Hitler, Chamberlain and appeasement

Frank McDonough
For Ann

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo
Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521000482

© Cambridge University Press 2002

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002
5th printing 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library


Text design by Newton Harris Design Partnership

Map Illustrations by Kathy Baxendale

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
Cover, © CORBIS; 45, 61, 70, reproduced with permission of Punch Ltd;
51, Hulton/Archive; 53, David Low/Evening Standard 30.9.38, Centre for the
Study of Cartoons and Caricature; 72, John Frost Newspapers.

Picture research by Sandie Huskinson-Rolfe of PHOTSEEKERS.
The cover illustration shows Chamberlain and Hitler at the 1938 Munich
conference at which Chamberlain agreed to allow Nazi Germany to annex the
Sudetenland.
Contents

Introduction 1

1 Anglo-German relations, 1918–33 3
   The legacies of the First World War 3
   The Paris peace conference 4
   The Treaty of Versailles 5
   The reparations problem 9
   The Locarno treaties 10
   The impact of the Great Depression 12
   German foreign policy, 1929–33 13
   Document case study 14

2 The impact of Adolf Hitler: foreign-policy aims and actions, 1933–37 17
   What were Hitler’s aims in foreign policy? 17
   The early years of Hitler’s foreign policy, 1933–35 18
   The problem of German rearmament 21
   The Italian invasion of Abyssinia and its consequences 22
   The Rhineland crisis 24
   The Spanish Civil War 25
   Hitler moves from strength to strength 25
   The search for an Anglo-German alliance 26
   Document case study 27

3 Why appeasement? 31
   The impact of the First World War 31
   Economic difficulties 32
   The crisis of French will 32
   Hostility towards Soviet communism 33
   The imperial dimension 33
   National defence 33
   The mass media 36
   Public opinion 36
   The supporters of appeasement 36
   The logic of appeasement 38
   Alternatives to appeasement 38
   Critics of appeasement 39
   Document case study 39

© Cambridge University Press  www.cambridge.org
## Contents

### 4 Chamberlain and appeasement (1):
**the period of hope, May 1937–October 1938**  
43  

- Neville Chamberlain: early life and character  
43  
- Chamberlain’s views on the European crisis  
44  
- Chamberlain’s new direction  
44  
- The Hossbach memorandum  
46  
- Hitler makes key changes  
47  
- Chamberlain’s conflict with the Foreign Office  
47  
- The union between Germany and Austria  
48  
- The Czech crisis  
49  
- The aftermath of Munich  
53  
*Document case study*  
55

### 5 Chamberlain and appeasement (2):
**the road to war, October 1938–September 1939**  
61  

- The backlash against the Munich agreement  
61  
- Difficulties with further appeasement  
63  
- The foreign-policy options facing Chamberlain after Prague  
65  
- The guarantee to Poland  
65  
- The search for an alliance with the Soviet Union  
68  
- The Nazi–Soviet pact  
69  
- The outbreak of war  
71  
*Document case study*  
73

### 6 The historical debate  
77

- The Hitlocentric interpretation  
77  
- The revisionist view  
78  
- Neville Chamberlain – ‘guilty man’?  
80  
- Modern revisionism  
81  
- A post-revisionist era?  
84  
- Conclusion  
86

Select bibliography  
87  
Chronology  
89  
Index  
91
Introduction

In spite of the many viewpoints which have been put forward to explain the outbreak of the Second World War, two interpretations dominate the historical debate.

The first view suggests that the key reason for the start of the war was Adolf Hitler’s cold-blooded desire for European expansion. This interpretation is enshrined in the final judgement at the famous Nuremberg trials of the leading (living) Nazis, which were held shortly after the end of hostilities. Although many new details have emerged concerning the conduct of German foreign policy under the Nazi regime, the central view of Hitler as a uniquely evil and brutal dictator plotting and scheming a war of conquest for Lebensraum (living space) in the east from the moment he came to power until the outbreak of war has not been substantially modified or revised.

The second key explanation of the outbreak of the Second World War concentrates on the role played by Neville Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement. This policy did prevent a major European war starting in 1938 through the signing of the Munich agreement, but it ended in humiliating failure when Germany attacked Poland in September 1939. In the popular mind, appeasement has been viewed (and is still generally viewed by world leaders) as a totally disreputable policy of shameful surrender which ‘sacrifices principles’ in order to ‘buy off’ a potential or actual aggressor. However, among historians, using more objective methods, the original view of Chamberlain as an incompetent leader and appeasement as a morally bankrupt policy doomed to failure has undergone a quite remarkable transformation. It has, indeed, now become commonplace for ‘revisionist historians’ to portray Chamberlain not as a weak and ineffective leader but as a complex and able politician with a clear-sighted approach to a foreign policy, who sought peace while at the same time preparing for war.

The main aim of this book is to examine the central roles played by Hitler and Chamberlain in the events which led to the outbreak of the Second World War. The book seeks to adopt a balanced approach to the subject, but does not flinch from giving fresh insights or offering critical assessment when it is deemed necessary. The major focus of the study is, of course, on Anglo-German relations from 1918 to 1939, with particular attention paid to the key events from 1937 to 1939, when Hitler pursued a bold and aggressive foreign policy, while Chamberlain strove energetically to satisfy the ‘legitimate’ demands made by Hitler, in the hope that this would prevent war.
Introduction

The book begins with a brief survey of the key events in Anglo-German relations from 1918 to 1933. In Chapter 2, the foreign-policy ideas, aims and actions of Adolf Hitler in the period from 1933 to 1937 are explored. Chapter 3 examines the factors which help to explain why appeasement became the policy adopted by the British government to deal with the growing tension in European relations during the 1930s. Chapters 4 and 5 concentrate on events in Anglo-German relations from 1937 to 1939. The book concludes with an extensive analysis of the changing nature of the debate over the roles of Hitler and Chamberlain in the origins of the Second World War.