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# Wishful Thinking or Buying Time?

The Logic of British  
Appeasement in the 1930s

Norrin M. Ripsman  
and  
Jack S. Levy

The “lessons of the 1930s,” based on British and French appeasement of Germany, have profoundly influenced U.S. security policy for a half century. Presidents have invoked these lessons in decisions for war in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq in 1990–91 and 2003, and in presidential campaigns.<sup>1</sup> Among policymakers and publics, and among many scholars as well, the futility of appeasement has acquired the status of a lawlike generalization.<sup>2</sup> The implicit assumption is that the Western allies’ primary aim was to secure a lasting peace with Germany through concessions to resolve Adolf Hitler’s grievances. If that was the aim, the policy clearly failed. But, as we shall demonstrate, that was not appeasement’s primary aim. Scholars need to rethink both the concept of appeasement and the goals of appeasement in the 1930s.

The popular image of appeasement was fueled by the scholarship of traditional historians, who condemned British and French appeasement of Germany as politically naïve and morally bankrupt. In their view, the policies

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1. Ernest R. May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); Jack S. Levy, “Learning from Experience in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy,” in Manus I. Midlarsky, John A. Vasquez, and Peter Gladkov, eds., *From Rivalry to Cooperation: Russian and American Perspectives on the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), pp. 56–86; and Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Jim Rutenberg, “Bush Assails ‘Appeasement,’ Touching Off Political Storm,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2008.

2. See Keith Robbins, *Munich, 1938* (London: Cassell, 1968), quoted in Donald C. Watt, “The Historiography of Appeasement,” in Alan Sked and Chris Cook, eds., *Crisis and Controversy: Essays in Honour of A.J.P. Taylor* (London: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 110–129, at p. 110.

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of appeasement erroneously assumed that Hitler had limited ambitions and that sufficient concessions would remove the sources of German grievances, moderate his foreign policy, and eliminate the danger of a European war.<sup>3</sup> They argued that concessions over German rearmament, the Rhineland, Austria, and Sudeten Czechoslovakia not only failed to appease Hitler, but made war even more likely by whetting his appetite for aggression and by undermining the credibility of Britain and France and the utility of their subsequent guarantee of Poland. Many critics of appeasement contend that a more confrontational strategy of rearmament and balancing might have avoided war, either by deterring Hitler or by exposing his recklessness and thereby triggering his overthrow by the more cautious German military and its internal allies.<sup>4</sup> Others concede that Hitler may have been undeterrable and that war was unavoidable, but that a harder line would have led to an earlier war on more favorable terms to the Allies.

This traditional interpretation of British and French diplomacy in the 1930s continues to dominate the literature, particularly among political scientists, and the strategy of appeasement is now inextricably linked to British and French concessions to Hitler prior to World War II. Although appeasement—conventionally defined as the satisfaction of grievances through unilateral concessions, with the aim of avoiding war—was once regarded as an honorable and effective strategy of statecraft, after the 1938 Munich Conference it came to symbolize naïveté, failed diplomacy, and the politics of cowardice.<sup>5</sup> Winston Churchill ridiculed appeasement as akin to “one who feeds a crocodile, hoping

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3. Representatives of the traditional interpretation include Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. 1: *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948); John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich: Prologue to Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1948); Lewis B. Namier, *Diplomatic Prelude, 1938–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1948); Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (London: Odhams, 1952); Arnold Wolfers, *Britain and France between Two World Wars: Conflicting Strategies of Peace since Versailles* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1963), p. 221; and Martin Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. xii. Correlli Barnett, for example, accuses the Chamberlain government of a naïve inability to see “the simple and obvious truth about German intentions,” arguing that “it does not seem to have occurred to them that the German grievances were simply a pretext . . . a tactical gambit in a struggle for Europe.” Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), p. 514.

4. Churchill stated, with considerable exaggeration, that “there never was a war more easy to stop.” Quoted in J.L. Richardson, “New Perspectives on Appeasement: Some Implications for International Relations,” *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (April 1988), pp. 289–316, at p. 291. See also William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960).

5. Paul Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870–1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 16; and Stephen R. Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), pp. 10–11.

it will eat him last." Hans Morgenthau wrote that "appeasement is a corrupted policy of compromise." Robert Gilpin stated that "'appeasement' as a policy has been in disrepute and has been regarded as inappropriate under every conceivable set of circumstances."<sup>6</sup> The term carries such emotional baggage that some have suggested that it be banished.<sup>7</sup>

In this article we reconsider the concept of appeasement. We treat the concept as a tool of statecraft, stripping away its pejorative implications and leaving the question of effectiveness for empirical analysis. We construct a novel taxonomy of appeasement, emphasizing that appeasement is not always intended to resolve an adversary's grievances and reduce the long-term prospects for war with that adversary. Appeasement can also be used to reduce tensions with one adversary to conserve resources for use against a second, more threatening, adversary; to separate an adversary from potential allies; to redirect an adversary's hostility toward another target; or to buy time to build up strength for deterrence or defense against the adversary.

Next we reexamine British appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s and demonstrate that our new conceptualization of appeasement can shed light on this paradigmatic case.<sup>8</sup> By examining British Cabinet documents, private paper collections, and memoirs, together with secondary source accounts, we argue that British appeasement was not based on a naïve understanding of Hitler's intentions or on wishful thinking about the possibility of establishing a lasting peace with Germany, nor was it an alternative to balancing. To the contrary, we demonstrate that British leaders recognized the growing German threat but felt they had no good options for dealing with it. They believed that Germany had already surpassed Britain in effective military power, and consequently that Britain, alone or even with France, could not yet win a war against Germany. They believed, however, that with a major rearmament effort the military imbalance could be corrected by the late 1930s. British leaders

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6. Churchill, quoted in Daniel Treisman, "Rational Appeasement," *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 345–373, at p. 345; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 61; and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 193.

7. W.N. Medlicott, review of Arthur H. Furnia, *Diplomacy of Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations and the Prelude to World War II, 1931–1938*, in *International Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January 1962), pp. 84–85, as noted in Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy*, p. 15.

8. France, which was dependent on Britain in any war with Germany, reluctantly followed the British lead. See Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, "The Preventive War That Never Happened: Britain, France, and the Rise of Germany in the 1930s," *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 32–67.

appeased Germany as a means of buying time for rearmament, thus delaying the likely confrontation until Britain was adequately prepared for war. In this regard, appeasement was a complement to balancing, rather than an alternative to it. Although in retrospect British policy choices may have been poor ones, based on erroneous intelligence, they were driven by strategic balance-of-power calculations, not by wishful thinking about the ability to pacify Hitler.

A few caveats to our approach are in order. In this article we limit ourselves to the causes of appeasement. We analyze the preferences and worldviews of political leaders and the strategic contexts within which they formulated their policies. Our aims in the case study are explicitly descriptive and interpretive, not evaluative. We ask why British leaders adopted a policy of appeasement, but we do not engage ongoing historiographical debates over whether an alternative policy might have been better, whether appeasement actually increased the probability of war, or whether Britain and France would have been better off going to war earlier rather than later.<sup>9</sup> Thus we do not construct a general theory of when appeasement works and how.<sup>10</sup> Those are important questions, and they deserve fuller attention than we can give them here.

While our interpretation diverges from traditional views of appeasement, it has more in common with revisionist historians' understanding of British policy in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup> Initially, the historical literature on appeasement was written without the window into decisionmaking provided by government documents. Moreover, it was based on the testimony of men such as Churchill, Anthony Eden, and others who had axes to grind against the appeasers. They portrayed appeasement as a naïve and foolish policy that ignored balance of power considerations.<sup>12</sup> This traditional view of appeasement continues to dominate the international relations literature.

Beginning with A.J.P. Taylor's controversial *The Origins of the Second World*

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9. We provide a brief summary of those debates in *ibid.*, p. 38n. See also Scott A. Silverstone, "Preventive War and the Political Costs of War Initiation: What If the Allies Had Attacked Nazi Germany in the Mid-1930s?" paper presented at the annual conference of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, California, March 26, 2008.

10. On the conditions for successful appeasement, see Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*.

11. For reviews of the historiography on appeasement, see Donald C. Watt, "Appeasement: The Rise of a Revisionist School?" *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (April 1965), pp. 191–213; Watt, "The Historiography of Appeasement"; and Robert J. Caputi, *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press, 2000).

12. Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*; and Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators: The Memoirs of Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

War, however, historians began to reexamine the logic of British appeasement policy.<sup>13</sup> Once British documents for the period were declassified in the late 1960s, revisionists began to understand appeasement not as the product of naïve idealists, but rather as the consequence of poor intelligence, military weakness, multiple threats, and a fear of overtaxing the British economy through rapid wartime mobilization.<sup>14</sup> Our analysis builds on this newer scholarship by confirming these more pragmatic motivations and identifying more clearly the link between appeasement and rearmament.

### *A Typology of Appeasement*

Appeasement, one of many strategies an actor might adopt in response to a threatening party, is often defined to include a strong evaluative component.<sup>15</sup> Webster's, for example, suggests that to appease is "to conciliate or buy off (a potential aggressor) by political or economic concessions [usually] at the sacrifice of principles." For Morgenthau, appeasement was "a politically unwise negotiated settlement" in which a nation "surrenders one of its vital interests without obtaining anything worthwhile in return." Glenn Snyder defined appeasement as "giving in cravenly to the demands of an aggressor in order to avoid being attacked."<sup>16</sup>

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13. A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961); and Watt, "Appeasement: The Rise of a Revisionist School?"

14. See, for example, Keith Middlemas, *The Strategy of Appeasement: The British Government and Germany, 1937–1939* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1972); Ian Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet: How the Meetings in 10 Downing Street, 1937–1939, Led to the Second World War* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1971); Gustav Schmidt, *The Politics and Economics of Appeasement: British Foreign Policy in the 1930s*, trans. Jackie Bennett-Ruete (Leamington Spa, U.K.: Berg, 1986); and Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985). Recent works that suggest a more rational basis for British appeasement strategy include James P. Levy, *Appeasement and Rearmament, Britain 1936–1939* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); and Peter Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement: The British Attempt to Prevent the Second World War* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006).

15. Other strategies include internal or external balancing against the threat, bandwagoning with the threat, buckpassing, distancing from the threat (or "hiding"), and preventive war. See Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 74–75; Paul W. Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 108–148; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), chap. 2; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), pp. 164–165; and Jack S. Levy, "Preventive War and Democratic Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 1–24.

16. Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G.&C. Merriam Company,

The effectiveness of appeasement is an empirical question and should not be incorporated into the definition. Appeasement is sometimes successful, as illustrated by British appeasement of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Even Churchill, the ultimate antiappeaser, presented a more nuanced picture: "Appeasement in itself may be good or bad according to the circumstances. Appeasement from weakness and fear is alike futile and fatal. Appeasement from strength is magnanimous and noble and might be the surer and perhaps the only path to world peace."<sup>18</sup>

More useful for theoretical and empirical inquiry are definitions that do not prejudge the morality or effectiveness of appeasement. Many adopt Kennedy's widely cited definition of appeasement as a "policy of settling international (or, for that matter, domestic) quarrels by admitting and satisfying grievances through rational negotiation and compromise, thereby avoiding the resort to an armed conflict which would be expensive, bloody, and possibly very dangerous." Similarly, Gordon Craig and Alexander George defined appeasement as "the reduction of tension between [two states] by the methodical removal of the principal cause of conflict and disagreement between them." Daniel Treisman defined appeasement as "a policy of making unilateral concessions in the hope of avoiding conflict."<sup>19</sup>

These and most other scholarly definitions of appeasement share several elements: concessions, satisfaction of grievances, reduction in tensions, and, explicitly or implicitly, the avoidance of war with the adversary. Although these criteria appear to capture the conventional wisdom about appeasement, they are simultaneously too broad and too narrow. They are too broad because they fail to distinguish appeasement from other negotiating strategies that involve mutual concessions designed to satisfy some grievances and avoid war while preserving vital interests. They are too narrow because they mistake one common pattern of appeasement, associated with conventional interpretations

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1976); Hans J. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), p. 137, quoted in Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*, p. 11; and Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 160.

17. Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*, chap. 2.

18. "Address to the House of Commons, December 14, 1950," in Robert Rhodes James, ed., *Churchill Speaks: Winston S. Churchill in Peace and War: Collected Speeches, 1897–1963* (New York: Chelsea House, 1980), p. 937.

19. Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy*, p. 16; Gordon A. Craig and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Problems of Our Time*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 250; and Treisman, "Rational Appeasement," p. 345.

of British and French strategies in the 1930s, with the broader theoretical concept. Consequently, they fail to capture several important variations of appeasement.

We define appeasement as a strategy of sustained, asymmetrical concessions in response to a threat, with the aim of avoiding war, at least in the short term. This definition has several advantages over conventional definitions. By emphasizing that concessions are sustained and asymmetrical, we distinguish appeasement from other negotiating strategies that involve some form of concessions. In a tit-for-tat strategy, for example, an initial cooperative move is repeated if and only if the adversary reciprocates.<sup>20</sup> If the adversary reciprocates, and if each player continues to cooperate, the pattern of concessions would be sustained, but it would not be asymmetrical and therefore would not be appeasement. A strategy of appeasement is based on the expectation that the adversary will probably not reciprocate one's concessions with its own concessions of comparable value.

In addition, we require that concessions be asymmetrical but not necessarily unilateral. British and French concessions at Munich, for example, were extensive but not unilateral. Although the Allies acceded to Hitler's demand for the incorporation of the Sudetenland into Germany, they rejected demands that threatened the integrity of the rest of Czechoslovakia, signaling a willingness to fight if necessary. Hitler backed away from these demands and initially regarded the Munich conference as a diplomatic defeat.<sup>21</sup>

We identify three types of the general appeasement strategy, based on more specific objectives and strategies for countering external threats with sustained and asymmetrical concessions: (1) resolving grievances, (2) diffusing secondary threats, and (3) buying time.

#### RESOLVING GRIEVANCES

The first pattern of appeasement involves the hope and expectation that substantial and asymmetrical concessions to the adversary will resolve grievances and avoid war for the foreseeable future. This resolving-grievances strategy is an alternative to balancing. It is nicely captured by standard definitions, and it

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20. Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

21. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*; and Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 214–215, 264. Thus Treisman goes too far in including “unilateral” in his definition of appeasement. Treisman, “Rational Appeasement,” p. 345.



is illustrated by traditional interpretations of British and French behavior in the 1930s.

#### DIFFUSING SECONDARY THREATS

A second pattern of appeasement, often adopted by states facing multiple threats and possessing limited resources, involves extensive concessions to a less threatening adversary so as to maximize the prospects for successful deterrence or defense against a more threatening adversary. Like the resolving-grievances strategy, the diffusing-secondary-threats strategy involves settling grievances with an adversary to avoid war with that adversary, but its primary motivation is to position the state better for a potential conflict with another adversary. Thus this pattern involves appeasing one adversary to facilitate balancing against another.

We can identify three subtypes of the diffusing-secondary-threats pattern of appeasement. In the “conserving-resources” strategy, the appeaser makes extensive concessions to the secondary adversary to free up resources for use against the primary adversary. An example is Britain’s appeasement of the United States in the late nineteenth century, which was motivated largely by its anticipation of the rising German threat to the British Empire.<sup>22</sup> Treisman calls this conserving-resources pattern “rational appeasement,” but that label is misleading because it implies that other forms of appeasement are not rational.<sup>23</sup> Each of the three general strategies of appeasement can be rational if based on reasonable judgments about the adversary’s intentions and relative capabilities.

The second subtype, the “denying-allies” strategy, involves appeasing a secondary adversary to keep that adversary from allying with the primary adversary or giving it military support. British leaders, for example, attempted to appease Benito Mussolini after Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in the hope of keeping Italy out of the German orbit.<sup>24</sup>

The third subtype, which is a stronger version of the second, is the “redirecting-the-threat” strategy. It involves appeasing a secondary adversary to redirect its hostility to the primary threat.<sup>25</sup> An example of this strategy, at

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22. Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*, chap. 2.

23. Treisman, “Rational Appeasement.”

24. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, p. 75.

25. The denying-allies and redirecting-the-threat strategies can each supplement a strategy of conserving resources against a primary threat.

least in the eyes of Soviet observers, is British and French behavior at Munich. As Williamson Murray argues, "The Russians saw Munich as the first step toward a coalition of capitalist states aimed at destroying the Soviet Union."<sup>26</sup>

#### BUYING TIME

In contrast to the first two patterns of appeasement, the buying-time strategy makes no assumption that extensive concessions will permanently resolve grievances and establish a durable peace.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the aim is to diffuse the threat temporarily and avoid war in the short term, thus facilitating balancing over the longer term by buying time to build up one's military power internally or to secure allies against the external threat. The goal is either to deter a future war that one perceives to be likely or to prevail in war in the event that deterrence fails.<sup>28</sup> Leaders would presumably regard satisfying the adversary's grievances and avoiding war as a desirable outcome, but they recognize that it is not a likely one.<sup>29</sup>

Political leaders are most likely to adopt a buying-time strategy if they believe that time is on their side—if they expect that the dyadic balance of power will shift in their favor and that they would be able to make better use of a delay in hostilities than would their adversary. What they expect to change is not necessarily the adversary's grievances, but its ability to make and follow through on threats in support of those grievances and to prevail in any subsequent military confrontation. Leaders may also adopt a buying-time strategy if they anticipate, or at least hope, that the adversary's threat might dissipate even in the absence of shifting power, either because a new adversary leader or regime comes to power or because a new threat arises that causes the adversary to shift its attention elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

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26. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power*, p. 246. See also Hugh Ragsdale, *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis, and the Coming of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

27. Thus the buying-time strategy would not qualify as appeasement according to most conventional definitions.

28. In a variation on this pattern, a state may appease an adversary to buy time to build up strength not for the purposes of deterrence or defense against a threatening adversary, but rather with the aim of pursuing an aggressive policy once one has the means to do so. Some interpret Soviet foreign policy in the era of détente in these terms. See Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy from 1917–1967* (New York: Praeger, 1974), pp. 726–776.

29. The underlying logic of the buying-time strategy is better later than now. This is the reverse of the better-now-than-later logic of preventive war. Elsewhere we contrast the better-later-than-now logic of British leaders in the mid-to-late 1930s with the better-now-than-later logic of French leaders. See Ripsman and Levy, "The Preventive War That Never Happened."

30. At the time of the Munich crisis, for example, British leaders had some hope that Hitler might

International relations scholars occasionally acknowledge the buying-time pattern of appeasement, but only in passing and without much recognition or development of its broader theoretical implications. Randall Schweller argues that states can use an engagement or appeasement strategy for “buying time to rearm and gain allies in case the rising power cannot be satisfied and war becomes necessary.” Mark Brawley notes that appeasement might “buy time in the hopes of accruing wealth and power for the future,” but asserts that appeasement is the “least likely” strategy to achieve that end. John Mearsheimer argues that “conceding power to a dangerous adversary might make sense as a short-term strategy for buying time to mobilize the resources needed to contain the threat,” but only if a state faces short-term weaknesses and can mobilize superior power in the long term. Mearsheimer notes the rarity of this pattern, however, and says he knows of only one case—the 1938 Munich agreement.<sup>31</sup>

Although we have described strategies of buying time and diffusing secondary threats as variants of appeasement, these strategies can also be utilized without the asymmetrical concessions associated with appeasement. One might try to elicit cooperation from one adversary through a strategy of reciprocity to conserve resources for an expected confrontation with a primary adversary, to buy time for an expected confrontation with the first adversary, or to redirect the threat toward another party. In the absence of sustained, asymmetrical concessions, however, we would not classify these strategies as appeasement.<sup>32</sup>

Another strategy that can be used in conjunction with appeasement but that we do not classify as appeasement is “diagnostic signaling.” This strategy involves concessions to an adversary as a means of eliciting behavior that might clarify the adversary’s intentions. Whether the adversary responds with reciprocal concessions or with an escalation of its demands provides valuable information about the adversary. The diagnostic signaling strategy, however, is

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be overthrown by his generals and replaced by a less expansionist German leader. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power*.

31. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, pp. 74–75; Mark Brawley, “The Political Economy of Balance of Power Theory,” in T.V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 76–99, at p. 85; and Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 165.

32. In signing the Nazi-Soviet pact, for example, Stalin hoped to redirect the German threat to the west, at least in the short term, and to buy time for rearmament before Hitler turned his armies eastward, which Stalin expected. This was not appeasement, however, because Stalin received substantial concessions in the form of territory in the Baltics and in Poland. Geoffrey Roberts, *The Unholy Alliance: Stalin's Pact with Hitler* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

almost always coupled with a strategy of one-time or perhaps limited concessions, not with an appeasement strategy involving sustained, asymmetrical concessions. Once the adversary reveals itself as hostile, one is likely to adopt a less conciliatory strategy.

We now examine British appeasement of Germany in the 1930s to determine whether Britain's sustained and asymmetrical concessions reflected a resolving-grievances strategy, as assumed in traditional interpretations, or a buying-time strategy. Given that the British identified Nazi Germany as the primary threat, a diffusing-secondary-threats strategy is not a plausible hypothesis.

### *British Appeasement in the 1930s*

If the resolving-grievances interpretation of British appeasement is correct, as traditional interpretations assert, we should expect to see evidence that British leaders consistently viewed Hitler's war aims as limited, believed that concessions would resolve bilateral differences, and consequently did not expect that an Anglo-German war was likely. Conversely, if the buying-time interpretation is correct, we would expect to see evidence that British leaders believed that concessions would probably not moderate Hitler's aggressive designs and that a future war was likely; that the balance of power favored Germany, but only temporarily; and consequently that delaying a conflict would buy time for rearmament and either help to deter future German aggression or allow Britain to fight a war on more favorable terms if deterrence failed. We would also expect to see evidence that diplomatic concessions to Germany were accompanied by efforts to build up armaments, secure allies, and prepare for war. We consider the evidence during four distinct phases of appeasement: (1) the rise of Hitler until after the German announcement of conscription and rearmament in 1935; (2) the Rhineland crisis of 1936; (3) the initial period of Neville Chamberlain's government (1937); and (4) the Czechoslovak crisis of 1938.

British appeasement policies must be understood in the context of a gradual decline in British relative power—naval, commercial, and financial—from the peak of British primacy in the middle of the nineteenth century. As Kennedy concludes, by the 1930s "the fighting strength of the British Empire was weaker in relation to its potential enemies than at any time since 1779."<sup>33</sup>

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33. Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy*, pp. 99–100. See also Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the*

British relative decline combined with the rising power of Germany to create a serious strategic dilemma for British decisionmakers. They understood and feared the challenge of the Nazi regime in Germany, but believed that Britain's limited military strength and fragile economy prevented them from taking a hard line against Hitler until the situation improved.

Following World War I, substantial segments of public opinion in many European countries demanded that governments disarm and eschew the militaristic policies that were widely believed to have brought about the catastrophic war. Having suffered economically in the war and incurred extensive debt to the United States, the British government responded by paring defense spending to the bone.<sup>34</sup> Britain's economic problems were compounded by the world economic crisis of the early 1930s, to the point that a military rearmament program was perceived as an unnecessary luxury, especially given the assumption—formulated in the Ten-Year rule, which was automatically renewed each year until Hitler's rise to power—that no major war was likely within the next ten years. Consequently, the British military was woefully unprepared for war in the 1930s. This led the cabinets of three successive prime ministers—Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin, and Chamberlain—to conclude that offering strategic concessions to Germany while beginning a rearmament program would satisfy Hitler's short-term ambitions and create time for British rearmament, which they commenced in 1935 and subsequently accelerated.

#### THE BEGINNINGS OF APPEASEMENT

The British Cabinet's initial reaction to Hitler's accession to power was hardly naïve or optimistic. In his first report on Germany after the March 5, 1933, vote that consolidated Nazi rule, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Sir John Simon expressed concern that "[Hitler's] militant, very dangerous and incompetent administration will remain in charge of the centre of Europe in strict training for mischief." In particular, he feared that Germany would rapidly build a land army with tanks and heavy guns, together with an air force that

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*Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987). For quantitative trends in naval strength, see George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494–1993* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), pp. 193–230.

34. John Robert Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy: The Evolution of British Strategic Policy, 1919–26* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); and R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 12–17.

would threaten French security and require immediate French efforts to redress it. Consequently, he concluded, "the number of years for which real hostilities can be staved off would, in all European opinion, be doubtful."<sup>35</sup>

By May 1933, after the display of German obstinacy in the Geneva disarmament conference, the institution of military training in Germany, and Nazi agitation in Danzig, Austria, and the Saar, Simon became convinced that Hitler was preparing an illegal military force for an eventual war to recapture German territories lost in World War I. He concluded that even if the führer appeared to be willing to moderate his policies in the face of a concerted British and French warning, "we should always have to count with the possibility that it was merely a temporary retreat—*un recul pour mieux sauter*." Simon advised the government to plan for one of two possibilities if the Nazi Party were to remain in power: either a preventive war initiated by the French or, more likely, "the success of Hitler, followed—if present Nazi dispositions are maintained—by a European war in four or five years' time."<sup>36</sup>

Other Cabinet members saw the German menace in similar terms. For example, Secretary of State for War Viscount Hailsham argued in September 1933 that "it was not advantageous to us to encourage Nazi Germany. Already Germany was too strong." In his view, Hitler "would be encouraged to take the next step in tearing up the Treaty of Versailles, dealing first with the Corridor as a prelude to other parts of the Eastern Frontier and then Alsace-Lorraine and the Colonies."<sup>37</sup> From this early juncture, then, the key ministers charged with British foreign security policy brooked few illusions about the threat Hitler posed to Europe.<sup>38</sup>

Under the circumstances, British policy aimed to bind Germany within an international disarmament framework by encouraging the French, in particular, to make limited concessions to the Germans—such as the right to possess a

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35. "The Crisis in Europe," C.P. 52 (33), February 28, 1933—[Public Records Office, Kew Gardens, England] CAB 24 (Cabinet Memoranda)/239, pp. 10–11.

36. "The Foreign Policy of the Present German Government," C.P. 129 (33), May 16, 1933—CAB 24/247, pp. 44–50. See also "A Memorandum on the Present and Future Position in Europe," C.P. 212 (33), August 30, 1933—CAB 24/243, p. 70.

37. Cabinet 50 (33), September 5, 1933—[Public Records Office, Kew Gardens, England] CAB 23 (Cabinet Minutes and Conclusions)/77, p. 10.

38. We therefore disagree with Mark L. Haas, who claims that the British appeased Hitler because the Conservatives had an ideological preference for fascists over the Bolsheviks, whom they felt were the real threat to their interests. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005). In fact, the documentary evidence shows that Conservative leaders consistently viewed Nazi Germany as the primary threat to British interests.

small number of tanks in accordance with the principle of equality.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, the Cabinet was unwilling to make excessive concessions to Germany to secure a convention. Interestingly, even Chamberlain, then chancellor of the exchequer, argued that "France ought not to be pushed by us into a position of weakness, more particularly as he [Chamberlain] felt misgivings about the attitude of Germany."<sup>40</sup> On several occasions, the Cabinet issued warnings to the German government against unilateral violations of the disarmament clauses of the Versailles and Locarno treaties.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the Cabinet sought to cement good relations with fascist Italy, which it wished to prevent from establishing an understanding with Hitler.<sup>42</sup>

After Germany withdrew from the League of Nations and the disarmament conference in October 1933, the Cabinet pursued a primary strategy of initiating British rearmament, which became the government's principal preoccupation. Significantly, the Committee of Imperial Defence was ordered to proceed with the 1933 Annual Defence Review without the Ten-Year rule for the first time since World War I. This review was premised on the assumption that Hitler was in the midst of consolidating German power in preparation for war. "During this period of preparation, therefore," the chiefs of staff stated, "we may expect to see pacific utterances on the part of the Government paralleled by a violent and bellicose propaganda of the Nazi Party, together with a steady preparation for war." Therefore, British military intervention on the continent might be necessary "at any time within the next, say, three to five years." Under these circumstances, the report concluded, the British military was woefully underfunded and unprepared, which necessitated a significant rearmament campaign.<sup>43</sup>

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39. "A Memorandum on the Present and Future Position in Europe," C.P. 212 (33), August 30, 1933—CAB 24/243, p. 70.

40. Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald agreed. Cabinet 48 (33), July 26, 1933—CAB 23/76, pp. 343–344.

41. See, for example, the message Simon communicated to Hitler in May 1933, reproduced in "The Foreign Policy of the Present German Government," C.P. 129 (33), May 16, 1933—CAB 24/247, p. 50; and Cabinet 52 (33), October 9, 1933—CAB 23/77, pp. 82–83.

42. See, for example, Cabinet 50 (33), September 5, 1933—CAB 23/77, pp. 11–12, where MacDonald identified Italy as the key to preventing a German putsch in Austria. Indeed, the Foreign Office, which until 1936 was not strongly committed to appeasing Germany, viewed Italy, rather than Germany, as the proper target of appeasement. See Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement*, pp. 148–149. This behavior fits the denying-allies and conserving-resources patterns of appeasement.

43. "Imperial Defence Policy: Annual Review (1933)," November 9, 1933, C.O.S. [Chiefs of Staff] 310, reproduced in CAB 24/244, pp. 135–142, at p. 139. The ensuing Defence Review assumed that Germany was "the ultimate potential enemy against whom our 'long range' defence policy must

The rearmament campaign would be a slow one, particularly given the economic constraints imposed by the world economic crisis and British war debts to the United States. Consequently, the government needed to buy time and became obsessed with “the importance of not giving Germany any excuse to re-arm without further parley.”<sup>44</sup> Thus was born the policy of accommodating German demands in the face of increasing German perfidy, in an attempt to slow the pace of German challenges.

British strategy in 1934 and 1935 was predicated on several assumptions. First, pending rearmament, Britain lacked the military strength to challenge Hitler. Second, attempts to bluff Hitler through stern warnings and threats were inadvisable because they risked provoking an acceleration of German rearmament and a possible crisis at a time when Britain lacked both the material means and the public support necessary to wage war. Third, economic sanctions against Germany were likely to prove costly to Britain—which was still receiving German debt repayments—at a time when its debt to the United States was considerable and its economy just recovering from the 1930s’ shock.<sup>45</sup> Although a strong deterrent stance against Germany was not feasible, a firm but unthreatening common front with France and Italy might restrain Hitler in the short run and could even strengthen the hands of the “reasonable men” around him—such as Hjalmar Schacht, president of the Reichsbank, and others in the business and banking sectors—who could then exert a moderating influence on German policy.<sup>46</sup>

As evidence mounted in late 1934 “that German re-armament was proceeding in an alarming manner,” in flagrant violation of the Versailles treaty (e.g., training an army of almost 300,000 men as opposed to the 100,000 allowed by Versailles, and building an air force approaching the strength of the Royal Air Force [RAF]), the British began to accelerate their appeasement policy.<sup>47</sup> In particular, they began to look for ways to legalize German remilitarization to achieve a “controlled re-armament” that would slow down its pace and limit

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be directed.” See “Committee of Imperial Defence: Defence Requirements Sub-committee Report,” D.R.C. 14, February 28, 1934, reproduced for the Cabinet in C.P. 64 (34)—CAB 24/247, p. 383.

44. Cabinet 60 (33), November 6, 1933—CAB 23/77, p. 183.

45. Cabinet 2 (34), January 24, 1934—CAB 23/78, pp. 47–54.

46. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*, pp. 72–74; and Steven E. Lobell, “The Second Face of Security: Britain’s ‘Smart’ Appeasement Policy Towards Japan and Germany,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 2007), pp. 73–98.

47. Cabinet 41 (34), November 21, 1934—CAB 23/80, p. 214; “Committee on German Re-armament Report,” C.P. 265 (34) and appendices, November 23, 1934—CAB 24/251, pp. 207–222; and “German Re-armament,” C.P. 268 (34) and appendices, November 26, 1934—CAB 24/251, pp. 227–246.



its scope.<sup>48</sup> Their idea was that if Hitler were to begin open, full-scale rearmament in violation of part 5 of the Versailles treaty, Britain would be powerless to oppose the *fait accompli*; therefore, they were better off acknowledging Germany's covert rearmament and permitting it, in exchange for freely agreed-upon limits on German armed forces.<sup>49</sup> They hoped that Germany would then return to the League of Nations and accede to the Washington principles on arms limitations and disarmament negotiated in 1935. The Cabinet wanted to secure an international agreement on these arrangements, but the French refused to release Germany from the disarmament clauses of the Versailles treaty.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, as German defiance grew with Hitler's public declaration of conscription in March 1935, the British proceeded on their own to negotiate the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

The British position over the Rhineland similarly eroded. As the pace of German rearmament accelerated, the Cabinet believed that a German attempt to remilitarize the Rhineland was likely and that Britain was not yet prepared to wage war. It concluded, therefore, that it ought not to risk a premature war with Hitler over the Rhineland.<sup>51</sup>

The Cabinet documents reveal that its members were not overly optimistic or naïve about German intentions at this stage. With the exception of a few pro-German officials, such as future Ambassador to Germany Sir Nevile Henderson, none of the dispatches or meeting minutes reflect a belief that Hitler's aims were limited or that a comprehensive settlement was likely or could be enforced. Thus, in preparation for the April 1935 Stresa conference with Italy and France to form a united front against German rearmament, the Cabinet members agreed that "while we should frankly admit that there was much evidence to show that Germany could not be brought to an acceptable agreement, we should make clear that we were not finally convinced that this was the case until after fuller explorations."<sup>52</sup> This hardly reflects a belief that appeasement would bring lasting peace. Instead, the documents reveal a widespread pessimism and feeling of powerlessness to stop the German challenges until Britain fully rearmed.<sup>53</sup>

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48. Cabinet 42 (34), November 26, 1934—CAB 23/80, p. 236.

49. Cabinet 46 (34), December 12, 1934—CAB 23/80, pp. 319–320.

50. *Ibid.*; and Cabinet 6 (35), January 30, 1935—CAB 23/81, pp. 88–89.

51. Cabinet 3 (35), January 14, 1935—CAB 23/81, p. 28.

52. Cabinet 20 and 21 (35), April 8, 1935—CAB 23/81, p. 297.

53. In a recent historical account, Peter Neville similarly concludes that the British viewed Nazi Germany as a considerable threat early on, but were constrained by economic and military weakness. See Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement*, pp. 25–26. Robert Self's recent biography of Chamberlain

#### THE RHINELAND CRISIS

By early 1936, Germany had begun to flex its newfound military muscles, and appeasement was facing its first major test as Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland in violation of both the Versailles and Locarno treaties. An examination of British decisionmaking during this crisis demonstrates that it was driven by a buying-time logic rather than by naïveté or excessive optimism.

On February 14, 1936, three weeks before the German move in the Rhineland, new Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden circulated to the Cabinet a memorandum by Sir Robert Vansittart on the consequences of German rearmament. Eden described this document as “the outcome of a prolonged and anxious study in the Foreign Office of the situation created by the extent and rapidity of German rearmament, and the policy which that Power may in consequence now be expected to pursue.”<sup>54</sup> In it, Vansittart warned the Cabinet that the demilitarized zone in the Rhineland was likely to be Germany’s next target in its revision of the Versailles settlement and that, as a consequence, “the French Government will then expect of us duties which we are unable either to repudiate or to fulfill.” His argument for appeasement had more to do with British incapacity than any belief that Britain could avoid war over the long term. As he explained to the Cabinet:

We are, in the matter of most armaments and all munitions, already weaker than Germany. . . . Moreover, owing to the late date of starting our own re-equipment (and our associates in the League have not even begun to think of starting yet), it is now inevitable that Germany will be ready for aggression long before we and the League can be ready for defence. If, therefore, we are to turn our backs on conciliation—and this will be our last opportunity, we must at least get as far as we can in the short time still ahead of us. . . . The aggressor will be located in advance—there is no longer doubt in Europe as to his eventual identity—and the only chance of restraining him will be that the collective strength of the potential victims should be twice as great in spirit and in truth, and not only on paper.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, Vansittart was under no illusions about German intentions, nor was he optimistic about the prospects of avoiding war by satisfying German griev-

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judges that “the need to employ diplomacy to ‘buy time’ for a carefully-stated expansion of rearmament at an economically sustainable pace was undoubtedly an important and explicit factor in reinforcing Chamberlain’s personal policy preferences.” Self, *Neville Chamberlain: A Biography* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006), p. 270. John Charmley similarly describes Chamberlain’s view that “until such time as the British rearmament neared fruition, what could not be cured would have to be endured.” Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (London: John Curtis, 1989), p. 83.

54. “Germany,” C.P. 42(36), February 11, 1936—CAB 24/260, p. 146.

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 154–155.

ances. Instead, he advocated appeasement based on a calculation of relative power and the expectation that war in 1936 would be more dangerous than war two years hence, after British rearmament bore fruit. Whether his calculation of relative power was accurate or not, his rationale for appeasement was consistent with a buying-time logic.

On February 25, the Cabinet reviewed a report by the Ministerial Subcommittee on Defence Policy and Requirements, which confirmed that British rearmament had not progressed far enough to permit war with Germany.<sup>56</sup> During the Rhineland crisis, this conclusion was further supported by the armed services ministers. They reported to the Cabinet that with British battlecruisers in the Mediterranean and airmen, aircraft, and soldiers in Egypt, Britain's ability to protect British shipping from German pocket battleships was suspect, home defenses were porous, and "the air position was deplorable."<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the Cabinet accelerated the rearmament program, approving ambitious reequipment campaigns for all three services: the navy, the army, and the RAF.<sup>58</sup>

With the rearmament effort so far behind, the Cabinet was reluctant to respond to an expected German Rhineland remilitarization with a forceful policy that could precipitate war before Britain was ready. During a March 5 Cabinet discussion on the matter, two days before Germany's "surprise" an-

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56. The report recommended that "in view of the altered international situation, important and extensive measures should be taken in the next 3 to 5 years to modernise our national defences." The priorities included a naval "replacement programme including 7 capital ships and 4 aircraft carriers"; the complete modernization of 3 capital ships and partial modernization of 4 more; a huge increase in the number of naval aircraft from 213 to 504; an additional 35,600 naval personnel; an increase in the rate of mobilization of the Regular Field Force; the modernization of 12 Territorial Army Divisions; the modernization of coastal defenses; the completion of the Air Defence Program; an upgrade of field artillery to accept 25-pound shells instead of 18-pound shells; an increase of 4 infantry battalions for overseas garrisons; and the completion of previous commitments to expand the metropolitan first line air force to 123 squadrons with 1,512 aircraft. The Cabinet approved most of these measures, together with the RAF's ambitious "Scheme F," which envisioned the construction of 8,000 new aircraft in an effort to catch up to and keep pace with the Germans. Cabinet 10 (36), February 25, 1936—CAB 23/83, pp. 157–161; M.M. Postan, *British War Production* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975), pp. 15–16; and J.A. Cross, *Lord Swinton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 158.

57. Cabinet 20 (36), March 16, 1936—CAB 23/83, p. 319. Indeed, the chiefs of staff Subcommittee of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) warned the government that "any question of war with Germany while we were as at present heavily committed to the possibility of hostilities in the Mediterranean would be thoroughly dangerous" due to insufficient naval forces and artillery for coastal defense, a wholly inadequate air force, and an undermanned and underequipped army. See "Report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-committee of the C.I.D.," March 18, 1936, *Documents on British Foreign Policy* [hereafter *DBFP*], Ser. 2, Vol. 16 (Oxford: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1977), p. 172.

58. Cabinet 10 (36), February 25, 1936—CAB 23/83, pp. 157–161.

nouncement that it would remilitarize the Rhineland, Prime Minister Baldwin, Chamberlain, and Eden all counseled against precipitate action and advocated restraining the French—not because they viewed German actions as legitimate or because they believed concessions would moderate German behavior, but because they believed that Britain was not yet ready for war with Germany.<sup>59</sup> As a result, the Cabinet authorized Eden to commence negotiations with Germany with the short-term goal of obtaining an air pact to limit the size of the German Air Force in exchange for allowing the Germans military rights in the Rhineland.<sup>60</sup>

Eden's March 8 memorandum gives further evidence that his preference for appeasement did not derive from the belief that German grievances could be satisfied or that Hitler's intentions were benign. He wrote, "Herr Hitler's action is alarming because of the fresh confirmation which it affords of the scant respect paid by German Governments to the sanctity of treaties." "The myth is now exploded that Herr Hitler only repudiates treaties imposed on Germany by force," he continued. "We must be prepared for him to repudiate any treaty even if freely negotiated (a) when it becomes inconvenient; and (b) when Germany is sufficiently strong and the circumstances are otherwise favourable for doing so." Yet British policy had to be realistic and cautious, he argued, and Britain should not force a confrontation before it was militarily ready.<sup>61</sup>

That appeasement in the Rhineland crisis was motivated by a desire to buy time for rearmament is confirmed by minutes of a meeting of the Cabinet Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs in late March. At that meeting, which deliberated on the French request for a firm joint stance against the German action, Baldwin noted that "the Government had received a mandate to re-equip our Forces, but at present we could not give any effective help." Chamberlain echoed that "our own Air Forces were so weak to-day that we could not do Germany much harm, but that in two years' time we should be able to hit her fairly hard."<sup>62</sup>

The Cabinet summed up its post-Rhineland rationale for appeasement as follows: "Our principal aim . . . at the present time was to play for time and for

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59. Cabinet 15 (36), March 5, 1936—CAB 23/83, pp. 236–237. A week later, in the midst of the Rhineland crisis, Baldwin echoed that "he himself had said at the Election that he was never going into sanctions again until our armaments were sufficient." See Cabinet 18 (36), March 11, 1936—CAB 23/83, p. 295.

60. Cabinet 15 (36), March 5, 1936—CAB 23/83, p. 240.

61. Cabinet Memorandum by Eden, C.P. 73 (36), March 8, 1936—CAB 24/261, pp. 189–190.

62. "Extract from Notes of a Meeting of Ministers Held on March 30, 1936," *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 16, p. 251.

peace. There was some reason to suppose that Germany did not wish to make war on us *now*. Time was vital to the completion of our defensive security."<sup>63</sup> This buying-time strategy was predicated on the conclusion that "our defensive arrangements were in such a condition that we could not face war this year."<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, the boldness of German challenges and the expectation that Germany would eventually initiate a war highlighted, as Eden morosely informed the Cabinet, that it was "more than ever necessary to do all we can to increase the tempo of our own re-equipment."<sup>65</sup>

#### CHAMBERLAIN'S CABINET: BALANCING ECONOMIC AND MILITARY CONCERNS

Chamberlain became prime minister on May 28, 1937, and continued to judge that the strategic situation required appeasement to buy time for rearmament, but until early 1938 he lengthened his assessment of the amount of time that was needed. Concerned that the British economy could not sustain the rapid and extensive rearmament effort that was necessary to engage Nazi Germany successfully on the battlefield, his priority became the management of rearmament. The Treasury reinforced this preoccupation, persuading Chamberlain that "if the rearmament program continued to expand at the rate it was then expanding, there was a profound possibility that it would undermine and destroy the existing economic and social structures" that underlay British power. He concluded that rearmament must be carried out at a manageable pace, while "ultimately our foreign policy must largely be determined by the limits of our strength."<sup>66</sup>

This conclusion, hardly new, was the defining feature of British policy in the

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63. "Extract from Cabinet Minutes of April 29, 1936," *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 16, p. 746 (emphasis in original). War Secretary Duff Cooper objected to what he called this "gain time" strategy on the grounds that it allowed Germany to grow even stronger in the interim. Because of British military weakness, however, his arguments fell on deaf ears. "Extract from Cabinet Minutes of April 30, 1936," *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 16, p. 749.

64. "Extract from Cabinet Minutes of July 6, 1936," *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 16, p. 755.

65. Memorandum by Eden, April 25, 1936, *DBFP*, Ser. 2, Vol. 16, p. 358.

66. Quoted in Robert Paul Shay Jr., *British Rearmament in the Thirties: Politics and Profits* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 174. This is not to say, as Randall L. Schweller does, that Chamberlain prioritized internal stability over external security, or as Kevin Narizny does, that appeasement arose because the economic interests of the Conservative Party took precedence over geostrategic concerns. Instead, British leaders avoided confronting Germany primarily for strategic reasons, and were mainly concerned about the economic costs of rearmament insofar as they threatened Britain's long-term military potential. See Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Narizny, "Both Guns and Butter, or Neither: Class Interests in the Political Economy of Rearmament," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (May 2003), pp. 203–220.

1930s. Even before the Rhineland crisis, nearly all British leaders recognized that while Britain needed a massive rearmament effort, it lacked the requisite economic strength and financial reserves. They believed that an unrestrained attempt to catch up with Germany militarily would severely weaken the British economy and undermine Britain's long-term military potential. Moreover, as the center of the world's financial and commercial systems, Britain was dependent on extensive global trade, which required peace and stability. Thus Britain's economic position could be severely compromised by war, particularly a long war on multiple fronts. But a long war was the only kind of war that Britain had any hope of winning against Germany.<sup>67</sup>

The British dilemma was further complicated by the fact that Germany was not the only potential British enemy. British interests in Asia and the Mediterranean were also vulnerable, as Japan and Italy were each increasing in strength and hostility. In this regard, Chamberlain's guns-without-sacrificing-butter thinking was bolstered by an influential memorandum on rearmament by the chiefs of staff in December 1937, which lamented the poor state of the British armed forces and their inadequacy to meet all potential threats. The chiefs of staff warned, "We cannot foresee a time when our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our territory and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. We cannot exaggerate the importance from the point of view of Imperial Defence of any political or international action which could be taken to reduce the number of our potential enemies and to gain the support of potential allies."<sup>68</sup>

Under the circumstances, continuing the government's existing policy of appeasement would have the dual advantage of allowing a slower rearmament policy and avoiding a war that was bound to be disastrous, even if Britain emerged victorious. In Robert Paul Shay's words, "Conciliation was the only course they [i.e., the British] could see by which it was possible to save the nation from the threat posed from without by too few arms and from within by

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67. Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy*, p. 102; and Christopher Layne, "Challenging the Churchillian Orthodoxy: Neville Chamberlain's Grand Strategy Reconsidered," paper presented at the annual conference of the International Studies Association, San Francisco, California, March 26–29, 2008.

68. Quoted in Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet*, p. 64. See also Cabinet 46 (37), December 8, 1937–CAB 23/90, pp. 265–268. The need to divide limited resources among multiple potential threats is a variation of the conserving-resources variant of the diffusing-secondary threats strategy of appeasement. Kennedy argues that Britain's "stretched global position was an enormously powerful reason for compromise with other states and for the pacific settlement of disputes with them." Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy*, p. 18. See also Paul W. Schroeder, "Munich and the British Tradition," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (March 1976), pp. 223–243, at p. 224.

too many.”<sup>69</sup> Chamberlain was therefore determined to do everything possible to avert a short-term crisis with Germany so that Britain could rearm slowly, either to avert a long-term crisis through deterrence or, more likely, to prepare for a general war. His primary target of appeasement at this time, however, was Italy. He hoped that Italy would help reinforce deterrence and moderate German challenges, and, if deterrence failed, contribute significantly to the war effort.

After the Anschluss was formalized in March 1938, however, Chamberlain reluctantly concluded that he could no longer privilege economic stability over rapid rearmament, telling the Cabinet that the appropriate response to Hitler’s insatiable appetite was to accelerate rearmament, regardless of its broader economic cost.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, having been compelled to choose guns over butter, he still needed to give rearmament time to proceed before risking a war with Germany.

#### THE CZECHOSLOVAK CRISIS

The British and French surrender of Sudeten Czechoslovakia to Hitler in 1938 was also a product of an assessment of relative capabilities and expected shifts in the balance of power, rather than the mistaken belief that war could be avoided for the foreseeable future by satisfying German grievances. Significantly, the Cabinet discussion of Hitler’s *fait accompli* in Austria was premised on the following assumptions. First, Hitler would undoubtedly continue his campaign of territorial aggrandizement now that the rapid pace of German rearmament made Germany the most powerful country in Europe. Second, Hitler’s next target would be Czechoslovakia, more specifically the largely German Sudetenland. Third, a British and French military response to a German offensive against Czechoslovakia would in all probability not save Czechoslovakia, for several reasons. After the Anschluss, Germany surrounded Czechoslovakia; Poland and Romania would not allow Soviet troops to cross their territory to aid the Czechs; and Poland was unlikely to intervene.<sup>71</sup> Fourth, given that the existing balance of power favored Germany, par-

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69. Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties*, p. 175. James P. Levy similarly ties appeasement to the following underlying cause: “too many enemies, too few resources to keep them all at bay.” Levy, *Appeasement and Rearmament*, p. 37.

70. Cabinet 12 (38), March 12, 1938—CAB 23/92, pp. 345–358; and Norman Henry Gibbs, *Grand Strategy*, Vol. 1: *Rearmament Policy* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1976), pp. 294–300.

71. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power*, pp. 235–238. The Cabinet did not expect Soviet intervention on behalf of Czechoslovakia, and had a low opinion of the Red Army based on reports from British military attaché in Moscow Col. W.G. Firebrace. See, for example, Colonel

ticularly with the weakness in the RAF and British air defenses, it was not the optimal time to engage Germany in a general war. Finally, British weaknesses would probably be remedied within two years. Consequently, it was better to make peaceful concessions to Hitler to buy time for rearmament and war on more favorable terms.

Some observers will object that British decisionmakers differed in their beliefs, and that Chamberlain and Foreign Secretary Halifax in particular did not the view, held by Baldwin and Eden in 1936 and many others in 1938, that German challenges were illegitimate or that war with Germany was extremely likely. Given the prominence of these two British leaders, we examine their views, which are more complex than often portrayed in the literature.<sup>72</sup>

Neither Chamberlain nor Halifax viewed the German challenges as legitimate. As Chamberlain told French Premier Edouard Daladier, "It made his blood boil to see Germany getting away with it time after time and increasing her domination over free peoples."<sup>73</sup> For his part, Halifax told a delegation of trade unionists that he viewed Nazi Germany as "the next thing to Hell."<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, while neither Chamberlain nor Halifax was irrevocably convinced that war with Germany was inevitable, neither was optimistic that it could be avoided. Chamberlain, for example, was of two minds regarding whether appeasement could avoid war. He often observed that because Britain would suffer economically in a war or even in maintaining a deterrence footing for an extended period, making a serious last-ditch effort to diffuse the ongoing crisis with Germany was worthwhile.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, occasionally in the midst of the German challenges that he felt powerless to stop, he would tell his colleagues that he "wondered whether it would not be possible to make some arrangement which would prove more acceptable to Germany. Apart from other considerations, this would have the advantage that it would be more likely to secure permanency."<sup>76</sup> Statements such as these have helped to per-

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Firebrace to Viscount Chilton (British ambassador to Moscow), April 18, 1938, *DBFP*, Ser. 3, Vol. 1, pp. 162–165.

72. Indeed, we believe that historical debates about British appeasement policies under Chamberlain were significantly shaped by his death in 1940, which left him unable to refute the charges of his critics. Consequently, his role in history has been distorted.

73. "Visit of French Ministers to London," meeting summary, CP 38 (109), May 3, 1938—CAB 24/276, p. 303.

74. Quoted in Corbin (French Ambassador to London) to MAE, April 7, 1938—MAE, *Correspondance Politique et Commerciale, 1918–1940, Grande Bretagne*, Vol. 278, pp. 123–124.

75. See, for example, Cabinet 6 (38), February 19, 1938—CAB 23/92, p. 181, where Chamberlain outlines his disagreement with Eden prior to the latter's resignation as foreign secretary.

76. Quoted in Middlemas, *The Strategy of Appeasement*, p. 189.



petuate the traditional interpretation of appeasement. As we demonstrate, however, this was not the dominant line of Chamberlain's or Halifax's thinking.

Chamberlain's view that avoiding the costs of war made a final attempt at negotiations worth pursuing is not equivalent to the view often attributed to him—that Chamberlain naïvely expected negotiations to cement a constructive European peace. He and Halifax fully acknowledged the magnitude of German challenges, which had grown commensurate with German strength, and believed that further German conquests in Central and Eastern Europe would most probably lead Germany into an eventual war with Britain and France. Thus, Halifax was far from optimistic in March 1938 when he stated during the Sudeten crisis, "It cannot be contended that the future is not black, but there is at least an element of uncertainty in the diagnosis."<sup>77</sup> A month later, Halifax went so far as to tell a meeting of trade unionists that "war with the Reich appeared from now on as inevitable, but diplomacy had as its goal to delay it, to choose its terrain, and to fortify its means of defense."<sup>78</sup>

In meetings with Daladier in April, Chamberlain explained that he, too, "asked himself where the present course of events was likely to stop." At the same time, however, he "asked himself whether the picture was really so black as M. Daladier had painted it," or whether Hitler could be contained and deterred after a likely conquest of Sudeten Czechoslovakia.<sup>79</sup> This duality is reflected in Chamberlain's private correspondence, a particularly good indicator of his thinking, as he was not pandering to any particular constituency. His letter to his sister Hilda after the Anschluss indicates his distrust of the Germans: "It is perfectly evident surely now that force is the only argument Germany understands and that 'collective security' cannot offer any prospect of preventing such events until it can show a viable force of overwhelming strength backed by determination to use it." Yet he also indicated, "If we can avoid a violent coup in Czecho-Slovakia, which ought to be feasible, it may be possible for Europe to settle down again and some day for us to start peace talks again with the Germans."<sup>80</sup>

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77. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 187.

78. Corbin (French Ambassador to London) to MAE, April 7, 1938, pp. 123–124.

79. "Visit of French Ministers to London," May 3, 1938—CAB 24/276, p. 303.

80. Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, March 13, 1938—Papers of Neville Chamberlain, University of Birmingham Library, Special Collections, Birmingham, United Kingdom, NC 18/1/1041. Indeed, Chamberlain's wild vacillations in the course of a single letter—which he begins by stating of the Germans, "I wished them at the bottom of the sea; instead of which they are on the top of the land, drat 'em!"—suggests that cognitive dissonance may have been the cause of his du-

In the context of their uncertainty regarding German motives and the risks of future war, Chamberlain and Halifax were heavily committed to rebuilding British military strength either to deter Hitler or to fight Germany on more favorable terms.<sup>81</sup> In their view, the problem was that pending full rearmament Britain lacked the capability either to deter Hitler or to resist his challenges. As Chamberlain explained to his sister, Ida:

You have only to look at the map to see that nothing that France or we could do could possibly save Czecho-Slovakia from being over-run by the Germans if they wanted to do it. The Austrian frontier is practically open; the great Skoda munition works are within easy bombing distance of the German aerodromes, the railways all pass through German territory, Russia is 100 miles away. Therefore we could not help Czecho-Slovakia—she would simply be a pretext for going to war with Germany. That we could not think of unless we had a reasonable prospect for being able to beat her to her knees in reasonable time and of that I see no sign. I have therefore abandoned any idea of giving guarantees to Czecho-Slovakia or to France in connection with her obligations to that country.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, after the Anschluss, Chamberlain told the Cabinet that “in spite of it all, he felt that this thing had to come. Nothing short of an overwhelming display of force would have stopped it. . . . So he believed that what had happened was inevitable unless the Powers had been able to say ‘If you make war with Austria you will have to deal with us.’” He did not, however, believe that Britain was ready to make such a commitment given its weakness. Therefore, he viewed accelerating rearmament plans as the appropriate response to the new German challenge.<sup>83</sup>

Chamberlain and Halifax also advocated serious negotiations with (and concessions to) Italy as a means of isolating an increasingly aggressive

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ality. He believed that Britain needed to stand up to Germany, but his chiefs of staff informed him that he lacked the means to confront Germany at that time. Thus, in the face of this painful reality, he occasionally lapsed into unwarranted hope. We believe that previous historians have mistakenly concluded that Chamberlain was naïvely optimistic about Germany because they focused on these passages of Chamberlain’s correspondence out of their proper context, thereby disregarding the more frequent instances of Chamberlain’s realism and pragmatism in the same letters.

81. See, for example, Cabinet 13 (38), March 14, 1938—CAB 23/92, p. 364.

82. Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, March 20, 1938—Papers of Neville Chamberlain, University of Birmingham Library, Special Collections, Birmingham, United Kingdom, NC 18/1/1042.

83. Cabinet 12 (38), March 12, 1938—CAB 23/92, pp. 349–358, at p. 352. Chamberlain similarly explained his opposition to war over Czechoslovakia to Daladier, noting that “Great Britain, having disarmed since 1919, just started rearming a short while ago.” “Munich,” undated memoir, private papers of Edouard Daladier, France, Archives Nationales, 496AP/8, 2DA1/Dr2/sdrb, p. 8.

Germany from its primary ally. They based their thinking on the belief that Britain, even with allies, lacked the military capability to tackle a united front of Germany, Italy, and Japan. Indeed, this was their principal disagreement with Eden, which led to Eden's resignation and his replacement by Halifax.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, although neither Chamberlain nor Halifax completely abandoned hope of avoiding war over the longer term by making strategic concessions, they were not optimistic that this policy would succeed, and they simultaneously accelerated the British military buildup to prepare for war. They were not starry-eyed idealists who believed that Hitler's intentions were benign. Their views are better characterized by uncertainty and fear than by optimism. Indeed, the only thing that was certain was the catastrophic cost of war. Even a victorious war would leave Britain worse off than the prevailing status quo. Faced with the near certainty of a destructive war, they pursued a strategy that they believed had a small chance of securing an acceptable settlement and a larger chance of buying time so that the dreaded war could be fought on more favorable terms.

When Chamberlain and Halifax presented their rationale for restraint to the Cabinet, it was premised on the balance of forces, rather than on the prospects for a long-term settlement with Germany. At the pivotal March 22, 1938, Cabinet meeting on the Sudeten crisis, they highlighted British military inferiority to Germany, especially with respect to airplanes and air defenses. Halifax presented a report by the chiefs of staff subcommittee on the military implications of German aggression against Czechoslovakia, which concluded that "no pressure which this country and its possible allies could exercise would suffice to prevent the defeat of Czechoslovakia." Furthermore, the report questioned the utility of British and French alliances with Greece, Hungary, Romania, Turkey, and Yugoslavia, and "gave a deplorable account of the French air position . . . as well as of our own position in respect of anti-aircraft defence." The foreign secretary concluded that "in view of this report, whatever his sympathies and anxieties, he felt that he was not in a position to recommend a policy involving a risk of war." Instead, he advocated restraining France and pressing Prague to make concessions to Germany.<sup>85</sup>

Chamberlain agreed, adding that appeasement of Germany was neither an end in itself nor the only track Britain would pursue. "To all this," he contin-

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84. See Cabinet 6 (38), February 19, 1938—CAB 23/92, p. 179; and subsequent emergency Cabinet meeting minutes.

85. Cabinet 15 (38), March 22, 1938—CAB 23/93, pp. 32–34.

ued, "there were two corollaries: the first that we should speed up our existing plans for rearmament. . . . Second, the sooner we could reach agreement with Italy the better."<sup>86</sup> In other words, while Chamberlain believed that Britain lacked the capability to challenge Germany in 1938, he would attempt to build Britain's military might and isolate Hitler so that it could deter or fight Germany on better terms in the future. Although there were some Cabinet members, such as Duff Cooper, who advocated support for France if Paris were to honor its pledge to Prague, the majority of the Cabinet agreed with Chamberlain that British military weakness, particularly in aircraft and air defenses, made it unwise to stand up to Hitler in 1938. The Cabinet was persuaded "that even if we had the strength, we could not protect a country in the geographic position of Czecho-Slovakia. Neither could the French, and the Russians were separated from Czecho-Slovakia by the territory of Poland and Roumania. No one could help in time. After the fall of Czecho-Slovakia, the French would remain behind the Maginot line. The Germans, owing to the strength of their Air Force, could damage us more than we could damage them. At least two months would elapse before the United Kingdom could give any effective help to France. Meanwhile the people of this country would have been put in a position of being subjected to constant bombing, a responsibility that no Government ought to take."<sup>87</sup>

Significantly, the Cabinet's decision was premised on the effect British rearmament was likely to have on the military balance within two years. The minutes of the March 22 meeting continue, "In regard to the position two years hence, the Cabinet were reminded that the Royal Air Force would at any rate be armed with up-to-date aeroplanes and the anti-aircraft defences with modern weapons. In addition to this improvement in quality, there would be in existence an organised active and passive defence."<sup>88</sup> As Halifax advised his ambassador in Paris, Sir Eric Phipps, Britain opposed French proposals for a stern bilateral warning against further German actions in Central Europe due to "our doubt as to our ability to enforce it." "Our effort in rearmament has been considerable," the foreign secretary continued, "but we are only approaching the stage where production will give us a return on the expenditure

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86. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

87. *Ibid.* This is exactly the vulnerability that Hitler attempted to exploit diplomatically. See Nevile Henderson, *Failure of a Mission: Berlin, 1937-1939* (Toronto: Musson, 1940), p. 156; and Gerald Geunwook Lee, "'I See Dead People': Air-Raid Phobia and Britain's Behavior in the Munich Crisis," *Security Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter 2003/04), pp. 230-272.

88. Cabinet 15 (38), March 22, 1938—CAB 23/93, p. 41.

on which we embarked. Quite frankly, the moment is unfavourable, and our plans, both for offence and defence, are not sufficiently advanced.”<sup>89</sup> Thus, as Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, the first secretary of the British embassy in Berlin, reflected later, “We were not ready either militarily or psychologically, and time had to be bought to make good both deficiencies.”<sup>90</sup>

At core, then, the decision to abandon the Sudetenland to Hitler was based on the belief that a deterrent threat by Britain was tantamount to an empty bluff that, if called, would have resulted either in a humiliating surrender or, worse, a devastating defeat. Halifax described this apprehension in his memoirs:

No one who had the misfortune to preside over the Foreign Office at that time could ever for one moment of the twenty-four hours of each day forget that he had little or nothing in his hands with which to support his diplomatic efforts. The British people had through years of wishful thinking come to believe that because they so clearly recognised war to be a bad plan, everybody else must recognise it for such too. Services and industry alike had been hampered by the formula writing down the risk of war, and thus the Foreign Secretary was like a player invited to stake, when he knew that if the fortune of the game turned against him he had nothing with which to redeem his pledge.<sup>91</sup>

British appeasement at Munich, then, was driven by a bleak assessment of relative power. Indeed, when he defended the Munich agreement before the Cabinet, Chamberlain declared, “I hope . . . that my colleagues will not think that I am making any attempts to disguise the fact that, if we now possessed a superior force to Germany, we should probably be considering these proposals in a very different spirit. But we must look facts in the face.”<sup>92</sup> We therefore agree with historian Wesley Wark’s conclusion that appeasement “undeniably . . . was influenced by the pessimism that flowed from intelligence circles. The near and medium-term military balance was presumed to be perilous, a perception that was instrumental in convincing the cabinet to avoid the dangers of any attempt at deterrence, above all during the Munich crisis.”<sup>93</sup>

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89. Halifax to Phipps, March 23, 1938, enclosure 2 in CP 76 (38), March 23, 1938—CAB 24/276, p. 19.

90. Ivone Kirkpatrick, *The Inner Circle: Memoirs* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1959), p. 133.

91. Edward Frederick Lindley Wood, Earl of Halifax, *Fullness of Days* (London: Collins, 1957), p. 198.

92. Quoted in Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 78.

93. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy*, p. 231.

Table 1. British Defense Expenditure, 1930–39 (in £million)

Year	Navy	Army	Royal Air Force	Total Defense Expenditures	Defense Spending as a Percentage of Total Government Expenditures
1930	52.3	40.2	17.6	110.1	13%
1931	51.0	38.6	17.9	107.5	13%
1932	50.2	36.1	17.0	103.4	12%
1933	53.4	37.5	16.7	107.7	14%
1934	56.6	39.7	17.6	113.9	14%
1935	64.9	44.7	27.5	137.0	15%
1936	81.0	55.0	50.0	186.0	21%
1937	101.9	72.7	81.8	256.4	26%
1938	132.4	121.5	143.5	397.5	38%
1939	181.8	242.4	294.8	719.0	48%

SOURCE: Robert Paul Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties: Politics and Profits* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 297.

NOTE: All figures represent actual expenditures during the fiscal year beginning March 31, including amounts raised by means of national defense loans.

#### THE PACE OF BRITISH REARMAMENT

If our interpretation of appeasement is correct, we would expect to see evidence that Britain made a serious effort to use the time it was buying to rearm. We noted earlier that the Cabinet initiated a rearmament program in 1935, which it accelerated during the Rhineland crisis. But we also require evidence that the Cabinet actually acted on its decision to rearm after the crisis to conclude with confidence that appeasement was truly designed to buy time for rearmament. Otherwise, as R.A.C. Parker suggests, Chamberlain's buying-time language might simply have been rhetoric to overcome Cabinet opposition.<sup>94</sup>

As Peter Neville points out, the British rearmament effort has been unfairly judged as lackluster and half-hearted because it is viewed in light of the rapid German victories in 1940.<sup>95</sup> Judged in objective terms, however, the British increased their commitment to defense consistently since 1935. As table 1 indicates, British defense spending increased by more than 35 percent in 1936 and a further 38 percent in 1937, even though Chamberlain attempted to moderate the impact of defense spending on the British economy. Moreover, defense

94. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement*.

95. Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement*, pp. 130–133.

spending as a percentage of total government expenditures rose to 21 percent in 1936, and 26 percent in 1937, before taking off in 1938, the year of the Anschluss and Sudeten crises.

Not surprisingly, in its early stages this spending was skewed toward the most important British defense priorities—the RAF and the Royal Navy rather than the army. British priorities, in descending order, were (1) to safeguard the British Isles from invasion; (2) to protect trade routes necessary for British survival; (3) to preserve the empire, which supplied Britain; and (4) to defend British allies.<sup>96</sup> For the first priority, the RAF and Royal Navy were vital. For the second and third priorities, the Royal Navy was of primary importance. Only for the last priority would the army be essential. Thus it made perfect sense to prioritize reequipment of the other two services over the army.

This order of priorities was reinforced by Chamberlain's understanding of military strategy in the late 1930s. Having been influenced by Sir Basil Liddell-Hart, Chamberlain believed that victory on land required a 3 to 1 offensive advantage over the defender, whereas a breakthrough by air or sea was far easier to obtain.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, it was more logical to devote the limited available resources to the air and sea theaters, where Chamberlain believed the Germans had a real potential for victory, than to the ground theater, where the Germans lacked the prescribed ratio of forces. Thus, although he acknowledged that the British and French had no offensive options against Germany to prevent its eastward expansion, he believed that France could hold out behind the Maginot line fortifications for a while, even without considerable British ground support. Instead, when the time came, the major British contribution would be through aerial bombardment and blockade. That explains why until 1938 the army received much lower levels of funding than the other two services and why in March 1938, when Chamberlain again accelerated the rearmament program during the Sudeten crisis, he privileged the RAF, which he felt suffered from the greatest deficiencies and was most strategically significant.<sup>98</sup> The government was rearming in a targeted way that it expected would be most efficient.

On balance, then, there is strong evidence that the British government accelerated its rearmament effort in 1936 as a result of the Rhineland crisis, and was

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96. *Ibid.*, p. 127; and G.C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury, 1932–1939* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979), pp. 134–135.

97. Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement*, pp. 126–127; and Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace*, p. 5.

98. See John Julius Norwich, ed., *The Duff Cooper Diaries* (London: Orion, 2007), p. 244.

preparing for an expected war with Germany. There is also evidence that the Cabinet believed the rearmament effort had made progress in the two-year interval between the Rhineland and Sudeten crises. In 1936 the chiefs of staff informed the government that, due to multiple commitments and widespread underequipment, air defenses against Germany were deficient; the ability to strike Germany with offensive air operations was almost nonexistent; the army was incapable of fielding an expeditionary force on the continent; and most damning, the Royal Navy was unable to mount effective coastal defenses against the rather small German Navy.<sup>99</sup> By 1938, although the Royal Navy was still incapable of fighting both Germany and Japan simultaneously, the Cabinet's primary anxiety in a confrontation with Germany was the inadequacy of anti-aircraft defenses and fighter aircraft, rather than the overall military situation.<sup>100</sup> This indicates that the Royal Navy, coastal defenses, and the bomber force of the RAF had made considerable leaps forward in two years.<sup>101</sup> In addition, the rearmament effort had provided Britain with a quantitative advantage over the German Navy, a ground force that was far more mechanized than the German Reichswehr, and high-quality radar installations and fighter aircraft (particularly the Hurricane and the Spitfire) that gave the British military a qualitative edge over Germany in key areas.<sup>102</sup>

The further acceleration of the pace of British rearmament after the Sudeten crisis and then again after the Munich Conference is fully consistent with our buying-time explanation of British appeasement. As we have demonstrated, British defense spending rose significantly and continuously after 1936 (even during the December 1937 to March 1938 period, when Chamberlain sought to moderate the economic effects of rearmament), and the services that were favored by Chamberlain's strategic concept made considerable progress since

99. See note 57.

100. See the chiefs of staff report that Halifax submitted to the Cabinet on March 22, 1938, Cabinet 15 (38), March 22, 1938—CAB 23/93, pp. 32–34.

101. Significantly, displacement tonnage of naval ships produced by British shipyards increased from more than 23,000 tons in 1935 to more than 86,000 tons in 1937, and more than 109,000 tons in 1938, before easing back to fewer than 84,000 tons in 1939. Thus, by February 1938 the Royal Navy had added seven more cruisers (including two anti-aircraft vessels) for home defense and had replaced a number of obsolete ships of the line. Great Britain Central Statistical Office, *Statistical Abstract for the United Kingdom*, No. 83: 1934–1938 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1940), pp. 166–167. Regarding the RAF, Secretary of State for Air Kingsley Wood told the editor of the *Manchester Guardian* privately in February 1939 that the air situation had improved considerably due to rearmament: "He was much easier in his mind than he was at the time of Munich; if there was another six months' respite he would be easier still and if we got through the end of the year he would be feeling quite confident." Quoted in H. Montgomery Hyde, *British Air Policy between the Wars: 1918–1939* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 476.

102. Levy, *Appeasement and Rearmament*, pp. 57–85.



1936. The short-lived effort, fueled by the Inskip memorandum of December 1937, to moderate the pace of rearmament was designed not to undermine rearmament in favor of a permanent settlement—which Chamberlain and Halifax expected was unlikely—but to prevent the pace of rearmament from undermining the economic stability necessary to sustain a long war.<sup>103</sup> Chamberlain sought merely to increase the amount of time that needed to be bought for rearmament to prevent overtaxing the Treasury. Three short months later, however, Hitler's bold challenge to Czechoslovakia convinced the Cabinet that "the assumption on which the reconditioning of the Services has been based, namely that the course of normal trade should not be impeded, should be cancelled." Thus, as M.M. Postan judged, "A new epoch in the history of rearmament began in the autumn of 1938 and ended in the summer of 1940."<sup>104</sup>

Indeed, in 1938 all three services received the budgetary allocations that they were requesting. Postan notes that "after August financial objections to the attainment of a two-power [naval] standard rapidly disappeared."<sup>105</sup> Britain also accelerated aircraft production, and in April 1938 the Cabinet approved the RAF's "Scheme L," which envisioned a first-line strength of 2,373 aircraft, a significant increase from the 1,735 level of "Scheme F" it had previously endorsed.<sup>106</sup> Thus aircraft production increased more than threefold, from fewer than 200 per month in each of the first six months of 1938 to 630 per month in the first six months of 1939.<sup>107</sup> The Cabinet took a few more months to decide on a plan to accelerate rearmament for the army, but it did so not long after Munich.<sup>108</sup> The pace of British rearmament from 1936 onward therefore is consistent with a buying-time interpretation of British appeasement policy.

Some may question our buying-time interpretation of British motivations on the grounds that Germany made better use of the delay in war than did Britain. In terms of outcomes, that is correct. For an assessment of the motiva-

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103. See Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury*, pp. 41–42; and Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet*, pp. 48–49. Peden notes that the rationing promoted by Inskip and the Treasury "was essentially a bargaining counter" to cut waste and that the services were actually provided with far more than the Inskip memorandum advocated, especially the RAF, which was never subject to rationing. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury*, pp. 42–43. Thus, while Duff Cooper's memoirs reflect the frustration of the admiralty with Chamberlain and Chancellor of the Exchequer Simon, the experience of the air secretary was wholly different.

104. Postan, *British War Production*, p. 53; and Cabinet 15 (38), March 22, 1938—CAB 23/93, p. 46.

105. Postan, *British War Production*, p. 58.

106. Cabinet 23 (38), April 27, 1938—CAB 23/93, pp. 215–221.

107. Postan, *British War Production*, p. 66.

108. *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

tions for appeasement, however, who ends up profiting most from the extra time is less relevant than the appeaser's expectations about whether it would be better off, in relative terms, after a postponement of war. The British were particularly sensitive to their vulnerability to the Luftwaffe in 1938, and gave particular weight to step-level advances that would minimize that vulnerability.

### *Conclusion*

British appeasement policy was not a naïve attempt to secure a lasting peace by resolving German grievances, as traditional analyses assume. Instead, it aimed to buy time for rearmament, based on the perception that the balance of power had already shifted in Germany's favor; that extensive concessions to Germany would not satisfy Hitler, moderate his aggressive policies, and eliminate the high risk of a military confrontation in the future; and that through a steady program of rearmament, Britain would be better prepared to confront Hitler in a few years. Chamberlain and Halifax would have been pleased by German reciprocity and a durable peace, but they viewed that outcome as highly unlikely. The real payoff they expected from appeasement would be a delay of war to buy time for rearmament and enable a militarily stronger and more secure Britain either to deter Germany from future challenges or, more likely, to fight a war on more favorable terms. For Britain, appeasement was thus a complement to a strategy of rearmament and balancing, not an alternative to it.

Our study of this paradigmatic case of appeasement confirms, therefore, that the traditional conception of appeasement, which involves satisfying grievances and reducing tensions to avoid war, is insufficient. It conflates one important strategy of appeasement with the general theoretical concept, and it ignores the strategies of diffusing secondary threats and buying time.

A couple of caveats are in order. First, our argument about British motivations does not necessarily imply that the buying-time strategy was the optimal response to the rise of German power in the 1930s. There is good reason to believe that British policy was based on flawed intelligence estimates of relative power. Wark, for example, argues that the British underestimated German power in the early 1930s—which led Britain to tolerate German revisionism—and overestimated German airpower in 1938—which made Britain too timid in the face of German moves in Central Europe.<sup>109</sup> Compounding these flawed

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109. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy*. See also Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack*

estimates was the British decision early on to calculate the balance of power based solely on Britain's military capabilities, excluding those of its allies.<sup>110</sup> This led to an underestimation of Britain's ability to prevail in a war with Germany and hence a dampening of its resolve to confront Germany.

We also acknowledge that other factors, such as pacifist public sentiments, may have contributed to British appeasement policy. Indeed, much of the British memoir literature from the period indicates that public opposition to rearmament and anything that could lead to war limited the government's ability to respond to German challenges.<sup>111</sup> Public opinion, however, acted more as an additional disincentive to a more active policy of containment, rather than a driving force behind it. British appeasement policies were driven primarily by perceptions of military weakness and the economic constraints on excessively rapid rearmament. Public opposition to war merely reinforced an appeasement policy that was determined by balance of power calculations.<sup>112</sup>

To conclude, scholars need to broaden the traditional conception of appeasement. Appeasement is not always about resolving grievances or creating a lasting peace; it is not always naïve; and it is not always antithetical to balancing. Instead, it can often allow states to balance against a more threatening adversary by diffusing secondary threats, or to facilitate balancing against the primary threat by delaying a conflict. We demonstrate that buying time was the dominant motivation underlying British policies toward Germany in the 1930s—the paradigmatic case of appeasement. We leave for future research an assessment of the relative frequency of this pattern of appeasement, its relative utility, and its relation to other policy instruments available to states confronted by a rising power.

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in *British Politics, 1932–1939* (London: Royal Historical Society Press, 1980). Wark attributes these misjudgments to cognitive biases and organizational procedures, not to any pressure from political leaders for assessments that would support their own preexisting policy preferences.

110. Cabinet 10 (34), March 19, 1934—CAB 23/78, p. 282. In subsequent work we plan to examine the sources of shifting British intelligence estimates, why those estimates were diametrically opposed to those of the French, and why the British did not give greater emphasis to French capabilities in British assessments of the balance of power.

111. See, for example, Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, p. 338; and Wood, *Fullness of Days*, pp. 182–183.

112. See, for example, Robert Gilbert Vansittart, *The Mist Procession: The Autobiography of Lord*