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***Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Special Issue on Appeasement, 19.3 (2008)**

Michael Roi. "Introduction: Appeasement: Rethinking the Policy and the Policy-Makers," 383-390. DOI: 10.1080/09592290802344947

B. J. C. McKercher. "National Security and Imperial Defence: British Grand Strategy and Appeasement, 1930-1939," 391-442. DOI: 10.1080/09592290802344954

Sidney Aster. "Appeasement: Before and After Revisionism," 443-480. DOI: 10.1080/09592290802344962

G. Bruce Strang. "The Spirit of Ulysses? Ideology and British Appeasement in the 1930s," 48-526. DOI: 10.1080/09592290802344970.

John R. Ferris. "'Now that the Milk is Spilt': Appeasement and the Archive on Intelligence," 527-565. DOI: 10.1080/09592290802344996

Martin Thomas. "Appeasement in the Late Third Republic," 566-607. DOI: 10.1080/09592290802345001

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Review by **David Dutton**, University of Liverpool

Few areas of twentieth-century history can have been subjected to such intense scrutiny as 'appeasement', particularly its British manifestation in the foreign policy of Neville Chamberlain's government towards Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in the late 1930s. The topic continues to inspire a passionate debate which, understandable in the course and immediate aftermath of the Second World War, must strike many nearly three-quarters of a century later as curious in its intensity. Indeed, the seventieth anniversary of the Munich Conference in September 2008 was an obvious excuse – if one were needed – for a new raft of publications. The explanation is probably two-fold. In the first place, the availability now of the vast majority of records and archives ever likely to come to light has failed to produce anything approaching an historiographical

consensus. Appeasement stands as telling proof that the past very seldom speaks for itself. The scope for individual historical interpretation remains only too obvious. But in the second place, appeasement, more broadly defined, persists as a pertinent issue for those who conduct, observe and study international diplomacy. There is a history of the word 'appeasement' from the 1930s to the present day which is just as significant as any interpretation of the concept in the years leading up to the Second World War.

Though the word was not invented in the 1930s, it took on at that time a pejorative overtone, not present in earlier usage, which has made it impossible to apply the term to the conduct of subsequent diplomacy without the clear intention of conveying an insult. Notwithstanding the skilled attempts of numerous academics to understand, sympathise with and in some cases even praise the foreign policy of the Chamberlain government, in the popular mind the word still conveys, simplistically and without qualification, the notion of craven surrender to aggression with the inevitable sub-text of a higher price having to the paid at a later date. If such unsophisticated thoughts were restricted to the general public, it would perhaps be a matter of little moment. But from the early Cold War to the invasion of Iraq world leaders have been ever ready to trundle out the parallel of the 1930s to justify and give virtue to their hard-line policy decisions. 'We all know this is how fascist governments behave', declared Sir Anthony Eden in 1956, with no appreciation of the individuality of each historical circumstance, as he sought to prepare the country for the invasion of Egypt and the recovery of the Suez Canal. 'We all remember, only too well, what the cost can be in giving in to Fascism.' Those who bemoan the failure of politicians to read history and learn its lessons often forget to add the rider that it is important that those lessons are the 'right' ones.

This special issue of *Diplomacy and Statecraft* contains five new essays on the theme of appeasement designed, as Michael Roi's introduction suggests, to 're-think the policy and the policy-makers'. There is some new detail here but, on the whole, the authors adopt a broad-brush approach, taking the opportunity to navigate interpretative paths through the existing historiography. In some ways, it is surprising that none of the articles addresses the question of whether the term 'appeasement' has any continuing value as an analytical tool, for beneath this catch-all umbrella a variety of strategies existed. But at least two of the essays add weight to such a proposition. As Bruce Strang recognises in his study of 'Ideology and British Appeasement', fundamental differences existed among the practitioners of appeasement in terms of tactics and timing. Those practitioners, moreover, include names usually listed on the 'right' side of the divide between the Guilty Men and their opponents. Robert Vansittart, often linked with Winston Churchill himself in the ranks of the virtuous anti-appeasers, 'wanted appeasement through comparative strength, the recruitment of partners in the endeavour, and to see genuine evidence of compromise on Germany's part'. By contrast, Anthony Eden, whose efforts to 'face the Dictators' were once dismissed by A.J.P. Taylor as 'making faces' at them, was ready enough to seek agreement with Germany, at least until his resignation as Foreign Secretary in February 1938, but was altogether more circumspect about making concessions to Italy. It might be added that Leo Amery, whose anti-appeasement

credentials rest essentially upon his celebrated attack on Chamberlain in the Norwegian debate of May 1940 and a hesitant abstention in the parliamentary debate on Munich, was ready to acquiesce in German domination of Europe, while Britain, isolated from the continent, fulfilled its imperial destiny in the wider world. In the same vein, Martin Thomas's thoughtful analysis of French foreign policy in the 1930s seeks to determine whether there was a specifically French version of appeasement or whether this is 'merely a convenient shorthand, an artificial transposition of something uniquely British'. Adopting as a working definition a 'recognition that French security was better served by a complete overhaul of the World War I settlement than by attempts to uphold it', Thomas concludes that France 'did appease, but only fitfully and never with significant material success' and that there was no real French equivalent of Chamberlain, until perhaps Georges Bonnet arrived at the Quai d'Orsay in 1938.

By contrast, Brian McKercher reasserts the distinctiveness of Chamberlainite appeasement, emphasising the difference which the advent of Neville Chamberlain's government made to Britain's overseas policy. Using his essay to reassess British 'Grand Strategy' in the 1930s, he challenges the long-established interpretation of Norman Gibbs that, until the last few months before the outbreak of war, that strategy was one of isolation from the continent of Europe. In McKercher's analysis national strategy from before 1930 until late 1937 was built upon the classic Foreign Office principle of the balance of power. From late 1937 until early 1939, however, appeasement – originally only one of a number of rational responses to Britain's international predicament – became the predominant, perhaps the only, element in that strategy. Then, after just over a year, appeasement was abandoned in the spring of 1939 in favour of a reassertion of the balance of power based upon a renewed continental commitment, military and diplomatic.

McKercher asserts that from the early 1920s until late 1937 the Foreign Office was able to control both the making and execution of British strategy. The first two Prime Ministers of the National Government, Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin, were on the whole ready to defer to the strategic prescriptions of the Foreign Office Permanent Under-Secretary, Robert Vansittart. But Chamberlain, by 'elevating' Vansittart at the end of 1937 to the high-sounding but relatively powerless post of Chief Diplomatic Advisor to the Government, while at the same time pushing through a defence review which favoured the RAF and the Royal Navy at the expense of the Army, succeeded in undermining the Foreign Office's control together with the strategic approach it had long championed. In their place he substituted the policy of appeasement. Unfortunately, with the Anschluss in March 1938, the ensuing Czech crisis culminating at Munich in September, and the German occupation of Prague in March 1939, 'appeasement proved a hollow reed on which to tie British national security and Imperial defence'.

Not all will accept McKercher's persuasive analysis without qualification, not least because it is doubtful whether well-placed contemporaries saw matters in these terms. Foreign Office officials and junior ministers would probably have been surprised to be told that their ministry was in the driving seat in the early 1930s. Their contemporary

complaint was often just the opposite. Vansittart was always vocal, but not always listened to – and not always representative of opinion in the Foreign Office as a whole. McKercher may be significantly underplaying the role of the Treasury in the construction of the decade's Grand Strategy. That ministry's power reflected both the raison d'être of the National Government itself – to restore and protect the country's finances – and the dominant presence of Neville Chamberlain as Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1931-37. What Chamberlain did on transferring from No 11 to No 10 Downing Street was to maintain the domination of his old department, a domination which arguably it did not lose until the first months of 1939. Only then did Halifax's Foreign Office reclaim pole position, leaving Simon, the Chancellor, and Chamberlain, the Premier, virtually isolated inside the cabinet.

Where, then, does research on appeasement go next? These essays offer some pointers. As Sidney Aster notes, 'appeasement studies retain their capacity to raise new questions and open new areas of investigation'. He concludes his survey of the existing historiography by suggesting directions in which the debate may now progress, including gender studies, public opinion and popular culture. 'Emerging "cultural approaches" that embrace "the role of ethnicity, race, gender and religion" promise new avenues to understanding the roots of policy making and international history.' Strang's study of ideology relates not, as might be expected, to the ideologies of the Dictator Powers but to those of the practitioners of British appeasement. He asks whether a pro-fascist ideology, a pacifist ideology or an anti-communist ideology led to appeasement. His conclusions are largely negative - though those relating to anti-communism are likely to remain controversial. The members of the National Government were not crypto-fascists nor did they set their faces irrevocably against war as a matter of inner conviction. As Strang notes, diplomatic historians may now need to employ the tools of social and cultural history to penetrate further into the complex belief systems of a group such as the appeasers. Such an approach might give us more understanding than we yet have of why these men, so conscious of the ideology underpinning Soviet Communism, were altogether less aware of the ideological dynamic which permeated the Nazi regime. After all, the fact that Chamberlain genuinely believed that Hitler *could* be appeased remains a fundamental starting-point for any study of his foreign policy.

David Dutton is Professor of Twentieth-Century British Political History at the University of Liverpool. His most recent books are *Liberals in Schism: A History of the National Liberal Party* (2008); *A History of the Liberal Party in the Twentieth Century* (2004); *Paris 1918: The War Diary of the 17th Earl of Derby* (editor) (2001); *Neville Chamberlain* (2001), and *The Politics of Diplomacy: Britain and France in the Balkans in the First World War* (1998).

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