1.1 **What were Churchill's views on appeasement?**

“This is not peace. It is an Armistice for twenty years.”

- **Marshall Foch, Commander of the Allied Forces at the end of WWI, speaking about the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.**

‘How few men are strong enough to stand against the prevailing currents of opinion!’

- **Winston Churchill**

 Appeasement now is a by-word for moral cowardice. In popular memory, Stanley Baldwin, Lord Halifax (previously Irwin) and especially Neville Chamberlain are blamed for allowing Hitler and the forces of Nazism to run rampant across Europe. Appeasement is also inextricably tied to its most famous and consistent critic: Winston Churchill. In many ways he stood virtually alone in opposition of the policy that ultimately ended with the outbreak the Second World War. As Best puts it:

> He was the first British statesman of any note to identify, and to call public attention to, the dangerous twist given to German national aspirations (which he well understood) by their confluence from 1933 with Nazi ideology.

The truth is, of course, rarely pure and never simple. So it is with appeasement, an issue wrought with historical complexity and still today the source of fierce and fiery debate. The below is only an outline of some of the key points. Further reading is required to do the subject full justice.

### 1933-1935

On **30th January 1933**, Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor. A little over six years later, on **September 1st, 1939**, Germany invaded Poland and the world once again collapsed into war.

However, it is important to recall the **prevailing mood** of Britain in the 1930s. The scars of the Great War were far from healed and there existed limited appetite for war. There is plenty of evidence of anti-war sentiment:

- In February 1933 the **Oxford Union** – ‘traditionally a nursery of politicians’ (Tombs) voted in a widely reported debate, voted to ‘refuse under any circumstances to **fight for King and Country**’.
- In October 1933 the Labour Party conference supported a motion to ‘take no part in war and to resist it with the whole force of the Labour movement’.
- On 25 October 1933, a few days after Hitler had walked out of the disarmament conference, the Tories were beaten in a **by-election** in **East Fulham** by a Labour candidate, **John Wilmot**, who held pacifist views.
- In 1934 the **Peace Pledge Union** was formed after the canon of St Paul’s Cathedral, Richard Sheppard, wrote a letter to the **Manchester Guardian**. By **1937** it had over **100,000 members**.
- In **1934** the Labour Party opposed spending increases on the RAF arguing that it would likely encourage war.
- In **1935** a **Defence White Paper** was published which opposed spending increases on the same grounds.
- In **1935** a **Peace Ballot** was organised outside Parliament. Fully **11.6m** participated (**30%**) of the eligible population and they voted heavily in favour of peace.
- In **1936** an **anti-rearmament film** financed by the wealthy Labour MP Stafford Cripps seen by over **2 million** people.

Despite this, from 1934 – albeit quietly – Britain began to rearm. However, as Roberts describes it, it was done in a ‘grudging, piecemeal, Treasury-led way that given minimum publicity so as not to ‘provoke’ Hitler or, just as importantly, the British public’.

Indeed, arguably the key consequence of the general public mood was that Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (1935-37) felt unable to openly increase spending on rearmament. In 1936, Baldwin recalled in the Commons the 1933 Fulham by-election and the run-up to the 1935 general election:

> “You will remember the election of Fulham in 1933… Suppose I had gone to the country and said that Germany was rearming and we must rearm. Does anyone think that this pacific democracy would have rallied to that cry at that moment? I **cannot think of anything that would have made the loss of the election from my point of view more certain.**”

Churchill, nonetheless, eyed the threat of Germany early. After the Fulham by-election he told a dinner party that the only hope of containing Germany was through a ‘**collective front**’ organised by the **League of Nations**.

In **1934**, he spoke in the Commons about the need to ready factories for wartime production. In particular, he was concerned by the threat the **Luftwaffe (Germany air force)** posed. (Military chiefs had estimated that an initial air raid on Britain could kill around **150,000 people**.)

Churchill observed: “We are not the same kind of country we used to be when we were an island, only twenty years ago.” It is imperative, he argued for Britain to build “an Air Force at least as strong as that of any Power that can get at us.”

However, he struggled to find people who agreed with him. In **February 1934** he told the **Oxford University Conservative Association** that rearmament was necessary “**for us**

---

1 Baldwin also once said of Churchill: “One of these days I’ll make a few casual remarks about Winston. I’ve got it all ready. I am going to say that when Winston was born, lots of fairies swooped down on his cradle [with] gifts – imagination, eloquence, industry, ability – and then came a fairy who said: ‘No one person has a right to so many gifts,’ picked him up and gave him a shake and twist and with all these gifts he was denied judgement and wisdom. And that is why while we delight to listen to him in this House we do not take his advice.”
Key Topic 1: Churchill’s view of events, 1919-40

to be safe in our Island home”. This declaration was met with ‘derisive laughter’ (Roberts).

After the Night of the Long Knives in June 1934, Churchill called for the doubling of the RAF and then its doubling again. Whilst Parliament approved some air force expansion, this came at the expense of the army and navy’s budgets.

By mid-July 1934 Churchill announced that he was in favour of befriending the Soviet Union and admitting it into the League of Nations as a means of containing the threat of Hitler. For someone as vehemently anti-Communist as Churchill was, Roberts argues that this was ‘a measure of how necessary he considered the building of collective security to be.’

In April 1935, the French and British prime ministers met Mussolini in Italy and agreed the Stresa Front, where the three countries committed to resisting any further attempts by Germany to alter the Treaty of Versailles. The meeting was triggered by Germany’s declaration of an intention to dramatically increase the size of its air force, its army (to 500,000 men) and to reintroduce conscription. Some historians have argued that it was one of the most important efforts to halt Hitler in the 1930s. However, with the invasion of Abyssinia just a few months later the agreement all but broke down.

The Abyssinian Crisis (1935-37)

In October 1935, Benito Mussolini attacked Abyssinia. Haile Selassie, the Abyssinian leader, appealed to the League (effectively Britain and France) for help. Their reaction was half-baked, not least because they still saw Mussolini as a potential ally against Hitler.

In secret, the British and French foreign ministers agreed the Hoare-Laval Pact which promised to grant most of Abyssinia to Italy whilst allowing it to maintain a trace of independence. The agreement, however, became public in December and was met with a public and political outcry.

Robert Tombs explains the consequences:

Mussolini was now determined to conquer all of Abyssinia and also took the first steps towards alliance with Hitler. The League of Nations proved impotent: it was effectively the end of collective security… The British and French governments were unwilling to take effective measures against Mussolini: no one wanted a European war over Abyssinia, but Britain was amply strong enough to stop Mussolini by closing the Suez Canal. That it did not do so proved to the world, and most importantly to
Hitler, that Britain, the world's greatest power, was not willing to take risks to defend international law.”

1936-37

In March 1936 Hitler gambled and marched just 3,000 troops into the demilitarised Rhineland. The troops were ordered to withdraw at the first sign of resistance, but none was forthcoming.

Afterwards, Hitler said: “The struggle for German equal rights can be regarded as closed… We have no territorial claims to make in Europe.” This was, as Roberts put it, a 'calculated sop' to British opinion.

Best agrees, adding:

*The importance of those [Hitler's] peace offerings and public pronouncements cannot be overstated. It was largely because of them that 'appeasement' had such a long life.*

However, as Roberts also points out, there was arguably an opportunity in 1936 to stop Hitler in his tracks:

[In 1936 France was] far more heavily armed than Germany, Italy was at least theoretically in the anti-German camp established at the Stresa Conference, and the Royal Navy was supreme – but nothing was done, in the hope that Hitler was telling the truth.

Churchill warned the Commons: “*This Rhineland business is but a step, is but a stage, is but an incident in this process.*”

However, the narrative that Churchill was often wrong was an easy enough case to make. One could list Sidney St., Tonypandy, Antwerp, Gallipoli, the Gold Standard, India and, most recently, the Abdication Crisis, as proof of his poor judgement.

Despite calling in March for the League to take action over the Rhineland, Churchill was growing ‘privately contemptuous' (Roberts) of the international organization. Indeed, the crisis compelled him to think 'more in terms of a collective security pact that could surround and contain the Third Reich, and which therefore must include the USSR.'

*By October 1936, Mussolini was no longer even theoretically aligned with Britain and France with the signing of the Rome-Berlin Axis.*

As Tombs points out, Britain now had to 'face the possibility of simultaneous war with Germany, Italy and Japan'. To deal with this the following was done:
- A shipbuilding programme aiming at a ‘two-ocean’ fleet (five battleships) was started in 1937
- The first ever purpose-built aircraft carrier was begun in 1938
- In 1938 the navy introduced ASDIC (an echo-sounding submarine location programme)
- In 1937 the RAF’s budget overtook that of the army with Fighter Command (e.g. Spitfires rather than bombers) given clear priority by 1938
- In 1935 radar was successfully trialed and then rapidly expanded

Regardless, the anti-war sentiment lingered in many quarters. The new Labour leader, Clement Attlee, attacked the government for having ‘absolutely no policy for peace’ and for putting the country ‘permanently on a war basis’. He declared: ‘Do not compete with the fascists in arms and they will not rearm.’

1938

1938 was eventful. In March 1938, Hitler annexed Austria, proclaiming its union with Germany in direct contravention with the Versailles treaty. He then made ‘barely concealed preparations’ (Tombs) to attack Czechoslovakia.

Hitler’s initial claim was to the Sudetenland which contained 3.5 million German-speakers. (It had, however, never been part of Germany, a mistake that Chamberlain made and has been used as evidence that he was ignorant of foreign affairs.) Crucially, the Sudetenland had been given to Czechoslovakia to provide it with defensible frontiers. If Hitler were to gain control of the territory, Czechoslovakia would be left highly vulnerable to attack.

However, many officials in London had little interest in Czechoslovakia. As Tombs writes:

Whitehall had always deplored France’s various east-European alliances as a provocation to Germany. It regarded as madness action on behalf of Czechoslovakia, widely regarded as one of the Versailles treaty’s mistakes, ‘a country which we can neither get at nor spell’, and which, thought the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Alexander Cadogan, ‘is not worth the bones of a single British Grenadier’… The mainstream Foreign Office view, expressed by Cadogan, was that ‘as long as Hitler could pretend he was incorporating Germans in the Reich we could pretend that he had a case.’

Around 12 September 1938, Hitler encouraged Konrad Henlein, leader of the Sudeten Nazis, to rebel and demand a union with Germany. The Czech government, in response, declared martial law (military government) to maintain control. Hitler began threatening war and placed troops on the Czech border. Chamberlain took it upon himself to try and resolve the crisis and flew to meet Hitler three times in September.
**Meeting 1: Berchtesgaden – 15 September 1938**

To avert the crisis, Chamberlain flew (his second time ever) to Berchtesgaden, Germany, on 15 September. After long discussions, he promised Hitler that he could have control over all the parts of the Sudetenland where more than **50% of the population were German**. He got the French premier, Edouard Daladier, to agree. In exchange, Britain and France received guarantees from Hitler of Czechoslovakia's independence. Czechoslovakia’s leader were not consulted.

**Meeting 2: Bad Godesberg – 22–23 September 1938**

Having persuaded the French to agree to the 50% plan, Chamberlain flew back to Bad Godesberg, Germany, to inform Hitler of their decision. However, now Hitler demanded all the Sudetenland. When Chamberlain refused, it looked as if war between Germany and Czechoslovakia was imminent. France even began to mobilise. Chamberlain, on return to Britain, describes the crisis as 'a quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing'.

**Meeting 3: Munich – 30 September 1938**

At a meeting brokered by Mussolini, Britain and France agreed to give Hitler the Sudetenland. In return, Chamberlain managed to convince Hitler to sign a piece of paper signalling the “**desire of our two peoples never to go to war** with one another again”. The following day, German troops marched into the Sudetenland and were welcomed as heroes.
Key Topic 1: Churchill’s view of events, 1919-40

The Aftermath of Munich

After Munich, Chamberlain was praised by many for securing, in his words, ‘peace with honour…peace for our time’:

- In Munich, people threw flowers at the British prime minister and shouted ‘Hail Chamberlain’
- Chamberlain was greeted with cheering crowds when he landed back in Britain at Heston Aerodrome
- Stanley Baldwin, now in the House of Lords, said of Hitler’s invitation to Chamberlain at Munich: ‘It was just as though the finger of God had drawn the rainbow once more across the sky and ratified again His Covenant with the children of men.’
- The King invited Chamberlain onto the balcony of Buckingham Palace to wave to the cheering crowds below
- One Tory MP announced that Chamberlain ‘will go down in history as the greatest European statesman of this or any other time’,

However, others were less convinced. Duff Cooper resigned as first lord of the Admiralty. In his resignation speech, he said:

The Prime Minister has believed in addressing Herr Hitler through the language of sweet reasonableness. I have believed that he was more open to the language of the mailed fist… I have ruined, perhaps, my political career. But that is a little matter; I have retained something which to me is of great value – I can still walk about the world with my head erect.²

Naturally, Churchill gave his opinion on Munich in a ‘the greatest speech of his life so far’ (Roberts) to a typically hostile House of Commons. Due to its quality, a significant section is worth reproducing:

We really must not waste time after all this long debate upon the difference between the positions reached at Berchtesgaden, at Godesberg and at Munich. They can be very simply epitomised, if the House will permit me to vary the metaphor. £1 was demanded at the pistol’s point. When it was given, £2 were demanded at the pistol’s point. Finally, the dictator consented to take £1 17s. 6d. and the rest in promises of goodwill for the future…

All is over. Silent, mournful, abandoned, broken, Czechoslovakia recedes into the darkness… We are in the presence of a disaster of the

² Churchill praised Cooper’s speech, writing: ‘My dear Duff, Your speech was one of the finest Parliamentary performances I have ever heard. It was admirable in form, massive in argument and shone with courage and public spirit.’
first magnitude which has befallen Great Britain and France. Do not let us blind ourselves to that…

[The British people] should know the truth. They should know that there has been gross neglect and deficiency in our defences; they should know that we have sustained a defeat without a war, the consequences of which will travel far with us along our road; they should know that we have passed an awful milestone in our history, when the whole equilibrium of Europe has been deranged, and that the terrible words have for the time being been pronounced against the Western democracies:

“Thou art weighed in the balance and found wanting.”

And do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour, we arise again and take our stand for freedom as in the olden time.

Even the normally critical Leo Amery said he was ‘really impressed’ by Churchill’s oration.

Tellingly, as Best notes, ‘Churchill’s excoriation of the Prime Minister actually got him into more trouble with his party than he had encountered since the climax of his campaign against the India Act’. Most people, it seemed, hoped Hitler was finished.

The Final Steps to War (1938-39)

It was not long, however, before Churchill was vindicated. An outline of the steps to war are thus:

- **9 November 1938**: Kristallnacht in Germany where vicious mobs attack Jews and Jewish property. One Tory MP apparently grumbled, ‘I must say Hitler never helps.’

- **13 March 1939**: German troops occupy Prague (the Czech capital) in violation of the Munich agreement. A Gallup poll showed 87% of Britons now favoured an alliance with France and Russia, although 55% still trusted Chamberlain.

- **March 1939**: The Nazis repeat their Sudetenland tactic in Poland, using Danzig (an international city) and the Polish Corridor as a pretext for their aggression.

- **31 March 1939**: Chamberlain tells the Commons that Britain and France will provide support to Poland if its independence is threatened. (As Tombs notes, ‘this did not mean that he was resolved to face an inevitable war’.)

- **Early-mid August 1939**: Britain and France seek – unsuccessfully – to form an alliance with Stalin.

- **24 August 1939**: Stalin shocks the world by announcing a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. Soviet exports of food and raw materials to Germany rise by 2,000 per cent.

- **1 September 1939**: Germany invades Poland and, as Tombs describes it, ‘a furious House of Commons, in an exceptionally stormy session, pressed the flustered Prime Minister to act.’ A leading figure in the Labour Party, Arthur Greenwood, told
Chamberlain that unless he sent an ultimatum to Germany ‘neither you nor I nor anyone else on earth will be able to hold the House of Commons’.

- **3 September 1939**: Britain delivers an ultimatum to Germany at 9.00am. There is no reply. At 11.00am, Britain is, once again, at war with Germany. Chamberlain appoints Churchill as first lord of the Admiralty, ending Churchill’s time in the political wilderness.