Neville Chamberlain was the British prime minister from 1937 to 1940. He is forever associated with the policy of appeasement, which amounted to a concerted attempt by the democratic powers to avoid war by giving in to Hitler’s demands. History has been harsh in its judgement of both Chamberlain and appeasement.

**CASE STUDY REVIEW TASK**

Make your own assessment of both the man and the policy. The key points of view about Chamberlain and appeasement follow in the document study. Review the documents and complete the questions.

**DOCUMENT STUDY**

**Source 15.3**

In this extract, Winston Churchill assesses Chamberlain.

I may here set down a comparative appreciation of these two Prime Ministers, Baldwin and Chamberlain, whom I had known so long and under whom I had served or was to serve. Stanley Baldwin was the wiser, more comprehending personality, but without detailed executive capacity. He was largely detached from foreign and military affairs ... Neville Chamberlain, on the other hand, was alert, businesslike, opinionated and self-confident in a very high degree ... His all-pervading hope was to go down to history as the great Peacemaker, and for this he was prepared to strive continually in the teeth of facts, and face great risks for himself and his country. Unhappily he ran into tides the force of which he could not measure, and met hurricanes from which he did not flinch, but with which he could not cope.


**Source 15.4**

This is Paul Kennedy’s assessment of appeasement from *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

There was a persistent willingness on the British government’s part, despite all the counterevidence, to trust in ‘reasonable’ approaches toward the Nazi regime. The emotional dislike of Communism was such that Russia’s potential as a member of an antifascist coalition was always ignored or downgraded. Vulnerable eastern European states, like Czechoslovakia and Poland, were all too often regarded as nuisances, and the lack of sympathy for France’s problems showed a fatal meanness of spirit. Germany’s and Italy’s power was consistently overrated, on the basis of slim evidence, whereas all British defence weaknesses were seized upon as a reason for inaction. Whitehall’s views of the European balance of power were self-serving and short-term. Critics of the appeasement policy such as Churchill were systematically censored and neutralized, even as the government proclaimed that it could only follow (rather than give a lead to) public opinion. For all the plausible, objectively valid grounds behind the British government’s desire to avoid standing up to the dictator states, therefore, there is much in its ungenerous, narrow attitude that looks dubious, even at this distance in time.


**DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Refer to Source 15.3. According to Churchill, what was Chamberlain’s ‘all-pervading hope’?
2. What did Churchill mean when he wrote that Chamberlain was prepared to ‘strive’ for his goal of peace ‘in the teeth of facts’? What in your view might those ‘facts’ be?
3. Refer to Source 15.4. Beginning with the British government’s willingness to ‘trust in “reasonable” approaches toward the Nazi regime’ despite the counterevidence, Kennedy makes a series of critical observations about appeasement. What are his observations?
4. Although he acknowledges that appeasement might have had ‘plausible … grounds’, how does Kennedy sum up the policy?
ARGUMENTS FOR CHAMBERLAIN AND APPEASEMENT

- Chamberlain was a highly intelligent man who was devoted to his country and the cause of peace. He was not a fool but more a victim of circumstances.
- Criticism of Chamberlain is based on the account of the history of the Second World War by Churchill, Chamberlain’s political rival. Churchill made no secret of the fact that he intended to write his version of events to ensure that history was kind to him (see D. Reynolds, In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War, Penguin, London, 2004).
- Although Churchill spoke out for rearmament in the 1930s, Chamberlain recognised that the British people were not ready for war, nor were they willing to see large sums devoted to defence-spending at the expense of much needed domestic social reform.
- Chamberlain was told by his defence chiefs that Britain couldn’t risk a war in Europe with either Germany or Italy at a time when the Japanese threat in Asia was growing. Chamberlain therefore used the policy of appeasement in an attempt to find a diplomatic means of easing tensions in Europe.
- As the historian Martin Gilbert has pointed out, Chamberlain did not invent the idea of appeasement; it had been an aspect of British foreign policy since 1919.
- Like many British politicians before him and many historians since, Chamberlain believed that Hitler’s initial demands were reasonable. He felt that the Treaty of Versailles had been too harsh on Germany and that Germany had a right to rearm, to put troops in the Rhineland (it was, after all, German territory) and to unify with fellow Germans such as in the Anschluss with Austria—a move supported by an overwhelming number of Austrians.
- If Chamberlain did make a mistake, it was taking Hitler at his word at the start but there had never been a national leader like Hitler before. Hitler was willing to lie and bully outrageously. The extent to which Hitler did this was unprecedented.
- Chamberlain did rearm after 1938 when it was clear that Hitler could not be trusted.
- Had the British spent money on expanding the Royal Air Force (RAF) in 1935 as Churchill wanted, they would have wasted money on outdated designs and not been able to acquire the large numbers of modern fighter planes such as the Hurricane and the Spitfire, the aircraft that saved Britain in the Battle of Britain.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST CHAMBERLAIN AND APPEASEMENT

- Appeasement, regardless of the reasons, failed. It only encouraged Hitler and was therefore a cause of the Second World War.
- Chamberlain was intelligent but he lacked experience in foreign affairs and often neglected the advice of his experts.
- The assessment of appeasement is not based solely on the views of Winston Churchill. Nevertheless, regardless of his motives, Churchill was proved to be right.
- Standing up to Hitler sooner would have prevented the need to fight.
- Hitler might have made reasonable demands but his methods were unacceptable and should have been opposed.
- Chamberlain’s dislike of communism meant that he failed to do more to enlist the Soviet Union as an ally during the 1930s. This was a particular failure at the time of the Czech crisis in 1938, when the Soviet Union made it clear that it would help Britain and France if they were willing to stand up to Hitler.
- At Munich in 1938, Chamberlain gave away a vital opportunity. The Czech army was willing to fight and was about the same size in 1938 as the German army. It had excellent border defences. Czechoslovakia was the sixth-largest industrial power in Europe and had an extensive armaments industry. At Munich, therefore, Chamberlain not only encouraged Hitler but also made Germany stronger, because Germany ultimately acquired all Czechoslovakia’s military equipment and industrial potential.
- Between 1935 and 1938 the British and the French vastly overestimated Germany’s military strength. Had they taken action at any stage before the final German takeover of Czechoslovakia in January 1939, or even before the Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939, they were likely to have been successful.
CASE STUDY REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In your view, what is the strongest argument and the weakest argument in favour of Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement? Give reasons for your answer.

2. In your view, what is the strongest argument and the weakest argument against Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement? Give reasons for your answer.

CASE STUDY REVIEW TASK

1. Using the evidence presented so far and the document study, conduct a debate and/or class discussion assessing appeasement. Consider whether the policy of appeasement was justifiable at the time or whether we are only wise after the event? Did the policy cause the Second World War?

2. Use the internet and the school library to expand your reading with further research about the appeasement policy. Using the following process, write an essay offering your assessment of the policy.

REVIEW TASK

Below you will find a list in random order of the main causes of the conflict in Europe. Using the information you already have and following further research in the library and the internet, make your own assessment of the causes.

Divide the causes into long-term (those that had an effect for more than a decade) and short-term (those that played a more immediate role).

Then divide the causes into primary ones (fundamental causes without which there would have been no war) and secondary ones (less important causes that influenced the timing and nature of the war but were not vital).

- The Great Depression
- Memories of the horrors of the First World War
- The policy of appeasement
- The First World War and the Treaty of Versailles
- Traditional German foreign-policy goals to dominate Central Europe
- The isolationist policy of the United States and its refusal to join the League of Nations
- Adolf Hitler and Nazi ideology
- The Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact
- The failure of collective security
- The unwillingness of the democratic powers to ally themselves with the Soviet Union
- German bitterness over defeat in the First World War.

Note that many of the causes will be linked—it is unusual for a cause to exist in isolation. During the course of your research and class discussions feel free to add to or modify causes.