Politicians still cite Britain’s policy of appeasing Nazi Germany as an example of disastrous inaction in the face of aggression. Talking about the invasion of Iraq, President Bush declared his admiration for Winston Churchill, who warned about the growing power of Germany while the governments of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain sought in vain for a settlement with Hitler. However, historians have been more sympathetic to the difficult situation Chamberlain was in.

**Document guidance**

*What factors forced Chamberlain to appease Hitler? How much choice did he have?*

**Source A**

Chamberlain’s asset was his sharp rationalism. He beat down critics with the question: what is the alternative? Hardly anyone now believed that the League of Nations could be effective in its existing form, though many shrank from admitting it—Germany, Italy and Japan outside the League; sanctions shattered by the failure over Abyssinia. Churchill tended to talk as though Great Britain and France could still lay down the law to Europe; some members of the foreign office thought that Hitler should be ‘hit on the head’. Chamberlain had no faith in his policy. Though he regarded France as secure from invasion behind the Maginot line and Great Britain as equally so behind the shield of sea power, he believed that Germany was also secure on her side. At least, she could be tamed only by a great war, lasting for years and tearing Europe to pieces. Such a war he and nearly all Englishmen wished to avoid.

A. J. P. Taylor (1956) *English History 1914–1945*

**Source B**

The important point was a simple one: British security was a global problem, not a German one. Until 1936 it was Japan and Italy, each with a substantial navy, that posed much the greater threat. In 1936 the threat from the Soviet Union against India could not be discounted... Britain was not militarily naked, but she certainly did not possess ‘great military strength’. In 1934 Maurice Hankey, the cabinet secretary, was nearer the truth: ‘We have but a façade of imperial defence. The whole structure is unsound.’ Nor was the diplomatic outlook more hopeful. The League system, in which British politicians had had little confidence, was universally recognised as bankrupt. Britain had no binding obligations in Europe; the USA, with whom Britain had most in common, was isolationist. British diplomacy had left her independent and flexible in the 1920s; in the 1930s it left her isolated and vulnerable... For want of any alternative, British foreign policy came to rely on the exercise of Britain’s traditional diplomatic skills to disguise the very real weakness of the British position.

Richard Overy with Andrew Wheatcroft (1989)

*The Road to War*
**Source C**

Unsighted by the economic blizzard, Chamberlain failed to perceive the full danger of Nazi aggression. He could hardly believe that either Hitler or Mussolini, despite their wild rantings and bellicose posturings, wanted 'to go to war'. Rather than risk the catastrophic loss of blood and treasure, they would surely be amenable to a deal. It was just a matter of making friendly overtures, seeking acceptable terms and catching the dictators in the right mood, when they would give anything they were asked for.

Piers Brendon (2000)

*The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s*

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**Source D**

There are many hard facts to be faced, and one is that in present conditions we alone cannot hope to equal Germany's military effort. (It seems doubtful whether we and France by our combined efforts could do more than attain something like equality with Germany.)

...And as regards defence, there is another point. We have inherited responsibilities all over the world, which have become more onerous with the rise to power of other nations such as Japan. In the Far East, we have British interests in China to defend. They are considerable, and are concentrated mainly in the hands of a very numerous body of British individuals and concerns. It might not be intrinsically vital to protect them, though it might be important from the point of view of our prestige in Asia generally. What involves us vitally in the Far East is the necessity of protecting Australia and New Zealand against possible attack by Japan... In the first place we must, so long as these conditions last, give up any idea of policing Europe such as has come down to us from Versailles and the Covenant of the League. We simply cannot protect our own interests all over the world and at the same time claim a preponderant voice in the ordering of affairs in continental Europe.


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**Questions**

**Comprehension**

1. Explain the following references:
   - 'Sanctions shattered by the failure over Abyssinia' (Source A)
   - 'The Maginot Line' (Source A)
   - 'Isolationist' (Source B)
   - 'Unsighted by the economic blizzard' (Source C)
   - 'We have inherited responsibilities all over the world' (Source D)

2. According to A. J. P. Taylor in Source A, why did Chamberlain feel he had to adopt a policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany?

   Chamberlain realised that Germany could only be stopped by means of a major war, which no one in Britain or France wanted, and which Britain was not prepared for. He took a strongly realistic line, and did not agree with Churchill's policy of making threats which there was no realistic prospect of carrying out.

**Comparison**

3. To what extent do Sources C and D disagree about Chamberlain's approach to Germany? Does the evidence of Source C show that Piers Brendon is mistaken?

**Interpretation**

4. How strong is the evidence given in Sources A and B to support Taylor's and Overy's view that Chamberlain had little alternative to a policy of appeasement?

**Summative**

5. Using all these sources and your own knowledge, to what extent did Chamberlain fail to appreciate the threat to European peace posed by Nazi Germany in the period 1937–39?

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**Essay guidance**

**To what extent is it accurate to describe British foreign policy in the period 1936–39 as a failure?**

**Essay Plan**

2. Limitations on Britain's position.
3. Appeasement 1936–38: success or failure?
5. Conclusion.

**Essay**

If it was British policy in the period 1936–39 to contain the growth of Nazi Germany or to maintain the peace and stability of Europe, then clearly it ended in failure, though to what extent that failure was Britain's fault is open to debate. However, British foreign policy was not wholly concerned with Europe. As an imperial power Britain had to take a global view, where Italy and Japan, and possibly even the Soviet Union, threatened important parts of the empire; Japan in the Far East, the Soviet Union in Central Asia and Italy in the Mediterranean. Hitler, by contrast, had frequently expressed his admiration for the British empire and made it clear that his
ambitions lay in a quite different direction. This does not mean that Britain could afford to ignore Hitler’s moves in Europe, but it does mean that preventing him from taking territory in Poland or Czechoslovakia was not necessarily a British priority in the way that it was a priority for France.

Britain’s position was difficult because it was having to box above its weight. The USA’s decision not to join the League of Nations meant that the League depended almost entirely on Britain and France for enforcing its decisions. Both countries had also taken on League mandate territories, many of which, like the British mandates in Palestine or Iraq, posed serious problems, while Britain also faced an extensive nationalist movement in India. Britain’s imperial commitments stretched her armed forces to the limit. Although Chamberlain had started a major rearmament programme as Baldwin’s chancellor of the exchequer, it was painfully clear — as Churchill never tired of pointing out — that Britain lagged behind Germany.

It was therefore pointless for Churchill, or anyone else, to speak of Britain taking military action against Germany in Europe: it simply could not be done without the French, and the French political system was in such turmoil that successive French governments did not dare force matters with Germany in a crisis that provoked civil war.

Chamberlain had to deal with a strong peace movement at home and a suspicious Labour Party, both deeply hostile to rearmament and demanding a peaceful outcome to each crisis, which would have to come from negotiating with Hitler. In any case, Hitler’s demands did not seem as unreasonable to British officials at the time as they do now. The Paris peace settlement was unpopular in Britain, and there was considerable impatience with smaller countries, such as Czechoslovakia, which insisted that it be upheld. When Chamberlain spoke dismissively of Czechoslovakia as ‘a far-away country of which we know nothing’, many British people, including many officials, such as Sir Neville Henderson, the ambassador in Berlin, or the foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, agreed with him.

Given that it was not British policy to uphold the Treaty of Versailles, it can be argued that in the period 1936–38, it certainly did succeed in upholding the peace. There was no evidence of widespread public support for military action over either the Rhineland or the Anschluss. It could even be argued that British policy improved on Versailles, by allowing the Germans to overturn two of the treaty’s injustices — the demilitarisation of the Rhineland and the enforced separation from Austria. According to the principle of national self-determination, even the Sudetenland should have gone to Germany in the first place.

The main criticism that can be levelled at British appeasement in these years is not so much that it allowed Hitler to make his moves as that it allowed Mussolini to make his. Britain’s failure to enact and enforce crippling sanctions against Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia and to challenge Italian and German intervention in Spain suggested to the world that even when there was no contentious Treaty of Versailles to cloud the picture, Britain would give way before aggression. In Chamberlain’s defence, he did still cling to the idea that he could work with Mussolini, as he always had done previously.

Appeasement was not necessarily a failure. Chamberlain’s conduct in the Sudetenland crisis certainly presented an unedifying spectacle, and perhaps his defenders gloss over his very real distaste for the Czechs. On the other hand, he was in an almost impossible situation: the French were desperate not to fight, as were the British, and he believed that the crisis could be resolved without war, as the Munich conference in fact proved. Hitler, we now know, was furious with Chamberlain for cheating him of the short, victorious war he had been hoping for. Appeasement was the only alternative to a military campaign which, there was every reason to fear, could have been a humiliating failure; that, after all, was what in fact happened in 1940.

There is no evidence that Chamberlain intended the Munich agreement as a stop-gap to allow Britain to rearm: in fact, he even hoped briefly to continue appeasement after the Germans seized the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939.

Nevertheless, that is what the truce from 1938–39 became, and there is no doubt that Britain was better prepared for war in military terms by 1939 than she had been the year before. Where Chamberlain failed (and this was a serious failure) was in leaving the Soviet Union (signatory of a Mutual Assistance Treaty with Czechoslovakia in 1935) out of the Munich meeting and subsequent negotiations. It might be unfair to blame him for not anticipating the Nazi–Soviet pact, but it is true that his deep hostility to the Soviet Union (which, incidentally, he shared both with Churchill and with the Polish government) made it unlikely that he would secure Russian neutrality, still less a military alliance. In the end he left it far too late and the Poles paid the price.

It is wrong to regard British policy as the complete failure Chamberlain’s critics accused him of; in particular it is difficult to suggest a realistic alternative to the appeasement policy of 1936–38. Chamberlain was also unlucky: it is probably true to say that with almost any leader other than Hitler, a more permanent settlement would have been possible. When Chamberlain finally did face up to the inevitability of war, he took effective measures for civil defence and rearmament, but his short-sighted foreign policy made it impossible to win the war for the independence of Poland that was actually declared on 3 September 1939.

Seán Lang