factors motivated British statesmen to pursue a foreign policy that avoided confrontation. “Appeasing” potential rivals became the logical foreign policy. Those involved in the events of the late 1930s took a less historical approach and placed the origins of appeasement to a later date. Anthony Eden, British foreign secretary from 1935 to 1938, recalled using the word appeasement in speeches or Foreign Office documents “occasionally” by 1936 (Eden 1962: 324). By contrast the Foreign Office, which began serious internal debates on how to handle Hitler in 1934, eschewed use of the word and instead preferred the term “general settlement,” as did Chamberlain.

### EARLY APPEASEMENT PRIOR TO 1933

The British followed a policy of appeasement vis-à-vis the United States in the late nineteenth century, giving way in disputes over Panama, Venezuela, and Alaska, rather than risk alienating Washington. Efforts to appease Germany prior to 1914 can be found as well. The British frequently tried to cool down the naval race by proposing compromises to the Germans. The failed visit of the British war minister, Lord Haldane, to Germany in 1912 has been seen as a foretaste of things to come in the 1930s (Kennedy 1976: 202). The British made colonial concessions to France and Russia in the period from 1904 to 1907. Following the war, British prime

minister David Lloyd George resorted to appeasement to mitigate what he feared were overly harsh terms of the postwar Treaty of Versailles. Lloyd George’s Fontainebleau Memorandum, written during the tense negotiations of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, sought to provide a more generous settlement to Germany. His efforts proved unsuccessful. Similarly, on May 10, 1919, C. P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, called for a lenient peace treaty. For Scott, “the fundamental question is whether we desire a peace of appeasement or a peace of violence” (Gilbert 1966: 54). Lloyd George’s successors as prime minister, especially Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin, likewise used appeasement to resolve disputes with Germany. Concessions were made to Germany on the reparations burden in 1924 and 1929 and admission to the League of Nations in 1926. Some observers would point to events in Asia as marking the beginning of appeasement. In 1931 the Japanese conquered the Chinese region of Manchuria. The inability of the League of Nations to formulate a response to a blatant act of aggression can be viewed as the beginning of a downward spiral in the 1930s. The league was not yet crippled though, as it was still seen as a primarily European organization. The rise of Adolf Hitler to power in 1933 lent renewed urgency to appeasement policies.

### APPEASEMENT FROM 1933 TO 1937

Hitler’s first round of challenges to the Versailles order began in the early months of 1935. In rapid succession in March of that year the Germans announced the existence of an air force (the *Luftwaffe*), reintroduced conscription and expanded the German army to a strength of thirty-five divisions. All these steps took place days before the visit of the British foreign secretary, Sir John Simon, to Berlin. The British, along with the French,

were left without an adequate response. Public support for a war with Germany at this time was minimal, as demonstrated later that year by the results of the Peace Ballot. Sponsored by the League of Nations Union, a powerful pro-league lobby group, over 11.6 million British voters turned out to “vote” for league principles and opposition to British rearmament. German rearmament could be easily rationalized as appropriate for any sovereign state, and a revision of the overly punitive terms of the Versailles treaty. The response of the British government was to attempt to manage the challenge of German rearmament through compromise and negotiation. The upshot was the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 18, 1935. Under the terms of the agreement the Germans were allowed to build a fleet up to 35 percent the tonnage of the Royal Navy and a submarine fleet equal to that of Britain’s. The agreement promised to head off a resumption of a naval race with Germany, easing pressure on the British economy, while allowing the British to focus on the emerging Japanese threat in the Pacific.

Another serious challenge emerged when Italy invaded Ethiopia, a member of the league, on October 3, 1935. The league branded Italy an aggressor and some sanctions were eventually imposed. However, both London and Paris were appalled at the prospect of war with Italy over Ethiopia in defense of league principles. Britain and France had hoped that they could lure Italy into an anti-German coalition, as they had in the First World War. In July 1934 a failed Austrian Nazi coup prompted Mussolini to send Italian troops to the Austrian border. At the time Mussolini regarded an independent Austria as essential to Italian security in Europe. The British and French were able to use Austria as a wedge between Hitler and Mussolini. They had some success in courting Mussolini with the so-called Stresa front of

April 1935, in which Britain, France, and Italy warned Hitler to stay out of Austria. The attack on Ethiopia, however, now meant the real possibility of Italian isolation and a defection to Hitler’s camp. For his part Hitler saw Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia as a means to distract Italian interest away from Austria. He went so far as to order a shipment of Mauser rifles to be sent to the Ethiopians to stiffen their resistance and embroil Mussolini on distant battlefields. The British believed they could defeat Italy if it came to war, but only at the cost of weakening the Royal Navy in the case of future conflict with Japan, and, especially, Germany. Again, a compromise negotiation was attempted. The Hoare–Laval Plan, named after the foreign ministers responsible (Samuel Hoare of Britain and Pierre Laval of France), would have given Italy effective control over Ethiopia while preserving the fiction of Ethiopian independence. The plan was stillborn when it was leaked to the press and public outrage forced Hoare’s resignation. Mussolini’s armies went on to conquer and annex Ethiopia by the following spring.

The Rhineland Crisis of March 1936 brought Germany back into the limelight. The Treaty of Versailles called for the Rhineland to be occupied by Allied troops for fifteen years. In 1926 the German government promised to leave the Rhineland demilitarized if French troops evacuated the territory early. French troops accordingly left in 1932. On March 7, 1936, German troops marched into the Rhineland, uncertain of the response to be expected from London and Paris. As it turned out, Hitler need not have worried, as nothing more than formal protests materialized. The lack of a readily available mobile strike-force, anti-war sentiment, a governmental crisis in Paris, and the fact that the German move took place on the weekend all contributed to British and French passivity. But more seriously, no

one by this stage wanted to fight Germany to maintain the discredited Treaty of Versailles. The German action could be rationalized as an act of national self-determination. The Rhineland was indisputably German territory, so remilitarizing it was viewed as acceptable.

Italy's breach with Britain and France accelerated in July 1936 with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Mussolini and Hitler rushed aid and assistance, including Italian troops and German aircraft, to their fascist colleague in Spain, Francisco Franco. On November 1, 1936, Mussolini proclaimed the Rome-Berlin Axis around which, he claimed, the world would in future revolve. To the increasing exasperation of many in Britain on the Left, the British government decided its prime objective was to try to contain the conflict to Spain. Some in London (and Paris also) feared that France might be dragged into the Spanish Civil War, or succumb to civil war itself. The result was a series of Non-Intervention declarations issued by twenty-six states including Britain, the USSR, Italy, and Germany, even though the latter two had already defied and continued to ignore the principle of non-intervention. Only the USSR came to the aid of the Spanish Republic, which was finally defeated by Franco in March 1939.

#### ACTIVE APPEASEMENT AND CHAMBERLAIN

Chamberlain was appointed prime minister on May 28, 1937. His name is associated with the most active phase of appeasement. Given the consistency of British responses to Hitler's challenges over the period from 1933 to 1937, it might be worth considering the structural factors behind appeasement in more detail.

First, Britain faced three potential enemies in the 1930s at widely separated theaters around the globe. Japan threatened China,

launching a full-scale invasion there in 1937. A hostile Japan could imperil British possessions in the Pacific including the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand and possibly even the Indian subcontinent. Second, a hostile Italy threatened the fragile British lifeline through the Mediterranean, including Malta and Suez. If the British were not on good terms with whomever won the Spanish Civil War, Gibraltar would be in danger. The most serious threat, of course was posed by Germany. It is no exaggeration to say that fear of resurgent German power was the key driver of appeasement.

The empire itself posed significant distractions. In the interwar period the British faced nationalist unrest in Ireland, Egypt, India, and Palestine. The British faced a particularly serious uprising in Palestine from the local Arab population in 1936-39. Even the Dominions seemed restive and anxious to avoid a European conflict.

Domestic constraints fueled appeasement. Anti-war sentiment in Britain, as has been noted, was running high and it was by no means clear that any British government could muster support for a rearmament program. The British economy had been hard hit by the Depression and unemployment continued at record levels well into the 1930s. The economic orthodoxy of the day prohibited deficit spending. As the 1930s continued, investment declined, a balance of payments problem emerged, and a worldwide move to protectionism damaged British trade. It was widely felt that a rearmament program would cripple the British economy, often referred to as the "fourth arm of defense." Later in the 1930s, as rearmament finally ramped up, bottlenecks in production and shortages of skilled labor emerged and significantly hampered the process. Finally, inter-service rivalries further complicated rearmament as each branch of the armed

forces could make compelling arguments for funding.

What of potential allies and the role of diplomacy? The United States, the single most crucial potential ally for Britain, was in a state of profound isolationism that was broken only by the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The Soviet Union was widely mistrusted after years of Comintern anti-British propaganda and attempts to subvert the British Empire. The Soviet Union had resumed Russia's role as a traditional rival of Britain's in Central Asia, but was now fortified with a potent revolutionary ideology. France was seen as an unstable state bent on policing the Versailles treaty and likely to drag Britain into entangling alliances in Europe. The British viewed France as a country in economic and political disarray with critical defense weaknesses and resentful over the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. The League of Nations was fatally discredited after the Ethiopian War.

Horror at the prospect of another European war was understandably widespread in Britain in the 1930s. New weapons such as tanks, poison gas, and air power, it was felt, would make the next war far worse than the last. Air power and bombers were particularly feared. In 1932 Baldwin famously declared in the House of Commons that "the bomber will always get through" (Middlemas and Barnes 1969: 735). This reflected the fear, popularized in a number of bestselling novels, that in the next war clouds of enemy bombers would appear in the skies over cities like London, inflicting mass casualties and breaking civilian morale. If the bombers dropped poison gas, the situation would be catastrophic. The potential of radar and new designs of fighter aircraft as an effective defense were not apparent until 1939.

Finally, a strong moral argument for appeasement surfaced. The Treaty of Versailles was seen as having been too harsh and vindictive, too "Carthaginian" (referencing

the harsh peace imposed upon Carthage by Rome). Revising the treaty and coming to a just settlement seemed desirable. The events of 1914 cast a shadow, as many commentators believed that Britain had not made its position clear to Germany and thus allowed the two states to blunder into war. Negotiation would avoid such a calamity in the future. Negotiation was believed to hold a good chance of success, as it was felt the Germans were led by rational statesmen. Hitler had encouraged such perceptions by often denouncing *Mein Kampf* as a product of youthful radicalism. Perhaps more delusional was the belief that "moderates" in the Nazi hierarchy, such as the banker Hjalmar Schacht, would restrain Hitler. Hitler evidently wanted to right the wrongs of Versailles by bringing all Germans into the boundaries of a single German state. Such a goal accorded with former US president Woodrow Wilson's doctrine of national self-determination, a highly desirable liberal principle.

The manner in which many of the above factors came together can be seen in the conclusion to a chiefs of staff memorandum in November 1937. "We cannot foresee when our defense forces will be strong enough to safeguard our trade, territory and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. We cannot therefore exaggerate the importance, from the point of view of Imperial Defence, of any political or international action that can be taken to reduce the number of our potential enemies and to gain the support of potential allies" (Doerr 1998: 209). The course of British foreign policy over the next year is understandable in light of the warning from the chiefs.

Chamberlain of course sympathized with the above assumptions and brought his own considerations to office as well. He shared the horror of war that grew out of the Great War, thought the league was a nice idea but impracticable, and had little faith in either

the United States or the USSR. In 1939 he steadfastly opposed possible alliance with the USSR, on the grounds that such a deal would scupper any chance of a settlement with Germany. Alliances, he thought, would only convince Germany that it was being encircled by hostile powers and therefore recreate the situation that led to war in 1914. He expressed concerns about the state of the British economy. As a former chancellor, the prime minister was keenly interested in the financial costs of rearmament. Chamberlain's preferred method of dealing with Germany was to sit down with Hitler, run down his list of grievances one by one, and check them off with a pencil. It was an updated version of the Concert of Europe, and one he put into practice at Munich in September 1938.

Hitler brought considerable pressure to bear on Austria in early 1938. Austria was a German-speaking state and Hitler demanded that it should be made part of Germany, as the doctrine of national self-determination would suggest. Italy was the only state that could have defended Austria, but Mussolini had already abandoned Austria to Hitler in early 1937 in search of greater rewards elsewhere under German tutelage. When Austrian chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg was summoned to meet with Hitler on February 12, 1938, he found himself isolated internationally and without hope. Neither Britain nor France had ever promised to fight for Austrian independence. German troops marched into Austria on March 13, 1938. Of course, the German *Anschluss* with Austria in March 1938 could be rationalized as an act of national self-determination, righting the wrongs of Versailles.

Pressure now built on Czechoslovakia over the border state of Sudetenland. The Sudetenland had never been part of Germany but it was populated by about 3.5 million German-speaking citizens. The territory had been part of the old Austro-Hungarian

Empire and after the First World War was given to the new state of Czechoslovakia as a strategic barrier against Germany. The hilly and forested terrain of the region had been fortified by the Czechs in the years leading up to 1938. The political vehicle of the Sudeten Germans was the Sudeten Nazi party, whose leader, Konrad Henlein, had been instructed by Hitler to keep raising demands and to resist any peaceful settlement. Hitler wanted to use the Sudeten dispute to provoke a war that would destroy the Czech state. Czechoslovakia was the only real functioning democracy in Central Europe, an ally of France and a child of the Versailles settlement.

Given the structural constraints under which Britain operated, Chamberlain's policy was predictable. War was unthinkable. Instead, negotiations had to be opened that would settle the dispute and avoid a war that could not save Czech independence. Isolated in central Europe, the British and French could offer no assistance to the Czech state. The neighboring states of Poland and Hungary had their own claims on Czech territory. The USSR had no contiguous borders with Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain sent Lord Runciman on a mission to Prague in August of 1938 where he informed the Czechs that they could expect no military help from Paris and London. Chamberlain paid a visit to Hitler at Berchtesgaden on September 15, to seek a face-to-face solution. He visited Hitler again at Godesberg on September 22. But a peaceful solution seemed to evade Chamberlain as Hitler kept raising new demands. War seemed imminent by the end of September. Astonishingly Hitler reversed course on September 27 and announced a willingness to negotiate based on a proposal from Mussolini. The result was the Munich Conference of September 29–30, 1938, with Chamberlain, Hitler, Mussolini, and French premier Édouard Daladier in attendance.



The conference agreed that the Sudetenland would be turned over to the Germans according to a schedule that Hitler subsequently ignored. The Czechs accepted the deal as they had no alternative. At the conclusion of the conference Chamberlain obtained Hitler's signature on a short written statement that read, in part: "We regard the agreement signed last night and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again" (Feiling 1947: 381). The reference to the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 was significant and illustrated the continuity of British policy.

The winter of 1938–39 was marked by continuing tension in Europe, a series of war scares and the *Kristallnacht* of November 9, 1938. On March 15, 1939, Hitler ordered German troops to occupy Bohemia and Moravia, while Slovakia was set up as a nominally independent state. Czechoslovakia was erased from the map of Europe and Hitler set his sights on Poland. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia marked the end of appeasement as a policy. What happened to Czechoslovakia could not be excused as an act of national self-determination. Public opinion in Britain turned decisively against appeasement. Better intelligence on German war-making potential and improved British air defenses aided the transition to a firmer policy. The British and French now adopted containment, issuing a guarantee of Poland's territorial integrity on March 31, a guarantee that led Britain and France to declare war on Germany the following September when Hitler ordered his forces to attack Poland. If it is possible to speak of any benefits of appeasement, some historians might point to the fact that Chamberlain's policy at least allowed the British crucial time in which to rearm, although that was never a stated aim of the British government. Britain also

entered the war united and convinced that it had done everything possible to avoid war.

Appeasement was bankrupted as a policy and remains discredited. Many countries have used appeasement since 1939, most notably in the context of the Cold War, and on both sides. The strategic arms limitations talks could be considered a prime example. However, no politician today would ever use the word except to discredit an opponent.

SEE ALSO: *Anschluss* (1938); Chamberlain, Neville (1869–1940); Churchill, Winston (1874–1965); Colonial Appeasement (1935–38); Eden, Anthony (1897–1977); Halifax, Lord (1881–1959); Hitler, Adolf (1889–1945); Munich and the Czechoslovak Crisis (1938); Rhineland Crisis (1936); Treaty of Versailles (1919); Vansittart, Robert (1881–1957)

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