The wisdom of the British policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany is one of the most controversial issues in modern world history. The reputation of Neville Chamberlain, British prime minister in the crucial period from May 1937 until war was declared in September 1939, is at the centre of much historical debate. For many historians, Chamberlain deserves vilification for failing to act and thus missing the opportunity to, at the very least, lessen the extent of the death and destruction that took place across the globe until 1945. Others argue that Chamberlain’s position has been misrepresented and oversimplified — they argue that attributing blame for the war requires more complex considerations. Is it fair to hold Chamberlain partly responsible for the Second World War?

Chamberlain failed to understand Hitler
Although simplistic, this argument is hard to refute. Right up to the Munich Conference of 1938, Chamberlain’s actions would seem to show beyond any doubt that he believed Hitler to be a reasonable man with whom he could negotiate. In particular, it would seem clear that he would not have made such forthright public pronouncements in the aftermath of Munich had he not believed that Hitler would honour his word, at least in the short term.

All the available evidence suggests Chamberlain believed that he had secured a genuine agreement which, at worst, would significantly delay a war, while Hitler privately considered the document to be ‘of no significance whatsoever’.

Chamberlain’s policy was morally indefensible
To begin with it can be argued strongly that Chamberlain was deliberately deceptive in his portrayal of appeasement to the British public. In dressing up the policy as motivated entirely by the desirability of peace (glossing over the issue of Britain’s readiness for war), Chamberlain knowingly raised unrealistic hopes of long-term avoidance of war and wilfully neglected to consider the potential costs of allowing the Nazis to enhance their power.

Furthermore, in the context of the eventual destruction of the war, it can be added that Chamberlain cannot be excused for disregarding Hitler’s extremism which was increasingly well known by 1937/38.

Chamberlain was an ineffective leader
Even the most generous assessment of Chamberlain should not overlook his shortcomings as a leader.
Chamberlain faced many pressures

An obsession with 'guilt' has meant that the various pressures affecting Chamberlain have never been fully understood. He was prime minister of a country that was not adequately prepared for war and was in no position to fight Germany in either 1937 or 1938.

Britain's military chiefs urged Chamberlain to avoid war at all costs during the Munich Conference and there was little Britain could have done to prevent Hitler's takeover of the Sudetenland in 1938. General Ironside, chief of the general staff, informed the prime minister during the Munich Conference that 'We have not the means of defending ourselves and he [Hitler] knows it'. In this sense there was no other option but to investigate whether German grievances could be solved without going to war.

Chamberlain's policy put Britain in a stronger position to fight

By delaying war Chamberlain had ensured that Britain was in a far stronger position — its radar system, covering the British coastline, which was crucial in preventing the Luftwaffe from defeating the RAF in 1940, was not operational in 1937 and 1938 when many of Chamberlain's opponents were urging confrontation with Hitler.

Source B

Neville Chamberlain on his return from Munich, 24 September 1938

Furthermore, he was ensuring that Britain was rapidly addressing its deficiencies in terms of fighter planes. By 1939 Chamberlain had made sure that Britain was committing nearly one quarter of its gross national product (GNP) to rearmament — a figure which often surprises those who see the embattled prime minister as having just one policy with regards to the German dictator.

Britain had no reliable and effective allies in 1938

It is difficult to see where Chamberlain was likely to find reliable and effective allies in the period when appeasement took place: the USA was still deeply committed to isolationism, the French lacked serious political leadership, and Chamberlain was naturally suspicious of the Russians. Churchill's vision of a 'Grand Alliance' did not take into account such practicalities.

In any case, none of the countries of Eastern Europe would have been prepared to let Soviet troops pass through their territory to get to Germany. Furthermore, the Dominions (such as Australia, South Africa and Canada), which had been crucial in contributing significant numbers of troops in the First World War, were not wholly convinced of the case for war in 1938; these countries had been given control over their own foreign policies in 1931 and their support for Britain in times of war could not now be taken for granted.

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