The Munich Agreement, signed at the end of September 1938, was the result of Nazi Germany’s attempts to revise the terms of the peace treaties of 1919 and of Hitler’s accurate assessment of Britain’s desire to avoid conflict. It was controversial even before the ink of the signatories dried on the document. Did Chamberlain genuinely believe Hitler’s assertion that there would be no further aggression or was he playing for time while British military capacity followed a policy of rapid expansion?

From 1936 Hitler had pursued an aggressive and militaristic policy, first by occupying the Rhineland and then by annexing Austria, provoking only verbal protestations from Britain, France, Belgium and Italy. In 1937 Britain adopted a policy of rearmament but simultaneously sent representatives to hear Hitler’s concerns over the supposed grievances of the German-speaking peoples of Danzig, Austria and Czechoslovakia. On 12 September 1938, in a speech at that year’s Nuremberg Rally, Hitler warned that ‘the Germans in Czechoslovakia are neither defenceless nor are they deserted and people should take notice of that fact.’ It is in the light of Hitler’s stance as defender of Germans’ rights and of the precedent of non-intervention by Britain that the Munich Agreement should be viewed.

Document guidance

What support did appeasement have?

Source A

The hour of need has found the man, Mr Neville Chamberlain, the prime minister. Since he took office, Mr Neville Chamberlain has never wavered in his determination to establish peace in Europe. At the hour when dark clouds of war hung most menacingly above the world of men, the prime minister took a wise and bold decision. We may call him Chamberlain the Peacemaker. Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary, was at Heston [the airfield for London] to see the prime minister off on this epic-making flight to Germany, the first flight he has ever made. We know that no man could do more than he, but since we also know that it lies not in the power of mortals to command success, we say with all our hearts, ‘May God go with him!’ Three cheers for Chamberlain.

Source B

We cannot foresee the time when our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our trade, territory and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan at the same time...[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.

**Source C**

Seldom can any British prime minister have suffered such a sense of desolation and disaster as Chamberlain did in the summer days of 1940. It was impossible not to feel a certain sympathy for such an end to a long career of an ambitious man and a member of a family which had served its country over the years. Perhaps fate was kind in making him a person with few feelings. Neville Chamberlain was a sad and, to me, pathetic man. He appeared to have but little love for his fellow men. The coldness of his character encompassed him like an aura. If he had little heart he certainly had a brain. He was a first-class administrator, probably one of the most capable ministers of health of this century. When he became prime minister, his personal tragedy was that he was genuinely aghast at the possibility of war and he adopted the role of a man of peace because he was convinced that he had the political acumen to achieve it. But he hadn’t. He would not drive for collective security which could have held Hitler, and Hitler would not make a genuine peace.

I believe that in 1938 and 1939, he genuinely felt that God had sent him into this world to obtain peace. That he failed may or may not be due to the inevitable ambition of Hitler to dominate the world, but there can be little doubt that in his mental attitude, Chamberlain went the wrong way about it. He decided in the early stages of his discussions to treat Hitler as a normal human being and an important human being at that. At the time of the Munich crisis I said extremely critical things in public speeches about the German chancellor, with the result that I was approached by one of Chamberlain’s more important ministers, who asked whether I would be good enough to desist, as the prime minister had been informed that Hitler resented it.

*Lord Morrison of Lambeth (1960)*

*Herbert Morrison: An Autobiography*

**Source D**

The settlement at Munich was a triumph for British foreign policy, which had worked precisely to this end: not a triumph for Hitler, who had started with no such clear intention. Nor was it merely a triumph for selfish or cynical British statesmen, indifferent to the fate of far-off people or calculating that Hitler might be launched into war against Soviet Russia. It was a triumph for those who had preached equal justice between peoples; a triumph for those who had courageously denounced the harshness and short-sightedness of Versailles. Briand, the leading socialist authority on foreign affairs, wrote in 1920 of the peace settlement: ‘The worst offence was the subjection of over 8 million Germans to Czech rule.’ This was the offence redressed at Munich.


**Source E**

How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing! I would not hesitate to pay even a third visit to Germany, if I thought it would do any good. Armed conflict between nations is a nightmare to me; but if I were convinced that any nation had made up its mind to dominate the world by fear of its force, I should feel that it must be resisted. Under such a domination, life for people who believe in liberty would not be worth living; but war is a fearful thing, and we must be very clear, before we embark on it, that it is really the great issues that are stake.

Neville Chamberlain’s radio broadcast, 27 September 1938

**Source F**

Those of us who had supported Eden* were certain that Hitler would not keep to the Munich Agreement and that Chamberlain had embarked on an immensely dangerous course which would end in failure, with a European war and all its consequences. These fears were expressed most eloquently by Churchill, in the Commons debate on the agreement held on 5 October. Exposing with devastating acuity the weaknesses of Munich, which he described as a ‘disaster of the first magnitude’, he called for a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour. He was right: we had to prepare for war.

At Oxford, Munich had to be the subject of the Union’s first debate of term and, on Thursday 13 October 1938, I proposed the motion ‘That this House deplores the government’s policy of peace without honour’. The debate was a stormy one. Denying the Munich Agreement as ‘the peace which passeth all understanding’, I attacked Chamberlain for a ‘policy which brought us to the brink of war, that pulled us out at such a terrible cost and that points at which we know not what future tragedies’. I also accused Chamberlain of ‘turning all four cheeks to Hitler at once’, a comment which earned me some criticism.

*Edward Heath (1988) The Course of My Life*

*Anthony Eden had served as foreign secretary from 1935 under Stanley Baldwin. Eden disagreed with Chamberlain about the way to deal with fascism in Europe and in 1938 he resigned from office.*

**Commentary**

Source A is an extract from a newsreel that was broadcast in cinemas before the main feature film. Audiences heard commentary with accompanying images of Neville Chamberlain boarding the aeroplane and patriotic background music.
Source B is an extract from a report by the Chiefs of Staff, who were in charge of the British armed forces. Throughout the interwar years they catalogued the deficiencies in British military provision, concluding that the navy was useless, the army too small and the air force underdeveloped in comparison with the German Luftwaffe. Historians such as Paul Kennedy have concluded that they were 'excessively gloomy' in their predictions but they influenced government thinking.

Source E is from a public broadcast made by Neville Chamberlain to convince the 'common man' of the validity of the policy of appeasement. The historian Martin Gilbert has commented that Chamberlain's private letters to his sister and Cabinet Committee minutes show that he was aware of the threat from Hitler but that he wittingly chose to ignore it. Even after Munich, he hoped that Britain could adopt a policy of disarmament.

Sources C and F are from memoirs written by politicians after the end of their political careers. Edward Heath became Conservative prime minister in 1970. Here he is referring to his time as a student in Oxford, when he vocally opposed the policy of appeasement. Herbert Morrison was a Labour MP who was invited by Winston Churchill to join the government during the Second World War as minister of supplies; he later became home secretary.

A. J. P. Taylor, the author of Source D, was a left-wing historian. He was a member of the Communist Party in the 1920s but later joined the Labour Party. He spoke originally against British rearmament, fearing that a rearmed Britain would ally itself with Germany against the Soviet Union, but from 1936, he began to fear the rise of Nazism and decided that British rearmament was essential. In 1938, he spoke at rallies condemning the Munich Agreement, yet in 1981 he wrote a justification of Chamberlain's policy.

Questions

Comprehension

(1) What do Sources B, D and E tell us about reasons for the government's policy of appeasement in 1938?

Analysis

(2) Look at Source A. Comment on its language and tone. What was the intention of the broadcast?

Source A was intended to make Neville Chamberlain seem a hero and saviour to the British people and perhaps to the whole of Europe. The extract begins with the words 'hour of need', which imply that the situation was critical. 'At the hour when dark clouds of war hung most menacingly above' adds to this sense of impending crisis.

The rest of the extract focuses on Chamberlain's diplomatic efforts, describing him as 'wise and bold' and labelling him 'Chamberlain the Peacemaker'. Thus the audience was given the idea that any treaty would be solely due to his efforts. The additional detail that this is his first flight gives the impression of the supreme effort Chamberlain is making to secure a peace settlement. His journey is treated like a religious mission, with the blessing 'May God go with him!' Should he succeed, the implication is that he would enjoy divine support. He is treated like a hero, being given 'three cheers'. The broadcast suggests that it is speaking for the nation in supporting Chamberlain's negotiations.

Evaluation

(3) Look at Sources C and F. How useful for a historian are political memoirs like these as a comment on popular reactions regarding the events at the Munich Conference?
Historiography

(4) Look at the Commentary and at Source D. Why do you think Taylor’s views were regarded as so controversial in 1961?

Summary

(5) Using all the sources and your own knowledge, demonstrate how and why support for Neville Chamberlain’s actions in Munich were received with varying levels of support in Britain.

Essay guidance

Why did Chamberlain persist in following a policy of appeasement at Munich in September 1938?

Essay plan

(1) Introduction describing public reactions to the Munich Agreement.
(2) Context of Chamberlain's policy.
(3) Economic reasons for appeasement.
(4) Social and political reasons.
(5) Conclusion.

Essay

Chamberlain arrived home with the Munich Treaty held aloft, declaring he had brought back ‘peace with honour’. Churchill was part of a tiny minority who protested at the overwhelming excitement and support with which the media greeted the agreement. Munich was initially seen as the successful culmination of a British foreign policy which aimed at containing Hitler’s aggression and the spread of Nazi Party ideology. It was also seen as a means of assuaging British (and French) guilt for the punitive terms of the Versailles Treaty. However, Hitler’s subsequent aggression and the outbreak of war in September 1939 inevitably meant that Churchill’s criticisms came to replace the positive popular opinion of Chamberlain.

Chamberlain’s negotiations with Nazi Germany need to be understood in the context of British interwar foreign policy as a whole. This was developed in the 1920s on the basis that the defeat of Germany and the political upheavals in Russia made Britain safe and superior. This belief in a favourable global position meant that military development was not seen as necessary (the basis of the 10-year rules, i.e. war not foreseen for 10 years). A desire to rebuild the British economy and sustain the empire meant that there was a reluctance to divert government money into a large arms programme. Furthermore, there was a growing sense of guilt regarding the terms imposed on Germany at the Treaty of Versailles. A policy of appeasement was developed which aimed to treat Germany less severely.

British politicians in the 1930s looked at the bleak economic outlook for the European nations that had been physically ravaged by war and saw that Britain was in a considerably stronger economic position. While the USA adopted an isolationist stance, it was left to Britain to police European relations. The maintenance of a peaceful equilibrium was thus to Britain’s advantage, and the League of Nations was seen as the panacea for potential disputes.

In reality, by the 1930s, the British economic position was not strong. The world Depression, which led to the collapse of textile exports and shipbuilding and of the production of raw materials such as coal and iron, had a massive impact on Britain’s position in the world economy. Germany, the USA and the USSR were all rebuilding their economies with large investment in industry. Britain continued to cling to its economic links with the empire, which proved costly. Thus, when the armed forces began to demand financial investment from the Treasury in order to rebuild themselves in line with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, the money was not available. Moreover, the trade unions prevented the employment of less skilled workers to make up for the lack of skilled labour, which meant that production levels could not be increased. The Treasury was not being obstructionist but pragmatic: the economic and industrial situation made appeasement a necessity (see R. Selk, ‘N. Chamberlain and rearmament’, TWENTIETH CENTURY HISTORY REVIEW, Vol. 3, No. 1).

Public opinion was of key importance in the development of a pacifist attitude towards diplomacy. As a result of the huge loss of lives in the First World War, feelings of revulsion about war were endemic. War was seen as senseless and destructive and politicians who advocated policies of negotiation or inaction in the face of aggression were hailed as heroes. The fear that Bolshevism might put diplomatic and economic ties under strain meant that fascism was seen as a way of blocking threats from the USSR. Conservative anti-Soviet prejudice was sufficient justification in itself for the adoption of a gentele approach towards Hitler’s demands.

Ultimately the majority of the British people believed that their country would gain nothing from a conflict. Instead, there was a fear that war would cause heavy losses both at home and in the empire. It was for this reason that Chamberlain continued to follow a policy of appeasement at Munich in September 1938 and received widespread support for his efforts.

Nicola Garcia