

# LLOYD GEORGE

## APPEASEMENT OF

Few studies of Lloyd George have focused on the period after his fall from office in the autumn of 1922, yet he remained very active in politics almost until his death in 1945, engaging in fierce debate on important questions, especially those involving Europe. He himself made clear his intention to remain in the forefront of politics. 'The burden is off my shoulders', he declared after being forced to resign, but 'my sword is in my hand'.<sup>1</sup> Although he never returned to high office, at times it seemed possible that he would and, as John Campbell points out in a rare appraisal devoted to some of Lloyd George's later years, he was still thought – usually with dismay by his successors – to be capable of shaping both public and political opinion.<sup>2</sup> **Stella Rudman** examines the role Lloyd George played in the appeasement of Germany after 1922, and his fascination with Adolf Hitler.



# LLOYD GEORGE AND THE GERMANY, 1922 – 1945

ONE PARTICULAR REASON why Lloyd George's later career is worthy of more attention is his link with the Versailles Treaty, whose enforcement and revision were at the heart of Britain's European policy in the inter-war years. The treaty underpinned relations with Germany and fertilised the ground in which appeasement was to thrive, and as one of its co-authors, Lloyd George had the means to speak more authoritatively on the subject than almost anyone in the country.

As Sir Martin Gilbert has argued, during the inter-war years the word 'appeasement' meant different things to different people at different times.<sup>3</sup> For most of the period, as a European policy, appeasement was taken for granted as being a good thing. It was accepted as the selfless wish to arbitrate fairly in the interests of all and to remove the causes of future wars. Politicians proclaiming a desire to achieve an appeasement regarding almost any diplomatic issue – including those involving Germany – were unlikely to be criticised. By the mid-1930s however, with the rise of the Nazis and Hitler's growing stridency, attitudes had begun to turn negative. Appeasement now seemed to a growing number of people to be about robbing the weak and friendly to pay the strong and hostile.

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Despite having been 'the man who won the war', once the fighting was

over Lloyd George soon became a determined appeaser of Germany. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, while taking a strong line on reparations, he argued against stripping Germany of territory and placing ethnic Germans under foreign rule, which, he believed, would be the kind of penalty most likely to make her vengeful. After the conference, when Germany seemed set to defy the peace settlement, there were still times when he argued for harshness, not only on reparations but also on German disarmament. Towards the end of his time as Prime Minister, however, economic depression and the advent to the French premiership of Raymond Poincaré – whom he regarded as the archetypal French chauvinist, aiming to establish French hegemony in Europe – inclined him to become more appeasing, even on reparations. Increasingly suspicious of French ambitions, he became more sympathetic to Germany's situation and more complacent about her treaty violations.

After his premiership came to an end Lloyd George's advocacy of appeasement grew even stronger – and more public. By now he ardently believed that, despite Germany's continued failures to fulfil the terms of the Peace Treaty, it was in Britain's interests to stop pestering her. He saw British unemployment, which was high and growing, as the equivalent of the damage done to France by the German army. British trade, he kept repeating, was Britain's 'devastated area',

and he became more concerned with the state of the British economy than with collecting money from Germany. His wish for Germany to return to her pre-war role as chief consumer of British goods and his belief that a more even Franco-German power balance would foster stability in Europe meant that he wanted to see a German economic revival, which huge reparations payments would inhibit. He now accepted Germany's argument that the amounts being sought were beyond her capacity. He was probably encouraged in this view by the growing influence, first on intellectuals and then on the general public attitude, of John Maynard Keynes's book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. The book, published in late 1919, was a highly articulate and stinging attack on the peace settlement in which Keynes argued that attempting to extract the huge sums being demanded from Germany would dislocate the European economic and financial system and cause Germany's collapse. For these reasons Lloyd George became increasingly insistent that reparations payments should be seriously reduced.

When, in early 1923, France led an incursion into the industrial Ruhr basin to try to wrest reparations from Germany, Lloyd George portrayed Germany as the near-innocent victim of French aggression and attacked the Conservative government's policy of 'benevolent neutrality' as being much too benevolent to France. Forgetting

Left: Hitler welcoming Lloyd George to the Berghof, Berchtesgaden on 4 September 1936. To Lloyd George's left is Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's roving ambassador, and between Lloyd George and Hitler is Professor T. P. Conwell-Evans, secretary of the Anglo-German Fellowship. (Photograph by kind permission of Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/The National Library of Wales.)

## LLOYD GEORGE AND THE APPEASEMENT OF GERMANY, 1922–1945

his own earlier confrontations with unyielding German leaders at a succession of conferences, he now spoke of Germany as the embodiment of co-operation and contrition, implying that the occupation was the sole cause of resurgent German militarism:

The national spirit of Germany which for four years I saw humbled, broken, its great statesmen coming and saying, 'What would you like us to do?' – that spirit which was humiliated is for the first time since the Armistice aroused by this action.<sup>4</sup>

He liked to think that the Ruhr crisis would never have come about if he had still been Prime Minister. He told his friend Lord Riddell, the proprietor of *The News of The World*, that 'he [L.G.] had managed to keep the French from going into the Ruhr; and that if B.L. [Bonar Law] had adopted the same tactics, he might have done the same'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, actually, he had contributed significantly to the development of the crisis in the first place, as many commentators pointed out. At the Peace Conference he had greatly swelled the reparations account by the addition of servicemen's allowances and war-widows' and orphans' pensions, to boost Britain's share. He had then become the leading critic of France for trying to 'make Germany pay'. He had alienated France by constantly sniping at her, by his evasion of an Anglo-French military alliance promised at the Peace Conference, and by refusing to consider effective controls on German finances to secure reparations payments. France's fears for her safety had grown as Lloyd George's sympathy with them had declined, and this had only increased her determination to prolong her position of superior strength over Germany. More immediately, because of his strident support for a German request for a reparations moratorium during 1922, Lloyd George had encouraged Germany to cry poverty and continue to evade her treaty obligations.

On a more positive note, during the crisis Lloyd George played an active part in luring the United States back into European affairs. The Americans had been a leading party to the peace settlement, but

had then quickly retreated into isolation. This, and their failure to join the League of Nations, had added greatly to the difficulties of executing the Versailles Treaty. Their determination to hold their European allies to account on war debts greatly compounded the problem. As Lloyd George said, 'they have the gold of the world locked in their chests, and they are suffering from indigestion ... They have a moral responsibility. They helped to create the situation.'<sup>6</sup>

He did, however, have a special reason for trying to entice the Americans back into Europe. He wanted French influence to be diluted in disputes over reparations, to Germany's benefit. He hoped that American bankers would agree with him that German economic recovery was more important to the bigger economic picture than the restoration of France's devastated areas. To help them to come to this view, during a highly successful tour of North America in the autumn of 1923, he portrayed French reparations policy as vindictive and short-sighted and argued the German case with gusto. At the end of his visit President Calvin Coolidge declared a willingness for America to get involved in reparations negotiations. The British, and even the French, accepted the offer, and the result was the Dawes Plan, which – as Lloyd George had hoped – allowed Germany's reparations burden to be greatly reduced.

In the second half of the 1920s Lloyd George's appeasing tendencies grew. He was increasingly convinced that France's European policy had created the need for appeasement in the first place. In early 1925 the Germans, fearing (wrongly) that an Anglo-French security pact was imminent, produced an alternative proposal for a Rhineland Pact in which Germany would honour her existing western boundaries and sign arbitration treaties with Poland and Czechoslovakia. Lloyd George was very enthusiastic, calling it a 'very remarkable proposal' representing 'an invaluable offer'.<sup>7</sup> During negotiations for the agreements Britain and France made important concessions to Germany. For instance, British troops occupying the Cologne zone of the Rhineland in accordance with the peace treaty were to be withdrawn without waiting for the completion of

German disarmament. Nevertheless, once the treaties were finalised – at Locarno in October 1925 – Lloyd George emphatically endorsed a statement by the Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain, that they should mark the beginning, not the end, of appeasement. Unhappy that the European military balance had swung heavily against Germany, he began calling for speedy progress on universal disarmament, without which, he insisted, Locarno would simply be 'a slobbering melodrama'. He claimed that the Allies, particularly France, had broken a 'solemn pledge' to Germany because they had not disarmed in accordance with the wording of the peace settlement, which said that Germany's disarmament would be the precursor to a general arms reduction.

It was a reduction in French arms that he most wished to see. 'It is no use having pacts and securities and arbitration', he declared, 'as long as nations are building submarines to sink our ships, and aerodromes are being planted on the shores of the English Channel'.<sup>8</sup> He also championed Germany's demand for the early evacuation of the remaining Allied troops from the Rhineland, despite warnings from the Allied military experts in Berlin that she was still not complying with the peace treaty's disarmament clauses and press reports of collaboration on arms manufacture between the Soviet and German armies. That Germany was becoming more demanding despite recent concessions did not dampen his enthusiasm. His twin desires of conciliating Germany and scuppering French designs strengthened his support for universal disarmament and his impatience with the British government. Indeed, his criticism of the government was sharpest when he thought he detected British deference to French policy. He dismissed Austen Chamberlain, whose deep affection for France and long-standing suspicions of German sincerity made him a most unsatisfactory appeaser, as 'an elegant ditto to Monsieur Briand'.<sup>9</sup>

Whether appeasement was the right policy depended on whether Germany could be satisfied peacefully and harmoniously. From the mid-1920s, despite Locarno, evidence suggested that she could not. Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, one of the Weimar Republic's

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bitterest enemies, was elected as its president in April 1925. Meanwhile, the composition of the Reichstag was growing more extreme, and the voices of Republicanism more muted. Although Germany's appeasement was still generally seen as a noble aspiration in Britain, the level of appeasement that Lloyd George advocated was becoming a dangerous gamble, because it would assist Germany's rise to dominance in Europe. A dominant Germany was unlikely to be friendly to those who had gained territory from her. But would she, at least, be friendly to Britain, who had helped her regain her strength? Her hostility to the peace settlement and the bad grace with which she usually received its ameliorations, suggested that she would see all her old adversaries, including Britain, in the same light as before. Lloyd George seemed blind to these considerations, being stubbornly fixed on two main themes. One was that France should be prevented from dominating Europe. The other was that Germany had just grievances which needed to be addressed.

By 1932, although Britain had received little from Germany in reparations, most Britons shared Lloyd George's relief when, at an international conference in Lausanne, it was agreed that payments could cease provided Germany paid one final sum. There was also general support for disarmament despite growing German militarism and the evacuation of the remaining Allied troops from the Rhineland in 1930. What distinguished Lloyd George from the majority was his unflagging support for Germany's standpoint. With the Nazis gaining ground rapidly in German elections, Churchill was arguing against pressing France, whose defensive position had been seriously weakened by the Rhineland evacuation, to reduce her arms. 'We must not forget', he warned, 'that ... the contingent of youth arriving at military age each year [in Germany] is at the present moment double that of France.' A strong French army would be 'a stabilising factor, and one of the strongest, apart from the general hatred of war.'<sup>10</sup> Leading Labour figures were also losing sympathy for Germany. Lloyd George, however, was still focusing on meeting Germany's demands

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and repeating his point about the Allies having broken a solemn pledge to her. The treaty stated that following Germany's disarmament the Allies would reduce their own arms 'to the lowest point consistent with national safety'; but with the Rhineland evacuation most of Germany's neighbours felt that that point had already been reached. Neither were they convinced that Germany was as disarmed as Lloyd George liked to think.

When British leaders prevaricated and back-tracked on international disarmament he rightly took them to task for their duplicity. Yet he did not criticise their failure to tackle French security, even though he must have known that France would not consent to a significant reduction in her army – or those of her eastern allies – until she was assured that Britain would come to her aid if attacked.

The appointment of Hitler as German Chancellor did not make Lloyd George more cautious. He blamed the British government's incompetence and French intransigence for rising German nationalism. Although he acknowledged 'the abominable treatment of Jews in Germany', he was more concerned to stress the 'abominable treatment of Germany by the Allies' regarding universal disarmament: 'It is ill provoking a brave people by the imposition of a flagrant wrong ... First we drive them to frenzy by an injustice and then we make that the excuse for not redressing the wrong. That is not British fair play.'<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, his strident support for Germany only made her appeasement more unattainable, because it encouraged the German people to think that they were being unfairly treated and that Hitler was right to defy the peace treaty. Hitler understood this and ensured that they were aware of Lloyd George's views. Film clips of speeches in which he stated that there could be 'no peace until the pledge to disarm is redeemed' were shown in German cinemas, and posters quoting his sympathetic pronouncements appeared on the streets, concluding with such statements as: 'Any German is a blackguard who does not demand what an Englishman concedes to be his right.'<sup>12</sup> Lloyd George's attacks on France also damaged the appeasement cause,

because they helped to fuel Anglo-French rivalry, which made France all the more determined to stick to her guns.

By 1934 it was known that Germany was rearming, and scepticism about appeasement was growing in Britain. Lloyd George's tone now changed slightly. He accepted that Britain should not be reducing her defences 'to a limit where we should be powerless against attacks', and that Germany's air force was a potential danger to Britain. He nevertheless argued that there was 'no need for precipitate action', because Germany was arming for defence and had no heavy guns. Despite admitting that, with the Nazi government working up a bad press against itself, it was becoming difficult to put the German case, he managed to do it:

For fourteen years they waited for a redemption. They had a succession of the most pacific ministers in the world ... They entreated the great Powers to begin redeeming their bond. They were mocked by a succession of pacts. ... meanwhile every country except Britain increased its armaments ... . Can you wonder that at last they were driven into revolution against ... the chronic deception of the great countries?

He then predicted that soon, because of their fear of communism, 'Conservative elements' in Britain would be 'welcoming Germany as our friend'.<sup>13</sup> This, at least, was a perceptive comment. While Labourites and Liberals were gradually losing faith in appeasement, the Conservatives were soon to embrace it more unequivocally.

Lloyd George's appeasing stance was reserved almost exclusively for Germany. During the mid-1930s he began attacking the government for its complacent attitude towards the belligerent adventures of other dictators. He argued that Britain should take a tough line against aggression, support its victims, and provide a strong lead in the League of Nations. During the Abyssinian crisis, although British leaders spoke of their commitment to League principles and of standing up to Mussolini, their actions said otherwise; and there were covert Anglo-French attempts

to buy Mussolini off at Abyssinia's expense. Lloyd George rightly attacked the government for its hypocrisy and lack of support for a fellow-League member, insisting that Britain was 'under an obligation to enter with other countries into a combined effort to prevent this danger'.<sup>14</sup>

When, with Mussolini's victory, the government announced that, since Abyssinia no longer existed, the (belated and ineffective) League sanctions might as well be lifted, an enraged Lloyd George responded with a dazzling speech – which was described by Churchill as 'one of the greatest Parliamentary performances of all time'. He lambasted the government for trying to pin the blame on the League for Mussolini's victory, when it had been Britain's and France's lack of leadership and double-dealing that had been at fault. He ended by referring to a recent proclamation on Abyssinia that Neville Chamberlain had made. Chamberlain had said:

The choice before us is whether we shall make a last effort at Geneva for peace and security or whether by a cowardly surrender we shall break all the promises we have made, and hold ourselves up to the shame of our children and our children's children.

'Tonight', declared Lloyd George to a packed and hysterical chamber, 'we have had the cowardly surrender, and there', he cried, flinging out an arm to the government front bench, 'are the cowards!'<sup>15</sup> As so often, Lloyd George had articulated the sentiments of fellow-minded politicians more brilliantly than they could themselves. Government leaders were 'cowed before his onslaught'.<sup>16</sup>

When it came to Germany, however, Lloyd George got things hopelessly wrong. He saw Hitler as one who, let down by the western democracies, had been reluctantly induced to seek friends elsewhere. As he wrote to T. P. Conwell-Evans, secretary of the Anglo-German Fellowship, in late 1937:

I have never doubted the fundamental greatness of Herr Hitler as a man, even in moments of profound disagreement with his policy ... It looks as if the Führer has committed himself

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to Mussolini – that adds enormously to the obstacles in the path of a friendly accommodation of the troubles of Europe. Mussolini is temperamentally an aggressor. I have never thought that Herr Hitler was ...<sup>17</sup>

He continued making excuses for Hitler's actions. Even though two of the severest treaty provisions – the Rhineland occupation and reparations – had been prematurely swept away, he maintained that 'the harshest conditions of the peace treaty had been enforced', while the more equitable provisions had been 'trampled upon'.<sup>18</sup> Hence, when German troops marched into the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland in early 1936 he was not unduly concerned. Like the government and the press, he preferred to focus on the peace proposals that Hitler announced at the same time. He argued against supporting France in her bid to expel the German troops, and tried to assure MPs that the situation was very different from that in 1914:

Germany small; Germany with no allies; Germany with France, Russia, part of Austria against her. The air force that could be brought in would overwhelm anything which Germany could produce. That is why when they offer a twenty-five years' guarantee of security I believe them ...

He would not question who was to blame for the invasion, he said, as if this were a matter of dispute. But he did not think that 'France was in a position to point a finger of scorn at Germany on the ground of treaty breaking'.<sup>19</sup> He also objected to the Anglo-French military talks that Britain offered to France in compensation for refusing to act against Germany.

There were a few cautionary voices in Parliament. Sir Edward Spears reported that on the Continent they were saying that, having taken the Rhineland and offered twenty-five years of peace, Germany would take Austria and offer fifty. Next would be Memel and seventy-five years. We could then look forward to eternal peace once France and England had disappeared. Harold Nicolson recalled that in 1918 there had been opposition to sending food to starving

German women and children. Yet now, 'we fall on our knees, we bow our foreheads in the dust, and we say "Heil Hitler"'.<sup>20</sup> Austen Chamberlain and Churchill also prophesied worse to come. But on this crucial issue British opinion was generally in tune with Lloyd George. Both failed to grasp that Hitler's coup had done enormous damage to Anglo-French security. The fact that he had not invaded a foreign country, as Mussolini had, obscured the dangerousness of his action.

Six months later Lloyd George went to see Hitler at Berchtesgaden. He thought that, as Hitler was reputed to hold him in high regard, he could bring an Anglo-German accord a little closer. Conwell-Evans, an intimate of Ribbentrop, acted as an intermediary in organising the trip, and Thomas Jones, the Deputy Cabinet Secretary – who had been urging Baldwin to meet Hitler and had recently done so himself – was also of the party. During the visit Lloyd George encountered much talk of 'the Bolshevik menace' and heard many complaints about Czechoslovakia, which was, according to Hitler, 'a positive danger on account of her alliance with Russia'. His enthusiasm to prove his friendship for Germany predominated, leading him to speak unwisely and indiscreetly. When Ribbentrop complained that the Czech government was seriously oppressing its German population in the Sudetenland, Lloyd George replied that he 'did not trust Beneš [the Czech President] in his sight, let alone out of it'. Although he tried to persuade Hitler to remain neutral regarding the Spanish Civil War, which had begun two months earlier, and told Ribbentrop that Britain would not join in an anti-Bolshevik front, he was highly critical of a British cabinet minister (Alfred Duff Cooper, the War Secretary) for having recently spoken of the urgent need for Anglo-French co-operation. He also sympathised with Hitler over the Rhineland invasion; and by agreeing that a new Locarno pact, which the British government was naively hoping for, should be limited to the West, he encouraged the idea that Britain had little interest in Eastern Europe.

When Hitler praised him as 'one of the very few people in England today who has shown

any real appreciation of my task', a delighted and emotional Lloyd George reciprocated by calling his host 'the greatest German of the age'. So besotted was he that he convinced himself that this extreme right-wing nationalist dictator, leading a party steeped in the paraphernalia of militarism and turning his country into a fighting machine, had a repugnance for war. He told his private secretary, A. J. Sylvester, that Hitler was 'not in favour either of rearmament or conscription'. He was more interested in 'roads, agriculture and productive measures generally'.<sup>21</sup>

On his return home he argued that Germany was arming purely for defence:

The idea of a Germany intimidating Europe with a threat that its irresistible army might march across frontiers forms no part of the new vision ... the establishment of a German hegemony in Europe, which was the aim and dream of the old militarism, is not even on the horizon of Nazism.<sup>22</sup>

Soon, however, Hitler's involvement in the Spanish Civil War was giving him cause for second thoughts. Once he realised that Hitler had no intention of remaining neutral, despite having entered into a non-intervention agreement with Britain and France, the scales appeared to fall from his eyes. Although he still regarded Mussolini, who gave the greatest support to Franco, as trouble-maker-in-chief, in a rare moment of humility he admitted in Parliament that he might have been wrong about Hitler:

... when I was Prime Minister, and afterwards when I was a private member of this House, I always pleaded for fair treatment for Germany ... But I am bound to say that the difficulties which used to come from France in the way of any scheme which appeared to promise appeasement, which gave justice and fair treatment to Germany – those difficulties now are made by Germany herself.

There was 'a lack of straightforwardness in the whole business', he conceded, which 'I frankly would not have expected from the present

head of the German Government'.<sup>23</sup> He denounced non-intervention as 'a tragic mockery', rightly accusing the government of tacitly supporting the Nationalists by their strict adherence to it while Italy and Germany supported Franco. He also warned of the security risk of a Fascist victory, which could prevent British naval access to the Mediterranean.

The appointment of Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister also contributed to Lloyd George's change in attitude. The two men disliked each other intensely. During the Great War Lloyd George had dismissed Chamberlain as Director of National Service. He had then criticised him in his *War Memoirs*. This unfriendly treatment rankled with Chamberlain and, once the tables were turned in the 1930s, he made a point of blocking any opportunity of Lloyd George's taking office.<sup>24</sup> Chamberlain's dedication to appeasement was in itself a strong incentive for Lloyd George to find fault with it.

When British seamen began losing their lives off the Spanish coast as a result of Italian and German attacks, Chamberlain's government did next to nothing about it. Lloyd George was disgusted. The Cabinet were 'behaving like a bevy of maiden aunts who have fallen among buccaneers'.<sup>25</sup> The government's 'twittering little protests' were becoming 'the joke of the world'.<sup>26</sup>

He even started expressing sympathy for France. This was surely evidence of a shift in perspective! Whereas Britain leaned towards Franco, France favoured the Spanish government, for whom non-intervention was seriously detrimental. 'I am sorry for the position that France has been put into', he declared. 'France with her noble tradition of always going to the help of nations fighting for liberty, for right and for independence. The French people have made great sacrifices for that. No country in Europe has made greater'.<sup>27</sup> This rare tribute was made as if from one who had been an unequivocal champion of France all along. Having denounced her for forging a mutual assistance pact with Russia in 1936, he now talked about joining forces with them both:

If the great Powers – France and Russia that are acting with

us, and ourselves – talked quite frankly, brutally if you like ... these three great Powers together have such a force that there is no-one in Europe that could stand up against them.<sup>28</sup>

He appeared to appreciate that a Fascist victory, and Britain's obvious lack of concern for its victims, had made a European war more likely. Yet he was quite unperturbed when, in March 1938, Nazi troops marched into Vienna and overthrew the Austrian government. It was, he believed, 'a natural sequence of events'. Even when he realised that the so-called *Anschluss* had been a brutal take-over, he managed to blame Mussolini more than Hitler – for having stood aside and allowed Hitler to have his way. He disapproved of Hitler's methods, but his judgement remained clouded by his belief that Germany's ambitions were reasonable.

He was not so sanguine regarding the Czech crisis, however. Although his belief that Czechoslovakia was a mistaken creation, coupled with his low opinion of Beneš, caused him to sympathise with the Sudetenlanders – as German minorities living under foreign sovereignty – on the eve of the Munich conference he wrote to the South Wales Liberal Federation:

We can hardly abandon the Czechs, who acted upon our counsel – not without dishonour to ourselves ... If war is to be avoided, what is required is a clear statement by the British Government that the Czechs have, in their opinion, gone to the limit of reasonable concession ... and that if there is any attempt to crush the Czech Republic by force the British Government would side with France and other countries to resist aggression.<sup>29</sup>

He had not abandoned appeasement – only what he regarded as Chamberlain's 'cringing' kind – but he was now worried about Britain's weakening position relative to Germany's, and saw that it should only be tried from a position of superior strength, which meant forming an alliance with France and Russia – which Stalin was soon to offer. This had the support of Liberal and Labour leaders,

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but the Conservatives were, with a few exceptions, unsurprisingly the most reluctant to embrace communist Russia. Knowing Chamberlain was averse to cooperation with Stalin, Lloyd George, who had long favoured dealing positively with Soviet Russia, now began a vigorous pro-Russian campaign. Russia had the world's strongest army, he argued, and the only one that could get to Poland, which everyone knew Hitler had in his sights. When, in parliament, an MP reminded him of Stalin's purge of officers he merely replied: 'It's news to me that getting rid of Generals is always a bad thing for an army'.<sup>30</sup> Two months later, with no sign of a rapprochement he declared: 'The supreme diplomatic imbecility of snubbing Russia ought to be repaired without loss of time. The peril is great and it is imminent.'<sup>31</sup>

When German troops marched into Bohemia in March 1939, Hitler's claim that he wished only to recover what was legitimately Germany's was exposed as a lie. With public opinion having already turned against appeasement, Chamberlain announced a guarantee to Poland. Lloyd George thought this madness without first securing support from Russia, especially as no obvious preparations were being made to honour it. He now urged the government to introduce conscription.<sup>32</sup> Although Chamberlain eventually agreed to negotiations with Russia it was clear he did not want them to succeed. Lloyd George was rightly incensed:

Mr Chamberlain negotiated directly with Hitler. He went to Germany to see him. He and Lord Halifax ... went to Rome, drank Mussolini's health, shook his hand, and told him what a fine fellow he was. But whom have they sent to Russia? ... a clerk in the Foreign Office ... It was an insult.<sup>33</sup>

When negotiations broke down in mid-August the Russians signed a non-aggression pact with Germany. Germany attacked Poland on 1 September, and two days later Britain was at war.

At first Lloyd George was optimistic. He pinned his hopes on Poland holding out until help arrived. He expected the help to be forthcoming, but he soon became

sceptical: 'So far, we do not seem to have done anything on land or in the air except scatter a few million unconvincing tracts on German soil'.<sup>34</sup> Once Russia invaded Poland he began to think the war was unwinnable, and his attitude changed dramatically. He started denigrating Polish leaders and talking about making peace with Hitler – 'if only for the purposes of gaining time'. He reverted to his earlier view of Hitler as a reasonable man and even talked of a further revision of the Versailles Treaty, including 'the very important question of the colonies'. 'You have to settle all the problems that are menacing the peace of the world, including the claims of Italy', he said.<sup>35</sup> Most MPs disagreed. So did Chamberlain.

Lloyd George did, however, also continue to argue for a more active war strategy. 'Why aren't we attacking?' he kept asking. 'Germany is producing far more arms than we. Delay only widens the gap'.<sup>36</sup> This was a perfectly reasonable criticism. Having given a guarantee to Poland, Britain had declared war on Germany, but had then done little else.

By May 1940 growing dissatisfaction with Chamberlain's leadership led to rumours that Lloyd George might succeed him, although he himself hinted that he wished to wait until the peril grew, presumably thinking he could step in to salvage something after the government had failed. In Parliament on 8 May Chamberlain appealed for sacrifice. Lloyd George responded: 'I say solemnly that the Prime Minister should give an example of sacrifice, because there is nothing which can contribute more to victory than that he should sacrifice the seals of office'.<sup>37</sup> Two days later Chamberlain was replaced by Churchill.

Relieved, Lloyd George appeared to shake off his defeatism – but not for long. He was soon talking of returning Germany's colonies.<sup>38</sup> Peeved because his advice was not sought, he even began grumbling about Churchill's leadership. Churchill, it seemed, preferred to surround himself with 'duds and mutts' rather than 'men with understanding minds' like himself. When eventually Churchill offered him a Cabinet post, he said he preferred to 'wait until

Winston is bust', again implying a wish to step in and settle with Hitler when all else failed.<sup>39</sup>

On 7 May 1941 when Lloyd George bemoaned government 'blunders' in parliament, Churchill likened his attitude to that of Marshal Pétain.<sup>40</sup> Yet, it must be said that, although talking pessimistically, Lloyd George was still arguing that Britain should be fighting much more aggressively. 'Here we are in the fourth year of war', he said at the beginning of 1943, 'and we have hardly tackled our main enemy, Germany, at all'. Later, he accused the government, quite reasonably, of delaying an invasion of Europe, leaving Russia to do most of the fighting. He only admitted feeling confident of victory when he heard about the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944. By then he had been diagnosed as suffering from cancer. He died on 26 March 1945.

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**Once Russia invaded Poland he began to think the war was unwinnable, and his attitude changed dramatically. He started denigrating Polish leaders and talking about making peace with Hitler – 'if only for the purposes of gaining time'.**

During the inter-war period the merits of pursuing an appeasement strategy changed with the ever-changing circumstances. In the early years, with the Kaiser's militarist regime having been replaced by a democratic republic, there were good reasons for helping Germany, whose fighting capacity had been greatly reduced, to thrive and demonstrate a commitment to peace. The appeasement of later years was another matter. By the time Hitler had started to rearm and take the law into his own hands, appeasement had become a dangerous gamble. It had also become immoral because, once reparations claims were dropped, there were few concessions that Britain could make that were not at the expense of others. Lloyd George paid little attention to these facts.

Martin Pugh argues that, because of his visit to Hitler in 1936, Lloyd George has been 'somewhat misrepresented', and that he was 'a resolute opponent of fascism and appeasement'.<sup>41</sup> This is not true. He was certainly a strong opponent of Mussolini and Franco, but he continued to favour Germany's appeasement even after Hitler's rise. After the Great War he quickly adopted – and never really abandoned – the view that Germany had justifiable grievances which partly excused her behaviour,

blaming Britain and France for the rise of Nazism. Although he hardened towards Germany during the Spanish Civil War and later championed an anti-German alliance with Russia, he failed to appreciate the enormous damage to Anglo-French security inflicted by the Rhineland coup and the *Anschluss*. It was only after Munich that he really began to lament Britain's weakening strategic position relative to Germany's. While he was prejudiced against France – because he thought she was wrong about Germany – he admired Hitler's 'guts' and was eager to excuse German transgressions. This meant that he tended to overlook the damage done to Anglo-French security by Hitler's early adventures. Once the Second World War began, these traits led him to underestimate what others envisaged would be the disastrous consequences of a Nazi-dominated Europe. Even in 1940 he was talking of appeasing Hitler. On 13 March he told Benjamin Sumner Welles, Roosevelt's emissary, that there was no reason 'why Germany should not unite under one government the Germanic peoples of Central Europe, or why Germany should not obtain and enjoy a special economic position in Central Europe, and at least in part, in South-eastern Europe'.<sup>42</sup>

Then there is the view that Lloyd George was an appeaser in the inter-war years, but that this stemmed 'partly out of a strong fear of communism as a greater danger'.<sup>43</sup> This is not true either. When he warned, in 1934, that British Conservatives would soon look to Germany as a bulwark against communism, this was not a reflection of his own fears. He did, after all, argue strongly for an Anglo-Soviet alliance.

Like other appeasers at the time, Lloyd George was preoccupied with Germany and her grievances. This led to a tendency to diminish the fears and claims of smaller nations such as Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Poland, and to see France as a nuisance who provoked Germany by her unreasonable determination to enforce the peace settlement. This view was, however, largely based on an error of judgement about the relative potential power and military ambitions of France and Germany. While underestimating Germany's inherent strengths and expansionist drive, Lloyd George portrayed the

**While underestimating Germany's inherent strengths and expansionist drive, Lloyd George portrayed the French, who were simply terrified of a resurgent Germany, as aggressive and militaristic.**

French, who were simply terrified of a resurgent Germany, as aggressive and militaristic. It is possible that this was less the result of objective miscalculations – Lloyd George knew the facts and figures as well as anyone – than the workings of a troubled mind. A. J. P. Taylor actually argues that guilty conscience was the main reason for appeasement's appeal in the inter-war years.<sup>44</sup> Lloyd George's brother William was convinced that the slaughter of the Great War – followed by the unsatisfactory peace – had a deep effect on Lloyd George, who clearly came to believe that Britain, if not he himself, had cause to feel guilty about Germany.<sup>45</sup> His misconceptions regarding France and Germany seem to reflect a subconscious wish to tip the scales in Germany's favour in an attempt to atone for what he came to see as the injustices inflicted on Germany after the war.

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