WWS Case Study 2/02

"MUNICH"
Reassessing the Diplomatic Value of Appeasement

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WWS 547 The Conduct of International Diplomacy
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– 1 –
Introduction

One month after the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11th 2001, the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon issued the following statement: "I call upon the United States not to commit again the terrible mistake made in Munich when Czechoslovakia was sacrificed for a temporary solution to German aggression. Do not try to appease Arab aggression at Israeli expense. It is unacceptable. Israel will not be another Czechoslovakia."[1] Sharon's reference to the Munich Conference of 1938 – where the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain disastrously attempted to satisfy Adolf Hitler's territorial ambitions – was scarcely a novel one in the annals of recent diplomatic history. Indeed, since Chamberlain's act of appeasement over six decades ago, leaders such as Harry Truman, Anthony Eden, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and George Bush, have all, at various times, raised the "lesson of Munich" to justify a firm and unequivocal response to aggressive international conduct.

The conventional interpretation of British appeasement of Nazi Germany during the 1930s holds that Chamberlain, guided by naivete or cowardice, wrongly sought to appease the aggressive Hitler, gaining neither peace nor honor for his concessions. Had Chamberlain stood fast, especially at Munich, and deterred the avaricious *führer*, the course of world history, it is argued, would have been significantly altered. On the basis of this interpretation, most international relations scholars, together with international decision-makers, accept that the "lesson of Munich" is that aggressors cannot be appeased, and must be deterred at all cost. However, over the last thirty years, archival research by historians, focussing on the circumstances surrounding the British appeasement of the 1930s, has raised many questions about the validity of this conventional interpretation. It now appears that Hitler was not in fact emboldened by Chamberlain's sustained efforts to appease, and that the world has perhaps moved to quickly in its adverse judgment of Chamberlain and in its outright dismissal of the practice of appeasement.

This paper aims to reach an understanding of the British policy of appeasement during the 1930s, why and how that policy failed, and what implications the interpretation of this failure have for the conduct of international diplomacy. The first part opens with a brief definition of appeasement, and then proceeds to consider the history of British policy toward Nazi Germany leading up to the Munich Conference in 1938. This is followed, in the second part, by a discussion of two competing interpretations of Chamberlain's appeasement program: the "Great Betrayal" and "overdeterminist" interpretations. The latter reveals that Chamberlain was, in many respects, without alternative options in the 1930s, and his pursuit of appeasement has received more criticism than is in fact

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[1] Sharon (2001), Press Conference, reported in "Sharon Warns U.S.," *New York Times*, October 7.

merited. Thus, the overdeterminist interpretation warrants a reconsideration of the utility of appeasement as a diplomatic tool. The third and final part explores how the conventional interpretation of Munich has been misapplied in modern international affairs and warns of the dangers of historical analogy. It also offers a "new" lesson regarding the use of appeasement based on a more nuanced assessment of the historical record.

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Appeasement and the Road to Munich

There exists significant debate among historians as to precisely when the British government can be said to have embarked on its policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany.[2] To a large degree, this debate reflects the ambiguity inherent in the meaning of "appeasement". Like so many concepts in the study and practice of international diplomacy, "appeasement", having been used widely and indiscriminately, can mean many things to many people. According to the *Dictionary of International Relations*, "appeasement" is "the reduction of tensions between two states by the methodical removal of the principal causes of conflict and disagreement between them, which might otherwise lead to war."[3] On the basis of this definition, the British policy of appeasement can be said to have started soon after Hitler's ascension to the German Chancellorship in January 1933 and continued until the German occupation of Prague in March 1939.

The roots of British policy

Within the space of six months following Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Germany abruptly withdrew from disarmament negotiations in Geneva and from membership in the League of Nations.[4] In March 1935, Hitler announced the existence of a German air force, reintroduced universal conscription, and revealed plans for a German army of twelve corps and thirty-six divisions.[5] A year later, in March 1936, between 35,000 and 50,000 German troops reentered the Rhineland.[6]

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[2] See e.g., Kennedy (1983), "Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy, 1865-1939," in Kennedy (1983), Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870-1945 (New York: George Allen & Unwin).

[3] Plano & Olten (eds) (1982), *Dictionary of International Relations* (New York: Santa Barbara). According to this definition, "appeasement" is a more ambitious undertaking than the related concept of "détente," which seeks to reduce hostility and tension without resolving the underlying differences or causes of conflict. Interestingly, appeasement is perhaps best understood as a subcategory of engagement (i.e., both are nonconfrontational approaches to dealing with an adversary, hoping eventually to produce a relaxation of tensions. Each relies in part on the offering of inducements).

[4] Singer, "The Appeasement Option: Past and Future," in Small, (ed), *Appeasing Fascism* (New York: University Press of America, 1991), p.4

[5] Douglas, "Chamberlain and Appeasement" in Mommsen (ed) *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement* (New York: University Press of America, 1983), p. 220.

[6] Ibid., p.220.

All of these provocative acts stood in blatant violation of the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Pact.[7] While there were those in Britain who favored meeting the German threat with significant force (as Britain was obligated to do pursuant to Versailles-Locarno), the more accepted view – reflected by the British Ambassador to Berlin, Neville Henderson – was that Germany's "acts of provocation" did not so much reflect a malignant quest for domination, but rather, political and economic insecurity. [8]

The British government identified two sources of this German insecurity: the exclusion from the *Reich* of many ethnic Germans in the Sudetenland region, and the severe economic constraints placed on Germany through reparations and trade restrictions. In terms of the first issue, British policymakers believed that Hitler's advocacy for the self-determination of ethnic Germans reflected, to a large degree, a legitimate ambition, which if properly addressed, might cause Germany to "settle down" and become "territorially contented".[9] Similarly, in terms of the second issue, British policymakers were convinced that German economic insecurity was fuelling support for German expansionism. As Chamberlain asked his foreign policy advisers: "Might not a great improvement in Germany's economic situation result in her becoming quieter and less interested in political adventures?"[10] These two issues were thus to become the central targets of British appeasement efforts, which if successful, Chamberlain said, would amount, in effect, to a resettlement of the "inequities" of Versailles.[11]

It was also becoming clear, by 1936, to British decision-makers that there were elements in the German government who might be receptive to conciliation. The British had identified two separate political camps within the German leadership, both contending for influence with Hitler. On the one hand, the so-called "extremists"[12] were seen to be deeply hostile toward England. On the other

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[7] Ibid., p.220. See also, Kennedy, "The Logic of Appeasement," *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 May 1982, p.587.

[8] See e.g., Discussion of Henderson, in Walker, "Solving the Appeasement Puzzle: Contending Historical Interpretations of British Diplomacy during the 1930s", *British Journal of International Studies* 6 (April 1980), p.230.

[9] See e.g., Correspondence of Henderson to Halifax, cited in Rock, Appeasement in International Politics (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), p.52.

[10] Quoted in Eden, *Facing the Dictators* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), p.362-363.

[11] Quoted in Fuchser, *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement: A Study in the Politics of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), p.144.

[12] Principally, Joseph Goebells, the minister of propaganda; Heinrich Himmler, chief of the SS; and Joachim von Ribbentrop, the foreign minister.

hand, the "moderates"[13] were viewed as desiring a more restrained Germany capable of enjoying fruitful political and economic relations with other European states. As a result, Chamberlain believed that, if the moderates could be cultivated and their influence with Hitler strengthened, it might be possible to manipulate the internal political balance of Germany such that a conciliatory policy of appeasement would succeed. Thus, in January 1937, Chamberlain and Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary, decided to more fully explore the idea of a conciliatory "European settlement."[14]

However, as events unfolded in 1937, the moderates proved to have insufficient influence with Hitler, and Hitler proved uninterested in a grand European settlement of the type proposed.[15] Hitler later told Lord Halifax, the acting British foreign secretary, that Germany was unwilling to discuss such issues as disarmament proposals or a return to the League of Nations even in return for significant inducements.[16] Ominously, Hitler also warned that, concerning central and eastern Europe, Germany would not tolerate any interference by third powers "in the settlement of her relations with kindred countries or with countries having large German elements in their population."[17] In other words, Hitler was not prepared to tie his hands in Central Europe, choosing instead resolution of the issue through the "free play of forces."[18] Soon afterwards, in March 1938, Germany annexed Austria.[19]

The annexation of Austria made it patently clear that the attempt to impose a European settlement was not going to succeed, and thus posed the first real test for the British policy of appeasement. Abandoning the idea of a grand settlement, British officials instead embarked upon a more incremental, "piecemeal" approach to appeasement.[20] This approach dictated that Britain would seek to achieve, on a case-by-case basis, solutions to the outstanding territorial issues of

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[13] Principally, Hjalmar Schacht, minister for economics; Werner von Blomberg, the war minister; and Hermann Göring, chief of the Luftwaffe.

[14] Rock, Op.Cit., (see supra, note 9), p.56.

[15] The British offered Germany concessions on territories taken away in Versailles, together with extensive economic and financial incentives. See Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 10), p.370.

[16] Similarly, Göring told Ambassador Henderson, "if you offered us the whole of Africa we would not accept it as the price of Austria". Quoted in Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.392.

[17] Hitler to Ambassador Henderson. Quoted in Rock, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 9), p.58.

[18] Hitler to Ambassador Henderson. Ibid., p.58.

[19] Douglas, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 5), p. 220.

[20] See e.g., Rock, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 9), p.58-59.

Europe. Lord Halifax accordingly told Hitler that “certain changes in the European system cannot be avoided in the long-run” and that Britain was prepared to allow “a change in the European status quo.”[21] Britain was only interested that such changes take place by “peaceful development.”[22] In accordance with the new policy, Britain, despite offering strong protest, accepted the annexation of Austria, which it regarded, in some sense, as “peaceful”.

The road to Munich

The great unresolved issue, however, was Germany’s desire for a “preponderating influence” in Central Europe.[23] As Germany continued its program of rearmament, British leaders thus became increasingly concerned about the fate of Czechoslovakia. In an attempt to resolve the issue before it exploded, Chamberlain met with Hitler in Berechtsgarden in September 1938.[24] There, Hitler presented his substantive demand for peace: the cession of the Sudetanland region to Germany. Following discussion with both his Cabinet and the French government, Chamberlain met again with Hitler a few days later in Bad Godesberg,[25] having secured approval for Hitler’s territorial demand on the principle of self-determination. However, on the cusp of signing an agreement, Chamberlain now found himself issued with a *diktat* from Hitler: the evacuation of German speaking regions was to begin in two days time, and to be completed two days later, and occupation by German troops was to take place immediately.[26] Chamberlain rejected the Bad Godesburg ultimatum. War seemed inevitable.

A few days later, to the great relief of the British and German people[27], Chamberlain was invited to meet with Hitler in Munich.[28] Chamberlain genuinely believed that he had gained the trust and confidence of Hitler, and that he alone

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[21] Quoted in Fuchser, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 11), p.160.

[22] Ibid., p.160.

[23] Jones, “The Study of Appeasement and the Study of International Relations”, *British Journal of International Studies* 1 (April 1975), p.210.

[24] See e.g., Rock, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 9), p.73.

[25] Ibid., p.73.

[26] Ibid., p.73.

[27] According to U.S. Ambassador to London, Joseph P. Kennedy, the sense of relief was palpable. He reports that at Westminster, when Chamberlain revealed that he had been invited to meet with Hitler in Munich, a loud cheer came up from both sides of the Commons. See Offner, “Influence Without Responsibility: American Statecraft and the Munich Conference,” in Small, (ed), *Appeasing Fascism* (New York: University Press of America, 1991), p. 51.

[28] Interestingly, U.S. President Roosevelt was credited by Chamberlain himself as having edged Hitler from the brink of war to negotiation. See Offner, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 26), p. 51.

was capable of influencing Hitler through his "patience, understanding and reasonableness."[29] "Plan Z" – Chamberlain's scheme to negotiate personally with the German Chancellor – was a reflection of this faith.[30] At the Munich conference, following two days of negotiation, agreement was finally reached on the terms of the Sudetenland cession.[31] Importantly, Chamberlain secured a clause in the agreement that called for an international commission to establish the terms under which the occupation should take place. Chamberlain also procured from Hitler a written promise that further changes in the European territorial status quo would not be forcibly imposed. In these respects, Chamberlain believed that an important principle had been won: that territorial changes in Europe should be negotiated rather than forced.[32]

In the immediate aftermath of the Munich conference, Chamberlain returned to Britain triumphantly declaring that by "slaking the German territorial thirst" he had delivered "peace for our time."[33] *Life* Magazine ran the headline: "Hitler Listens to Reason" and then saluted Chamberlain: "Britain Wins Back Germany into World Law."[34] *Time* Magazine reported that "For the first time in history, a major conflict has been settled by talking rather than shooting first." And the *Times of London* reported: "No conqueror returning from victory on the battlefield has come home adorned with nobler laurels than Mr. Chamberlain from Munich yesterday."[35] U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt declared that he was "not a bit upset by the final result" and stated on national radio that there was now "more opportunity than at any time in the past twenty years to establish a new world order based upon justice and upon law."[36] U.S. Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, the father of the future U.S. President, found it all "wonderful."[37]

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[29] Fuchser, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 11), p.191.

[30] Ibid., p.191.

[31] Chamberlain declared following the Munich conference: "However much we may sympathize with a small nation that has to contend with a great and powerful neighbor, we cannot, under the circumstances, involve the entire British Empire in a war on account of such a country. If we did have to fight, it would have to be for a far weightier cause". See Walker, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 8), p.310.

[32] Fuchser, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 11), p.192. See also Rock, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 9), p.73.

[33] Ibid., p.192.

[34] Quoted in Douglas, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 5), p.384.

[35] Ibid., p.384.

[36] See Offner, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 26), p. 70. Indeed, even George Kennan, in Prague, confided in his diary that the settlement may have saved the independence of Czechoslovakia.

[37] Ibid., p.51.

The onset of war

There was a downside to the euphoria. Czechoslovakia, having lost about one third of its people and territory, was left politically unsustainable and militarily defenseless. On paper, the European balance of power was thrown into disarray, the Versailles-Locarno collective security system shattered.[38] In March 1939, German troops, having earlier entered the Sudetenland region, took Czechoslovakia proper and occupied Prague.[39] France, who was at least theoretically obliged to defend Czechoslovakia, decided not to fulfill its obligation. As a result, Britain, whose treaty obligation was to defend France and not specifically Czechoslovakia, also did not intervene.[40] Chamberlain wrote in his diary: "Given these unhappy conditions [i.e., the poor state of British military readiness], we cannot help Czechoslovakia – she would simply be a pretext for going to war with Germany. That we could not think of unless we had a reasonable prospect of being able to defeat her to her knees in a reasonable time, and of that I see no sign."[41]

Only the occupation of Prague in March 1939 finally convinced Chamberlain that the policy of appeasement had been a failure. In light of this realization, and with fear that Poland was next in line, Chamberlain moved to a policy of deterrence, and rapidly escalated British rearmament programs.[42] The British government was placed firmly on a war footing, and the public prepared for the possibility of a long conflict. In September 1939, less than a year after the Munich conference, that eventuality came about: Hitler invaded Poland, precipitating the outbreak of the Second World War.[43] It was, in effect, the end of Chamberlain's career.[44] In early 1940, rapidly declining in health, Chamberlain was succeeded as British Prime Minister by the indomitable Winston Churchill, his foremost critic.

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[38] Importantly, the Sudetenland area, with its extensive fortifications and world-renowned arms industry, was strategically vital in the European balance of power. Czechoslovakia had an important role in the defense of France, Poland and the Soviet Union. See Jones, Op.Cit., (supra, note 22), p.217.

[39] Douglas, Op.Cit. (supra, note 5), p.385.

[40] Ibid., p.385.

[41] Quoted in Ibid., p.385.

[42] Douglas, Op.Cit. (supra, note 5), p.386.

[43] Eden, Op.Cit. (supra, note 10), p.411.

[44] Beck, "Munich's Lesson's Reconsidered," *International Security* 14 (Fall 1989), p.43.

– 3 –
Interpreting British Appeasement: The Great Betrayal or Overdetermined Diplomacy?

"The Great Betrayal"

The popular interpretation of British appeasement during the 1930s is well known: after five years of truckling to German aggression in the Rhineland, Austria and elsewhere, the British government crowned its pusillanimous policy of appeasement with the "Great Betrayal"[45] of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain, having violated the firm moral and ethical norms of international behavior, was found guilty of the "Rape of the Czechs,"[46] and held responsible for bringing England its darkest hour. Yet worse, Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, surrendering as it did one position after the other through diplomatic negotiations, ultimately delivered Europe into a calamitous world war lasting more than five years and causing untold destruction and horror.

The leading proponent of this interpretation – certainly in the years immediately following Munich – was Winston Churchill. Churchill, in *The Gathering Storm*, the first volume of his war memoirs, portrays appeasement as a policy of "shameful weakness" before the challenge of dictators, a policy which was doomed to fail from the start.[47] The problem, as Churchill saw it, was that Chamberlain – well-intentioned but naïve, or perhaps even cowardly – had radically misjudged Hitler's intentions. Hitler, like all serial aggressors, was unappeasable. There existed an overwhelming preponderance of evidence pointing toward this assessment well before Munich. The attempt at a grand "European settlement" had failed, and Hitler had repeatedly stated his unwillingness to tie his hands in central Europe. Indeed, Hitler's program of territorial expansion had been outlined, for all to read, in *Mein Kampf*, which served as a "blueprint" for German policy.[48] Thus, Churchill famously wrote of the futility of "throwing a small state [Czechoslovakia] to the wolves,"[49] and contended that the fundamental reason for the failure of appeasement was that Hitler's goals lay far beyond the limits of any reasonable accommodation.

For Churchill, and other similar minded historians, the Second World War could have been prevented by a policy of timely resistance to German aggression:

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[45] See e.g., Offner, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 26), p. 66..

[46] Ibid., p.66.

[47] Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1948).

[48] See e.g., Rock, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 9), p.65.

[49] Churchill, Op.Cit. (Supra note 45), p.176.

"there never was a war so easy to stop."[50] Churchill identified the remilitarization of the Rhineland, in March 1936, as the last opportunity to prevent world war, had Britain and France responded to Hitler's treaty violations using their still overwhelming military superiority.[51] Germany, at that stage, had weak western fortifications, while France had a strong military force on the ready and Britain enjoyed clear naval supremacy. There was also the possibility of an alliance with the Soviet Union, which, Churchill argued, Chamberlain should have pursued assiduously well before 1939.[52] Had Britain advanced such a deterrent force posture, it would have served as a signal that the Versailles-Locarno treaty was to be taken seriously, and Hitler might have been discouraged from developing Germany into a central European hegemonic power.[53] This view is implicitly endorsed by Kenneth Walz: "One must lament Churchill's failure to gain control of the British government in the 1930s, for he knew what actions were required to maintain a balance of power."[54]

An additional and important aspect of the "Great Betrayal" interpretation is the linking of appeasement to the failure of deterrence in 1939. This view, which has reverberated in diplomatic circles ever since, argues that the Munich conference, by casting doubts upon the subsequent British security commitment to Poland, encouraged Germany's invasion of that country.[55] In other words, Munich was said to have undermined Britain's later deterrent posture by creating a "psychological effect" – a reputation for irresolution – which convinced Hitler that the British guarantee was likely to be a "bluff".[56] This argument gains much of its support from a comment Hitler is alleged to have made to his aides, that the response from Britain to any German invasion of Poland would be a "mere recalling of Ambassadors, or perhaps a blockade."[57] Hitler then followed: "The men I got to know in Munich are not the kind that start a new World War."[58]

"Overdetermined" diplomacy

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[50] Ibid., p.180.

[51] Ibid., p.170-210.

[52] Ibid., p.178.

[53] Ibid., 175-185.

[54] Walz, *Theory of International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.349.

[55] See e.g. Beck, "Munich's Lesson's Reconsidered," *International Security* 14 (Fall 1989).

[56] Huth, "Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War," *American Political Science Review* 82 (June 1988), p.423.

[57] See e.g., Rock, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 9), p.71.

[58] Ibid., 71.

In recent years many historians have begun to question the "Great Betrayal" interpretation of British appeasement.[59] Rejecting the orthodox characterization of Chamberlain as a naïve, wishful-thinking optimist, the new consensus among historians emphasizes the military, economic, bureaucratic and political constraints that limited Chamberlain's diplomatic alternatives during the 1930s. Chamberlain, an experienced diplomat, "simply lacked the cards to play a very difficult game."[60] According to Sir Horace Wilson, Chamberlain's chief adviser, "Chamberlain would have been as glad as anyone to have 'stood up to Hitler,' but he realized that in 1938 he was not in a position, politically or militarily, to do so; nor were the people of this country or the Commonwealth, still peace-minded, ready to proceed with war."[61] Similarly, in a famous article by the British professor Paul Schroeder, British policy at the time of Munich was said to be "so massively overdetermined, that [for Chamberlain] to have chosen another course would have been astounding."[62]

The first important point in this alternative interpretation of British policy is that, at no time prior to March 1939, was there any popular support for a strong British deterrent posture or for a rapid program of rearmament. According to Anthony Eden in his memoir, *Facing the Dictators*, "Academically speaking, there is little dispute that [during the mid-1930s] Hitler should have been called to order, if need be forcibly. But nobody was prepared to do it, in this country literally nobody. … If Churchill had been Prime Minister, he too would have encountered formidable obstacles, not the least of which was a parliament and public deeply adverse to any prospect of war."[63] In this context, it is salient to ask, were there any conceivable causes that British leaders could have called on their people once again for war? Over Czechoslovakia? If so, that cause would need to have been clear not only to a few enlightened observers,[64] but also to the population-at-large who would be forced to make the sacrifices. Yet, in the 1930s, with the memories of the Great War still fresh, the general population was not prepared to fight against Germany in order to prevent it from incorporating Austrian and Sudeten Germans into the *Reich*.[65]

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[59] For an excellent account of the historiography of the "overdeterminist" school, see e.g., Beck, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 53). See also Wilson, "New Interpretations of Munich," *International Security* 14 (Fall 1989); Kennedy, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 2).

[60] Beck, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 53), p 167.

[61] Quoted in Wilson, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 57), p.20.

[62] Schroeder, "Munich and the British Tradition," *The Historical Journal* 19 (March 1976), p.102.

[63] Eden, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 10), p.457.

[64] E.g., Churchill, sitting on the backbench in the Commons.

[65] History has shown that well-over three quarters of Sudeten Germans supported union with Germany, just as the great majority of the Austrians supported the annexation. In this sense, some historians have argued that, had Britain and the other western democracies gone to war, they

The "overdeterminists" also argue that Chamberlain's policy of appeasement was motivated by his recognition of Britain's inadequate military capabilities, which constrained his ability to pursue a deterrent diplomacy against Germany.[66] In the 1930s, Britain's military star was waning, and as a result of her extensive empire, there existed a significant gap between British imperial obligations and military power. As a result, Britain – especially without the strategic protection of the isolationist United States – did not enjoy the luxury of "patrolling" the European continent.[67] It therefore followed that if there were outstanding issues in international relations, these should be dealt with by peaceful negotiations and adjustment. Chamberlain's difficulties in this respect were further compounded by the lack of support among the British public for rapid rearmament and alliances, together with the ever present fear that rapid rearmament would prove financially ruinous and exacerbate the threat of depression.[68] Thus, in this scenario, appeasement was a necessary realist strategy dictated by geopolitical and pragmatic circumstances. To abandon appeasement meant not only fighting a war, but fighting a war for which Britain was totally unprepared.

Finally and critically, most historians now disagree that Chamberlain's weakness and irresolution over Czechoslovakia led Hitler to discount the possibility of military reprisal if Germany invaded Poland. According to recent scholarship, Hitler himself viewed the result of Munich as a "crushing defeat", one in which he abandoned his true goal – which was to seize Prague by force[69] – in the face of British pressure. As Andrei Francois Poncet, the French Ambassador in Berlin, noted, "Hitler did not at all believe that he had, at Munich, achieved a success. He felt, on the contrary, that he renounced his original objective, that he had compromised and capitulated."[70] Having once retreated, Hitler was determined not to repeat the performance. He told his aides that his greatest fear with respect to Poland was not that Britain and France would

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would have been opposing the democratic will of the people for whom they were ostensibly fighting. See e.g., Wilson, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 57), p.25.

[66] Schroeder, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 62), p.122.

[67] Interestingly, it is argued that not until documents were released in the 1960s did scholars fully appreciated the degree to which this fear had plagued the Chamberlain government. See Beck, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 53), p 174.

[68] Schroeder, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 60), p.112.

[69] Hitler did not expect to achieve his goal of Lebensraum without a great war. His willingness to risk war, possibly even his desire for war, had increased along with the state of German rearmament. If this view of Hitler is true, it follows that neither appeasement *nor deterrence* could have succeeded in averting war. See Beck, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 53), p 170.

[70] Quoted in Rock, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 9), p.74.

intervene, but that they would again broker some kind of agreement that he would be unable to reject.[71] If this account is accurate, then Chamberlain's act of appeasement in Munich was not directly linked to Hitler's decision to invade Poland.[72]

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The Lessons of Munich in Modern International Diplomacy

The dangers of historical analogy

In his introduction to *Munich 1938*, Keith Robins argued that the only "lesson of Munich" is "that there should be no lessons."[73] Notwithstanding the deliberate hyperbole of the statement, there is a certain truth to its proposition. One must be careful about the use of historical analogies – and that applies especially to policymakers – for they have a tendency to liberate people from the need to think creatively about new and particular cases.[74] Analogies are frequently based upon a facile or inaccurate reading of the past, and even when they are accurate, they may be applied to situations that are not necessarily comparable. This is because, as the French philosopher Paul Valéry has written, "history is the science of things which do not repeat themselves."[75] However, for all the good and wise advice dispensed by philosophers and historians, international relations practitioners nonetheless look to historical episodes, such as Munich, for lessons and guidance.

The popular "lesson of Munich" – as propounded by countless western leaders – holds that making concessions to an aggressive state can never succeed in pacifying the aggressor and thereby preventing war. As a result, it contends that aggression must be checked early if one is to avoid the proliferation of disaster. This aversion to appeasement – which formed the intellectual basis for the containment model so influential during the Cold War – has come to achieve an unimpeachable status, especially within the American foreign policy

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[71] Ibid., p.74.

[72] There is an important distinction between "cognitive bias" – seeing what one expects to see, often based on previous experience – and "motivated bias" – seeing what one would like to see. The notion that Hitler wrongly perceived Britain's commitment to Poland as a result of appeasement identifies cognitive bias as the source of his misperception. However, the above discussion indicates perhaps an example of motivated bias.

[73] Robbins, *Munich 1938* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1984), p.6.

[74] Ebban, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 71), p.56.

[75] Quoted in Eban, *Diplomacy for the Next Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p.50.

establishment.[76] The problem with this "lesson of Munich," however, is that it is predicated upon the "Great Betrayal" interpretation of the 1930s, and thus draws specious conclusions with respect to the utility of appeasement as a diplomatic tool. The policy of appeasement failed in the 1930s not because Britain's *diplomatic* weakness emboldened Hitler's territorial ambitions, but rather, because Britain's *military* weakness was insufficient to provide any constraint on Germany's bellicose behavior. As a result, British appeasement never stood a chance, for Germany had no reason to conciliate. The fundamental point is that the existence of one unappeasable country – Nazi Germany – cannot of itself invalidate the concept of "appeasement".[77] Not every aggressor will be a Hitler, with a rapacious territorial appetite, and in control of the most powerful armed forces in the world.

The danger of declaring the bankruptcy of a diplomatic concept on spurious grounds is that it needlessly limits the range of policy choices open to decision-makers engaged on difficult diplomatic problems, thereby increasing the risk of strategic miscalculation. This point is well demonstrated in two diplomatic episodes where decision-makers employed the popular "lesson of Munich" as the frame of reference: the Suez crisis[78] and Vietnam.

In 1956, Britain, France and Israel invaded Egypt in protest against the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egyptian President Nasser. Anthony Eden, at that time the British Prime Minister, wrote to U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower suggesting that there was a close analogy between Nasser's defiance of international law and Hitler's aggressive conduct in the 1930s.[79] The implication

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[76] See e.g., Rystad, *Prisoners of the Past?: The Munich Syndrome and Makers of American Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); *May, Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Jensen & Wumser (eds), *The Meaning of Munich Fifty Years Later* (New York: Macmillan, 1990).

[77] Ebban explains this point in a slightly misleading, but pertinent, example: "Munich was an attempt to solve a crisis by appeasement. Munich was a disastrous failure. Therefore any attempt to solve a crisis by appeasement should be avoided" … "Vietnam was an attempt to solve a problem by military resistance. Vietnam was a disastrous failure. Therefore any attempt to solve a crisis by military resistance should be avoided." The example is misleading because there have been plenty of crises successfully resolved by military resistance, but not many successful cases for appeasement, hence the importance of the Munch story. See Eban, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 71), p. 56.

[78] Ironically, Suez has now itself become a "lesson" for policy-makers. During the Cuban missile crisis Dean Rusk spoke of the "Suez-Hungary" combination, alluding to 1956 when western preoccupation with Suez made it easier for the Soviets to crush a rebellion in Hungary. See Nuestadt and May, *Thinking in Time: The Use of History for Decision-Makers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 5.

[79] Eden raised this theme on at least seven different occasions in an attempt to mobilize the United States to intervene in support of the tripartite alliance. See Ebban, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 71), p. 57.

was that if the aggressor Nasser was not thwarted in the attempted seizure of the Suez Canal, he would take heart and visit a series of aggressive and calamitous acts on the world. The Suez Crisis, however, was a disaster for British diplomacy. This was not least because the analogy employed led policymakers to gravely miscalculate. The two situations – German military adventurism and Egypt's nationalization of the Canal – were not similar at all. They were different both in their proportion and in their essential nature.[80] The German military was, in the mid-to-late 1930s, the strongest in the world, very different than the Egyptian armed forces in 1956. Moreover, unlike the German's insatiable territorial appetite, the Egyptians had no ambition nor power to extend their activities beyond their own border.[81]

The use of the "lesson of Munich" in Vietnam had yet greater consequences than in the Suez crisis. By the time of Vietnam in 1965, the aversion to appeasement had laid the foundation for the domino theory: if aggression were not checked in Vietnam, then Laos, Cambodia and Thailand would become the next Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. As U.S. President Lyndon Johnson stated: "The central lesson of the 1930s is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next. … Either we make a stand here [in Vietnam] or we lose all of Asia."[82] However, in Vietnam, the U.S. was not dealing with Hitler. Ho Chi Minh was the leader of a minor power who posed no threat to its neighbors. Even if Vietnam had been a puppet of the Chinese Communists, as some thought at the time, fears of Chinese military aggression against its neighbors were exaggerated.[83] With time, and with the ever expanding casualty list of American soldiers, Johnson came to see that the U.S. military operation in Vietnam was misguided. Yet, by this stage, Johnson was focussed on a second aspect of the "lesson of Munich": that Chamberlain is remembered by history solely for his "losing Czechoslovakia." In light of this, Johnson refused to be remembered for his "losing Vietnam" and thus declined to withdraw American troops.[84] As a result, Vietnam stands as another example of the dangers of diplomatic analogy.

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[80] Ibid., p. 57.

[81] Ibid., p. 57.

[82] Small, "Some Lessons of Munich," in Small, (ed), *Appeasing Fascism* (New York: University Press of America, 1991), p. 93.

[83] Interestingly, when U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles also used the "Munich analogy" to justify the use of force against the insurgents in Vietnam, Anthony Eden replied: "I was not convinced by the assertion that Mr. Dulles then made, that the situation in Indo-China was analogous to Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland". Quoted in Eban, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 71), p. 57.

[84] Small, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 79), p. 94.

The Suez crisis and Vietnam both demonstrate that the popular "lesson of Munich" – that appeasement should under no circumstances be pursued – was inappropriate for those particular diplomatic episodes. This is not to suggest that a policy of appeasement would have been necessarily more successful than the use of force.[85] It is to suggest, however, that foreclosing certain diplomatic options is ill-advised when that foreclosure is predicated on flawed and misleading historical analysis.

Appeasement requires forceful backing

It seems clear that if any lesson should be drawn from the experience of the 1930s – and even then prudence would caution against its literal employment – it is that for appeasement to have any chance of success, it must be simultaneously and credibly backed by the threat of force. This proposition – that appeasement may work if an appeasing state can back its conciliatory efforts with muscle – is in fact borne out by the success of two international diplomatic episodes in the post-Second World War period: the Cuban missile crisis, and the "appeasement" of North Korea by U.S. Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton.

Interestingly, the Cuban missile crisis is frequently held out as a classic example of containment. In October 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Kruschev tried to install offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba. Although the threat posed by Soviet missiles in Cuba only marginally threatened U.S. national security[86] – in much the same way that cession of the Sudetenland marginally affected British national security – the fear for U.S. President John F. Kennedy, drawing on the experience at Munich, was that if the Russians were allowed to win a small victory in Cuba, they would be emboldened to move even more menacingly in another area.[87] Thus, when the Russians initially offered to trade missiles in Cuba for missiles that were due for removal in Turkey, Kennedy rejected the compromise because the trade would result in a victory for the aggressor.[88] In the end, however, removing U.S. missiles from Turkey is precisely how the crisis was resolved. Although no word was ever said of appeasement – in fact, the very opposite –

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[85] Although there are good reasons to suspect that appeasement might have been a more fruitful diplomatic approach, certainly with respect to the Suez.

[86] The Soviets already possessed long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles that were capable of hitting the United States.

[87] Indeed, Kennedy allegedly accused his UN ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, of advocating a conciliatory approach towards Cuba that would lead to another Munich. See May, Op.Cit., (see supra, note 73).

[88] Interestingly, World War II was the most powerful historical experience for all of the major figures in the Kennedy (and Johnson) administration. From the presidents on down, almost all had served in the military or had been in college in the 1930s. Kennedy himself wrote his senior thesis at Harvard on the folly of Britain's appeasement policies (which, as discussed supra, his father had enthusiastically endorsed at the time). See Nuestadt and May, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 73).

Kennedy's resolution of this crisis fits within the definition of appeasement earlier articulated: "the reduction of tensions between two states by the methodical removal of the principal causes of conflict between them, which might otherwise lead to war."[89] The real lesson learned from the 1930s, it appears, is that if a state is intending to pursue a policy of appeasement, it must first make it very clear to the aggressor that it is willing to fight.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, U.S. Presidents Bush and Clinton pursued a policy toward North Korea that can be characterized as "appeasement". The immediate objective of U.S. policy was the abandonment by North Korea of its accelerating nuclear weapons program. In October 1994, agreement was finally reached between the two countries. In exchange for a small number of U.S. concessions, larger promises of future aid, and full diplomatic recognition, the North Koreans agreed to immediately freeze its nuclear program and to allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to access their nuclear sites. At the time, the agreement was condemned by many – including by former U.S. defense secretary Caspar Weinberger and Senator John McCain – an act of "appeasement" consisting of "all carrot and no stick."[90] To date, however, the agreement has been a solid success.[91] The reason for such success appears that the U.S. concessions addressed the most important objectives (i.e., economic) of the North Korean leaders, while implicitly threatening the use of force against North Korea if it refused to abandon its nuclear program.[92] In effect, then, the Americans appeased the North Koreans by buying them off, while underwriting the deal with an unambiguous demonstration of their willingness to use force if necessary.

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Conclusion

The history of British appeasement of Nazi Germany underscores that diplomacy can be an extremely difficult enterprise. This was famously reflected in a comment by Lord Halifax when asked whether he regretted Munich: "Oh well,"

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[89] Note again, appeasement is different from straight-out deterrence, which does not seek to remove the causes of conflict through negotiation.

[90] Quoted in Rock, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 9), p.139.

[91] Although there is some speculation that the North Koreans have not meticulously upheld their end of the bargain. In late 1998, for example, the North Koreans tested a multi-stage ballistic missile, which violated Japanese air space. There have also been reports of increased activity at underground sites long suspected as possible locations of nuclear weapons development. See Ibid., p. 151.

[92] There was an implicit threat from the U.S. that the program would be stopped "one way or another." The Pentagon also leaked a new military strategy in the event of North Korean invasion of South Korea, which called for a rapid counter-offensive designed to seize Pyongyang and overthrow the government of Kim Il Sung. Ibid., p.151-152.

he replied, "if you don't make one mistake, you make another."[93] In this respect, it is hard not to sympathize with Chamberlain that the inclement circumstances he faced in the 1930s rendered his room for maneuver limited. When he finally reached Munich, Chamberlain had at his disposal a military that was weak, compared to the German war machine. Furthermore, Britain could not rely on American military assistance in the event of war. And if war came, Chamberlain did not think he would have the support of the British people, or the British Dominions. In short, Chamberlain's position was perilous. While it is possibly true that, in retrospect, Chamberlain should have sought to rearm Britain earlier and seek to deter Germany, it is highly unlikely, given the circumstances, whether any British Prime Minister could have done so, or indeed whether Hitler was capable of being deterred.

Thus, the difficulty with the popular "lesson of Munich" – that accommodating an aggressor always results in disaster for the appeasing party – lies in the fact that there exists little evidence from the 1930s to justify its central proposition. British appeasement failed not because of Chamberlain's diplomatic irresolution, but rather, because the British military was insufficiently strong to pressure Germany to conciliate. Thus, to treat all aggressors as inherently unappeasable at all times, is to misread the historical record of the 1930s. Furthermore, it is to needlessly and dangerously limit the range of diplomatic policy choices open to decision-makers, thereby increasing the risk for miscalculation. It is therefore possible to say that appeasement should not yet be ruled out of the diplomatic lexicon on acceptable international statecraft. However, if appeasement is to be employed, and if it is desired to be employed successfully, it is important to remember that the history of the 1930s teaches the appeaser to "conciliate softly, and carry a big stick." This is the "new lesson of Munich."

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[93] Quoted in Beck, Op.Cit. (see supra, note 53), p 122.

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