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Britain in the 20th Century: "Appeasement" Transcript

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“Appeasement”

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Those who came to the last lecture will remember that I finished with the formation of the National Government, which was a Conservative/Liberal coalition, led by a Labour Prime Minister whom the rest of the Labour Party regarded as a renegade, Ramsay MacDonald. It was formed to deal with the very serious economic crisis, but in fact, its main problems were those of foreign policy, in particular, the challenge in the 1930s from three totalitarian dictatorships, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan.

The three Governments of Ramsay MacDonald from 1931 to 1935, Stanley Baldwin, a Conservative, from 1935 to 1937, and then Neville Chamberlain, another Conservative, from 1937 to 1940 have been very harshly judged by historians. We all have the image in our minds of Neville Chamberlain coming back from the Munich Agreement with the piece of paper in his hand, signed by himself and Hitler, which he said guaranteed peace. These Governments have been bitterly attacked for not preparing Britain for war and for leading Britain, so it is said, in 1940, into perhaps the most dangerous moment of our history. That had great effects on post-War politics because, in 1945, the Conservatives, who had been the dominant element in the National Government were repudiated and the first majority Labour Government under Attlee was returned. One of the leading Conservatives of the time, who had opposed the policies of the National Government, Harold Macmillan, later to become Prime Minister, said, in 1945 that people were not voting against Churchill, they were voting against the ghost of Neville Chamberlain.

History has judged these Governments rather harshly, though the more we know about the period the more sympathetic we become to the dilemmas faced by those Prime Ministers, in my view at any rate. The Cabinet papers that have been revealed also give us a different view. The trouble with so many of the judgements on the period is that they are based on hindsight, and whenever you see, on television, a discussion of the Munich Agreement, you always have interviews with opponents of Munich. You never seem to find anyone who supported it, but we know from opinion polls, which were begun in Britain in 1937, that the majority of people did support the Munich Agreement. There is another element of hindsight here because, despite the criticisms made of these Governments, Britain and France were the only countries to go to war against Nazi Germany without themselves being attacked. They were the only Governments to go, as it were, freely to war.

Of course, in 1940, quite unexpectedly, France collapsed, and no one had thought of that. People thought of the French Army as the strongest in Europe, and most computer simulations of the German attack in 1940 show that it should fail. Had the German attack failed, judgements of the Governments of the 1930s would, I think, be more favourable. Upon that failure, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, said, “The one firm rock on which everybody has been willing to build for the last two years has collapsed.” Everybody relied on the French Army.

It is fair to say that, looking at the policy of appeasement, as it was called, that the worst of Hitler’s atrocities, and in particular the Holocaust, did not occur until the War, and it was difficult perhaps before it happened to imagine that atrocities on that scale would be carried out in what was thought of as a civilised era. It was possible to believe that Hitler, although in some sense an extremist, would become more moderate if German grievances were resolved peaceably, and difficult to believe that even the Nazis wanted a war for its own sake. Neville Chamberlain said, in April 1939, “In cold blood, I cannot see Hitler starting a world war for Danzig.”

A further factor, biasing our judgements of the Governments of the 1930s, is the accident, in a sense, that Winston Churchill, after his defeat in 1945, spent his time in Opposition not in fact leading the Opposition but writing his war memoirs. The first volume of those memoirs contained a biting criticism of the Governments of the period, and it has been very difficult for historians to escape from what Churchill said, and people assumed that what Churchill said was objective history, but of course he was giving his own point of view. In fact, he once said, in answer to a parliamentary question: “We can safely leave that to the judgment of history, especially as I shall be writing the history”.

Churchill called the War “the unnecessary war”, and that has hit home. I think our view of it would be very different if Churchill had been returned to Government and other people had written their memoirs first, or other people had done so. It is worth noting that the three Prime Ministers of the 1930s were the last Prime Ministers not to have written their memoirs. Every Prime Minister since has. MacDonald and Chamberlain died shortly after leaving office, and Baldwin, although he lived on for 10 years after resigning in 1937, never wrote an autobiography, so they did not write their own defence.

Churchill said, “Never was a war in all history easier to prevent by timely action,” and that critique did become very important. The critics of the 1930s became the post-War political establishment.

After the Munich Agreement of 1938, there was a vote in the House of Commons, and around 30 Conservatives abstained from supporting the Government which was not really very many. However, those 30 included three

future Prime Ministers – Churchill himself, Anthony Eden, and Harold Macmillan. It is fair to say that if the policy of appeasement had succeeded, none of them would have become leaders of the Conservative Party.

Churchill, it is worth remembering, in 1938, was already 63 years old, and 63 was then older than it is now. It was thought his political career was really finished, that he was a figure of the past, a brilliant failure, in a sense.

Anthony Eden was a young man, he was only 40, but he had compromised his position, so it was held, by resigning from Neville Chamberlain's Government early in 1938, from the position of Foreign Secretary. He had been the youngest Foreign Secretary in modern times, appointed at the age of 38. He resigned on the question of the appeasement of Italy, and it was clear that, if Chamberlain survived, there would not be much future for Anthony Eden.

Harold Macmillan was an unimportant and eccentric backbencher of the time, who made very little impact on affairs. At the time, in Munich, he was already 44 and had no office whatsoever, and was not going to be given any office by the National Government as he was a bitter opponent of it. There is a story in the War that Churchill was talking to Harold Macmillan, and giving a rather, as Macmillan saw it, interminable monologue about the evils of Hitler, and Macmillan said, "You should not be too hard on Hitler, you know," and Churchill said, "What?!" He said, "I hope you are not going to say anything favourable about that man," which was how he called Hitler. Macmillan said, "No, but it took Hitler to make you Prime Minister and me an Under-Secretary – no one else could have done it!" Churchill growled, "Well, perhaps that is right!" Macmillan got his first appointment under Churchill in 1940, as an under-secretary, a very junior appointment, and gradually worked his way up, but it is clear he would not have been appointed under the National Government.

Now, similarly, all the statistical information we have shows that if there had been a General Election in 1940, when it was next due, the Conservatives would have won it by a pretty convincing majority, and it is possible that Attlee, the Labour leader, would not have remained Labour leader for much longer. However, instead of that happening, Labour was brought into the Government, and the effect of bringing Labour into the Government was to bring the trade unions into the Government. The leading trade unionist, who we discussed at the time of the General Strike, Ernest Bevin, was made Minister for Labour & National Service, with a crucial role in the War. Labour and the trade unions became a part of the state and a part of the establishment which was a very different matter from 1931. The implication of the National Government of 1931 was that Labour could not be trusted, that Labour was somehow not national and it was somehow outside the state and not patriotic. 1940 brought Labour into respectability and helped the Labour Party win the Election of 1945, because Labour could say – it had a double advantage: not only had it opposed the policies of the National Government in the 1930s, but it had been in Government from 1940 onwards so you could not say Labour had been an irresponsible Opposition.

During the 1945 Election campaign, Churchill made a very ill-judged speech, in which he said that "...a Socialist Government in Britain could not work successfully without introducing some form of Gestapo." That struck people, looking at Atlee, Bevin, Morrison and the rest, as a bit absurd. Attlee had a wonderful refutation of that in his reply on the radio. He said: "I understand why Churchill said that, because he wanted to draw a clear distinction between Winston Churchill, the great War leader, and Mr Churchill, the leader of the Conservative Party." He did not want people to vote for him just because of his success in the War, but he wanted to draw attention to the fact that he was also a leader of a Conservative Party which was a bit wild in its outlook, and that proved very effective.

At any rate, I am arguing that the opposition to appeasement brought together a new political establishment which, as it were, had every interest in damning the leaders of the 1930s. However, I think one has to go back to look at what actually happened, rather than what, in hindsight, people said happened.

I think the first point to make is one I made when talking about the end of the First World War, that three million British families were affected by it. Three million families had lost a husband, a father, a son, or a brother. 750,000 soldiers, young men, were killed – there was a lost generation – and there were War memorials constructed in every town and village. I think the First World War had a much deeper emotional impact upon Britain than the Second. This affected particularly the awareness of what one might call the opinion-forming political elite. Harold Macmillan had been an undergraduate when the War broke out, it had been interrupted by the War, and he said he could not bear to go back to Oxford because, in his College, he was just one of two scholars and exhibitioners left alive. He said, the rest of them had been "sent down by the Kaiser", and there were none of them left. Therefore, it was very natural to say that this was "the War to end war", there should never again be another war, and more than that, that no sensible person in any country could ever want a war again, and therefore anything would be better than that.

In 2002 I wrote an article for the Times on the 50th anniversary of the death of George VI and said that George VI had committed a constitutional error because, when Neville Chamberlain had come back from Munich, he had welcomed him onto the balcony of Buckingham Palace. I said that was an error because, after all, Munich was a partisan policy, opposed by the Labour Party in Parliament, but nevertheless, it was an understandable error because the country was hysterical at being freed from the menace of war as they feared bombing over London and everything else that came with it. I had a very interesting letter from a lady in Northern Ireland, who said, "You misunderstand the atmosphere – it was not the bombing we were frightened of, it was the thought of

another war." She said, "I had lost three uncles on the Somme," just over 20 years before, "and we were all determined it should not happen again, which was why we supported Neville Chamberlain." I think that was right.

Gradually, as the 1920s went on, people went even further and said, not only should there never be another war, but perhaps even the First War itself had been a mistake and a bit pointless.

Around about 1929 we had the famous polemics. A play in London by R.C. Sheriff called "Journey's End" was put on at around this time and the memoirs of Siegfried Sassoon, the poet, came out. Actually, both of those men were actually in favour of the War, they thought it had been a good thing, but that message was lost, obviously, in the literary creations.

People said it was also a mistake to believe, as they had thought immediately after the War, the War had come about as a result of German aggression. They said it resulted from a competitive arms race and from alliances which meant that a war-like atmosphere had been produced in Europe and, therefore, we must make sure that did not happen again. It was rather unfortunate this view came just as Hitler was coming to power in Germany. Perhaps it shows that all you learn from history is how to make new mistakes and not the old ones.

In order to avoid another war, the Allies - primarily the Americans - decided after 1918 that they should set up a League of Nations which was intended to be an international policeman. Just as, if you had a law-breaker domestically, the police would intervene to deal with the law-breaker and impose sanctions of various sorts, so any aggressor would be met by the civilised, law-abiding, nations getting together and implementing sanctions, first perhaps economic, but, in the last resort, military sanctions to ensure that the aggressor did not get away with it.

The idea came from Britain, but it was championed by the American President Woodrow Wilson, who hoped that this would be accepted by all countries. Unfortunately, Wilson himself was repudiated by the American Senate, which refused to join, and America withdrew from any involvement in European affairs in the 1920s. In America, the view was held, perhaps even more strongly than in Britain, that she had been mistaken to get involved in European squabbles and that they were irrelevant to America, and perhaps even that Woodrow Wilson had got America into war against the wishes of the American people. In the 1930s, the American Congress passed neutrality legislation, which meant the President could not get involved in any foreign war, unless America was attacked, and the President was required to go neutral. America had, as it were, the constitution of an isolationist state.

All this was crucial because it meant the League of Nations lacked much clout, and when people talked about collective security, they really meant Britain and France. The other large power, the Soviet Union, refused until the 1930s to join the League of Nations, which it said was a group of imperialist thieves and had no relevance to a socialist state. Therefore, in practice it meant Britain and France which was perhaps just not enough clout to hold the peace.

When the Nazis came to power, Hitler said that the Versailles Treaty had not been applied properly, because the Versailles Treaty said there should be general disarmament and while the victors had forced Germans to disarm, they had not disarmed themselves. Hitler repeated this so often that many people came to believe it, but in fact, it was not true. Britain and America - America even more than Britain - disarmed very considerably in the 1920s and early 1930s. In America, when President Roosevelt came to power, General McArthur said to him that America had disarmed to a dangerously low level, but Roosevelt said they were not going to do anything about that.

Britain, in the 1920s, adopted the so-called 10-year rule which stated that they should plan on the assumption there would not be a war for the next 10 years because the view was that large armaments led to war - this was only abandoned in 1932. The critics of the National Government, led by Churchill, said that the National Government itself failed to rearm, and that view cannot I think be sustained. The King's speech is a bit of a caricature and very unfair to Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister of that Government.

As the 1930s proceeded, Britain, paradoxically, came to feel that Germany had been harshly treated in the peace treaties, and that if Germany was treated fairly, then her extremism would die down. The National Government did not, in fact, fail to rearm, and, in 1933, shortly after Hitler came to power, a committee was set up, ironically by Ramsay MacDonald, who, as a pacifist, had been opposed to the First World War, to consider what should be done, and they produced a report in 1934. The dominant figure in the Government, although he was not in charge of defence at the time, was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, who set the pattern for rearmament right through the 1930s.

In 1934, he made two crucial decisions. He first said that defence expenditure could not be unlimited in the interests of the economy, that if defence expenditure was unlimited, it would unbalance the economy to a dangerous extent. I think he also felt, as most Conservatives did at the time, that their aim was to try and secure recovery from the slump, and one of the National Government's policies was to have very low interest rates at 2%. This encouraged, in particular, a housing boom, and an expansion of consumer goods. We tend to see the 1930s in the light of mass unemployment and the Jarrow Marches, but in the South of England and the Midlands, living standards improved fairly rapidly. Where the new light industries were going up, there was very

low unemployment, lower than 5%, and more people were beginning to buy their houses and also buy the consumer goods that they wanted. The National Government, quite understandably, said that they were not ready to divert resources from this into armaments, especially as they were being attacked from the Left, not for failing to re-arm, but for re-arming too much, and thereby repeating the mistakes of Governments before 1914 and leading to war. So Chamberlain said that defence spending should be limited in the interests of economics.

He also said the emphasis should be not on the Army but on the RAF and in particular in defending Britain against enemy attack, on fighters for defence, and on radar, and thus we had a very small Army. In May 1940, just before the German attack, Britain had 10 divisions on the Western Front, France had 104 and Belgium had 22, and the Netherlands 8, so we did not have a strong Army. The Americans had also cut down their Army – though they were not fighting in 1940. In 1939, when we tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a pact with the Soviet Union, Stalin said, “How many divisions has Britain got to put in the field against Nazi Germany?” and we replied, “Two.” Stalin said, “The Soviet Union has 500 divisions, so that makes 502.”

The reason for not having a strong Army was absolutely clear. The only way to get it was through conscription, and we had never had conscription in peace-time. Conscription and a large Army meant, for most British people, Chamberlain included had links to the horrors of the Somme and Passchendaele all over again. They did not want to go through that all over again although they wanted to make sure they could defend the country.

There is no evidence that Churchill disagreed strongly with that policy, and it was known, when the Cabinet papers were published, that Churchill was brought into the Government committees discussing rearmament, that the very policy he attacked, he had helped to formulate. His attack was that we were not doing enough in the air and that the Germans were ahead of us in their Air Force. Figures tend to show that he was probably wrong in that argument. It may be the National Government did not mind being attacked so much by Churchill because it made them appear moderate – they could say Churchill was a warmonger but not them. In any case, the argument over the Air Force was, I think, a sideshow. The real question was whether we were prepared to have a large army.

Churchill did not himself favour a large Army. He said that if you had a strong Air Force, you did not need conscription in peace-time, so the real debate, I think, was ignored. The only people calling for a large Army were the military, the leaders of the Army, and they were dismissed as blimps, old-fashioned people who want to lead the British into another bloodbath.

The consequence of this was that the brunt of the fighting would be done by the French, and the British said the French could supply the Army and we would supply the Air Force. If you were a French leader, you might perhaps not be too happy at that – the French would lose all their men, while the British were fighting from the air. In fact, British policy under Chamberlain was really the policy of an isolationist state, a state which was going to defend itself against attack, but could not do very much to stop Hitler in Europe.

Or, rather, you may say, it was the policy of an imperialist. One has to remember that Neville Chamberlain was the son of the great imperialist Joseph Chamberlain, and, at that time, Britain was a very different sort of country from what it was now because a quarter of the world was part of the British Empire. Britain was **the** superpower, in the way that perhaps the United States is now – a quarter of the world was painted red. The older ones among you may perhaps remember history lessons where you saw a small island in the middle, with the rest of the world painted red. Britain was a very large empire, a satiated power. The head of the Admiralty, Lord Chatfield, said, “We have got most of the world already, or the best parts of it, and we only want to keep what we have got and prevent others taking it away from us.” Now, if you take that view, you may say what happens in Europe perhaps did not matter too much.

Neville Chamberlain, during the Munich crisis, famously referred to Czechoslovakia as “a faraway country of which we know nothing”, and that annoyed many people, but perhaps expressed what many British people thought. There is a debate that still goes on about whether Britain is in fact a European country or not – that is not just a debate of the 1930s. If you were imperialist then, you might point out that we had a worldwide empire and it did not matter who ruled a certain part of Czechoslovakia or Poland. Before 1914 and 1939, British leaders tried to keep out of European involvements, but they were dragged in, on both occasions, by what you may call quarrels in faraway countries. The First World War began in Serbia, with the killing in Sarajevo, which most people would certainly have thought a faraway country; and the Second because of a dispute in Poland.

This debate about Europe of course has dominated British domestic policy since the War. It broke up the Labour Party in 1981, almost broke up the Conservatives in the 1990s, and could conceivably break up the current Coalition Government. It was certainly a matter of dispute then, and I think this was the main source of dispute between Chamberlain and Churchill. Churchill was a different sort of imperialist from Chamberlain, as he was, fundamentally, a European. He said that we could not allow one country to dominate Europe, though I think the conclusion, from what he said, was conscription, which he did not himself draw.

We are so accustomed to the heroic status of Winston Churchill that we have to cast our mind back to the 1930s as to how people saw him then. You sometimes see the argument that Churchill was kept out of office by political pygmies who were disinclined to notice his warnings and that he was a kind of prophet in the wilderness. That is untrue. Churchill was not a member of the National Government because he had resigned from the

Conservative Shadow Cabinet in January 1931 because he did not agree with the Conservative policy that India should be steered to self-government.

The Viceroy of India, Halifax, who was to be the Conservative Foreign Secretary in the late 1930s, issued a declaration in 1929 to say the natural evolution of India should be towards self-government, like the older dominions such as Australia and Canada. This, for the time, was revolutionary because, until 1914, even fairly progressive people had tended to the view self-government was only for white people and that, for non-white people, imperial paternal rule was the best they could hope for. This was quite revolutionary in a way, at the time, coming from a Conservative. Baldwin, the leader of the Conservative Party, accepted that and said that it was absolutely right, so he refused to oppose the Labour Government on it. He said that we had had partisan troubles on Ireland so we ought not to do the same with India. Instead, he thought we should steer India responsibly to self-government - the origins of Indian Independence lie there.

Churchill said that this was quite wrong as it would disrupt the Empire which he opposed. Not only did he resign from the Shadow Cabinet, he led a powerful campaign, which came within an inch of success, to defeat the leadership on the India Bill which the National Government brought forward. He went round the constituencies - as you can imagine in those days he had a lot of support in the Conservative constituencies - and came within an inch of success. He said some pretty wild things. He said, in the 1930s, that the British Empire faced two crucial challenges, from Gandhi and from Hitler, and you can see why people did not take him too seriously. He was not the only one who compared Gandhi to Hitler, because Lord Halifax, shortly before becoming Foreign Secretary, had visited Hitler in 1937. On returning, one of his associates said to him, "I was delighted you were going to go to Berlin because, some time ago, Lloyd George told me, after his visit to Hitler, that the man was really an oriental mystic, a sort of Gandhi, and I thought there was no one better able to deal with a Gandhi than you." Halifax said, "Did Lloyd George really say that? Well, it is perfectly true. That is exactly what he is." You may say that that was a very serious misjudgement there.

It is fair to say that Gandhi's own utterances also do not bear much repetition because, in June 1940, after the fall of France, he said: "Germans of future generations will honour Herr Hitler as a genius, as a brave man, a matchless organiser, and much more."

Churchill used this analogy between Hitler and Gandhi and the National Government thought that if it could conciliate Gandhi it could conciliate Hitler also. The leaders of appeasement were those who had succeeded in appeasing Gandhi: the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, the Viceroy of India and Sir Samuel Hoare, the India Secretary, who had steered the Bill through Parliament, against the opposition of Churchill. Churchill, therefore, was discredited, and appeasement seemed a policy for liberal-minded people.

Churchill, during the 1930s, for anyone who looked at his previous record, seemed marked by bad judgement. Immediately after the Russian Revolution, he had sought to lead foreign intervention against the Soviet Union to remove the Bolshevik regime. Whatever you may think of that now, in the 1930s, this was thought as illegitimate. It was thought that the Russian system of government was their own business and it was not for us to try and determine how Russia was ruled. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, he had led the return to the Gold Standard at too high a rate in 1925, which people were beginning to say was responsible for our economic troubles. Finally, and here, the King's speech is a travesty, far from being a friend of George VI, Churchill not only supported Edward VIII during the Abdication, but tried to act unconstitutionally by saying that if the Government resigned, because they could not accept the marriage, he, Churchill, would become Prime Minister, and since he did not have a majority in Parliament, there would be an election on the question of the King's marriage. Anything more disastrous is difficult to imagine, and it put the Cabinet, as you can understand, very much against him.

Therefore, it seemed that Churchill had a record of being wrong on almost everything, and that was the view that people had of him in the 1930s, quite contrary to the view afterwards. He was thought of as a right-wing renegade, with very poor judgement, a reactionary and a figure from the past. Lord Halifax said: "The day is past, in my humble opinion, when Winston's possessive instinct can be applied to empires and the like. That conception of imperialism is finished." When he called for British rearmament, people said he was a scaremonger, and the leader of the Liberals, Sir Herbert Samuel, said he was "causing blind and causeless panic, the language of a malaise running amok rather than a responsible British statesman". People did not take much notice, at that time, of Churchill.

The National Government then faced a difficult problem, and it did not have the advantage of the hindsight that we now have. They decided to follow conciliatory policies towards the dictators. The first serious breach of Treaty obligations of a territorial kind on the part of Hitler took place in March 1936, when he reoccupied and re-militarised the Rhineland - the Left Bank of the Rhine - which had been de-militarised by the Treaty of Versailles. This was a breach not only of the Versailles Treaty, which Hitler said had been exacted from Germany by force, but also of the Treaty of Locarno of 1925, which Germany had freely signed, although, it is fair to say, a pre-Nazi Government, not Hitler himself. Churchill, in his war memoirs, said this was the ideal opportunity to stop Hitler and he said we now know that if British and French troops had moved into the Rhineland, Hitler would have had to withdraw. If you look at what happened at the time, Churchill made no comment about the Rhineland at the time, and I have not found one British politician who said that this should be met with force, the reason being that we now know the British and French had realised that the Rhineland provisions were untenable - they could

not forever prevent Germany from occupying her own territory or putting troops in her own territory. They thought, it being untenable, to see if they could get something in return. The Germans were well aware of the British and French thinking, and so they were not taking as much of a risk as previously had been thought, in reoccupying the Rhineland. They knew the British and French would not fight for something they were, in any case, going to give up.

Apart from that, in 1923, the French had followed a similar policy, because, when the Germans defaulted on their reparations payments, they had occupied the Ruhr with French troops. That had done no good, and after a while, they simply had to withdraw. The same would have happened in 1936, if British and French troops had gone in. The Nazis would have withdrawn and we would have found ourselves permanently trying to hold down a hostile population and would have had to withdraw, and possibly Hitler's prestige would have increased. I do not think this was a great missed opportunity, and nor did people at the time. Even Harold Macmillan, who was a bitter opponent of the Government said, in 1938, in his constituency, that "Hitler had a good deal of reason behind him" in the reoccupation of the Rhineland. I do not think that that was a lost opportunity.

In February 1938, Neville Chamberlain's Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, resigned from the Government, in protest not against the appeasement of Germany, but against the appeasement of Italy. Chamberlain was rather eager to reduce the number of Britain's potential enemies, and he therefore sought to make an agreement with Mussolini. Eden said this should not have been done until Mussolini kept his earlier agreements, and his earlier agreement was to stop sending so-called volunteers to Spain to help Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Mussolini had promised to stop that, but he had not in fact done so. Eden said that there was no point in signing a further treaty with Mussolini until he accepted the previous one and kept to his word.

The resignation of Eden was made the subject of a purple passage in Winston Churchill's war memoirs. Churchill said that there were many times in the War when he felt depressed and upset, but he said he had never felt the sense of gloom that he had felt when Anthony Eden resigned. He said that this was the one night he could not sleep, because this was a symbol of young Britain and while he had not always agreed with Eden he stood for something very firm, important and idealistic, and with him out of the Government, the policy of appeasement clearly would have no obstacles. It was the one time he had really felt depressed about the future. That may be so, but he did, immediately after the resignation of Eden at the time, sign a motion expressing full confidence in the Government's foreign policy, so you have to compare what he said later with what happened at the time.

Later in that year came the real symbol of the policy of appeasement, namely, the Munich Agreement. This too, has been misinterpreted, and it is seen as a caricature of Neville Chamberlain, rather weak and naïve, being bluffed by Hitler, and I think that is not true. Firstly, Neville Chamberlain was by no means weak. He was a strong, powerful Prime Minister who knew his own mind extremely well. Secondly, the policy followed at Munich was not the policy of a single individual, and I think that is very important. It would be a mistake to think that because the policy Chamberlain followed was the policy laid down by the Cabinet, and not just at the time of the Munich Agreement. The Government had had to face the problem that after the Anschluss with Austria in March 1938 - the link between Germany and Austria - it was very clear that Czechoslovakia might be under threat, and the Cabinet met to consider their policy. They said that they would not go to war to keep the German-speaking territories of Czechoslovakia within Czechoslovakia. They had all decided that. That was a policy, and Munich, in a sense, was the implementation of that policy, and therefore, in a sense, the Conference did not decide anything. The important decision was made by the Cabinet, for good or ill, in March, and Munich merely ratified a decision that had already been made and dealt with the procedures by which German territorial claims would be carried out.

There was a very good book I reviewed years ago by David Reynolds of Cambridge, called "Summits", about summit conferences, and he took the first summit conference as being the Munich Conference between the four leading powers then - Britain, France, Germany and Italy. Interestingly, none of them are leading powers now.

Neville Chamberlain did not like this policy. In March 1938, he wrote to his sister. I should say that he was a very assiduous family man, fortunately for the historian, and every week, he wrote letters to his wife, if his wife was in Birmingham, because he represented the Birmingham constituency, and also to his two sisters, laying out in great detail the basis of his policy. He said in March 1938 that it "...made his blood boil to see Germany getting away with it time after time and increasing her domination over free peoples," but such sentimental considerations were dangerous and Britain had to remember the forces with which she was playing. He did not think we were sufficiently powerful to make victory certain. He thought that a time would come when a gamble on the issue of peace or war might be contemplated with less anxiety than at present. At this moment, he was certain public opinion in Great Britain would not allow His Majesty's Government to take such a risk, and it was no use for this Government, or indeed for any other Government, to go beyond its public opinion, with the possible effect of bringing destruction to brave people.

He was confronted with the view of the Chiefs of Staff, which supported his view that Britain was in no condition to go to war. They held that view unanimously, and in my opinion, it is a brave Prime Minister who goes to war when the Chiefs of Staff say you are not in a position to do so. He made the point that public opinion would not allow the Government to take such a risk, for this reason: that, whatever you thought of Hitler and his Government, he had on his side, at that time, the argument from self-determination. After all, it was argued that Germans in Czechoslovakia did not want to remain in Czechoslovakia - they wanted to go back to Germany. He

did not think people wanted to go to war to stop them doing that.

More particularly, the purpose of going to war would not be simply to deal with that problem, but to remove Hitler, and that, possibly, would involve a long war. He did not think the British people would have the stomach for it or think it was really a cause they ought to fight for at that time.

He wrote to his sister about the alternative policy which Winston Churchill was putting forward. This was for a grand alliance between Britain, France, Czechoslovakia and possibly the Soviet Union. Chamberlain wrote to his sister: "You have only to look at the map to see that nothing that France or we could do could possibly save Czechoslovakia from being overrun by the Germans if they want to do it. Therefore, we could not help Czechoslovakia. She would simply be a pretext for going to war with Germany. That, we could not think of, unless we had a reasonable prospect of being able to bend her to her knees in a reasonable time, and of that, I see no sign. I have therefore abandoned any idea of giving guarantees to Czechoslovakia or to France in connection with her obligations to that country." He spoke in terms of what he had decided, but that was the Cabinet's view.

Czechoslovakia attracted much sympathy in Britain. It was the only democracy, at that time, east of the Rhine. Every other country was a dictatorship. Of its population of 10 million, 3 million were German-speaking people who were mainly concentrated in the north-west and south-west parts of the country, near the borders. It was also divided by other ethnic conflicts: with the Slovaks, the Czechs and Slovaks, which of course broke the country up in the 1990s; and there were also strong Hungarian and Polish minorities which had claims upon the country. In 1935, the German Nationalist Party in the territories, fairly close to a Nazi Party, won more votes than any other in the German-speaking areas, and became the second largest in the Czech Parliament as a whole. They were threatening the unity of the country.

Czechoslovakia had a treaty with France, by which France was obliged to go to her aid if she was attacked, and also a treaty with the Soviet Union, by which the Soviet Union was obliged to go to her aid if attacked. She did not have a treaty with Britain, but British Governments feared they might be dragged in, because once the French were at war, they would have to be at war, because, after all, that is what had happened in 1914. We did not have a treaty with France, but we were dragged in when France was dragged in and when Belgium was attacked, and that analogy was in many people's minds.

As time went on, the tension during the summer and autumn months ratcheted up, and in September, at the Nuremberg Rally, Hitler made a wild speech, but without making any specific proposals. The Czech-German Nationalist leader Conrad Heinlein, broke off negotiations, went to Germany, said that he was no longer prepared to discuss anything with the Czech Government and that the German-speaking territories must be allowed to secede.

Meanwhile, Chamberlain, in seeing to mediate, had sent a mission to Czechoslovakia, under Lord Runciman, a former Minister, to see if he could find a solution. Lord Runciman said that the dispute was no longer an internal one, but one between two countries, Czechoslovakia and Germany, and that although the Germans were responsible for breaking up negotiations, he said he had much sympathy with them. He said that although Czech rule was not oppressive and certainly not terroristic, it had, he said, been marred by tactlessness, lack of understanding, petty intolerance and discrimination, to a point where the resentment of the German population was inevitably moving in the direction of revolt, and he said that, therefore, the frontier district should be transferred to Germany. Chamberlain thought that this was going to lead to war because the Czechs would not transfer the territory and Hitler will attack - he wanted to stop that happening.

He wrote to his sister in September that he had conceived of a plan to try and avoid that happening, by personally visiting Hitler. He said: "I fully realise, if things eventually go wrong and the aggression takes place, there will be many, including Winston, who will say that the British Government must bear the responsibility, and that if only they had had the courage to tell Hitler now that, if he used force, we should at once declare war, that would have stopped him. By that time, it will be impossible to prove the contrary, but I am satisfied we should be wrong to allow the most vital decision that any country could take, the decision as to peace or war, to pass out of our own hands into those of a ruler of another country, and a lunatic at that."

Now, the first public proposal that the German-speaking territories should be ceded came not from any Conservative but from a left-wing newspaper, the New Statesman, which said, at the end of August, before Hitler's speech at Nuremberg: "The strategical value of the bohemian frontier should not be made the occasion of a World War."

Chamberlain decided on this daring plan to visit Hitler at Berchtesgaden in Bavaria, and, rather naïvely perhaps, he visited Hitler without an interpreter, so he relied on Hitler's interpreter's account of what was discussed. He hoped to begin with a general discussion, on Anglo-German problems. Hitler brushed that aside and said the only problem worth discussing was that in the Sudetenland, which was his last territorial demand in Europe, but he said, if the British Government accepted the principle of self-determination, which the Nazis had not invented, he would discuss ways and means. He said, apart from that, there was no other place where frontiers made any territorial difficulty - he did not want any Czechs in Germany, but merely racial unity. In other words, he was saying that he would negotiate only if his basic principle was immediately accepted, and if he did not get what he wanted, he would use force.

Chamberlain replied, perhaps foolishly, "My personal opinion was that, on principle, I didn't care two hoots whether the Sudetens were in the Reich or out of it, according to their own wishes." Hitler said that all areas with more than 50% of Germans should be ceded. Chamberlain said that he would consult with his Cabinet, and then return when the Cabinet and the Czechs had decided. When he returned, he told the Cabinet that they could not go to war to prevent the principle of self-determination, which is what the Cabinet thought. He then said, as so many people do at summits, "I had established a certain confidence, which was my aim, and on my side, in spite of the hardness and ruthlessness I thought I saw in his face, I got the impression that here was a man who could be relied upon when he had given his word."

The principle of self-determination was decided, and once that was decided, there was no point in going to war, because the other issues, like the area to be ceded and the timetable, should not have been made the occasion for war. You may say the Munich Agreement was, as it were, preordained. Well, after some difficult discussions, Chamberlain got the agreement of the Cabinet, which was fairly easy, and the Czechs, which was not easy. He then went back for a second meeting with Hitler. This time, Hitler said it was a long way to fly to Bavaria so they met Bonne, at Godesberg on the Rhine.

However, when Chamberlain arrived, Hitler said, "Well, how have you got on?" and he said "I have managed to get the agreement." Hitler said, "Well, I am afraid that is no longer enough, it is too late." It seems probably that Hitler had not expected Chamberlain to be able to coerce the Czechs to agree to the cession of territory and that his aim had been to split Britain and France from Czechoslovakia. Hitler now demanded immediate occupation of the areas, without any delay, plebiscites in the various other areas, and also settlements of Polish and Hungarian claims on Czechoslovakia. He presented Chamberlain with another memorandum, which Chamberlain said was an ultimatum, and he said that, again, after this is settled, he had no further territorial claims to make in Europe. Chamberlain came back to the Cabinet and said that this was terrible and it was a bit difficult, but still they had agreed the principle of self-determination. Hitler's object, he said, was racial unity and not the domination of Europe, and he said that Hitler trusted him and would work with him and would not deliberately deceive a man whom he respected. At this point, the Cabinet, led by the Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, rebelled and said there was a distinction between an orderly transfer of territory and a disorderly transfer, and that they could not accept the Godesberg memorandum. At that point, it looked as if Britain was heading for war.

Chamberlain made a famous broadcast about "a quarrel in a faraway country of which we know nothing". It was seemingly a minor quarrel, being blown up, like Serbia before in 1914, and suddenly we were all getting into war - when people heard him speak, they were reminded of 1914. He also said, in a radio broadcast, that "Armed conflict between nations is a nightmare to me, but if I were convinced that any nation had made up its mind to dominate the world by fear of its force, I should feel it must be resisted." He thought about this and said that it was mad to go to war over what amounted to procedures. He sent another letter to Hitler and suggested they discuss all this together at a conference. Hitler agreed, and Chamberlain then set off for Munich. At Heston Airport, the predecessor of Heathrow, Chamberlain who was very fond of Shakespeare quoted to the waiting newsmen, from Henry IV Part I. He said, "Out of this nettled danger, we pluck this flower, safety." The Poet Laureate, John Masefield, wrote a poem to accompany his visit. He said, "As Priam to Achilles for his son, so you, into the night, divinely led, to ask that young men's bodies, not yet dead, be given from the battle not yet begun."

Chamberlain was on the flight to Munich and there were to be four representatives there - Britain, France, Germany and Italy. The Czechs were not to be represented, and nor were the Soviet Union. It is interesting that, 10 years later, none of those four powers counted as world powers. It was the last major European conference, and incidentally, the only conference Hitler ever attended in his career.

Mussolini said "There will be no war, but it is the end of British prestige." He also said: "In a country where animals are adored to the point of making cemeteries and hospitals and houses for them and legacies are bequeathed to parrots, you can be sure that decadence has set in!"

That was a grievously mistaken view also held by Hitler. They thought that the British were going to Munich out of weakness, which it was not, primarily. It was because they believed that, however awful Hitler's regime was, there was some justice to the claim for self-determination and they should not resist it. Mussolini made a bad error in believing that Britain was decadent.

We now know what people did not know at the time: that Hitler was not interested in the Sudetenland, that he was interested, just as in 1939, in using that dispute in order to go to war with Czechoslovakia and defeat her, because he regarded Czechoslovakia as, which it was, an anti-Nazi power. The Sudetenland was to be the excuse, just as Danzig and the Polish Corridor in 1939 were the excuses to war. The Munich Agreement actually stopped a war, which Hitler wanted, and although the general British view is that Chamberlain was utterly deceived by Hitler, Hitler's view was that he had been deceived by a cunning Englishman who would go to war with him when the time was ripe.

Near the end of the war, when it was clear he was going to be defeated, Hitler said to Martin Bormann: "September 1938, that was the most favourable moment, when attack carried the lowest risk for us. Great Britain and France, surprised by the speed of our attack, would have done nothing, all the more so since we had world opinion on our side. We could have settled the remaining territorial questions in Eastern Europe and the Balkans without fearing intervention from the Anglo-French powers."

As you can see, there is much misunderstanding about the Munich Agreement. We shall leave Chamberlain in the plane, going to Munich, and next time, we will talk about the Munich Agreement, Britain coming to war and the rise of Churchill.

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