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Britain's Relations with Germany in the 1930s

Vztahy Velké Británie s Německem ve třicátých letech dvacátého
století

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Anotace

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá vztahy Velké Británie a Německa ve třicátých letech dvacátého století. Snaží se postihnout politický vývoj od konce První světové války až po vypuknutí Druhé světové války, přičemž věnuje hlavní pozornost politice appeasementu, důvodům jejího vzniku a jejímu hlavnímu představiteli, Nevillu Chamberlainovi. Zároveň si klade za cíl osvětlit i důvody neúspěchu jak Nevilla Chamberlaina, tak jeho politiky. Ve svém závěru se práce pokouší o obhajobu appeasementu i jeho hlavního reprezentanta.

Abstract

The goal of this thesis is to analyze the relationship of Great Britain and Germany in the 1930s. It concerns itself with the political development in Britain between the world wars while focusing on the policy of appeasement, its roots, and its most famous exponent, Neville Chamberlain. The thesis also hopes to explain why both the Prime Minister and his policy failed. In its conclusion the thesis argues in defense of appeasement as well as in defense of Neville Chamberlain.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Theme, Questions, Sources

This thesis hopes to deliver an accurate illustration of the relationship between Great Britain and Germany in the 1930s. Its main focus is concentrated on the policy of appeasement as it was employed by Neville Chamberlain during the time of his premiership. It will try to communicate the difficulties Chamberlain faced in pursuing his ultimate goal of "international harmony";¹ the thesis will also provide a background broad enough for a comfortable understanding of why Chamberlain's pursuit of peace was necessary, and why said pursuit inevitably failed.

After illustrating the world of the 1920s and 1930s the thesis will try to answer the following questions. Why was the policy of appeasement adopted? Was the Second World War inevitable after the Treaty of Versailles was signed? Did any viable alternative to appeasement exist? Would it have been better for Britain to go to war sooner? Does Hitler share with anyone else the responsibility for the Second World War?

Sources used are predominantly of secondary type, except for a compilation of Chamberlain's speeches produced by the Prime Minister himself "in the hope of making clear the aim and purpose"² of his policy, and selected newspapers used to illustrate public opinion around the culmination of the Munich Crisis.

2. From Versailles to Great Depression – International Development

2.1. European Situation after Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919. It put the majority of the "war guilt" on Germany; it stripped away its recent conquest of Alsace-Lorraine and took away many other territories;³ it imposed enormous war reparations; and reduced legal German army to 100 000 men. Versailles was a tragedy for Germans and for many British politicians it felt like one as well. The British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference was headed by the then Prime

¹ Neville Chamberlain, *The Struggle for Peace*, London 1939, p. 5.

² *Ibidem*, p. 5.

³ Including overseas colonies.

Minister Lloyd George who wanted to take a more benevolent approach towards the defeated Germans. Unfortunately, he was forced by the French to agree to a peace he did not want.⁴

The outcomes of the Paris Peace Conference were considered so bad because they clashed with the old British strategy of balancing the equilibrium of power in Europe. Now the "Old Europe" was dead.⁵ Austria-Hungary was dissolved into numerous small states by the treaties of Trianon and Saint-Germain, Russia was fighting with itself, and Germany was starving. The newly set up League of Nations was immediately weakened by the decision of the United States not to join it and to remove itself from the European affairs as much (and as quickly) as possible. The equilibrium was nowhere to be found and finding one would be the entire effort of British foreign policy for the next 20 years.

In his first try of renewing the equilibrium Lloyd George organized a new international conference. The Genoa Conference of 1922 "was Lloyd George's last creative effort"⁶ and its main purpose was to create "a better world".⁷ That was not to be. Lloyd's main ally on the international scene the French Prime Minister Briand was defeated in elections and the French delegation sent by the new government was there "only to insist on the payment of reparations".⁸ Furthermore, the German and Russian delegations, in fear of being turned against each other, allied themselves in Rappallo and worked together against the French. These two circumstances locked the talks in Genoa into a deadlock and the conference ended without any outcomes.⁹

2.2. Occupation of Ruhr and the Tale of War Reparations

France and Germany were already in an intense rivalry heading into the World War One and, understandably, the outcome of the war would only deepen it. After the war the German people hated the French for enforcing heavy reparations at the peace conference. On the other hand, the French were furious about the complete devastation of northern France, which they

⁴ Jiří Ellinger, *Neville Chamberlain: od usmiřování k válce: britská zahraniční politika 1937 -1940*, Praha 2009, p. 34

⁵ Ibidem, p. 33

⁶ Alan J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, London 1991, p. 77.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 76.

⁸ Alan J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny druhé světové války*, Bratislava 2005, p. 64. Two versions of Taylor's book had to be used due to the linguistic duality of the research. One version (Bratislava 2005) is used for general references. The second version (London 1991) is used for direct quotes.

⁹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 36.

considered to be entirely German fault; hence they saw the reparations as just and necessary.¹⁰ It was this tension over reparations that led to the first European crisis following the Great War.

Being fixated on reparations, both economically and emotionally,¹¹ France viewed the German inability to pay them in 1923 as a threat, so the French Prime Minister, Raymond Poincaré, ordered his troops to occupy Ruhr on January 11, 1923. The "Germans surrendered at discretion, under the catastrophe of inflation",¹² and soon after the exhausted French agreed to a new reparations payment plan.

The new plan, named the Dawes plan, ensured the payment of reparations for the next five years until it was substituted by the Young Plan in 1930. The Dawes plan had to be substituted because both Germany and France were still unsatisfied with the reparations system. The newly introduced Young Plan malfunctioned next year due to the Great Depression. In 1931, realizing the immense economic downfall in the Western world, the Hoover moratorium postponed both the payment of reparations and the inter-Allied debt. The reparations were finally abolished at the Lausanne Conference in 1932.¹³

It is important to understand that reparations were the main reason for international tensions in the 1920s. It was not, however, the reparations themselves but the seemingly never ending arguing about them which poisoned France's as well as Germany's democracies and their relationship. British historians R. A. C. Parker and A. J. P. Taylor both attribute the main importance in the rise of domestic tensions in Germany to reparations. Parker notes that, "Hitler's ranting against foreigners and their alleged German accomplices, and the widespread belief in the evil effects of reparations, helped him to secure for the Nazis one-third of the electorate in 1932".¹⁴ Taylor similarly paints the view of ordinary Germans,

Reparations became the sole cause of German poverty. The businessman in difficulties; the underpaid schoolteacher; the unemployed worker all blamed their troubles on reparations. The cry of a hungry child was a cry against reparations. Old men stumbled into the grave because of reparations.¹⁵

¹⁰ William R. Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World: An International History*, New York 1996, p. 78.

¹¹ A.J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny* p. 60.

¹² A.J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 70.

¹³ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 60.

¹⁴ Robert A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement. British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War*, Hampshire and New York 1993, p. 14.

¹⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 73.

In Britain, the electorate together with the politicians were for the cancelation of the reparations.¹⁶ The issue of reparations as well as French behavior during the attempts to solve it angered British politicians and drove them closer to Germany, not only in the issues regarding reparations but in the revision of Versailles in general. They believed that it was the French obstinacy that prevented the stability of Europe in the 1920s.¹⁷ The British public viewed the German people as victims;¹⁸ a view which lingered with the British electorate well into 1930s. This view contributed to the longevity of appeasement.

2.3. Locarno Treaties and the Briand–Kellogg Pact

In 1925, British politicians felt ready to elevate Germany from the position of a defeated power to a partner that would have the same rights as any other nation. So, when German Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann, proposed what would become the Locarno Treaties, the United Kingdom happily agreed.¹⁹

From the British point of view the system was devised to reach deeper Anglo-German understanding²⁰ as well to stabilize Germany's western borders.²¹ France was eager to cling closer to Britain and to get the Germans to recognize the current borders. Germany regarded the new treaty as its own reintroduction to high international politics and maybe as the first step towards the revision of Versailles.²²

The British delegation was headed by the then Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain,²³ who, together with the Foreign Secretaries of France and Germany,²⁴ preliminarily signed the treaties in October 1925 and the final signature was solemnly added in December of the same year.²⁵

The outcome was the following: the United Kingdom together with the Kingdom of Italy guaranteed the current borders between Belgium, France, and Germany, and whoever would

¹⁶ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹⁸ A perception which merged with the overall feeling towards the Treaty of Versailles and rightfulness of German grievances.

¹⁹ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 68.

²⁰ Other long-term intentions were to persuade the other European powers to an agreement on disarmament, and to begin a building of a long-lasting Anglo-German friendship.

²¹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 39.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 40.

²³ Neville Chamberlain's half-brother.

²⁴ Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann.

²⁵ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 39.

try to change these borders would be declared war upon by the rest of the signatories. Germany also signed arbitration treaties with Poland and Czechoslovakia, nevertheless, this did not guarantee the borders of the signatories; it just ensured peaceful settlement of any quarrels.²⁶

Even though in long-term Locarno harmed the chances of a long-term peace in Europe (as it negated both Versailles and the League of Nations) at the time it was almost universally and enthusiastically celebrated. Taylor remarks that,

Locarno gave to Europe a period of peace and hope...Stresemann, Chamberlain, and Briand appeared regularly at the League Council. Geneva seemed to be the centre of a revived Europe: the Concert really in tune at last, and international affairs regulated by discussion instead of by the jangling of arms.²⁷

The signs of better times were later confirmed through the German admission to the League of Nations and by the signing of the Briand–Kellogg Pact, by all of the world’s major powers, in 1929, which renounced war and preferred arbitration as means of resolving conflicts.

This international mood, unfortunately, did not last. In fact, it was the last successful step towards collective disarmament. The first sign was the inability of the League of Nations to amend the Briand-Kellogg Pact into its constitution, and worse was to come.²⁸

3. From Versailles to Great Depression – Domestic Development

3.1. Three Years of Annual Elections

During the First World War the United Kingdom was governed by a Coalition government of Liberals and Conservatives under the premiership of Lloyd George. The Coalition government lasted until the end of 1922 when, on October 19, at the Carlton Club, the party backbenchers of the Conservatives (led by Stanley Baldwin and Bonar Law) voted to dissolve the coalition and go into the next general election independently.²⁹ Lloyd George resigned on the same day. The new Prime Minister, Bonar Law, served only few months until his resignation that was brought about by the diagnosis of cancer. However, in his short term he was able to call and win general election (November 15, 1922) for the Conservatives. In May

²⁶A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 69.

²⁷A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 83.

²⁸J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 41.

²⁹Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939*, Oxford and Cambridge 1993, p. 224.

the following year Stanley Baldwin succeeded Law both as leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister.

In 1922 Conservatives won a comfortable majority, however, their new leader wished to introduce new tariffs (to reduce unemployment) and since "he [Baldwin] was hampered by the pledge given by Law not to introduce them without the nation's express approval",³⁰ he had called for a new election.³¹ The new general election was scheduled for December 6, 1923. Surprisingly, Conservatives lost their majority, being reduced to only 258 seats.

This development led to a formation of the first Labour government which was presided by Ramsay MacDonald. Not having achieved majority (only 191 MPs) MacDonald had to introduce Liberals to his government. It was anticipated that his coalition would not last, as Labour could have been "voted out by the Conservatives if the Liberals merely abstained".³² Even though MacDonald was the Prime Minister, he was stuck. He could not ever pursue his real agenda because the Liberals would vote him out whenever he would attempt to do so, and his own voters would desert him if he did not try to follow said agenda. Thus, the following nine months were marked by mostly tepid approach to governing. MacDonald's goal at this point was "to prove Labour's competence to the undecided voter"³³ and nine months were more than ample. The peaks of MacDonald's premiership were the improvement of relationship with France and the finalization of the Dawes Plan. After "MacDonald secured his own defeat by 198 to 394 votes",³⁴ he had called new elections on October 29, 1924.

The winter election was unsurprisingly won by the Conservatives and with 419 seats Stanley Baldwin assembled his second Cabinet.³⁵

3.2. Eerie Silence – 1924 – 1929

The years from 1924 to 1929 were blissfully quiet. Britain needed this break. Individual crises had been wreaking havoc for more than a decade at this point. Stanley Baldwin's government

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 225.

³¹ The other, purely political, reason for new elections was to unite his party, since the clique of Austen Chamberlain could still threaten his leadership and unite the Conservatives with Lloyd George, which Baldwin was strongly opposed to, as he disliked Lloyd George deeply. Also, the Labour, a new left-wing party founded only in 1900, was deemed to be unfit to rule, so their ascent to the Government was anticipated to end in a disaster which could only help Baldwin. Ibidem. p. 226. The unfitness of Labour to govern – Ibidem, p. 231.

³² Ibidem, p. 231.

³³ Ibidem, p. 234.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 234.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 237.

was celebrated for its role in the Locarno Treaties. Not so much for its part in the 1926 General Strike. The strike had no chance of removing Baldwin, however, it weakened his hand in the next general election.³⁶ Despite serving the whole term, the second Baldwin Cabinet was not able to solve any of the problems that were eroding British economy. Housing crisis, education, and health care were the problems that attacked United Kingdom's poorest and throughout the 1920s, no one was able to successfully solve them.³⁷ These deficiencies prevented Baldwin from securing another term and general election of 1929 delivered MacDonald back into office.

4. 1920s and Their Importance for Appeasement

The biggest challenge for Britain in the 1920s was finding the role of Germany in the European politics. The goal was clear. Britain wanted to incorporate Germany back into Europe as a friendly and pacific nation. But how do you befriend someone from whom you demand reparations? Someone whom you have inscribed as guilty for the last war? Someone from whom you have taken territory and on whom you have forcibly enforced disarmament and supervision?

Throughout the 1920s efforts were made to achieve said goal. These efforts took the form of revisions of Versailles since the bad peace was blamed for the unpleasant situation. The greatest obstruction in the early efforts to reconcile proved to be France. France was afraid of Germany which would be free of supervision, and she wanted to keep in place the restrictions of Versailles since Germany was naturally stronger than her.³⁸ France would become vulnerable if Germany was to be freed from Versailles. So, a system had to be made which would assure the safety of France and at the same time befriend Germany. This system was supposed to be Locarno. And truly, the latter half of the 1920s was described by the contemporaries as hopeful and peaceful.³⁹ Germany was admitted to the League of Nations, reparations were being paid, and the world economy was prospering.

However, if Locarno is analyzed with the knowledge of today, it becomes clear that it sowed the seeds for future disputes. If Germany was treated as an equal partner in Locarno, on what

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 256.

³⁷ Frank McDonough, *Hitler, Chamberlain and appeasement*, Cambridge 2012, p. 32.

³⁸ Germany had greater industrial potential and possessed much more numerous population than France.

³⁹ A.J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 70.

grounds was she still held forcibly disarmed and paying reparations?⁴⁰ Another hidden problem was that Locarno was signed outside the League of Nations, thus lowering its authority and showing that allegiance of the Great Powers to the League was shaky at best even before the 1930s.

These problems were not clear to the contemporaries because no one stressed them. Stresemann (the German Foreign Minister) had a long-term and peaceful plan and possessed the prestige necessary to enforce it.⁴¹ Unfortunately, he died on October 3, 1929. The death of such a brilliant diplomat and highly respected man destabilized German democracy; no one was able to fill Stresemann's place until Hitler. Also, Stresemann's death came at the worst possible time since in little over two years Europe would be hit by the Great Depression.

In summary, the 1920s set a precedent for appeasing Germany, however, this appeasement was logical and in fact needed for normal and functional Europe. The problems of the 1920s alone would not have led to anything drastic in the following years. Unfortunately, they were not alone.

5. From Great Depression to the Anglo-German Naval Agreement

5.1. Domestic Outcomes of the Great Depression in Germany and Britain

The Great Depression began in the United States in 1929 and by 1931 it made its way to Europe. The Great Depression was so brutal because the basic economic tools that we know of today were nowhere to be found back then. It was believed that to battle the recession, balanced budgets combined with lower government spending were needed for the prices to go down, and to restore the buying power of the population.⁴² However, "This policy caused hardship and discontent in every country where it was applied".⁴³ So, the world suffered for a few years with no real solution in sight. The economy improved only gradually and in the democratic world it remained weak for the remainder of the 1930s, only improving after the heavy investments into rearmament.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 73.

⁴¹ The plan was to empower Germany and to revise Versailles completely, but the actions taken would be quiet and small.

⁴² A.J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 75.

⁴³ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ W. R. Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century*, p. 136.

What was more important was the domestic development in Germany and Britain. Germans blamed their new-found hardship not on the world-wide collapse but on the Treaty of Versailles.⁴⁵ The destabilized German democracy eventually led to Hitler, who had assumed the office of Chancellor on January 30, 1933, and by the end of March was in control of Germany.⁴⁶

In the United Kingdom, the recession caused the end of the second Labour government, as the House of Commons was unable to decide which course to take to battle the depression.⁴⁷ After being ejected from his own party MacDonald formed a new one, which he called the National Labour Party. Three months before the freshly called election of 1931, MacDonald formed the National Government. The new National Government included the Conservative Party, Liberals of Herbert Samuel, and MacDonald's National Labour. This coalition was a huge success, as it achieved a land-slide victory with 554 MPs.⁴⁸ Although conservatives held most of the seats MacDonald remained the Prime Minister and Baldwin took on the less stressful position of Lord President.

To battle the crisis and increase domestic production, and to reduce unemployment, Neville Chamberlain⁴⁹ introduced (in 1932) a bill that established a 10% tariff on almost all foreign products (the rare exception being the most ordinary products as meat and wheat).⁵⁰ Similar bills were enacted in the United States and Germany. These bills and the weakening of international conversations in favor of unilateral solutions are recognized by some historians as the end of the warmth of the twenties and a beginning to an end of the Versailles system.⁵¹

5.2. The Geneva Disarmament Conference

In February 1932, representatives of sixty-one states met in Geneva to discuss disarmament. General disarmament was a thought typical for its time and after the horrors of the Great War

⁴⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 76.

⁴⁶ Tim Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler: Chamberlain, Churchill and the Road to War*, London 2019, p. 10.

⁴⁷ M. Pugh, *The Making*, p. 259.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 259.

⁴⁹ Neville Chamberlain held the position of the Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1931 to 1937 and was the second man in the Conservative Party.

⁵⁰ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 43.

⁵¹ F. McDonough, *Hitler*, p. 13.; J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 46.; W. R. Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century*, p. 133 – Keylor notes only that international conversations were ineffective.

it can be easily understood why. Unfortunately, the Conference ended in a disaster foreshadowing the end of collective security in inter-war Europe.⁵²

The conference was at first welcomed by Germany because if the number of arms was to be topped for everyone then she would be allowed more than now; in this sense the Disarmament conference was in defiance of Versailles.⁵³ However, the German domestic situation was getting worse for the government of von Papen, so in an effort to gain some political points he withdrew Germany from the conference.⁵⁴ The official reason for the withdrawal was that the nations were not treated equally.⁵⁵ Yet, if nations were to be treated equally and some level of armaments was agreed upon French security would be threatened. So, "If the French got security, there would be no equality of status; if they did not get security, there was to be no equality".⁵⁶ As long as there was a distrust between France and Germany (which there was a plenty of), general disarmament was unrealistic.

The French were now being squeezed from both sides as the British were in favor of allowing Germany equality.⁵⁷ After the summer break, the conference re-started again in October 1932. France agreed on the equality in negotiations and Germany joined the conference again. In May 1933, MacDonald proposed a plan⁵⁸ which would give Germany an army two-hundred thousand strong and a complete equality in arms after 5 years.⁵⁹ The new German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, was delighted by this offer and immediately accepted. France again posed problems, as she would not agree to eventual equality in arms if she did not have assurance of help from Britain. Britain would not give such assurance as she thought it unnecessary.

Back at the conference in autumn 1933, France proclaimed that she would agree with the Eden Plan⁶⁰ only if another 4 years of German disarmament were exercised. This gave Hitler his opportunity and he withdrew Germany from the conference on October 14, 1933, and a week later from the League of Nations as well. The conference then wasted its own time until June 1934 when it dissolved without any outcomes.⁶¹

⁵² J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 50.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

⁵⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 81.

⁵⁵ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 47.

⁵⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 96.

⁵⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 88.

⁵⁸ This plan had been devised by Simon and Eden.

⁵⁹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 49.

⁶⁰ Alternative name for the MacDonald proposal.

⁶¹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 51.

Together with the summer failure of the London Economic Conference, the year of 1933 was a devastating defeat for collective security, beginning of the end for the League of Nations, and the end of disarmament. From now on, the world powers again turned to alliances, raised arms to discourage any war attempt of other powers, and would conclude bilateral treaties instead of collective ones.⁶² What this actually meant was a fatal decrease in the prestige and importance of small (or weak, e. g. China) nations which would from now on be bargained in the interests of the Powers.⁶³ The ideals of the Great War were dead in the minds of the politicians. All of this happened before Hitler.

5.3. British Reaction to Hitler

It is widely believed that Hitler's aims were not well known. Those beliefs are wrong. Hitler sent his political adversaries many warnings before his ascent to power (e. g. *Mein Kampf*) and even after his appointment as Chancellor. As Taylor cynically notes, "they could read the truth in any newspaper".⁶⁴ And if British politicians did not want to read the newspaper, they had two documents from their own employees: the Rumbold Despatch and the Temperley Memorandum.

In April 1933, British Ambassador to Germany, Horace Rumbold, wrote back to London a five-thousand-word assessment essay on Hitler. In his essay, Rumbold concluded that the politicians in London should not let themselves be enchanted by Hitler's sweet words of disarmament and peace, as those were there only to lull the world until Germany would be rearmed and ready to enforce her own program.⁶⁵ Few months later, a member of Britain's delegation to the Disarmament conference, A. C. Temperley, advocated in his memorandum for a pre-emptive war against Germany, which was blatantly rearming (e. g. there were reports of German air-force) under Hitler.⁶⁶

⁶² Ibidem, p. 52. An example of the bilateral treaty (in this case Quadrilateral) that were in fashion after 1933 – Four-Power Pact. Britain also entered bilateral treaties regarding free trade with Argentina, USSR and others.

⁶³ Nations that were to be bargained until the outbreak of the war: China (twice), Abyssinia, Austria, Czechoslovakia (twice), and almost Poland.

⁶⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 102.

⁶⁵ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 16. It must be noted that Germany was rearming even before Hitler's ascent to power but once the Nazi regime was in place the rearmament efforts sped up dramatically.

Both documents were read at the Foreign Office, and both were circulated to the government; and both "had little effect"⁶⁷ since the public opinion would not support pre-emptive war, and many British politicians did not want to act. Furthermore, Taylor argues,

What would intervention achieve? If Hitler fell, chaos would follow in Germany worse than that which followed the occupation of the Ruhr; if he did not fall, German rearmament would presumably be renewed as soon as the occupying forces were withdrawn.⁶⁸

In retrospect, it is easy to think that it was obvious that Hitler should have been deposed as soon as possible, however, politicians of 1933 did not know what is known now, and any other action than the action taken would have led to them being voted out of office. Increase in arms spending equals higher taxes for the people, which is a good incentive for the voters to embrace the opposition. Pre-emptive war against Germany? That is financially unwise, and how would they explain that to the electorate? Is it Hitler who causes all the problems? Again, how would they not look like warmongers because when Germany finally has a strong government, they wish to topple it? They could not do any of these things because even if they knew that it was the right action to take, they would be ending their own careers; and who does that?

5.4. First Contact

In an effort to find some common ground with the new German regime, the United Kingdom's government decided to dispatch Anthony Eden on a diplomatic mission. In February 1934, the Lord Privy Seal was sent to Berlin where he had a meeting with Hitler and the two had a pleasant chat. Both Eden and Hitler had served in the Great War and Eden used this as means to establish good relationship with the Führer. Hitler was in good mood, and he tried to use this occasion to explain his immediate plans "he would honour the Treaty of Locarno, promised to guarantee the 'non-military' nature of the SA and the SS, and did not rule out Germany's return to the League of Nations".⁶⁹ In return Hitler mainly demanded that "Germany should be allowed an air-force".⁷⁰ Eden found such demands reasonable; the government already knew that Germany was building an air-force, and there was not much the UK could realistically do to prevent it.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 17.

⁶⁸ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 103.

⁶⁹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 43.

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 43.

On this first official visit to Germany with Hitler in power Ellinger finds interesting that, "Eden's successful visit in February 1934 opened the door for the possibility of reaching understanding through bilateral contacts, a possibility which Britain was to employ from now on until 1939".⁷¹

This visit also set a precedent – British politicians come to Hitler, not the other way around, otherwise, this visit was neither important nor interesting.⁷²

5.5. White Paper on Defence and a Second Meeting with Hitler

The United Kingdom's White Paper on Defence of 1935 was published on March 5. The White Paper increased rearmament spending and mainly focused on the Air-force. What is interesting is that the White Paper stressed the importance of bombers (offensive aircraft) instead of fighters (defensive aircraft) in a ratio of 2:1.⁷³ If Britain was not preparing for an offensive war, why all the bombers? The reason is that during the 1930s the fear of bombers was immeasurable. Indeed, as Stanley Baldwin had said in regard to bomber warfare, "you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves".⁷⁴ Truly, bombers were perceived as weapons of mass destruction, and the British Government expected deaths in the hundreds of thousands if the isles were attacked, so the only possibility of deterring such attack was to have a force great enough to make the counterattack deadly.⁷⁵

Unfortunately, the publication of the White Paper gave Hitler the opportunity to defy Versailles once more. On March 16, 1935, Hitler announced conscription and the enlargement of the German army to five hundred thousand men.⁷⁶ This news together with the foundation of Luftwaffe frightened British public. The situation was particularly bad because a diplomatic meeting was arranged for the end of March. Though the British government disliked the news, it saw them as an opportunity to reach deeper understanding with Germany and to maybe confine its rearmament to some tolerable volume. On the meeting of the

⁷¹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 60. Own translation.

⁷² Hitler never went to Britain. On the contrary, Chamberlain visited Germany three times in September 1938 alone.

⁷³ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 64

⁷⁴ Keith Middlemas – John Barnes, *Baldwin. A Biography*, London 1969, p. 735.

⁷⁵ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 65.

⁷⁶ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 26. Germany was already rearming, and it was widely known. For Hitler his proclamation on March 16 just made what he was doing more official. The White Paper provided a good argument for Hitler, because if Britain was rearming, why should not Germany?

Cabinet on 18 March, instead of debating an offensive action, the dates (25.–26. March) of the diplomatic meeting were finalized and confirmed. Eden together with the Foreign Minister John Simon were to be sent to negotiate with Hitler.

The meeting in Berlin went badly. Hitler deeply disliked Simon,⁷⁷ and the wishes of restrained armament were gone. Hitler wanted Germany to be able to do whatever she wanted to do. As always, Hitler's harsh words came with sweet undertones. Hitler deeply longed for an Anglo-German alliance.⁷⁸ Under Hitler's terms the alliance would grant Germany free hand in eastern Europe and Hitler would in return guarantee the British Empire. As much as Hitler yearned the alliance with Britain, he knew that this proposal was unrealistic and only used it to confuse British politicians. His other proposals were more realistic and caught the British attention. He showed a desire to "discuss naval armaments and limit German claims to 35 per cent of the British navy".⁷⁹ Hitler's other proposals included: the prohibition of bombing outside the fighting zones, maybe even prohibition of bombing overall, and the prohibition of gas and incendiary weapons.⁸⁰

Outcome of such beautiful suggestions was to be the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. The summer of 1935 was to be as close as Hitler was to get to the desired Anglo-German alliance, and even then, he was not even close to getting it.

5.6. The Front of Stresa and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement

The Front of Stresa was an "alliance" of the United Kingdom, Italy, and France concluded on April 14, 1935. The pact was brought into reality by Mussolini, French Foreign Minister Laval and Prime Minister Flandin, and British Prime Minister MacDonald and Foreign Minister Simon. The main purpose of the front was to safeguard the peace in Europe mainly against Germany, also the independence of Austria was guaranteed, as it was thought necessary to prevent the union of Germany and Austria.⁸¹

Sadly, the Front of Stresa lasted only few months before the vows were broken and the good will spoiled. When, a month later, Hitler declared that Germany no longer adhered to the

⁷⁷ He suspected him of being a Jew. J. Ellinger, p. 67.

⁷⁸ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 83.

⁷⁹ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 27.

⁸⁰ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁸¹ This prevented bigger problems with the July Putsch (attempt of Austrian Nazis to take control) because Hitler recalled his support for the Austrian Nazis when Mussolini sent Italian troops to Austrian borders. A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 96.

Versailles Treaty the reaction of the Front was null. Another blow came, surprisingly, from the British, who on July 18 concluded their Anglo-German Naval Agreement, which topped Germany naval tonnage at 35% of the British navy, gave it parity in U-boats, and most importantly for British intelligence - it assured that both powers would exchange information concerning their navies.⁸²

The main point of Stresa was to try to deter Hitler from another defiance of Versailles, however, as Taylor points out "in truth each of the three Powers hoped to receive help from the others without providing any in return",⁸³ so when Britain saw the opportunity to reach their Naval Agreement with Hitler, she took it regardless of her proclamations from Stresa. Another problem were the different concepts of security in Europe that were employed by the French and the British. France wanted to deter Germany and for that matter, it entered an alliance with the Soviet Union in 1935. Britain wanted to appease Germany to keep her calm and avoid arms race.⁸⁴ The Front of Stresa was a pact that no-one wanted to adhere to, but everyone wanted others to follow it, for example there were never any military staff talks or strategic planning. The whole pact was just a bunch of words.

On the contrary, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement served its purpose, for Hitler. Hitler successfully put a wedge between France and Britain while lulling the British closer to him, while giving up nothing of importance. The German Navy was not at its approved 35% limit even in 1939, so entering such Treaty in 1935, when the German Navy hardly existed, was from the United Kingdom premature in the least.⁸⁵ But such prematureness only stemmed from the terrible British intelligence capabilities.⁸⁶

6. The Six Remaining Months of 1935

From the end of June to Christmas of 1935 British politics was in a whirlwind. The situations that contributed most to said whirlwind were the Peace Ballot, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the scandal that provided the Hoare–Laval Plan, and mainly the general election.

⁸² J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 69.

⁸³ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 117.

⁸⁴ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 71.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

⁸⁶ Wesley K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy. British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933–1939*. London 1985, p. 22.

6.1. A Time of Hypocrisy – July To November

At the end of June two things happened. First, it became apparent that Italy was preparing to attack Abyssinia. Second, results of the "Peace Ballot" were made public. The "Peace Ballot" was a poll organized by the League of Nations Union.⁸⁷ It asked the British public five questions relating to foreign policy. Most of the responses were pro-League, the public was split only on the last question asking whether aggressive countries should be punished economically or militarily.⁸⁸ Most still answered "Yes", but 20% were against and another 20% abstained.⁸⁹ Even though this last question partially broke the uniformity of the vote the outcome was a clear and overwhelming support for the League of Nations.⁹⁰

On June 7, 1935, Ramsay MacDonald ended his career in high politics. He resigned due to ill health and decreasing mental capabilities.⁹¹ Baldwin succeeded him as Prime Minister and immediately replaced John Simon (who was relocated to the position of Home Secretary) with Samuel Hoare. Simultaneously, a new ministry was created for Anthony Eden (the Ministry for League of Nations Affairs), to emphasize the Government's attachment to the League.

Hoare and Baldwin had the same strategy towards Abyssinia – not to drag Britain into war because of it.⁹² As the public, un/fortunately, supported the League of Nations, Baldwin had to act accordingly, and was therefore trapped between Britain's foreign policy and the public opinion. Abyssinia was a member of the League and if attacked, it had to be protected. Nonetheless, Britain and France wanted Italy as an ally against Germany, so a complex problem developed: In the wake of the upcoming election the Government had to appear pro-League, however, it did not want to be pro-League too much because then Italy would not help against Germany.⁹³ In an effort to forestall and maybe avert the invasion, Anthony Eden was sent to Rome.

Eden was relaying an offer. Britain offered Mussolini most of Abyssinian land; Abyssinia would in return be offered a slither of land from Britain, that would at least compensate it

⁸⁷ An organization that advocated for a close adherence to the league. More than eleven million people participated in the ballot.

⁸⁸ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 80.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

⁹⁰ It must be noted that the ballot was mostly taken by people who already supported the League (J. Ellinger, p. 80.) so its outcomes do not reflect the opinion of the entire electorate, but it still was an opinion to which the government had to respond to, especially as the general election was called for November.

⁹¹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 75.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 76.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

with an access to sea.⁹⁴ Sadly, Mussolini was bent on attacking Abyssinia.⁹⁵ The invasion began on October 3, 1935.

The question was now not if Italy would defeat Abyssinia, but how the League would react. It seemed that Britain had no other choice than to stick with the League, as her Foreign Minister in his speech before the League's General Assembly on September 11 proclaimed that, "the League stands, and my country stands with it, for the collective maintenance of the Covenant in its entirety, and particularly for steady and collective resistance to all acts of unprovoked aggression".⁹⁶ And the League's nations, excited to find such a strong leader in Britain, decided to act.

But first, the General Election took place. The debate was fought mainly over the themes of housing and unemployment. What helped the National Coalition win the election was the almost universal approval for its foreign policy.⁹⁷ On November 14, the National Coalition again won an overwhelming majority of the seats (429). But it was now committed to the League.

On October 19, the League's committee recommended economic sanctions and on November 18, the sanctions went into effect.⁹⁸ Britain and France fought valiantly for anything vital not to be sanctioned, so "foie gras [was banned] but not coal, iron, steel or, most crucially, oil".⁹⁹ It is interesting to note that Germany supported the sanctions (this shows how much Hitler wanted British friendship). The United States technically did the same, as they banned their traders from trading with both fighting countries, and because their trade with Abyssinia was non-existent this ban were practically sanctions against Italy.¹⁰⁰

Another factor that concerned the British was the naval situation in the Mediterranean. It was at this point that the British began to be terrified of a "Mad Dog" attack on their fleet at Malta or in Egypt, and their military experts were strongly advising against further escalation of the situation. For these reasons the British and the French took to the drafting table and tried to

⁹⁴ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 86.

⁹⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 100.

⁹⁶ John A. Cross, *Sir Samuel Hoare: A Political Biography*, London 1977, pp. 219–20.

⁹⁷ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 52.

⁹⁸ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 86.

⁹⁹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁰ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 103.

devise an offer that would satisfy Mussolini and preserve (in some form) Abyssinia. This offer was then to be pushed on Haile Selassie as well as on the League.¹⁰¹

6.2. Hypocrisy Unveiled – The Hoare-Laval Plan

Hoare and Vansittart¹⁰² were sent to France to work out a plan before the League would propose oil sanctions.¹⁰³ On the weekend of December 7 and 8 they debated with Laval and produced what was to become the hated Hoare-Laval Plan.¹⁰⁴ The British government hoped to persuade Mussolini to agree to the Plan (Mussolini was ready to agree because his generals did not think the invasion was going so well). Another step was to present the plan to the League where Britain expected some resistance but did not consider it an obstacle. Finally, the plan was to be forced on the Abyssinian emperor who then, if he declined, would be responsible for the tragedy that was happening to his people.¹⁰⁵ The plan was good (better than what Abyssinia in the end got – full annexation) and would probably work if it could have been carried out as intended. Un/fortunately, it was leaked to the French press on December 10.

Bouverie comments that, "British public opinion erupted in a lava of moral indignation. Having wrapped itself in the mantle of the League, the Government was now revealed to be involved in a shady deal which would see Mussolini rewarded for his aggression".¹⁰⁶ Everyone felt betrayed, the League, the people, the other Conservative MPs. Even though the whole Cabinet approved of the plan on December 9, they now deserted Hoare in the wake of the domestic (and international) rage. Baldwin denounced any involvement in the plan, and it was called "a personal eccentricity of an over-tired and ill Sir Samuel Hoare".¹⁰⁷ The betrayed and humiliated Hoare was then persuaded to resign (so at least the government could save some of its face), and as a consolidation price he was assured of a quick return to some high office. On December 22, to fully cleanse himself and his Cabinet, Baldwin promoted the ever so popular Anthony Eden to be the new Foreign Secretary.

¹⁰¹ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 52.

¹⁰² Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs from 1930 to 1938.

¹⁰³ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁴ The plan was very similar to the one Eden travelled to Rome with earlier in the year.

¹⁰⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 106.

¹⁰⁶ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁷ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 53.

6.3. Consequences of 1935

At the beginning of May 1936, the Italian troops marched into Addis Ababa, and the emperor fled. The sanctions were lifted a month later.¹⁰⁸ The main consequence of the Abyssinian invasion was (beside the annexation) the antagonization of Mussolini. From then on, he did not trust the democratic powers and his rapprochement with Hitler began. The failure of the League discouraged her small members from relying solely on the collective security.¹⁰⁹

But why had the British politicians turned away from the League? Mainly because it restrained them. As long as Britain was a member of such organization (or as long as such organization was relevant), she could not conceive her foreign policy freely. British politicians did not have any stake in Abyssinia. In fact, they could not care less if, or if not, Abyssinia was an independent state. What they cared about was the friendliness of Italy, and at this particular moment, the League stood in the way of that. Furthermore, Britain and France wanted to make treaties that would guarantee (or change peacefully) the borders of Europe anyway, so why would they trouble themselves with the League where their intentions would only be slowed down or changed or stopped?¹¹⁰ In the end, it was this "Great Power" mindset that pushed the League into obscurity.

Another consequence of 1935 was the realization that aggression can be successful. This consequence was quickly recognized by Hitler, who had decided that on March 7, 1936, the time had come to remilitarize Rhineland.

7. Rhineland, the Abdication Crisis, and Chamberlain's Assent

7.1. Remilitarization of Rhineland

The German remilitarization of Rhineland was anticipated both in Paris and London. France knew about the re-occupation more than a year in advance, but no plan existed to confront the Germans. On the contrary, in 1935, large military cuts were imposed on the French Army.¹¹¹ Britain decided that it was not in her interest to fight Germany only on the basis of the remilitarization itself. In fact, "the Foreign Secretary was in a hurry to use the demilitarised

¹⁰⁸ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁹ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 113.

¹¹⁰ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 90.

¹¹¹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 85.

zone as a bargaining chip while it still had value".¹¹² Plans were conducted that would allow Germany to remilitarize Rhineland in return for some concessions (e. g. an Air Pact). Just on March 6, Eden called to the German ambassador to propose negotiations and arranged a meeting for the next day. The next day, the ambassador brought both the news of remilitarization and Hitler's proposals.¹¹³

In another of his skillfully devised political traps, Hitler at the same time occupied Rhineland and sent blissful proposals to Britain and France.¹¹⁴ The proposals included such offers as: the return to the League of Nations (under certain circumstances); to begin negotiation on the non-aggression pacts with his eastern neighbors; non-aggression pacts with France and Belgium lasting 25 years; and for Britain there was an offer of an Air Pact which would beautifully complement the recent Anglo-German Naval Agreement.¹¹⁵

In view of these proposals the signatories of Locarno (without Germany) met in Paris on March 10 to review options. Even though France alone would do nothing, in Paris Flandin tried to convince Eden and Halifax that punitive action was needed. He ranted that, "France would ask the League Council to confirm that Germany had broken the Treaty of Versailles, after which she would place all her resources, both economic and military, at the disposal of the League".¹¹⁶ This was Flandin's try to extort some further assurances and actions (mainly staff talks) out of Britain, as France was open to an attack from Germany.¹¹⁷ Indeed, France enjoyed very much the buffer zone Rhineland provided but was alone too brittle to undergo any offensive actions (the main source of these convictions in the minds of the French politicians were the defensive-minded words of their General Gamelin).¹¹⁸ On 11 March, Eden returned to London where he learned that the Chiefs of Staff were strongly against any action, and that the public opinion was angered at France. The cabinet decided that negotiations are wiser, and the French pressure evaporated. By March 15, Flandin resigned on his simulated anger, and started to act in accordance with the British. On March 19, the signatories of Locarno produced a statement where they expressed the need for a replacement for Locarno as well as an acceptance of Hitler's proposals from March 7, and the need for

¹¹² Ibidem, p. 85.

¹¹³ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 61.

¹¹⁴ As his reason for the remilitarization Hitler chose to argue that the ratification of the Franco-Soviet alliance by the French Parliament was in breach of the Locarno treaties and because of that he does not feel obliged to follow Locarno anymore.

¹¹⁵ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 93.

¹¹⁶ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 88.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 88.

¹¹⁸ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 110.

further negotiation.¹¹⁹ The negotiations with Germany went nowhere, as Hitler did not answer; but negotiations between France and Britain yielded a British pledge (by the French yearned and divinified) to come to France's help if attacked.¹²⁰

To this day the remilitarization of Rhineland is being considered a turning point. For the wrong reasons, sadly. It is argued¹²¹ that Rhineland was the last opportunity to stop Hitler without a major war. This argument has a foundation in the fact that there were not hundreds of thousands of Germans, as Gamelin claimed, but only three thousand.¹²² It is true that Germany could have been beaten easily, the problem is that this way of thinking is anachronistic.

British public was strongly against any offensive action (in fact it was angered at the French for even suggesting it) and the politicians agreed with the public's opinion that the remilitarization was justified. French currency would have had collapsed if France had mobilized.¹²³ Furthermore, what would be the outcome of the war anyway? Taylor argues that,

The situation would remain the same as before, or, if anything worse – the Germans more resentful and restless than ever. There was in fact no sense in opposing Germany until there was something solid to oppose, until the settlement of Versailles was undone and Germany rearmed. Only a country which aims at victory can be threatened with defeat.¹²⁴

If the spirit of the time is respected, then there is little to be improved on the actions of the politicians. Only one thing can be rightfully regretted with today's eyes – that Britain and France failed to push more on Hitler regarding his proposals. But then again, Hitler would have just ignored them.

Last thing to be noted. After the Rhineland crisis the Government began to ask themselves if it is even possible to extract an agreement from Germany. Some eyes began shifting after heavy rearmament to force Germany to behave. However, Britain was expected to be able to stand up to Germany only in 1939. To stall, to provide more time for the armament effort, was from now always at the back of the mind of British politicians.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 65.

¹²⁰ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 95.

¹²¹ For example, Churchill wrote that in his memoirs.

¹²² T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 92.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

¹²⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 134.

¹²⁵ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 68.

7.2. The Spanish Civil War, the Abdication Crisis, and Chamberlain's Assent

The Spanish civil war began on July 18, 1936. The biggest influence it had on the British politics was the radicalization of the opposition. Up until the outbreak of the Spanish war the Labour Party had been pacific and always against armaments, now its viewpoint changed. The Spanish civil war was seen as a battleground of ideologies.¹²⁶ The official government standpoint was one of non-intervention, but given that other European powers (except France) were militarily supporting some side in the conflict,¹²⁷ the opposition saw it as a silent agreement with the rebel regime. Therefore, the logic of the opposition was that: if the government supports Franco, then it is itself pro-fascist and needs to be removed.¹²⁸ On the other side, in the Conservative Party, the fear and hatred of communism had grown substantially.¹²⁹ The first outcome of the Spanish war was polarization of the political scene and an impossibility of consensus on the foreign affairs from summer 1936 onwards. The second was more international. Parker notes that,

It may be that 'non-intervention' contributed to the prickly suspicion with which Stalin and his associates treated Britain and France in the summer of 1939 and so to the diplomatic revolution which gave Hitler his opening for war.¹³⁰

Given Stalin's crippling paranoia, this may very well have been true.

The Abdication crisis started on November 16, 1936, when King Edward VIII told Stanley Baldwin that he intended to marry Wallis Simpson, a twice-divorced American. Few days later the news was leaked to the public. The problem was that Baldwin thought Simpson inadequate for the position of a British Queen, and most of the high politicians agreed with him (except Churchill).¹³¹ The king was then placed before a decision – termination of the relationship with Simpson or abdication. Under political and public pressure Edward abdicated on December 11. The Abdication crisis was an absolute win for Stanley Baldwin, as it restored his own as well as his Cabinet's prestige and popular support.¹³² The abdication crisis is important for two reasons, which both stem from the same problem – the personality of Edward VIII.

¹²⁶ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 99.

¹²⁷ Germany and Italy supported Franco, and the Soviets were on the side of the Republican government.

¹²⁸ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 99.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 100.

¹³⁰ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 92.

¹³¹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 102.

¹³² *Ibidem*, p. 102.

First, Edward VIII was a Nazi sympathizer, both before and during the war.¹³³ On their 1937 visit to Germany Edward and Simpson both hailed multiple times and were proudly photographed with Hitler.¹³⁴ It is without a question that if Edward remained king, he would have had a very bad influence on the public and possibly even on the politics. Basically, Hitler would have had a propagandist residing in Buckingham Palace. It is possible, that in view of such behavior Edward would have had been eventually dethroned anyway, but he would have had definitely stained the British morale much more than he did through his abdication in 1936. Second, Hitler had lost hope and practically gave up on the Anglo-German alliance. Ribbentrop was recalled from Britain (as he was important for Hitler and now that the alliance with Britain was unlikely the position of ambassador was no longer a job for important people). Bouverie comments that, "the high noon of Anglo-German friendship was over".¹³⁵

After the Abdication crisis Stanley Baldwin decided to retire. The reasons were fatigue and old age, and since the recent crisis renewed his political credibility and personal popularity, he decided that now was the best time to go.¹³⁶ There was no doubt who would succeed him at Downing Street No. 10.

8. Premiership of Neville Chamberlain until September 1, 1939

8.1. Credentials and Personality of Neville Chamberlain

Neville Chamberlain entered parliament in 1918 aged 49. Prior to that he held a small cabinet position and had been the mayor of Birmingham. After the revolt at the Carlton Club, he clung to Stanley Baldwin – entering the Cabinet as his Postmaster General. Few months later, he had become the Minister of Health, and in August 1923 he became the Chancellor of the Exchequer (traditionally the second highest office in the Cabinet) but only for 6 months.¹³⁷ Next year, Chamberlain spent in opposition during the first Labour government. Following its collapse, and the victory of the Conservatives in the 1924 election, Baldwin invited Chamberlain to be his Minister of Health again; this time Chamberlain served a full term. In

¹³³ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 118.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 118.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

¹³⁶ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 102.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

1931, upon the creation of the National Coalition, Chamberlain assumed the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer and remained there until his ascension to the premiership.

During all this time and in all his Cabinet positions, Chamberlain stayed the same – "a cultivated, highly intelligent, hard-working statesman".¹³⁸ Indeed, Chamberlain was a highly valued member of any Cabinet he was in; carrying through many reforms as the Minister of Health between 1924-1929; and being the dominant force of the National governments since 1931.¹³⁹ Chamberlain's abilities shine even more when it is noted that he served as the Chancellor of the Exchequer during the Great Depression, being entrusted with the financial sector at such difficult times really meant something.

As for Chamberlain's in-work persona he was not very pleasant to work with.¹⁴⁰ That does not in the slightest mean that Chamberlain was rude or indecent to anyone. The truth is that for many of his colleagues it just was not much fun to be around him. Concentrating on his work and not socializing was Chamberlain's strategy.¹⁴¹ It was the devotion he put in his work that was always propelling his career and eventually brought him to Downing Street No. 10.

Unsurprisingly, Chamberlain was not a saint. He was susceptible to flattery. Parker notes that "he [Chamberlain] loved flattery more even than most politicians; part of his tragedy was that Hitler exploited this weakness".¹⁴² Another one of Chamberlain's unlikable qualities was his inability to take criticism, or rather, when taking it, not taking it well.

In personal life Chamberlain was "what might have been expected of an elderly and staid Conservative in the 1930s".¹⁴³ Chamberlain enjoyed theatre, music, literature, cinema, galleries, weekends at his hut, long walks, and much more. In private, he was as obstinate as at work, but overall was much more pleasant and enjoyable. What should be noted is that even though Chamberlain did not serve in the Great War, he did not escape the horrors of it as his cousin Norman (one of Chamberlain's closest friends) died in France in December 1917.¹⁴⁴ This experience made him very resentful towards war and its horrors.

¹³⁸ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 1.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Chamberlain even wrote a short book in memory of his cousin. J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 26.

In 1937, Chamberlain was the man for the job. From today's perspective it is quite bitter to discover that Chamberlain wanted his premiership to be remembered for the social and domestic changes he had planned. Wanting to secure a quick agreement with Germany in 1937 and then focus on social reforms at home.¹⁴⁵ Up until his premiership Chamberlain's career was perfect.

8.2. Cabinet Shuffles and Italian Rapprochement

Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister on May 28, 1937, a few days later he was also elected to succeed Baldwin as the leader of the Conservative Party. After the official takeover was over, it was time for a practical one. As Chamberlain had to leave his position of Chancellor of Exchequer that position had to be refilled. To this crucial position Chamberlain appointed the Leader of National Liberals, John Simon. Other cabinet changes included: Samuel Hoare returned to the Cabinet as Home Secretary, Lord Halifax assumed the position of Lord President, Duff Cooper was relocated from the office of the Secretary of State for War to be the First Lord of the Admiralty, and his place was given to Hore-Belisha.¹⁴⁶

What all these changes show is that Chamberlain did not desire any opposition in his Cabinet. Indeed, the reason for the relocation of Duff Cooper speaks for itself. Cooper disagreed with Chamberlain a few months earlier. As the Secretary of State for War, Cooper argued for a bigger budget for his department since he considered it important that Britain should have greater ground army to, if the event of the need occurred, help France. Chamberlain remembered that. So, when the opportunity presented itself, Chamberlain transferred Cooper to the Admiralty; and Cooper could not complain, as this was technically a promotion;¹⁴⁷ and since Navy was given enough money Cooper was deprived of arguments.¹⁴⁸

After the reorganization of the Cabinet, the time came for a first try at cajoling the dictators. Chamberlain's objective on the international scene consisted of two, at a first glance interfering, ideas. First, there was the emphasis on British rearmament. The Second aim was to conclude some new form of Agreement to produce a new European system satisfactory for everyone.¹⁴⁹ Why rearm when a peaceful settlement is most desirable? Primarily, there was no guarantee of success and failure would mean war, so preparations for such possibility were

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 108.

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 114.

¹⁴⁷ Navy was traditionally the most important component of the British Army. In fact, it still is today.

¹⁴⁸ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 114.

¹⁴⁹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 117.

mandatory. Secondly, Germany and Italy would be more easily deterred from war if they knew that Britain was strong and ready to fight, therefore making the craved agreement more likely.

Negotiations were started with Italy first because if Italy could be won Germany would be isolated and not so confident. The British goal was to re-establish the Front of Stresa. Mussolini's objective was to bully the British into fully acknowledging his rule over Abyssinia.¹⁵⁰ On July 27, Chamberlain wrote a personal letter to Mussolini expressing his grief over the unfortunate state of Anglo-Italian relationship. Mussolini answered quickly and empathetically.¹⁵¹ Unfortunately, the negotiations with Italy proved harder than expected as Britain could not offer what Mussolini wanted. To acknowledge the Italian ownership of Abyssinia the United Kingdom needed an approval from the League of Nations; this approval was hard to get due to the Italian interference in the Spanish civil war.¹⁵² Furthermore, to ensure a real settlement in the Mediterranean the French had to be involved. On August 26, three-way talks were proposed but were set back by an Italian submarine attack on a British boat. On September 4, Count Ciano stopped the submarine attacks and negotiations could proceed. By this time Chamberlain was ready to acknowledge the Italian conquest of Abyssinia.¹⁵³ However, another obstacle unveiled itself and it took the shape of the Foreign Secretary.

Eden thought the rapprochement with Italy pointless as it would not change much in regard to British rearmament; another reason against Anglo-Italian understanding was his belief that Italy could not be trusted.¹⁵⁴ On the next Cabinet meeting, on September 8, Eden successfully stood up to Chamberlain, as the Cabinet was split between his and the Prime Minister's approach and therefore failed to reach a definite conclusion. Sadly, the definite conclusion was not needed because in November Mussolini decided to leave the League of Nations.

The talks with Italy would continue but from now on they would be less and less promising. The most important impact of the failed negotiations of summer 1937 was the creation of a rivalry between Chamberlain and Eden. Chamberlain would from now on be much harder on

¹⁵⁰ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 112.

¹⁵¹ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 135.

¹⁵² R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 113.

¹⁵³ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 121.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

Eden, and consequently, he would try to obstruct or bypass him, eventually driving him out of the government.¹⁵⁵

8.3. Halifax's Hunting Trip and Resignation of Anthony Eden

At the beginning of November 1937 Halifax was invited to a prestigious hunting exhibition in Germany. Interestingly, this visit was not innocent, it was thought up by the Nazis as an opportunity for unofficial talks.¹⁵⁶ Shortly after the official invitation came an offer of a meeting with Hitler at Berchtesgaden. This spurred another hassle between the Foreign Office and Chamberlain. Eden was not alone¹⁵⁷ in his belief that Halifax's meeting should not be used for unofficial establishment of talks. Chamberlain together with Halifax and Henderson¹⁵⁸ thought otherwise and decided that Halifax should engage in talks over Austria and Czechoslovakia.¹⁵⁹ This time Chamberlain's course was taken.

On November 17, Halifax arrived in Berlin; had a candid lunch with the German Foreign Minister von Neurath; and attended the exhibition, which saw the Lord President being the most interesting exhibit.¹⁶⁰ The second day was spent again at the exhibition and sightseeing, before hopping on a train that would take Halifax to Hitler. On the next day, the talks did not start well as Hitler "showed no inclination to try and establish common ground".¹⁶¹ On the contrary, Hitler expressed his anger towards the British press which was criticizing and making fun of him. To soften Hitler, Halifax introduced his main offer – Britain would not object to border changes with Austria and Czechoslovakia if they were not done by force; Britain would also consider the German grievances regarding colonies if it was a part of some collective European settlement. On this, Hitler noted that Germany does not want to use force and wanted to respect international law, however, his mood did not improve.¹⁶² After the audience, Halifax wrote that he was not certain of the diplomatic value of this meeting. Chamberlain was of different opinion. Prime Minister thought the visit successful as it created an atmosphere in which the settlement could be reached.¹⁶³ The next day Halifax met with Göring. That was a much more pleasant meeting because Göring tried to behave as a

¹⁵⁵ Ibidem, p. 123.

¹⁵⁶ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 138.

¹⁵⁷ Vansittart, Sargent, and others stood by him.

¹⁵⁸ A new and (as time would prove) very problematic British Ambassador in Berlin.

¹⁵⁹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 140.

¹⁶⁰ He was followed closely by a large crowd of overjoyed Germans. Ibidem, p. 142.

¹⁶¹ Ibidem, p. 142.

¹⁶² J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 134.

¹⁶³ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 101.

gentleman and a capable politician. This was a part of German strategy – Hitler behaved badly to appear as a villain in charge, and Goring tried to appear as moderate and reasonable.¹⁶⁴ This strategy was supposed to create an illusion that there was an opposition to Hitler. The British were then supposed to try to appease Hitler to persuade him and others that Göring's clique was right and therefore Hitler should change his attitude towards the United Kingdom.¹⁶⁵ The goal was to extract as much as possible from the British. According to Ellinger, this strategy was working as late as 1940.¹⁶⁶ On 21 January, Halifax was joined at tea by Goebbels, whose main request was a cession of attacks at the Führer in the British press. To that Halifax said that the press in England was free, however, back at home he had a talk with some newspaper representatives and the attacks calmed down for a while.¹⁶⁷

Back in London, Sir Robert Vansittart was removed from the position of Permanent Under-Secretary and given a special office of Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the Government. In this office he had much smaller influence and lacked access to crucial documents of the Foreign Office.¹⁶⁸ He was replaced by Alexander Cadogan. Vansittart's removal was one of the last acts committed together by Chamberlain and Eden. Eden disliked Vansittart in part because of his "overbearing brilliance"¹⁶⁹ but mostly because Vansittart acted as if he was the Foreign Secretary himself. Another rift was in policy. Vansittart wanted to befriend Italy as he still saw her as a tool to control Germany; good relationships with Italy would allow for a more confrontational advance towards Germany, Vansittart thought. Conversely, Eden deemed Italy useless, and thought concessions to Germany a viable strategy.¹⁷⁰ Chamberlain was not only closer to Eden's policy standpoint but also wanted "to make Eden less worried and easier for him to work with".¹⁷¹ It was for these reasons that Chamberlain relocated Vansittart and at Eden's request replaced him with Cadogan, who was supposed to have a soothing effect on Eden.¹⁷²

It was 10 days later when the American Under-Secretary of State, Sumner Welles, brought to the British embassy a secret plan of President Roosevelt. The plan wanted to give Italy and Germany a fair share in the world's resources in exchange for disarmament agreements. After

¹⁶⁴ Simplified, it was a "good cop bad cop" strategy. This strategy was also employed by the Italians.

¹⁶⁵ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 136.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

¹⁶⁷ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 149.

¹⁶⁸ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 144.

¹⁶⁹ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 102.

¹⁷⁰ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 144.

¹⁷¹ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 102.

¹⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 103.

that a new conference of the world's powers would take place.¹⁷³ On 12 January, the plan was in London. The next morning, after a discussion with Horace Wilson, Chamberlain rejected Roosevelt's plan. His reasoning was that it would "annoy the dictators and interfere with their [Britain's] own schemes for disarming Hitler and Mussolini".¹⁷⁴ The unfavorable response was sent back to Washington and to Eden.¹⁷⁵

Eden rushed back to London where he could not believe what Chamberlain had done.¹⁷⁶ Eden believed that a good will of the Americans could mean so much more than any agreement with the dictators.¹⁷⁷ For this reason, Eden did everything he could to force Chamberlain to change his attitude towards the American proposals. It took a lot to beat Chamberlain. On 18 January, the two had a 2-hour dialogue, then the discussions at the meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee finally made Chamberlain write another telegram (20 January) to Washington, which was much warmer to Roosevelt's proposals.¹⁷⁸

The core difference in the standpoints of the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary was that Eden thought the ambitions of the three potential enemies¹⁷⁹ incomparable with the existence of the British empire; therefore, Britain should look for more potential allies, not try to decrease the number of potential enemies, because that Eden considered unachievable.¹⁸⁰ That is why Eden wanted to take such a friendly approach towards the United States, he thought that their help was crucial for British interests. Chamberlain disagreed. He thought that Britain could not rely on the United States, as she was too unpredictable. Furthermore, Chamberlain believed that he could reach agreement with Hitler and Mussolini. To summarize – Chamberlain thought that he could decrease the number of potential enemies; Eden thought that infeasible and believed that increasing the number of potential allies should

¹⁷³ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 146.

¹⁷⁴ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 116.

¹⁷⁵ Eden was at the time in France, and he did not make it back in time to stop Chamberlain from responding so hastily. *Ibidem*, p. 117.

¹⁷⁶ F. McDonough, *Hitler*, p. 47.

¹⁷⁷ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 117.

¹⁷⁸ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 149.

¹⁷⁹ Germany, Italy, and Japan. Japan wanted her own empire in the Far East and from 1937 was in war with China – endangering heavily the great British investment in the region. However, it is out of the scope of this thesis to discuss Japan at length, even though her importance for the formation of the British policy in the 1930s is more than notable.

¹⁸⁰ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 152.

take the priority.¹⁸¹ The American initiative itself eventually evaporated. Roosevelt postponed and postponed until finally (at end of February) he postponed indefinitely.¹⁸²

This standoff was not final, but it showed that there are long-term differences between the conceptions of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, differences that were not compatible. After this crisis was averted, friendly relationships were restored; they, however, did not last long, as the Italian talks rose in actuality again.¹⁸³

"Cherchez la femme". Lady Ivy Chamberlain spent the end of 1937 in Italy where she had several conversations with Mussolini, including one where she read to him a letter from her brother-in-law, Neville Chamberlain. Chamberlain intentionally left Eden out because he knew that he would disapprove of such actions. Indeed, on February 8 Eden wrote a fiery letter to the Prime Minister denouncing such kind of diplomacy, and mainly complaining that the Foreign Office was left stranded again.¹⁸⁴ Chamberlain responded that he was sorry and that he would no longer use Lady Ivy in this manner. The Anglo-Italian negotiations were ramping up because on 12 February, Hitler had met the Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg at Berchtesgaden and,

Bullied and shouted and, under the threat of armed attack, drove Schuschnigg into arrangements to enable the progressive Nazification of Austria including the appointment of a Nazi, Seyss-Inquart, as Minister of the Interior.¹⁸⁵

Under this news a meeting with Italian ambassador was arranged for February 18. It was at this meeting where Chamberlain and Eden had their biggest fight – Eden was advocating for the withdrawal of Italian "volunteers" from Spain, while Chamberlain was ridiculing Eden's demands.¹⁸⁶ The following day on a Cabinet meeting regarding the negotiations with the Italians seventeen ministers supported Chamberlain and only three Eden. Another meeting was held on January 20 where Eden expressed his wish to leave the government. The Cabinet were shocked. It was tried to make certain concessions to Eden – it was decided that the withdrawal of the Italian "volunteers" must be incorporated into the Anglo- Italian agreement.¹⁸⁷ Eden was not swayed, he resigned the same day.

¹⁸¹ Ibidem, p. 152. Eden was not against appeasement, but he wanted to use the policy differently.

¹⁸² R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 118.

¹⁸³ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, pp. 118-119.

¹⁸⁴ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 153.

¹⁸⁵ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 119.

¹⁸⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 152.

¹⁸⁷ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 155.

Reasons for Eden's resignation were numerous. There was the Roosevelt Initiative, which Eden himself identified as the main reason for the departure, as he believed that befriending the United States was most important. There was Chamberlain's never-ending disrespect to the Foreign Office which obstructed Eden's work.¹⁸⁸ There was the overall difference in policy. And as most of the Cabinet supported Chamberlain's course, Eden was the odd one out.

8.4. Events until September 1938

After his meeting with Hitler on February 12 Schuschnigg did what Hitler wanted, but over time "he built up resentment against the treatment he had received at Berchtesgaden".¹⁸⁹ With his courage built up, Schuschnigg decided to try to stop further Nazification of Austria by truly an explosive manner – plebiscite.¹⁹⁰ The plebiscite was called on March 9 and was supposed to take place on March 12. This was a defiance of Hitler, and furthermore, if the plebiscite succeeded Hitler would have suffered a great loss of prestige and of all of his momentum. Hitler could not risk that. The army was deployed on the Austro-German border. Now Schuschnigg had to pray that Western powers would save him and his country. His prayers were not answered.

Britain had not found herself to be strong enough to oppose Germany.¹⁹¹ France was in the midst of yet another constitutional crisis. And Mussolini had written Austria off when he had joined Axis in November 1936. Britain, however, had one plan at preserving Austria. Chamberlain had hoped that he could keep Hitler in check by befriending Mussolini who would then defend Austria as in 1934. Unfortunately, it was not 1934 anymore. During the negotiations with Britain Mussolini was providing details to Hitler, and specifically assured him that the Austrian independence will not be binding for anyone.¹⁹²

Schuschnigg soon realized he was all alone. He tried salvaging what he could and called the plebiscite off, but that was no longer enough for the Germans and on March 11, Göring told Schuschnigg to resign and that his successor must be the leading Austrian Nazi Seyss-Inquart. Schuschnigg did resign but President Miklas refused to appoint Seyss-Inquart Chancellor. So,

¹⁸⁸ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 168.

¹⁸⁹ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 185.

¹⁹⁰ The electorate was to be asked whether Austria should be a part of Germany.

¹⁹¹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 164.

¹⁹² A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 152.

in the evening of March 11, he appointed himself, but it was too late. The German Army began the "invasion" half an hour earlier.¹⁹³ Hitler entered Austria on March 12, and on March 13, Seyss-Inquart resigned. Austria was going to be incorporated into the Third Reich.

British reaction was one of resentful resignation. Halifax¹⁹⁴ was "outraged by these 'highwaymen's methods'" when he was informed of the ultimatum issued to Schuschnigg, but soon "recognized that there was nothing that Britain could possibly do".¹⁹⁵ Halifax then hurried to the German Embassy but not to confront the ambassador but to say farewell. Joachim von Ribbentrop was being recalled as the German ambassador, as he was promoted to be the new Foreign Minister. It is interesting that his departure coincided with the crisis in Austria.¹⁹⁶ What was more maddening (to the British ministers) than interesting was that Ribbentrop was intentionally left out by Hitler, so when he was asked what was going on he panicked and lied awkwardly.¹⁹⁷ On March 13, the British government expressed disappointment and anger over the escalation of the Austrian events but otherwise nothing of importance was done to preserve Austrian independence.¹⁹⁸ On March 14 Chamberlain restated this viewpoint in the House of Commons. He was attacked by a few MPs, most notably Churchill and Amery but nothing had happened that would matter to the Cabinet. The next day Chamberlain was already stating that he sees no reason for a change in the Government's policy towards Germany.¹⁹⁹

Where there was a reason to change policy (or rather to develop one) was towards Czechoslovakia. Nobody doubted that the country that was now encircled on its west by Germany with around three million Germans inside of it was the next on Hitler's list. Indeed, Czechoslovakia was the main point of discussion on March 16, at a Cabinet meeting, and on March 18, at a meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee. Both Halifax and Chamberlain expressed that it would not be wise for Britain to defend Czechoslovakia at all costs; they agreed that if Germany can achieve her demands peacefully Britain would not object. Other ministers debated Britain's commitment to France and whether Britain should assure the

¹⁹³ Ibidem, p. 154.

¹⁹⁴ Halifax replaced Eden as the Foreign Secretary.

¹⁹⁵ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 181.

¹⁹⁶ One could wonder, whether it was planned in advance, as a distraction for the upcoming Anschluss. That is not the case. A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 142.

¹⁹⁷ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 163.

¹⁹⁸ Ibidem, p. 163.

¹⁹⁹ Ibidem, p. 166.

French of her help if war over Czechoslovakia began, and France would be called in.²⁰⁰ The debate was split. On one hand, giving assurances to France would surely strengthen German reluctance to use force towards Czechoslovakia; on the other, not giving assurances would make the Anglo-German rapprochement more likely; but most importantly, giving assurance to France would give away British right to decide herself if she wants to go to war or not.²⁰¹ Mainly for the last reason the assurance was not given.

At a next Cabinet meeting on March 22, armed with a new report from the Chiefs of Staff,²⁰² Chamberlain and Halifax "exploited it [the Chiefs of Staff report] to secure agreement to their policy of concession to Germany".²⁰³ The argument was that Britain and France could win only a long war of attrition against Germany. Why do that only because of Czechoslovakia which probably would not even be renewed in the same borders, anyway? Furthermore, the victory was not even likely if Italy and Japan joined the war on Germany's side.²⁰⁴ The policy that was decided on was one of forcing Czechoslovakia to satisfy the Sudeten Germans accordingly, and if Czechoslovakia refused Britain and France would retract their support and make the Czechoslovak obstinacy responsible for war with Germany.²⁰⁵ Therefore, Britain still tried to keep her door towards understanding with Germany open.

With their mind made up, it was now time to persuade the French to follow. The new Prime Minister of France, Édouard Daladier, and his Foreign Minister, Georges Bonnet, were invited to Britain on 28 April. Chamberlain had invited them to have an opportunity to convince them to follow his policy. The French were asked to support "their policy of pressuring the Czechs into concessions"²⁰⁶, and after a little while of pretended heroism Daladier complied. While this was going on, Hitler was getting ready. In late March, he met with Henlein and together they devised a plan to break up Czechoslovakia, they used a strategy where their demands would be so great that Beneš could never agree to them, therefore, keeping the tensions high and making Beneš look as he was the irrational one.

²⁰⁰ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 136.

²⁰¹ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

²⁰² This report concerned itself with the military implications of the possible events regarding Czechoslovakia.

²⁰³ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 137.

²⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

²⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

²⁰⁶ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 202.

Hitler had also instructed his Chief of the Army, Wilhelm Keitel, to prepare for "Case Green" – an invasion of Czechoslovakia.²⁰⁷

In May, crisis broke out over election in some districts of the Sudetenland. The German Army was allegedly massing on the borders and on May 20, Czechoslovakia partially mobilized. On May 21, France reassured Czechoslovakia in its commitments and Halifax sent a note to Berlin that if France was to enter the war, the involvement of the United Kingdom could not be ruled out.²⁰⁸ When Henderson was reporting this message to Ribbentrop, the Foreign Minister replied with a threat of war. Indeed, war seemed imminent. However, with the tensions still high, it was soon discovered that the Germans did not plan any attacks at this time. The Czechoslovak mobilization had happened under false information of German actions.²⁰⁹

Unfortunately, even though the May crisis was a mirage, the consequences were not. Even though Britain did something very close to nothing, it "was singled out for lavish praise in the international press".²¹⁰ This, understandably, angered Hitler. He became even more concentrated on the Czechoslovak issue. "Case Green" was reworked and supposed to be ready on October 1 at the latest. Another consequence was that the British involvement had deepened, even though that was the opposite of what British leaders desired. In order to prevent another crisis and to get the Czechoslovaks to behave responsibly, Lord Runciman was sent to Prague as an impartial mediator to help reach settlement between Czechoslovakia and the Sudeten Germans.²¹¹

The idea of an impartial mediator was not new. Ellinger points out that the idea first appeared as soon as March 14, when Jan Masaryk wrote to Hoare and requested help.²¹² Hoare was supposed to tell Masaryk that Czechoslovakia should ask Britain and France for an impartial mediator who would oversee the negotiations with the SDP (*Sudetendeutsche Partei*). Masaryk relayed this message back to Prague, but the idea had been forgotten in the midst of the political hastiness. Now it surfaced again in June and on July 1, Runciman was already being prepared by Halifax for his mission.²¹³ After Runciman was made familiar with his

²⁰⁷ Ibidem, p. 204.

²⁰⁸ Ibidem, p. 207.

²⁰⁹ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 149.

²¹⁰ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 208.

²¹¹ Ibidem, p. 210.

²¹² J. Ellinger, Neville, p. 182.

²¹³ Ibidem, p. 184.

objectives, Prague was forced to ask for a mediator, and only after the Czechoslovaks had accepted, Chamberlain announced Runciman's mission in the House of Commons on July 26.²¹⁴

Runciman arrived in Prague on August 3, and after initial meetings, he soon found himself with not much to do. Beneš and the Czechoslovak government were presenting one proposal after another which were all being declined by the SDP. On September 4, after Beneš had technically approved all German demands, the SDP stalled for time, stating that it will have time to address the proposal only after the Nazi Nuremberg rally and mainly after Hitler's speech on September 12.²¹⁵ Taylor comments on the importance of this moment,

At the beginning of 1938, most English people sympathised with German grievances, however much they disliked Hitler's way of voicing them. The Sudeten Germans had a good case: they did not possess national equality, or anything like it. By September, thanks to Benes, the bottom had been knocked out of this case. Few people continued to believe that the Sudetens had genuine grievances; the Sudetens hardly believed it themselves. Hitler ceased to be an idealistic liberator of his fellow-nationals; he appeared instead as an unscrupulous conqueror, bent on war and domination.²¹⁶

Indeed, one of the main importances of the whole Czechoslovak crisis can be found in the change of the opinion of the British public.

After the failed mission of Runciman, most of the British politicians did not know what to do, but not Chamberlain. Throughout summer he was developing a new shocking strategy which he dubbed "Plan Z".²¹⁷ After Hitler's speech in Nuremberg, a riot broke out in the Sudetenland; the Czechoslovak government declared martial law, and the revolt was suppressed. This gave SDP a chance to officially brake off negotiations.²¹⁸ With the world anxiously watching, it was now time for Chamberlain's secret plan.

8.5. Munich

"Plan Z" was very characteristic for Chamberlain. Always wanting to impose control over his surroundings, and his longing for admiration were the corner stones of "Plan Z" – the idea that he would negotiate with Hitler himself, without France and without Czechoslovakia. On September 14, the idea was presented to the surprised Cabinet, which approved and applauded

²¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 184.

²¹⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 173.

²¹⁶ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins*, p. 212.

²¹⁷ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 238.

²¹⁸ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 197.

it.²¹⁹ Chamberlain lifted off the Heston airfield in the morning of September 15 and made his way to Berchtesgaden. As Ellinger points out, Chamberlain did not leave for Germany with the idea of changing the Czechoslovak borders, he did not yet know that SPD had broken off negotiations.²²⁰ Another new piece of information that Hitler presented to the Prime Minister was that more than three hundred Germans had been shot in Sudetenland. This was a pure lie.²²¹ Hitler just wanted to make his position seem urgent.

The meeting went, according to Chamberlain, quite well. Hitler demanded an immediate solution to the crisis. Chamberlain said that he could not give him that alone and would have to debate with his Cabinet first. After a few hours, the two men agreed that after securing approval for his policy Chamberlain would visit Germany again to finalize the negotiations. Chamberlain then requested that Hitler should not use force until the next visit, which Hitler had promptly promised.²²² Even though Chamberlain was happy, the situation that he had put himself in had little to be happy about. As Bouverie notes,

Chamberlain had now made himself responsible for delivering the Sudetenland in a way that would prove acceptable to the Czechs, as well as to French, British and international opinion. If he succeeded then Hitler had gained his stated demand. If he failed – as Hitler expected – then the Führer could have the little war he dreamt of. It was hardly a triumph of British diplomacy.²²³

Back in London, Chamberlain first informed his Cabinet and then on September 18, the French arrived to unify the policy of the democracies. The British and the French agreed about the immediate cession of the Sudetenland to Germany; a guarantee (requested by the French) for the remainders of rump Czechoslovakia was also agreed upon.²²⁴ Now the agreement was to be forced on Czechoslovakia; if she refused, she would be left all alone. Czechoslovakia was literally bullied into accepting the Anglo-French plan. After an entire night of international calls and debates, at 5 a. m., the broken Czechoslovaks finally agreed to cede their borderlands.²²⁵

On September 22, Chamberlain flew to Germany again, this time to Godesberg. The first meeting was a catastrophe. Hitler had thrown Chamberlain's hard-fought deal off the table. Hitler had stated that representatives of Poland and Hungary had their demands too,

²¹⁹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 246.

²²⁰ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 199.

²²¹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 251.

²²² *Ibidem*, p. 252.

²²³ *Ibidem*, p. 252.

²²⁴ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 165.

²²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 167.

furthermore, Hitler fabricated another lie about the murdering of Germans in Sudetenland and demanded that the whole affair must be settled by September 28 at the latest.²²⁶ After that the talks were adjourned for the next morning. Meanwhile under the impression of the looming German attack, the Czechoslovak government decided to mobilize, but in an effort to not interrupt the second day of negotiations, Halifax stalled the Czechoslovaks.²²⁷ On the second day, the two delegations were at first only supposed to exchange documents, but then Henderson together with Wilson and Ribbentrop arranged another meeting between the two statesmen. The second meeting was heading towards an all-out argument between Hitler and Chamberlain.²²⁸ The Prime Minister was ready to walk out when Ribbentrop asked if he would still deliver the new demands to the Czechoslovak government. Chamberlain replied that he would do so, only if Czechoslovakia was not attacked until the end of negotiations. Hitler agreed and then persuaded Chamberlain to at least hear the German demands that were in the memorandum that he was to deliver. After the following discussion, only one thing had changed, the date on which the German forces were to enter Czechoslovakia was pushed to October 1.²²⁹

With more work than before he left, Chamberlain returned to Britain. Even though Hitler's demands upset him, he decided that he would try to spur them into reality. His Inner Cabinet gave him a lukewarm approval and the whole Cabinet meeting was split with Hoare, Cooper, Hore-Belisha, De La Warr, and Winterton opposing the new demands.²³⁰ The debate was adjourned for the following day. There, between the drive home and the second meeting of the Cabinet, the biggest change in British domestic politics since the resignation of Anthony Eden happened. Halifax was being driven home by Cadogan, who was strongly against the new concessions, and decided to give Halifax "a piece of his mind".²³¹ This argument persuaded Halifax to change sides. After a sleepless night, Halifax was now in opposition to the Prime Minister. On the meeting next day, (September 25) Halifax explained his new mindset: He now saw a big difference between the Anglo-French plan and the memorandum from Godesberg – the difference was that Hitler was demanding an unorderedly transfer, without respect for anyone involved. Furthermore, Halifax thought Hitler had given nothing

²²⁶ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, pp. 204-205.

²²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 206.

²²⁸ In reaction to the Czechoslovak mobilization Hitler wanted to abandon all talks and prepare for war.

²²⁹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 209.

²³⁰ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 264. It is interesting that Bouverie does not mention Hoare as one of the rebels, but Ellinger does (J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 213.) I included Hoare in the list because Ellinger's argument seems more than valid.

²³¹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 265.

back for the concessions made by Britain and others. With that in mind, Halifax came to a decision that while Nazism lasted, there could be no peace in Europe.²³² In an open revolt against Chamberlain were now: Halifax, Hoare, Cooper, Hore-Belisha, Hailsham, Stanley, Elliot, De La Warr, Winterton.²³³ The Cabinet then dispersed because the French delegation had arrived.

At the meeting, Daladier resolutely declared that if Hitler did not revert to the original Anglo-French plan, France would fulfill her obligations to Czechoslovakia.²³⁴ The Britons then grilled Daladier who, surprisingly and bravely, held his ground. Chamberlain then asked if a representative of the French Army could arrive for talks, Daladier responded positively, and the meeting was postponed until the arrival of General Gamelin.²³⁵ Another meeting of the Cabinet was called.²³⁶ There a partial agreement was reached – Chamberlain would write a personal letter to Hitler, the letter would be accompanied by an information that, if Czechoslovakia were attacked, and France would fulfilled her obligations, then Britain would join the war.²³⁷ The letter was presented to the French next morning, they agreed and left.

Chamberlain found it absurd that war should be started over a principle. All sides had already agreed on the cession of territory, why should they now go to war over the manner of the cession?²³⁸ Chamberlain truly believed that this was the last German grievance and that after that the great European settlement would come, and even though he was in his beliefs more and more alone, he carried through.

By September 27 – 29, the mood in Britain was gloomy. War seemed imminent. Trenches were being dug through the parks of London. Gas masks were being handed out. Men were being called for service.²³⁹ On September 27, Chamberlain, through a radio broadcast, said his famous words, "how horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing".²⁴⁰ Truly, even Chamberlain had lost almost all hope.²⁴¹

²³² Ibidem, p. 266.

²³³ Ibidem, p. 266.

²³⁴ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 217.

²³⁵ Ibidem, p. 219.

²³⁶ Still the same night.

²³⁷ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 220.

²³⁸ N. Chamberlain, *The Struggle*, p. 275.

²³⁹ Ibidem, pp. 275-276.

²⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 275.

²⁴¹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 272.

On the other side of the Channel, in Berlin, Hitler was having doubts of his own. The German people did not show as much enthusiasm as he had hoped for.²⁴² In view of this, Hitler sent a conciliatory telegram to Britain. Chamberlain seized this opportunity and offered to fly to Germany yet again; together with this offer came a proposal of a Four Power conference with Daladier and Mussolini. With this Chamberlain had to leave for a meeting of the House of Commons.²⁴³ While Chamberlain was in the parliament, a message came to the Foreign Office that Hitler had accepted the offer of Four Power conference, and that the conference would take place the next day. The message was rushed to the House of Commons and upon receiving the message Chamberlain bombastically uttered:

I have something further to say to the House yet. I have now been informed by Herr Hitler that he invites me to meet him at Munich to-morrow morning. He has also invited Signor Mussolini and M. Daladier. Signor Mussolini has accepted and I have no doubt that M. Daladier will also accept. I need not say what my answer will be.²⁴⁴

The House exploded with cheers.

The next day, Chamberlain and his entourage flew to Munich. The conference itself was uninteresting. Whenever Chamberlain wanted to make some changes (most notably on the quickness of the occupation of the Sudetenland), he was shouted down by Hitler. At 2 a.m. the Munich Agreement was signed by the four statesmen. The Czechoslovaks were not invited to the conference and when they were being handed the agreement, they were told that the matter was considered settled and that if the Czechoslovak government rejected the agreement, they would be left alone by both France and Britain.²⁴⁵ Chamberlain then used the occasion to ask Hitler for another short meeting the next morning. When the two met Chamberlain asked Hitler if he wished to sign an Anglo-German statement in which was written that the two nations never wish to go to war again. Hitler signed. It was, surprisingly, this short statement that meant more to Chamberlain than the Munich Agreement.²⁴⁶

Upon his return to London Chamberlain was greeted by an unbelievable number of cheers. The public was ecstatic.²⁴⁷ A correspondent of *The Yorkshire Post* had written "all London to-night has shown its relief that war has been avoided. Crowded streets have paid generous tribute to the Prime Minister's unflagging efforts for peace". Later, he continued,

²⁴² Ibidem, pp. 274-275.

²⁴³ Ibidem, p. 275.

²⁴⁴ N. Chamberlain, *The Struggle*, p. 300.

²⁴⁵ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 285.

²⁴⁶ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 235.

²⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 239.

I moved among the crowds in Whitehall to-night as they waited for Mr. Chamberlain to return to Downing Street. Despite the drizzle, they were determined to make it a jubilant occasion. They cheered every car which turned into Downing Street.²⁴⁸

Indeed, many newspapers wrote articles about the praise Chamberlain had received. But what is more interesting is that the letters from correspondents²⁴⁹ had a very different tone. The correspondents were not so positive about the Munich agreement. One commented "was it really necessary for our Prime Minister to go three times to Germany to take Hitler's orders?"²⁵⁰ Another added that "Munich will undoubtedly be ranked by historians as marking the definitive acquisition of hegemony in Europe by Herr Hitler".²⁵¹ What can be derived from these contradicting opinions and feelings is that even a day after its signing, the Munich agreement was controversial. And as time passed and other developments came, people started to interpret the "Peace with Honour" very differently.

On the first meeting of the House of Commons after Munich, on October 3, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Duff Cooper, resigned. Cooper already disagreed with the policy of appeasement, rather wanting to address Hitler by "the language of mailed fist"²⁵² but his resignation was also supported by the impertinent behavior of the Prime Minister. In his resignation speech Cooper addressed the Anglo-German statement arguing that,

For the Prime Minister of England to sign, without consulting with his colleagues and without, so far as I am aware, any reference to his Allies, obviously without any communication with the Dominions and without the assistance of any expert diplomatic advisers, such a declaration with the dictator of a great State, is not the way in which the foreign affairs of the British Empire should be conducted.²⁵³

In his critique Cooper was joined by many, for example Nicolson, Law, and Churchill.²⁵⁴

Despite all the controversy, Chamberlain's position was still strong, 51% of respondents, in a poll which had been organized by *Mass Observation*, were supporting his actions during the September Crisis while only 31% were against them.²⁵⁵ Chamberlain's approach was also put to vote to the MPs on the final day of the debate over Munich. The government and its actions were upheld by 366 to 144.²⁵⁶ After some Cabinet shuffles, which saw more of Chamberlain's opponents leave and friends come in, it would not be wrong to say that Chamberlain was at

²⁴⁸ The Yorkshire Post, October 1, 1938, *London Notes and Comment*, p. 10.

²⁴⁹ Ordinary people who wrote to the redaction of the newspaper and the newspaper then published their opinion.

²⁵⁰ W. W. Grantham, qtd. in The Yorkshire Post, October 1, 1938, *Correspondence*, p. 8.

²⁵¹ Keith A. Berriedale, qtd. in The Scotsman, October 1, 1938, *Points of View*, p. 15.

²⁵² N. Chamberlain, *The Struggle*, p. 305.

²⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 305

²⁵⁴ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 243.

²⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 243.

²⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 244.

the peak of his power. This power, however, would now more than ever fall and rise with the good or bad behavior of Hitler. Unfortunately for Chamberlain, Hitler was just getting started.

8.6. Six Months of Hope

After Munich, the established good-will that Chamberlain counted on did not last for long. First, Hitler made unfavorable comments in his speeches on October 9, and November 6, and then the *Kristallnacht* came. The *Kristallnacht*, together with another hateful speech on November 10, finally turned the British public against Hitler.²⁵⁷ Chamberlain was not disturbed. The Prime Minister continued in his course. Throughout December and January talks were being conducted between Britain and Germany whose aim was to bind the two economies together to make them more dependent. Most of the talks went nowhere as the Germans refused to lower their armament expenditures.²⁵⁸ But one agreement was reached, the Anglo-German coal export agreement, which gave Chamberlain at least something and supported his hopes of tranquilizing Germany.²⁵⁹

Indeed, at the end of 1938 everything did not look that bad for Chamberlain. In December the alliance with France was made official; Italy was still successfully split from Germany (and was still thought of as a counterweight);²⁶⁰ and the double strategy of conciliating Germany while fastening rearmament was going well.²⁶¹ First of the final blows to these hopes was the illness of Neville Henderson, the British ambassador to Germany. Henderson was an even bigger appeaser than Chamberlain and his dispatches from Berlin were always making matters less threatening than they were. It was then, unsurprisingly, a big shock for the Foreign Office when the dispatches without Henderson's influence began to come in. These reports were much more critical towards Germany and paid more attention to Germany's inner maneuvers.²⁶²

Soon the Foreign Office was receiving alarming news. In January a report informed that Hitler was planning an attack on Holland.²⁶³ This German threat was taken seriously because

²⁵⁷ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 308.

²⁵⁸ One of the British conditions for British loan/investment in Germany.

²⁵⁹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 256.

²⁶⁰ It must be noted that Chamberlain did not think about Italy in this way for much longer, as he lost most of his hope for her after his visit to Rome in January 1939.

²⁶¹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 258.

²⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 274. Ellinger indicates that these reports might have had some influence on certain members of the Cabinet.

²⁶³ F. McDonough, *Hitler*, p. 64.

intelligence reported that Germany will soon have to choose "between reducing arms production or making immediate war, to solve by conquest German shortages of food, raw material and labour".²⁶⁴ As the Netherlands were seen as of vital interest to Britain, both the Chiefs of Staff and the Cabinet decided that it would be necessary to go to war if they were attacked.²⁶⁵ Fortunately, the January crisis was a mirage and no plan to attack the Netherlands existed.

It, however, started a real crisis of the policy of appeasement. In the wake of the January crisis Hore-Belisha proposed an enlargement of the British expeditionary forces, and against the wishes of Chamberlain, and with the support of Halifax, the proposal was upheld by the Cabinet.²⁶⁶ Ellinger marks the period of late January to February as a time when Chamberlain lost his dominant position in his Cabinet, instead the Cabinet was from now on being dominated by Halifax with a support of Hoare, and Hore-Belisha.²⁶⁷ Indeed, by March, Chamberlain's hopes of appeasing Germany were beginning to more resemble prayers than reality.

On March 15, Germany occupied the rump of Czechoslovakia. The occupation was a consequence of a quick crisis. On March 9, the Slovakian Cabinet was dismissed under suspicion of preparing to declare independence. Hitler seized his chance. The Chancellor instructed Josef Tiso, a Nazi collaborator and the Slovak Prime Minister, to declare Slovak independence and request protection from the Reich. Tiso obliged and on the night of March 14, Emil Hácha was on a train towards Hitler to decide the fate of Czechoslovakia. Hitler dictated his demands; if there was an objection to any of them, Prague would be bombed into smithereens. Hácha, after suffering a mild heart attack, obliged and "requested" German protection. On March 16, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was created.²⁶⁸

The occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia brought, for the first time, into the Reich a territory that was not ethnically dominated by Germans. March 15 blatantly broke the Munich agreement; it was now obvious that Hitler could not be trusted. Bouverie remarks that,

The consensus that appeasement was now dead was instantaneous. In one swift stroke, Hitler had broken his word – repudiating the claim that the Sudetenland constituted his

²⁶⁴ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 191.

²⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

²⁶⁶ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 276.

²⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 277.

²⁶⁸ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, pp. 323-324.

last territorial demand – and revealed that ‘lust for conquest’ with which his critics had always charged him.²⁶⁹

On the afternoon of March 15, the House of Commons met. Chamberlain rose to speak, he first recapitulated the events which led to the occupation, then the Prime Minister went on about how the guarantee to the Czecho-Slovak republic was not a valid one,

His Majesty’s Government have endeavoured to come to an agreement with the other Governments represented at Munich on the scope and terms of such guarantee, but up to the present we have been unable to reach any such agreement. In our opinion the situation has radically altered since the Slovak Diet declared the independence of Slovakia. The effect of this declaration put an end by internal disruption to the State whose frontiers we had proposed to guarantee.²⁷⁰

The guarantee²⁷¹ problem was then promptly swept away by Chamberlain: "His Majesty’s Government cannot accordingly hold themselves any longer bound by this obligation".²⁷² The Prime Minister technically said that since Czechoslovakia disassembled on its own, the British government was not obligated to do anything. At the end of his speech Chamberlain indicated that appeasement would limp on as nothing had happened.²⁷³

The reaction of the Opposition was murderous in the least and even the Conservative MPs felt that if Chamberlain remained so adamantly obstinate in his policy, he would probably have to resign.²⁷⁴ Realizing the weakness of his position (in his Cabinet, in the House of Commons, and in the eye of the public) Chamberlain chose a braver tone in his speech at the meeting of the Birmingham Unionist Association.

Chamberlain tried to explain why he was so meek in his speech to the Commons arguing that,

The Government were at a disadvantage, because the information that we had was only partial; much of it was unofficial. We had no time to digest it much less to form a considered opinion upon it. And so it necessarily followed that I, speaking on behalf of the Government, with all the responsibility that attaches to that position, was obliged to confine myself to a very restrained and cautious disposition.²⁷⁵

So, if Chamberlain had excused his spiritless House of Commons speech, what did he want to do differently? Nothing. Even after this speech in which he stated that he would fight for "the

²⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 324.

²⁷⁰ N. Chamberlain, *The Struggle*, p. 407.

²⁷¹ The signatories of the Munich Agreement were supposed to guarantee the borders of the rest of Czechoslovakia.

²⁷² N. Chamberlain, *The Struggle*, p. 407.

²⁷³ It must be noted that Chamberlain expressed sadness and disillusionment over the German actions but in the end, he decided that it did not interfere gravely with his pursuit of peace. N. Chamberlain, *The Struggle*, p. 410.

²⁷⁴ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 325.

²⁷⁵ N. Chamberlain, *The Struggle*, p. 413.

liberty that we have enjoyed for hundreds of years, and which we will never surrender";²⁷⁶ and that for this fight he was,

Convinced that I have not merely the support, the sympathy, the confidence of my fellow-countrymen and countrywomen, but I shall have also the approval of the whole British Empire and of all other nations who value peace indeed, but who value freedom even more.²⁷⁷

even after this speech, Chamberlain still wanted to appease Germany.²⁷⁸ Unfortunately for Chamberlain, it was not 1938 anymore. He was no longer in charge of the events; the events were in charge of him. From March 15, the Prime Minister was, if not in a subordinate position to his Cabinet, then in a position of equal strength at utmost, and his preferred agenda was to be no longer followed.

8.7. Scramble for Deterrence

It must be remembered that from March to September many (if not all) of the diplomatic decisions were made under the impression that war was imminent. One of those cases was the British guarantee to Poland.

On March 17, a frightened (and falsified) message was relayed to Halifax by Virgil Tilea, the Romanian ambassador in London. Romania was supposedly under the threat of military attack by Germany which desired a monopoly on the exports of Romanian oil.²⁷⁹ The first try of the British Cabinet was to organize a Four-Power conference where Britain, France, Poland, and the USSR would agree to defend other small states of Europe. This plan failed thanks to the Polish fear of the Soviets.²⁸⁰ Indeed, Chamberlain was also reluctant to co-operate with the USSR, as he had not seen her as useful²⁸¹ because the USSR had not shared a border with Germany, and since the transfer of troops through Poland was out of the question, the USSR would truly not be very useful if she joined the war while Poland existed. It was for these reasons (plus ideology, as hatred of communism was profound in Britain at this time) that Britain first decided to first try to build a broader alliance with the smaller states of Europe.

²⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 420.

²⁷⁷ Ibidem, p. 420.

²⁷⁸ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, pp. 325-326.

²⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 326.

²⁸⁰ Poland was fearful due to the Polish-Soviet War and many other disputes between the two nations.

²⁸¹ Throughout the 1930s the USSR was perceived as weak nation, which is incapable of offensive war, barely able to defend herself. T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 326.

The diplomatic proceedings were hastened even more by the multiplicity of German threats. On March 20, news came of the German preparations for the Invasion of Poland. A day later, Hitler issued an ultimatum to Lithuania to hand over the region of Memel.²⁸² Under the impression that these threats would spark a European war, (if Germany was not swiftly deterred) Britain decided to offer a guarantee to Poland. This moment is gravely interesting; by giving this guarantee Britain withheld her right to decide when or when not she would go to war. That was so because if Poland refused German proposals,²⁸³ even if they were reasonable, then Poland would be attacked, and Britain would have to help regardless of what she thought about the German proposals. The guarantee was famously accepted between two flicks from a cigarette by the Polish Foreign Minister, Józef Beck, on afternoon March 30.²⁸⁴ Taylor melancholically notes,

Two flicks; and British grenadiers would die for Danzig...the assurance was unconditional: the Poles alone were to judge whether it should be called upon. The British could no longer press for concessions over Danzig; equally they could no longer urge Poland to cooperate with Soviet Russia.²⁸⁵

The next day Chamberlain informed the House of Commons of the guarantee.

The guarantee was greeted by a mostly warm reception in the House. It, however, rattled the Soviets, who thought that by diverting Hitler from Poland the British wished him to attack in the Baltic (a Soviet sphere of influence), where they were supposed to hope to poise the two nations against each other and to surveil the clash from the comfort of their islands. The Soviet distrust towards the West grew and the position of the pro-West Soviet Foreign Commissar, Maxim Litvinov, was quickly turning from shaky to unsustainable. The actual goal of the British was the opposite. Chamberlain and Halifax thought the Polish guarantee a "cornerstone of a wider defensive agreement in eastern Europe",²⁸⁶ however after being given the guarantee the Polish refused to cooperate further (on April 4, Beck refused to pledge Poland to help Romania if she was attacked) and said defensive agreement never came to be.

With the situation in central Europe at least resembling stability a crisis broke elsewhere. On April 7, Mussolini invaded Albania. As Italy was now threatening British interests in the

²⁸² A former German territory.

²⁸³ The hated Polish corridor was demanded to be ceded (together with Danzig and other minor territories) as it was splitting Germany in two.

²⁸⁴ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 327.

²⁸⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 260.

²⁸⁶ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 328.; Ellinger confirms this – J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 306-307.

Mediterranean the Foreign policy committee decided that Greece should be guaranteed.²⁸⁷ On a final Cabinet debate concerning the guarantees it was decided that Romania would also be rewarded a guarantee; on April 13, Chamberlain announced the guarantees in the House of Commons.²⁸⁸ Even though Ellinger notes that the guarantees were not a very sound policy (both Britain and France were unable to fulfill their obligations; the guaranteed nations would be overrun and the democracies could do nothing about it), at the same time he comments that they were the result of necessity (to prevent Germany or Italy from occupying further territories) and their dubiousness was realized even by the contemporaries, e. g. Cadogan.²⁸⁹

Following the guarantees were two big losses for Chamberlain, in both of these cases he was overruled by his Cabinet. First, a law enforcing conscription was pushed on him (April 26) and second, the Prime Minister was defeated on the issue of the Ministry of Supply (even though he succeeded in making it ineffective until July 1939).²⁹⁰ At the end of April, Hitler smothered all the remaining reasonable hopes of Chamberlain. In his speech on March 28, Hitler had announced that negotiations with Poland had failed and that he would therefore terminate the German-Polish non-aggression Pact; in the same speech he also repudiated the Anglo-German Naval Agreement.²⁹¹ These very saddening news brought about another change in British politics. The British government were becoming more and more afraid that Hitler might strike a deal with Moscow. Such a deal would secure Germany's eastern front, which would lead to the main attack being focused on Britain and France.²⁹² For this reason negotiations were opened with the USSR.²⁹³

²⁸⁷ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 306.

²⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 307. The guarantees were of course offered together with France; they were joint Franco-British guarantees.

²⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 307.

²⁹⁰ Why was Chamberlain blocking the efforts of his Cabinet? They were doing everything in their power to prevent war, or were they not? British thinking was very concerned about an immediate attack, and such attack needed to be prevented – that is why the strategy of deterrence was deemed necessary; meanwhile the British were also, simultaneously, afraid that if they were too passive then the dictators would think that they have the upper hand and would, therefore, start the war anyway. This way of thinking called for the strategy of slowly decreasing the pressure. (J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 305.) Chamberlain supported the second strategy as it left more room for some form of future European settlement. Chamberlain's tragedy was that his beliefs and hopes were unrealistic. If the dictators desired European peace, it would have been secured years ago.

²⁹¹ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 309.

²⁹² This strategy was now also favored because the course of an interconnected alliance with the smaller nations of Europe resulted only in unilateral guarantees from Britain and France. The smaller states refused to defend each other. The final reason that pushed Britain towards the Soviet alliance was the signing of the Pact of steel on May 22. J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 315.

²⁹³ It is not in the aptitude of this thesis to cover the vast complexity of the Anglo-Franco-Soviet negotiations throughout the summer of 1939. The following paragraph will focus on the results of the negotiations and why they failed; the negotiations themselves will be left out.

The negotiations with the Soviet Union failed. The main reason why they failed was that Hitler had been able to offer more to Stalin. The democracies wanted an alliance with the Soviets only so that Germany would not get it. British politicians were still afraid of the communist menace; therefore, it was then impossible for them to consent to Stalin's demands of the control of the Baltic states (May 30).²⁹⁴ Hitler on the other hand had not cared a damn about the Baltic states, for now. Another reason for the failure of the negotiations was the excruciating slowness of the British. On most of the Soviet proposals the British took days to respond, and when the question of Staff talks came up, the British insisted on traveling by boat, and not even by a fast one.²⁹⁵ An additional factor for the failure could be just the behavior of the British towards the Soviets throughout the 1930s. After all the beratement and walking-around from the British it should be no surprise that Stalin would perceive Hitler as more trustworthy.²⁹⁶ All of this culminated on the evening of August 23 – Pact Ribbentrop-Molotov had been signed.

After the signing of the Pact there was not much else to do. The main question was now if Britain and France would fulfill their obligations to Poland. Hitler probably thought that the severance of the USSR from the democracies would destabilize their already small will to fight. This time it was Hitler who was wrong. British politicians had done everything in their power to prevent war, but Hitler would not have it; by shouting, bullying, promising, cajoling, lying, and outright politically torturing (Godesberg) the British politicians since 1933, Hitler had pushed them to put their foot down, and after all this time when they finally did so, he failed to realize that. When he began his invasion of Poland on September 1, Hitler thought (heavily encouraged by Ribbentrop)²⁹⁷ that the democracies would not scramble together enough courage to intervene, but this time the British public was ready, most of the British politicians were ready, and even though Chamberlain tried in his last heroic effort to save the peace, the die was cast. When on September 2, Chamberlain informed the House of

²⁹⁴ These demands were hidden in supposed guarantees to countries bordering the USSR. The problem was that in fear of a loss of their independence countries like Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Finland would not accept a guarantee from the Soviets, so the Soviets proposed that those guarantees should be enforced on said states. This would, however, left the interpretation of what is and is not an aggressive move against said states on the guarantors, and nobody doubted that Soviets would be quite liberal with their interpretation. The British public would not stomach a deliberate sacrifice of these states, which the Soviet proposals clearly meant. R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 232.; Ellinger makes the same point – J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 337.

²⁹⁵ R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain*, p. 241.

²⁹⁶ During the summer of 1939 the British (mainly Chamberlain) also tried to negotiate with the moderates in Germany who had not wished war (J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 325.). The thesis will not analyze these negotiations, as I consider them completely inconsequential and unimportant, except maybe for the influence they had on Stalin and his attitude towards Britain, which was in any case insignificant.

²⁹⁷ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 378.

Commons, that Britain would not join Poland immediately and would instead wait for the German response to the proposed conference, the House was ready to vote him out of power.²⁹⁸

On the night from September 2 to September 3, the Cabinet finally forced Chamberlain to issue an ultimatum to the Germans. The ultimatum was delivered to Hitler at 9 a.m. the next day, and if the German invasion were not stop by 11 a.m., Britain would declare war. Hitler is recorded to have been quite surprised and rattled by the ultimatum, but he could not afford to stop the invasion anymore.²⁹⁹ Hitler never responded to the ultimatum. A few minutes after 11 a.m., Britain declared war on Germany. The European theater of the Second World War had been opened.

9. Conclusion – In Defense of Appeasement

Appeasement developed from a policy of reconciliation that was used during the 1920s.³⁰⁰ The turning point of the two strategies was 1933 – the year of Hitler’s ascent. Reconciliation was necessary as the Treaty of Versailles was much more divisive than it was unifying. And because Britain and France did not possess the resources to militarily enforce Versailles in the long-term, they had to try to make Germany happy in the new system (that is why Locarno came to be); and indeed, up until the Great Depression these efforts were mostly successful.³⁰¹ The Great Depression hit Europe in 1931 and under its pressure the Great powers turned away from the collective treaties to bilateral ones. However, the Great Depression was only a symptom, not the cause of the end of the collective treaties and the future death of collective security, and of the League of Nations. The real cause of the break-up of Europe was the Great Power mindset of Britain. The Great Power mindset meant that smaller nations could have been bullied to ensure the stability between Britain, France, Germany, and Italy. It was this mindset of the British that Hitler had exploited.³⁰² The British wished to make a system in which all (major) nations would be happy and pacific, if that cost them a few re-drawings of

²⁹⁸ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 345.

²⁹⁹ T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 378.

³⁰⁰ I do not consider the policy of the 1920s to be the policy of appeasement because in the 1920s Germany was not aggressive, therefore it could not have been appeased.

³⁰¹ Subchapter 2.3.

³⁰² This exploitation was possible because Britain understood German grievances which were stemming from the Treaty of Versailles. The problem is that her Prime Minister continued to understand them until Munich.

the map of Europe then that would be a fair price.³⁰³ Contrary to that, Hitler wanted to make Germany the strongest nation in Europe and used the pretense of his own search for stability to lure the democracies into believing German grievances. So, subsequently, the tragedy of the British foreign policy after Hitler's rise to power was threefold. First, Hitler was an unreasonable fanatic with great diplomatic skill to whom a treaty meant nothing; while throughout the 1930s the British believed (or hoped for?) him to be reasonable and themselves thought to be able to persuade him to adhere to the concluded treaties.³⁰⁴ Second, thanks to the idea of self-determination,³⁰⁵ Hitler's claims seemed reasonable for quite a long time (until March 15, 1939), partially cloaking his expansionism under the idea of pan-Germanism. Third, the British public would not support war with Germany before the crisis of January 1939, which means that even if in 1933 (Hitler's ascent) or 1936 (remilitarization of Rhineland) someone in the position of power in the British government had realized (or cared enough) that Hitler must be stopped, he would not be supported by the public.

With these reasons in mind – was there any realistic alternative to appeasement?³⁰⁶ Not until it was too late. The only realistic alternative to appeasement was the policy of Chamberlain's second Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, and even Eden did not have majority support of the Cabinet. But before the policy of Eden is discussed, why was it the only alternative? It was the only one because the others were not sensible or not convenient for the politicians. For example, a policy that would be oriented at the League of Nations is a case of the latter. This policy was quite viable until the end of 1935 and was at least partially employed by the government of Stanley Baldwin before the 1935 election. Why did it fail? Because if Britain actively supported the League of Nations, her resources would be drained the most. She would basically provide an umbrella of defense for the whole Europe without anything in return. Another problem with this policy was the fact that after 1935 (the Hoare-Laval Plan) many of the British politicians who would lead the country in the coming years began to believe that bilateral treaties, which Britain would conclude with the aggressors, would be

³⁰³ Evidence of this can be found even in Locarno where Stresemann refused to acknowledge the eastern borders of Germany as final, and the other signatories did not mind.

³⁰⁴ Trusting Hitler was in my opinion the greatest misfortune of the British (and mainly Chamberlain) from 1933 onwards and even sadder is the fact that this could not have been avoided. Hitler behaved nicely towards Britain (at least until the Abdication crisis) and even abided by the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. I believe that the answer to why Chamberlain (and others) went so far with their attempts at appeasement is simply that Hitler played a spectacular diplomatic game, and British politicians were caught up in a "perfect storm" of events.

³⁰⁵ A part of the post-war idealism left in Europe after the First World War by the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson.

³⁰⁶ "Realistic" means a policy which would be accepted by the public as well as by the majority of the Conservative Party.

safer and more efficient than the League's.³⁰⁷ Also, a policy without the League offered more diplomatic freedom (the Hoare-Laval Plan is a perfect example of the freedom the British politicians sought after). Other policies, such as the great alliance policy, which was suggested by the Labour Party (only after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War) and Winston Churchill, were not viable before the annexation of the rump Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939, due to public and political opposition to an alliance with the USSR.

To the policy of Anthony Eden from the beginning of 1938. Eden had an inverse thought process to Chamberlain. Eden wanted to enlarge the number of potential allies (mainly the United States)³⁰⁸ while Chamberlain wanted to decrease the number of potential enemies; again, it was Chamberlain's tragedy that he failed to realize (though he was not alone) that it was not possible; but would Eden's strategy work? Probably not, as the United States did not join the war even when London was being bombed by the Luftwaffe. Hence, they would have hardly joined (or be of greater help) in any other instance even if the relationship between the two countries was better; and if Eden's strategy would have failed to secure the help of the United States – what could it have been good for anyway? Indeed, until March 1939, there was no realistic alternative to the policy of appeasement.

If there was no other policy, would it at least be better for Britain to enter the war sooner, for example if the war broke out over Sudetenland?³⁰⁹ Yes, definitely. In 1938, Luftwaffe did not have any plans of attacking London; the French outnumbered the Germans heavily on the Western front; Germany was overall much weaker; and the USSR would most likely join the war on the side of the democracies.³¹⁰ In 1939, the Soviets were kept neutral; the Czechoslovak army was non-existent, in fact, all its shiny and first-rate equipment was now in German hands; and Germany completed her defenses on the western front (known as West Wall).³¹¹ Then, why did the British not fight in 1938? First, they did not have all the information – they believed that Germany was much stronger. Second, it was not up to Britain to declare war; that decision laid in Hitler's hands, and he chose not to fight in 1938.

³⁰⁷ J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 90.

³⁰⁸ As a prime example would serve the Roosevelt initiative from the beginning of January 1938, over which the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary had a clash of policies.

³⁰⁹ It must be remembered that Britain (the Cabinet overruled Chamberlain in that matter) was ready to go to war over Sudetenland (Ellinger provides the date of September 26, 1938; J. Ellinger, *Neville*, p. 240) but that year Europe was saved by Hitler's second doubts.

³¹⁰ The Czechoslovaks also had a quite formidable army. T. Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler*, p. 295

³¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 296.

Under pressure of such information, it may seem that Hitler was solely responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War. So, was he? As mentioned before, Hitler was quite startled to learn of the British ultimatum and Britain's decision to go to war.³¹² This indicates that he did not intend war with Britain, or at least not at that point in time. Hitler hoped to expand eastward; to occupy and germanize Poland and Ukraine;³¹³ and to make Germany self-sufficient. Albeit considerate of Hitler that he would "spare" Britain of his conquest, British politicians could not and would not allow German expansion of such magnitude, as the age-old British strategy was one of balance of power on the Continent. Indeed, what it all comes down to is that Germany wanted to be as safe and powerful as Britain; and such a position could not have been achieved peacefully.³¹⁴ But if Hitler knew that Germany was weaker than Britain, why did he even risk war with her? Simply because he thought that if Germany was to ever rule Europe, the time was now (and technically he was right). Hitler could have ruled Germany peacefully, but he, in an attempt to make Germany the strongest nation in Europe, choose not to. Truly, a war with Hitler "probably could not have been deterred".³¹⁵ Hitler definitely shares the responsibility for the timing of the outbreak of World War Two (mainly with Ribbentrop),³¹⁶ but thanks to him and his fanaticism Europe was a ticking bomb ever since 1933.

To conclude, Chamberlain had a thankless job in which he could not succeed. I also believe that Chamberlain could not have had done more – his attempts at saving peace were countless; he repeatedly increased Britain's defense budget; and he put his soul and heart into his service. Sadly, the fight for peace in Europe was lost long before Chamberlain became Prime Minister.

³¹² Subchapter 8.7.

³¹³ A. J. P. Taylor, *Příčiny*, p. 23.

³¹⁴ Another factor was the economic situation, Germany lacked some key resources (oil, iron etc.), and through expansion said resources could have been obtained.

³¹⁵ Geoffrey L. Hughes, *The Origins of World War II in Europe: British Deterrence Failure and German Expansionism*, in: Robert Rotberg – Theodore Rabb (edd.), *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars (Studies in Interdisciplinary History)*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 281-322, here p. 283.

³¹⁶ In regard to the timing, Ribbentrop probably bears even more responsibility than Hitler.

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