
On the Origins of World War II:

An Analysis of Appeasement as a Causal Factor During the Inter-War Period.

Abstract

Appeasement has been overstated as a cause of World War II. Popular disposition and economic factors exerted much greater influence over the flow of events during the inter-war period. Facts drawn from Keith Eubank's analysis: *The Origins of World War II* reinforce this standpoint even as Eubank argues that appeasement was a primary causal factor.

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HST-104 (10162)

April 12, 2013

It is quite clear from Eubank's narrative that the policy of appeasement had relatively little to do with the onset of World War Two in 1939. The imbalanced and unrealistic terms of the Treaty of Versailles imposed on a German nation never occupied by foreign soldiers¹, with no system of enforcement in place² fanned the flames of German animosity towards the Allies. German dissatisfaction and enthusiasm for militaristic expansion contrasted harshly with the exhaustion and revulsion for war resounding through Britain and France, creating a political flood plane in the west and a record breaking storm in the east. If World War Two were compared to a flood sweeping across Europe, Versailles and the Great Depression provided the water, Adolf Hitler broke down several dams, and the policy of appeasement was only the poorly built levee expected to hold nature back. Had a brilliant politician entered British or French service at the right time and made exactly the right decisions, war may perhaps have been avoided. Such a close shave would indeed have been a miracle, and would have required major diversion from popular political trends of the time. The only effective method to avoid war in 1939 would have required gradual reconstruction and modernization of the British and French armed forces to provide diplomats a truly powerful bargaining chip for dealing with Hitler's fanaticism. Such a movement never happened because the British and French people vehemently rejected any military agenda both due to terror over the potential of war³, and the misguided belief that another great war was impossible. Thus they viewed military spending as a waste of funds made sparse by the Great Depression ⁴.

The story of World War Two began in Versailles, France on the twenty-eighth of June, 1919⁵. World War One ended without resolving the fundamental national tensions that drove the European Continent to madness in 1914. Upon arrival to the peace talks, German

¹Keith Eubank, *The Origins of World War II*, 3rd Ed. (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2004), 2.

²Ibid., 7.

³Ibid., 56.

⁴Ibid., 16,23.

⁵Ibid., 5.

delegates were refused the right to negotiate as the Allied powers assumed the role of victors after what the German people felt had been a mutual armistice. The treaty writers focused on national agendas at the cost of international stability. Among the four main authors of the treaty: U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was dedicated to his concept of a League of Nations, which lost a great deal of its power when Wilson failed to convince Congress to vote for United States membership in the league. France's Georges Clemenceau was intent on crippling German military potential and securing a guarantee of German reparations to help rebuild his war-ravaged country. Britain's David Lloyd George was mostly interested in maintaining British naval supremacy, enlarging the empire, and reviving trade. Italian delegate Vitorio Orlando so disruptively demanded plunder to satisfy Italian greed that he was forced out by Wilson to keep the talks on track⁶.

The completed treaty was forced upon the German delegates and very quickly became unpopular. Germany was outraged, and the groundwork for the fall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of more radical forces was laid⁷. British policy very quickly became sympathetic to Germany's burden, and France was stymied by the lack of enforcement protocols with which Germany might be compelled to provide much needed reparations and resources. The redefinition of Danzig as a free city, the distribution of land to create a Polish corridor, and the new policy of self determination brought into existence a milieu of small, vulnerable states in the east over which Germany would quickly extend its influence.

Between 1920 and 1930, the components of the treaty were tested and broken at a leisurely pace and Germany enjoyed a period of great leniency. According to Eubank, "Only one military attempt was made to enforce the reparations section of the treaty and that attempt failed"⁸. French and Belgian forces occupied a section of the Ruhr valley to secure a badly needed supply of coal. Confronted with workers bent on sabotaging their effort and

⁶Ibid., 4.

⁷Ibid., 7.

⁸Ibid., 9.

government driven inflation so bad that the reparations received barely offset the cost of occupation, France and Belgium chose to open the problem up for investigation. The resulting Dawes Commission proposed reparations payments based on German ability to pay⁹ and a system of international loans to bolster the German economy. French and Belgian troops were removed from the Ruhr, and the new flood of capital revitalized the German industrial sector, making way for military expansion. It is in this period that “appeasement” was first observed, as Germany bristled under the treaty, her opponents made concessions. However it seems clear that without these concessions German animosity would only have been greater and, as stated by John Maynard Keynes, without the German economy to provide an industrial backbone to the recovering continent, reconstruction would have continued far longer¹⁰.

It is here that Eubank points out that the treaty terms were more reasonable than they were given credit for and that Germany *could* have fulfilled them comfortably had she been so inclined. However he completely ignores the disposition of the German people, and forgets his statements on the necessity of an occupation to bring the reality of German defeat home to the populous. Without strong-handed enforcement, German acceptance of the treaty was impossible. With the the British and French people unwilling to get tough on the treaty and against the concept of military expansion, they were in no position to force compliance of the Germans. Appeasement here was not some calculated policy chosen for its efficiency, but rather the only practical diplomatic course of action available. The best example of purely foolish diplomacy in the period are the treaties signed at Locarno on the sixteenth of October 1925, whereby Germany formally recognized French rights in Alsace-Lorraine, a triviality, while creating a barrier that would prevent French fulfillment of its mutual defense commitments with eastern Europe. This treaty cleared the way for German

⁹Ibid., 9.

¹⁰Ibid., 11

expansion eastward, while securing a faster timetable for demilitarization of the Rhineland, however the effect was still relatively small. Even before the treaty, France could not have simply marched across Germany, and with the onset of the Great Depression the occupation of the Rhineland became a prohibitively expensive venture. With popular opinion in favor of lessening German burdens, this seemed a reasonable political move at the time.

The period of relatively calm reconstruction was concluded abruptly by the onset of the Great Depression, which prompted the fall of the unpopular Weimar Republic. Perhaps the most important events along the path to war in 1939 took place during the rise of Adolf Hitler. Hitler's gift was in organizing people, inundating them with his charisma, and controlling public discourse with the SA and later the SS. The SA, the paramilitary branch of the Nazi party, otherwise known as the "brown shirts" were used to gather intelligence, spread propaganda, and physically intimidate opponents of Hitler's agenda. They were motivated by and well received as protectors against the possible spread of Bolshevism, of which many right and even moderate Germans were terrified. The secret police in Germany helped to create a silent culture in which opposition to Hitler's ideals was never voiced because Germans "never knew who might be listening"¹¹. Hitler's experience with the SA during his rise in Germany created a blueprint for how similar groups would be used in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, and how outright dishonesty could be applied on the political stage.

After January 1933¹², Hitler became the primary actor driving events on the diplomatic stage. As soon as he came to power, he set about facilitating an aggressive foreign policy. Even under Versailles restrictions, Germany had maintained one of the most efficient and well-trained armies in Europe¹³. Hitler would expand the German military to give him a

¹¹Robert Gellately, eds., "The Gestapo and German Society: Political Denunciation in the Gestapo Case Files," *The Journal of Modern History* 60, no. 4 (1988): 678-680.

¹²Eubank, *The Origins of World War II*, 31

¹³*Ibid.*, 31.

strong diplomatic stance. At this point, regardless of how many Versailles terms remained intact, economic depression left no nation in a position to police or enforce German adherence to the treaty. In the ensuing negotiations, while Hitler sought to eliminate any remaining restriction on German armament, Hitler's opponents could only hope for German participation in talks. With militaries emaciated by budget cuts¹⁴ the weakness of the western powers enabled Hitler to achieve his goals, from the re-militarization of the Rhineland to the repeal of limitations on German armaments.

By 1936, war was nearly imminent. Hitler had complete power in Germany, a large and growing modern military, and a will for conquest. It was time for Germany to start using its strong diplomatic position to make tangible gains. An incorporation of Austria into Germany had been desired well before Hitler came to power. On July 11, 1936, Hitler cemented German diplomatic power over Austria with an Austro-German Agreement that provided rights to Austrian Nazis and lubricated the flow of goods and propaganda between the two nations. Hitler immediately commenced an extremely aggressive campaign forcing the Austrian government to include Austrian Nazi party members and disseminating Nazi propaganda across Austria¹⁵. In early 1938, as Hitler's threats grew in violence, it became clear that Britain and France were unwilling and unprepared to go to war for Austria's sake¹⁶. Austria was on its own, not because the western powers thought that it might appease Hitler, but because they simply were not in a position to do anything about it. On March 12, the invasion of Austria was carried out with almost no resistance, diplomatic or otherwise.

By late 1938, the German military was nearly complete and Hitler was prepared for the contingency of war. With Anschluss accomplished, Hitler was free to turn his entire attention to the question of Czechoslovakia. To begin, Hitler displayed one of his greatest advantages over his diplomatic opponents, the ability to tell outright lies on the international stage:

¹⁴Ibid., 63-65, 72.

¹⁵Ibid., 87-89.

¹⁶Ibid., 91-93

The misery of the Sudeten Germans is indescribable. It is sought to annihilate them. As human beings they are oppressed and scandalously treated in an intolerable fashion...or when they are they are beaten until the blood flows solely because they wear stockings the sight of which offends the Czechs, or when they are terrorized and ill treated because they use a form of greeting...¹⁷

Hitler magicked a racial plight for Sudeten Germans out of nearly thin air, subsidizing a Sudeten Nazi party to begin increasing the visibility of the Sudeten problem and making impossible demands of the Czech government. On these grounds, the Fuehrer made plans for invasion and began a series of unreasonable diplomatic campaigns against the Czech government. These campaigns "...were not ideas which were realized at the moment of their conception, but were long-made plans which I was determined to realize the moment I thought the circumstances at the time would be favorable"¹⁸.

Britain and France were completely unprepared for war at this point, particularly over such a small foreign state. Neville Chamberlain took the plight of Sudeten Germans at face value, and determined to do everything possible to resolve the problem before blood could be shed over it. By the time of Chamberlain's desperate negotiations in September of 1938, Germany had completed battle plans and distributed orders. There was no idle bluff in Hitler's actions, he was ready for war as was his nation¹⁹. The Munich conference and the imminent end of Czechoslovakia as an autonomous state were not inevitable. Had Britain and France taken a stronger stand, Hitler was prepared for war and defended along the French border even as he expected western powers to remain uninvolved. The policy of appeasement served to push war back another year, allowing Germany to gain an arguably better strategic position, but this policy was an artifact of the larger social disposition that was ultimately at fault for allowing Germany to bring the world to the brink of war.

¹⁷Monica Curtis, *Documents on International Affairs, 1938* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), II, 193.

¹⁸Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919-1945*. Vol. 3: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 117.

¹⁹Eubank, *The Origins of World War II*, 111-113.

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