

DID GIVING INTO HITLER CAUSE HIM TO BECOME MORE BOLD? PROOF?

National socialism = NAZI party

Mandate = support of the people

German expansion

With the ideological justification of National Socialism and a mandate, manipulated though it was, from the German people, Hitler set about undoing the hated Treaty of Versailles. In 1935 he tore up the disarmament clauses of the treaty and announced conscription and rearmament, responding, he said, to the lengthening of French conscription terms. This was to be the first example of Hitler's approach to the West. He would push the envelope and wait for the Allies' reaction and judge his next step accordingly. When Britain and France did not react to his rearmament programme he accelerated it. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, although seeming to limit German naval building, signified for Hitler a tacit approval of German rearmament.

In 1936 he again tested the West's commitment to Versailles. Hitler ordered the German army to re-occupy the Rhineland, German territory demilitarized by Versailles, and waited for the Allies' response. German commanders had orders to pull back across the Rhine should France show the slightest inclination to intervene. Hitler did not want to risk his fledgling army. When France did nothing, Hitler was again emboldened. The next year, Germany intervened in the Spanish Civil War on the side of Franco and the rebels while France and Britain rigorously upheld their non-interventionist stance. If France and her British ally did not respond to threats on its border, why would they object to German expansion in the east?

The territorial ambitions of Nazism pushed Germany to annex Austria, the *Anschluss*, in 1938, an act forbidden by Versailles. Again the British and French raised no objections. Versailles was clearly dead. Perhaps more disturbingly for the British was Hitler's preference for unilateral action, without recourse to diplomacy or negotiation. If Germany no longer played by the rules that Britain assumed underpinned international relations, rules like the sanctity of treaties and agreements and the use of war as a last resort rather than a preferred response, then her whole approach to European relations was built on sand. Hitler's ephemeral promises were illustrated when he ignored the Munich Agreement within six months of signing it and occupied what remained of Czechoslovakia. When France and Britain guaranteed Poland's borders in response Hitler had no reason to believe that this commitment was any more solid than the Allies' commitment to Munich.

Appeasement

Very simply, appeasement is to give in to demands in order to avoid conflict. This, however, obscures the great complexity with which appeasement was used in the 1930s. With the benefit of hindsight, many post-war commentators used the word with disdain to denote what they saw as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's naive and weak

approach to German foreign policy in the late 1930s. Superficially this assessment seems to hold, however, more recent scholarship interprets appeasement differently.

Appeasement can be seen as a continuation of traditional British diplomacy:

- based on discussion and negotiation
- based on Britain's economic and military strength
- considering the global scope of Britain's interests
- treating each issue on its own merits
- avoiding war when possible
- resorting to war if it were in Britain's interest to do so.

These principles were applied by the British to each of Hitler's foreign policy adventures. When he re-occupied the Rhineland, it was clearly no direct threat to British interests and could be seen as a return to a more normalized situation of German autonomy. Likewise it was not clear how the *Anschluss* threatened British interests. Certainly the Sino-Japanese war was more of a concern for Britain globally. At Munich, Chamberlain judged the Czechs' sovereignty to be less of a concern than the costs of any kind of British intervention, if such an intervention was even feasible, and negotiated an end to the crisis. Germany's actions did not threaten her shores as any movement toward France or Belgium would. It did not threaten their sea routes and communications through the Mediterranean. It in no way impeded the operation of the British Empire. Rearmament, started in 1938, nevertheless continued in Britain.

There were two underlying assumptions when it came to applying this policy to German actions in central Europe. This first assumption was that German leadership held the same values as did Britain and France in terms of international agreements. The second assumption was that German ambitions could be satisfied. Both assumptions in the end proved to be false. Once it became obvious that they were false, and the British rearmament programme was close to putting Britain on par with German military output, war became a more feasible solution to future situations.

This interpretation suggests that the key question is not why did the Allies not fight for Czechoslovakia, but rather why did they fight for Poland? As mentioned, British rearmament had reached peak production by mid-1939 and French rearmament was progressing. Globally, the Sino-Japanese war seemed to be sapping Japanese ability to menace British holdings. The Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact removed the USSR as a deterrent to German expansion. In the end, the British abandoned their assumption that Hitler could be sated and thus their ability to affect the course of world affairs and by so doing protect their interests through diplomacy was no longer feasible. Appeasement had worked until it did not.



Class discussion

Is there a moral or ethical element to appeasement?

ATL Research and thinking skills

For each of the following positions, research the views of the historians listed. Each historian may either support or reject the perspective. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each historian's position?

The policy of appeasement caused the war

- RAC Parker
- AJP Taylor

Nazi ideology caused the war

- Eric Hobsbawm
- AJP Taylor
- Hugh Trevor Roper

