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Britain in the Twentieth Century: The Road to War

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Ladies and gentlemen, this lecture will focus on the immediate pre-War period, and those who came to the last lecture will remember that it ended with Neville Chamberlain on the plane on the way to the Munich Conference with Hitler.

That conference was the only conference that Hitler ever attended. The four great powers of the time were present: the British and the French and the Germans and the Italians. It is interesting to note that ten years later, none of those four (with the marginal exception of Britain) could any longer be regarded as a great power. By 1948, the great powers were the United States and the Soviet Union. Britain was arguably still a great power – or at least the British considered themselves so but not everyone else did. The Americans were not at the Munich Conference. They said they were not prepared to take any responsibilities with regard to Europe, but they wished it well. Roosevelt sent a message saying: "The Government of the United States has no political involvements in Europe and will assume no obligations in the conduct of the present negotiations." The Soviets were not invited to Munich either, although they had an alliance with Czechoslovakia, whose borders were being considered. Therefore it was, in a way, the last great conference of the European powers.

As I mentioned last time, this was the third of Chamberlain's three visits to Hitler. During the first visit, they seemed to have reached an agreement that the borderlands - the German-speaking borderlands of Czechoslovakia, called the Sudetenland - would be ceded to Germany. However, at the second meeting, things seemed to go wrong; Hitler said that this was not sufficient. He demanded immediate occupation of the areas concerned and said that the Hungarians and Poles who had claims on Czechoslovakia should in addition be allowed to take their own territories of Hungarian and Polish speaking people. He gave Chamberlain something of an ultimatum. Chamberlain was, on the whole, in favour of acceptance, but the Cabinet obstinately disagreed and it looked for a time as if war would break out. Trenches were being built in London, gas masks were being issued, and Chamberlain made a famous broadcast - later held against him - in which he said, "how fantastic it is that we should be trying on gas masks and building trenches because of a quarrel in a faraway country of which we know nothing." Although this was met with criticism, I suspect that it did reflect the attitude of many British people.

There was debate in Parliament on the situation, and people remembered 1914, where another quarrel in a faraway country, Serbia, sparked an inexorable and unavoidable chain of events that resulted in dragging Britain into a quarrel on the Continent.

However, as Chamberlain was making his concluding speech, a message was passed to him along the Treasury bench, informing him that Hitler had agreed to hold a conference to discuss the issues concerned. The whole House erupted, opposition as well as the Government. Only a few people remained in their seats – Churchill and Eden amongst them – but the whole House was thankful that it looked as if we were going to be delivered from war. People felt, wrongly I think, that the beginning of another war would not be like 1914, but feared that London would immediately be bombed and there would be very heavy casualties. To them, this news seemed like a great deliverance.

Roosevelt sent a telegram to Neville Chamberlain saying "Good man" – simply that.

When Chamberlain reached Heston Airport to set off for Germany for the third time, he quoted a line from Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part One:* "Out of this nettled danger, we pluck this flower, safety."

The Poet Laureate, John Masefield, wrote the following poem in celebration: "As Priam to Achilles for his son, so you, into the night, divinely led, to ask that young men's bodies, not yet dead, be given from the battle not yet begun."

In a sense, there was not much to decide at the Munich Conference, because Mussolini produced a proposal, which had been coordinated with Hitler beforehand, for the cession of the Sudeten territories to Germany. The proposal was that there should be a fairly immediate cession of the German-speaking territories, and that the remaining disputed territories should be subject to a commission, which would decide whether they should remain with Czechoslovakia or become part of Germany. This commission was to be composed of five states - the four states meeting in Munich and Czechoslovakia. This seemed acceptable to Britain because it meant that there would be three states on the democratic side – Britain, France and Czechoslovakia – and that, after this process had been reached, the Germans and Italians, together with the British and French, would guarantee what remained of Czechoslovakia against further aggression. That was the basis of the Munich Agreement: the cession of the German-speaking territories; disputed territories to be decided on by a commission; and then a guarantee of all the powers involved of what remained of Czechoslovakia.

I should emphasise that the Munich Agreement was not to decide whether the Sudeten areas should be ceded. That had been agreed at the first meeting with Chamberlain. What the Agreement was considering was the method and conditions by which the transfer was made and whether it should be by force, by an ultimatum (which had seemed to be the case at the second meeting with Hitler) or by agreement. This, for Chamberlain, was a key issue because it symbolised the larger question as to whether Hitler could be contained within the international system or not. In other words, was it the case, as the critics argued, led by Churchill, that war was inevitable, that Hitler introduced an unstable element into Europe which could only be dealt with by war? Or could Hitler, violent and ruthless though he was, be held within certain rules of international conduct? All this seemed to be within the views of Chamberlain and seemed to meet his views about the procedure. He said that the guarantee was very important for Czechoslovakia because it would mean the new Czechoslovakia could find a greater security than it had enjoyed in the past. So you would have a more compact country, without its minorities, and with a guarantee; Chamberlain said, "The new Republic may be as safe as Switzerland has been for many generations in the past on the Continent of Europe."

Even one of Chamberlain's leading critics, Duff Cooper the War Secretary (incidentally the father of the well-known art commentator, John Julius Norwich) and who resigned from the Government, nonetheless conceded, "There are great and important differences, and it's a triumph for the Prime Minister that he was able to acquire them."

Of course, we now know what people did not know at the time, that Hitler was intent on attacking Czechoslovakia, that he was not interested in a peaceful settlement but used the German-speaking territories as an excuse to invade Czechoslovakia, as he was going to invade Poland in the year afterwards. If you see it from that point of view, you can see that Neville Chamberlain had actually won, that he had prevented a war, and I think this is the first thing to be said about Munich, that, for better or worse, it prevented a war breaking out then.

You may take the view, as many people do, that we would have been better off fighting then than in 1939. But Neville Chamberlain wrote to his sister that "all the prayers of all the peoples of the world, including Germany, had prevailed against the fanatical obstinacy of one man." He said that Britain, "although militarily weak, had made Hitler work within an international framework of negotiation."

Now, as well as the Munich Agreement, Chamberlain achieved another agreement with Hitler, which became even more notorious. He said that he would like to have a further chat with Hitler at his flat in Munich, and he produced a piece of paper which said that Britain and Germany agreed that they were primarily responsible for the peace of Europe, and that the method of negotiation and consultation should be used in future to deal with any differences between them, rather than force. Hitler signed this agreement, and this was the piece of paper that Neville Chamberlain famously waved on his return to Heston Airport.

As I said, there was an extraordinary, hysterical sense of relief in Britain. Crowds lined the road from Heston to London. It was quite remarkable. The King and Queen appeared with Neville Chamberlain on the balcony of Buckingham Palace to

welcome the agreement, which constitutionally was a mistake, because it was the subject of a division in Parliament and the opposition did not agree with it.

Neville Chamberlain, on returning to Number 10 Downing Street, was under pressure to say something. One of Chamberlain's colleagues said, "Neville, go to the window and repeat history by saying "Peace in our time"," because Disraeli had said exactly that following the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. Chamberlain, rather crossly, turned to the minister concerned and said, "No, I don't do that sort of thing," but he did do it, and in the heat of the moment – he later regretted it I think – he said:

"My good friends, this is the second time in our history that there has come back from Germany to Downing Street peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time."

I think that this is an unfair representation of his attitude. As he was driving from the airport, he turned to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, and said, "Edward, we must hope for the best and fear for the worst." I think that this is a fairer account of his attitude.

Whenever you watch a BBC or ITN documentary on Munich, you get the impression that the whole country was against the Agreement, but a poll showed that this was not the case. It was welcomed. Every newspaper supported it, except for the Daily Telegraph and Reynolds News, a small Labour, left-wing circulation newspaper that no longer exists. The proprietor of the Daily Mail, Lord Rothermere, went even further, sending a congratulatory telegram to Hitler and saying that Frederick the Great was a popular figure in England – "may not Adolf the Great become an equally popular figure." He said, "I salute your Excellency's star, which rises higher and higher."

Nowadays we tend to think of Munich as a symbol of weakness, as a rather innocent and foolish old man being bluffed by a ruthless dictator. This, however, cannot be sustained because, as I said, Hitler was intent on war. Neville Chamberlain was anything but a weak man; he was a very powerful and strong Prime Minister, who was never bluffed or blackmailed. The Munich Agreement merely ratified decisions that had already been made and dealt primarily with procedures. He therefore had some hopes that this would actually work.

In the debate in Parliament, 39 Conservative MPs abstained in the debate on the Munich Agreement, and they included three future Prime Ministers: Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan. Having given Chamberlain's side of the case, I now give Churchill's side of the case. While Chamberlain had a certain logic to his case, everything that Churchill said came about to be true.

Churchill began by puncturing the mood of euphoria and saying, "We are in the presence of a disaster of the first magnitude. Do not let us blind ourselves to that, and do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us. This is the consequence of five years of futile good intentions, five years of eager search for the line of least resistance, five years of uninterrupted retreat of British power, five years of neglect of air defences. We have been reduced, in these five years, from a position of security so overwhelming and so unchallengeable that we never cared to think about it. We have been reduced from a position where the very word "war" was considered one which would be used only by persons qualifying for a lunatic asylum."

He then made a prediction: "I venture to think that in future the Czech State cannot be maintained as an independent entity. You will find that, in a period of time, which may be measured by years, but may be measured only by months, Czechoslovakia will be engulfed in the Nazi regime," which is precisely what happened.

He ended by saying: "There can never be friendship between the British democracy and the Nazi power. That power, which spurns Christian ethics, which cheers its onward course by a barbarous Paganism, which vaunts the spirit of aggression and conquest, which derives strength and perverted pleasure from persecution, and uses, as we have seen, with pitiless brutality, the threat of murderous force, that power cannot ever be the trusted friend of the British democracy."

He ended by saying: "What I find unendurable is the sense of our country falling into the power, into the orbit, of Nazi Germany, and of our existence becoming dependent upon their goodwill or pleasure."

This leaves open the argument of whether we ought to have gone to war in 1938 or 1939. There is one powerful witness who thinks that we ought to have gone to war in 1938, and that was Hitler himself. At the very end of his life in 1945, he said to Martin Bormann, "September 1938, that was the most favourable moment, where an attack carried the lowest risk for us.

Great Britain and France, surprised by the speed of our attack, would have done nothing, all the more so since we had world opinion on our side. We could have settled the remaining territorial questions in Eastern Europe and the Balkans without fearing intervention from the Anglo-French powers." That does not seem to me a wholly unreasonable judgement - that British opinion, at any rate, was not yet convinced that Hitler had to be resisted, and for all the unattractiveness of his regime, people could comprehend his case for self-determination.

The hopes of the Munich settlement were immediately shattered by Germany's attitude following it. In his first speech after the Munich Agreement, Hitler said that the British should mind their own business and not interfere in Central Europe at all. He did not, indeed, mention the Munich Agreement, but he said that Germany had only one friend, and that was Mussolini's Italy. He called Stanley Baldwin, the former Prime Minster, a guttersnipe and said that Churchill and Eden were warmongers who were threatening Germany.

In November, just a month or so after the Munich Agreement, there was a vicious pogrom against German Jews. When the International Commission began meeting to carry out the Munich Agreement, Germany simply demanded what she wanted, and warned that if these demands were not met, she would use force against Czechoslovakia. The British and French, not having resisted at the time in Munich, were hardly in a position to do so now, and so the Germans more or less took what boundaries they wanted in Czechoslovakia. When the British asked about the guarantee, the Germans said that was best forgotten and that they were not going to do anything about it.

In March 1939, Czechoslovakia fell apart under the pressures from Hitler, who pressed the Slovaks to declare independence and then occupied Bohemia and Moravia (now the Czech Republic). At first, the British Government were rather stunned by that, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, when asked about the British guarantee, said you could no longer guarantee a country which no longer existed. Of course, this was not a very helpful response. Chamberlain then made a speech at Birmingham, in which he said that no one could be more dedicated to peace than him, but if Germany was going to challenge for world domination or European domination, Britain would resist that, and therefore, they must take steps to stop her attacking any further.

Chamberlain first put forward a seemingly reasonable proposal, that here should be "a front against aggression" of all the countries which might appear to be threatened by Germany, and that Britain and France should be its leaders. The obvious countries concerned were the remaining independent countries of Eastern Europe, particularly Poland and Romania, but also the Soviet Union. The British Government issued an appeal to these countries to join together in some form of mutual defence pact and collective security.

Unfortunately, this ran into an immediate obstacle, because the Poles and Romanians said they did not want to have anything to do with the Soviet Union. They argued that if the Soviet Union helped them, they would never be able to escape from Russian clutches and that, being strongly anti-Communist, they were almost as much afraid or hostile to the Soviet Union as they were to Nazi Germany.

So that idea had to be dropped, and the British Government's next idea was to guarantee the countries of independent Eastern Europe against any threat to that independence, particularly Poland and Romania. Fairly rapidly, after the invasion of Bohemia and Moravia, the British Government changed its policy by getting involved in Eastern Europe and giving a guarantee to the Polish Government that, if Poland was the victim of aggression, we would go to war to defend Poland.

Chamberlain and the Government were much criticised for giving that guarantee and for leaving the Soviet Union out, but it seems to me there was not much that they could do because Poland was the country that was going to be threatened and the Poles insisted they did not want to be helped by the Soviet Union. You might argue that, in the light of later history, they were right to take that view, believing that once the Soviet Union came into their territory, they would never leave.

Now, at that time, there was a German minority in Poland, as there had been in Czechoslovakia, and there were further problems, which German governments had wrestled with even before Hitler. Firstly, there was the so-called Free City of Danzig, now called Gdansk, which had been given to Poland after the First War to give the country a corridor to the sea. However, after protests that this was a German city, a compromise was reached making it a free city, under the League of Nations, giving facilities to Poland, but neither part of Poland nor Germany. This was a compromised introduced in 1919, really for Germany's benefit.

Secondly, as part of the peace settlement of 1919, there was one part of Germany which was split from the main part, called East Prussia, of which the capital was Konigsberg – it is now in Russia, called Kaliningrad. East Prussia was split off from the

rest of Germany to create for Poland a so-called corridor to the sea, as well as a port. There were arrangements for transit across the two parts of Germany, so that Germans did not have to show their passports, but despite these agreements being scrupulously respected by the Poles, Germans were still upset to have their territory broken up in this way.

Shortly after the Munich Agreement, Hitler presented proposals to the Poles, demanding the unconditional return of Danzig to Nazi Germany as a German city, as well as an extra-territorial German railway and road built through the Polish corridor. Furthermore, and most importantly from Hitler's point of view, he demanded that Poland join the Anti-Comintern Part, of which Germany, Italy and Japan were members, and gave vague hints that in return, Poland would be given territory in the Soviet Union as soon as Hitler had invaded it.

Now, the Poles, unlike the Czechs, were not prepared to discuss this or negotiate. They declared Danzig non-negotiable, and though they were prepared to liberalise conditions in the Polish Corridor, they were not prepared to sacrifice territory and have their own country cut into two. They were also not prepared to join the Anti-Comintern Pact because, although they were hostile to Communism, they believed that their best chance was to balance between Germany and Russia, as two enemies they thought would never form an alliance. And so, they rejected Hitler's demands.

Tensions rose throughout 1939, and the British Government turned their attentions to strengthening a peace front to deter Hitler from war. They approached the Soviet Union, rather against the wishes of Neville Chamberlain, who distrusted the Soviet Union's intentions. He wrote to his sister, in March 1939: "I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia. I have no belief whatever in her ability to maintain an effective offensive, even if she wanted to." There had just been purges in the Soviet Army which had weakened them. "And I distrust her motives, which seem to me to have little connection with our ideas of liberty, and to be concerned only with getting everyone else by the ears. Moreover, she is both hated and suspected by many of the smaller states, notably by Poland, Romania and Finland, so that our close association with her might easily cost us the sympathy of those who would much more effectively help us if we could get them on our side."

The first British proposals to the Soviet Union might well be considered another important turning point in history, because an alliance with the Soviet Union might have meant Britain winning the War more easily and avoiding much of the Cold War. However, Britain's first proposals to the Soviet Union were rather clumsy – we asked the Soviet Union to agree that if Poland or Romania were attacked, they would come to their aid. Of course, the Soviets said, "What are we going to get in return? If we are going to be attacked by the German Army, what will you be doing?" to which the British and French replied, "Well, we shall be on the other side and you can rely on us to help out." The Soviets demanded that any agreements had to be absolutely reciprocal, with the assurance of being allowed to enter Polish and Romanian territory, if necessary, for their defence. The British and French then sent a delegation to Moscow for discussions, which lasted a long time and in which the British and French made – in my opinion - endless concessions. The Soviets, rather rigidly, stuck to their original position, which argued for a mutual defence pact, involving an agreement from Poland and Romania that Soviet troops could enter their territories to defend against German attacks, but also an agreement that the Soviet Union would be similarly defended. The Poles and Romanians said, flatly, no. The British tried to negotiate by promising to convey the Polish opinion to the Soviet Union and then attempting to persuade the Poles to meet the agreements, but the Soviets would only accept this agreement directly from the Poles themselves. Now, it might be argued that the Soviets were making excuses – we do not know enough about Soviet behaviour at the time to support this. At any rate, the negotiations were broken off in August, and the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed just a week or so before war broke out.

My own view, for what it is worth, is that the Soviets did not want an agreement, on the grounds that they would then face the formidable bulk of the German Army, without much help from Britain and France. However, an agreement with the Nazis would turn Germany against Britain and France, and the Soviets might hope to benefit from any resulting stalemate, such as occurred in the First War. That is my view, but there are people who take a different view.

It is fair to say that those in the Cabinet who had pressed Chamberlain to negotiate with the Soviet Union later conceded that he was right, that the Soviets could not be trusted, and that they did not want an agreement.

During the War, the Soviets spoke a lot about a Second Front. They could have had a Second Front in 1939, had they wanted it, and later made a rare admission of fault in this instance. Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, had rigidly set down "the Soviet position" in 1939 with no room for negotiation. However, upon meeting a British official in London in 1942, after the Soviet Union had been attacked, he said, "I am glad to see an old friend... We did our best in 1939, but we failed – we were both at fault." This is a rare admission from any Soviet diplomat.

When the War broke out, Poland was occupied very quickly, within a month, and the British and French took up a defensive position on the Western Front. The first really aggressive move on the part of the British was very much influenced by Churchill, who was brought into the Government when war broke out. This was an operation to try to deny Germany access to iron ore, which travelling from Sweden, through Norway, and into to German ports. It was a disastrous failure, as Chamberlain predicted. The army was not yet well-trained enough to cope with those conditions. Conscription had just been introduced in April 1939, shortly before the War, whereas Germans had had conscription since 1935, and so it was a humiliating disaster.

However, and as is often the way in politics, the disaster actually reflected badly on Chamberlain. His critics branded it the last in a whole series of disasters that Chamberlain had led the country into: the Munich Agreement was a disaster; the guarantee to Poland was a disaster; the negotiations with the Soviet Union were a disaster; and now, this terrible trouble in Norway. In a debate, which was in effect a vote of confidence, the normal national Government majority (predominantly Conservative) of 200 was reduced to 81, and it was very clear that things could not go on as they were.

It was also clear that for the War to be carried out effectively, it had to be run by a genuine coalition - the Labour and Liberal parties had to be brought into the Government. Chamberlain called the leaders of these parties together and asked them two questions: firstly, "Will you join a coalition led by me?" and secondly, "If not, will you join a coalition led by someone else?" The answer to the first question was "no", and the answer to the second question was "yes", which meant that Chamberlain would have to resign and another leader would have to be found.

Looking back in retrospect, we think that Churchill was the obvious leader, but that was not how it seemed at the time. There was another candidate, Lord Halifax the Foreign Secretary, and though many people since have doctored their diaries and their reminiscences by saying that they favoured Churchill, Halifax was in fact the more popular candidate at the time.

The King certainly favoured Lord Halifax because Churchill had been an ally of Edward VIII in 1936. As I said in my last lecture, the film *The King's Speech* commits a travesty of history by portraying Churchill as close to the King. They became close during the War, that is true, but in 1940 the King was very suspicious of Churchill.

The Conservative Party, on the whole, supported Halifax because Churchill had been a rebel against the Conservative Governments in the 1930s - not only on foreign policy, which is perhaps forgivable, but also on the question of India, where it seemed he was completely wrong and that it was right to move towards Indian self-government. The Labour Party was also hostile to Churchill because he had been so hostile to the trade unions at the time of the General Strike.

So Churchill did not really have many friends initially. It is my opinion (though, again, this is a matter of some controversy) that Chamberlain played a great part in making Churchill Prime Minister, because instead of going straight to the King and resigning, Chamberlain held a meeting at which Halifax, Churchill and the Chief Whip were present, and it was decided that Churchill should become Prime Minister. Halifax said, "I can't do it – I'm a peer." That, I think, was not a serious problem in wartime, but it was eventually agreed that Churchill should assume the role.

When Chamberlain went to the Palace to resign, the King assumed that he should send for Lord Halifax, but Chamberlain insisted that he was not the right person and that Churchill should be called instead. As a result, Churchill became Prime Minister – but it was a much closer call than people now imagine.

Churchill's support before the War had really been very small. Shortly after the Munich Agreement, in November 1938, he had called for a Ministry of Supply and asked for fifty Conservatives to follow him into the lobby; only two did so, one of them being Harold Macmillan, the future Prime Minister, also completely isolated at that time.

Now, in an extraordinary coincidence, the day that Churchill became Prime Minister was the same day that Hitler invaded the West. Contrary to what was supposed at the time, he broke through on the Western Front, through the Ardennes, which were thought to be impassable, and very rapidly was going to defeat France. Churchill became Prime Minister on the 10th of May. By the 26th of May, it was clear that France was suffering defeat, and the French Prime Minister, Monsieur Renaud, came to Britain to say that France was going to sue for peace and suggest that Britain should follow his example and try and see what terms were available.

In his war memoirs, Churchill wrote, "Future generations may deem it noteworthy that the supreme question of whether we should fight on alone never found a place upon the War Cabinet agenda. We were much too busy to waste time upon such academic, unreal issues."

If you look at the War Cabinet minutes for the 27th of May 1940, you will find this: "The War Cabinet had before them two reports by the Chiefs of Staff, and a note by the Minister without Portfolio. A record of the discussion is contained in the Secretary's standard file of War Cabinet conclusions." A rather innocuous statement, you may say, but it concealed a debate on whether Britain should continue to fight in the War. Churchill was therefore rather generous in that quoted statement, because we now know that the War Cabinet held no fewer than five meetings, between the 26th and the 28th of May, to decide whether or not to continue the battle.

On the 27th of May, a disagreement arose between Churchill and his Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, on the subject of Italy. Halifax said that it would be worth consulting with the Italians to see what peace terms were available, and that if they were such as to preserve the British Empire, the Government should consider them very seriously. He argued that if the two powers reached the point of discussing the terms of a general settlement, and found that terms existed which did not necessitate the destruction of British independence, then the Government would be foolish not to accept them.

Churchill was opposed to that. He branded it a mistake, insisting that news of it would get out and compromise the British position. Britain would not be able to withdraw, would not be able to fight again; Hitler would offer generous terms, but he would nonetheless insist on British disarmament.

That evening, Halifax wrote in his diary that certain rather profound differences of view had arisen which he would like to make clear. He said that if British independence was not at stake, he would think it right to accept an offer which would save the country from avoidable disaster:

"At the 4.30 Cabinet, we had a long and rather confused discussion about nominally the approach to Italy, but also largely about general policy in the event of things going really badly in France. I thought Winston talked the most frightful rot, and also Greenwood [a Labour member of the War Cabinet]. After leaving it for some time, I said exactly what I thought of them, adding that, if that was really their view, and if it came to the point, our ways must separate."

He said to the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, "I can't work with Winston any longer."

On the 28th of May, there was a final Cabinet meeting, and Lord Halifax again said, "We might get better terms before France goes out of the War and our aircraft factories are bombed than we might get in three months' time."

The meeting was adjourned at quarter past six, to meet again at seven o'clock. During that adjournment, Churchill met with the Ministers of Cabinet who were not part of the small War Cabinet of five, and said, "Of course, whatever happens at Dunkirk, we shall fight on." He said, "It was idle to think that if we tried to make peace now, we should get better terms from Germany than if we went on and fought it out. We should become a slave state, though a British Government, which would be Hitler's puppet, would be set up, under Mosley or some such person."

A Labour Minister who was present said: "Not much more was said. No one expressed even the faintest flicker of dissent." So, when Churchill got back to the Cabinet, he could say that all the other Ministers supported him. He said he told the Cabinet he "did not remember having ever before heard a gathering of persons occupying high places in political life express themselves so emphatically."

That was one attempt at a peace settlement, which did not get anywhere. There was a second attempt at the beginning of June, initiated by R.A. Butler - a junior Minister at the Foreign Office who would become a very important figure in post-War politics. In October 1939, when Hitler made a peace offer which was rejected contemptuously by the Cabinet, Butler had tried to soften the terms of the rejection, and in March 1940, he had shown himself to be sympathetic to the idea of a truce with Germany. In May 1940, he tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Lord Halifax to accept the Premiership. Shortly after Churchill had been asked to form a Government, Butler expressed the view, which he was not alone in holding I think, that "the good clean tradition of English politics had been sold to the greatest adventurer in modern political history." He believed the "sudden coup of Winston and his rabble was a serious disaster." He said Churchill was, I quote, "a half-breed American, whose main support was that of inefficient, but talkative, people of a similar type."

After Butler met with the Swedish ambassador, the latter reported back to his government in Stockholm the following message. (Butler later claimed that he was misunderstood, but there is no question that the ambassador was an excellent English speaker – he was educated at Dulwich College):

"During a highly confidential conversation today with Butler at the Foreign Office, he confirmed that France had capitulated, without any reservations concerning her fleet or colonies. Everything had been attempted yesterday to support Renaud, but in vain. Britain's official attitude will, for the present, continue to be that the War must go on, but he assured me that no opportunity for reaching a compromise peace would be neglected if the possibility were offered on reasonable conditions and that no diehards would be allowed to stand in the way in this connection. He thought that Britain had greater possibilities of negotiation today than she might have later on, and that Russia would come to play a greater role than the USA if conversations began. During the conversation, Butler was called in to see Halifax, who sent me the message that, and I quote, "Commonsense not bravado would dictate the British Government's policy". Halifax added he realised such a message would be welcomed by the Swedish Minister, but it should not be interpreted as peace at any price. It would appear, from conversations I have had with other Members of Parliament, that there is an expectation that, if and when the prospect of negotiation arises, possibly after the 28th of June, Halifax may succeed Churchill."

This was sent on to the Swedish ambassador to Germany, who met the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office in Berlin. The latter wrote in his diaries, published after the War:

"The Swedish Minister spoke to me today about the collapse of France, and then went on to ask what we thought England's attitude would be now. When I replied that yesterday's speech by Churchill did not give the impression that people in England had come to see reason, the Swedish Minister said that, last night, he had read a very recent telegram from the Swedish Minister in London which gave a different impression. The Swedish representative in London had observed, on the contrary, a return to sound commonsense in authoritative circles in London."

A few days later, he said: "During a conversation with the Swedish Minister on another subject, I showed him this afternoon a press report from London which stated that Lloyd George was to enter the Government and to take over the post of Prime Minister in order to conclude a compromise peace with Germany. The Minister said at once this version was new to him and he could hardly believe it. On the contrary, he repeated on this occasion too that a peace trend was beginning to be perceptible in the present English Cabinet. Going down the list of the more important members of the Cabinet, he eliminated Churchill, Eden, Duff Cooper, Chamberlain and Simon as unsuitable for this, and hinted that Halifax represented the peace trend. When I said again that we knew nothing of such peace moves in England, the Minister said, more emphatically than his last visit, that we would soon hear something more of this, but he could of course not say in what way."

So that was another peace attempt that really, in the end, got nowhere, and this is an important point to remember, I think.

This was, I think, a decisive turning point, not only in British history but in European and world history because, if the War Cabinet had approached Mussolini, it could not really have gone back on it, and the Government could hardly have continued fighting. Churchill telegraphed Admiral Keyes after this to say, "Our only hope is victory, and England will never quit the War, whatever happens, till Hitler is beat or we cease to be a state."

One further chance for peace was, I think, represented by Lloyd George, who was waiting outside the Government on the assumption that peace negotiations would have to be held, and that he would be called in to lead them. Shortly after Churchill became Prime Minister, he told Cecil King, the magnate of *The Daily Mirror*, that he "expects that Churchill will get into a mess and that he, the victor of the last War, will be called in too late, and will have no alternative but to sue for peace."

Churchill offered him a post in the Government or the post of Ambassador to Washington. Lloyd George declined both, ostensibly because he was too old, but I am not convinced that that was the real reason.

Lord Beaverbrook said to one of his colleagues: "The public are divided into two camps about that statesman," Lloyd George. "There are the people who think that Winston should bring him in, and other people who think Hitler would bring him in." That did not happen either, but at the end of the War, Hitler regarded it as yet another missed opportunity. He said: "Churchill's real opponent was Lloyd George. Unfortunately, he is twenty years too old." I do not think that was the only cause. I think the British public, on the whole, supported Churchill's aim of fighting on.

The effects of this decision in 1940 are clearly colossal and crucial in terms of world history because, although Britain could not win the War without the help of America and Russia, she could ensure that the War was not lost and that Hitler did not win it. Britain was one of only two countries to declare war on Hitler in 1939 before themselves being attacked, and fought on when Hitler had nearly won the War, and he came much closer to winning than is often recognised.

Attlee was once asked what Churchill had done to win the War and he replied, rather laconically, "He talked about it!" His wartime speeches expressed the view that people should fight on; Churchill said that "the nation had the lion's heart, and I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar." His argument was that even if the Government had favoured a compromise for peace, the public would not have accepted it. We obviously do not know if this was true, but it was a generous view.

The events of 1940 also had very important effects on domestic politics. The key domestic factor during the War was to make the Labour Party respectable, to bring them into Government. They had been brought into Government in the First War, but with the General Strike, weak Labour Governments and financial crises, they were still not quite seen as part of the Establishment. The Second World War, however, really completed that process of making the Labour Party a part of the state, and politics had to adjust to that.

The leader of the Labour Party in 1940 was Attlee and, like Churchill, our views of him are much influenced by hindsight. When he was elected in 1935, it was widely thought that he would be a stopgap because he was one of the few who kept their seats in 1931. You will remember that the National Government swept all before it against the Labour Party; only 46 Labour MPs returned, and all the people who had been in the Cabinet, bar one, were defeated in 1931. Attlee had been a junior Minister. No one really thought of him as having leadership potential. He was returned. He became Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, and when the elderly Leader, George Lansbury, resigned in 1935, Attlee was chosen, more or less because he happened to be there. Someone said of the Labour Party, "Well, a little mouse shall lead them," and he was not alone in thinking very little of Attlee. Cecil King said, "If I'd heard that he'd been employed by East Ham Council on a salary of £10 a week, I'd have thought that would be excessive."

Oddly enough, he is actually the longest leader of any major party in the twentieth century, leader of the Labour Party for twenty years, which teaches you to be careful with your judgement. During the War, however, he was in Government as Leader of the Labour Party, but he was Chairman of most of the important committees. In fact, he ran the War, domestically, while Churchill went to the great international conferences and conducted grand strategy, and Attlee proved a most remarkably effective Chairman and gained great respect. The opinion polls show us that, had there been an election in 1939 or 1940, in peace-time, Labour would hardly have done better than in 1935 – it would not have won a General Election, almost certainly. Therefore, one must attribute the landslide victory of 1945 to changes that happened during the War, one of which was the increased respectability of Labour. Labour, in 1945, had tremendous advantages because they were simultaneously the Government who had been responsible for a great victory – you could not call them untrained or inexperienced in government – but they were also the Conservatives' opposition in the 1930s, both on domestic policy and on the foreign policy, which then seemed to be disastrous, which was of fundamental importance for the Labour Party.

In the late 1930s, despite previous hostility between the Labour Party and Churchill, the two seemed to be coming together, particularly with the trade union leaders, who were favouring rearmament against Nazi Germany. In 1936, Churchill said to his son: "All left-wing intelligencia are coming to look to me for protection, and I will give it wholeheartedly in return for their aid in the rearmament of Britain."

If you look at the leaders of the Conservative Party after the War - first Churchill, then Anthony Eden, then Harold Macmillan – all were opponents of appeasement. Had Neville Chamberlain's policy succeeded, none of them would have got anywhere near power. Churchill, at the outbreak of war, was sixty-four years old. He was thought to be a figure of the past, a brilliant failure, great qualities but no judgement, no sense, and no one, at that time, would have said that he would be Prime Minister, had there not been a war.

Anthony Eden had resigned from Chamberlain's Government against the appeasement of Italy in February 1938. Had Chamberlain and his colleagues continued in power, Eden would not have made a rapid comeback, and certainly not to a very prominent position.

Harold Macmillan had been given no office at all. When war broke out, he was forty-five years old. He was seen as an eccentric and insignificant backbencher, and he too would not have become Prime Minister had it not been for his opposition to appeasement.

Conversely, it is very possible that R. A. Butler would have become Prime Minister if appeasement had been successful. He was strongly identified with appeasement, but that obviously proved very damaging to him after the War.

How justifiable you find the process of the War to be - Norway, Dunkirk and so on – is for you to judge, but the pre-War Conservatives were utterly discredited. Munich, whether rightly or wrongly, became a dirty word. Mass unemployment was

criticised as avoidable and unnecessary, and caused by how cruel, heartless and insensitive the Conservatives were. Consequently, Labour was legitimised by the War, while the Conservatives were de-legitimised it, in a way. They had been wrong on foreign policy and wrong on domestic policy - we had to have a better world afterwards, with full employment and social security and so on.

In 1945, Harold Macmillan said the British people were voting not against Winston Churchill but against the ghost of Neville Chamberlain, which I think is correct.

Already, during the War, the welfare state in its modern form began to take shape. In 1940, free milk was introduced for mothers and children under five, and free school meals were extended. In 1942, the Beveridge Report came out, which urged that conditions should be better after the War, arguing for a welfare state, a health service free at source, social security and so on. A new consensus was emerging, a social democratic, and more left-wing consensus than that of the '30s, which lasted until the mid-1970s, until Margaret Thatcher. She was perhaps a consequence of this consensus, a consequence that proceeded to undermine it. But it lasted well, and legitimised a much greater role for the state, which of course had been of importance during the War.

An interesting comment comes from an opponent of all these developments, a free market economist, Friedrich von Hayek, who wrote a book in 1944 called *The Road to Serfdom*. It was quoted by Churchill in his election broadcast in 1945, and then mocked by Attlee, who emphasised Hayek's foreign origins in his speech. He said, "Churchill is trying to frighten us with a book by an unknown Austrian called von Hayek!" But Hayek said, "If we take the people whose views influence developments, they are now, in the democracies, all socialists. Scarcely anyone doubts that we must move towards socialism."

I think that is a key feature; in a sense, what happened in 1940 and developed throughout the War pre-figured the post-War settlement which ruled Britain really until the late-1970s. So, from the international point of view, 1940 is a momentous time in world history when Britain, perhaps for the last time, by independent initiative arguably saved Europe and the world. However, from a domestic perspective, there is another key moment, which should not be overlooked – the emergence of a new and different type of Conservative, and the increased respectability of the Labour Party. This leads us towards a social democratic consensus and the post-War settlement, and that is a good point at which to stop. To hear the rest of the story, you will have to come back in September – thank you.

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