

## Introduction

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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

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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.