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History-Geography essay

“Explain how and why the collective memory of appeasement has changed over time?”

The First World War greatly impacted the views of the British society on the British external policies: many believed that the 1st World War was caused by an avoidable mistake that no one fixed. They believed that the key to global peace would be avoiding this mistake and trying to solve all problems through diplomacy. They believed that the war was also started by the large-scale armaments, and that disarmament would be the best answer to that. There was also the problem of multiple national grievances left over after the 1st World War, but the British also came up with a solution: they would assist in solving these grievances in a diplomatic and peaceful way. The Treaty of Versailles was also seen as an element provoking a new conflict through a direct attack on Germany, stripping them away from the most basic principles and making it a subject to other countries. That is why the British society preceding the 2nd World War thought that Chamberlain's policy of appeasement was well reasoned and would contribute the most towards creating world peace. That policy reached it's pinnacle during the Munich crisis of 1938, where the leaders of UK and France gave up the Sudetenland to Hitler. Yet their policy of appeasement to avoid war proved ineffective in September 1939, when the 2nd World War finally started.

With the beginning of the war, the pacifist view of the British was challenged by the German Blitzkrieg that flooded the entire Europe. In 1940, France has fallen and Great Britain found itself the new target of the German forces. That is when 3 British journalists, Michael Foot, Frank Owen and Peter Howard, wrote “Guilty Men” in which they blamed the appeasers for failing to stop the dictators in Europe and Asia, thus contributing to the beginning of the war. For them, the main “guilty men” were Chamberlain and Baldwin, the main British appeasers who were defined by their action of  "deliberate surrender of small nations in the face of Hitler's blatant bullying.". The British society, hungry for the explanation about why did this war start, quickly accepted the views in “Guilty Men” as fact, even if there wasn't much historical scholarship behind it. This book shaped how the British, and the rest of the world viewed the 1930-1939 appeasers: as cowards and blind towards the Nazi threat while they were preoccupying themselves with the Soviet Russia. This view was supported by Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister during the war. In 1948, he released his book “The Gathering Storm”, in which he uses his very influential position of a World War 2 hero to criticise the policy of appeasement. But contrary to “Guilty Men”, Churchill's book was written in a more analytical tone, and utilising his experience from the war.

The spirit of the “Guilty Men” quickly rooted itself in the British minds, but some tried to challenge that opinion, like A.J.P. Tyler in his “Origins of the Second World War”, written in 1961. Taylor argued that Hitler did not have a blueprint for war and was behaving much as any other German leader might have done. Appeasement was an active policy, and not a passive one; allowing Hitler to consolidate himself was a policy implemented by "men confronted with real problems, doing their best in the circumstances of their time". Taylor said that appeasement ought to be seen as a rational response to an unpredictable leader, appropriate to the time both diplomatically and politically. Some historians shared his point of view, like Paul Kennedy or Martin Gilbert. Thinking along Taylor's lines, they said that appeasement was the least bad solution available at Chamberlain's time. It was a mood of fear, insisting on accepting the bad of the Nazi's in order to preserve some good and peace. However, many rejected Taylor's views because he suggested that appeasement was commonly accepted before the war, breaking the idea that appeasers were a secluded group of cowards, and he actually tried to explain what might have been their motives, instead of merely condemning them.

Yet the damage has been done: the revisionists shook the society's beliefs, and set path towards further revision of the views on appeasement. In the early 1990s a new theory of appeasement, sometimes called "counter-revisionist", emerged as historians argued that appeasement was probably the only choice for the British government in the 1930s, but that it was poorly implemented, carried out too late and not enforced strongly enough to constrain Hitler. Appeasement was considered a viable policy, considering the strains that the British Empire faced in recuperating from World War I, and Chamberlain was said to have adopted a policy suitable to Britain's cultural and political needs.  Frank McDonough is a leading proponent of this view of appeasement and describes his book *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement and the British Road to War* as a "post revisionist" study. Appeasement was a crisis management strategy seeking a peaceful settlement of Hitler's grievances. "Chamberlain's worst error," says McDonough, "was to believe that he could march Hitler on the yellow brick road to peace when in reality Hitler was marching very firmly on the road to war." He has criticised revisionist historians for concentrating on Chamberlain's motivations rather than how appeasement worked in practice – as a "usable policy" to deal with Hitler. James P. Levy argues against the outright condemnation of appeasement. "Knowing what Hitler did later," he writes, "the critics of Appeasement condemn the men who tried to keep the peace in the 1930s, men who could not know what would come later. ... The political leaders responsible for Appeasement made many errors. They were not blameless. But what they attempted was logical, rational, and humane.

It can be clearly seen that the memories of appeasement really varied across the last century: starting from a very positive view, going through a clear hatred towards it, and ending with it still frowned upon, but understood it's motives.