

OXFORD IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME



CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF 20TH-CENTURY WARS

COURSE COMPANION

David M. Smith

OXFORD

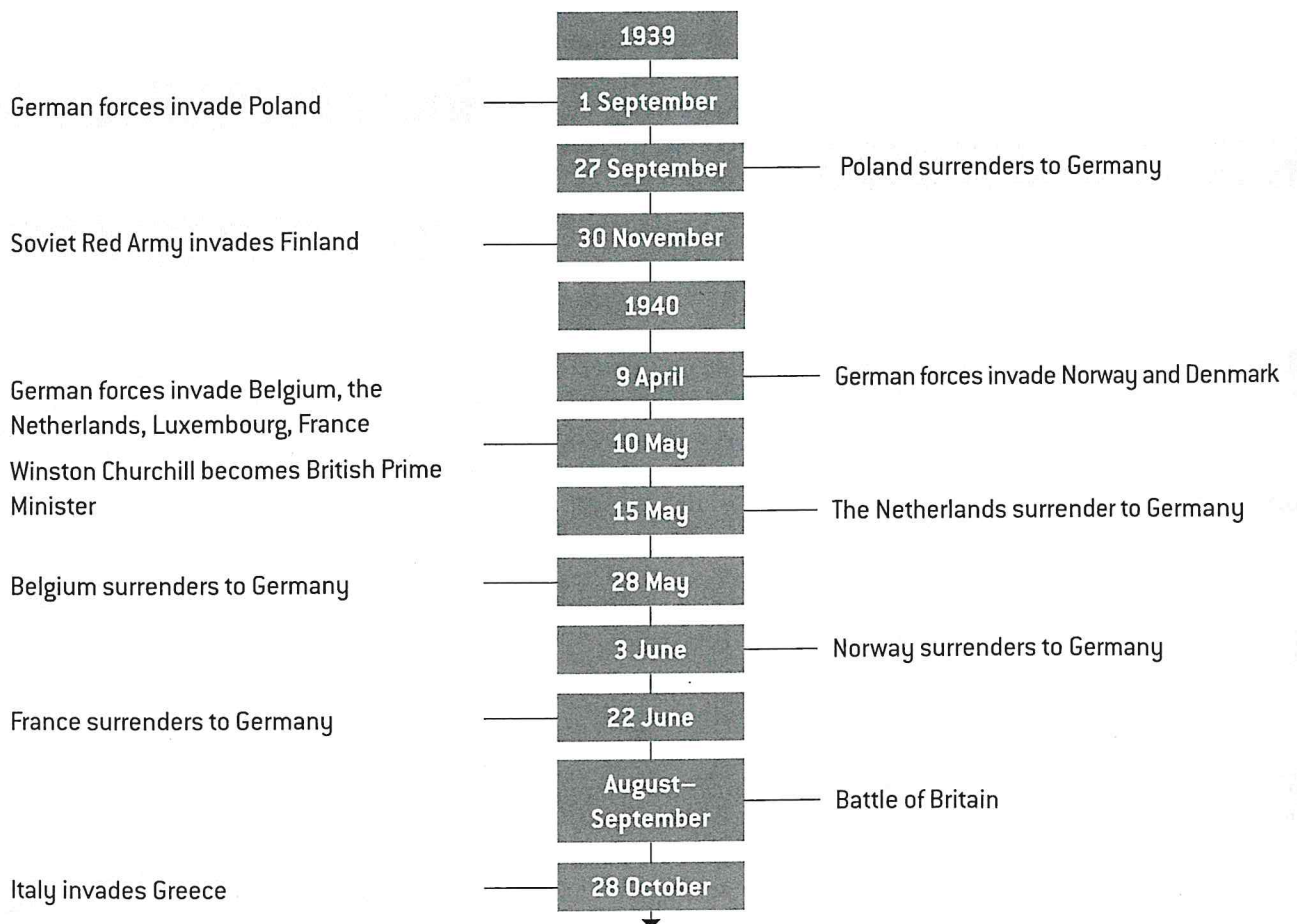
6 THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN EUROPE AND NORTH AFRICA: A RETURN TO TOTAL WAR

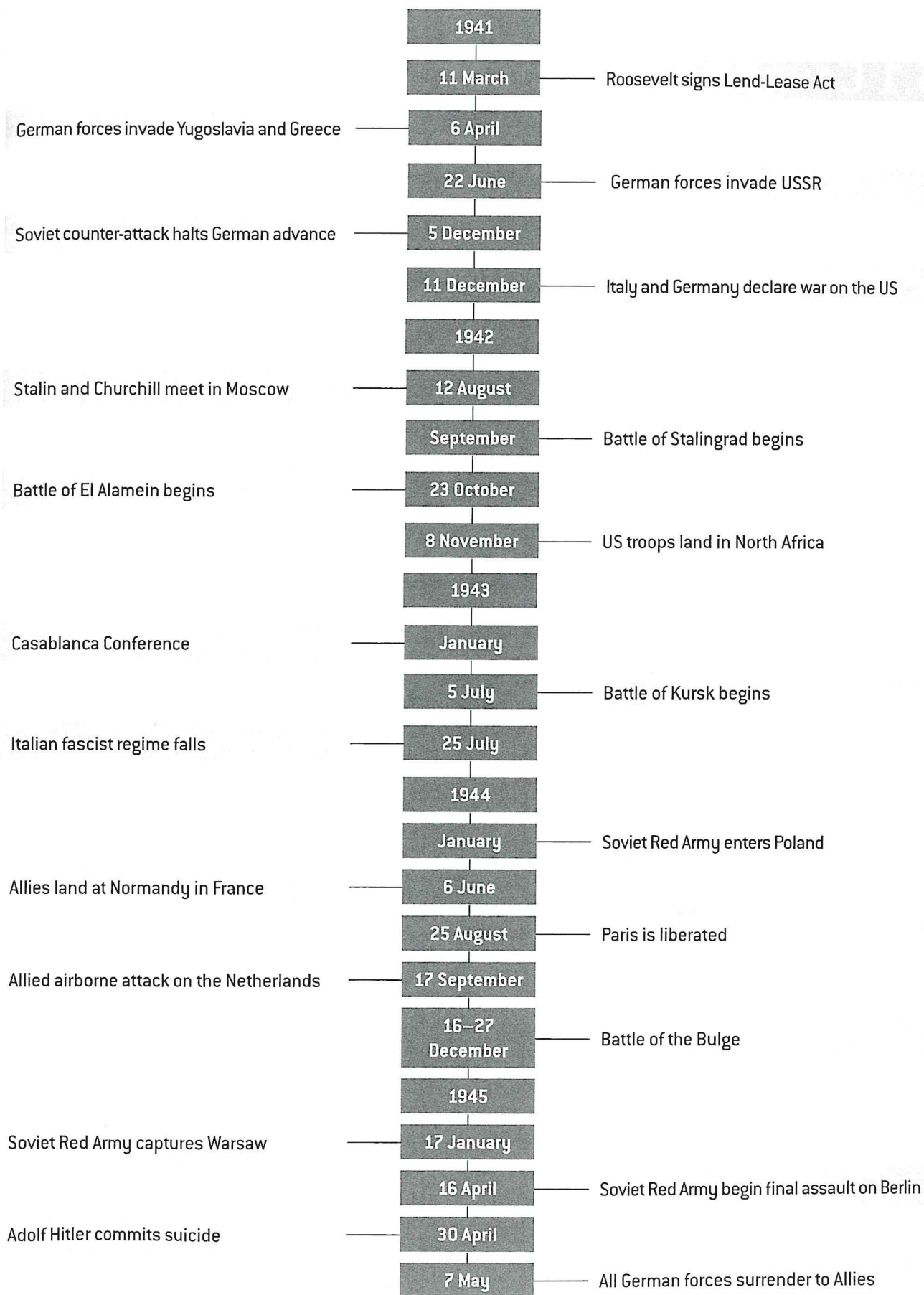
Global context

It is to some extent a cliché to say that the Second World War erupted out of the ashes of the First World War. Nevertheless, the First World War left a deep impression on the political, economic and social climate of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe. No country had been untouched by it. It was out of this context of poverty, humiliation and dependence on other countries that the totalitarian ideologies which dominated central and eastern Europe during this period grew. The three dominant

ideologies in Europe during this period – liberal democracy, fascism and communism – were in many ways mutually incompatible. When this incompatibility was coupled with the uncompromising and expansionist nature of one of these ideologies, namely fascism, conflict became far more likely. This dangerous mix was made more volatile by the isolationist policies of the US and the introverted stance of France and Britain.

Timeline





6.1 Causes of the Second World War

Conceptual understanding

Key questions

- To what extent did Hitler plan a war?
- What responsibility do France and Britain bear for the outbreak of the war?
- What alternatives were there to the policy of appeasement?
- What is the relationship of the First World War to the outbreak of the Second World War?

Key concepts

- Cause
- Consequence
- Significance

Long-term causes

The legacy of the First World War

It has become popular to see the roots of the Second World War in the unsatisfactory conclusion to the First World War and there is certainly evidence to support this view. With the exception of the US, the victors were themselves near ruin. Germany and the other Central Powers were sliding into chaos and denied a seat at Versailles and with it any meaningful say in the future of their countries. The Nazi Party came to power partially on a promise of reversing the verdict of Versailles and Germany's subsequent military programme had this as one of its key aims. The Bolshevik government in Russia extracted itself from the war only to face three more years of devastating civil war during which she was ostracized from European politics. The commander of the French army, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, recognized that the end of the war brought little stability to Europe when he said at the signing of the treaty of Versailles, "This is not a peace. It is an armistice for 20 years".

Insofar as wars are often fought to address issues in international relations, the unsatisfactory outcome of the First World War seems to suggest that at least some of these issues were outstanding for some if not all the combatants. Indeed the victors sought to recreate the conditions of the 19th century that had brought them to the commanding positions they had enjoyed in international politics and economics.

Britain eschewed the politics of the continent after Versailles and instead looked to its empire to return it to its former position. It would take part in the League of Nations insofar as it helped to confirm its worldview – that it was the natural leader of its empire and this empire should serve first the mother country. For Britain this desire to return to the balance

of the 19th century also meant a return to the belief that international disputes could be sorted out by discussion and compromise. War as a tool of diplomacy was to be used as a last resort.

Such an approach, however, could no more be expected to resolve issues in the 1930s than it could in 1914. And many of the same issues remained, if in somewhat altered forms. Germany was dissatisfied with its place in European and world politics. Versailles had stripped it of its colonies and these sources of income needed to be replaced, especially in light of the massive public spending that Germany undertook once the Nazis came to power. Nationalism in the Balkans riled Mussolini and the Italians. Nationalism also posed a threat to more established empires such as the British and French. The Soviet Union can be seen as an exception. Russia's position and interests were more of an enigma to the West than it had been in 1914 and she was certainly not the continental power she had been in 1914, although her industrial and thus her military potential was still massive.

Between them Britain and France controlled a third of the world by the 1930s and each country saw its empire as vital to its economic health. This was especially true in the years after the stock market crash of 1929. Of course, it was an advantage denied to Germany, Italy and Japan in 1919. While colonies may have been an economic asset, strategically they could also be a liability, as they had in the years leading up to 1914. While countries may have little to bring them into conflict in Europe – say Britain and France – colonial issues could collide in Africa or Asia thus destabilizing Europe. Protecting such large empires was expensive and in the 1930s neither country could afford to do so adequately. Britain and France were faced with using their limited military to police and defend their empires, thus leaving them only diplomacy to maintain their international interests.

If continuity marked western governments' approach to the international situation after the First World War, change was the key word for the attitude of the general population. In contrast to the bellicose attitude of many Europeans in 1914, western Europeans looked on the international situation of the inter-war period with a sense of unease and pacifism. This took many forms, from popular support for official neutrality in the US to student-led peace movements throughout Europe.

The legacy of the First World War in western Europe was one of military and diplomatic weakness. This weakness was obscured by the absence of any power to challenge it. The rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s would provide such a power and expose that weakness.

Fascism

The catastrophe of the First World War convinced many, and confirmed the conviction of others, that political systems based on liberal democracy were incapable of organizing and governing modern states to the benefit of the many. Two ideologies that rejected liberal principles, one from a class perspective and the other from an ultra-nationalist perspective, rose to the fore in the dislocation of the First World War.

TOK discussion

To what extent can the citizens of a country be held accountable for the actions of its government? To what extent can they be held accountable for the actions of governments in the past?

Fascism, based as it was on ultra-nationalism, had expansionism built into its central tenets.

In Italy, Mussolini used theatre and violence to ride socio-economic unrest and parliamentary weakness to power. Part of Mussolini's political theatre was to invoke the grandeur of the Roman Empire with rhetoric and symbols, but with the Great Depression and Mussolini's policy of autarky this rhetoric would take on more substance. The Italian military was expanded as an expression of national strength and virility. Initial forays into the Balkans proved insufficient and in 1935 Italy invaded Abyssinia in a quest for an empire of its own, in the process destabilizing the diplomatic situation in Europe even further.

The form that fascism took in Germany was of a kind, but more lethal in its execution. Taking as its premise the racial superiority of Germans and certain social Darwinian concepts, Nazism preached the need for Germany to expand in response to economic and demographic pressures. A belief that Jews and Slavs were inferior provided a racist justification for expansion to the east. The tool of this expansion, or *Lebensraum*, was to be a massive and modern national military seen, as it was in Italy, as an expression of national strength. Restoration of territory also fuelled Nazi ideology. The fact that German-speaking people in Austria, parts of Czechoslovakia and Poland were not part of Germany was anathema to the Nazis' ultra-nationalism. The means and justification for war was built into Nazism.

Short-term causes

The Great Depression

After the First World War it became clear that the only national economy that could in any way claim to be healthy was that of the United States. Any kind of recovery in the post-war years, therefore, would in some way, shape or form be dependent on the US economy. This proved true with the adoption of the **Dawes Plan** as a solution to the Ruhr Crisis and attendant economic turmoil. Money in the form of loans and capital flowed from the US to Germany. Reparations in turn flowed from Germany to France and Britain, which then paid back wartime loans to the US. This triangular flow seemed to work at first. The German economy, with its new currency, began to recover in the years 1924–1929, the so-called Golden Age of the Weimar Republic.

After the Wall Street Crash of 1929, cash-strapped US banks recalled German loans and investors sold German securities, plunging Germany into depression. Eight million Germans were unemployed by 1932 and Hitler and the Nazis rode this wave of economic hardship into office. In this sense the Great Depression can be seen as a long-term cause of the war in that it brought an expansionist ideology to power. The depression also prompted countries into adopting protectionist economic policies that isolated countries such as Germany and Japan, who had to look elsewhere for markets. This increased economic rivalry between European powers in South America, China and the Balkans. Economic isolation helped fuel diplomatic isolation, especially in the

Dawes Plan

A financial aid package from the US to Germany. The package was in response to the French invasion of the Ruhr and subsequent German hyperinflation. The plan provided US dollars to refinance the German currency as well as capital to German banks and businesses.

case of the United States, which emboldened expansionist powers. Economic hardship also hampered the rearmament of the western allies at exactly the time the expansionist powers were rapidly increasing the size of their militaries.

German expansion

With the ideological justification of National Socialism and a mandate, manipulated though it was, from the German people, Hitler set about undoing the hated Treaty of Versailles. In 1935 he tore up the disarmament clauses of the treaty and announced conscription and rearmament, responding, he said, to the lengthening of French conscription terms. This was to be the first example of Hitler's approach to the West. He would push the envelope and wait for the Allies' reaction and judge his next step accordingly. When Britain and France did not react to his rearmament programme he accelerated it. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, although seeming to limit German naval building, signified for Hitler a tacit approval of German rearmament.

In 1936 he again tested the West's commitment to Versailles. Hitler ordered the German army to re-occupy the Rhineland, German territory demilitarized by Versailles, and waited for the Allies' response. German commanders had orders to pull back across the Rhine should France show the slightest inclination to intervene. Hitler did not want to risk his fledgling army. When France did nothing, Hitler was again emboldened. The next year, Germany intervened in the Spanish Civil War on the side of Franco and the rebels while France and Britain rigorously upheld their non-interventionist stance. If France and her British ally did not respond to threats on its border, why would they object to German expansion in the east?

The territorial ambitions of Nazism pushed Germany to annex Austria, the *Anschluss*, in 1938, an act forbidden by Versailles. Again the British and French raised no objections. Versailles was clearly dead. Perhaps more disturbingly for the British was Hitler's preference for unilateral action, without recourse to diplomacy or negotiation. If Germany no longer played by the rules that Britain assumed underpinned international relations, rules like the sanctity of treaties and agreements and the use of war as a last resort rather than a preferred response, then her whole approach to European relations was built on sand. Hitler's ephemeral promises were illustrated when he ignored the Munich Agreement within six months of signing it and occupied what remained of Czechoslovakia. When France and Britain guaranteed Poland's borders in response Hitler had no reason to believe that this commitment was any more solid than the Allies' commitment to Munich.

Appeasement

Very simply, appeasement is to give in to demands in order to avoid conflict. This, however, obscures the great complexity with which appeasement was used in the 1930s. With the benefit of hindsight, many post-war commentators used the word with disdain to denote what they saw as British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's naive and weak

approach to German foreign policy in the late 1930s. Superficially this assessment seems to hold, however, more recent scholarship interprets appeasement differently.

Appeasement can be seen as a continuation of traditional British diplomacy:

- based on discussion and negotiation
- based on Britain's economic and military strength
- considering the global scope of Britain's interests
- treating each issue on its own merits
- avoiding war when possible
- resorting to war if it were in Britain's interest to do so.

These principles were applied by the British to each of Hitler's foreign policy adventures. When he re-occupied the Rhineland, it was clearly no direct threat to British interests and could be seen as a return to a more normalized situation of German autonomy. Likewise it was not clear how the *Anschluss* threatened British interests. Certainly the Sino-Japanese war was more of a concern for Britain globally. At Munich, Chamberlain judged the Czechs' sovereignty to be less of a concern than the costs of any kind of British intervention, if such an intervention was even feasible, and negotiated an end to the crisis. Germany's actions did not threaten her shores as any movement toward France or Belgium would. It did not threaten their sea routes and communications through the Mediterranean. It in no way impeded the operation of the British Empire. Rearmament, started in 1938, nevertheless continued in Britain.

There were two underlying assumptions when it came to applying this policy to German actions in central Europe. This first assumption was that German leadership held the same values as did Britain and France in terms of international agreements. The second assumption was that German ambitions could be satisfied. Both assumptions in the end proved to be false. Once it became obvious that they were false, and the British rearmament programme was close to putting Britain on par with German military output, war became a more feasible solution to future situations.

This interpretation suggests that the key question is not why did the Allies not fight for Czechoslovakia, but rather why did they fight for Poland? As mentioned, British rearmament had reached peak production by mid-1939 and French rearmament was progressing. Globally, the Sino-Japanese war seemed to be sapping Japanese ability to menace British holdings. The Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact removed the USSR as a deterrent to German expansion. In the end, the British abandoned their assumption that Hitler could be sated and thus their ability to affect the course of world affairs and by so doing protect their interests through diplomacy was no longer feasible. Appeasement had worked until it did not.

Class discussion

Is there a moral or ethical element to appeasement?

ATL Research and thinking skills

For each of the following positions, research the views of the historians listed. Each historian may either support or reject the perspective. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each historian's position?

The policy of appeasement caused the war

- RAC Parker
- AJP Taylor

Nazi ideology caused the war

- Eric Hobsbawm
- AJP Taylor
- Hugh Trevor Roper

Source skills

Chamberlain and appeasement

The following is an extract from the memoirs of Lord Halifax, Chamberlain's Foreign Secretary.

Source A

The other element that gave fuel to the fires of criticism was the unhappy phrases which Neville Chamberlain under the stress of great emotion allowed himself to use. 'Peace with Honour'; 'Peace for our time' – such sentences grated harshly on the ear and thought of even those closest to him. But when all has been said, one fact remains dominant and unchallengeable. When war did come a year later it found a country and Commonwealth wholly united within itself, convinced to the foundations of soul and conscience that every conceivable effort had been made to find the way of sparing Europe the ordeal of war, and that no alternative remained. And that was the best thing that Chamberlain did.

Source: Halifax, Edward. 1956. *Fullness of Days*. Dodd, Mead and Co. London, UK.

<http://spartacus-educational.com/PRchamberlain.htm>

Source B

Winston Churchill's speech to the House of Commons on Neville Chamberlain's death, 12 November 1940.

It fell to Neville Chamberlain in one of the supreme crises of the world to be contradicted by events, to be disappointed in his hopes, and to be deceived and cheated by a wicked man. But what were these hopes in which he was disappointed? What were these wishes in which he was frustrated? What was that faith that was abused? They were surely among the most noble and benevolent instincts of the human heart – the love of peace, the toil for peace, the strife for peace, the pursuit of peace, even at great peril, and certainly to the utter disdain of popularity or clamour.

Source: <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/neville-chamberlain>

Source C

Duff Cooper, First Lord of the Admiralty, Diary entry 17 September 1938 describing a cabinet meeting with Chamberlain.

Power from obtaining undue predominance in Europe; but we were now faced with probably the most formidable Power that had ever dominated Europe, and resistance to that Power was quite obviously a British interest. If I thought surrender would bring lasting peace I should be in favour of surrender, but I did not believe there would ever be peace in Europe so long as Nazism ruled in Germany. The next act of aggression might be one that it would be far harder for us to resist.

Source D

The following is an extract from *The Origins of the Second World War*, written by British historian AJP Taylor.

The settlement at Munich was a triumph for British policy, which had worked precisely to this end; not a triumph for Hitler, who had started with far less clear intentions. Nor was it merely a triumph for selfish or cynical British statesmen, indifferent to the fate of far-off peoples or calculating that Hitler might be launched against Soviet Russia. It was a triumph for all that was best and most enlightened in British life; a triumph for those who had preached equal justice between peoples; a triumph for those who had denounced the harshness and short-sightedness of Versailles.

Source: Taylor, AJP. 1961. *The Origins of the Second World War*. Hamish Hamilton. London, UK

Questions

- 1 a What does Churchill mean when he says Chamberlain was "contradicted by events"? (Source B)
 - b What are the implications of Source D?
- 2 With reference to its origin, purpose and content discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Source B for historians studying Chamberlain's role in the war.
- 3 Compare and contrast the perspectives of Source A and Source B on Chamberlain's policy of appeasement.
- 4 Using your own knowledge and these sources evaluate appeasement as an effective foreign policy.