Introduction

There are few more contrasting historical reputations than those of Winston Churchill and Neville Chamberlain. On the one hand, there is the hero who led Britain in its finest hour when it stood alone against Nazi Germany in 1940. On the other, there is the man of Munich who attempted to appease Hitler by agreeing to his territorial demands on Czechoslovakia in 1938. Appeasement subsequently became a byword for weakness and shameful failure to stand up to dictators. Even today diplomatic compromise with an authoritarian regime is frequently criticised as another Munich.

Churchill is dominant in history partly because of what he achieved as prime minister, but also because of what he wrote in his best-selling history of the Second World War. Volume one, which appeared in 1948, established an enduring narrative of government failure to heed his warnings and of missed opportunities to halt Hitler before Germany became too powerful. Churchill's account still influences popular perceptions of Chamberlain. In contrast, academic historians have debated the pros and cons of appeasement for six decades without reaching a consensus. Surprisingly, this book is the first to compare Churchill and Chamberlain systematically in relation to both foreign and defence policy. It places their ideas in the context of Britain's power to influence international affairs through armed force or diplomacy, and of advice from the Foreign Office, the Treasury, the armed forces and the intelligence services as to what should be done. By doing so it demonstrates not only the uncertainty facing statesmen in the 1930s but also why historians find it difficult to agree what would have happened if statesmen had taken different decisions.

Chamberlain was accused by Churchill and by many historians since of failing to stand up to Hitler and of not preparing the country to face the danger it was in. Yet it was Chamberlain, the self-styled man of peace, who declared war on Germany in 1939 and who supported Churchill's decision to fight on in 1940. The Battle of Britain was won with aircraft ordered by Chamberlain's government. These apparent

contradictions can only be understood in the context of what happened between the Great Depression of the early 1930s and the first stages of the Second World War.

This book is an attempt to clarify issues that continue to divide historians. Could war have been prevented as Churchill claimed? In what respects did Churchill and Chamberlain differ on defence and foreign policy? Did appeasement end in 1939? To what extent was Chamberlain responsible for military defeats suffered by Britain in the early phases of the war? The book is distinctive in three respects. First, it pays equal attention to defence and diplomacy. Second, it considers the practicality of Churchill's alternatives to Chamberlain's policies. Third, it poses moral questions for readers to consider before coming to their own conclusions about Churchill, Chamberlain and appeasement.

1 Churchill, Chamberlain and Historians

1.1 Chamberlain: Guilty Man?

One of the most cited works in the literature on appeasement is *Guilty Men*, a best-selling polemic written by three journalists – one of them, Michael Foot, a future leader of the Labour Party – in a few days in the summer of 1940, when Britain faced the threat of invasion. Under the pseudonym 'Cato', the authors condemned Chamberlain for trusting Hitler and failing to rearm adequately.[1] They echoed the Labour Party's criticisms that the Conservative-dominated National Government formed in 1931 had undermined the rule of international law and collective security through the League of Nations by acquiescing in the Japanese seizure of Manchuria and the Italian conquest of Ethiopia, and failed to prevent Germany and Italy intervening against the democratically elected Republican government in the Spanish Civil War.[2] The original 'guilty man' thesis thus came from the left. After Chamberlain's death in November 1940, his family sought to defend his reputation by commissioning Keith Feiling, an Oxford historian with Conservative leanings, to write a biography. Feiling used Chamberlain's private papers, particularly his diary and his weekly letters to his sisters Ida and Hilda, to put the former prime minister's case in his own words. He drew attention to Chamberlain's hatred of war and his belief that it was impossible to ask Britons to die in order to stop the German-speaking minority in Czechoslovakia seceding. He also set out Chamberlain's conception of defence policy as a balance between producing arms and maintaining economic resources with which to wage war.[3]

Feiling's biography was published in 1946, but its impact was overshadowed by the appearance two years later of the first volume of Churchill's *The Second World War* covering the years 1919–40. Although Churchill gave an impression of objectivity, his purpose was to reassert the case he had made in the 1930s that appeasement only encouraged aggression. The 'fatal course' taken at Munich would have been avoided, he said, if British and French statesmen had been guided

by a sense of honour. Churchill claimed Hitler could 'easily' have been stopped in 1938 by a combination of Britain, France and the Soviet Union, and that Chamberlain's unwillingness to fight earlier than 1939 led to a decision to go to war over Poland in the worst possible circumstances, without a Soviet alliance and with Germany strengthened by absorbing the resources of Czechoslovakia. The focus of the book was very much on the threat from Germany, with comparatively little said about the threats from Japan and Italy.[4]

Churchill's arguments remained largely unchallenged by historians until 1961, when A. J. P. Taylor raised a storm in academic circles with his book, *The Origins of the Second World War*. In Taylor's account, the Treaty of Versailles, and in particular its denial of self-determination to German minorities in Eastern Europe after the First World War, lacked legitimacy in the eyes of informed British opinion. He claimed Chamberlain was motivated by the rights of German speakers in Czechoslovakia, not military weakness or fear of air attack. Munich was described as a triumph that had been praised by almost every British newspaper. Taylor admitted that some members of the Foreign Office disliked Chamberlain's policy, but believed they offered no alternative. To him it was inconceivable the Soviets would have committed themselves to the defence of the status quo and therefore it was pointless to speculate whether an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance such as Churchill advocated could have prevented war.[5]

Taylor was widely regarded as a maverick. Nevertheless, by 1965 Donald Watt could accurately forecast the rise of a revisionist school against the Churchillian orthodoxy.[6] The publication of volumes in the Foreign Office Historians' series of *Documents on British Foreign Policy* and a similar selection from the German archives enabled Keith Robbins to challenge prevailing beliefs about Munich in a well-received book in 1968. To him Chamberlain was not naïve about the potential threat from Nazi Germany, and his dual policy of appeasement and rearmament was described as an appropriate response. Robbins thought historians were bound to disagree about moral issues raised by the Munich settlement, such as the rival rights of ethnic groups, or the preservation of peace by surrender to the threat of force.[7] Robbins was a young historian, but revisionism was also embraced by the senior figure of W. Norton Medlicott, one of the editors of *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, who pointed to continuities in British foreign policy before and after Chamberlain became prime minister, and said that Chamberlain, like Sir Robert Vansittart, the permanent under-secretary of the Foreign Office, thought diplomacy should aim to gain time until Britain's defence preparations were complete in 1939.[8]

Revisionism thus preceded the flood of new evidence released under the Public Records Act of 1967, which reduced the normal period of closure of government archives from fifty years to thirty. Nevertheless, the sudden availability of Cabinet papers and the files of the Prime Minister's Office, the Foreign Office, the Treasury and the defence departments made it easier to understand how policy had been decided. Moreover, Chamberlain's own papers were made generally available to researchers in 1975. With the publication of Norman Gibbs's official history of grand strategy in 1976, followed by books on the Treasury's influence on rearmament, it became fully apparent how far ministers and their advisers had been influenced by economic constraints.[9] Grand strategy could be studied in its widest sense as the co-ordination and direction at the highest level of the nation's resources to achieve major military and political objectives. In the 1980s, revisionist historians like David Dilks and John Charmley portrayed Chamberlain as someone who pursued a rational policy of addressing legitimate German grievances through diplomacy, while rearming at an economically sustainable rate in the hope that Hitler would be deterred from going to war.[10]

To some historians, revisionism smacked of *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardoner* (to understand everything is to forgive everything). Drawing on much the same archival material as Dilks and Charmley, Keith Middlemas, Sidney Aster, Larry Fuscher and Williamson Murray produced a substantial body of anti-revisionist work along Churchillian or even more severely critical lines.[11] In 1993 Alastair Parker took an intermediate position with what he called a counter-revisionist interpretation. Parker accepted the revisionist case that Chamberlain's options had been restricted by economic and strategic circumstances. However, he argued that Chamberlain had chosen conciliation rather than resistance whenever he had to make a choice. Parker rejected Churchill's portrait of Chamberlain as narrow-minded and lacking experience in European affairs, and likewise the charge by the authors of *Guilty Men* that he had recklessly neglected rearmament. Nevertheless, he concluded that Chamberlain's obstinacy in pursuing appeasement, his caution regarding the effects of rearmament on the economy and his opposition to a Soviet alliance removed any chance of creating an effective deterrent. Parker believed Chamberlain should have followed Churchill's advice to form a close Anglo-French nucleus around which other states, including the Soviet Union, could have gathered in collective opposition to aggression.[12]

Parker's one caveat was that, despite the partial opening of Soviet archives after 1989, he felt even in 2000 that evidence of Stalin's intentions was still lacking.[13] However, Michael Jabara Carley, on the basis of his research in the Moscow archives, had no doubt an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance

could have been concluded in the summer of 1939 had it not been for Chamberlain's anti-Communist prejudice. Louise Grace Shaw, in an explicitly anti-revisionist study of British elite attitudes towards the Soviet Union, came to the same conclusion.[14] For Carley and Shaw, Chamberlain's failure to make an alliance with Stalin was no less reprehensible than the Munich agreement. Keith Neilson, however, found ideological antipathy an insufficient explanation of Chamberlain's position. The Soviet Union was, after all, a Communist state and therefore 'essentially hostile to British interests', and there was good reason to examine critically Soviet offers of co-operation.[15]

Differences between anti-revisionist and revisionist historians have tended to widen. Zara Steiner, in her magisterial international history of the 1930s, recognised the scale of the strategic problems Chamberlain faced. She accepted he was hoping for the best and preparing for the worst while conducting his dual policy of appeasement and rearmament. However, in her judgement, his 'hubristic' diplomatic ambitions, fear of risk, 'fatally flawed' reading of Hitler's character and 'obsession' with preserving peace led him to place more emphasis on appeasement than on rearmament.[16] Niall Ferguson was more Keynesian than Keynes in dismissing the economic case for limiting rearmament and contended that the most appropriate course of action would have been to conscript the unemployed into the army and to wage a preventative war. Keynes in fact thought in 1937 that the scale of borrowing to finance rearmament was potentially inflationary and would place a strain on the balance of payments.[17] Most anti-revisionist historians have focused on what they considered to be the immorality of appeasement rather than on economic constraints and grand strategy.[18] Revisionists, on the other hand, have linked diplomacy with the need to make strategic choices. For example, James Levy argued that appeasement and rearmament were logical and appropriate strategies: appeasement being aimed primarily at preventing, and only secondarily at delaying, war, and rearmament being primarily aimed at deterrence and only secondarily at creating the means to fight. Drawing on historians' research, Christopher Layne criticised his fellow international relations theorists for being too willing to accept Churchill's version of events, and emphasised the threat war posed to Britain's position as a world power; the lack of resources to meet multiple threats from Germany, Japan and Italy; and Chamberlain's use of deterrence as well as diplomacy.[19] However, Chamberlain's contribution to defence policy has not been universally admired. Greg Kennedy rated him as the worst of Britain's interwar strategic foreign policymakers on the grounds that, both as chancellor and as prime minister, he opted for defence on the cheap through air power that was severely limited in capability, held back the navy

so that it was inadequate to defend the Empire, and failed to develop a co-operative relationship with the United States or an effective alliance system in Europe.[20] There have been similar divisions of opinion on Chamberlain's diplomacy. John Ruggiero condemned him for precipitating the war in 1939 by sabotaging an Anglo-Soviet alliance and by being so obsequious towards Hitler that the latter was convinced that Britain and France would not fight for Poland.[21] In contrast, Peter Neville believed it was Stalin's decision to make a pact with Hitler, rather than British foot-dragging in negotiations with Moscow, that made war inevitable and that Chamberlain made it plain to Hitler that an invasion of Poland would mean war.[22]

Many differences between historians arise from different assumptions of what would have happened if different policies had been adopted. As Robert Self, Chamberlain's by no means uncritical biographer, observed, the reality of the 1930s was neither as simple nor as clear as it may appear in hindsight to anti-revisionists, and that failure to preserve peace did not imply the existence of an alternative strategy that would have avoided war.[23] Andrew Stedman examined a range of alternatives to appeasement, including collective security through the League of Nations, formation of alliances and greater rearmament, and concluded that none would have deterred Hitler.[24]

Churchill himself long escaped historical criticism. In 1954, a short and little-noticed article by the American historian Richard Powers commented on how Churchill's parliamentary speeches had supported the appeasement of Italy when Mussolini attacked Ethiopia in 1935, had accepted the *fait accompli* of Hitler's occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 and as late as December 1937 had shown willingness to contemplate colonial concessions to Germany.[25] However, the first seriously researched challenge did not come until 1970 when Robert Rhodes James asked how, if war could have been easily avoided, Churchill failed to convince contemporaries to take appropriate action. One reason identified by Rhodes James was that Churchill focused on the German threat and did not share the passionate conviction of Labour and Liberal politicians that the League of Nations should halt Japanese aggression in China and Italian aggression in Ethiopia. Moreover, his anti-Communism led him to take a neutral stance over the Spanish Civil War. Churchill thus cut himself off from substantial potential public support. His position within the Conservative Party suffered from his opposition to the National Government's proposals for Indian self-government and his support for King Edward VIII in the Abdication Crisis. His reputation as someone who enjoyed war did not help at a time when the nation longed for peace. Rhodes James showed that, while

Churchill's warnings about the need for greater rearmament and firmer diplomacy were prescient, he failed to convince the House of Commons until the German occupation of the rump of Czechoslovakia in March 1939.[26]

Churchill's account of the 1930s in *The Second World War* was powerfully restated by Martin Gilbert in volume 5 of the official biography, which appeared in 1976. Gilbert incorporated substantial extracts from Churchill's papers in the text, and edited companion volumes of documents, most of them written by Churchill.[27] Churchill was thus his own historian for a second time. Nevertheless over the past thirty years a number of historians have revised Churchill's version of events. In 1993, John Charmley noted that the main difference between Churchill and the government over rearmament concerned how quickly the air force should be expanded. Charmley was critical of what he took to be Churchill's neglect of problems arising from rapid technical change in aircraft and from the scarcity of workers with the right skills to produce them, and argued that, had the government taken Churchill's advice, the result would have been higher output of obsolescent machines that would have been of no use in the summer of 1940. Charmley also doubted the practicality and efficacy of Churchill's concept of a grand alliance of Britain, France, the Soviet Union and smaller European powers, asking where was the evidence that other powers, particularly those that suspected the Soviets of hostile intentions, would have collaborated, and would not Germany have been tempted to strike against Britain while such an alliance was being negotiated? He saw no evidence to support Churchill's hopes of obtaining American support. In Charmley's view, Churchill grossly overestimated British strength, did not think in terms of strategic choices or long-term consequences of his actions and, consequently, while avoiding defeat in 1940, won a pyrrhic victory in 1945.[28] Brian McKercher also thought Churchill's criticisms of the National Government's defence and foreign policy lacked a rational strategic basis, and claimed they were motivated as much by his hopes of regaining office as by concern with national security.[29]

Donald Watt pointed out that Churchill's arguments in *The Second World War* depended upon counterfactuals that remain imponderable. In particular, Watt doubted whether Hitler would have been overthrown by a military coup even if Chamberlain had taken a firm stand in 1938. Watt also noted that Churchill's emphasis on air rearmament rather than on the army wrongly assumed the Germans feared strategic bombing as much as the British.[30] Likewise, David Reynolds, in a forensic study of how Churchill wrote *The Second World War*, showed that omissions and careful phrasing lent plausibility to counterfactuals such as Hitler could

have been stopped in 1936 or 1938.[31] David Carlton demonstrated that Churchill had by no means been consistent earlier in seeing the Soviet Union as a counterbalance to Nazi Germany, being at least as anti-Communist as Chamberlain. He added that both men favoured friendship with Fascist Italy and it was only from 1938 that they diverged on the related issues of whether to fight Germany and whether to seek an Anglo-Soviet alliance.[32] Notwithstanding all these criticisms, Churchill's status as a great man whose virtues outweighed his faults has remained unimpaired.[33] Even Charmley acknowledged that. The question is, rather, whether Churchill's version of events should dominate historical analysis.

1.2 Why Historians Differ on Appeasement

Appeasement was long an uncontroversial term for the improvement of international relations by the peaceful settlement of grievances through rational negotiation and compromise.[34] In 1927 a Foreign Office memorandum referred to the Locarno Treaty of 1925 whereby Britain and Italy guaranteed the frontiers between Germany and France and Belgium (but not between Germany and Czechoslovakia and Poland) as part of a 'policy of appeasement'.[35] In 1936, in a speech praised by Churchill, Anthony Eden, the foreign secretary, said his objective was 'the appeasement of Europe'.[36] Churchill himself had used the term in 1921 when he spoke of the need for 'an appeasement of the fearful hatreds and antagonisms which exist in Europe', and in 1932 he said Germany's 'just grievances' ought to be removed before Britain and France agreed to disarm to the level set for Germany by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. For Churchill, appeasement from strength was a wise policy.[37] Chamberlain had a similar understanding of appeasement as a policy of conciliation and he did not accept that the Munich settlement amounted to shameful surrender.[38] Some, but not all historians, attach a derogatory meaning to appeasement, and it is impossible for agreement to be reached when arguing from different premises. To avoid ambiguity, Medlicott proposed that the word should not be used by scholars.[39] That is impossible. In this book the word normally retains its original meaning – to pacify by making concessions, not necessarily from a position of weakness – and it is made clear when it is used in its pejorative sense by Chamberlain's critics.

Appeasement was only half of Chamberlain's policy, the other being deterrence. However, the precise meaning of the term is hard to pin down. In a speech in 1936 Chamberlain spoke of his 'enthusiasm' for an air force which, when fully developed, would have 'terrific striking power' and would be 'the most formidable deterrent to war that could be devised'.[40] Air warfare was widely expected to include the use of gas as

well as high explosive and incendiary bombs against cities. For example, in 1937 the Air Staff estimated that 600,000 people would be killed and 1,200,000 injured in 60 days of air attacks on Britain. In the event, civilian casualties in 120 days from September to December 1940 were 23,767 killed and 84,529 injured.[41] It was the greatly exaggerated estimates that shaped policymakers' thinking in the 1930s. Harold Macmillan, who was prime minister during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, was exaggerating only slightly when he said in 1966 that people in Britain in the 1930s thought of air warfare 'rather as people think of nuclear warfare today'.[42] Nevertheless, it would be anachronistic to equate Chamberlain's conception of deterrence with theories developed in the nuclear age. While the Air Ministry certainly hoped to create a bomber force that would deter Germany, such a force was not yet technically feasible.[43] Malcolm Smith believed Chamberlain's primary purpose in backing expansion of the Royal Air Force (RAF) from 1934 was to persuade the Germans to agree to an air arms limitation pact, thereby preventing bombers becoming a significant new factor in international relations. In Smith's view, Britain's air 'deterrent' was integral to appeasement and not an alternative to it.[44] In the event, an air pact proved to be a Will o' the Wisp. The British government was left pursuing a policy of 'parity' with Germany as a means of maintaining diplomatic credibility without any clear conception of how air power would be applied in war.

Once it was apparent British aircraft production was lagging behind Germany's, Chamberlain changed tack and gave priority to Britain's air defences, with the army's preparations to fight in Europe at the outbreak of war being delayed until these defences were complete. Brian McKercher argued that until then the army had been central to deterrence of Germany, by showing that Britain was committed to maintaining the continental balance of power, and claimed that by abandoning that commitment Chamberlain was taking the path to appeasement.[45] The decision on the army can be understood only in the context of another conception of deterrence: the Treasury doctrine that economic stability – the 'fourth arm of defence' – would give Britain the staying power to withstand a long war in which Germany would be worn down by blockade, as was believed to have been the case in the First World War. From this point of view, defence expenditure should not exceed a level that would destabilise the economy. By early 1939, as both the British and German economies showed signs of strain from the arms race, the Foreign Office advised that the issue of peace or war seemed likely to be decided within 12 months, and Chamberlain focused on short-term deterrence. [46] He agreed to the restoration of the army's