

# Appeasement essay



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The application of Appeasement to British Foreign policy post World War One remains a highly debated topic amongst historians, mainly regarding the use and reasons for the policy and its ineffectiveness. Appeasement generally refers to ‘ The policy of settling disputes by peaceful means and compromise rather than by resort to war’<sup>1</sup>. It is mostly associated with the policies of Neville Chamberlain in the build up to the Second World War, however its origins go back to the Treaty of Versailles right after the Great War. This essay will attempt to investigate how far the policy was applied to Foreign Policy in the inter-war years through exploration of the period in two phases, post war up to 1937 and then 1937 onwards under Chamberlain.

It will also attempt to look for possible alternatives to appeasement and the failures of the policy. Post Versailles appeasement was a basic principle of British Foreign policy. In August 1919 cabinet agreed, ‘ it should be assumed that the British Empire will not be engaged in any Great War during the next ten years and that no expeditious force is required for this purpose. ’ <sup>2</sup> Therefore the 10-year rule was introduced, though it was extended past 1929, rearmament did not begin again until 1934.

Aims of British Foreign Policy in the 1920’s and 1930’s included securing the British Empire, developing British trade and prosperity and avoiding alliances at all costs, it adopted an increasing isolationist outlook however policy was in some respects contradictory. Whilst Britain wanted to be left alone and undisturbed by continental Europe ‘ it was not prepared to abandon its influence and prestige and it felt it had a moral duty to intervene in world affairs, to put them right when it considered that it was necessary to do so’<sup>3</sup>. Policy centred on the Triple threat of Italy, Japan and most importantly

Germany. Foreign Policy towards Japan included unsuccessful economic appeasement and an equally unsuccessful proposed security agreement whilst policy towards Italy was mainly to prevent or weaken a Rome-Berlin axis. For Britain there was a two-sided pressure when dealing with Italy.

Whilst wanting to avoid a war there was huge public outcry surrounding Abyssinia. Responding to public opinion by supporting the League of Nations over Abyssinia had disastrous consequences. The actions of Britain here neither stopped Mussolini nor retained his good will. It just angered him.

The issue of Germany was more complex and saw the greatest use of Appeasement, particularly in the second phase of Appeasement under Chamberlain as will be discussed later. In the 1920's and 1930's up to 1937 British Foreign policy could be described as an ad hoc policy. It was flexible and pragmatic. Basically some problems were confronted whilst others were ignored. Britain seemed to drift along accepting events such as Manchuria, Abyssinia, German rearmament and the Rhineland occupation. Here is an example of simply accepting rather than negotiation and diplomacy, not really what appeasement entails.

But Britain had good reasoning for this acceptance and for the use of appeasement; three major concerns- Revision of Versailles, public opinion and extensive global commitments and military and economic weakness governed British policy. After world war one the anti-German feeling gradually subsided. Many people felt that Germany as well as Italy had genuine grievances. Italy had been cheated at Versailles whilst Germany had apparently been treated too harshly by the Treaty. In fact many people

actually felt Hitler had a strong case for revision. They were won over by his extremely anti-Communist stance (there was a genuine fear of communism) and saw him as a useful barrier to Soviet expansion.

It was felt that Britain should react with sympathy and that revision would remove the need for feared German aggression. However Britain's agreement that there was need for revision saw a deterioration of Anglo-French relations and the French disagreed staunchly with revision. Another reason for the use of Appeasement was public opinion, particularly towards war and conflict. The memories and horrors of world war one were impressed heavily in people's minds. This led to a 'never again' mentality. An example of this is the Oxford Union vote in February 1933 against war claiming that 'this house would not fight for king and country.'

' 4 Public Opinion was very much for the League of Nations in order to try and keep peace. In secret ministers felt the league was useless but they had to respond to public opinion to support the league. This was particularly disastrous against Mussolini in Abyssinia. Another way in which public opinion shaped actions was with regard to rearmament. Due to the 'never again' mentality there was huge public opposition to rearming, particularly as it may antagonise Hitler. However it is important to note that this could have been mask for the real reasons against rearmament, the idea that Britain was not economically stable enough particularly after the Depression of 1929, Britain simply couldn't afford a huge rearmament programme at the time.

One vital reason for Appeasement rather than conflict was due to Britain's global commitments. A Foreign Office memo of 1926 laid out Britain's defence obligations. Britain had obligations as a member of the league, was signatory to the Paris, Washington and Locarno treaties and had commitments in Egypt, Abyssinia, the Middle East, Portugal, the entire Commonwealth and British Empire which consisted of Australia and New Zealand as well as India and Singapore and large areas of Africa and the Caribbean. This was a highly impossible task, Britain did not possess the military or economic strength to defend such a far-flung Empire and when challenged could not assert herself.

Appeasement stepped up to a whole new level in the 1930's particularly when Chamberlain came to power in 1937. Rather than being a case of simply letting occurrences slip by, Chamberlain made a real effort to appease and use greater diplomacy. Under Chamberlain policy changed from passive to active appeasement. Chamberlain himself had a personal fear of war as he said in a radio broadcast, ' Armed conflict is a nightmare to me..

. I shall not give up hope of a peaceful solution, or abandon my efforts for peace, as long as any chance for peace remains. ' 5 He hoped to produce a ' Grand Settlement of internal problems in order to create a lasting European peace. But Chamberlain made a crucial error.

He based his policy of appeasement upon the false assumption that Hitler was a reasonable and trustworthy man. In a letter to his sister after a meeting with Hitler Chamberlain stated, ' I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied on when he had given his word. ' 6 He also put

some misplaced trust in Mussolini whom he felt could restrain Hitler.

However whilst appeasing possible enemies Britain was also in the process of rearming and assessing defence strategies. We could say that Chamberlain was hoping for the best by appeasing Hitler whilst preparing for the worst by rearming. In the latter stages of appeasement Chamberlain made three flights to Germany in the autumn of 1938 to try and achieve a peaceful settlement with Germany.

From his first meeting Chamberlain along with France had agreed to Hitler's demand for the Sudetanland. Chamberlain appeared to believe that Hitler was demanding the Sudetanland as a way of uniting all Germans. Hitler then continued to demand further concessions and raised the stakes and war seemed more likely but Chamberlain did not want a war and still believed that he could negotiate with Hitler. Therefore when the opportunity arose for a conference at Munich Chamberlain jumped at the chance. At Munich Britain and France agreed to Hitler's demands in return for a four-power guarantee of Czechoslovakia, however this turned out to be the limit of the policy of Appeasement. Whilst appeasing, Chamberlain's policy aim was never peace at any price, the British government would never accept German domination of Europe.

It simply was not viable. The use of Appeasement seemed to be running out however it appeared that Chamberlain still placed some faith in negotiation. He believed that he might be able to influence Hitler through Mussolini, but unfortunately his visit to Rome in January 1939 achieved little if anything. Time was clearly running out. Foreign Secretary Halifax urged for a tougher policy towards Germany and warned that Hitler may in fact attack the West

and finally on the 1st February the cabinet agreed that Britain must go to war if Germany invades either Holland or Switzerland.

However unsuccessful appeasement was, there did not really seem to be any viable alternatives. The failure of Abyssinia for example when Britain went against the policy of appeasement proved a failure and did nothing for Anglo-Italian relations. Alternative policies were hard to define as Young states, ' Alternative policies to Appeasement were not easy to define. The time for European integration, or even collective security, had passed. ' 7 One alternative could have been for an alliance between Britain and France or possibly one with the Soviet Union, however this was only viable if Hitler could be stopped by it. Another alternative could have been for all out rearmament however this would have had serious economic repercussions.

We could argue that it did not really matter what sort of policy Britain adopted as Hitler was so bent on expansion regardless. It is important not to over estimate the policy of appeasement. Darby states that appeasement was ' not peace at any price – it was a policy of accommodation and adjustment but accommodation that did not disturb British interests. ' 8 Therefore there was only so far Britain was prepared to go in order to negotiate. It was not able to get out of hand.

In the 1920's there was never any real negotiation. It was a policy of passive appeasement, Britain just let occurrences happen and pass her by, and it only really became active under Chamberlain. Chamberlain tried to use the policy to its full extent. It should be noted though that at the same time a policy of rearmament was also in place. Appeasement may have been used

to quite an extent however it failed to stop the war. But it did provide Britain with one advantage.

It brought valuable time and delayed the war. This was vital as Britain was in no way ready for a war earlier on.