

History

The Lesson of Appeasement

by AJ Powell | 0 Comments | 15 min read

Written by [AJ Powell](#)

We fully understand that the [Treaty of Versailles](#) was a complete failure, that the major powers who negotiated peace in Paris through selfish, self-serving, hidden agendas set themselves up for failure by refusing Germany a seat at the table, by placing all blame on Germany and Germany alone, and by conceding to egotistical demands instead of logical reason... but this was not the only thing that worked against peace after WWI ended... indeed, while the treaty worked to fuel anger and discontent amongst a starved population burdened by impossible-to-fulfill demands, any opportunity to prevent a second war was squandered by even more petty and misguided politics. Working silently right along-side of the failure treaty was a failed political policy called "Appeasement"...

This is a historical analysis that discusses how the policy of Appeasement created a chain of events that allowed WWII to happen. In reading this analysis, it is important to ask, what lessons can we learn from this period of the past that we might see repeating themselves today, why are these lessons still so very important, and what lessons can we take with us on our own path? We will discuss this bit of history for the purpose of discovering such thoughts, and we will start by asking three particular questions for which to guide the analysis:

1. What is Appeasement, how does it work, and how was it used?
2. What kind of social and political problems existed at the time?
3. What players were a part of the problem, and how did their actions or inactions instigate the drive for war?

Now, these questions are guides, and the reason is that, upon conclusion of our assessment, we will ask a series of entirely new questions designed to prompt critical thinking, and then use this new knowledge to apply towards our own advancement of self-improvement.

Upon conclusion of this analysis, take a few moments to carefully consider the questions at the end, **then share your thoughts in the comments below** so the community may benefit from open discussion.

In the wake of the first Great War, the mass amount of suffering all endured was clearly established. Hindsight reveals to us time and time again just how bad life was for the majority of people. It is for these very reasons that we know for a fact that the matter of concerns over the treatment of Germany following the war were directly responsible for the very creation of yet another world war. Yet in the decades leading up to the rise of Nazism, we also find a mountain of evidence to support a very different possibility. Indeed, if it were not for the inaction of those outside of German borders, there existed a large number of measures in which World War Two might have been prevented. Of course, as we know today, the political policies of Appeasement used by the major players during this time actually contributed to Hitler's rise, and after the war, once the dust had settled and two Great Powers became World Powers, we know how Appeasement turned into Containment. Containment of course was an active policy, unlike the passiveness of Appeasement, and as we know today, Containment is what balanced the world's powers while preventing both the spread of Communism and a third world war during the Cold War era. So why wasn't Containment used back then when it would have mattered most? The answers are deeper than surface matters, and actually have a lot to do with finance.

Neither England nor France was in any position to fully realize their continued responsibilities to maintain influence throughout the European continent after the First World War ended. The financial crises created by depleted resources, manpower, and trade had eventually led to a total economic collapse – the Great Depression. Internal fighting amongst labor forces and politicians created gaps in government efficiency, while strikes and absolute failure in leadership (i.e., the “blame game” – people in leadership positions who absolutely refused to accept any form of responsibility for their actions while blaming everyone else for the problems they created... has anyone seen a solid example of this form of “Toxic Leadership” anytime in recent history?) only distracted from the obvious. The two greatest possibilities – England and France – to hold Germany at bay were so preoccupied with themselves that they nearly completely forgot Germany even existed or might matter for the sake of their own future. Truth be told, again as we know today, Germany was the strongest nation on the continent, even after the war's end, and in the century that followed, it has been proven over and over, that Europe prospers with inter-continental structure, support, and cooperation, and it falls apart every single time its many nations become selfish and self-centered. In the broadest sense, this is exactly what was happening throughout the '20's and '30's.

The drive to support the war effort had severely damaged the strength of the British economy. After the war's end, England – now fully aware of the crisis – returned to the gold standard in 1925 in an effort to spur a recovery in value of the Pound. Instead, it sparked a change in industry wages due to a newly created profit gap, and in-turn, led to the general strike of 1926. Regardless of the reasons for the strike, the government was prepared for it. A state of emergency was declared, divided districts under civil commissions supported

by civil servants were created, and a mass of trained volunteers were mobilized. Immediate important services were maintained, and food supplies continued to flow, even into cities. The government managed to survive the effects of the strike, but the strike itself is important to note because of the following effects it created.

Industry was in need for an overhaul, and the opportunity had now been missed, low wages and growing unemployment continued to plague a large number of areas, and a growing amount of distrust between the working class and the rest of the nation created major pressure just beneath the surface of society as a whole. As a result, the economy continued to tank in productive areas. The return to the gold standard also backfired on British banks original intentions of returning England to the dominant seat. Instead, it caused an increase in the price of British made goods, literally destroying England's position on the world trade stage. Financiers from this point on scrutinized the positions of imports and exports, leaving many to flee from the Pound in a last-ditch effort to save their own pocket lining.

The economic situation also had a hand in the shifting of political parties and affairs, which didn't solve the problem or make it any better. At the time, the British government was mostly conservative and was led by Stanley Baldwin, a lazy industrialist with no real vision, goals or direction in life. This situation led to a decrease in conservative popularity, and the rise of a labor government under the head of Ramsay MacDonald resulted in the 1929 elections. 2.5 million people were unemployed by the time the new labor government came into full power in 1930, and with national government income reduced – due to reduced taxation caused by unemployment – the national budget quickly became unbalanced. This created another panic of flight from the Pound that only compounded the effects of the economic struggles currently plaguing the world. As a result, the government reduced salaries and cut unemployment benefits. Wages were reduced for the armed services, which created a mutiny and triggered further financial panics, and finally, the government removed the Pound from the gold standard. These moves were paramount to creating a possible economic recovery. Trade was stabilized, and the labor government was overwhelmingly popular. Yet for some reason, MacDonald ended his position in 1935 and Baldwin took over administration duties of the office for the following two years until 1937, when Neville Chamberlain stepped into the picture.

By all accounts, Chamberlain was entirely unfit as a politician and a leader of any kind. His attention span was often single-tracked, and he lacked the diversity in well-rounded character to be effective in a leadership role – especially one so multifaceted and task saturated as the office of Prime Minister of an entire nation. Chamberlain's chief concern was economic recovery, which in the case of his government was strictly orthodox at best. He wanted to balance the national budget, but wanted economic stimulus and low taxes at the same time. Even a simple economics class will teach you that you can't have it all, but progress can be made through long-term investing, and that cautious policy is exactly what ended up prompting an eventual rise in recovery over time. While the careful attention Chamberlain's government paid to economic improvement did indeed finally begin to show signs of payout, their emphasis on the burden already at hand caused them to ignore taking on necessary new matters, mainly the largely ignored affairs within the German borders that were taking place.

The state of internal affairs we see England attempting to manage over the course of four Prime Ministers and changes in government partisan involvement is central to understanding why Appeasement came into the picture, or the role it played in England's foreign policy. On one side, because they refused to accept the ideas that matters outside the state were possibly more pressing than matters within, parties within the government refused to even acknowledge the mounting threat growing from across the pond. They simply did not want to take on any more pressures than they already had to deal with, and thus adorned horse blinders to focus all their attention on money. While on the other side, influential groups within the British ruling classes actually considered the rise of Nazism beneficial. These individuals – like the Astor family (you may know John Jacob Astor IV, he died when the Titanic sank in April of 1912), who was the wealthiest family in the United States – held Hitler in high esteem due to acceptance of his rage against the treatment Germany had received due to the Treaty of Versailles. They believed the German people would be pacified if the treaty's injustices were removed from the picture. Furthermore, these groups had a certain level of love affair over the past Germanic social way of life – structured and disciplined in a Prussian sense of being – they believed Hitler would be able to effectively return Germany to this state (and in a way, he did exactly that). Next, as the strongest nation within continental Europe, they believed Germany was entitled to

hegemony as a way to keep other nations in-line. Finally, they believed in the Nazi premise of keeping Communism at bay, that the rise of the Nazi state would prevent the spread of Communism.

These individuals (known as the Cliveden set), combined with internal political blinder-like focus on the economic state of affairs, became the driving force behind the Chamberlain government. In a way, we could say that Chamberlain – in all reality – didn't possess a self-motivated bone in his body, that all his decisions on international affair policies were made out for him, and that he was simply along for the ride as a figurehead. But nonetheless, when the dynamic explosion of Nazism expanding throughout Germany finally reached England, Chamberlain's response was business-like negotiations. He literally felt that, if he could reason with Hitler through goodwill concessions, then Hitler would be willing to negotiate cooperative peace with England. In reality, all his actions proved were the words of his own family members as they stated before, that Chamberlain simply lacked the ability to lead politically.

It wasn't very long before Germany mobilized along the Rhineland once more (a beautiful place that just happens to be extremely strategic for a military advantage, as WWII maneuvers and operations later proved), the French no longer held the advantage of the possibility for projection of force into Germany, and even England's Eastern-European Balkan allies slowly began to drift towards German influence as each felt the pressures of money and resources tighten, and saw not only German outreach as a possibility for improvement, but appeal of totalitarianism a structural advantage. As those nations began imitating Mussolini's example, which even Hitler admired from afar, the dictatorial regimes began cooperation, and Appeasement finally entered the stage as the West began foolishly negotiated concessions. In the years that followed, both Hitler and Mussolini saw the end of the Spanish civil war as weakness on the side of the West. Hitler took it as a "green light" to finally proceed with his own aggressive expansionist efforts, thus the Blitzkrieg would soon follow, but not before the assimilation of Austria – Hitler's homeland.

The Austrian government was already under years of suppression by this time, and Nazi propaganda was dramatically stepped-up. Hitler demanded that Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg allow the integration of Austrian Nazis into the government, and under threat of German invasions, gave into those demands. As soon as the Austrian government looked its weakest – during the postponed plebiscite vote of March 11th – Hitler sent in the troops to take over. On the 14th of March 1938, Hitler had returned to his youthful home of Vienna as a conqueror who proclaimed triumph in his own mind. The West did nothing except protest (hmmm... sound's oddly familiar to current affairs today...), they didn't even lift a finger of aid to Austria. When Italy turned a blind eye, Hitler tipped his hat in gratitude and turned his attention to Czechoslovakia. Again, the West meekly protested.

In truth, Chamberlain didn't even really care as far as history is concerned. He wrote the whole thing off as squabble between people they neither knew nor cared of in far off lands. But England as a whole knew what was to come. Czechoslovakia was a key ally of France, who was in-turn supported by bounded obligation from Russia. If one was attacked, the chain reaction was soon to follow. England felt it was possible to persuade Hitler to be content with simply uniting other "Germans", and pressured the Czech government to concede as well. Amidst a clash of protests Hitler threatened military action, and Chamberlain flew to Hitler's home in Berchtesgaden to give Hitler what he wanted under promise of no further military actions. Both England and France forced Czech to agree under their own threat of removal of support, but Hitler was not satisfied, threatened action regardless, and Mussolini – who actually wanted to avoid a war at this point – convinced all to attend the infamous conference in Munich on September 29th.

Winston Churchill characterized the Munich Conference as "a disaster of the first magnitude." (p. 295), in the British House of Commons, but his voice sadly rang out alone. The 4 great powers of the conference dictated the terms for Czechoslovakia, and handed them out after the fact. Chamberlain was seen as a victorious conqueror for stopping the compounding escalation of the Nazi threat, and a champion of peace. They were all wrong. Chamberlain defended his decisions in Munich as good will on both ends, and yet once more, Chamberlain proved his family's words true. The fall of Czechoslovakia only enabled an increase in Nazi influence and military manpower. The path of Appeasement had run its course, and it was a mere 6-months from this point that the world would find itself once again at war when the Chaplin satirized madman led his goose-steppers on a rampage.

In retrospect, we might be able to say that a policy of Containment was far more suitable for this period of time, and if used, might have been able to prevent Germany from spreading and gaining strength. We know that the Treaty of Versailles was beyond harsh, and that it created a mass amount of resentment throughout the German people, eventually leading them to follow Hitler because he represented a way out, but we also know that national interests remained a chief concern within the very nations who set all this in motion to begin with. The first war depleted resources and collapsed entire markets, and the Great Depression resulted. As the Governments of England and France became more concerned with internal affairs than the problems in Germany to which they created, they refused to accept the burden of responsibility. Thus, Appeasement only enabled Hitler, whereas Containment might have shut him down.

Questions to Ponder:

1. Why is this important to history?
2. Why is it important to understand what Appeasement is and how it works?
3. What were the results of an Appeasement-based political policy?
4. What lessons can we learn from these past events that apply to our advancement of “Globalized Leadership”?
5. How do you think you could apply those lessons to your own professional environment today?
6. Can you think of events in recent history that share similarities found within this analysis?
7. What are the effects?

Post YOUR replies in the **comments section below** so the community can discuss these thoughts openly.

Gilbert, Felix and Large, David C. (2009). *The End of The European Era – 1890 to the Present*. Sixth Edition. W.W. Norton & Company, New York | London.

[Appeasement](#) [Chamberlain](#) [Historical Analysis](#) [History](#) [Hitler](#) [World War Two](#) [WWII](#)

About the author



AJ Powell

AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.