It is said that all great men are sooner or later due for debunking — though when faced with extraordinary crises, prime ministers are not always great men. It has certainly been difficult to substantiate serious criticism of the wartime leadership of Winston Churchill.

However, Britain had two war leaders in this period. The first was Neville Chamberlain, a fellow Conservative, who arrived at Downing Street in 1937 and whose ministry is best remembered for his avowed objective of avoiding a European war, followed by a policy of appeasement towards the European dictators.

In the beginning

Despite the ultimate failure of this policy, Chamberlain remained in office to declare war on Germany. Its onset was clearly a severe blow to Chamberlain who, with accents of personal tragedy, told his colleagues of his sadness: ‘Everything that I have worked for, everything that I have hoped for, everything that I have believed in during my public life, has crashed in ruins’. At the time, however, his political position appeared remarkably secure. His government had an overall majority of more than 200. Furthermore, it was strengthened by the inclusion of two influential Tories, Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, as well as by a number of other ministers of high ability.

In September 1939 the Conservatives were in a strong position to maintain a monopoly of power throughout the war, yet only eight months later, Chamberlain was forced from office following a Labour-led vote of ‘no confidence’ in the conduct of the war. His majority had fallen to eighty-one — and in a telling and decisive indication of the disunity in his party, forty of Chamberlain’s own backbenchers had joined with Labour in voting against the government and another forty may have abstained.

This article examines the wartime premiership of Neville Chamberlain from September 1939 to May 1940, outlining the factors which contributed to his downfall. The damaging charge most frequently laid against Chamberlain was of over-optimism and complacency. The reasons for this are found not only in his personal failings as a war leader, but also in the highly unusual course of events that characterized the first months of the Second World War. This was a period known — thanks to the American journalist who first coined the phrase — as the ‘phony war’.

The late summer of 1939 was one of the warmest on record. It was, as someone later recalled with acerbic humour, perfect weather for a late holiday, or for invading Poland. The reaction of the British public to the onset of another major conflict, only twenty years after the horror of the Great War, was markedly different from that witnessed in 1914. Bitter experience had discredited the concept of jingoism; instead the people were quietly resigned to the task ahead and desired only ‘to get the job over with as soon as possible’.

The problem with Stalin

The opening phase of the Second World War was an extraordinary period. There were still nearly one and a half million unemployed Britons — a hangover from the economic crisis of the thirties — while Germany was manufacturing arms at full speed. The British government had gone to war to defend Polish sovereignty, but found itself handcuffed, first by its failure to secure an anti-Hitler alliance with Stalin and then by the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939. Of course, given the long-standing mistrust and animosity between Stalin and the Western powers, there were few in Britain who anticipated that, within two years, Stalin would be a vital ally.

British impotence in the face of Nazi aggression was exacerbated when Poland, having fought heroically against the Germans ‘bloody’, was subject to Russian treachery and partitioned between the invaders. As a consequence, the government found itself unable to contemplate direct military action to help the Poles, without the very real risk of fighting Germany and Russia at the same time. Clearly, the re-establishment of Polish sovereignty required the withdrawal from Polish soil — either voluntary or forced — of both occupying armies; and there were few who did not dismiss this as wishful thinking.

The British government quickly reached the conclusion that, as nothing could be done to help the Poles in the early stages of the conflict, British strategy should be geared to a three-year war. It called for the perfection of the naval blockade of Germany, strengthened economic pressure against Hitler, the continued build-up of its own armed forces — and hope for the best.

Getting the right strategy

British military strategy during this time was determined by several factors, not least Chamberlain’s desire to wage a limited war. At the same time that the Luftwaffe was indiscriminately bombing and strafing Polish civilians, he issued a joint declaration with the French, ‘solemnly affirming our intention to conduct hostilities with a firm desire to spare the civilian population, and to preserve historical monuments’, and announced they had instructed their forces not to bombard any but ‘strictly military objectives, in the narrowest sense of the word’.

The RAF carried out several ineffective but costly raids against naval targets, but was otherwise restricted to dropping propaganda leaflets on German cities telling the populace what a bad man Hitler was and that it was a bad thing to do to...
war. Incredibly, the then Secretary of State for Air (Sir Kingsley Wood), tried to present this as a great victory, when he told the Labour MP, Hugh Dalton, that these so-called ‘Truth Raids’ had caused great irritation with the German authorities — since all air raid precautions had been put into operation in the belief that bombs, not leaflets, would be dropped.

This tactic (coined the ‘confetti war’ by its critics) did not go unchallenged. Opposition in Parliament was considerable. One heated exchange took place in October, when the Conservative, Leo Amery, met with Kingsley Wood to suggest that the RAF should attack the Black Forest region with incendiary bombs, as the area was known to contain reserves of timber and stores vital to the German war effort. Amery later recorded how his idea was rejected, because the proposed target was private property.

Soon, much of the popular press began to raise serious concerns about the conduct of the war. In November the National Review complained that ‘tired old men who have weighed upon the country like lead’ were still in the government.

Hitler was delighted with initial progress. For the whole of the autumn and winter of 1939, a gigantic expansion of German munitions production was undertaken without interruption — while British production suffered from the blackout.

**Parliamentary problems**

In the context of domestic politics, the German invasion of Poland provided the government with the opportunity, through the speedy issue of a decisive ultimatum to Hitler to ‘get out or else’, to rid itself of the sense of moral and political failure which was the legacy of appeasement. Yet in its initial response to the crisis, the government appeared to typify the indecisiveness which had been the hallmark of its foreign policy for the preceding four years.

When Chamberlain went on the evening of 2 September to make a statement in Parliament, the apparent ambiguity of his speech did little to reassure a House of Commons already in a mood of extreme apprehension. It was described by one listener as ‘unimpressive and hardly worth the occasion’.

A minority wondered whether the government was, in fact, attempting some surreptitious deal with the Nazis, but the common perception was all too clear: Britain was weakening in its undertaking to Poland.

Whatever the reality of the situation, and it was certainly far more complex than it seemed at the time, it appeared to many that the Prime Minister had to be forced into a declaration of war against Germany, following expiry of the British ultimatum. Nonetheless, Chamberlain’s political authority suffered another devastating blow. He recognized this when reporting the evening’s events to his sister, Ida. ‘The House of Commons’, he wrote, ‘was out of hand, torn with suspicions, and ready (some of them) to believe the Government guilty of cowardice and treachery.’

By his own admission Chamberlain was too busy to keep an extensive diary during the war; but he did maintain a long-standing correspondence with his sisters. His letters to them, and others, reveal his deep personal anguish about the immorality of warfare.

Looting war as passionately as he did, it is not surprising he was determined to wage as little of it as possible. He could not contemplate the ‘agony of mind’ it would mean for him to give wartime directives which would bring ‘death and mutilation and misery’ to so many. Following the sinking of one of the Royal Navy’s capital ships, Chamberlain confided in his sisters, ‘How I do hate and loathe this war,’ he wrote. ‘I was never meant to be a War Minister and the thought of all those homes wrecked with the Royal Oak makes me want to hand over my responsibilities to someone else.’

Chamberlain’s biographer, Iain Macleod, tells us that he should really have resigned at the war’s outbreak. He was ‘too much a man of peace to lead a nation and an empire effectively in war’. While few today would challenge Chamberlain’s abhorrence of violence, there was no place for an essentially pacifist Prime Minister at the head of a nation engaged in a struggle for survival.

**The best possible leader?**

Doubts remain over Chamberlain’s style of leadership. He was a man who did not believe in sudden inspiration or sensational short-cuts. Everything had to be patiently thought out. He resented outside pressure on decision making and had a contempt for those who disagreed with him, which he was often unwilling to conceal.

The testimony of some of those closest to him in the War Cabinet suggests that his personality dominated everyday affairs. According to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, Chamberlain would go into a ‘mood which was his personal problem, test it at every point, listen in a business-like fashion to what one had to say, and then state his conclusion with the finality of a General Manager conducting a company’s affairs.’

While Chamberlain saw this as steady persistence, others saw it as vanity and obstinacy. It perhaps explains Chamberlain’s reluctance to step aside in favour of a more dynamic war leader, for he always believed that when the time came for peace, he would fulfil what he saw as a pietistic destiny — being the only British politician capable of ending the war on favourable terms. One critic described this as ‘a mixture of cosmic ignorance and provincial romanticism’.

**How to defeat Germany**

When considering the conduct of the war, Chamberlain’s reasoning was always the same: the longer the fighting could be put off — and once it began, the longer the German attack could be delayed — the more time Britain would have to make good the deficiencies in its defences. Far less sound was his private, governing assumption that Nazism could be destroyed if Hitler were overthrown, and victory achieved without the incipient horror of a frontal clash between Germany and the Allies. His greatest error was his under-estimation of the Nazi regime and his lack of appreciation of its popular support.

He put too much faith in his ‘hunch’ that the German people, having been reduced by economic warfare, would be close to starvation by the end of the year. It was, in his mind, only logical that the ‘good Germans’ would be persuaded of their folly and overthrow the Führer, thereby ending the war in the spring of 1940. One rumour suggested that Goring might have Hitler assassinated and seize power himself, if he could be assured that Britain would not demand another Versailles settlement.

The meeting at Munich, September 1938. History has judged Chamberlain harshly for his failure to ‘stand up’ to Hitler.

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such an outcome would greatly enhance Chamberlain’s damaged political standing. A short and limited war, concluded by a Conservative government with a minimum of social and economic suffering, would allow the continued exclusion from power of Labour — a party with which he had no emotional rapport, but only an intellectual disdain for those he described as ‘an ignorant, ill-prepared and over-privileged opposition’. Once peace terms were agreed, he would be able to return to the questions of social reform which had drawn him into politics in the first place.

Churchill makes his mark
The beginning of the end came in November 1939, with the Russian invasion of Finland. Because the Soviet Union was considered as potentially dangerous as Germany, the government was sympathetic to the Finns. They wanted a concrete plan of action, which would enable them to help, while at the same time prosecuting the war against Hitler. Winston Churchill, First Sea Lord, had long had his eyes on Norway. It was important to Germany, both as a possible naval base for operations in the Atlantic, but also because Swedish iron ore — vital for the German war effort — was transported on land to Norwegian ports, whence it travelled by sea to Germany through neutral waters.

Churchill’s first proposal was for the Navy to mine the Norwegian coast. He then purposefully tensed the War Cabinet with the suggestion that, if several port cities were captured, they could be used as bases to help the Finns in their fight against the Russians. There were real dangers. Not only could Britain be drawn into war with Russia, but Chamberlain was concerned about innocent Norwegian lives as well as the effect such a move would have on public opinion in America. Many politicians and soldiers felt great mistrust towards the adventurous Churchill, best remembered for the disastrous Gallipoli campaign of the First World War — and characterized by Lloyd George as having ‘brilliance, unrivalled parliamentary powers, and no judgement whatever’.

In the end Chamberlain was won over to Churchill’s scheme, largely because it was a much-needed offensive action, which might quieten the government’s critics; but also because it kept a major clash — a repetition of Passchendaele or the Somme — at a safe distance. Fortunately, in early April 1940 Finland capitulated, thus saving Britain from a potential war with Russia.

In April 1940 Chamberlain spoke to the Central Council of the Conservative party. The wording of his speech reflected the mood of wishful thinking which typified his wartime leadership. Was it not extraordinary, he asked his listeners, that in the opening months of the war Hitler had made no effort to overwhelm Britain and France? Hitler, Chamberlain gleefully announced, had ‘missed the bus’. Four days later, just as the Royal Navy began to mine Norwegian waters, the Germans invaded Norway and Denmark.

Denmark quickly surrendered, having no standing army. Soon afterwards, British and French troops initiated pre-planned landings at several points along the Norwegian coast and the land war began in earnest.

The Allied operation was bungled from the start. British troops received no training for a winter war and travelled with little protective clothing and no skis. Nor did they have any heavy weapons, aircraft or even proper maps of the Norwegian countryside. Fighting raged for four weeks before the remaining British and French troops were evacuated from their landing ports on 8 June 1940, having been overwhelmed by a better-equipped and better-trained enemy.

Meanwhile, for the two days of 7 and 8 May, the military débâcle was debated in the Commons. Finally, following nearly a year of growing anger and bitterness on both sides of the House, the Labour party forced a vote of ‘no confidence’ in the government. Leo Amery, a persistent critic of the Prime Minister, delivered the coup de grâce when he reported Cromwell’s terrible words to the Long Parliament: ‘You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!’ Lloyd George begged the Prime Minister to set an example of sacrifice by giving up the seals of office.

Despite the crushing outcome of the vote, Chamberlain clung to the belief that he could remain as Prime Minister of a National Government. However, his political fate was sealed by a telephone call from the Labour leader. Attlee informed Chamberlain that the Labour party would not serve in any government under his leadership. The Labour opposition was adamant that it would not be led by a man who, in Attlee’s own words, ‘always treated us like dirt’.

Conclusion
Neville Chamberlain’s political downfall was, above all else, the result of a growing Tory rebellion. The relative quiet of the phoney war provided ample opportunity for political recrimination against the government, not least because of its apparent willingness to back a strategy which had not won the previous war — but at least had not lost it. The government’s foreign policy had failed, war had indeed come; yet those who had presided over the drift were, in the words of A. J. P. Taylor, ‘still moving into the war backwards with their eyes tightly shut’.

Churchill now became Prime Minister, but his move to Downing Street was no foregone conclusion. Lord Halifax, Chamberlain’s long-time and trusted Foreign Secretary, was seen by many as a natural successor. Unlike the maverick Churchill, he was considered ‘safe’ by many in Whitehall and respected by the Labour party for his cleverness, his charm and his integrity. Yet no peer had been Prime Minister for nearly forty years.

In the end the whole episode was something of an anti-climax. Halifax, tired by the events of the previous five years, felt unable to take on the responsibility. In earnest, he did not want to be Prime Minister — while Churchill clearly did.

On 10 May 1940, to the dismay of many, Winston Churchill, the long-standing prophet of the dangers posed by German rearmament, was asked by the King to form a coalition government. His first day in the job coincided with the German invasion of Holland and Belgium. The ‘real’ war had started at last.

The end of a life
Chamberlain accepted a relatively minor office in the new government. Sadly he was to live only a few months more and in October 1940 succumbed to illness, but not before witnessing the epic evacuation of the BEF from Dunkirk, the separate French armistice, and the German air offensive against Britain, launched as the preliminary to an intended invasion. There can be no doubting his heartfelt desire to avoid the horrors of war. Since 1937 he had struggled in vain to prevent another European conflict; and he took his failure to do so very personally.

At the same time, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that he should have stepped down in September 1939. He was not cut out to be an effective war leader. Despite being an outstanding administrator and party manager in peacetime, he was, in the words of his own Chief Whip, ‘a man on his own, he who — because of his unfortunate propensity to see political disagreements in personal terms — engendered personal dislike among his opponents to an extent almost unbelievable.’

Moreover, as Prime Minister he never achieved the mastery of the House of Commons, which Baldwin had acquired so easily. He was a lucid but uninspiring speaker, lacking in energy and vitality, at a time when it was most needed. He should have recognized from the start that the country could only hope to win the war if it was united. It was his task, above all others, to create unity, to rise above party, so that all politicians could look to him as their wartime leader.

Only a National Government could gain support for the all-out effort the war was bound to demand. The fact that Labour’s attitude towards Chamberlain’s administration remained one of ‘cold, critical, patriotic detachment’ rendered his leadership of a coalition impossible. His inability to achieve unity ensured that the wartime premiership of Neville Chamberlain was destined to end in failure.

Further reading

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