British Appeasement Policy Toward Hitler: A Complex Initiative Predicated on Factors Beyond Naïve Idealism

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Introduction

Forming the cornerstone of inter-war British foreign policy, the appeasement of Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany during the latter half of the 1930s has become a heavily discussed issue garnering much debate by prominent figures and academics alike (Gilbert 56). While the popular traditionalist view of British appeasement has advanced the notion that it was futile, cowardly, and, as Hans Morgenthau puts it, “a corrupted policy of compromise” advanced by naïve idealists, revisionist historians suggest that appeasement was a more complex phenomenon motivated by a diverse array of factors in the precarious game of statecraft (Morgenthau 151-2). Drawing inspiration from the broader revisionist view, this paper seeks to adopt its narrative and ask the following question: what were the significant factors that influenced British policymakers to adopt a strategy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1939? Ultimately, it shall be argued that British appeasement towards Hitler was a complex policy initiative influenced by the following assortment of elements: a desire to avoid war based on fear and economic incentive, lack of dominion support and anxiety over colonial control, and the need to buy time for re-armament. To support this contention, an analysis of primary and secondary material relating to appeasement policy shall be undertaken to illustrate their influence.

Avoidance of War: Fear of Annihilation and Economic Destruction

To begin an effective analysis of the factors that influenced appeasement, it is first necessary to provide a brief contextual background concerning its use. Appeasement essentially took place within four distinct phases of German aggression that impinged on post World War I peace and territorial treaties, along with the sovereignty of other nations (Lee 149-51). Beginning with German re-armament (1935), followed by the remilitarization of the Rhineland (1936), the annexation of Austria (1938), and the incorporation of the Sudetenland into the Reich (1938), Britain allowed such events to take place peacefully to appease Hitler and avoid war (Ripsman and Levy 149). Essentially, appeasement was premised on the principles of diplomacy and peace as effective problem-solving tools rather than the traditional force and aggression that were conducive to war. With a contextual basis now set, it is apt to turn towards the main impetus of this paper: the factors that influenced the British move to appease.

Beginning with one of the simplest reasons, appeasement was a policy based on one primary and guiding factor: “a resolve never again to drift or fall unwittingly into war” (Gilbert 19). Various British decision-makers, along with the main figurehead of appeasement, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, did not want to go to war and saw peace-making policy as the only available avenue to avoid it (Rock 50). This desire to prevent war was motivated by a variety of considerations stemming from the elements of fear and economic incentive. An examination of early British cabinet documents can serve to illustrate the component of fear and its pervasive influence. For example, during the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was given to the British Cabinet and favoured an approach based on appeasement, as it declared that “we are, in the matter of most armaments and all munitions, already dangerously weaker than

Germany" (The National Archives "CAB 24/260" 153). This was echoed by a report to the cabinet on defence matters one month later that called British air forces "utterly inadequate" in the event of fighting Germany (The National Archives "CAB 24/261" 384). As a result, the cabinet allowed Hitler to remilitarize the Rhineland, concluding that peace was the only appropriate option (The National Archives "CAB 23/84" 297). Clearly, fear of German military strength was already developing amongst the British cabinet in 1936 and this would only come to intensify.

By 1938 this undercurrent of fear had evolved and Chamberlain became severely concerned about the ability of German strategic bombing to decimate Britain (Trubowitz and Harris 297). Chamberlain's fear derived from the German *Luftwaffe*'s bombing of Guernica in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War and the destruction it left in its wake (Lee 155). A direct examination of Chamberlain's address to the cabinet in September 1938 provides evidence of this anxiety (The National Archives "CAB 23/95/6" 181). While discussing the justification for appeasing Hitler to the British cabinet and allowing the annexation of the Sudetenland, Chamberlain refers to "German bombs" as a "direct threat to every home in this country, and… to the people of this country" (The National Archives "CAB 23/95/6" 181). Chamberlain was haunted by the destructive capability of German bombing and was petrified by its prospective ability to decimate British cities and slaughter millions in the event of war (Lee 155). This is further evidenced by the fact that during the Sudeten crisis, air-raid shelters were built in London and gas masks were mass-distributed (Lee 155). Undoubtedly, the fear of German military strength compared to the inferior nature of Britain's military, paired with Chamberlain's horror concerning German bombing capabilities, pushed British policymakers to appease. Bringing war to Britain was seen as entailing physical annihilation and the death of millions, and this was to be avoided if at all possible (Lee 155). In this sense, avoidance of war motivated by fear was an influential factor in choosing a course of appeasement.

Another element that made avoiding war an important consideration for Britain was economic incentive and survival. As the centre of the world's commercial and financial systems, "Britain was dependent on extensive global trade, which required peace and stability" (Ripsman and Levy 168). Already suffering from the economic downturns of World War I and the Great Depression, Britain felt that charging into another war, if unnecessary, was financially irresponsible (Trubowitz and Harris 297). Indeed, the spectre of World War I loomed ominously over Britain as its adverse effects upon the economy and status as a world power were apparent. Not only did the length of the great war lead to an increase in national debt from £650 million to £7.4 billion, but manufacturing exports to the rest of the world declined as war production eclipsed other forms of industry (Kemp 97-8). This decrease in manufacturing exports left an opportunistic hole, which became filled by the Americans and Japanese as they expanded into Latin American and Asian Markets (Kemp 98). Certainly, the economic consequences of the Great War provided a looking glass illuminating the economic and empire-based costs that the British could expect from another war. Evidence of such anxiety can be seen in the report of Sir Alan Barlow to the Strategical Appreciation Committee in April 1939, where he outlines the economic plight of Britain and its incapacity to wage another long war. Barlow, the under-Secretary of the Treasury at the time, stated to the Committee that, "the position had radically changed for the worse compared with 1914 . . . we had not the same resources for purchasing supplies abroad" (The National Archives "CAB 16/209 SAC 4"). Expanding on this premise, Barlow concluded that, in terms of financial viability, "if we were under the impression that we were as well able as in 1914 to conduct a long war we were burying our heads in the sand" (The National Archives "CAB 16/209 SAC 4"). This presented an interesting dilemma, as the British Chiefs of Staff felt a protracted war was the only war they could win, but according to Barlow, such a war would likely lead to economic collapse (Kemp 102). Even Chamberlain himself worried that a costly war

undermining the economic position of Britain could be detrimental to the empire and weaken Britain's status as a great power (Trubowitz and Harris 297). While fear of economic decline due to conflict was not unique to the British, the breadth of their empire and the losses that it incurred from World War I made this a particularly pertinent issue. In light of the doubt concerning Britain's economic capacity to wage war, it is logical to assert that economic matters were of specific concern to the British until the last moments before World War II. Considering the prevalence of anxiety concerning the ability of the British Empire to economically survive another war, it would be naïve to adopt the view that such factors did not influence the decision to adopt a course of appeasement until no longer possible. Thus, the desire to avoid war and seek a policy of appeasement can also be said to be motivated, at least in some manner, by the maintenance of the empire's economic welfare and due to anxiety relating to Britain's capacity to afford another long-term war.

In consideration of both fear and economic incentive, it is no wonder British policymakers wished to avoid war and choose a policy of appeasement instead. By examining these motivators, Britain seemingly had much to lose and nothing to gain out of the prospect of another conflict and almost "every British Cabinet Minister proved unwilling to accept the choice of war" (Barros et al. 175). Ultimately, in light of the significant evidence presented, it can be confidently claimed that the avoidance of war based on fear and economic incentive was a simple yet crucial reason that propelled the British government to adopt a policy of conciliation.

Lack of Dominion Support and Anxiety over Colonial Control: Crucial Military and Imperial Considerations

Although the narrow-minded traditionalist interpretation would claim avoiding war was the sole factor that influenced appeasement

policy, there were a variety of other elements based on pragmatism and careful military consideration that British policymakers took into account. As early as 1933, the British Committee of Imperial Defence presented the British Cabinet with an annual review document that claimed: “within the next, say, three to five years we may be faced with demands for military intervention on the continent” concerning Nazi Germany (The National Archives “CAB 24/244” 139). This notion was based on Germany’s withdrawal from the League of Nations and speculation that German re-armament or aggression may lead to war (The National Archives “CAB 24/244” 139). Although British policymakers wished to avoid war, preparation for the worst-case scenario was still an important part of British imperial defence policy to ensure that if conflict came, the proper resources were allocated for it. The British dominions were vital to overall military strength, and “British officials believed that if they were to go to war, they must have the unanimous backing of the dominions” (Kent 396). This would come to be problematic for Britain as the dominions were much more autonomous than they were in 1919, and Britain could not simply force them into a war or make their interests coincide (Ovendale 20). Indeed, by the 1930s, the dominions had essentially become fully autonomous self-governing states with their own parliaments and were in no way subordinate to Britain (20). The British government was thus unable to dispute the right of dominion parliaments to formulate their own policies in regards to external affairs, defence policy, and neutrality in any future war involving Britain (20). In this sense, British statesmen were left with the harsh reality that a shared commonwealth policy could no longer be expected, but had to be carefully procured by convincing each dominion to adopt the same stance (20). As German re-armament began to accelerate in 1935, Britain attempted to secure unanimous dominion military backing in the case of conflict involving Germany. As revealed by the dominions’ stances, securing such support was highly problematic and unlikely. Mackenzie King in Canada was an ardent isolationist uninterested in fighting foreign non-Canadian wars, and Prime

Minister J. B. M. Hertzog in South Africa was adamant about maintaining his country's neutrality (23). In Australia, Prime Minister J. A. Lyons faced considerable opposition that condemned the idea of Australia involving itself in any commitments outside its territorial sphere (23). New Zealand was the only dominion that was seemingly ready to provide aid as long as it was consonant with the League of Nations (23). In an attempt to achieve dominion commitment and co-operation to defence in the case of war, the British held an imperial conference that met in London during May 1937 (Imperial Conference). Unfortunately for Britain, this co-operation would not be attained.

An exploration of the imperial conference's summary of proceedings provides an excellent overview into the formal position of the dominions in 1937 concerning their stance if Britain engaged in a European war. There was a consensus reached by the dominions. However, it was the opposite of a concerted commitment to British defence in the case of war. Their stance is posited in the conference's summary as such:

> For each member of the Commonwealth the first objective is the preservation of peace… Holding these views and desiring to base their policies upon the aims and ideals of the League of Nations, they found themselves unanimous in declaring that their respective armaments will never be used for purposes of aggression. (Imperial Conference 10)

The dominions were essentially set on maintaining peace and refused to utilize their armaments in a British recourse to force against Germany. This attitude would continue throughout the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938, as the dominion leaders made it clear that they did not regard such actions as adequate for them to become involved in a European war with Britain (Gilbert 155). Throughout the entire period of appeasement, Britain was put in a precarious position where failing to pursue peace

and conciliation with Germany would lead to the possibility of war without the military backing of the dominions. Considering just how crucial to British success the dominions were during the First World War, and the large part they would go on to play in the Second, it is no doubt this absence of support helped determine the British decision to choose appeasement (Gilbert 155). Inevitably, a war without dominion backing would have left the already lagging British military even more ill-equipped to deal with the Nazis. Such a position would have entailed a vastly weakened and crippled British military, which is why the British wished to ensure the unanimous backing of the dominions in the case of war (Kent 396). By failing to secure this co-operation, Britain was left with the decision of diplomatic appeasement as favoured by the dominions, or war without dominion backing, which would have been conducive to a weakened British military. Put into this context, it is easy to see how lack of dominion support influenced the decision to choose appeasement, as this absence of backing deteriorated Britain's prospective military force against Germany.

Although the dominions were certainly an important factor in the overall scheme of World War II, an assessment of British military prowess is sorely incomplete without acknowledging the often-overlooked role of British colonies. British colonies provided millions of troops and wartime personnel (Crowley and Dawson 4). Significantly, India provided the British with the largest share of soldiers at 2.5 million (Leonard 361). Such a source cannot be ignored, as it was the highest contribution of any colony or dominion. Though this is the case, the literature surrounding colonial contributions and British assessments of colonial sentiment about assisting in World War II remains shockingly sparse. Even more so, there is a dearth of academic sources discussing the potential link between appeasement and British anxiety about colonial loyalty and contribution to the war effort. As unfortunate as this is, the lack of knowledge can likely be attributed to the scarcity of primary source documents discussing the mobilization of colonial military forces in

the event of a second world war. While some documents do discuss such topics, they provide meagre evidence. However, when viewed in light of events and politics at the time, this evidence lends credence to the premise that British anxiety about colonial control and loyalty influenced appeasement policy to some degree. It is important to note that most of these sources concern India, as it was the largest British colony and was rife with ongoing political tension.

In 1937, the possibility of war was on the horizon, and the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) was preparing for this prospect by reviewing the military might of the empire. Discussing the possibility of war, the CID mentioned that "[c]o-operation by the Dominions and India would be of great importance" (The National Archives "CAB 24/268/23" 17). In particular, the CID posited that the security of Singapore was imperative to the survival of the commonwealth and that India could provide reinforcements in that regard (The National Archives "CAB 24/268/23" 7-19). Undoubtedly, such assertions by the CID illustrate the importance of Indian military cooperation with Britain in the event of a world war. While these contributions were seen as key, there was looming concern amongst the British cabinet that ascertaining the aid of India may not occur. The quarterly reports of the political and constitutional position in British India provide evidence of this fear. For example, in a report released that considered Indian sentiment between May to July 1938, it was announced to the British cabinet that the Indian National Congress (INC) had advanced and maintained the decision to refrain from assisting Britain in a war (The National Archives "CAB 24/278/29" 37). In addition to this, the report spoke of anti-war and recruiting propaganda penetrating India (The National Archives "CAB 24/278/29" 37). The INC was the leading party in India at the time, winning eight majorities in the eleven provinces and holding a substantial amount of political influence (Metcalf and Metcalf 213). They sought India's independence from Britain, and with this sort of political turmoil, Britain was in a precarious position relative to being assured of not only India's allegiance in a conflict, but whether they

could maintain their control over India in the event of a war (124). Another quarterly report, this time documenting sentiment in India from August to October, 1938, directly states the following: “again, the British avoidance of war is explained as due in part to anxiety about the possibility of maintaining domination in India if all the resources of the Empire were concentrated on a struggle for existence” (The National Archives “CAB 24/281/6” 42). This statement indicates that the British appeasement of Hitler was partially premised on the fear of British politicians that India would separate from Britain if a war broke out, and Britain would not have the military capacity to prevent such an event. In this sense, unlike the dominions, Britain did not simply fear losing military support. Rather, the loyalty and control of India due to ongoing political tension hung in the balance.

Considering the evidence adduced, the British understood that Indian military contribution was important, that such military support was tenuous, and that going to war could mean losing British control over India. Losing control of India was clearly an ongoing fear permeating the British cabinet, and, according to the quarterly India report aforementioned, was a factor influencing the policy of conciliation towards Hitler. While India was just one of the British colonies, it was the largest, and based on the sources presented, it can be claimed that British anxiety over colonial control influenced the decision to choose appeasement. Without the benefit of hindsight we now have, the British decision makers were left with rather grim options. They could join a war without dominion support (and possibly lose control of India) or they could appease Germany to maintain imperial control (and not be in a weakened military position lacking dominion and Indian support). Placed in this light, the choice to appease was, at the time, a practical and realistic option in consideration of military might, imperial integrity, and statecraft.

Based on the evidence presented, a sufficient burden of proof has been established to confidently claim that lack of dominion military support and concerns over colonial control influenced the British decision to embark on a policy of appeasement. Such revelations also reveal the complex pragmatic considerations involved in appeasement policy that go beyond the traditionalist sense of cowardice and simply avoiding war.

Buying Time: Appeasement as a Strategy of Re-armament

Yet another rational factor that influenced the decision to appease was that of buying time to successfully re-arm the British military until it was adequately prepared in case of war (Ripsman and Levy 150-51). In this sense, British policymakers were involved in a process of strategic balance-of-power calculations predicated on the longer-term goal of building up the British military if peace was ultimately unachievable (156). As aforementioned, British policymakers had come to realize in 1936 that German military power had eclipsed that of Britain and that British air forces were utterly inadequate against Germany (The National Archives “CAB 24/260” 384). The reason behind Britain’s comparatively weak military lay in its post-World War I economic situation; it incurred significant debt to the U.S and chose to cut its defence spending drastically (Ripsman and Levy 159). Consequently, “the British military was woefully unprepared for war in the 1930s” and had to begin a slow process of re-armament in 1935 while already considerably behind the Nazis (159). Knowing full well that the British military paled in comparison to the Nazis, and that time would be needed to effectively re-arm in preparation for a possible war, the British opted to provide short-term appeasement and concessions to Hitler as a method to create that necessary time (174). Indeed, evidence of this strategic maneuvering is apparent within the cabinet documents available from that period. During the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the British cabinet had

been presented with a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, which claimed that the British military was dangerously weaker than Germany's and war was simply untenable at that time (The National Archives "CAB 24/260" 153). The same report went on to state that "with this in view we must double-bank our own [re-armament] preparations" (The National Archives "CAB 24/260" 154). Similar sentiment is extensive within many other cabinet meetings during the Rhineland crisis. For example, one report presented to the cabinet on the condition of British forces to go to war with Germany claimed, "our air forces at home are denuded to an extent almost unparalleled in the past" and that they "would be quite inadequate… against Germany" (The National Archives "CAB 24/261" 386). The insufficiency of British air power was quite apparent, and decision makers such as Chamberlain suggested that if the British kept out of war for a few more years, it could be polished into a powerful striking force (Ripsman and Levy 150). A similar stance was echoed by British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, who was in favour of appeasement during the Rhineland issue, as he claimed "he was never going into sanctions again until our armaments were sufficient" (The National Archives "CAB 23/83" 295). Undoubtedly, this illustrates the buying-time logic that influenced the decision to appease Hitler as a pragmatic policy initiative meant to ensure the successful re-armament of the British military. The British knew they needed time to re-arm, pushing them to provide short-term concessions in the form of appeasement to reach this goal. Unsurprisingly, concerning the Rhineland issue, the British cabinet decided that they could not survive a war in Europe at the time and concluded the following: "our principal aim… at the present time was to play for time and for peace. Time was vital for the completion of our defensive security" (The National Archives "CAB 23/84" 33). This led the British to appease Hitler and allow him to remilitarize the Rhineland, buying crucial time for British re-armament.

The idea of buying time for re-armament was not solely limited to the Rhineland issue and was still carefully pursued by Neville Chamberlain once he became Prime Minister in 1937. By 1938 the British military had been undergoing significant re-armament, yet was still woefully underprepared in juxtaposition to the German war machine. Such inadequacy is evidenced by Chamberlain's address to the cabinet in September 1938 concerning the Sudeten crisis, where he states: "if we now possessed a superior force to Germany, we should probably be considering these proposals in a very different spirit" (The National Archives "CAB 23/95/6" 181). This statement was used to assert Chamberlain's idea that appeasement was necessary to continue re-armament, as standing up to Hitler in the current state of military weakness was unwise (Ripsman and Levy 174). In fact, an assessment of quantitative data reveals Chamberlain's buying-time logic via appeasement significantly contributed to re-armament. In 1938 the total defence expenditure was £397.5 million, but rose to £719 million in 1939 (Shay 297). The dire situation of the British military in 1938 and the need to buy time for rearmament are further exemplified in a private letter written by Chamberlain in May 1940 in which he claimed: "whatever the outcome, it is clear as daylight that, if we had to fight in 1938, the result would have been far worse" (Chamberlain 985). Simply put, Chamberlain knew the British lacked the military capacity to challenge Germany in 1938, instead choosing to buy time through appeasement policy so he could build up Britain's military to fight the Nazis on better military terms (Ripsman and Levy 174).

Based on the evidence presented, it is quite irrefutable that buying time for re-armament was a principle factor that truly influenced the British policy of conciliation towards Hitler. Not only does this reveal yet another significant element that was conducive towards choosing appeasement as a policy initiative, but is also strongly undermines the traditionalist interpretation of appeasement, which asserts it was based solely on avoiding war through naïve idealism. In conjunction with the other factors aforementioned, it is clear that

the British appeasement of Nazi Germany between 1935 to 1939 was an intricate policy initiative influenced by various factors predicated on the pragmatic consideration of effective statecraft.

Conclusion

This paper set out to contend that British appeasement policy towards Nazi Germany during 1935 to 1939 was a complex policy initiative influenced by three important elements in particular. First, it illustrated how the desire to avoid war based on an undercurrent of fear resulting from British military weakness and German military prowess, along with economic incentive and survival, influenced the British decision to appease. Second, it analyzed the dominions' positions on backing Britain in case of war with Germany during the 1935 to 1939 period of appeasement. This investigation demonstrated that the British lacked the unanimous dominion military support they wished to procure, thus leaving the British military in a severely weakened state if they chose war instead of conciliation. Alongside this assessment, this paper examined primary source materials to determine whether British fears pertaining to their colonies had any impact on the choice to appease. It illustrated that British anxiety over losing control of India in the event of war was a prevalent factor striking fear into the British cabinet, as they wished to maintain imperial integrity. The result of these conundrums pushed Britain to choose conciliation, revealing that the lack of dominion military support and anxiety over maintaining colonial control were further factors that influenced appeasement. Lastly, this paper reviewed British cabinet documents and established that British policymakers used appeasement as a time-buying policy for effective re-armament of the British military in preparation for the possibility of war. This review illustrated that buying time for re-armament was another factor that influenced appeasement. Ultimately, on the basis of this evidence, it can be claimed that British appeasement policy towards Nazi Germany was

a complex policy initiative influenced by the following elements: a desire to avoid war based on fear and economic incentive, lack of dominion support and anxiety over colonial control, and buying time for re-armament.

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