

BOOK REVIEW

## David French. *Deterrence, Coercion, and Appeasement: British Grand Strategy, 1919–1940*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 634. \$115.00 (cloth) and G.C. Peden. *Churchill, Chamberlain and Appeasement*

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Eighty-plus years since its failure, the British policy of appeasement of Nazi Germany in the 1930s is still controversial. Debates continue—especially in works aimed at general audiences—about why and how it was pursued, whether it was doomed from the start, and what its short- and long-term consequences for Britain and the world were. This debate has been joined once again, this time by two well-established scholars. David French and G.C. Peden have provided excellent contributions to our understanding of British foreign and defense policy leading up to World War II. French covers the entirety of the interwar period, while Peden focuses specifically on the 1930s. Key individuals and institutions are well covered in each of their works. Politics and public opinion are considered, along with behind-the-scenes government work in Whitehall. Significant diplomatic and imperial issues are investigated, economic interests and limitations are addressed, and defense debates are all discussed in depth.

David French's *Deterrence, Coercion, and Appeasement: British Grand Strategy, 1919–1940* is a detailed examination of interwar British grand strategy where he delineates three distinct phases of British policy development. First, the post-World War I decade, which was marked by a general political consensus around support for constructive diplomacy, disarmament, and a new international order based on the League of Nations. Second, the six years between the onset of the Great Depression to the developing foreign policy challenges to that order from Hitler's Third Reich. Last, the three-year period of Chamberlain's ascendancy as prime minister and, after Dunkirk, his support of Churchill's decision to fight Germany without allies.

French's research is thoroughly grounded in the official papers of Britain's foreign and defense policy establishments, the papers of prominent political figures and the cabinet office, as well as the rich historiographical literature covering the interwar period.

His new tome builds on his previous monographs on the grand strategy during World War I—*British Strategy and War Aims, 1914–1916* (1986) and *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916–1918* (1995). In the latter book, French concludes with the reflection that British policymakers in the interwar years did not fully understand how important international prestige was to its policy. In this book, he amends this, at least in part, with regard to British strategic thinking in the 1920s.

French's approach demonstrates the wide range of challenges that British statesmen had to address, if not fully resolve, in the two decades between the wars. He attempts to answer

three main questions about interwar strategic planning: “what was British grand strategy, how did British policymakers go about devising it, and why were the outcomes so much more successful in the 1920s than they were in the 1930s?” (2).

French points out that there were significant continuities between the wartime and immediate postwar political leaders—David Lloyd George, Arthur Balfour, Lord Curzon, Austen Chamberlain, and Winston Churchill—who were able to skillfully navigate the “new diplomacy.” They were experienced, willing to fuse traditional approaches with new international institutions and movements (especially arms limitation), and in step with public opinion. During this period, they successfully negotiated the Washington and London Naval Treaties, the Locarno Pact, and various local agreements, all consistent with balancing threats through active diplomacy and appropriate defense measures.

By the early thirties, these leaders had either died, stepped back from ministerial responsibilities, or, as in the cases of Lloyd George and Churchill, were too polarizing. Though they had held power in the twenties, the leaders of the national governments—Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin, and Neville Chamberlain—had not served in high office during the war and were apt to follow, rather than shape, public opinion. These factors contributed to hindering the development of an effective grand strategy.

French asserts that MacDonald and, especially, Baldwin and Chamberlain misread public opinion, accepting those general views that supported their policies, rather than delving into the specific varieties of opinion that challenged them. For instance, Baldwin famously claimed in November 1936 that the national government did not fight the 1935 election on a platform of rearmament as there was little public support for such a position (and the government might, therefore, have lost the election). French demonstrates that the evidence is more complex and simply does not support Baldwin’s assertion. Instead, French argues, “What is not ambiguous is that British public opinion was distinctly malleable by the middle of 1935, and that it might have been possible to steer it towards a greater degree of defense preparedness had ministers been willing to give a stronger lead” (321).

French also notes that, of the three, Chamberlain was more willing to review Britain’s preparedness and had already begun to assert his views in 1934. In late 1934, he dominated committee deliberations and controlled defense spending by supporting an offensive air strategy and trimming navy and army requests. By late 1937, Chamberlain shifted from a British grand strategy based on the construction of a bomber force against a possible German air attack to an alternative strategy of the defense of the home islands through the use of fighter aircraft and the prospect of early radio detection of incoming enemy planes. This new approach was both economical and well-suited to Chamberlain’s developing notions of appeasement and grand strategy. It assumed that if war did come, it would be a potentially long war, with British strategy to be based on an effective naval blockade, a robust French defense across the channel, financial and commercial strength, and air defenses. However, this “Fortress Britain” approach left Chamberlain without an effective response to Hitler’s aggressive moves in central Europe, against Austria and Czechoslovakia. The prime minister was more successful in containing political opposition at home than addressing these increasing new threats abroad.

Any summary of French’s impressive research would fall short of its detailed analysis of the flawed strategic thinking and political leadership of the 1930s. French’s arguments are methodically laid out and well supported throughout. He is critical of the troika that led the national governments of the 1930s, asserting that Britain’s political leaders in the 1920s were confident in Britain’s power and influence in the world, while MacDonald, Baldwin, and Chamberlain were not. He points out that Britain’s power was not in decline; rather, they—and Chamberlain, in particular—“did not know how to wield it” (571). As a result, the war that they had sought to prevent, came; and when it came, much of the “Fortress Britain” approach would collapse by the summer of 1940.

G.C. Peden’s *Churchill, Chamberlain and Appeasement* is an excellent, tightly argued overview of the leading policymakers and events of the 1930s, during the ascendancy of Chamberlain’s

influence on British cabinet politics. Peden has tackled some of these issues before, though from very different lenses. His first monograph, on *British Rearmament and the Treasury, 1932–1939* (1979), focused on the tensions between the rising demands for increased defense spending and the management of government finances during the prewar years. He also published two more broad-based studies which help inform his work here—*The Treasury and British Public Policy, 1906–1959* (2000) and *Arms, Economics and British Strategy: From Dreadnoughts to Hydrogen Bombs* (2007). As with French, he is well prepared to tackle the questions he raises in his current work.

After providing a helpful introduction to the historiographical debates surrounding appeasement, Peden discusses the key figures and institutions in the decision-making process. These chapters provide an important foundation for the assessments that follow. Peden next explores the difficulties faced by the national governments during the depression years. Led initially by the former Labour leader, MacDonald and, subsequently, by Baldwin, this Conservative-dominated coalition applied itself to meeting the challenges of the economic crisis that brought it to power. In such circumstances, the role of the Chancellor of the Exchequer would be a significant one. Chamberlain, who became Chancellor in late 1931, brought determination and energy to the national governments. These traits made him the dominant member of the government and the obvious successor to Baldwin, whom he replaced in 1937.

Peden's approach has some similarities to French's. Peden's focus on the thirties means that the interpretation is limited to the actions of the national governments. He does a very good job setting out the various crises that arose, as well as the main limits faced by the government, along the way. By the late 1930s, Chamberlain and Churchill, a critic of the appeasement of Germany, were the most significant senior politicians still active in politics. Though there were areas of agreement between them, Peden points to some significant differences.

Peden uses this organization to lay out Chamberlain's ideas and actions, then discusses the ways in which Churchill either agreed or disagreed with his rival. A good deal of the latter analysis provides an opportunity for Peden to demonstrate that there were areas of close agreement between the two men (they both hoped to keep Mussolini in the mix as a potential counterweight against Hitler; they, for different reasons, believed that Britain should stay out of the civil war in Spain). On other points, Peden examines Churchill's alternatives in a manner that comes close to being counterfactual in nature. This is especially true in considering Churchill's advocacy of a commitment to France and Czechoslovakia in 1938, as well as his advocacy of an alliance with the Soviet Union. In this latter case, Peden's alternative analysis falls a little short. Suggesting that "Churchill's experience of dealing with Stalin [in and after the Second World War] suggests that an alliance with the Soviet Union in 1938 or 1939 would have entailed ruthless realpolitik at the expense of the states on its border" (304) seems to be highly speculative and based on a contextual equivalency that is unprovable. To his credit, Peden does later admit that this is very much open to debate (318).

More importantly, what is obscured in this crisis-by-crisis catalogue of agreements and disagreements between the two men's points of view is how Chamberlain consistently believed that he could successfully negotiate with Hitler. Churchill distrusted Hitler's intentions and pushed for rearmament and alliances as the only effective counters to the German dictator. We know how Chamberlain's efforts turned out, not only in 1939, but up to May 10, 1940, and in its immediate aftermath. We will never know, however, whether Churchill's ideas would have worked out. In his conclusion, Peden also draws a moral equivalency between the Hoare-Laval Pact and the Munich Agreement (the first of which "Churchill implicitly endorsed"; the second, he opposed, 316). But this seems a bit off point. For Churchill, there *were* differences between the two attempts at appeasement. His focus was on Europe and the threat from Hitler, which he viewed as more immediate and dangerous to Britain and its allies.

These caveats aside, Peden provides us with a valuable assessment of the key issues in the 1930s, the recent historiography about them, and a willingness to provide the reader with an understanding of the policy options between Chamberlain and Churchill. This is a highly analytical and thought-provoking monograph.

French and Peden cover a good deal of common ground. French is more critical, especially with his assertion that the national governments failed to take their concerns to the British people that Nazi Germany and its allies posed an existential threat to Britain, that Britain had to seriously begin to rearm and seek alliances on the continent, and that successful grand strategy required the effective balancing of defense, diplomacy, and finance. In short, though it had taken early steps toward developing some sort of grand strategy, that strategy did not fully provide the security it was intended to achieve. Peden, though not uncritical, is balanced while exploring the limits and challenges that confronted Chamberlain.

These two works are welcome additions to the vast literature on British appeasement. The French book is more wide-ranging and well-grounded in a wide array of government reports and a vast secondary scholarly literature. The Peden monograph is effectively focused on the key issues and historiography of appeasement. In tandem, they augment and contrast each other quite nicely.

One final note. Both books are well produced—they are, literally, weighty tomes. On the editing side, one wishes that the French monograph had been more closely reviewed. There are a number of spelling errors (including a good many references to “Chamberlin,” as opposed to “Chamberlain”); given the centrality of that figure in the book, this is distracting) and some parts of sentences are missing words or repeat a few three- or four-word passages. The scholarly heft of the book deserves better.