

The Roads that Lead to War

How Europe Treated The Aggressors In The Build-Up To The Second World War And The War In Ukraine

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"My good friends, for the second time in our history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time... Go home and get a nice quiet sleep."

- Neville Chamberlain, 1938

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1.0 Introduction

My interest in the project arose while I was reading a news article. The article was about how the West had been blind to the deception and the aim of the Russian government in the months leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Guardian, 2022). This strongly reminded me of a peace-pursuing policy pushed by the West some 80 years earlier, called “appeasement”. The policy was meant to keep the peace in Europe as the German threat grew, but fell flat. Can the appeasement-policy era be compared to the Euro-Russian relationship in the last decade?

1.2 Thesis Question

The brutality of human nature is a well-known fact – this is clearer than anywhere in Europe. Europe has one of the bloodiest histories, and for our ancestors war was often the normal, not the exception (The Conversation, 2016). However, with industrialization, war also became an industrial affair. After the first devastating industrial-scale war at the beginning of the 20th century, war became more dreaded than ever before (Lawrence, 2003). This could be one of the major reasons why, when faced with another industrial war, the Western powers tried any and every way to prevent a new war. In the end, when every diplomatic possibility had been exploited war was inevitable.

The horror of the Second World War was a lesson that set deep roots in the European consciousness. Many believed this was a lesson so deep that war between major countries in Europe could never happen again. So yet again, European nations tried to secure their ideal of a peaceful Europe when the possibility of a new war grew (SNL, 2021). Per contra, that dream was crushed the moment Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. This led me to dive deeper into what transpired when tensions between countries grew and decide upon writing an article on the issue. *In this article I am going to compare and discuss the West’s treatment of Germany in the lead-up to the Second World War, with the West’s treatment of Russia in the build-up to the War in Ukraine: Can both historical examples be seen as examples of Western Appeasement policy, and what can we learn from this repetition?*

2.0 Background

At the time this article is written Russia and Ukraine have been in a state of war for little over a year, making the issue very relevant to the current event at the time of writing. Taking the timeframe into account the problem debated in this article relatively recently arose. Therefore, to my knowledge, there is not an abundance of previous research on the issue, and it has also not been widely discussed in media outlets. However, I found a few articles previously debating the issue at hand, such as Turkish diplomat Yunus Emre Ozigci's article where he argues for the similarities between the two timelines and what could have caused the likeness in Western strategy (Emre Yunus, 2022).

Firstly, in 1933 Hitler seized power in Germany, and it did not take long before the new Nazi regime started making claims and plans for the German-speaking neighbouring countries. They wanted to unite the Germanic people in one pure realm – or *Reich* (SNL, 2023). This, of course, worried the Western European powers in whose collective memory the devastation of the First World War still stood strong, and where pacifism had flourished (Lawrence, 2003).

Britain, led by prime minister Neville Chamberlain, believed that through cooperation and strong diplomatic ties, another industrial-scale European war could be avoided (SNL, 2021). The idea was that if Hitler's demands and claims were "acceptable" and "reasonable" then an agreement could be reached. In other terms, it was an agreement where they could appease Hitler's demands and save the fragile European peace – this was called "appeasement". 1938 and 1939 were two years marked by continuous secret diplomatic meetings, public conferences, promises, and compromises. Even when Germany continued to break its promises, Britain and the West continued to negotiate. Negotiations continued even after the German Anschluss to Austria¹, and the annexation of Sudetenland as well as the rest of Czechoslovakia² (SNL, 2021). It was not until Germany invaded Poland that the Western countries no longer could ignore the fact that a new world war had become reality.

Secondly, at the beginning of 2022, about 80 years later, Europe was yet again faced with the threat of a new industrial-scale war between European countries. In 1991 the Soviet Union was dissolved, and Ukraine became a sovereign state. In the early post-soviet days Russo-Ukrainian relations stayed close. Nonetheless, relations would worsen in the new century with

¹ Germany annexed Austria with support both in Germany and in Austria in 1938 (Britannica, 2023).

² Through an agreement (the Munich Agreement) Hitler could annex Sudetenland, a German part of Czechoslovakia. Soon after invaded the rest of the country. He did not face much resistance from the West. (Britannica, 2022).

events such as the Ukrainian Orange Revolution³, and election fraud in Ukraine that might have been partly caused by the involvement of the Russian Government (Financial Times, 2022). The Western European countries had a great wish to include and democratize the former Soviet countries. In 2004 many of the previously Russian-controlled countries such as the Baltics, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia became members of the western military alliance NATO⁴ (Atlantic Council, 2021). This new liberal movement of alliances agitated Russia, and the newly renewed geopolitical relations between the West and Russia were strained. Four years later, Russia invaded Georgia - a neighbouring country. Even if the violent actions by the Russian Federation were condemned by several European countries, the West's response was muted, and Russia suffered no major consequences (Atlantic Council, 2021).

Six years later, in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea in Ukraine. Crimea is a peninsula in the Black Sea with deep ties to Russia. Russian forces have controlled the area since the annexation, creating a falling-out with Western powers (SNL, 2023). In addition, Russia financed and supported pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine (Politico, 2022). Creating instability in the country. For the West, it was an eye-opener. Countries near Russia worried about what trend Russia's action could start, and what that could mean for their independence. This time, however, Russia did not go unpunished by the West (CEPA, 2023). Relations worsened, suspicion from both sides grew, and sanctions were imposed. Even so, large-scale bilateral projects such as the North Stream pipeline⁵ continued. At the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 world leaders frequently travelled to Moscow to pursue peace in Europe. Nevertheless, today's leaders returned empty-handed just like Western leaders 80 years prior. Europe was yet again thrust into an industrial-scale war between large European countries.

3.0 Method

My empiricism is found by analysing newspaper articles, letters, and accounts from meetings between world leaders. In the text, I have used content analysis and idea analysis.

3.1 Background for Delimitation

³ A series of protests and political events that took place in Ukraine from late November 2004 to January 2005 following the election (Atlantic Council, 2020).

⁴ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

⁵ North Stream pipeline is a bilateral project between Russia and Western countries. Through the pipeline, oil and gas are imported into Germany (SNL, 2023)

I have used a lot of different sources fitting the different time periods. As for the 1930s Appeasement policy I have mainly used Neville Chamberlain's own notes from meetings with Adolf Hitler and correspondence between foreign offices. In addition, I have used Norwegian national and local newspapers to better understand the mood of the Western population. My original sources for the time leading up to Russia's invasion are mainly news sites and transcripts of conversations. In my opinion, analysing texts written without the critical lens found in later texts is the best way to understand the reasoning behind the policies, and how they were perceived. In my attempt at getting as close as possible to first-hand sources, I have chosen debate articles, conversations, and quotations as the main sources. In the qualitative method, I have mostly used content analysis, but also some idea analysis to better understand the full extent of the issue.

3.1.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a much-used form of analysis. According to Colombia University content analysis is "a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data" (Columbia University, w. d.). This form of analysis allows for a more detailed and deeper understanding of historical document's cultural significance. They can tell us a lot about the cultural, social, political, and historical structures creating the backdrop to events such as the 1930s appeasement policy.

3.1.2. Idea Analysis

I have also used some idea analysis in the project. Idea analysis is used to analyse the thought processes and what motivated the actor's actions and can be a useful tool when dive deeper into why it happened and why people approved or disapproved of it. The reason I chose idea analysis is that it can provide a more detailed basis for understanding the underlying ideas and mindsets that affect the political decisions made in the lead-up to the Second World War and the build-up to the War in Ukraine by Western leaders.

3.2 Theory

When exploring the issue of appeasement from a historical and political perspective it is important to explore possible theories that fit into the issue. I found that at the centre of understanding appeasement are topics focusing on states and on the state system as a source of conflict. One theory often defined by its focus on these topics is the international relations (IR) theory (Emre Yunus, 2022). IR theory is hard to define and has several different

definitions. However, Oxford Bibliographies define IR theory as “a theory that seeks both to explain past state behaviour and to predict future state behaviour” (Oxford Bibliographies, 2019). This is the theory I will be using when writing this article due to its focus on state behaviour and systems that lead to conflict. Appeasement often reappears in comparable, not identical, circumstances. That is why when identifying appeasement policy, we need a theoretical effort.

3.3 Source of Error

In this project, there are a few possible sources of error. One of these has to do with the quality of the newspaper copies. In older newspapers, poor printing can make it difficult to read, as well as give false search results. The other main source of error when analysing historical pieces is misinterpreting the language and cultural references. It is an unquestionable fact that for a contemporary English speaker some words and phrases, common 80 years ago, will no longer be understandable. Therefore, me analysing the time leading up to the Second World War will present itself with more possible sources of errors than in the time leading up to the War in Ukraine - a time I personally remember.

3.4 Ethics

When writing an article, it is important to consider the ethics of what you are writing. In the case of this article bias and the importance of faithfully transcribing the sources are two things to reflect over, which are closely connected to the sources of error. I, as the writer of the article, might be unwillingly biased because I live in a Western Country and therefore view the timelines and consequences with Western eyes, perhaps making it more difficult to see both sides as I am closely connected to one. Another important thing to consider is the transcribing of sources. The question is if they are faithfully transcribed as that is an extremely important part of being able to truly understand the issue. I do believe I have faithfully transcribed the sources, but it is always important to remember the possible unwilling bias and possible sources of error that could affect the article.

4.0 Reflection

In the text below I will reflect upon and discuss the sources I have settled upon. I have chosen five themes that I will centre my reflections around: *The External View and Public Opinion*, *The Internal view and tone from inside the Governments*, *The Power of Fear*, *“Trade Equals*

Peace”, *Appeasement – a slippery slope?* I believe these themes are the most imperative themes to try to understand the thesis question at hand.

4.1 The External View and Public Opinion

How newspapers expressed and reported on the rising international tensions in the time before the Second World War and the War in Ukraine can tell us a lot about public opinion. It can also tell us how the situation was perceived and presented to the population. On the 29th of September 1938, an article was published in the newspaper *Nidaros*, with the title *The Western powers proposal*. The article reports on the then-upcoming Munich Conference⁶ where Germany, Italy, France, and Britain were going to attempt to reach a compromise due to the rising tensions between the countries. “The pessimism after what last happened was relieved with hope, and many now believe that the Munich conference will lead to an extensive European arrangement, not only with regard to the Sudeten-German issue but also with other European issues” (Nidaros, 1938)⁷. Judging from the extract it seems that not only the public still did believe peace was a viable possibility, but also politicians and diplomats. It further states, “The four world power’s heads of government’s decision have stopped the further moral deterioration, – In addition, the sudden turn has sparked renewed hope in all other countries.” (Nidaros, 1938). The article is a conventional example of its time and provides some insight into the opinion of the population. It shows that the continued negotiations created hope and a belief that somehow governments could find an international solution that could protect the European order of peace.

Not unlike the late 1930s the early 2020s public opinion wayed towards a belief that the precarious situation would somehow be solved. There is an abundance of articles and other texts that shows us examples of how the international situation was conveyed to the public in the lead-up to the War in Ukraine. For instance, on the news site Al Jazeera, on the 9th of February 2022, an article was published. Explaining how a Russian invasion of Ukraine was unlikely due to the effects it would have on Russia’s economy. “All these measures, however, will fall within Russia’s cost-effective calculations. That means that a large-scale invasion or war is highly unlikely” (Al Jazeera, 2022). This is one example of the view that even with serious escalation, threats, and severed diplomatic ties, war “would never truly happen”. The reason for this was simple. A war between large European countries had not happened in a

⁶ The Munich Conference was a meeting between fascist Italy and Germany, and Britain and France.

⁷ Translated to English

long time. Therefore, many people believed that the time of European industrial war was over. That is not to say that everyone believed in this slightly naive idea of a post-war international structure, an international structure where war was unthinkable simply because it was so distant, not because of any actual evidence proving it. Others, on the other hand, especially international relations (IR) scholars, believed war was the likely outcome, and thought it wiser to settle upon what would be an appropriate reaction to such aggression. This view was commented upon on the news site Foreign Policy: “A Russian invasion of Ukraine is more likely than not, but significant uncertainty remains. The challenge it faces is to select responses that impose costs on Russia but limit the risks of escalation.” (Foreign Policy, 2022). This doomsday theory had, however, no major public consensus. One conclusion we can draw from this is that even if the IR-scholar’s thinking had some intellectual support most people believed war to be an almost unthinkable outcome.

Another factor worth considering is empathy (Emre Yunus, 2022). The feeling of having been too hard and unfair with Nazi Germany and Russia also affected the public debate. Some people believed that Germany had a right to be bitter over the hard economic conditions imposed on the country after the First World War. The same was the timelines for Russia. In the time after the Cold War they lost considerable amounts of influence and power. This is why some meant they deserved sympathy from the West (Clare, w.d). This might not be one of the most important factors in the appeasement policy era, but helped to build up under the policy’s foundation by creating increased public support.

4.2 The Internal View and Tone from Inside the Governments

To fully comprehend the issue, we need to analyse not only the public perception conveyed by the media, but also what transpired behind closed doors. Here, source material is limited, but we have some transcripts of conversations, notes, and letters.

On the 30th of June 2022, a documentary was aired on French television showing the time leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine from the French government’s perspective (NRK TV, 2022). In the documentary, a phone conversation between French President Emmanuel Macron and Russian President Vladimir Putin was published. The conversation transpired on the 20th of February 2022– four days prior to the invasion. Macron’s tone is calm and attentive as he states his commitment to finding a peaceful solution and a continued dialogue, while his Russian counterpart sounds more and more annoyed and relentless. “You

know my commitment to dialogue. I have a completely different idea of the events of recent days.” (NRK TV, 2022). Putin agrees to this. Further into the conversation, Macron tries to present Putin with rational arguments and the significance of the rule of law principle⁸. However, it seems to have little effect on the Russian president who throughout the call refuses to accept basic facts, such as the sovereignty of Ukraine, democratic ground rules, and rule of law. The tone from both sides turns more heated and frustrated. Even so, Macron advocates for a summit between Russia and the US in neutral Geneva, as well as putting himself completely at Putin’s disposal. “President Biden also considered appropriate ways to de-escalate the situation, taking into account your requirements and clearly approaching NATO and Ukraine. Name a date that suits you.” (NRK TV, 2022). In the end Putin gives a general yes to Marcon’s proposal, but seems rather uninterested saying “Honestly, I was going to play hockey” (NRK TV, 2022).

It is important to note that at the time of the conversation we can assume that Putin had already decided to invade Ukraine. Even with the West having intelligence (The Telegraph, 2022) pointing at this, President Macron still attempts a “cool down strategy”, hoping it could lead to de-escalation. In this case, we can draw a parallel to the 1930s Appeasement policy. This becomes clear when looking at Prime Minister Chamberlain’s notes from a pre-war meeting with Hitler, and a letter written by the British Ambassador in Germany. Not unlike Putin Hitler’s tone is defensive and agitated as he tells Chamberlain: “I want to get down to realities. Three hundred Sudetens have been killed and things of that kind cannot go on; the thing has got to be settled at once.” (Hitler, 1983). The disagreement of ground rules and facts are present in both timelines. The allegations towards the West about the ill-treatment of Separatists (NRK TV, 2022) stated by Putin use almost the same rhetoric as Hitler in his harsh allegation against Czechoslovakia (Hitler, 1938). The is one area that show great likeness in the international relations and is one of the strongest ties between them.

In the source material it is apparent that the Western leaders think the wisest course of action is to remain diplomatic and “gently nudge the ball to Hitler”. In British Ambassador Neville Henderson’s⁹ letter from 1938 he strongly advocates for a friendly approach towards Germany: “I suppose the chances of Hitler coming out at Nuremberg with what will amount to peace or what will amount to war (thunder there is sure to be) are about 50-50. I opt for the

⁸ Rule of law is a principle where all persons, institutioni and the state, are accountable to laws that are equally enforced.

⁹ British Ambassador in Germany.

former. If I am right, I do wish it might be possible to get at any rate the Times, Camrose, Beaverbrook Press, etc to write up Hitler as an apostle of Peace.” (Henderson, 1938). Not long after Henderson wrote the letter, he told Hitler. “On principle, I had nothing to say against the separation of the Sudeten Germans from the rest of Czechoslovakia, provided that the practical difficulties could be overcome.” (Henderson, 1938). His opinion was not unique for its time, quite the opposite. Internally, British authorities generally thought salvaging the peace came ahead of almost everything else – even letting Hitler annex a part of an independent country, such as Czechoslovakia (BBC, w. d.). Historians and political scientist, such as Norrin M. Ripsman, have pointed at the appeasement policy as being a way to gain time to prepare the population, military forces, and infrastructure for industrial warfare (Belfare Center, 2008). Even so, much of the background for the policy has to do with wishful thinking that peace was possible.

The appeasement approach has been extensively criticized in later years. The criticism often points to the Western leaders’ willingness to sacrifice countries of “little importance” far away. Both Czechoslovakia and Georgia are examples of this. The problem, which often is pointed at, is that the West not only ignores countries crossing a red line that is very difficult to rebuild when first broken. More importantly, an “insignificant” country might create a dangerous domino effect. Just like knocking over a stack of domino bricks leads to total collapse, one small insignificant country, such as Georgia or Czechoslovakia, can lead to a devastating collapse of peace and stability. One example of such criticism, can be found in an opinion piece published in the newspaper the Guardian, where Timothy Garton Ash writes “Oh, Adolf Hitler’s threat to Czechoslovakia is “a quarrel in a faraway country, between people of whom we know nothing” – and then we find ourselves in the second world war.” (Guardian, 2022). Another instance comes from Chamberlain’s main anti-appeasement political opponent - Winston Churchill “Appeasement is feeding the crocodile, hoping he will eat you last” (Churchill, 1954).

Although the tone and rhetoric between the leaders look to be fairly similar, there is one important difference in the relationship between the countries. This has to do with the international structure. The time period leading up to the War in Ukraine is unquestionably altered from the time period 80 years earlier in the lead-up to the Second World War (Emre Yunus, 2022). After the First World War, the international structure did not radically change. The structure remained mainly multipolar (coexistence of several major power on the world stage). However, the pre-war international system of order did not survive like the multipolar

structure. The major powers' so-called "qualitative edge" changed. In other words, their strength relative to each other shifted. The reason for this was mainly the weakening of Germany and Russia, due to the harsh conditions in the Treaty of Versailles and the Russian Revolution. With the burden of the Treaty of Versailles, it became almost impossible for Germany to integrate into the new post-war order. This sowed the seed for great bitterness in the German population, something later played upon by Hitler. During the Cold War era, the world had a bipolar structure (two major powers control the world stage), but with the dismemberment of the Soviet Union in the 1990s the structure changed into a post-bipolar/unipolar (one major power dominates the world stage) structure. Also, the order changed into a new post-escalation order. Even if no war or Versailles-like treaty followed the end of the Soviet Union, Russia was thrust into chaos. Consequently, bitterness over the loss of influence grew in Russia, much like in post-war Germany. These two different international structures and orders create two different foundations for possible appeasement policies (Emre Yunus, 2022). This creates a notable difference between the Western pre-war treatment of Nazi Germany and the Russian Federation.

4.3 The Power of Fear

War and conflict have been constant factors in human history. It is believed that the first recorded war in history took place in Mesopotamia c. 2700 BCE (World History, 2008). 4000 years since, countless wars have been fought and most humans have experienced conflict either in close or far proximity. Arguably, the fear of war has followed society just for as long. However, the two world wars fought in the 20th century showed a darker side of mankind than ever seen before, and this might have struck a new deep collective trauma and fear in society (Lawrence, 2003). The collective anxiety for another even larger European industrial-scale war might have been one of the leading causes for the western leaders's willingness to appease the aggressors in the build-up to the Second World War and the Russo-Ukrainian War.

An article in the newspaper *Telemark Arbeiderblad* on the 28th of September 1938 reports upon American President Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt to arrange an international conference with Hitler. In his speech he argues that war has no winner – only losers. "What the world demands from us, who currently are the nation's leaders, is that we fulfill our uppermost duty, that is to lead the nation's destiny without forcing them devastation and

millions of dead. The use of power during the last war did not lead to peace. Victory and defeat were equally fruitless. This knowledge should have taught the world. It is for this reason I send my appeal to you”(Telemark Arbeiderblad, 1938). Roosevelt’s appeal reflects the mood in the Western democratic nations fearing what a new war could bring. However, that is the fear both Hitler and Putin played upon. Hitler played on the Western fear of a new world war, and Putin played on the fear of nuclear holocaust, to pressure democratic leaders to agree to extreme compromises. The collective fear might have driven the Western leaders to go further in their compromises and deals that they ought to have, or would have without the overshadowing anxiety (Clare, J. D., w. d.). The question is, how much do you risk for you principles?

The fear of having to relive the life lived by the earlier generations who lived through the first and second world war was immense. The memory of the horrors that were seen in Europe in the two world wars had created a collective fear. Fear is one of the most powerful components, and this was fully extorted by Nazi-Germany and Russia. The people living in 1930s Europe remembered either in their own lifetime or their parent’s, the devastation the first industrial scale war had brought. So, the thought of having another generation haunted by an even more industrial war was defying. Today’s generation have mostly either grown up during the cold or have parents who did. Because of this the fear of nuclear war between the West and Russia have been a fear carried with us collectively for several generations.

4.4 «Trade Equals Peace»

In a classroom at Yale University in 2022 historian Timothy Snyder is teaching a class, he stated that the greatest lesson Europe learned in the 20th century was just how erroneous war is. Therefore, it must be avoided and the way towards peace was trade. In other words, according to Snyder peace will be secured by dependency (Snyder, 2022): “The lesson was that war is bad. We do not want war. To avoid war, we need trade – dependency” (Snyder, 2022).

In 1990 the Cold War ended and the so-called “iron curtain” fell¹⁰. In the years that followed, Western countries attempted to include the new Russian Federation in the international market and order. After decades of little to no contact many democratic leaders believed the

¹⁰ Symbol of the division between West and East

most effective way to bring Russia into the fold was trade. Dependency between the West and the East was meant to build bridges, but it might have ended up as a roadblock for Western leverage against Russian aggression (Snyder, 2022).

The country that went furthest in its attempt to trade with Russia was Germany. According to Snyder Germany felt that it had a special role to play in anchoring Russia to the West. This was because of the country's history of being a country split between the West and East. For many years Russia has been Germany's primary source of gas and oil imports (Snyder, 2022). To increase trade and dependency has in recent years become Germany's principal apparatus in democratizing and incorporating Russian society into the West. The Germans believed this could prevent a new cold war between the West and Russia (Jensen, 2013). As the German foreign minister said on several occasions "German foreign policy is peace policy" (Jensen, 2013). This statement is an evident example of the undoubted German understanding of their trade policy towards Russia. In addition, a survey showed that approximately 72% of Germans were positive about further expansion in the energy partnership with Russia (Jensen, 2013). Creating trade dependency to Russia was widely supported in German society. The most distinguished case is the North Stream Pipeline. Opened in 2011, the North Stream project between Russia and Western countries stands as a testimony to the European Russian integration attempt. These pipelines were meant to be a guarantee for free flow of Russian gas to central Europe (Jensen, 2013). In 2009 then-chancellor Schröder stated that the pipelines were of vital importance for the continued stability in Europe: "Nord Stream is an extremely important project to strengthen the energy security not only of Germany but of all of Europe" (Jensen, 2013).

However, the pipelines that were meant to connect Russia to the West by creating dependency, that would make escalation "unthinkable", had instead created a difficult dilemma for Western countries. The North Stream project had done exactly what it was meant to do – create dependency. The only problem was that this dependency was misused by the Russian government, who rather used it to pressure the West to accept Russia's aggressive advances. Cutting the pipelines would cause great damage to the Western countries' own economies. Therefore, even if the Western leaders in the end saw it fit to stop the flow in the pipelines, and with that taking a notable economic hit, it had delayed and spilt the countries in their united front against Russia (Snyder, 2022). With that said, you could argue that through trade connections Russia "forced" the West into appeasement, as sanctions would be as painful to their own populations, as to the Russian population.

Trade dependency was an important factor in the lead-up to the Russo-Ukrainian War, but it was, however, not as dominant a factor in the lead-up to the Second World War. As earlier mentioned, Germany struggled to integrate into the new post-war order and trade market due to the tough conditions imposed on Germany by the Versailles peace treaty. These conditions entailed weakening Germany's economy, military, and landmass. Thus, an attempt at securing peace through trade dependency between major Western powers and Germany was never made. That is not to say that trade relations did not play a part in the Second World War, but it was not used as an important tool in securing a peaceful Europe (SNL, 2023).

History might judge Germany's trade dependency policy towards Russia as trivial or ill-advised, but the fact is that trade is a sign of trust between partners. And that can be an important tool in integrating nations into the international order. However, as it became apparent with Russia, creating too close bonds of trade and dependency can become a treacherous affair. The question is if a golden mean of trade and dependency exists when faced with countries that could become a threat to the international order.

4.5 Appeasement – a slippery slope?

In the Macmillan Dictionary, a red line is described as “a limit beyond which someone must not go without facing severe consequences.” (Macmillan Dictionary, w. d.). However, when a red line is crossed, and no major consequences are served you set out on a dangerous path. Since if the red line was defied and ignored before, why would it be upheld the next time? This could be one of the major problems with the appeasement policy.

Appeasement is about one actor appeasing another actor on an issue of escalation (SNL, 2021). However, it is a dangerous balancing act. If you refuse to attempt a compromise the risk is high for immediate conflict, possibly costing millions of lives. On the other hand, if you give too much you might face an equally horrid situation of mass destruction, at the same time as showing aggressive leaders that you can be pushed and giving them “the power”. This balancing act can quickly lead to a slippery slope.

There is a connection between the timeline of the West's treatment of Russia in the lead-up to the Russian invasion and the timeline of their treatment of Germany in the build-up to the Second World War. One important similarity between the timelines concerns the precarious side effect of ignoring leaders such as Putin and Hitler crossing the red lines put up by the

West. When ignoring, such a breach, both timelines entered a cycle of escalation-empathy-appeasement that defined the diplomatic relationship between the pre-existing international system supported by the democratic Western countries, and the system-challenger, in these timelines Nazi-Germany and the Russian Federation. The system-challenger's goal is often wanting to create a new world order to their benefit. The cycle between these parties creates a damaging centrifugal effect on the international order. In this cycle, the Western countries gradually sacrificed principles essential to uphold the international order. Consequently, they free the system-challenger from having to compromise, and in the process weaken their own relevance and strength (Emre Yunus, 2022).

On the 30th of September 1938, a momentous conference was held in the town of Munich. During the conference, Germany, Italy, France, and Britain reached a settlement allowing Nazi Germany to annex Sudetenland in Western Czechoslovakia (Britannica, 2021). This an area that inhabited around three million German-speaking or ethnic Germans. Therefore, in Hitler's opinion, the area had to be included in the "new German Reich". Britain and France, who were deeply opposed to full-scale war, agreed to not assist the Czechoslovakians if Hitler invaded. In return Hitler promised his advances would stop following Sudetenland. Half a year later Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia, and in September, a little under a year after the agreement, Britain and France were at war with Germany following the German invasion of Poland (Britannica, 2021). This settlement is the most unmistakable example of Appeasement policy in action.

Today it is apparent that Prime Minister Chamberlain's speech claiming, "peace in our time" (Chamberlain, 1938) did not stand the test of time. The objective of the Western leaders to guard the peace in Europe was left unfilled. There are several things that point at Hitler assuming that Britain and France would not come to Poland's aid, even with them having promised to do so. In Nazi Germany's mind the West had given them an all-clear with the Munich agreement, and now they were "free" to do as they like without diplomacy. In the timeline of the 1930s appeasement policy, I believe we can conclude that the policy became a slippery slope into a new devastating industrial-scale war.

Exactly 70 years after the Munich agreement, the Western nations were yet again faced with a momentous situation. In 2008, a little over 20 years after the end of the Cold War, an event took place that in retrospect might have foreshadowed what the world became aware of 14 years later with the Russo-Ukrainian War. In August 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, a former Soviet state in Eastern Europe. The invasion was the culmination of a long-standing conflict

between the two countries. Following a Georgian military operation in the breakaway region of South Ossetia, Russia initiated a full-scale invasion both into the breakaway region and into Georgian-controlled territory. The invasion lasted for five days leaving chaos in the country (Atlantic Council, 2021).

The War between Russia and Georgia had been viewed as a historic event in the shift from the post-soviet era of cooperation between Russia and the West, to today's cold-war climate. Yet, even if the invasion was a shift in geopolitical relations, the West's response has been described as slow, weak, and all in all muted (Atlantic Council, 2021). The terms of the ceasefire fronted by French President Nicolas Sarkozy contained no extensive consequences toward Russia. The US, who condemned the invasion, discontinued their token of support only one year later with a "reset" in their relationship with Russia. The signal the West's actions sent to the Kremlin was that the Western countries would rather stay passive and ignore their own red lines. This is yet another example that shows great likeness to the build-up to the Second World War.

Concluding reflection

In this historical-political research project, I attempted to compare and discuss the West's treatment of Germany in the lead-up to the Second World War, with the West's treatment of Russia in the build-up to the War in Ukraine. In the introduction I posed the question *Can both historical examples be seen as examples of Western Appeasement policy, and what can we learn from this repetition?* Having compared and analysed the similarities and differences, I believe we can draw a parallel between the Western treatment of Russia in the build-up to the War in Ukraine and the Western powers treatment of Germany in the lead-up to the Second World War.

The two historical timelines are both defined by a cycle of escalation-empathy-appeasement (Emre Yunus, 2022). This is a cycle apparent in the bilateral relationship between the international system represented by the Western countries, and the system challenger who is opposing the international order and system (Nazi Germany and the Russian Federation). The Western powers, set upon upholding peace in Europe, tried to negotiate and compromise with the system challenger to achieve a peaceful world order. The most significant incident to back up the 1930s appeasement policy in action is the Munich conference, and what transpired following the agreement. The Munich agreement stated that Britain and France would not

support Czechoslovakia if Germany invaded German-speaking Sudetenland. In addition, later these countries chose to let the German dictator get away with invading the rest of Czechoslovakia, even though it was a breach of the agreement. This is an undoubtedly example of Western leaders going to great lengths to uphold the international system of diplomacy and dialogue when faced with a leader with a completely different understanding of basic facts.

The cycle towered over the Western power's foreign policies, leading them to draw up red lines and points of no-return, but on several occasions ignoring it when the system challenger crossed it. This, in the end, led to a situation where further appeasement was no longer possible. I believe this also was the case in the lead-up to the War in Ukraine. This time, again one incident stands out – the Russian invasion of Georgia. Western countries failed to act and did not take a strong stand against Russian aggression, opening for such an event to be repeated (Crimea in 2014).

The reasons why Western countries put such a significant effort into protecting peace are many and complex. In this project, I have reflected on some reasons for this anti-aggression policy. One example is the collective anxiety for a new devastating conflict that was an outspread phenomenon in Western countries both in the 1930s and in the 2020s following the First World War's devastation and the threat of nuclear war. In 1930s Western Europe pacifism flourished and many, both politicians and the public, strongly believed the mistakes that lead to the millions of dead in the First World War had to be avoided at almost any cost. In the 2020s, pacifism was not as outspread as in the lead-up to the Second World War, but a war against Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) had been feared ever since the mid-1940s. That is one of the reasons why the appeasement policy had considerable public and intellectual support in both timelines.

Nevertheless, the periods of escalation are not identical. The lead-up to the Second World War and the War in Ukraine took place in two different time periods. In other words, the international system and order anno 2022 and anno 1939 have considerable differences. In 1939 the world had a multipolar international structure, with many countries having a lead role internationally. However, in 2022 the world had a unipolar (or at least a post-bipolar) international structure. In addition, the Western countries had created close trade relations with Russia after the Cold War. Many European countries, such as Germany, had become dependent on Russian gas imports. The idea behind the close trade connections might have been to create mutual dependency to intergrade and democratize Russia, leading to a stable

peace in Europe. This was, however, not the timeline of the Western-German relations in the build-up to the Second World War. Germany had been heavily affected by the Treaty of Versailles, making integration into the new post-war order difficult. The Western countries had wanted to minimize Germany's power, instead of including Germany in the international market, such as Western countries attempted with post-soviet Russia. These factors created two quite different foundations for appeasement policy attempts.

To answer the thesis question at hand *Can both historical examples be seen as examples of Western Appeasement policy, and what can we learn from this repetition?* I believe the answer is affirmative. There are great similarities between the Western treatment of Nazi Germany and Russia, who both are examples of system-challenging regimes. Therefore, even if there are some differences, especially connected to trade dependency and international structure and order, the resemblance is striking. For that reason, I believe calling the Western treatment of the Russian Federation in the build-up to the War in Ukraine a modern appeasement policy would be a correct definition. To answer the second part of the thesis question is a more difficult task. History has shown us that diplomacy is an essential part in upholding a stable and peaceful international order, but the question is to what length. I believe that the research shows that appeasement policy can be a useful tool and, in some cases even a necessary one, to start a dialogue and hopefully de-escalation when faced with system-challenging regimes. That is not to say that appeasement always has had a positive outcome. The danger with appeasement policy is getting trapped in the cycle of escalation-empathy-appeasement, becoming blind to the red lines crossed in the process. Countries that ignore system-challenging regimes crossing their own red lines set out on a dangerous path. That is because when the aggressive part no longer seriously considers threats and other red lines coming from these democratic countries, you often end up in a situation that in many cases ends in conflict. In my opinion, this shows that appeasement policy has an apparent connection to the IR theory and can therefore be characterized as a part of this theory. With that said we can conclude with saying that appeasement policy is a difficult balancing act attempted by Western leaders both in the lead-up to the Second World War and the War in Ukraine.

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