



Has Appeasement Been the Best Policy towards Dictatorships in the Past and Will Continue to Be in the Future

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Abstract

The statement “appeasement has been the best policy towards dictatorships in the past and will continue to be in the future” is not convincing based on the historical knowledge. To clarify the contradiction to the statement, this essay will use the case of the rise of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany, which eventually led to World War II.

The maxim “compromise seems better than conflict” appropriately describes the diplomatic relations between European superpowers, particularly Britain, France, and Germany post-World War I. If viewed in detail, World War II could be considered as a string that evolved from the failure of the appeasement policy adopted by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in the 1930s.

What is to be noted here is the legitimacy of the appeasement policy by the British, whether it is a thriving democratic move to postpone the war or something that should not be done because, in the end, there was also World War II. As a result of the British failure to appease Germany, which triggered World War II, this essay argues that appeasement has not been, and might never be, the right strategy and suitable policy against dictatorships.

Keywords: Appeasement Policy, World War II, Treaty of Versailles, Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain

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1. Introduction

The statement “appeasement has been the best policy towards dictatorships in the past and will continue to be in the future” is not convincing based on the historical knowledge. To clarify the contradiction to the statement, this essay will use the case of the rise of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany, which eventually led to World War II.

The maxim “compromise seems better than conflict” appropriately describes the diplomatic relations between European superpowers, particularly Britain, France, and Germany post-World War I. If viewed in detail, World War II could be considered as a string that evolved from the failure of the appeasement policy adopted by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in the 1930s. (Messinger, 1995, pp.716-718) A dispute also emerged in the British government on preventing Adolf Hitler, the leader of Germany’s Nazi Party, from igniting an interstate war in the European region. (Schmidt, 1983, p.101) This unresolved problem seems to reflect the deliberate refusal of the British and its allies, especially France, to address issues and conflicts arising from World War I, mainly from Germany and the Treaty of Versailles.

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2. Content

In the beginning of the 1930s, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain adopted an appeasement policy that primarily focuses on settling diplomatic tensions with Germany and the grievances of the Nazi Party leader, Adolf Hitler, through mediation and negotiation. The appeasement policy was initially implemented to avert conflict and interstate war among the European countries, but Germany, in turn, took advantage of it to aggressively expand its territories. As a result, appeasement policy was later seen as a weak strategy and a disappointment by the British government, although it was once popular and seemed to be a proper solution to persuade Germany, which was not well-prepared to fight and wage war at that time. (Abel, 1938, p. 421)

It is also claimed that the appeasement policy facilitated Hitler’s violence and animosity as it accommodating most of his demands, particularly the need to reclaim territories that were once part of Germany and annex significant German-speaking population areas. (Rogers & Thomas, 2010, pp. 122-27) When Hitler’s blatant breach of the Treaty of Versailles



occurred, the aggressive behavior of Hitler's expansion became evident. For example, he violated a provision in the Treaty of Versailles, specifically Article 44, which prohibited Germany from stationing troops along the French border. (Abel, 1938, pp. 431-37)

The German Air Force was established in gross violation of the Treaty of Versailles, at a breakneck pace and under strict, albeit not feasible, confidentiality between 1933 and 1935. It was not until 9 March 1935 that Hitler announced the establishment of the Luftwaffe (German Air Force). (Wark, 1982, p. 629) A week later, on 16 March 1935, Hitler enacted new legislation reintroducing the draft and formally expanding the Wehrmacht (German Army) to 500,000 men. As a result, he reinstated the conscription program to form an approximately 600,000-member army, six times the number authorised under the Treaty of Versailles. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019)

Although the allied forces, mainly composed of the British and French, were opposed to Hitler's reformation of the Luftwaffe and the Wehrmacht, they did not take any decisive actions because they strictly adhered to the appeasement policy. Then the following year, on Saturday, March 7, 1936, Hitler deployed the Wehrmacht into the hitherto demilitarised zone on the east and west banks of the Rhineland, in doing so, launching his most arrogant 'Saturday Surprise' to date. (Shore, 1999, p. 5)

However, the British and French continued to tolerate Hitler's unreasonable behaviour as he invaded neighbouring nations and violated the Treaty of Versailles. This was because they believed that if Germany could regain its military power and rationally mobilise German forces on its own land, Germany's resentment of the Treaty of Versailles would be alleviated. Britain also agreed to sign the Anglo-German naval agreement on a maritime development resolution with Germany on June 18, 1935, in order to appease Hitler. This agreement permitted and enabled Germany to develop the Bundesmarine (Federal Navy) and increase the number of its warships, including acquiring a submarine, to one-third the size of the British Navy. (Best, 1981, pp. 68-70)

Furthermore, two years after reclaiming Rhineland, Hitler further demonstrated his determination and animosity by commanding the Wehrmacht to cross the border into Austria with no opposition from Austrian forces in March 1938. The appeasement policy seems to have been meant to facilitate Germany to restore privileges lost due to the Treaty of Versailles' injustices. (Williams, 1979, pp. 139-147)

Cato, the pseudonym of three journalists, condemned Chamberlain for failing to react with military action to the Anschluss with Austria in March 1938. This was a massive mistake on



the part of the British government because it fortified Hitler's expansionist resolve, seeing that neither the French nor the British reacted vigorously to its retaking of Rhineland, and now its Anschluss with Austria. (Cato, 2011, pp. 19-29)

Conversely, it may be argued that the British government's non-aggressive response was reasonable because doing otherwise would have accelerated the war. According to Norman A. Graebner and Edward Bennett, this was a logical action reaction among the British, French, and Germans. As long as Hitler was uncertain whether Britain or France would offensively react or fight, he would try to prevent major conflict. (Graebner & Bennett, 2011, p. 167)

However, while some academics argue that Chamberlain's response in Rhineland and the Anschluss crisis was appropriate, the appeasement policy eventually led to the British government's ineffective deterrence as it made too many compromises. Such can be seen when the Sudeten crisis exploded in Czechoslovakia and the Munich Agreement.

On September 29, 1938, Chamberlain travelled to Munich together with French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier and Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini to meet with Hitler to discuss Nazi violence against its neighbors, notably Austria and Czechoslovakia. (Warshauer, 2004, pp. 247-50) During the conference, even though Britain had previously stated that it would support the Czechs in times of crisis, mainly from the looming German invasion of Sudetenland, Chamberlain felt that the only way to proceed was to exclude the matter from the agenda and just to be glad that no war had occurred. Chamberlain also said that he did not want to start a war over such a minor issue. (Adamthwaite, 1977, pp. 68-70)

Hence, this conference produced a resolution, later known as the Munich Agreement, founded on all member states' acceptance of Hitler's demand to enlarge German territories – allowing it to annex the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia's German-speaking area. (Rogers & Thomas, 2010, pp. 122-27) After regaining control of Sudetenland, the British government may have bolstered Hitler's resolve to conquer Poland, persuaded that his opponents are mere tiny worms. ('Hitler's Speech to the Commanders in Chief (August 22, 1939)')

Rather than keeping a commitment with Czechoslovakia and preserving Sudetenland, which was Czechoslovakia's sovereign territory, the British obliged the Czech government to admit Sudetenland sovereignty in reaction to the 3-million Sudetenland Germans' objections. Chamberlain, Daladier, and Mussolini were arguably forced to compromise with Hitler in Munich because authorising his conquer of the Sudetenland was the only thing that prohibited him from waging war with Czechoslovakia.



Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott also assess that the appeasement policy demonstrated to Hitler that the British government, as a leading European country, was amenable to trade-off some of the privileges of minor states to achieve peace. Although appeasement postponed war, it could not preclude it forever since neither Britain nor France could implement a negotiation with Hitler.

On the one hand, the Munich Agreement was greeted with excitement in certain parts of Britain because it illustrated how appeasement policy persuaded all member states of the Munich Conference to reach an agreement. Appeasement policy was justified in the ideas of appeasers to ensure European security, especially the safety of the British kingdom. Therefore, some European countries praised Chamberlain and sensed the British government's desperate motivation to avert a war in Europe.

The positive attitude of Chamberlain is presented in his "peace for our time" speech following the signing of the Munich Agreement and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. Chamberlain perceived these resolutions as an overture to a broader compromise in which all the European states could live peacefully, stating that he and Hitler consented to "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." (Overy, 2016, p. 115) Nonetheless, though a cheering audience welcomed Chamberlain as he delivered this address, the crowd did not indicate the general public opinion, as 15,000 people gathered to protest against the Munich Agreement in Trafalgar Square that day. (McDonough, 1998, pp. 124-33)

As Frank McDonough opined, Chamberlain's speech showcased his indiscreetness and heedlessness as he should not have treated Hitler as a reasonable politician. McDonough viewed Hitler as an irrational man, which led to Chamberlain proceeding on an impossible mission to appease him. (McDonough, 1998, pp.157) Moreover, Winston Churchill, who later left the government and became a fervent opponent of the appeasement policy and Hitler in general, viewed the Munich Agreement as an unjustified tragedy. (Messinger, 1995, pp. 716-18) He chastised the appeasement policy for its unwise decisions, claiming that war grew inevitable when the British government refused to take decisive responses toward Hitler. (Churchill, 1986, p. ix-xv) In addition, according to Richard Overy, another aspect that made war unavoidable was Hitler's long-term preparations for his expansionist policies, as evidenced by a summary of the Hossbach Memorandum during a conference between Hitler and his staffs held in Berlin on 5 November 1937. (Overy, 2016, pp. 131) As it seemed, appeasement supporters overlooked the Hossbach Memorandum, claiming that Hitler did not respect the



memorandum as he only acts on the basic intuition. Therefore, accusing the British government of overlooking Hitler's plans is unreasonable given that Hitler himself was unaware of his intentions. (Taylor, 1991, p. 68)

Interestingly, another possible explanation for the British government's appeasement strategy is to buy time to prolong the peace until the British and its principal ally, France, are ready for war. The European countries' situations had not fully recovered from the hardships of World War I. Furthermore, public opinion in Britain and France was spooked by the trauma from World War I, which had been presented as a war to end all wars.

Apart from the war-related factors, economics is also another reason which forces many parties to avoid war. Since enduring the economic pressures that peaked in the early 1930s, or historically known as the Great Depression, resulted in high unemployment rates in many war-torn European countries, Britain and France were not prepared for a full-scale war, unable to re-arm and restore military strength. In this sense, many parties were unable to prepare both in military and financial terms. Even if they would like to oppose Hitler's Germany, financial restrictions made it impossible to do so. This caused the British and French to be unable to deter Germany from any aggressive action effectively.

From a historical context of Hitler's Germany's rise, which eventually led Germany to World War II, we can see that in the beginning, many nations tried to please Hitler and chose the appeasement method to deal with him. Whether they suffered economically or sought peace by remaining neutral, they ended up appeasing a mad dictator. While it seemed peaceful initially, the appeasement eventually uncovered the weaknesses of the Allied powers and, conversely, enhanced Hitler's power. As we are all aware, power tends to corrupt, and Hitler used his power to wage World War II.

Paul Kennedy's argued that appeasement policy was the right strategy to employ against Hitler beginning in 1933 because Britain and France were unprepared, militarily, or economically, for another full-scale war and interstate conflict. (Kennedy, 1981, p. 301) Therefore, the appeasement policy could be considered as a suitable policy against Germany at the time.

Alan John Percivale Taylor FBA (A.J.P. Taylor), a British historian, goes on to argue that Hitler was successful in undermining the Treaty of Versailles due to the lapses of the League of Nations and other European leaders in properly appeasing Germany. Furthermore, some historians claim that appeasement inspired Hitler to pursue the aggressive strategy to preserve his supremacy over Poland while ignoring the threat posed by Britain and France.



Therefore, another failure of appeasement is that Hitler was not effectively deterred by Britain's and France's efforts to declare war on Germany, which he considered insignificant or impossible if he invaded Poland. Therefore, it was too late to stop Germany from invading Poland, which was one of Russia's territories at the time. (Adamthwaite, 1977, pp. 65-67)

As a result, Taylor concludes that Hitler was not much different from previous German dictators, such as Bismarck, who desperately desired to unite German lands and extend authority, but Hitler seems to have been greedier in his desire to broaden his influence and did not compromise to negotiate peace. (Adamthwaite, 1977, pp. 65-67) According to Ian Kershaw, Hitler was a dictator who was adamant about securing regional autonomy and would not make any concessions to Britain. (Kershaw, 2015, p. 109)

It might be argued that Germany, led by Hitler, was more aggressive in dominating other European countries because he assumed that Britain and France could not oppose any action or decision he took. Most notably, many historians believe that Britain's policy, which resulted in the betrayal of Czechoslovakia by appeasing Hitler and allowing German control of Sudetenland at the Munich conference, was a big mistake. Nonetheless, despite Hitler's pledge that after annexing Sudetenland, there would be no more territorial claims in Europe, he breached the Munich Agreement by occupying all of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Six months later, in September 1939, Hitler continued his plan by invading Poland. As a result, the British, along with France, waged war on Germany. (Adamthwaite, 1977, pp. 65-67)

According to Richard Overy, Chamberlain pursued appeasement deliberately out of concern for the viability of Britain's empire and aimed to build a balance of risks by preventing tensions with Japan, which could undermine the British empire in the East, and Germany, which could threaten European stability. (Overy, 2016, p. 19) Another controversial rationalisation of appeasement is contended by Clement Leibovitz, who claims that a primary cause for appeasement policy was suspicion of Bolshevism among the Conservative elite, who saw Hitler, through his dictatorial characteristic and fascist ideology, as a strategic barrier against the spread of communism from Russia. (Leibovitz & Finkel, 1997, pp. 21-22)



3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Britain's appeasement approach against Germany was seen as a responsible effort to prevent war from breaking out. However, as a result of policies introduced by both Britain and France, Germany and its dictatorial leader, Adolf Hitler, began to benefit avariciously from the expansion of German power. Britain initially agreed and complied with all of Germany's demands, in fact, Hitler's preferences and aspirations, but later realised that Hitler preferred to be battled when attempting to invade Poland, which was then one of Russia's territories. The appeasement policy is seen as if Britain and France, the two European superpowers expected to prevent and discourage Germany from regaining its rights, were purposely failing to do so to allow Germany a fair opportunity to reclaim its rights. This is possibly attributable to Britain's intention to prevent war for the umpteenth time due to its own country's desperate economic crisis.

Appeasement policy was a reasonable solution that sought to postpone war and prolong peacetime, but it failed to acknowledge the inevitability of warfare sanctified by Hitler's belligerent foreign policy and missed to produce adequate preparations for war. Overall, the failure of the appeasement policy, which triggered World War II, should be used as a learning experience and case study to ensure that history could not repeat itself. As long as everything can still be negotiated and settled peacefully, it should be given priority in any challenges that emerge because 'compromise seems better than conflict.'

The greatest mistake of the appeasement policy was not that it was a bad policy in general, but that there was an inappropriate equilibrium, with the accumulating compromises significantly outpacing the opportunity to keep Hitler in place under current agreements, such as the Treaty of Versailles, the Munich Agreement, and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. Perhaps if some of these agreements had been successfully applied and territorial acquisitions had been more vigorously criticised rather than implicitly welcomed, the appeasement policy would not have been so viciously condemned after the outbreak of World War II. Nonetheless, war was hardly unavoidable as long as Hitler was still in charge, although at the very least, the appeasement policy could postpone war and provide for particular if constrained, arrangements by the European powers.



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