

From the Rhineland to Czechoslovakia:

How the Policies of Appeasement in the British

Government led to the Second World War

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Introduction

The Second World War is amongst the most famous wars in all human history. Battles such as Midway and The Bulge as well as people like Hitler and Churchill are household names. Movies, books, and (more recently) video games about the war are prevalent and have been practically since the war ended in 1945. The problem is though, that the causes that led up to the war are not as widely known. Events such as the German invasion of Poland and the Battle of France are easy to point to when referencing the start of the Second World War. But to truly understand how the countries got the point of war, one must look back to the months and years preceding September 1939. The goal of this thesis then, is to bring a better understanding of that time. The thesis is thus: the policies of appeasement within the British government between the years of 1936 and 1939 created a diplomatic environment in Europe which enabled Nazi Germany to violate international treaties without worry of retribution, leading to the Second World War.

Historiography

One of the best secondary sources used in this thesis to better understand the politics of British appeasement is *The Appeasers* by Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott. In this book, the authors take a very hardline stance on the role appeasement had in bringing about the Second World War. The book takes a critical view of appeasement and those who promulgated it. In particular, it takes aim at Neville Chamberlain and his various Cabinet ministers who went along with his policies, most notably Lord Halifax. The book argues that time and time again, Chamberlain, so focused on avoiding war at all costs, ignored the advice of qualified members of the government. The book paints a picture of Chamberlain that is one of either foolishness or naivety. His willingness to take Hitler on his word on a number of occasions would come back to

negatively impact not only Britain but also the nations over which Hitler wielded his unchecked power. Written less than twenty years after the war, the authors did not have access to a number of documents readily available today due to the rule prohibiting the publication of government documents until a certain (in this case 50) number of years after they were written. This means that there are insights in this thesis into the personal lives of some of the people discussed in the book that were not available at the time. Perhaps the most glaring omission is Neville Chamberlain's diary letters. While they are not necessarily pertinent to every point the authors make against him, having access to his diaries would have enabled a better understanding of Chamberlain as a person as opposed to focusing solely on his public persona.

Another good secondary source used in this thesis was the book *Troublesome Young Men* by Lynne Olson. This book focuses almost exclusively on the members of parliament who were opposed to the appeasement policies of Neville Chamberlain and his predecessor Stanley Baldwin, giving insights into the small but vocal group of mostly Conservative MPs. The author lends a great deal of credence to the interpersonal relationships between the various MPs as a way to explain how and why they acted in the way that they did towards appeasement. The author argues that those who went against Chamberlain, members of the December Club, did so at great social and political risk because they believed more in doing what they thought was right for the country than what was right for the party and the prime minister.

These two sources were essential for coming to a better understanding of the politics of the British parliament during the interwar period. They showcased the behind the scenes workings of Parliament as well as the interpersonal relationships between the many various parliamentary officials.

Primary Sources

The Cabinet Papers were invaluable to this thesis. The information contained within them gave insight into the real issues that the government was dealing with as well as the thoughts that the various Cabinet ministers had on those issues. The Cabinet Papers displayed the true feelings of Cabinet ministers as well as the Prime Minister as opposed to the public personae that they often presented when debating within Parliament. Of particular note were the Cabinet Papers discussing the Cabinet meeting on the Anschluss. Chamberlain's disdain for the Austrian Chancellor's decision to call a plebiscite is clearly present, with him quoted as giving a sarcastic remark. That is the type of honesty that does not appear in other primary documents such as the archived Parliamentary debates.

Neville Chamberlain's *Diary Letters* were also an invaluable primary source. They gave regular insight into the type of person that Neville Chamberlain was in private with family, which was very different from how he was in public and with other governmental ministers. The letters, all to his sisters Hilda and Ida, showcased a much less callous and more endearing Chamberlain. In the letters, he is never afraid to voice his concerns or tell his sisters when he is upset. In one particular letter, when he was meeting with Hitler in Berchtesgaden, he excitedly remarks on the Italian nude paintings in the room he was sitting in. The letters also help give a better understanding of what Chamberlain was thinking during major events such as the Anschluss or immediately after the German invasion of Czechoslovakia.

The primary sources that were accessible were really what made this thesis possible. This was not the first question that I attempted to answer in a thesis. The first, which discussed the causes behind the French and British inaction during the Phoney War, was shown to be unworkable due to the lack of available French sources. For that question to have worked, I

would have had to travel to France and visit the archives in person, which was not viable.

Thankfully, I was able to pivot the thesis to a topic that had a plethora of primary documents readily available online.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided into three primary chapters. The chapters follow a chronological timeline, starting with the Rhineland Crisis of March 1936, then 1938, and finally 1939. While the first chapter deals with one singular event and the appeasement policies that caused it, the second and third chapters are much broader in scope. The 1938 chapter starts by discussing the events leading up and during the Anschluss and ends with perhaps the most famous example of appeasement, the Munich Conference. The 1939 chapter primarily discusses the effect that the German invasion of Czechoslovakia had on appeasement, eventually leading to its demise with the British guarantee of Polish independence on March 31st. I decided to start with 1936 and the Rhineland Crisis as opposed to going all the way back to 1933 and the beginning of Nazi Germany because the remilitarization of the Rhineland by Germany as really Hitler testing the water to see just how much he could get away with. Prior to this, he had only skirted the restrictions placed upon Germany in relatively minor ways such as rearmament and the reintroduction of conscription in 1935. The remilitarization of the Rhineland was the first hint at Hitler's end goals.

Chapter 1

The Rhineland Crisis

In a speech given on March 7th, 1936 in front of the gathered Reichstag, Adolf Hitler announced that as he spoke German troops were moving into the demilitarized zone of the

Rhineland in Western Germany. He proclaimed, "I would therefore like the German people to understand the inner motives of National Socialist foreign policy, which finds it painful that the outlet to the sea of a people of 35 million is situated on territory formerly belonging to the Reich, but which recognizes that it is unreasonable and impossible to deny a State of such a size as this any outlet to the sea at all." Hitler was, in this speech, justifying the remilitarization of the Rhineland, namely the fact that he saw the implementation of the demilitarized zone as being the work of the other European powers simply violating the "national interests" of Germany.¹ This move, while not at all a surprise to many in Europe, was the first in a series of events that would lead to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The Rhineland Crisis of March 1936 is today a blip on the radar when it comes to the causes and events leading up the Second World War. Events like the Anschluss and the Munich Conference tend to overshadow it. A reason for this could be that Germany was not conquering another nations territory. The Rhineland was still German territory, it was just off-limits to any German military units. Another reason for the relative unknown that is the Rhineland Crisis could also be that the response to it, both from the British and French, amounted to very little. Britain was at the time preoccupied with Italy and its war with Abyssinia. Britain had lobbied in 1935 for the League of Nations to impose economic sanctions on Italy for its invasion of Abyssinia² in October. The invasion of one League of Nations member by another was seen in Britain as an example of how toothless the League of Nations was as an organization. There was support for the League's actions in Parliament as the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin felt that the League was doing better than expected under such difficult circumstances.³ The sanctions

¹ *The British War Bluebook*. Reichstag Speech, March 7, 1936. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk03.asp>

² Known today as Ethiopia and Eritrea

³ House of Commons Debate 23 October 1935 vol. 305 cc149-53

were mild and did little to sway Mussolini. An attempted pact between the British Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare and the French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval near the end of 1935, in which the two agreed that their countries would let Mussolini have Abyssinia, was leaked to the press. The public reaction was enormously hostile, resulting in Hoare's resignation.⁴ This inaction towards Mussolini emboldened Hitler, who would take advantage of the British preoccupation with Italy by remilitarizing the Rhineland.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland by German forces was in direct violation of two important international treaties signed by a number of European nations: the Versailles Treaty and the Locarno Treaty. The Versailles Treaty, signed on June 28th, 1919, ended the First World War and laid down a considerable amount of restrictions upon Germany. With regards to the Rhineland, Articles 42, 43, and 44 were the most important, with 42 explicitly stating that "Germany is forbidden to maintain or construct any fortifications either on the left bank of the Rhine or on the right bank to the west of a line drawn 50 kilometres to the East of the Rhine."⁵ The Locarno Treaty signed by Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain, and Italy on October 16th, 1925, was a renewal of sorts of the some of the articles in the Versailles Treaty. Articles 1 and 4 referenced Articles 42 and 43 of the Versailles Treaty and reaffirmed the position of all those that signed both treaties. The Locarno Treaty was put in place to create a voluntary agreement between the major European signatories of peace so as to prevent the "scourge of the war of 1914-1918."⁶

⁴ Lynne Olson, *Troublesome Young Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 72-73.

⁵ Articles 43 and 44 say "In the area defined above the maintenance and the assembly of armed forces, either permanently or temporarily, and military maneuvers of any kind, as well as the upkeep of all permanent works for mobilization, are in the same way forbidden" and "In case Germany violates in any manner whatever the provisions of Articles 42 and 43, she shall be regarded as committing a hostile act against the Powers signatory of the present Treaty and as calculated to disturb the peace of the world" respectively. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partiii.asp>

⁶ *Treaty of Mutual Guarantee between Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Italy; October 16, 1925 (The Locarno Pact)* http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/locarno_001.asp

Though the remilitarization of the Rhineland broke international treaties, Hitler was more than willing to do so because he felt as though he was in the right. The timing of the remilitarization was anything but random. On the 27th of February, a little more than a week prior, France had signed the Franco- Soviet Pact. Hitler immediately challenged the legitimacy of the pact and “demanded arbitration as to the compatibility” of said pact “with Locarno.”⁷ Hitler also sought to go against the Versailles Treaty in particular as its harsh “diktat” terms were seen as humiliating.⁸ However, his repudiation of the Locarno Treaty was not at all in line with previous statements that he had made. Hitler had said that he would not recognize any treaties that were imposed upon Germany, such as Versailles, but that he would accept those that Germany had voluntarily signed.⁹ This would imply that the demilitarization of the Rhineland would fall within the latter category because it had been reaffirmed in the Locarno Treaty, which Germany had signed voluntarily. Hitler also chose the time that he did to move troops into the Rhineland because two of the primary signers of the Locarno Treaty, Great Britain and Italy, were at loggerheads with one another over Italy’s war in Ethiopia. The Italo-Ethiopian War created a rift between Italy and the British. The British considered Italy’s advances to be a detriment to the stability of the Mediterranean, which caused Great Britain to push for economic sanctions against Italy via the League of Nations. Hitler reasoned that Great Britain was too preoccupied with the Mediterranean situation to assist France if his remilitarization were to cause a military confrontation between Germany and France. He was in fact correct as France was not prepared to act against Germany without the assistance of Great Britain.¹⁰

⁷ CAB 24/261/3 p. 2

⁸ Robert J. Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 22.

⁹ Joseph A. Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-39* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 45.

The French response to the remilitarization of the Rhineland by Germany was ambivalent at best. With the ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact, the French High Command understood that the Germans would most likely make a move into the Rhineland and that it would be justified due to the ratification of the pact. This was not to say that there were not those within the High Command who had not seen the writing on the wall prior to that. General Gamelin, chief of the General Staff of the French military at the time had warned in January, two months prior to the crisis, the High Command that Germany would invade the Rhineland to “neutralize the French Army by constructing on its western frontiers a fortified barrier comparable to our own [the Maginot Line].”¹¹

Beginning in 1929 with the start of construction on the Maginot Line, France had settled on a primarily defensive approach towards Germany. By 1930 all French troops had evacuated the demilitarized zone, doing so five years prior to the date specified in the Versailles Treaty. The presence of the demilitarized zone and the buildup of a large fortified line on the French side of the river lulled the French into a sense of safety. By the time of the crisis, the British had estimated that the French had spent the equivalent of forty million British pounds on the Maginot Line.¹² The demilitarized zone was seen as a buffer against any German military action against France and its presence was thought to enable the French more time to respond in the event that Germany directed a military assault on France’s allies in Eastern Europe. In effect, the demilitarized zone was a balance against unrestrained violence by the Germans, arguably making it the “single most important guarantee of peace in Europe.”¹³

¹¹ Robert J. Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 119.

¹² CAB 24/261/3 p. 2

¹³ Gerhard Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany Diplomatic Revolution in Europe 1933-36* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), 239.

Only about 10,000 German troops moved into the Rhineland on March 7th with an additional 25,000 or so policemen joining in once they had crossed into the demilitarized zone. While this was a relatively small force, it was large enough that had the French wanted to counter it, they would have had to put some actual effort into their response. Even though it was not completely impossible for the French to respond to a force of such number, the French General Staff felt it was necessary to grossly exaggerate the total number of German troops in the Rhineland. Their estimate, which went against French intelligence, put the number of German troops at 235,000.¹⁴ This exaggeration was meant to legitimize Gamelin's position with regards to how the French should respond. He was adamant that total mobilization of the military was the only way in which the French could move against the Germans.¹⁵ Gamelin was unyielding in his perception of the organization of the French military at the time and that he saw it as not being conducive to quickly forming a corps, particularly an expeditionary corps, that would have been able to respond to the German advance. In fact, the only plan that Gamelin advocated for was the mobilization of 1.2 million troops to station along the frontier.¹⁶

The economic situation in France made matters of defense in 1936 an issue. By 1935, the French army budget had been cut to six billion Francs.¹⁷ The Maginot Line was also deemed to be ready around this time, even though it was not complete according to the original designs. Over five billion Francs had been invested into the Line but due to inflation and budget cuts, the Line was only ready to defend France in a limited capacity.¹⁸ The fact that the Germans crossed

¹⁴ P.M.H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940: Entente & Estrangement* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1996), 204-205.

¹⁵ Eugene Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 145.

¹⁶ Robert A. Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-39* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1985), 38-39.

¹⁷ Robert Forczyk, *Case Red: The Collapse of France* (Oxford: Osprey, 2017), 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 54.

into the Rhineland should have been no surprise to Gamelin, even though it was. As would be the case on multiple occasions in the next three years, the Deuxième Bureau, the French military intelligence arm, knew of Germany's intentions beforehand and warned the French Government and Gamelin. The dire conditions of the French economy also resulted in there being no French divisions able to rapidly respond to the German movement.¹⁹ Following the crisis, Albert Sarraut and his government were voted out of office, giving way to the rise of the Popular Front. The Popular Front, led by Leon Blum, pushed for rearmament and pumped more funds into the military so as to avoid putting the military in a position in the future where it would be unable to adequately respond to any more German aggression.

The British response to the German remilitarization of the Rhineland was divided into two camps. On one side there were those who were generally ambivalent or even supportive of the move by the Germans, many of whom were in the government. This included the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, the Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare, the Home Secretary Sir John Simon, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain. There were a number of those not in the government who were also on this side, the most prominent of these being the Prince of Wales who would become King Edward VIII in 1936. On the other side there were those who were passively or even vehemently opposed. This side counted amongst its members Winston Churchill who was only an MP at the time as well as Anthony Eden who became Foreign Secretary after the resignation of Hoare. There was also a group formed early in 1936 called the December Club. This club consisted of about thirty-five anti-appeasement MPs. A few of the thirty-five were Harold Nicolson, Robert Boothby, Paul Emrys-Evans, Ronald Cartland, Ronald

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 55.

Tree, Harold Macmillan, Louis Spears, and John Macnamara.²⁰ While neither side was keen on imposing upon the Germans, there was a great deal of conflict between the two sides.

One of the most prominent figures in the ambivalence and support camp was Philip Kerr, better known as Lord Lothian. Lord Lothian was known to have been a vocal supporter of the Nazi regime, being seen to have “praised Hitler for saving Germany in 1933” and he had enjoyed Hitler’s company on numerous occasions.²¹ People such as Sir John Simon, who was the Home Secretary during the crisis, and the former prime minister David Lloyd George also had kind descriptions of Hitler; saying that he was an “Austrian Joan of Arc”²² and similar to George Washington. Lloyd George even went so far as to wish aloud that Great Britain “had a man of his supreme quality at the head of affairs.”²³ There were those within parliament however who were deeply opposed to Hitler because of what they had seen when visiting Germany. Bob Boothby and Paul Emrys-Evans, curiously once part of the Foreign Office, were two members of parliament who had been in contact with the opposition in Germany and had learned of the horrors that were lying beneath the surface.²⁴ The party divide of those who were for and against appeasement was not clear cut. While most of the Liberal and Labour MPs were against appeasement and the Conservatives for appeasement, that did not mean there were not those from each party in both camps. As the Conservatives had won the previous election in November of 1935, the number of Conservatives in Parliament was considerably higher than that of the Liberal and Labour parties.²⁵ Curiously, a large number of those within the anti-appeasement group The December Club were Conservatives. This included John Macnamara, Harold

²⁰ Lynne Olson, *Troublesome Young Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 74.

²¹ Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Phoenix Press, 1963), 40.

²² Lynne Olson, *Troublesome Young Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 68.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 69.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 69.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 72.

Macmillan, Ronald Tree, Robert Boothby, Paul Emrys-Evans, Louis Spears, and Ronald Cartland. Those within the group were motivated by the government's "refusal to respond to Italian and German aggression"²⁶ and they "wanted to show Baldwin and his men that 'there were quite a number of us who are perfectly prepared in a real emergency to take action independent of the Whips'²⁷, should we deem it in the national interest."²⁸

The most vehemently opposed to Hitler and his push into the Rhineland were those within the Foreign Office. One of the most outspoken critics was the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. Eden was of the mindset, along with the Prime Minister of Belgium Paul van Zeeland, that war with Germany was inevitable in two years' time unless Germany was forced to withdraw militarily from the Rhineland.²⁹ Eden proposed speaking in defense of the Treaty of Locarno and Belgium and to not let the Franco-Soviet Pact create any unnecessary qualms between the countries, saying that despite all of the diplomatic conflict "we (the British) were anxious to obtain a peaceful settlement; that we were not asking for anything impossible; but that we wanted some contribution from Germany to give our efforts some prospect of success in the difficult circumstances."³⁰ Though he was opposed to Hitler and his actions, Eden was not above acquiescing to Hitler's offer for a new version of the Locarno Treaty, though not without concessions such as the total removal of troops from the Rhineland.³¹ There were elements within the Royal Navy who advocated for a diplomatic approach towards Germany in order to protect the Anglo-German Naval agreement of 1935 from any fallout from the crisis. This was

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 74.

²⁷ A whip in the UK Parliament functions the same as in the US Congress, 'whipping' up votes in support of the party agenda

²⁸ Lynne Olson, *Troublesome Young Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 74.

²⁹ CAB 23/83/18 P. 2

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

due to the agreement being a formal treaty between the two nations, which tied them together somewhat, creating a degree of interconnectedness as a form of security.³²

One of the key actions taken by the British after German forces had moved into the Rhineland was to call for a meeting of the Locarno Powers to deliberate over what should be done about Germany's violation of the treaty. The conference, which was held in Paris from the 9th to the 11th of March and then in London from the 13th to the 23rd March, was attended by representatives from four out five of the signatories of the Locarno Treaty (Germany was excluded). Neville Chamberlain, who was in attendance, described the conference as having difficulty coming to an agreement on anything even though at times it would appear that they were on the verge of making progress.³³ There were also talks between the French and British military staffs, though these ultimately ended in failure after only five days.³⁴

The failure of the British and French to respond to the German remilitarization of the Rhineland would continue to haunt them until war broke out in September 1939. By not pushing against Hitler in his first foray into skirting the territorial aspects of the Treaty of Versailles, the British and French allowed the Germans to break international agreements with very little pushback. While it is uncertain how events would have unfolded had Hitler been challenged in 1936, it is certain that by doing nothing, Britain and France were only encouraging him to continue to act against them.

³² Joseph A. Maiolo, *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-39* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 46.

³³ *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, IV: The Downing Street Years*, ed. Robert. Self (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 180.

³⁴ R.A.C. Parker, "Alternatives to Appeasement," in *The Origins of The Second World War*, ed. Patrick Finney (London, Bloomsbury, 1997), 214.

*Chapter 2**1938*

1938 was a disastrous year for European diplomacy which may have been no surprise given how politically tumultuous the previous year had been for two of Europe's major nations, France and the United Kingdom. By the middle of 1937 both nations had new heads of government in Camille Chautemps and Neville Chamberlain respectively. It was Chamberlain though, and his government's policies of appeasement that would take center stage in 1938. The failure and general unwillingness of the British to push back against the Anschluss, the German annexation of Austria, as well as acquiescence to Hitler's demands at the Munich Conference failed to put out the flames of the growing tensions in Europe leading up to the Second World War.

In July of 1936, Germany and Austria came to an agreement on the question of Austria's sovereignty. Hitler agreed to accept Austria as an independently sovereign state as long as Austria considered itself a "German state."³⁵ Due to growing pressure internally from the Austrian Nazi Party as well as overtures from Hitler, the Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg was for all intents and purposes forced into a meeting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden on the 12th of February 1938. In the meeting Hitler reaffirmed Germany's position of not intervening in Austria's internal affairs, which had been agreed upon in the July agreement of 1936. This was in reality a sham as Chancellor Schuschnigg was forced to make four concessions to the Germans:

"(1) A general amnesty has been declared covering all political offences committed before 15th February of this year, provided the offender has remained in Austria. This amnesty has been extended to school and university students and its execution was

³⁵ *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, IV: The Downing Street Years*, ed. Robert Self (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 201.

completed on 19th February. All those released must sign an undertaking of good behaviour until 31st December 1941. (2) The Government has been reconstructed and in the new Cabinet Dr. von Seyss-Inquart, the Minister for the Interior and Security, will be the only representative of National-Socialism, apart from Dr. Glaise-Horstenau, who was also a member of the last administration. (3) The cases of public officials who were deprived of their pensions are to be re-examined. It is understood that in general these pensions will be restored and the officials will receive an appropriate indemnity. (4) Austrian National-Socialists will be legally permitted to indulge in political activity, within the framework of the Patriotic Front, and of other Austrian organisations, to the same extent as is permitted to other groups, provided they are loyal to Austria and her constitution. It should be pointed out that the Austrian Constitution of 1934 remains unchanged.”³⁶ The second point dealt a crippling blow to the Schuschnigg administration. Arthur von Seyss-Inquart was an avowed Nazi party member and an advocate for the unification of Germany and Austria. Schuschnigg was also forced to appoint Guido Schmidt, whose loyalty to Schuschnigg was uncertain, as the Foreign Minister.³⁷

The British reaction to this new agreement was as shallow as it was hollow. Initially when asked in the House of Commons on February 16th, about whether “the integrity and independence of Austria remains the same as that stated by him [Eden] on a previous occasion in this House,” the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Anthony Eden took the stance that Britain and its government “desired in Central Europe, as elsewhere, peace and good understanding.” Minister Eden was then asked whether the government was going to stand by the 1934 joint declaration, to which he said, “that is quite true.”³⁸ The joint declaration the questioner and Eden were referring to was the Stresa Declaration formalized in April of 1935. In relation to the agreement between Germany and Austria, the declaration stated that,

“the representatives of the three Governments examined afresh the Austrian situation: They confirmed the Anglo-Franco-Italian declarations of the 17th February and the 27th September, 1934, in which the three governments recognised that the necessity of maintaining the independence and integrity of Austria would continue to inspire their common policy. Referring to the Franco-Italian protocol of 7th January 1935, and to the Anglo-French declarations of the 3rd February 1935, in which the decision was reaffirmed

³⁶ House of Commons Debate 21 February 1938 vol. 332 cc6-12, quoted: Sir John Simon.

³⁷ CAB 23/92/5 P. 2.

³⁸ House of Commons Debate 16 February 1938 vol. 331 cc1862-3, quoted: Anthony Eden.

to consult together as to the measures to be taken in the case of the threats to the integrity and independence of Austria, they agreed to recommend that Representatives of all the Governments enumerated in the protocol of Rome should meet at a very early date with a view to concluding the Central European agreement.”³⁹

Seen as going directly against this, the Cabinet felt that the agreement between Germany and Austria hamstrung Austria into an agreement that would limit its freedoms. An issue arose nearly immediately that of the three nations that were a part of the joint declaration, only France and the United Kingdom had been in contact with one another, with Italy failing to consult with either of the governments.⁴⁰

The French moved to contact the British first, having the French Ambassador in London Charles Corbin hand a memorandum over to the British government on the 18th of February. The memorandum called for a “demarche” or joint action against Germany in response to the new Austro-German agreement. France suggested that,

the legitimate anxiety of Dr. Schuschnigg to safeguard Austrian independence will not, in the opinion of Great Britain and France, allow him to go any further [with the current move closer to Germany] ; that the real and not merely verbal independence of Austria constitutes one of the major interests of European peace, and that the British and French Governments could not be indifferent spectators of any new attempts destined to destroy it; that in general we cannot tolerate any coup de main or act of war likely to bring into question the territorial status quo in Central Europe, and that in that case these events would meet with opposition on the part of the Western Powers.⁴¹

France recognized at this point that Italy and Mussolini had all but abandoned their commitment to the Stresa Declaration, leaving the French and British alone to respond to German aggression towards Austria.

³⁹ *Joint Resolution of the Stresa Conference*. Article 3. April 14, 1935.

⁴⁰ House of Commons Debate 16 February 1938 vol. 331 cc1862-3, quoted: Anthony Eden.

⁴¹ CAB 24/275/13 P. 2.

The British were not at all committed to moving forward with the plans laid out by the French ambassador; instead they wished to follow a plan that allowed for a peaceful resolution of the current situation. The British understood that without any real commitment to back up the words that the French were proposing, they would just be that, and that the Germans would not be inhibited by anything short of concrete action. The hesitance to commit to providing real, actionable support to Austria was a concern of the British because they did not want to say anything in conjunction with the French that might have allowed Schuschnigg to believe in the possibility of joint military support against German incursions on Austrian sovereignty. The third point in the memorandum was where the British had the biggest objection. The wording of the point, they argued, made it seem as though the French and British were ready to embark on a war against the Germans over their intentions against Austria.⁴² The British government was not in a place in February 1938 to attack the Germans, which would become more apparent down the road as more internal studies of the military capabilities of the United Kingdom were conducted within the government. During a cabinet meeting on February 16, the maximum commitment of troops that the United Kingdom would have been able to dispatch to France in the event that the obligation of the Treaty of Locarno was to be invoked was set at “two regular divisions and a mobile division within three weeks, followed by two further regular divisions” forty days later.⁴³ This was a miniscule force compared to the near 100 divisions that Germany had at its disposal.⁴⁴

Over the course of February there was much debate within Parliament over what the best course of action towards the Austrian situation was. Within Parliament, members of the Cabinet,

⁴² *Ibid.* P. 3.

⁴³ CAB 23/92/5. P. 52.

⁴⁴ Lynne Olson, *Troublesome Young Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 127.

such as Sir John Simon, were adamant in their insistence that the only real obligation that Britain had towards Austria, and by extension Czechoslovakia, was in line with the duties Britain was expected to perform as a member of the League of Nations. Simon made it explicitly clear that the British government had “given no special guarantees towards either country.”⁴⁵ This situation put both France and Great Britain in an uncomfortable spot. The French wanted to act in concert with the British, but at the same time, the British wanted to wait for someone else in the Stresa Declaration to make the first move. Anthony Eden made this point in a House of Commons debate on February 17th where he said, in response to Winston Churchill’s question as to if “the League of Nations at Geneva [had] certain duties and responsibilities lying upon it in respect of the independence and integrity of Austria,” that “in view of the particular circumstances of the Stresa Declaration, that we are willing to act with others as provided for in that declaration, but we do not think it lies with us to take the initiative.”⁴⁶ This was a clear statement by the British government that it would not consider taking action against Germany alone but that if either Italy or France were to do so, that it would follow suit according to its obligations not only as a member of the League of Nations but also as one of the signatories of the Stresa Declaration.

The handling of the situation within the government became even more complicated when on the 20th of February Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, resigned his post. Though there is still speculation as to what prompted this decision, in a letter to his sister Hilda following Eden’s resignation, Neville Chamberlain stated that he had gradually come to the conclusion that “at bottom Anthony did not want to talk either with Hitler or Mussolini and as I did he was right to go.”⁴⁷ If Chamberlain was telling the truth here, it would appear that

⁴⁵ CAB 24/275/31. Annex 7. P. 15.

⁴⁶ House of Commons Debate 17 February 1938 vol. 331 cc2073-5, quoted: Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden.

⁴⁷ *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, IV: The Downing Street Years*, ed. Robert Self (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 303.

Eden opposed Chamberlain's policy of appeasement with regards to the two dictators. Earlier in the letter Chamberlain had mentioned that he felt as though the real disagreement between the two was not whether the British should be talking to Germany and Italy at that time but if they should be talking to them at all.⁴⁸ There were others in Parliament who also disagreed with the perceived direction that Eden was leading the Foreign Office towards. The Conservative MP Cuthbert Headlam was exceedingly critical of Eden in his diaries; saying "He [Eden] crashed badly over sanctions and the European situation has gone from worse to worse since he has been in power. Three years ago, we could have got almost any bargain we liked with Germany: now it is not going to be easy to get a decent agreement – the same applies with Italy."⁴⁹ Given that Eden was vehemently against the appeasement policies of Chamberlain, so much so that it led to his resignation, it is interesting that there were some in Parliament like Headlam who saw Eden as the root of the issues with Germany and Italy. This sort of private indignation towards Eden was not uncommon for Headlam. Headlam while not publicly against the policies of appeasement due to party loyalty, privately he was highly critical of the failures of British foreign policy in the years since 1935 and the reliance on the League of Nations.⁵⁰ Eden was, along with Winston Churchill, one of the leading anti-appeasement figures, thus to be blamed for the disastrous effects of appeasement smacks more of political scapegoating than actual dogmatic disagreement. Following Eden's resignation, there was an outpouring of support in Parliament, primarily from his fellow anti-appeasement MPs such as Arthur Greenwood, Robert Boothby, and Paul Emrys-Evans. The only real rebukes of Eden came from the Prime Minister. During the Commons Sitting of Tuesday, 22nd of February 1938, the Prime Minister was beset

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* P. 303.

⁴⁹ *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries 1935-51*, ed. Stuart Ball (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 123.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* P. 9.

by MPs from all sides. Of particular note was the exchange between the Prime Minister and the Liberal MP F. Kingsley Griffith. Griffith lashed out against the fact that the Italian Ambassador had blackmailed and intimidated Eden, to which the Chamberlain took immediate issue stating, “I must interrupt the Hon. Gentleman in order to deny categorically that the Italian Ambassador ever made use of any language which had any significance of that kind.”⁵¹ This showed that even if he was to be attacked, Chamberlain was still willing to defend his positions; doing so knowing full well that his supporters were in near total control of Parliament. Anthony Eden was quickly replaced as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs by the Lord President of the Council, Lord Halifax.

The influence of the appeasers within the British government and social circles swelled during the course of 1938. The powerful Conservative group known as the 1922 Committee wielded a great deal of influence within the government. The 1922 Committee consisted of every Conservative backbencher⁵² in Parliament. Due to their support of Anthony Eden following his resignation, the Conservative MP Paul Emrys-Evans and the National Labourite MP Harold Nicolson were forced to resign from their leadership positions on the Foreign Affairs Committee in April 1938. They were even chastised by some in their constituencies, with Emrys-Evans being told by the chairman of his constituency association that “to oppose [the prime minister] is definitely a headlong rush to war!”⁵³ It wasn’t just people within the government who were wielding their influence in 1938. Most newspapers in Britain, as well as the BBC supported the appeasement policies of Chamberlain. This was not done independently as the BBC and many of

⁵¹ Commons Sitting of Tuesday, 22nd of February 1938, quoted: Neville Chamberlain. Accessed March 30, 2018. <https://parlipapers-proquest-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/parlipapers/docview/t71.d76.cds5cv0332p0-0002?accountid=14503>

⁵² In the Westminster parliamentary systems, a backbencher is a member of parliament who holds no governmental office and is not a part of the frontbench of the opposition.

⁵³ Lynne Olson, *Troublesome Young Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 106.

the newspapers were manipulated either by their executives or by Chamberlain himself into holding the same opinions as those that were expressed at 10 Downing Street.⁵⁴

Of these executives, none were as well connected or as influential as Lord Dawson, Lord Beaverbrook, and Lord Rothermere. Lord Dawson, who shared close ties with the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Halifax, was the editor of *The Times* which was considered to be the United Kingdom's most influential newspaper. Dawson would refuse to print anything critical of the Chamberlain government or its policies of appeasement. He was also moderately pro-Nazi, being quoted as saying that he did his "utmost, night after night, to keep out of the paper anything that might hurt [Nazi] susceptibilities."⁵⁵ Lord Beaverbrook, the owner of three newspapers was intensely pro-appeasement, going so far as to congratulate Joachim von Ribbentrop when he was named German Foreign Minister, telling him that Ribbentrop had the "'loyal support' of all the Beaverbrook papers."⁵⁶ Lord Rothermere was different from the other two in that he was not explicitly pro-appeasement, he was instead intensely anti-communist. His newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, was the only major British newspaper that was unequivocally pro-Nazi regime. This support was driven by Rothermere's perception that Hitler was the only one who could stop the tide of communism from taking over the rest of Europe.⁵⁷

Growing pressure from Germany on Austria reached a fever pitch on the March 11, 1938. Two days earlier, Chancellor Schuschnigg had decided that he was in a position politically to settle the growing German influence over the country once and for all. He announced that four days later there would be a plebiscite on the question of Austrian independence. Schuschnigg

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 119.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 122.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 123.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 123.

was confident that Austrian support for Germany and the Nazis was low enough that the people would vote to keep Austria separate from Germany. This decision did not sit well with Germany and the Austrian Nazis. Two of the Nazi ministers whom he had been forced to appoint in February issued an ultimatum to Schuschnigg; either he was to abandon the plebiscite or the Nazis would disrupt the voting process. Though Schuschnigg accepted the ultimatum, his acquiescence was deemed to be insufficient and he was then presented with a second ultimatum: he was to resign and von Seyss-Inquart would take his place. He was told that if he had not accepted the new ultimatum by a predetermined time, German troops would invade Austria and take it by force.⁵⁸ Late in the afternoon of the 11th Chancellor Schuschnigg contacted the British government, asking them for advice on how he should respond in the face of the German ultimatum. Lord Halifax, after discussing the situation with the Prime Minister, responded that “His Majesty's Government could not take the responsibility of advising the Chancellor to take any course of action which might expose his country to dangers against which His Majesty's Government are unable to guarantee protection.”⁵⁹ A sign of frustration followed shortly after when the Prime Minister mentioned that Schuschnigg had not inquired about advice before he announced the plebiscite “which had caused so much trouble.”⁶⁰ This comment by Chamberlain showed not only frustration but some level of contempt that he and perhaps others in the Cabinet had for Schuschnigg. The comment comes across as almost sarcastic in tone which, given the magnitude of the situation, appears out of place.

As the crisis developed, the British and French governments had been in contact, trying to devise a strategy for moving forward. The French suggested to the British that they should

⁵⁸ House of Commons Debate 14 March 1938 vol. 333 cc45-169, quoted: Neville Chamberlain.

⁵⁹ CAB 23-92-12. P. 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 2.

consult with the Italians, given that they were one third of the Stresa Declaration, and should have their ambassador to Germany make a formal protest in Berlin.⁶¹ The fact that the French had the presence of mind to contact the British is astounding given the domestic troubles they were struggling with at the time. On the 10th of March, the day before the crisis really began, the government of Camille Chautemps had collapsed, leaving a hole where the government administration once was. The veteran⁶² Prime Minister Léon Blum was nominally in charge but was nowhere near ready to confront a grand geopolitical crisis. His foreign minister Paul-Boncour was still able to stir up enough attention that the British Ambassador to France Eric Phipps was alarmed and cautioned Lord Halifax not to allow Paul-Boncour any meetings in London over Spain or Austria.⁶³

Regarding the inquiry as to the position of Italy on Austria, the British and French hit the same roadblock they had been experiencing with Mussolini for the past three years. Mussolini was unwilling to take a hardline stance regarding either side, even though Italy had signed the Stresa Declaration, there by agreeing that Austria was to be independent. Eric Drummond, Earl of Perth and British Ambassador to Italy, sought out a meeting with Mussolini but was unable to secure one before the crisis had run its course. The French Ambassador to Italy had also attempted to contact the Italian government with regards to Austria, but the Italian foreign minister, Galeazzo Ciano, flatly said that if the contact was to be about Austria, there was nothing to discuss.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁶² Léon Blum had been Prime Minister of France on two earlier occasions, the most recent being between June 1937 and January 1938.

⁶³P.M.H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940: Entente & Estrangement* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1996), 210-11.

⁶⁴ CAB 23/92/12. Pgs. 2-3.

On the morning of the 12th of March, German forces crossed the border into Austria. Hitler predicted, correctly, that France and Britain would not act militarily against him, thereby allowing the Germans to easily take control of Austria. Hitler and other Austrians saw the unification of Austria and Germany as the fulfillment of the wish Austria had had at the end of the First World War. In 1918, the people of Austria had voted through a motion to join with Germany but this was denied by the victorious nations at the end of the War.⁶⁵ In fact, this very scenario was prohibited by Article 88 of the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. The article⁶⁶ not only forbade any nation from compromising Austria's independence, but also prohibited Austria from essentially ceding its independence to another nation. To add some air of legitimacy, Hitler organized a plebiscite that, predictably, went in his favor with the people of Austria voting overwhelmingly in favor of joining Germany.⁶⁷

The British Cabinet response to the German invasion of Austria was resigned. The Prime Minister felt as though this action by the Germans was inevitable and that the only thing that could have stopped it would have been "an overwhelming display of force."⁶⁸ Chamberlain blamed Chancellor Schuschnigg, insisting that he had blundered by calling the plebiscite when he did. Chamberlain was incensed that Schuschnigg had given Hitler the opening he needed to invade Austria, thus putting Eastern Europe at risk.⁶⁹ This is also when a great divide began to emerge between the British government, particularly Chamberlain, and the German Foreign

⁶⁵Maurice Larkin, *France since the Popular Front: 1936-1986* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 70

⁶⁶Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Article 88: "The independence of Austria is inalienable otherwise than with the consent of the Council of the League of Nations. Consequently, Austria undertakes in the absence of the consent of the said Council to abstain from any act which might directly or indirectly or by any means whatever compromise her independence, particularly, and until her admission to membership of the League of Nations, by participation in the affairs of another Power."

⁶⁷Maurice Larkin, *France since the Popular Front: 1936-1986* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 70

⁶⁸CAB 23/92/12. P. 5.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. In a letter to his sister Hilda, Chamberlain did not hold back in expressing his utter contempt for Ribbentrop; “in talking to Ribbentrop I am always overcome by a feeling of helplessness. He is so stupid, so shallow, so self-centered and self-satisfied, so totally devoid of intellectual capacity that he never seems to take in what is said to him.”⁷⁰ Despite this contempt, Chamberlain did agree with him on Schuschnigg’s “breach of faith’ and folly in holding a plebiscite” but was exasperated by what he perceived as Ribbentrop’s inability to “comprehend our objection to German methods.”⁷¹ Ribbentrop might have been the only person for whom Chamberlain had more disdain than Anthony Eden.

Attention quickly moved to the question of how to stop Czechoslovakia from succumbing to the same fate.⁷² Anti-appeasement figures such as Frederick Cocks had for some time been raising the issue of a German invasion being a byproduct of appeasement, most recently during a debate in the House of Commons on the 7th of March, just prior to the Anschluss. In his speech, Cocks criticized the actions of Pierre Laval, former Prime Minister of France⁷³ and charged that Chamberlain was following the same pattern: “the policy of the Prime Minister is identical with the policy pursued by M. Laval, which was to make friends with Italy and Germany by unilateral agreements ignoring the principles of the League. They failed.”⁷⁴ He then went on to say that he hoped “that the sequel to the Prime Minister's policy will not be the invasion of Czechoslovakia.”⁷⁵

⁷⁰*The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, IV: The Downing Street Years*, ed. Robert Self (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 304

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²CAB 23/92/12. P. 6.

⁷³ Laval served as Prime Minister of France three times: 1931-1932, 1935-1936, and 1942-1944 during the Vichy Regime.

⁷⁴ House of Commons Debate 07 March 1938 vol. 332 cc1555-683, quoted: Frederick Cocks

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

During the Cabinet meeting on March 12, the Minister of Transport, E. L. Burgin, presented the Cabinet with details from a “communication he had received on the previous day from an official of a well-known public company in Germany stating that German officials were being collected for employment in Austria and that Czecho-Slovakia was to be dealt with in the same manner as Austria. The Sudeten Deutsch were to rise and that was to be an excuse for an invasion.”⁷⁶ The leader of the Sudeten Germans, Konrad Henlein, was the head of the main German speaking political party in the Sudetenland, the Sudeten German Party. The party, as well as Henlein, were strongly against the Czechoslovak government and had advocated for the absorption of the Sudetenland into Germany.⁷⁷

Beginning with the Cabinet meeting on the 12th of March, the British government embarked on an intensified rearmament policy. The Naval Programme that had been proposed earlier in the year was changed to fit the needs of the Navy in a coming war, which many now saw as a possibility. The changes to the Programme were significant with the decisions to build three capital ships instead of two, seven destroyers instead of none, and seven submarines instead of three, with the ships to be completed by 1942.⁷⁸ This was not enough for some in the government as Winston Churchill advocated for the improvement of the Air Force Programme which he saw as inadequate.⁷⁹ There had been a defense scheme considered, called ‘Scheme K’, but it was deemed to be too expensive. ‘K’ was really about the appearance that the Royal Air Force was being expanded quickly when in reality it was more so about the development of training programs and factory preparations for maintenance of an increased RAF.⁸⁰ This was

⁷⁶ CAB 23/92/12. P. 7.

⁷⁷ Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Phoenix Press, 1963), 105.

⁷⁸ CAB 23/92/12. P. 6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 9.

scrapped and instead the Cabinet decided to consider expanding and accelerating the current armament plan that was in place.⁸¹

Following the German annexation of Austria in March, Czechoslovakia became the next potential site for a confrontation between the British and Germans. It was at this time that Neville Chamberlain asked the British Chiefs of Staff to examine the strategic situation Britain and her potential allies would confront if they were forced to go to war with the Germans over Czechoslovakia. The report that the Chiefs of Staff submitted to Chamberlain was bleak. Of the branches of the British Armed Forces, only the Navy was deemed to be superior to the Germans, “our naval superiority will be sufficiently pronounced to ensure control against Germany’s naval forces, except in the Baltic.”⁸² The issue of air-defense was raised though as it was deemed that “the anti-aircraft measures for defence of naval bases and fuel storage in the United Kingdom are quite inadequate.”⁸³ The Army situation was quite dire as well, with the Chiefs of Staff estimating that “the maximum field force that Great Britain could dispatch at present to the continent [to France] is one corps of two regular divisions... This force could commence embarkation within 14 days, but it would be seriously deficient of modern equipment.”⁸⁴ As stated previously, this was a tiny force compared to what the Germans were able to muster. Two divisions would only amount to around 50,000 troops, whereas the Germans had access to 90 divisions, or nearly one million troops.⁸⁵ It is important to note however that the two British divisions were not going to act alone. The Chiefs of Staff estimated the French Army would have been able to mobilize around 53 divisions, of which 30 to 40 would be maintainable over a long

⁸¹ *Ibid.* P. 10.

⁸² British Chiefs of Staff, “Military Implications of German Aggression Against Czechoslovakia,” in *World War II: Roots and Causes 2nd Edition*, ed. Keith Eubank (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 138.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

period of time. The Chiefs had their doubts about the capabilities of the French arms industry however, noting that there were “reports of considerable deficiencies in reserve stocks” of guns and ammunition. They did praise the defensive capabilities of France, primarily the Maginot Line as that was seen to be potentially very useful against the Germans.⁸⁶ The Chiefs estimated that the Czechoslovakian Army consisted of 21 well equipped divisions. They did raise concern over the number of Sudeten Germans, who made up around ten percent of the army, as their loyalty was in question but ultimately the officers were Czechs which meant that unit cohesion was not of great concern.⁸⁷ The defensive capabilities of Czechoslovakia, once considered impressive due to the buildup on the border of Germany, were compromised. The Anschluss had rendered the defenses moot because the Germans, having free rein over Austria, could now bypass the Czechoslovak defenses entirely and invade across the Austrian border which had no “effective” fortifications.⁸⁸

When the Chiefs of Staff completed their examination in 1938, the terrible state of the Royal Air Force was glaringly obvious. Though it was being expanded, the capabilities of the RAF were outclassed by their German counterparts. The RAF had on hand thirty fighter squadrons made up of 420 aircraft. Of these, only 27 were said to be mobilizable. Of these 27, only 7 squadrons would consist of up-to-date aircraft, while the other 20 would be armed with “obsolete or obsolescent aircraft which are slower than the majority of German bombers.”⁸⁹ By comparison, the German air force was estimated to have 520 fighter aircraft at its disposal, with nearly all being up-to-date designs and fully mobilizable.⁹⁰ The first-line strength of the bomber

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 140.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 141.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 141.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 138.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 143.

squadrons was in a slightly better situation but not by much. The Chiefs estimated that by April 1938, there would have been 804 strike aircraft, of which 420 would have been mobilizable. The problem presented was that most of these strike aircraft would not have the range to penetrate deep into Germany from bases in Great Britain. This meant that the French would have to be asked about British aircraft being based in France so as to allow for longer ranges and better preparedness.⁹¹ The German air force was estimated to have nearly 1,600 modern strike aircraft⁹², 1,300 of which were capable of striking Great Britain directly. Simply put, when the Chiefs of Staff completed their examination the RAF was seriously outmatched by the German air force. The terrible state that the RAF was in caused new defense schemes to be pushed for approval in Parliament. Scheme K, which was a development on Scheme J from December 1937, was deemed to be too expensive and was opposed by the Minister for the Co-Ordination of Defence, Sir Thomas Inskip, even though it was “below the minimum scheme considered necessary by the Air Staff for security.”⁹³ In April, Scheme L was adopted, which called for the RAF to reach a strength of “1,352 bombers and 608 first-line fighters by April 1940.”⁹⁴ This scheme would ultimately result in a moderate success as the RAF entered the war in September 1939 with “608 first-line fighters against the 1,215 of the Luftwaffe⁹⁵, and with 536 bombers against 2,130.”⁹⁶

The most enduring example of appeasement was perhaps the Munich Conference. As the summer of 1938 progressed, the situation in the Sudetenland had deteriorated. Prompted by this,

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p. 139.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 142.

⁹³ CAB 23/92/12. P. 9.

⁹⁴ Max Hastings, *Bomber Command*, (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 1979), 13.

⁹⁵ German Air Force.

⁹⁶ Max Hastings, *Bomber Command*, (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 1979), 14.

the British government decided to send Lord Runciman⁹⁷ in an attempt to mediate between the Sudeten-Germans and the Czechs.⁹⁸ The news of Lord Runciman's mission was praised in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.⁹⁹ Runciman's mission was a failure. Though he spoke to both Sudeten-Germans and Czechs, he spent most weekends "with German princes in the Sudetenland;" and he "tended to listen to Czechs with Nazi leanings."¹⁰⁰ Ultimately, his meeting failed because the Germans were simply not interested in having any real mediation between the two sides.¹⁰¹ By September 13th the situation had gotten out of hand with riots occurring in the Sudetenland. With Germany poised to invade, Chamberlain decided, after weeks of thinking on it, to personally go to Germany and meet Hitler in person. This upset the French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier who had wished for a meeting that included the French as well.¹⁰² On the 15th, Chamberlain flew¹⁰³ to Munich and then on to Berchtesgaden where he met Hitler. The meeting between Hitler and Chamberlain resulted in little of substance except for Chamberlain to gain a familiarity with Hitler. In their conversation, Chamberlain said that Hitler spoke mostly in low tones aside from the occasional outburst when it came to the Czechs. The issue that would soon arise, however, was Chamberlain's stance on the Sudetenland. He himself, in a letter to his sister dated four days after the meeting, stated that his personal opinion on the matter was that "on principle I didn't care two hoots whether the Sudetens [sic] were in the Reich or out of it."¹⁰⁴ This mindset, of not caring one way or another, would create problems for

⁹⁷ Lord Runciman was a Liberal politician that would later serve as Lord President of the Council from October 1938 to the outbreak of the war in September 1939.

⁹⁸ Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Phoenix Press, 1963), 130.

⁹⁹ House of Lords Debate 26 July 1938 vol. 110 cc1162-76.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Phoenix Press, 1963), 130.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 131.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 142.

¹⁰³ An interesting note, this was the first flight of Chamberlain's 69 years

¹⁰⁴ *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, IV: The Downing Street Years*, ed. Robert Self (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 348.

the Czechs later down the line as they effectively were without an ally when in negotiations with the Germans and British.

Following Chamberlain's return to England the next day, the Prime Minister and some of his Cabinet members met with Daladier, Bonnet, and Leger concerning the meeting and to work out a proposal to the Czechs concerning a guarantee. This proposal demanded that any area of Czechoslovakia that contained a number of German inhabitants exceeding 50 percent was to be ceded to Germany, in exchange for which the French and British would guarantee Czechoslovakia's independence. The Czechs rejected the proposal, as did the British Secretary of War Leslie Hore-Belisha who was concerned that the proposal would leave Czechoslovakia financially unstable and unable to defend itself against its neighbors¹⁰⁵ A new proposal with four points was quickly created after the failure of the previous proposal:

- 1) That which has been proposed by England and France is the only mean of averting war and the invasion of Czechoslovakia.
- 2) Should the Czechoslovak Republic reply in the negative, she would bear the responsibility for the war.
- 3) This would destroy Franco-British solidarity, since England would not march.
- 4) If under these circumstances the war starts, France will not take part, i.e. she will not fulfill her treaty obligation.¹⁰⁶

The Czech Prime Minister Hodza would accept this proposal on the 21st before he was replaced the next day when his government collapsed.

Chamberlain once again travelled to Germany on September 22nd to discuss the Anglo-French proposal that had been accepted by the Czechs. Hitler rejected this proposal and gave Chamberlain his own, which would become known as the Godesberg Memorandum. This memorandum, which was released the following day, demanded that the Czechs evacuate all

¹⁰⁵ Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Phoenix Press, 1963), 148-149.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 150.

military, police, and governmental workers from the Sudetenland; that the Sudetenland would be handed over to Germany; all Sudeten Germans who were serving in the military or police were to be allowed a discharge and to go home; that all political prisoners of German race were to be released by the Czechoslovak government; and that the German government would conduct a plebiscite in the Sudetenland on the question of unification with the Reich or its return to Czechoslovakia, coming before November 25.¹⁰⁷ This proposal was at first accepted by the Czechs but Hitler insisted on adding more to it, complicating matters. The Czechs waited in their response to the Germans, causing Hitler to become upset and setting an ultimatum: either the Czechs agreed to the new proposals or there would be war. A meeting between Britain, France, Italy, and Germany was soon arranged to finally resolve the situation. On September 29th a deal between the four nations was reached, resolving the Sudetenland crisis:

(1) The evacuation will begin on 1st October.(2) The United Kingdom, France and Italy agree that the evacuation of the territory shall be completed by the 10th October, without any existing installations having been destroyed, and that the Czechoslovak Government will be held responsible for carrying out the evacuation without damage to the said installations.(3) The conditions governing the evacuation will be laid down in detail by an international commission composed of representatives of Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Czechoslovakia.(4) The occupation by stages of the predominantly German territory by German troops will begin on 1st October. The four territories marked on the attached map will be occupied by German troops in the following order: The territory marked No. I on the 1st and 2nd of October; the territory marked No. II on the 2nd and 3rd of October; the territory marked No. III on the 3rd, 4th and 5th of October; the territory marked No. IV on the 6th and 7th of October. The remaining territory of preponderantly German character will be ascertained by the aforesaid international commission forthwith and be occupied by German troops by the 10th of October. (5) The international commission referred to in paragraph 3 will determine the territories in which a plebiscite is to be held. These territories will be occupied by international bodies until the plebiscite has been completed. The same commission will fix the conditions in which the plebiscite is to be held, taking as a basis the conditions of the Saar plebiscite. The commission will also fix a date, not later than the end of November, on which the plebiscite will be held. (6) The final determination of the frontiers will be carried out by the international commission. The commission will also be entitled to recommend to the four Powers, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy, in certain exceptional

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p. 157.

cases, minor modifications in the strictly ethnographical determination of the zones which are to be transferred without plebiscite. (7) There will be a right of option into and out of the transferred territories, the option to be exercised within six months from the date of this agreement. A German-Czechoslovak commission shall determine the details of the option, consider ways of facilitating the transfer of population and settle questions of principle arising out of the said transfer.(8) The Czechoslovak Government will within a period of four weeks from the date of this agreement release from their military and police forces any Sudeten Germans who may wish to be released, and the Czechoslovak Government will within the same period release Sudeten German prisoners who are serving terms of imprisonment for political offences.¹⁰⁸

The deal was wildly accepted by the French and British masses and Daladier and Chamberlain were welcomed back to their countries with cheers, while Benes and the Czechs considered it a betrayal as they were not even invited to speak on their own behalf. War had been avoided and the hopes for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing Hitler question were on the rise.

Chamberlain's policies of appeasement seemed to be working. This was not the case, however, as the world and Chamberlain would see in 1939.

¹⁰⁸ *Munich Pact September 29, 1938.* <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/munich1.asp#art4>

*Chapter 3**1939*

1939 saw the culmination of all the diplomatic and non-diplomatic moves Hitler and Nazi Germany had been making over the course of the previous three years. It was because of these maneuvers that the United Kingdom and the government of Neville Chamberlain came to reject the policies of appeasement in the spring of 1939. This abandonment of such an entrenched set of policies was too little too late, however. The world plunged once more into chaos as the Second World War began in September with Germany's invasion of Poland, an aggressive move which prompted France and Britain to declare war on Germany.

The months following the end of the Munich Conference in September 1938 were not kind to Czechoslovakia. President Edvard Beneš resigned given the catastrophic result of the Conference. He was replaced by the elderly Emil Hácha. In November 1938, Czechoslovakia lost even more of its territory with the First Vienna Award. The Award gave Hungary a large chunk of the Slovakian area of Czechoslovakia which resulted in the evacuation of any non-Magyar descended citizens living in the area.¹⁰⁹

The near constant loss of territory caused Czechoslovakia a great deal of trouble, especially economically. On January 27th, 1939 France, the United Kingdom, and Czechoslovakia reached an agreement of financial assistance. The agreement was broken into four parts:

- (1) An Agreement between the United Kingdom, France and Czechoslovakia, providing for the issue by the Czechoslovak Government of a loan sufficient to raise £8 millions

¹⁰⁹ *Arbitral award establishing the Czechoslovak-Hungarian boundary. Decision of 2 November 1938.*
http://legal.un.org/riaa/cases/vol_XXVIII/401-406.pdf

(together with the expenses of issue), to be guaranteed jointly and severally by the United Kingdom and the French Governments.

(2) An Agreement between the United Kingdom and Czechoslovakia providing that the United Kingdom Government shall release the Czechoslovak Government from liability in respect of £4 millions of the advance already made, and that the Czechoslovak Government shall pay the same sum into the Special Account to be disbursed in accordance with the arrangements agreed; also that when they have received the proceeds of the Guaranteed Loan they shall repay to the United Kingdom Government the balance outstanding (viz. £6 millions) of the £10 millions advance, with interest at 1.%.
 (3) An Agreement between France and Czechoslovakia embodying the arrangement described above for the French free gift.
 (4) An Agreement between the United Kingdom and France providing that each Government shall provide half of any sums required under the guarantee.,¹¹⁰

Of the money that the United Kingdom agreed to give Czechoslovakia, £4 million of it was to “be paid into a Special Account and used to provide foreign exchange for refugees emigrating from Czechoslovakia”¹¹¹ in response to the large number of refugees who were fleeing Czechoslovakia due to the loss of its territory. Similar arrangements applied the money the Czechoslovak government was supposed to use to pay the interest on the French loan. This was an interesting provision to add, but not completely surprising as people in Britain, including Neville Chamberlain, had been horrified at how the Germans had treated the Jews during the Kristallnacht in November of 1938. This had, to some degree, opened people’s eyes to what living under Nazi rule could be like for minorities.¹¹²

January also saw negotiations between France, the United Kingdom, and Italy on the question of Czechoslovakia. The first conversation, on January 11th, was between the Prime Minister of France Edouard Daladier, the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Lord Halifax, and various French ministers. There was a very stern assertion on the part of the French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet and the

¹¹⁰ CAB 24/282/24. Pgs. 3-4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹¹² *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, IV: The Downing Street Years*, ed. Robert Self (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 363.

General Secretary of the French Foreign Office Alexis Leger that there must be a joint guarantee of Czechoslovakia by the four Munich Powers. They stressed this because the next day, a joint French and British diplomatic mission would be going to Italy to discuss several issues with the Italian government. Italy, as one of the four Munich Powers, was needed to support the position of a guarantee by the British and French as the guarantee could only come about if three of the four powers agreed. The group of ministers saw Italy as the only viable ally due to the German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, voicing his concerns over a guarantee because Germany believed “Czechoslovakia might some day be hostile again to Germany and might even be governed by ‘another Benes’.”¹¹³

The second of these conversations took place on January 12 in Rome at the Palazzo Venezia. This time it was not simply a conversation between the British and French but also the Italians, with the Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano and Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini. Since 1934 nearly every single time the French and British tried to come to a diplomatic agreement with the Italians, the Italians either made diplomatic negotiations exceedingly more difficult due to their Abyssinian aspirations or they simply stonewalled the Anglo-French efforts. This time was no different. Mussolini, on the subject of a guarantee of Czechoslovakia, said that he was not “unfavorable in principle to such a guarantee but he did not think the time had yet come, for Czechoslovakia was now a national State, and it really must be neutral before the guarantee could be given.”¹¹⁴ Chamberlain conceded to this point saying that both his and the French Government “fully recognised that only by neutrality could Czechoslovakia hope to preserve her position.”¹¹⁵ Daladier then raised the question of who

¹¹³ CAB 24/282/8. P. 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

would guarantee Czechoslovakia, the four Munich Powers? Mussolini was “quite agreeable” to this but was of the mind that for the guarantee to be effective, all nations which bordered Czechoslovakia needed to give the guarantee. He felt that the “powers which did not adjoin Czechoslovakia might come in, but their effect would be moral rather than material.”¹¹⁶ Mussolini clearly implied by this that France and Britain, lacking contiguous borders with Czechoslovakia would not be in a position to guarantee the independence of Czechoslovakia. This assumption was proven correct a few months later. Mussolini’s reservations seem not to have bothered Chamberlain, however, as he did not challenge him on it, whether simply out of politeness since he was a guest or because he did not want to upset the Duce is unclear. Chamberlain did however make the point that the guarantee would not pertain to the borders of Czechoslovakia but “against unprovoked aggression.”¹¹⁷ This was important for Chamberlain to note as the guarantee of the borders of Czechoslovakia as they stood, while more useful given the amount of territory the country had lost over the past few months, was difficult to enforce due to the lack of physical border representations being present as most of the agreed upon borders of Czechoslovakia existed primarily on paper only.

The problem, as Chamberlain saw it, with having the four Munich Powers be the guarantors of Czechoslovakia against “unprovoked aggression” was that what constituted the unprovoked part of “unprovoked aggression” and who was to make said decision. This presented further issues because it raised the question of how decisions would be made, either unanimously or by majority. If unanimity was required then Chamberlain stated that the entire guarantee would be worthless because if one of the four Powers were the aggressor towards

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 12.

Czechoslovakia by which, clearly, he meant, Germany then that nation would not vote to intervene against itself. For this reason, Chamberlain stressed that Britain and France were much more in favor of a majority system where only three of the four Powers needed to be in agreement. Mussolini essentially side-stepped this point, saying “this was a matter which was of considerable importance and no doubt it would have to be settled, but it would require some thought and consideration before a decision could be arrived at.”¹¹⁸ While that was being settled, Mussolini thought it prescient to consider who was likely to attack Czechoslovakia. To this he thought,

“Not Poland; she was not likely to make any attack; nor Roumania [sic], who had nothing to gain by it: nor Hungary. He did not think Russia would attack, and Germany had shown that she regarded herself now as the protector of Czechoslovakia; so that he did not think it was likely that there would be an attack on her from any side.”¹¹⁹

Mussolini’s assessment of Germany’s intentions towards Czechoslovakia raises a number of questions. Was he being willfully ignorant of the attitude that Germany had towards Czechoslovakia? It could be that he was not aware of the comments that von Ribbentrop had made, suggesting (however implausibly) that Germany saw Czechoslovakia as a threat. Or perhaps Mussolini simply wanted to paint the Germans in a positive light, in order to maintain Italy’s partnership with its fascist ally, something he had done during the Anschluss in 1938 when Italy had refused to discuss Austria with France.¹²⁰ In any case, Mussolini proposed the following three issues that had to be addressed before the guarantee could be considered:

1. The internal constitution of Czechoslovakia itself.
2. The establishment of her neutrality, and
3. The demarcation of her frontiers on the ground, for hitherto they had only been shown on maps.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹²⁰ CAB 23/92/12. Pgs. 2-3.

“When these conditions were fulfilled, a guarantee might be considered but, in the meantime, owing to the actions of Germany and Italy it was considered that Central Europe would remain quiet.”¹²¹

These talks would ultimately result in no agreement between the three nations, mostly due to Italian reluctance to commit to any concrete plan of Czechoslovakian guarantee.

The events of March 15th should have come as no surprise to either the British or French Governments, yet the German and Hungarian invasion of Czechoslovakia did just that. Going back to the months before the Munich Conference, the British had been aware of Hitler’s true intentions when it came to Czechoslovakia. Hitler was apparently quite upset that the Sudetenland had been given up so easily and under the guidance of the other three members of the Conference. British Cabinet papers reveal how the British authorities understood the situation: Hitler was forced “to forego his ‘quick war’ against an isolated Czechoslovakia with all the glory and increase in prestige which would have come from such a victory. We know for a fact, for instance, that his original intention was to occupy Prague and draw a ‘strategic frontier’ across Moravia.”¹²² Hitler’s speech to the Reichstag on January 30th lulled the British Government, primarily Neville Chamberlain, into a false sense of security. In his speech Hitler said “it would be fortunate for the whole world if our two peoples (Germans and British) could co-operate in full confidence with one another.”¹²³ Chamberlain was enamored with the speech, writing in a letter to his sister Hilda on February 19th,

In his Reichstag speech of January 30th, the Furrer [sic] gave an indication of the lines which Anglo-German relations might follow... These words of the Furrer [sic] were all the more impressive because they were spoken at the end of a year which was full of international tension & crises yet that year found solutions for problems that seemed almost insuperable. Special mention should be made of the fact that the course of the

¹²¹ CAB 24/282/8. P. 12.

¹²² CAB 23/97/2. P. 2.

¹²³ *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters, IV: The Downing Street Years*, ed. Robert Self (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 385.

great historical events brought about for the first time personal contact between the head of British policy and the leader of the German Reich. All of us who have at heart the existence of close friendly relations between Germany & England, hope therefrom for a further clarification of international relations and are convinced that a new and fruitful element of co-operation between the two nations has been established. The speech goes on to welcome the Anglo-German coal agreement recently concluded and the prospects of further industrial negotiations between the 2 countries which it says 'We shall follow with the deepest interest.'¹²⁴

This excerpt from the letter makes very clear Chamberlain's hope for sustaining amicable relations with Germany. It is rather curious that Chamberlain still had this opinion at the time. Even though Hitler's speech was all very positive, British intelligence seemed to suggest that it was all an act. According to reports following the Munich Conference Hitler was reported to have been "constantly making depreciatory remarks" about Chamberlain.¹²⁵ In the case of England, Hitler felt that "she was both decadent and the arch-enemy."¹²⁶ According to intelligence Hitler was reported as saying on 9th November 1938: "'Conditions are all against an Anglo-German understanding! If Foreign Powers will not meet German demands, then Germany will take for herself what she cannot get by negotiation.'"¹²⁷ Chamberlain's target of everlasting disdain, von Ribbentrop, was also quoted around the same time saying: " 'If no agreement with England can be reached, he (the Fuhrer) is determined not to shrink from war in order to destroy her.' The desire at once to counter Mr. Chamberlain's popularity in Germany and to make an Anglo-German understanding almost impossible was probably one of the principal reasons for the persecution of the Jews.'"¹²⁸ The most damning quotes from Hitler with regards to how he truly felt about the English came just before Christmas 1938 where he was quoted as saying at a meeting of minor Nazi leaders in Munich that:

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 385.

¹²⁵ CAB 23/97/2. P. 2.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 2.

'These English, arrogant apes that they are, think that they can rule the world for ever with 15 battleships. They won't, however. Our Air Force, and the German and Italian U. Boats will take care of that." If an understanding 'on our terms' (continued our (British Foreign Office) informant) did not come one day, the Fuhrer would arrange for a general crisis in which Germany, Italy and Japan would simultaneously play their parts and produce a triple edition of the Czech crisis. "'Under certain circumstances, that should come about the end of January or in February, and then you will see how Chamberlain and Daladier will again fly to Berchtesgaden, to the accompaniment of a laughable howl from their Left Press!'¹²⁹

The response that Chamberlain had to the January 30th speech reveals that he was either unaware of information British intelligence had collected, or willfully indifferent to it. It could be that he was in fact in possession of all the information on Hitler's motives and actions behind closed doors but instead decided to ignore it so as to not risk causing a larger rift between the Germans and British. Based on what he says in the letter to his sister, Chamberlain still seems to be quite hopeful that everything would turn out all right between the two nations. But if that is not the case, what reason would he have to lie to his sister; to save face perhaps?

In the weeks prior to March 15th, the French Ambassador to Germany Robert Coulondre and the French Ambassador to Czechoslovakia Victor De Lacroix were in near constant contact with the French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet. Both began to voice their concerns over the increasingly hostile language that the Germans were using in reference to Czechoslovakia. On February 18th in response to the Four Power guarantee of Czechoslovakia proposed by Chamberlain in his visit to Italy in January, the German Government gave De Lacroix conditions under which the Germans would guarantee the Czechoslovak frontiers. These were as follows:

- (1) Complete neutrality of Czechoslovakia.
- (2) The foreign policy of Czechoslovakia must be brought into line with that of the Reich; adherence to the Anti-Comintern Pact is deemed advisable.
- (3) Czechoslovakia must immediately leave the League of Nations.
- (4) Drastic reduction of military effectives.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 4.

- (5) A part of the gold reserve of Czechoslovakia must be ceded to Germany. A part of the Czechoslovak industries having been ceded a part of the gold-reserve must accordingly pass into the hands of Germany.
- (6) The Czechoslovak currency from Sudetenland must be exchanged for Czechoslovak raw materials.
- (7) The Czechoslovak markets must be open to the German industries of Sudetenland. No new industry may be created in Czechoslovakia if it competes with an industry already existing in Sudetenland.
- (8) Promulgation of anti-Semitic laws analogous to those of Nuremberg.
- (9) Dismissal of all Czechoslovak Government employees who may have given Germany any ground for complaint.
- (10) The German population of Czechoslovakia must have the right to carry Nazi badges and to fly the National-Socialist flag.¹³⁰

This list of demands was extensive and incompatible with Czechoslovak sovereignty, especially point eight. Point eight infringed on the independence of Czechoslovakia by demanding the imposition of a set of laws upon non-citizens, dictated by a foreign government. Point three was potentially one of the biggest blows to Czechoslovak sovereignty as Czechoslovakia had played a large part in the League of Nations since its inception, with Edvard Beneš serving as the president of the League of Nations council for a brief amount of time.

The Germans sent along an even lengthier reply, putting into words their conditions for guaranteeing Czechoslovakia. Robert Coulondre was upset with the terms and sent back a summary of the note to the Foreign Office. The first point that he sees as being important in the German reply is that “in the opinion of the Government of the Reich, the conditions foreseen in annex 1 to the Munich Agreement for Germany to adhere to an international guarantee of the new frontiers of the Czechoslovak State have been in no way fulfilled up to the present time.”¹³¹ Annex 1 of the Munich Agreement dealt with the giving of greater freedoms and more political rights for the Polish and Hungarian minorities living within Czechoslovakia. When that issue had

¹³⁰ *The French Yellow Book*. M. V. De Lacroix, French Minister in Prague, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Prague, February 18, 1939. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/ylbk048.asp>

¹³¹ *The French Yellow Book*. M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Berlin, March 2, 1939. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/ylbk051.asp>

been dealt with, then Germany and Italy would agree to a guarantee of Czechoslovakia.

Coulondre saw that the German government was taking a position that would allow it to refuse the guarantee that it promised to conditionally give, which would leave “door open for it to eventually reconsider the entire question.”¹³² Germany’s reluctance to adhere to its previous promises would have surely been alarming to Coulondre. The second point that he felt was important to note was that:

It unequivocally declares that an intervention of the Western Powers in Central Europe, in the shape of a guarantee in favour of the Czechoslovak State, would do more harm than good. It would contribute to aggravate the differences of Czechoslovakia with her neighbours—other than the Reich—and perhaps even lead them to degenerate into a conflict. Doubtless the note seems in places to deal with a “premature” guarantee, but, for those who understand, it is the whole conception of a guarantee of the new Czechoslovakia by the Western Powers which it rejects. ‘The German Government,’ it points out, ‘cannot in any way see in an extension of this guarantee obligation to the Western Powers a factor that might allay internal quarrels in the said area, but rather an element liable to increase unreasonable tendencies, as has already been the case.’

His reading of the note gives the impression that he saw it as an affront to the diplomatic abilities of the Western Powers. He took issue with what he believed was Germany telling the Western Powers that they were no longer to be involved in Eastern Europe. This would have cut off Czechoslovakia from the west, resulting in its isolation which was Hitler’s plan all along.¹³³ Coulondre was also conscious of the fact that because Germany held power over Italy, it gave them near total control of the guarantee and under what conditions it would be implemented. This put France and Britain in a precarious position as Germany was almost unilaterally given free rein over the fate of Czechoslovakia.

¹³² *The French Yellow Book*. M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Berlin, March 2, 1939. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/ylbk051.asp>

¹³³ CAB 23/97/2. P. 2.

The German invasion of Czechoslovakia on March 15th was essentially an open secret within the French Government. As early as March 6th the French Intelligence Service, the Deuxième Bureau, knew that Hitler planned to invade Czechoslovakia and seize Prague. The General Staff as well as the government were alerted to this plan but they failed to act upon it, going so far as to not bring it up during meetings on the 9th and 13th. Anthony Adamthwaite asserted that the French chose not to act upon the information for one of two reasons. Either they failed to realize how valuable the information was until it was too late or that Deuxième Bureau was of the mindset that “Czechoslovakia was a lost cause.”¹³⁴ This information, valuable not only to the French, was not shared with the British intelligence service. This could be due to a level of mistrust between the British and the Deuxième Bureau stemming from allegations that the Deuxième Bureau had been giving British Intelligence false information regarding an impending German attack on the west in early 1939. These allegations were unfounded as these reports of a German attack came from “German opposition groups.” These allegations made little sense since the reports that the Germans were planning to attack Holland conflicted with the French opinion that Romania was the more likely target.¹³⁵ This still does not quite explain why the Deuxième Bureau did not share the information given that it was the British who mistrusted the French and not, at least not to a large degree, the other way around. Had the Deuxième Bureau shared the information, it is unlikely that the British would have acted upon it because they would have required the French to act as well, which they were clearly not interested in doing.

¹³⁴ Anthony Adamthwaite, “French Military Intelligence and the Coming War,” in *World War II: Roots and Causes 2nd Edition*, ed. Keith Eubank (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 202.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, pgs. 200-201.

The British, on the other hand, especially Neville Chamberlain, were caught off guard completely by the German invasion. On March 9th, Chamberlain, still convinced that there would be no war, invited several political journalists to 10 Downing Street to announce that he was planning a disarmament conference by the end of the year. The journalists laughed, asking him whether or not he and the government had been getting the same reports of German mobilization along the Czechoslovak border. The government had in fact been getting these reports, they “simply didn’t believe them.”¹³⁶

On the afternoon of March 14th, the President of Czechoslovakia Emil Hácha and the Czechoslovakian Foreign Minister František Chvalkovský were summoned to Berlin to meet with Hitler. Hácha was being forced to sign away the rest of Czechoslovakia to the Germans. This was not a smooth process. The French Ambassador to Germany Robert Coulondre became privy to what occurred during the meeting between Hitler and the two Czechoslovakian officials. The situation that he described was anything but civil. Hitler stated at the outset of the meeting that “the time was not one for negotiation but that the Czech Ministers had been summoned to be informed of Germany’s decisions, that these decisions were irrevocable. He then stated that Prague was to be occupied the following day and the Czech section of Czechoslovakia was to become the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Hitler warned against any resistance threatening that any who did so would be “trodden underfoot.” Hitler then signed the memorandum and left the room. This behavior from Hitler was in contrast to the amenable portrait he had painted of himself at the Munich Conference. This was a Hitler who was only concerned with taking a unilateral approach to diplomacy, an approach where he dictated the terms. After Hitler left the room, Hácha and Chvalkovský protested for hours against the task

¹³⁶ Lynne Olson, *Troublesome Young Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 188.

that was required of them. They did not wish to sign away Czechoslovakia to the Germans. Hácha saw the Protectorate status as nothing more than slavery observing that “no white people was reduced to such a condition.” The Germans present, one being Herman Goering, threatened the two Czechoslovakian officials with the destruction of Prague from the air if they did not sign the memorandum.¹³⁷ Exhausted, Hácha finally relented to the pressure, but only agreed to sign the memorandum if the two officials were able to contact the Czechoslovakian government on the matter, which they did. At 4:30, Hácha and Chvalkovský finally signed the memorandum. The experience had completely drained Hácha, who was only able to sign the document with the assistance of injections from the medical staff on hand. Chvalkovský eventually saw the memorandum as necessary to save the people of his nation. Upon leaving the Chancellery building, Chvalkovský stated “Our people will curse us, and yet we have saved their existence. We have preserved them from a horrible massacre.”¹³⁸

In what was essentially a mugging, the rest of the lands of Czechoslovakia were stolen from them under duress. This was not like the Anschluss the year previous, where local Austrians were allowed to take over and Germany absorbed them to the sound of cheers; no this was a violent takeover of a people who were not German-speaking, truly making Hitler a liar.¹³⁹

News of the agreement signed between Hitler, von Ribbentrop, Hácha, and Chvalkovský had already reached the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* at 7 a.m., before any

¹³⁷ Prague was the only European capital of involved nations not to be bombed during the war.

¹³⁸ *The French Yellow Book*. No. 77:

M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Berlin, March 17, 1939. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/ylbk077.asp>

¹³⁹ P. M. H. Bell, *France and Britain 1900-1940: Entente and Estrangement* (New York: Longman Group, 1996), 223.

government agencies had received it.¹⁴⁰ By 9:30 a.m. German troops were beginning to arrive on the outskirts of Prague. At the early stage of the invasion, the British Government was relying heavily on international news organizations for information, particularly Reuters. The Reuters' Berlin correspondent was the first to learn from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin, "that Bohemia and Moravia were to be militarily occupied"¹⁴¹ and that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs "had admitted officially that the occupation had begun on the previous day."¹⁴² Hungary also invaded at the same time with troops "discreetly infiltrating into Ruthenia"; a proclamation announcing the annexation of Ruthenia by Hungary was expected shortly thereafter.

The immediate joint response by the British and French was non-existent. Both governments felt that because the invasion had already happened there was nothing to be done. The British Ambassador to France, Sir Eric Phipps, the French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet, and the French Senator Henry Bérenger all agreed that "the less we interfered in this crisis the better."¹⁴³ With the invasion and occupation, Chamberlain was resigned to the fact that "the State whose frontiers we had undertaken to guarantee against unprovoked aggression had now completely broken up"¹⁴⁴ and that "in the circumstances which had arisen, our guarantee had come to an end."¹⁴⁵

Chamberlain gave a speech in the House of Commons on the day of the invasion. The speech had a tone of disappointment and regret, yet still Chamberlain was committed to Munich Agreement. He did not wish Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia to cause the United

¹⁴⁰ CAB 23/98/1. P. 2.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 4.

Kingdom to be deflected from its course and that “the desire of all the peoples of the world still remains concentrated on the hopes of peace and a return to the atmosphere of understanding and good will which has so often been disturbed.”¹⁴⁶ Chamberlain seemed to still believe that the Hitler situation could be resolved peacefully with words and not actions, “the aim of this Government is now, as it has always been, to promote that desire and to substitute the method of discussion for the method of force in the settlement of differences.”¹⁴⁷ Hitler’s aggression towards Czechoslovakia clearly showed that words were not going to stop him. The Labour MP David Grenfell tore into Chamberlain’s statement, calling his account of the events in Czechoslovakia akin to “simply a matter of routine and official comment which fell upon him to perform. I am quite sure that the Prime Minister is about the only person in diplomatic circles in Europe who can afford that splendid sense of isolation and detachment that he presented to-day.”¹⁴⁸ Grenfell harshly criticized Chamberlain’s calm demeanor when discussing the events in Czechoslovakia, saying that “the great mass of the Czech people who have witnessed the invasion of their country, the violation of their liberties, the liquidation of the sovereignty of their country, the destruction of their independence—not one of those people could afford to preserve the calm mien which the Prime Minister has been able to preserve to-day.”¹⁴⁹ This was one of the strongest rebuttals spoken in the House of Commons with regards to the policies of appeasement. The German occupation of Czechoslovakia made a mockery of Chamberlain’s approach to Hitler, which called into question his methods and standing as Prime Minister. Many of his own backers in Parliament as well as most of his Cabinet called on him to end appeasement, even

¹⁴⁶ House of Commons Debate 15 March 1939 vol 345 cc435-555. Quoted: Neville Chamberlain.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid* Quoted: David Grenfell

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Lord Halifax moved against appeasement.¹⁵⁰ It was because of this that Chamberlain finally decided to kill off appeasement in his speech in Birmingham on the 17th of March.

Before a packed meeting hall in Birmingham England and transmitted over the radio all over the world, Chamberlain apologized for how calm he had seemed in the House of Commons two days prior and that he did not react as strongly on the subject as he felt he should have. He defended himself and the Munich Conference, saying that the situation Europe found itself in now was not a new problem, that it was one that “had existed ever since the Treaty of Versailles,”¹⁵¹ and blaming the statesmen of the past for not resolving the issues that the Treaty had created. Chamberlain struck out against Hitler personally saying that he had “taken the law into his own hands.”¹⁵² The conquest of Czechoslovakia had showed Chamberlain that Hitler was not simply trying to unify all of the German peoples in Central Europe. He recognized the lies coming out of the Nazi regime:

According to the proclamation which was read out in Prague yesterday, Bohemia and Moravia have been annexed to the German Reich. Non-German inhabitants, who, of course, include the Czechs, are placed under the German Protector in the German Protectorate. They are to be subject to the political, military and economic needs of the Reich. They are called self-governing States, but the Reich is to take charge of their foreign policy, their customs and their excise, their bank reserves, and the equipment of the disarmed Czech forces. Perhaps most sinister of all, we hear again of the appearance of the Gestapo, the secret police, followed by the usual tale of wholesale arrests of prominent individuals, with consequences with which we are all familiar.¹⁵³

Chamberlain was done being fooled by Hitler and lulled to a state of calm by his promises.

Chamberlain had finally come to terms with the real aims of Hitler. He, like many others, knew

¹⁵⁰ William L. Shirer, *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 453.

¹⁵¹ *The British War Bluebook*. Speech by the Prime Minister at Birmingham on March 17, 1939. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk09.asp>

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

that Hitler was not done, asking “Is this the last attack upon a small State, or is it to be followed by others? Is this, in fact, a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by force?”¹⁵⁴

It was the not so secret answer to this question that prompted Chamberlain and the British Government to issue a guarantee of Poland on March 31st. In a statement given to Parliament Chamberlain said:

I am glad to take this opportunity of stating again the general policy of His Majesty's Government. They have constantly advocated the adjustment, by way of free negotiation between the parties concerned, of any differences that may arise between them. They consider that this is the natural and proper course where differences exist. In their opinion there should be no question incapable of solution by peaceful means, and they would see no justification for the substitution of force or threats of force for the method of negotiation. As the House is aware, certain consultations are now proceeding with other Governments. In order to make perfectly clear the position of His Majesty's Government in the meantime before those consultations are concluded, I now have to inform the House that during that period, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect. I may add that the French Government have authorised me to make it plain that they stand in the same position in this matter as do His Majesty's Government.¹⁵⁵

The guarantee of Poland by the United Kingdom on March 31st and by France officially on April 13th opened the door for conflict in Europe. Chamberlain and the British Government had finally decided to physically put the country in Hitler's way instead of just their words.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *The British War Blue Book*. Statement by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons on March 31, 1939. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk17.asp>

Conclusion

The policies of appeasement, undertaken by the British government between 1936 and 1939 created a diplomatic environment in Europe which enabled Nazi Germany to violate international treaties without worry of retribution, ultimately leading to the Second World War. A key argument of this thesis is that during this era, appeasement came in the form not only of direct diplomatic appeasement but also in a number of indirect ways. Chamberlain's near constant insistence on not worrying about building up the army put Britain in a situation where they would have not had the manpower to effectively combat the Germans. Even when combined with the military resources of the French, the military was severely lacking not only in trained men but also in vehicles and equipment. This was not a direct form of appeasement, as Chamberlain was not fulfilling conditions set by Hitler, but was instead in an effort to avoid provoking the Germans. Chamberlain and his supporters in the government wished to avoid war so badly that they were willing to compromise the country's military so as to not appear as though war was inevitable.

Another key argument of this thesis, which is not present in the dominant interpretations of the historiography is how significant a stumbling block Mussolini's Italy was to efforts of the British. Italy was a part of nearly every major diplomatic treaty and negotiation going all the way back to the Treaty of Versailles. They were party to the Locarno Treaty, the Stresa Conference, and the Munich Conference. This would not have been an issue for the British except that Italy was, from 1922 and onwards, ruled by the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Time and again, the British were able to garner the support of the French, thus creating a near majority in most of the treaties and agreements but because of Mussolini's constant refusal to go along with the Anglo-Franco coalitions, efforts to punish Germany often fell apart. Italy is often relegated to the

background when it comes to the lead up to and the Second World War. Though they were a major partner in the Axis, they were not as visible as Germany was. That was not the case in the period leading up to the war with Italy playing a major role in a number of diplomatic missions and negotiations. The historiography of this topic neglects the role that Italy played in keeping appeasement alive for as long as it did. Had Italy joined with the west on any number of occasions, not least of which during the Anschluss, then perhaps Hitler would have backed down due to the overwhelming odds against him. But, because Mussolini stayed on the sidelines, appeasement policies seemed to be necessary in Britain as they could not wrangle enough support to impose upon Germany.

This thesis also argues that Chamberlain was not completely to blame for the outcome of appeasement. Though there are some works within the historiography, namely *The Appeasers* that wish to heap most of the blame upon Chamberlain, it is important to understand that there were many both in and outside the government that argued for appeasement. To this point it is important to mention just how focused many of the Conservative British newspapers were on keeping appeasement alive. They were able to drive public discourse towards favoring the policies of appeasement even when they no longer seemed viable.

This thesis is in agreement with the dominant interpretation that regardless of the policies of appeasement, Britain was not in a position to push Germany from its goals alone. Appeasement then, in this case, was not simply a set of British policies but also French. The inability of France to keep the momentum that it had at the end of the First World War in regard of being the dominant allied military allowed for the German military to reach a position where it was unmatched in capability. This was not entirely on purpose as the Great Depression did hit France very hard. But, the slashing of the military budget hobbled the French military to the

point where it was playing catch up to the other European powers up until the beginning of the war.

This thesis also agrees with the interpretation that Britain under Chamberlain was almost antagonistic towards the smaller nations of central and eastern Europe. Britain did not see the sovereignty of the nations of Austria and Czechoslovakia as being a priority, less so given the prospect of having to defend them in a war against Germany. Appeasement relegated the well-being of these smaller nations to a state of neglect. Chamberlain and the pro-appeasers felt that Britain had to avoid being dragged into another war on the continent against Germany because the effects of the previous war were still being apparent. The Treaty of Versailles's harshness towards Germany was blamed by the appeasers for causing Germany to feel as though it was a victim and that it needed to reclaim past glories, starting with the Rhineland.

Appeasement was by no means the only course of action that Britain could have pursued during the late 1930s but it was the set of policies that made the most sense to the appeasers that pushed them. There was no one person at fault for the failures of appeasement, no matter how easy it would be to pin its failings on Chamberlain. Appeasement did not happen in a vacuum. There were extenuating circumstances, such as Mussolini's refusal to cooperate and the ill-effects of a global financial depression as well as the only British ally in Europe, France, adopting similar policies therefore compounding the effects to a point where neither nation was prepared to combat Germany's growing power. Though blaming appeasement for the inaction on the part of the Allies at the beginning of the war is perhaps the correct conclusion to come to, it is still important to understand what caused appeasement to be so prevalent within the British government between 1936 and 1939.

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