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THE ECONOMIC AND MILITARY CONSTRAINTS OF NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN

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Abstract. *Introduction.* This research explores British foreign policy, rearmament, and the Munich Crisis in the lead-up to World War II, focusing on the strategic decisions of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Using a mix of primary sources such as Cabinet minutes, archival records, and military documents, along with secondary academic analyses, it examines the diplomatic, military, and economic factors shaping British policy during this critical period. *Goals and objectives.* The main objectives are to understand the motivations behind Chamberlain’s leadership and how military spending, intelligence reports, and diplomatic pressures influenced his decisions. By examining key events like the Munich Agreement and the rearmament program of 1936, the study aims to assess Chamberlain's strategic choices in the context of budget constraints, shifting intelligence reports, and missed opportunities for Franco-British collaboration. *Results.* The research finds that economic limitations significantly impacted Chamberlain’s reluctance to fully commit to rearmament. His appeasement policy, which sought to delay conflict, was shaped by inaccurate military intelligence that overestimated Germany’s strength. Additionally, the study highlights missed opportunities for cooperation between Britain and France, which could have strengthened resistance to Nazi expansionism. Ultimately, Chamberlain’s decisions were a calculated attempt to balance diplomacy, military readiness, and economic realities. *Conclusion.* The study concludes that Chamberlain’s leadership was driven by a strategy to postpone war, allowing Britain time to build its military capabilities. While his appeasement policy has been widely criticised, it was a deliberate, albeit flawed, response to the economic and military constraints Britain faced at the time. The research underscores the complexity of British foreign policy in the years leading up to World War II.

Keywords: British foreign policy, Neville Chamberlain, Munich Crisis, World War II, Appeasement strategy, Military rearmament, Intelligence assessments
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НЕВИЛЬ ЧЕМБЕРЛЕНДІҢ ЭКОНОМИКАЛЫҚ ЖӘНЕ ӘСКЕРИ ШЕКТЕУЛЕРІ

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Аннотация. *Кіріспе.* Бұл зерттеу премьер-министр Невилл Чемберленнің стратегиялық шешімдеріне назар аудара отырып, Ұлыбританияның сыртқы саясатын, қайта қаруландыуын және Екінші дүниежүзілік соғыс алдындағы Мюнхен дағдарысын қарастырады. Министрлер кабинетінің хаттамалары, архивтік жазбалар және әскери құжаттар, сонымен қатар қосымша академиялық талдаулар сияқты негізгі дереккөздердің комбинациясын пайдалана отырып, ол осы қиын кезеңде британдық саясатты қалыптастырған дипломатиялық, әскери және экономикалық факторларды зерттейді. *Мақсаттары мен міндеттері*. Негізгі мақсаттар – Чемберлен басшылығының мотивтерін және оның шешімдеріне әскери шығындар, барлау есептері мен дипломатиялық қысым қалай әсер еткенін түсіну. Мюнхен келісімі және 1936 жылғы қайта қарулану бағдарламасы сияқты негізгі оқиғаларды қарастыра отырып, зерттеу бюджеттік шектеулер, барлау есептерінің өзгеруі және француз-британ ынтымақтастығы үшін жіберіп алған мүмкіндіктер контекстінде Чемберленнің стратегиялық таңдауын бағалауға бағытталған. *Нәтижелер*. Зерттеу көрсеткендей, экономикалық шектеулер Чемберленнің өзін толықтай қайта қаруландыуын қаламауына айтарлықтай әсер етті. Оның қақтығысты кейінге қалдыруға бағытталған тыныштандыру саясаты неміс күшін асыра бағалайтын дәл емес әскери барлаумен қалыптасты. Сонымен қатар, зерттеу Ұлыбритания мен Франция арасындағы нацистік экспансионизмге қарсылықты күшейтуі мүмкін ынтымақтастықтың жіберіп алған мүмкіндіктерін көрсетеді. Сайып келгенде, Чемберленнің шешімдері дипломатияны, әскери дайындықты және экономикалық шындықты теңестіруге бағытталған есептелген әрекет болды. *Қорытынды*. Зерттеу қорытындысында Чемберленнің басшылығы соғысты кейінге қалдыру стратегиясына негізделген, бұл Ұлыбританияға өзінің әскери әлеуетін арттыруға уақыт берді. Оның тыныштандыру саясаты кеңінен сынға ұшырағанымен, бұл сол кездегі Ұлыбританияның алдында тұрған экономикалық және әскери шектеулерге әдейі, жетілмеген болса да, жауап болды. Зерттеу Ұлыбританияның Екінші дүниежүзілік соғысқа дейінгі жылдардағы сыртқы саясатының күрделілігін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: Ұлыбританияның сыртқы саясаты, Невилл Чемберлен, Мюнхен дағдарысы, Екінші дүниежүзілік соғыс, тыныштандыру стратегиясы, әскери қайта қарулану, барлау бағалаулары

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ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИЕ И ВОЕННЫЕ ОГРАНИЧЕНИЯ НЕВИЛЛА ЧЕМБЕРЛЕНА

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Аннотация. *Введение*. Это исследование изучает британскую внешнюю политику, перевооружение и Мюнхенский кризис в преддверии Второй мировой войны, уделяя особое внимание стратегическим решениям премьер-министра Невилла Чемберлена. Используя сочетание первичных источников, таких как протоколы заседаний кабинета министров, архивные записи и военные документы, а также вторичный академический анализ, оно изучает дипломатические, военные и экономические факторы, формировавшие британскую политику в этот критический период. *Цели и задачи*. Главные цели – понять мотивы лидерства Чемберлена и то, как военные расходы, отчеты разведки и дипломатическое давление влияли на его решения. Рассматривая такие ключевые события, как Мюнхенское соглашение и программа перевооружения 1936 года, исследование направлено на оценку стратегических выборов Чемберлена в контексте бюджетных ограничений, меняющихся отчетов разведки и упущенных возможностей для франко-британского сотрудничества. *Результаты*. Исследование показывает, что экономические ограничения существенно повлияли на нежелание Чемберлена полностью посвятить себя перевооружению. Его политика умиротворения, направленная на отсрочку конфликта, была сформирована неточной военной разведкой, которая переоценивала силу Германии. Кроме того, исследование подчеркивает упущенные возможности для сотрудничества между Великобританией и Францией, которые могли бы усилить сопротивление нацистскому экспансионизму. В конечном счете, решения Чемберлена были рассчитанной попыткой сбалансировать дипломатию, военную готовность и экономические реалии. *Заключение*. Исследование приходит к выводу, что руководство Чемберлена было обусловлено стратегией отсрочки войны, что дало Великобритании время для наращивания своего военного потенциала. Хотя его политика умиротворения широко критиковалась, она была преднамеренным, хотя и несовершенным, ответом на экономические и военные ограничения, с которыми столкнулась Великобритания в то время. Исследование подчеркивает сложность британской внешней политики в годы, предшествовавшие Второй мировой войне.

Ключевые слова: Британская внешняя политика, Невилл Чемберлен, Мюнхенский кризис, Вторая мировая война, стратегия умиротворения, военное перевооружение, оценки разведки
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Introduction

Neville Chamberlain, who served as Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1937 to 1940, is widely regarded as an important figure in international history due to his political decisions and actions during the turbulent years leading up to World War II. Was he merely constrained by Britain's limited economic capabilities and inconsistent reports by military intelligence, which reduced his political manoeuvrability, or did he simply fail to implement his rearmament program to keep pace with the growing size of the Wehrmacht? Was he perhaps just a mediocre politician who failed to recognise the emerging Nazi threat and underestimated Hitler while manipulating the media and

public opinion? Or was he a political genius whose brilliant diplomatic manoeuvres managed to influence the course of world history in a fragile economic situation and delay the outbreak of war?

Discussion

Scholarly discussion has focused extensively on Neville Chamberlain's foreign policy and his role in British rearmament. Early researches, such Keith Feiling's The Life of Neville Chamberlain (1946), present Chamberlain as a leader limited by British diplomatic challenges, military underpreparedness, and economic constraints. Feiling's account centres on Chamberlain's effort to ease tensions by gaining time for Britain to rearmament, even though he acknowledged that his appeasement policy was a deliberate, if unsuccessful, effort.

The complexity of Chamberlain's leadership has also been examined by academics such as Robert Self (2000), who emphasises the economic constraints and military limitations that influenced his decision-making. Self's research highlights the idea that Chamberlain's approach, which included the Munich Agreement, was not just a passive appeasement tactic but rather a larger, although ultimately futile, attempt to avert war and strengthen Britain's defences. The balance between diplomatic and military methods has also been studied by historians like Richard Overy (The Road to War, 1998), who contends that Chamberlain's actions were greatly impacted by the military and economic difficulties of the day.

On the other hand, more critical viewpoints have been provided by academics such as A.J.P. Taylor (The Origins of the Second World War, 1961), who paints Chamberlain as naive in his underestimating of Hitler's objectives. Taylor's research is frequently compared to more modern studies, including those by Frank McDonough, who argue that given Britain's military and financial realities, Chamberlain's appeasement strategy was a necessary evil.

From the “guilty man” narrative to a more nuanced assessment of his strategic choices, the perceptions of Chamberlain's leadership have changed, reflecting the larger historiographical debate on British foreign policy in the run-up to World War II. Numerous contemporary evaluations, such as those authored by historians like Tim Bouverie (Appeasement: Chamberlain, Hitler, Churchill, and the Road to War, 2019), emphasise the nuanced nature of Chamberlain's decisions, acknowledging both his shortcomings and the limitations imposed upon him.

In summary, prior research offers a nuanced analysis of Chamberlain's tactics, striking a balance between his apparent strategic errors and the hard economic and military realities that influenced his choices. Building upon these conclusions, the current study adds to the current discussion by fusing contemporary perceptions of Chamberlain's leadership during a pivotal juncture in British history with historical sources.

Materials and methods

This research draws on a comprehensive range of sources, utilising both primary and secondary materials to provide a detailed analysis of British foreign policy, rearmament, and the Munich Crisis. Primary sources include archival documents from the British National Archives, such as Cabinet minutes, military and intelligence reports, and personal diaries of key figures like Neville Chamberlain, alongside parliamentary records. These are complemented by secondary sources, including scholarly publications, historical analyses, and biographies that delve into British military and economic strategy, and with key texts.

The study employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Content analysis of archival materials, speeches, and correspondence is used to uncover the motivations and perceptions of British leaders, while statistical analysis of military expenditures, industrial output, and comparisons of British and German military capacities provides further insights. Together, these methods offer a robust examination of the decision-making processes and strategic considerations of British leadership during the prelude to World War II.

To provide a thorough knowledge of British strategic thought and decision-making processes during the period leading up to World War II, the research uses a multifaceted methodological approach. In order to follow the development of British strategy, document analysis is used to look

at primary sources such as government records, intelligence reports, and private diaries. Speeches, documents, and letters are methodically coded and analysed using content analysis to find recurring themes, issues, and strategic priorities among British policymakers. The balance of power and its impact on British policy decisions are assessed by conducting a comparative analysis of the military capabilities, economic conditions, and strategic evaluations of Britain and Germany. By placing these actions and events into the larger framework of international relations, economic conditions, and technological developments of the 1930s, historical contextualisation aids in making understand them. Lastly, a case study method examines the complex relations between rearmament, diplomacy, and military policy by concentrating on significant events like the Munich Agreement, the Anschluss, and the declaration of war on Germany.

Results

Hypothesis

The research's hypothesis is that a complex interaction between economic constraints, military intelligence assessments, and the geopolitical environment of Europe had a significant impact on British rearmament and diplomatic strategies between 1936 and 1939. It suggests that, given the alleged military and economic weaknesses of the moment, Chamberlain's appeasement strategy was motivated by more than a mere desire to prevent war; rather, it was a deliberate effort to buy time for Britain's military readiness. The study also postulates that the potential for a strong and cohesive deterrence against German aggression was severely undermined by the lack of coordination with France on military industry capacities and diplomatic efforts, due to France’s fragile internal political environment, as well as by inefficient military intelligence reports, ultimately contributing to the onset of World War II.

Research questions

- What were the key factors driving British rearmament and foreign policy decisions, especially in relation to Germany, Italy and Japan? How did the British Cabinet's long-term rearmament program change to the outbreak of World War II in 1939?
- What influence did British intelligence and strategic assessments have on the decisions that preceded the Munich Agreement and the declaration of war against Germany? How did economic, military, and intelligence assessments influence Chamberlain's strategy of appeasement and rearmament?

Progress of the Work

The research is organised chronologically, commencing with an examination at the British Cabinet's initial rearmament initiatives in 1936. The analysis then follows the changing military and economic factors that shaped British policy, with a special emphasis on the years 1937–1939. Important events like the Anschluss and the Munich Crisis are thoroughly examined to comprehend how military intelligence, financial limitations, and diplomatic tactics interact.

The research continues by incorporating examinations of Chamberlain's public speeches and private correspondence to evaluate his strategic thinking and policy choices. A critical analysis of military intelligence assessments from the Chiefs of Staff and other military organisations is included to supplement this, showing the varying degrees of optimism and pessimism over Germany's military prowess. The analysis also takes into account the larger European background, paying special attention to the consequences of Franco-British relations and the lost chances for concerted defence initiatives.

The research concludes with an assessment of Chamberlain's appeasement strategy, its strategic justification, and its ultimate influence on the outbreak of World War II. Comprehensive analyses of the Munich Agreement, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, and the choices that preceded the British declaration of war in September 1939 are used to support this section.

The British Response to Rearmament

The British economy faced significant challenges in the early 1930s. High levels of unemployment, combined with major structural difficulties within key industries, remained a defining feature of the inter-war period. Despite some signs of recovery in the mid-1930s, these issues

persisted throughout the decade. The economy began to emerge from the Great Depression in late 1932, experiencing steady expansion until 1937, when a new recession occurred just before the outbreak of the Second World War (Capie, Collins, 1980: 40). As a result, the Great Depression led to a financial crisis in Britain in 1931, which significantly hindered any plans for rearmament.

The potential economic costs of another war, its crippling impact on British power, the vulnerability of the empire, and the inadequacy of Britain's air and coastal defence systems prompted Chamberlain to seek new methods for buying time, enabling him to rearm the country at a manageable pace and to improve British relations with Italy or even Germany. As early as 1933, he emphasised the need to focus on mitigating other external threats so that Britain could direct more energy toward Germany. He urged the Imperial Defence Committee (CID) to improve relations with Japan and to ease the Far Eastern threat (which at that time was identified as the primary priority of British strategy) so that Europe and the potential German threat could become the main priority (CAB 2/6, p. 52).

The British response to Hitler's secret rearmament in 1933 (Kershaw, 1998: 537; Weinberg, 1994; 49)[1], and then his open rearmament from March 1935 (Kershaw, 1998: 537)[2], was to announce their own rearmament program. The Cabinet's[3] decision not to oppose Hitler's 1936 reoccupation of the Rhineland stemmed from the belief that the British armed forces were not yet prepared to confront the military challenges Germany could pose in the air and at sea, although it was assumed they would be ready by the end of the decade. Chamberlain's motivations were in line with British military intelligence reports, which consistently warned that British rearmament had not yet reached the point where the government could consider going to war against Germany (Barros et al., 2009: 197).

Chamberlain’s Diplomatic Efforts and Economic Concerns

Shortly after becoming prime minister in 1937-a year after the Rhineland crisis-Chamberlain entered the international political arena and began direct talks with Italy, a country that the world had shunned because of its invasion and occupation of Ethiopia (Self, 2006: 273–274). On September 8, 1937, Chamberlain stated during a Cabinet meeting that he believed *“the lessening of the tension between this country and Italy as a very valuable contribution toward the pacification and appeasement of Europe”* and that this would *“weaken the Rome–Berlin axis”*. (Self, 2006: 274). Also, in order to create a stable Europe, Chamberlain attempted to appease Germany and turn the Nazi regime into a partner (Smart, 2010: 225). Initially, he was concerned about a potential German aerial offensive if war were to break out, which led him to advocate for the creation of a powerful metropolitan fighter force and to accelerate the schedule for air production. His main goal was to deter Germany from going to war while committing as little as possible to European affairs. In February 1936, he wrote the following: *“If we can stay out of the war for a few years, we will be able to build an air force with such striking power that no one will dare to take the risk against it. I do not believe that the next war, if it happens at all, will be like the last one, and I think our resources can be used more effectively in the air and at sea than in building large armies”* (Feiling, 1946: 314).

Great Britain feared that the arms race would not only jeopardise its own financial stability but also push Germany and Italy into war. Chamberlain felt that Italy's campaign in Ethiopia stemmed from a desperate need for raw materials (MacDonald, 1972: 105–135; Kaiser, 1980: 282). One approach of British diplomacy was to reduce threats and buy time for rearmament. A second approach

[1]Shortly after coming to power in 1933, Hitler initiated Germany's illegal rearmament. It was only from 1935 that he began rearming openly, introducing conscription on March 16th. Shortly after becoming Chancellor, Hitler secretly began rearming Germany, violating the Treaty of Versailles, which had restricted the size and capacity of the German military (Kershaw, 1998: 537; Weinberg, 1994; 49).

[2]On March 16, Hitler publicly announced the reintroduction of conscription and the establishment of the German air force, openly defying the Treaty of Versailles (Kershaw, 1998: 537).

[3]The Cabinet was a part of the government composed of the highest-ranking ministers appointed by the Prime Minister. It typically included the heads of the major ministries, such as the Treasury, the Foreign Office, and the Home Office. The Cabinet was the primary decision-making body responsible for major political decisions and strategic direction. Cabinet meetings were held regularly, often weekly, and were kept confidential to allow for frank discussions. (Roberts, 1966: 135) During Cabinet meetings, government policies were discussed and coordinated. The decisions made were binding on all members of the government, ensuring unified leadership (Hennessy, 1986: 44).

was to compare Britain's economic problems with those of its adversaries, particularly Germany. Decision-makers turned to a new source of information, the Industrial Intelligence Centre (IIC), which operated outside the traditional scope of the COS. Starting in July 1937, the IIC examined Germany's exposure to economic pressure and reported that due to severe restrictions on raw materials, an economic blockade could have a crippling effect, although it would not prevent Germany from fighting a short war. Similar to the Air Force, the IIC assumed that its concerns – economic potential, reserves, and related threats – would also be closely monitored and assessed in Germany (Wark, 1985: 160, 177; Hinsley, 1979: 63; Gibbs, 1976: 109).

British Intelligence

In the autumn of 1936, a decisive turning point occurred for British air intelligence efforts. Officials were no longer as confident about the limiting effects on the German air force's capabilities. The possibility of achieving future parity vanished, along with the presumed similarities between the Luftwaffe and the Royal Air Force. This had a liberating effect on air intelligence forecasts (Wark, 1985: 59). Estimates regarding the future size of the Luftwaffe quickly increased and became more accurate. The forecast in October 1936 suggested that the German frontline force would consist of 2,500 aircraft by 1939, but by July 1937, this figure was soon raised to 3,240. When 1939 arrived, air intelligence believed that Germany was aiming for 3,700 frontline aircraft by the end of the year. When the war broke out, the actual strength of the Luftwaffe was 3,541. (C5604/185/18, et al., 1937). The development of German armoured forces between 1935 and 1938, when the first armoured units were formed and four armoured divisions existed within the German military order, brought British perceptions of how Germany would fight a future war closer to the actual capabilities of the German army, which were measured based on their equipment and training. However, the War Office's judgement (one of the most significant decisions of the 1930s) that Germany could overrun Czechoslovakia with a sudden attack, if based on the assumption that Germany was fully prepared in terms of force and doctrine to execute a blitzkrieg, was an exaggeration and premature" (Wesley, 1985: 99).

Despite the overall accuracy of the most recent assessments of the peacetime strength of the army, some exaggerated elements remained hidden. The British Military Intelligence branch accepted the French General Staff's higher estimates regarding the strength of German reserve and Landwehr divisions, thereby distorting the calculation of the size of the German wartime army. The estimated strength of tank forces distributed among German armoured and light divisions was also inflated. On the fourth day of the German invasion of Poland, military intelligence overestimated the number of German tanks by 17% (three and a half thousand tanks instead of three thousand) and drastically underestimated the number of obsolete tanks in this total" (Wesley, 1985: 111).

In September 1938, only 1,699 aircraft from the Luftwaffe's fleet were operational, of which only 582 were long-range bombers. As Richard Overy observed about the Munich crisis: "The massive imbalance of forces believed to exist in the air was just a myth" (Overy, 1997: 23). This myth was created by the intelligence services. A much broader network would have been required within the Luftwaffe (for example, regular contacts with active squadrons and ground personnel, as well as constant reports from repair stations and factories) to dispel it. Even more and better information would not have changed the situation because reports on poor service conditions would have contradicted the British perception of a strong Luftwaffe and the worst-case scenario approach" (Wark, 1985: 69).

Military and Economic Concerns

When Chamberlain took office as Prime Minister in May 1937, the international peace system established in Paris after World War I had already collapsed. With his "Saturday surprises"[4] Hitler had broken free from the constraints imposed by the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Pact

[4]The phrase "Saturday surprises" refers to unexpected and bold actions taken by Hitler over the weekend, with the aim of catching other nations off guard and rendering them incapable of an immediate response. Examples of this include the reintroduction of conscription on March 16, 1935, and the remilitarization of the Rhineland on March 7, 1936. These surprises had significant strategic impacts, violating international agreements and reshaping the geopolitical landscape in favour of Nazi Germany (Kershaw, 1998: 537; Weinberg, 1994: 69)

(Sontag, 1953: 386). One of Chamberlain's biggest problems was that Great Britain did not have enough industrial capacity or financial resources to defeat Germany, Italy, and Japan in a potential arms race in the long term. Chamberlain's goal, therefore, was to alienate Germany from Italy or Italy from Germany. He believed that this way, Great Britain might gain the upper hand in the arms race against the remaining Axis powers. He summarised his view in a letter from June 1937: *"If we could come to an agreement with the Germans, then I wouldn't care a bit about Musso [Benito Mussolini]."* Chamberlain later wrote in his diary in January 1938: *"At first, I tried to improve relations with the two storm centres, Berlin and Rome. It seemed to me that we were drifting into an increasingly worse situation with both, and eventually, we would have to face two enemies at the same time."* (Goldstein, 1999, 281). By 1939, Chamberlain already regarded Germany as the greatest threat to Great Britain. Although his Chief of Staff initially disagreed on whether Japan or Germany posed the greater danger, Chamberlain argued that Europe should take priority over the Far East. As early as 1934, he had warned that *"we are paying too much attention to disarmament and not enough to security"*. He supported the 1934 Defence Requirements Committee (DRC), which argued that *"deterring German aggression is the best long-term guarantee"* for keeping Japan in check. He recognized Germany as the *"ultimate potential enemy"* and based its recommendations on the assumption that there would be a war by 1939. Later, in 1935, he also opposed British disarmament agreements, a stance that was not particularly popular (Feiling, 1946: 314).

In early 1936, the British Cabinet approved a long-term rearmament program, but by 1937, the Treasury was already becoming concerned about the rising costs. By June, they were urging a review of the costs associated with rearming and maintaining the expanded armed forces that were to be established by 1942. The Treasury argued that defence expenditures should not exceed the country's production capacity or its ability to pay for imports, nor should they undermine confidence in financial stability. It seemed likely that Germany might be tempted to carry out a decisive air attack against Britain at the start of the war, using gas and high-explosive bombs due to the rapid technological advancements in aircraft—hence, air defence became a focal point of British attention. In December 1937, the Cabinet reviewed the results of a strategic defence assessment, which recommended that military expenditures be limited to the level approved by the Treasury over the next five years. According to this, the main efforts should be focused on defending Great Britain against air strikes and preserving its trade routes, thereby prioritising the Royal Air Force and the Navy, as well as the Army's air defence units. Consequently, the report suggested that the Army should not possess the equipment and ammunition reserves necessary for continental warfare at the outbreak of war (Peden, 2010).

This immediately raises the question of why this was not coordinated with the French side. Why did they not attempt to align their defence industry capacities and armaments at this stage? Taking the report into account practically reduced the need to maintain large-scale ground forces capable of immediate deployment on the European continent, thereby diminishing the incentive for close military cooperation with the French army, which was more focused on preparing for a land war against Germany (Bennister et al., 2017: 210).

Shifting Strategic Calculations

Military intelligence assessments fluctuated between optimism and pessimism; the sense of vulnerability soon permeated strategic planning and diplomacy as well. The February 1937 COS (Chief of Staff) Subcommittee, which dealt with planning for a war against Germany, assumed that Germany would not only be aggressive but would first initiate air strikes from the west in order to *"capitalise on its preparedness advantage by quickly disabling either Great Britain or France, as it is not prepared for a long war."* Specifically regarding fighter aircraft, the (RAF) later warned the government in October 1938 that German Luftwaffe bombers were likely to penetrate: *"the situation...will clearly be unsatisfactory over the next twelve months."* (Gibbs, 1976: 598). By 1937, the position was that their commitments to Europe were inversely proportional to their ability to defend the empire; that the air threat remained of paramount importance; and that an economic blockade was a reasonable threat against Germany. Chamberlain's policies often closely followed the shifting military assessments he received. The Foreign Office, in fact,

"became increasingly outraged by the pessimistic strategic assessments of the General Staff, believing they exerted too much influence on policy formation." However, it is understandable that the military analyses of 1937 emphasised the possibility that commitments in Central Europe could exceed capabilities and highlighted the necessity of British rearmament (Hinsley, 1993: 68).

In early 1938, a report from the Chiefs of Staff noted that Great Britain would be unprepared for a world war that could arise from the Czechoslovak crisis, particularly in terms of air attacks. Inskip observed that Germany would still be capable of fighting a short war and that Great Britain could lose a brief war involving air strikes. Chamberlain concluded that, due to the Anschluss, the defence of Czechoslovakia had become militarily unfeasible. Defending the Czechs would have meant committing to a long war to revive a state that could provoke a short and aggressive war in the West, for which Great Britain was not yet prepared. In his private notes, Chamberlain wrote that these military considerations had moved him away from his initial instinct to offer a British guarantee. Diplomacy must achieve the best result. The air balance will be more favourable in one or two years (Hughes, 1988: 866–867).

Later, Chamberlain reaffirmed his confidence that British rearmament would help *"convince the world that disagreements should be settled through peaceful discussion, not by force."* (Chamberlain, 1937). During a parliamentary debate in 1938, he made his views on appeasing Germany clear: *"Our policy of appeasement does not mean that we will seek new friends at the expense of old ones, nor, indeed, at the expense of any other nations... our aim is to achieve cooperation among all nations – without excluding the totalitarian states – in building lasting peace in Europe."* (Chamberlain, 1938: 552).

Anschluss

The first European crisis during Chamberlain's premiership was triggered by the Anschluss, or the annexation of Austria by Germany, which occurred on March 12, 1938, when the Austrian Federal State was occupied by the German Reich (Prodhan, 2013). Nevertheless, one could argue that the Anschluss was consistent with the principle of self-determination as outlined in Wilson's Fourteen Points (Wilson, 1918). The Anschluss was so popular in Austria that there was no chance for Britain or France to resist it by force or to threaten military or economic countermeasures. The failure to impose a potential economic blockade primarily stemmed from a lack of international support: Great Britain did not have sufficient international backing to enforce a blockade. Key allies, including France, were unwilling to take such drastic measures against Germany. Additionally, the United States remained largely isolationist and was not willing to engage in European conflicts (Overy, 1998: 142). Not to mention the economic consequences of the blockade. Great Britain was concerned about the economic impact of a blockade. Such a move could have disrupted trade and damaged the British economy, which was still recovering from the Great Depression (Kershaw, 2000: 197). Chamberlain concluded that *"it is perfectly evident, surely, now that force is the only argument that Germany understands"* (Hughes, 1988: 866). He also discussed the *"Austrian situation"* in the House of Commons in March and he said that *"The hard fact is that nothing could have arrested what has actually happened unless this country and other countries had been prepared to use force"* (Chamberlain, 1938: 52).

It became clear that the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia was likely to be Hitler's next target. At the Cabinet meeting on March 22, six months before Chamberlain's meeting with the Führer, it was decided that until British air defences were fully established and the Royal Air Force reinforced with additional aircraft, they could not guarantee Czechoslovakia's sovereignty against German aggression, nor could they join France in a strong response to the German challenge (CAB, 23/93: 33–46). The Munich Agreement provided the crucial time needed to bring British defences and fighter strength up to the required levels. Notably, the Chain Home radar system was still in its infancy at the time of the Munich crisis. The months that followed allowed for the completion of the system, which became fully operational by the time of the Battle of Britain and played a critical role in the RAF's victory. In August 1938, the first five stations were declared operational, and during the Munich crisis, they commenced full-time operation in September (Gough, 1993: 6). In March 1938, the British RAF consisted of 118,000 personnel and 1,750 aircraft

(Richards, 1953: 47), while the German Luftwaffe had 400,000 personnel and 3,500 aircraft (Overy, 1997: 29). In March 1938, the German Luftwaffe significantly outmatched the British Royal Air Force in both personnel and aircraft numbers. But would the combined British and French air forces have outmatched the Luftwaffe?

In this situation, as during the 1930s, strategic calculations prevailed, particularly the belief that British disarmament in the 1920s had so hindered the British military services that the government would not have been able to contemplate war against Germany until the end of the decade at the earliest. Chamberlain echoed this strategic logic in a letter to his sister, Ida, shortly before the Munich Conference: *"Never threaten unless you are capable of carrying out your threats, and while I hope that if we had to fight, we could give a good account of ourselves, we are certainly not in a position where our military advisers would undertake to start a war unless we were forced into it."* (Chamberlain, 1938: NC 18/1/1068).

Chamberlain and the Cabinet were undoubtedly influenced by the pessimism that emanated from intelligence circles. The near- and medium-term military balance was considered dangerous, and this realisation was crucial for the Cabinet in deciding to avoid the risks of attempting deterrence, especially during the Munich Crisis (Wark, 1985: 231). If the economic situation of the Allies appeared unstable in 1939, Germany's position had arguably strengthened since 1938, having exploited Czechoslovakia's economic and industrial resources.However, in 1939, British and French intelligence began to identify signs that were interpreted as indications of German economic and financial weakness, as rearmament had reached the limits of Germany's own resources. At the same time, though, the economic intelligence assessments compiled in London and Paris were far from unanimous. Not only was reliable information often incomplete, but British and French analysts also disagreed on how to interpret the available data. Moreover, the assessment of Germany's economic vulnerability was based on the assumption that the Germans would not have significant access to external resources. Yet this assumption appeared extremely fragile, given that the Allies had few means to prevent Germany from extending its influence in Central and Eastern Europe, whether in peace or war (Barros et al., 2009: 178).

The Munich Crisis

Undoubtedly, one of Chamberlain's most significant contributions to international history was the Munich Agreement, established on September 30, 1938, in response to Nazi Germany's intention to occupy the Sudetenland.

Hitler's 30 May 1938 directive officially and unequivocally stated, *"It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future."* (De Vabres, n.d.) As events were escalating, in an attempt to prevent a war, Chamberlain requested a private meeting with Hitler on September 13, following internal unrest and chaos in Czechoslovakia. Two days later, he took off for Berchtesgaden. (Bell, 2007: 239).

After his arrival, during a summit held at the Berghof in Berchtesgaden, Chamberlain pledged to exert pressure on Prague to comply with Hitler's openly expressed demands regarding the Sudetenland's union with Germany. In exchange, Hitler grudgingly agreed to delay any military action until he had given Chamberlain an opportunity to carry out his commitment (Middlemas, 1972: 340–341). He tactically told to Hitler that *"If the Fuehrer is determined to settle this matter by force, without waiting even for a discussion between ourselves to take place, what did he let me come here for? I have wasted my time."* (Chamberlain and Hitler, 1938: FO 371/21738). As the meeting continued, he said *"I could give him my personal opinion, which was that on principle I had nothing to say against the separation of the Sudeten Germans from the rest of Czechoslovakia, provided that the practical difficulties could be overcome."* (Chamberlain and Hitler, 1938: FO 371/21738).

Another illustration of his skillful bargaining strategy to deter imminent attack was when he convinced Hitler that starting a war with Germany would not be in Britain's best interests. He recounted to the House of Commons on September 28th what he had said to the Fuhrer at that meeting: *"At one point he complained of British threats against him, to which I replied that he must distinguish between a threat and a warning, and that he might have just cause of complaint if I allowed him to think that in no circumstances would this country go to war with Germany when, in*

fact, there were conditions in which such a contingency might arise." (Chamberlain, 1938: 14).

Bad Godesberg

Much to the British delegation's dismay, Hitler rejected the idea that Chamberlain had himself delivered to them at Berchtesgaden when he returned to propose it at a summit with Hitler at Bad Godesberg on September 22, 1938 (Middlemas, 1972: 364). In an attempt to completely undermine Chamberlain's efforts to broker a peace agreement, Hitler insisted that the Sudetenland be returned to Germany by September 28, 1938, without any talks between Prague and Berlin, without the creation of an international commission to supervise the transfer, without plebiscites scheduled for the transferred districts prior to the transfer, and, just for good measure, without Germany abandoning the possibility of war until all claims made against Czechoslovakia by Poland and Hungary had been addressed. *"I declared that the language and the manner of the document, which I described as an ultimatum rather than a memorandum, would profoundly shock public opinion in neutral countries, and I bitterly reproached the Chancellor for his failure to respond in any way to the efforts which I had made to secure peace."* (Chamberlain, 1938: 8). Once more, Chamberlain demonstrated his ability to negotiate by pushing back against Hitler and preventing the complete absorption of Czechoslovakia.

Finally, the Munich Agreement was signed by Benito Mussolini, Édouard Daladier, Neville Chamberlain, and Adolf Hitler. The German army was to finish occupying the Sudetenland by October 10th, and an international committee was to decide what would happen to other disputed areas (Butterworth, 1974: 191–216). After a short nap, on September 30, Chamberlain went to Hitler's residence and signed an announcement as *"symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again…to contribute to assure the peace of Europe."* (Hitler, Chamberlain, 1938: ARF M) Hitler was happy to accept it after his interpreter had translated it (Reynolds, 2007: 389).

The Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia would be given to Germany as part of a solution that Chamberlain announced had been struck after a month during which Britain thought the world was on the verge of war. October 1st was supposed to mark the start of the Sudetenland evacuation (National Archives, FO 93/1/220A). Even though Chamberlain gave in to Hitler's demands, the deal was nonetheless a success. It was *"merely the prelude to a larger settlement in which all of Europe may find peace,"* as Chamberlain had pledged. After returning to Britain, Chamberlain waved a piece of paper in front of the jubilant audience at the Heston Aerodrome on 30 September 1938, declaring that it was a commitment that bore the signatures of both Hitler and himself. There was going to be *"peace in our time"* in Britain (Goddard, 2018: 118).

Through deceiving Hitler into signing the agreement, Chamberlain succeeded in removing the chance of a military confrontation between Germany and Britain. As it is well known today, the war eventually broke out, but at the time, it appeared like it would keep the peace in Europe, and it was possible to delay the conflict by allowing Hitler to occupy the Sudetenland. Another key objective of the agreement was to ensure that, if Hitler reneged on his promises and initiated a war, there would be no ambiguity regarding the party responsible for such a conflict.

Summer 1939

During the summer of 1939, in addition to attempting to mediate a compromise between Germany and Poland[5] Chamberlain adhered to his deterrence tactic, telling Hitler on multiple occasions that Britain would declare war on Germany should he attack Poland. He wrote to Hitler on August 27, 1939.: *"If the case should arise, they are resolved, and prepared, to employ without delay all the forces at their command, and it is impossible to foresee the end of hostilities once engaged. It would be a dangerous illusion to think that, if war once starts, it will come to an early end even if a success on any one of the several fronts on which it will be engaged should have been secured."* (Weinberg, 1980: 623).

[5]The Allies reached a compromise by granting Poland a narrow strip of land, commonly known as the Polish Corridor, which provided the country with a fragile link to the Baltic Sea. However, this corridor included a significant German population and effectively separated the German province of East Prussia from the rest of Germany. Additionally, the Allies designated the German port of Danzig as a Free City under the supervision of the League of Nations, while granting Poland special rights to transship goods through the port (Hagen, 2010: 63).

Following Hitler's conquest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, Chamberlain had provided assurances to many European nations, preliminarily Poland. As the summer progressed, tensions worsened as Hitler imposed conditions on Poland. On Friday, September 1, the German invasion got underway early in the morning with tanks advancing across the border and the Luftwaffe bombarding Warsaw (Ball, 2019).

Declaration of War

Undoubtedly, the greatest impact Chamberlain has ever made to world history was his decision, on September 3, 1939, to declare war on Germany in response to its invasion of Poland. In his speech to the Commons, he declared: *"The time has come when action rather than speech is required. If out of the struggle we again re-establish in the world the rules of good faith and the renunciation of force, why, then even the sacrifices that will be entailed upon us will find their fullest justification."* (Chamberlain, 1939).

He also told the country in a radio broadcast two days later that: *"This morning, the British ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany."* (Chamberlain, 1939: BBCA). Though Chamberlain made the right choice, he could not foresee the subsequent six-year struggle.The British Empire, its people, and afterwards all of Europe entered a new era and dimension with his decision.

Conclusion

This research confirms the hypothesis that the geopolitical environment of pre-World War I Europe, economic constraints, and military intelligence evaluations were the main factors influencing Neville Chamberlain's appeasement strategy. Chamberlain's hesitation to completely commit to rearmament was partly due to financial restrictions, while intelligence assessments, which typically overstated Germany's military might, pushed him toward cautiousness. A cohesive European approach against Nazi aggression was further undermined by missed possibilities for cooperation with France. The study demonstrates that, despite diplomatic obstacles and practical considerations related to the economy, Chamberlain's strategy was not merely one of passive appeasement but rather a deliberate attempt to gain time for Britain's military preparation. Ultimately, his choices were determined by the necessity to strike a balance between military readiness and the pressing diplomatic demands of the time, proving that his approach was more complex than is often portrayed.

Chamberlain's approach to rearmament and diplomacy was heavily influenced by Britain's limited industrial capacity and the fear that a premature military confrontation with Germany would devastate the country's economy and empire. His decision to prioritise air defence and the Royal Navy over large-scale ground forces was driven by the belief that Britain could not afford to engage in a continental war without first ensuring the security of its own airspace and trade routes. This strategy was informed by the shifting assessments of British military intelligence, which fluctuated between optimism and pessimism regarding Germany's capabilities, and the broader context of international relations during the 1930s.

The research has also addressed the key question of why Chamberlain did not coordinate more closely with France on defence industry capacities. Chamberlain did attempt to coordinate diplomacy with France; however, this proved challenging due to the political instability within the French government at the time. While France often articulated certain positions, it frequently seemed to expect Britain to take decisive action on those matters. The evidence suggests that Chamberlain's focus on rearmament and appeasement was driven by a desire to avoid immediate conflict while gradually building up Britain's military strength. However, this approach ultimately left Britain and its allies vulnerable, as it failed to create a unified front against the rising threat of Nazi Germany.

The Munich Crisis of 1938 stands as a pivotal moment in Chamberlain's premiership, demonstrating both the strengths and limitations of his diplomatic efforts. While the Munich Agreement temporarily averted war and was hailed by some as a success, it also emboldened Hitler and weakened the position of Czechoslovakia, contributing to the eventual

outbreak of World War II. Chamberlain's efforts to engage with Hitler, including his personal meetings and attempts at negotiation, reveal a leader deeply committed to peace but constrained by the realities of Britain's military and economic situation.

In the final analysis, Chamberlain's decision to declare war on Germany in September 1939 marked a significant turning point in British history. While his earlier strategies of appeasement and rearmament may be criticised for their shortcomings, it is clear that Chamberlain was operating under immense pressure, navigating a fragile international landscape with limited resources. While we now understand Hitler's true intentions, it is important to recognise that in the 1930s, his plans were not as clear. Until his invasion of the rest of Czechoslovakia, his actions were largely perceived as efforts to address the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles and aligned with the principle of national self-determination. Chamberlain's ultimate decision to confront Germany was a recognition of the failure of appeasement and the inevitability of war, ushering Britain and Europe into a new and devastating conflict. He pursued a dual strategy of appeasement and rearmament, utilising the latter to buy time for Britain's military preparedness. His primary objective, however, was the preservation of peace in Europe, even at the cost of his own reputation.

It can be concluded that Chamberlain's legacy is a complex one, shaped by his efforts to balance the demands of rearmament with the constraints of economic and military reality. His actions during this period highlight the difficulties of leadership in a time of unprecedented global instability and offer important lessons for understanding the challenges of statecraft in the face of emerging threats. Nevertheless, the fact that his appeasement strategy helped to postpone the outbreak of the war and save millions of lives, should not be disregarded. He also made the right choice to declare war on Germany when the time came. As he explained after his resignation in September 1940, *"The day may come when my much cursed Munich will be understood. Neither we, nor the French were not prepared for war…If only we had had another year of preparation, we should have been in a far stronger position and so would the French. But anyway, whatever the outcome it is clear as daylight that if we had had to fight in 1938 the result would have been far worse."* (Self, 2000: 44).

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