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Revision

Britain and appeasement, 1919–40: Unit HIS2J (p. 30)

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You can use this material, alongside the AQA exam focus on p. 30 of this issue, to help you revise this topic. Here, an alternative example answer to the question has been provided, and some commentary assessing the answer has been supplied.

Question

(a) Explain why the British government took no military action over the invasion of the Rhineland in 1936. (12 marks)

(b) ‘The British government followed a policy of appeasing Germany between 1937 and 1939 because it feared a military defeat.’ Explain why you agree or disagree with this view. (24 marks)

Example answer to part (a)

Relations had improved with Germany since the war. The Locarno Treaties and Kellogg-Briand Pact had removed tension and Germany was no longer regarded as a threat. The borders of Germany were fixed and agreed while the major powers, including both Britain and Germany, agreed to resolve future disputes by means other than war.

Many within the British government believed that the Treaty of Versailles was too harsh on Germany. German rearmament from 1933 and the Naval Agreement in 1935 were examples of the British government allowing Germany to break certain parts of the treaty. The Naval Agreement decided that the German Navy could be 35% the size of the British Navy, a level that the British government thought was no threat. The remilitarisation of the Rhineland was another example. It was regarded by many in Britain as a reasonable and acceptable way that Germany could secure her own borders, merely ‘walking into her own back yard’.

The Depression of the 1930s left Britain in a weak economic state. A lack of military expenditure gave the impression that Britain was unable to fight, although this was perhaps an underestimation relative to Germany’s still-developing military. Hitler ordered his troops to withdraw if they faced resistance but the British government did not know this. Instead, they thought that the German Army would be able to push back any foreign force that tried to stop them in the Rhineland, or at least cause enough casualties to remind people of the suffering of the First World War.

Comments

The answer to part (a) certainly has plenty of knowledge in it. The student is well aware of what the Locarno Treaties, Kellogg-Briand Pact and Naval Agreement were all about. However, look again at

the question. Has the student really answered it? They've included a lot of information, most of which is relevant, but they haven't linked it to the question. Instead, it is just a description of Europe in the 1930s, which means that the answer cannot be given more than 6 marks.

Example answer to part (b)

As the 1930s developed and Hitler continued to follow an expansionist foreign policy, a European war began to look more likely. Aware of this, the British government began to make preparations for war, rearming and reforming the military after a number of years of decline. In 1936, the Air Raid Precautions Department was set up, and the following year the minister for the coordination of defence published a review of air defences. As a result of this, a call for air raid wardens produced a million volunteers and the 1938 Air Raid Precautions Act made local authorities responsible for war contingency plans and gas masks were handed out. By 1939, 120,000 volunteers had joined the Auxiliary Fire Service. This evidence shows that Britain feared the military power of Germany and was anxiously rushing to prepare for war from 1936 onwards.

Yet, despite all these preparations, politicians still thought that Britain was not ready to fight Germany and needed more time to prepare. The ominous warning of Stanley Baldwin that 'the bomber will always get through' was still at the forefront of people's minds. In 1936, the Joint Services Planning Committee predicted that Germany's first attacks against Britain would be 'knock-out blows'. By 1938, the defence advisor warned that Britain would still not be ready for 6 or 12 months, especially because the radar network would not be ready until 1939. As such, British politicians felt that they had no choice but to appease Hitler, otherwise a military defeat was inevitable.

As it turns out, much of this belief was wrong. The German military was weaker than the British leadership thought and it is unlikely that Hitler could have launched the knock-out blows against Britain that they feared. Nevertheless, the fear of military defeat, although wrong, was the major motivating factor behind appeasing Hitler over the Anschluss and the Sudetenland.

It is true that Britain appeased Germany between 1937 and 1939 because they feared a military defeat. Although the fear of defeat was exaggerated, it was still the major factor behind their actions.

Comments

This answer would receive 16 marks out of 24. It's certainly very good in places. Look at the last sentence in each of the first three paragraphs. The student relates the points made in the paragraph back to the question. This is a good way of making sure that an answer keeps on track rather than straying off into irrelevance. It also has excellent factual knowledge. Look at the many dates and events included in the first two paragraphs — this student has obviously done his/her revision.

So why isn't the mark higher? It's because the answer is one-sided. The student has looked at the fear of military defeat as a cause of appeasement, but hasn't considered any other factors. What about the influence of public opinion? That was a major factor too. What about the idea that Hitler's Germany was a barrier against the incursion of Communism from the east? That also played a contributing role.

Total mark

The total mark for this answer is 22 marks out of 36, which would be a borderline grade B/C.

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