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978-0-521-00048-2 - Hitler, Chamberlain and Appeasement

Frank McDonough

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The cover illustration shows Chamberlain and Hitler at the 1938 Munich conference at which Chamberlain agreed to allow Nazi Germany to annex the Sudetenland.

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Introduction

In spite of the many viewpoints which have been put forward to explain the outbreak of the Second World War, two interpretations dominate the historical debate.

The first view suggests that the key reason for the start of the war was Adolf Hitler's cold-blooded desire for European expansion. This interpretation is enshrined in the final judgement at the famous Nuremberg trials of the leading (living) Nazis, which were held shortly after the end of hostilities. Although many new details have emerged concerning the conduct of German foreign policy under the Nazi regime, the central view of Hitler as a uniquely evil and brutal dictator plotting and scheming a war of conquest for *Lebensraum* (living space) in the east from the moment he came to power until the outbreak of war has not been substantially modified or revised.

The second key explanation of the outbreak of the Second World War concentrates on the role played by Neville Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement. This policy did prevent a major European war starting in 1938 through the signing of the Munich agreement, but it ended in humiliating failure when Germany attacked Poland in September 1939. In the popular mind, appeasement has been viewed (and is still generally viewed by world leaders) as a totally disreputable policy of shameful surrender which 'sacrifices principles' in order to 'buy off' a potential or actual aggressor. However, among historians, using more objective methods, the original view of Chamberlain as an incompetent leader and appeasement as a morally bankrupt policy doomed to failure has undergone a quite remarkable transformation. It has, indeed, now become commonplace for 'revisionist historians' to portray Chamberlain not as a weak and ineffective leader but as a complex and able politician with a clear-sighted approach to a foreign policy, who sought peace while at the same time preparing for war.

The main aim of this book is to examine the central roles played by Hitler and Chamberlain in the events which led to the outbreak of the Second World War. The book seeks to adopt a balanced approach to the subject, but does not flinch from giving fresh insights or offering critical assessment when it is deemed necessary. The major focus of the study is, of course, on Anglo-German relations from 1918 to 1939, with particular attention paid to the key events from 1937 to 1939, when Hitler pursued a bold and aggressive foreign policy, while Chamberlain strove energetically to satisfy the 'legitimate' demands made by Hitler, in the hope that this would prevent war.

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Introduction

The book begins with a brief survey of the key events in Anglo-German relations from 1918 to 1933. In Chapter 2, the foreign-policy ideas, aims and actions of Adolf Hitler in the period from 1933 to 1937 are explored. Chapter 3 examines the factors which help to explain why appeasement became the policy adopted by the British government to deal with the growing tension in European relations during the 1930s. Chapters 4 and 5 concentrate on events in Anglo-German relations from 1937 to 1939. The book concludes with an extensive analysis of the changing nature of the debate over the roles of Hitler and Chamberlain in the origins of the Second World War.