

What was Neville Chamberlain's motivation for pursuing the appeasement policy during the Sudetencrisis resulting in the Munich Conference in 1938?

Neville Chamberlain, the appeasement policy, and the Munich Agreement

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Internal Assessment



Neville Chamberlain showing the Anglo-German declaration - [5]

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1 Identification and evaluation of sources (529 Words)

This investigation will analyze the pursuit of the appeasement policy by Neville Chamberlain in September and October 1938. Following research question will be explored: *What was Neville Chamberlain's motivation for pursuing the appeasement policy during the Sudetencrisis resulting in the Munich Conference in 1938?* The two sources to be evaluated are both primary sources, with N. Chamberlain being the originator.

1.1 The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters

The first source that will be evaluated is the collection of the diary letters of Neville Chamberlain, written in late 1938. The letters have mostly been written in 10 Downing Street, London, and in Chequers, Buckinghamshire. N. Chamberlain wrote the letters to keep in touch, perhaps sometimes persuade and share his thoughts with his sisters, Hilda and Ida Chamberlain. The letters are valuable because they share insight into Neville Chamberlain's thoughts, better than official letters (e.g. to Members of the House of Commons) would. The letters further gain in value, as he comments not only on personal but also on political matters: he shares his 'Plan Z', possible criticism of the British government should war break out, and his hope for resolution of the conflict. A lightly limiting factor of this source are that the letters have been edited by Robert C. Self and published posthumously. This should not have a profound impact on the value, as R. C. Self has worked closely with other historians and also James Lloyd, Neville Chamberlain's grandson [2]. A further limit is the nature of the source: It is a letter, which can be restricting with what detail N. Chamberlain could have expressed his thoughts and feelings.

1.2 Common Sitting, European Situation: Prime Ministers Statement

The second source to be analyzed is a transcript of Neville Chamberlain's speech to the Members of the House of Commons on September 28th, 1938, published by the UK Parliament: The speech was held one day before the European powers got together for the Munich Conference. The transcript is relevant to this investigation because Neville Chamberlain presented his public view on the Sudetencrisis as a Prime Minister, not his personal view. It was made to inform the Members of the House Of Commons, not necessarily to convince the Members of his actions: He summarizes the recent events and only draws little attention on his own actions. He also briefly mentions his next move, being his flight to Munich and the get together with other European leaders. Because the speech was held before the Munich Conference, he did not present the events in Europe and his views in retrospect, which could have changed his views on the situation. There are several limitation concerning this source. Firstly, the source is a transcript; it leaves room for interpretation in N. Chamberlain's speech. Secondly, it is also possible that the contents of the transcript deviate from the original speech. It could have been altered on purpose, changing N. Chamberlain's message – although this seems rather unlikely, as the transcript has been published by the UK Parliament. Lastly, N. Chamberlain's thoughts have been

filtered to fit into this speech. To counterbalance this, Source A should reflect his personal thoughts better than Source B does. [6]

2 Investigation (1156 Words)

There are numerous possible reasons why N. Chamberlain was motivated to pursue his policy of appeasement. The most notable are Britains military disadvantage, his personal beliefs in finding a peaceful solution and his desire to protect and respect British public opinion. N. Chamberlain's beliefs in peace and the public's opinion are noteworthy, but the military disadvantage of Britain has the most weight in finding the true motivation of Great Britains Prime Minister to pursue the appeasement policy.

2.1 Military

Since the beginning of the 1930's Germany had planned to rise to a position of great power in Europe. While they accelerated their rearmament, they also had a détente policy with other European nations. This was to avoid a war of sanctions. By the end of 1937, France and Great Britain had begun to speed up their arming, with the possibility to catch up to the Germans. By this time, the Germans had strated to plan their attack on Czechoslovakia [4] : Germany had developed concrete plans, by mid 1938, for an attack on Czechoslovakia and Britain was not in a position of power.

With no power to carry out your threats, one should never menace, was the conclusion that N. Chamberlain drew from a book on the foreign policy of Canning [2]. This presents another reason for why N. Chamberlain pursued the appeasement policy: Great Britain should not menace Germany, as they were not in a position in which they could carry out their threats.

Furthermore, N. Chamberlain stated that Great Britain was in no position in which "[their] military advisors would feel happy in undertaking hostilities if we were not forced to do so" [2]. With no support from government officials, a war against Germany would be impossible. In addition to this, the British Cabinet received a note from Ismay Hastings, a general in the British Indian Army. He stated that it would be favourable to delay a potential war with Germany for about six to twelve months:

"It follows, therefore, that, from the military point of view, time is in our favour, and that, if war with Germany has to come, it would be better to fight her in say 6-12 months' time, than to accept the present challenge." [3]

With this consensus between government officials, military advisors and military personnel as well as Canning's book, it is likely that this strongly influenced N. Chamberlain view on Britain's foreign policy toward pursuing the appeasement policy.

2.2 Pacifism

N. Chamberlain's motivation to prevent war is evident in the letters to his sisters, in which he showed dedication to find a peaceful solution to the Sudetencrisis. He stated in a letter written on September 11th, 1938 that the Daily Mail had declared that the United Kingdom had issued an ultimatum to Germany. He called this action "most gratuitously mischievous of all", taking a clear stance against the action of the Daily Mail and also implying that he was against a possible ultimatum.

Furthermore, N. Chamberlain expressed in a letter written eight days later, that he did not care whether the Sudetenland was in the German Reich or not. This shows that he did not care which side would profit, but shows his will to find a settlement to which both Czechoslovakia and Germany could agree, so that he did not have to risk a war for the Sudetens.

Another demonstration of his pacifist conviction is, that he not only let Lord Runciman, and later Sir Horace Wilson, handle this conflict; N. Chamberlain had planned to surprise Hitler with the offer to meet him when things looked darkest and the crisis seemed to reach its climax. This was without consent of Monsieur Daladier – the French Prime Minister with whom he had planned a common strategy – and also a surprise to the Members of the House of Commons [7]. He tried an unconventional method, in a moment when things looked as if nothing could be done, to prevent war.

He stayed with his peaceful solution even when other politicians (Winston Churchill and Tomáš Masaryk) carried out a conspiracy against him [2], which he wrote on October 9th, 1938. It stays unclear whether this was out of hopes to increase his popularity among the politicians and the public, by showing resilience, or whether it was a testament to his belief in finding a conflict-free and sustainable solution for the Sudetencrisis.

Between the different efforts he made to keep peace in Europe, his endeavour to meet Hitler privately shows how committed he was to find a peaceful solution.

2.3 Britain's Public Opinion

N. Chamberlain was also motivated by the desire to protect Britain's interests and respect the public's opinion against war. This is especially clear in his speech to the House of Commons on September 28th, 1938:

"this country, which does not readily resort to war, would not have followed us if we had tried to lead it into war to prevent a minority from obtaining autonomy, or even from choosing to pass under some other Government." [6]

With this statement, he explains that charging into war with Germany would have not been supported by the British public. It has to be stated that by saying that Great Britain "does not readily resort to war" it does not have to be tied to the public's opinion but more to the country's political orientation, beliefs and strategy, which in Great Britain's case was not pro-war. Furthermore, this sentence implies that this was much more a convention than the periods *zeitgeist*.

Polls taken after the Munich Conference showed that 57% of people were satisfied with the results [1]. This implies that these people preferred peace over war. However, in a different poll, 72% of people were still in favor of an increased defense spending after the Munich Conference [1]. Given these results, it can be said that the British public distrusted Germany and Hitler, but nonetheless preferred peace over war.

With a country that would "not readily resort to war" and the country's population being – mostly – happy with a peaceful solution, N. Chamberlain would have had no reason not to pursue the appeasement policy from a domestic politics point-of-view.

2.4 Conclusion

Britain's public opinion and his own beliefs in a peaceful solution to the Sudeten crisis are influential factors that have determined N. Chamberlain's motivation for his appeasement policy. The most crucial factor having influenced his will to find a peaceful solution was very likely Britain's military disadvantage compared to Germany: With not only his closest advisors but also other government officials, military advisors and military personnel advocating against a war, it should have sent a clear signal to N. Chamberlain to keep pushing for a non-violent resolution of the crisis.

Given this, it would still be interesting to know to what extent the public's opinion and his own will to keep peace in Europe had influenced him.

3 Reflection (398 Words)

For this investigation it was necessary to carefully review both primary and secondary materials in order to determine Neville Chamberlain's motivation for pursuing the appeasement strategy. Governmental records, letters, speeches, and polls were all examined as part of this investigation. These sources offered insightful details on the political, economic, and social circumstances that influenced Chamberlain's choices.

In order to provide a thorough and accurate picture of the past, it is the responsibility of the historian to critically evaluate and interpret the materials that are accessible. For me, this meant being mindful of the sources' constraints and biases as well as the potential values and viewpoints that may have influenced their creation: This was crucial to take into account to fully comprehend Neville Chamberlain's reasons in the context of his appeasement policy. Governmental materials, for instance, may have a constrained viewpoint because they frequently aim to depict the government in the best possible light. Similar to how historical accounts might give a skewed perception due to the fact that many of their authors have political or ideological viewpoints of their own.

To overcome these challenges, historians must evaluate the reliability of their sources by considering

factors such as authenticity, context, and the perspective of the author. Additionally, it is important to differentiate between bias and selection, as the latter involves conscious choices made by the historian while the former involves unconscious influences on their interpretation of events. While it may be difficult to establish proof in history, this does not mean that all versions of events are equally acceptable. The historian must weigh the evidence and consider multiple perspectives in order to arrive at the most credible interpretation of events.

This investigation into the appeasement policy of Neville Chamberlain during the Sudetencrisis in 1938 provided valuable insight into his motivations. The primary sources evaluated, the Neville Chamberlain diary letters and the transcript of his speech to the House of Commons, offered unique perspectives on his thoughts and beliefs. The letters, written to his sisters, provided a personal view while the speech, made to the Members of the House of Commons, presents his public view. Through the analysis of these sources, the investigation concluded that Britain's military disadvantage, Chamberlain's personal beliefs in finding a peaceful solution, and his desire to protect and respect British public opinion were the most notable reasons for pursuing the appeasement policy.

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