Appeasement, 1936–1939

Give way to keep the peace, or stand firm and risk war? Five crises from the Rhineland to Poland

Grades 9–12	50–60 min	World History	Two ways to run it
and AP World / AP European	one class period	Government & Civics	Plan A free · Plan B Teacher Plus

Choose one plan

Plan A (free): every student plays solo practice on their own device, leading one country while the computer plays the rest. Nothing to set up and no accounts. **Plan B (Teacher Plus):** the live class game. Seven teams join with codes, share four jobs, negotiate face to face and propose deals on their devices; you run the rounds and the projector shows the crisis, the newspapers, the map and the standings.

Content note

Students may lead Nazi Germany's government, or any of six other countries, through the crises of 1936–1939. The game models diplomacy, military readiness and public opinion; it does not depict the Holocaust, persecution or combat, and German newspapers in the game are labeled propaganda. Before play, remind students that playing a government is a way to understand its decisions, not to admire them, and plan to discuss the Nazi regime's crimes in the debrief or the next lesson.

History to know before you play

After World War I, the Treaty of Versailles limited Germany's army and kept German troops out of the Rhineland. Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 promising to overturn the treaty. Britain and France, still scarred by the last war and facing economic depression, were reluctant to fight. The Soviet Union distrusted both sides. Students need only this much; each round's front page gives the rest.

Overview

Students lead Germany, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, Italy, Poland or Czechoslovakia through five crises: the Rhineland (1936), the Anschluss (1938), the Sudetenland and Munich (1938), Prague (1939) and Danzig and Poland (1939). Each round Germany may make a demand; every country chooses how to respond, takes one action, makes deals and decides how its press tells the story. If anyone resists, the crisis becomes a game of chicken: Germany backs down or holds firm, and the resisting democracies fight or climb down.

The rules are a model, built so that the choices of the 1930s feel hard: early concessions are popular and cheap, resisting costs a government support unless the public is on board, Germany may secretly plan to break its promises, and rearming costs popularity now but matters later. Most games end close to what happened; some end very differently. Either way, the debrief asks students to compare their game with history.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain what appeasement was and why British and French leaders chose it in 1936–1938 (fear of another world war, public opinion, economic weakness, the belief that Versailles was too harsh, overestimates of German strength).
- Describe the main crises of 1936–1939 in order, and what each gave Germany (the Rhineland, Austria, the Sudetenland and its border forts, the Czech arms industry, the pact with the Soviet Union).
- Explain why Britain and France guaranteed Poland in March 1939, and why the Soviet Union signed the Nazi–Soviet Pact in August 1939.
- Evaluate whether appeasement was a mistake, using evidence from the game and from history, and recognize that historians disagree.

Standards covered

STANDARD	WHAT STUDENTS DO
CA HSS 10.8.1	The German, Italian and Japanese drives for empire in the 1930s, including the Stalin–Hitler Pact of 1939
CA HSS 10.8.2	The role of appeasement, nonintervention (isolationism) and domestic distractions in Europe and the United States before World War II
CA HSS HI 1	Show the connections between particular historical events and larger social, economic and political trends
CA HSS HI 4	Recognize that interpretations of history are subject to change as new information is uncovered
C3 D2.His.14.9-12	Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past
C3 D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past

Summaries. Official text: California History–Social Science Content Standards; California History–Social Science Analysis Skills, grades 9–12; C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards (NCSS).

Before class

- Play one solo game yourself as Britain (about 25 minutes). Then skim one as Germany: the secret pledges make sense once you have seen both sides.
- Print the **debrief worksheet** (free) if students will write on paper, or let them answer the in-game debrief and hand in the PDF.
- Decide how students hand in work: the game makes one PDF on each student's device (certificate, debrief answers, and a list of every decision they made).

Plan A · Free: solo practice

0–8 min Hook	• Show the 1938 "Peace for our time" front page (in the game) or a photo of Chamberlain at Heston. Ask: *Would you have cheered?* Take a quick show of hands. • Define appeasement in one sentence. Tell students they will lead a country and decide for themselves.
8–10 min Assign countries	• Assign countries so every one is played, with extra students on Britain, France and Germany. Students open the game, read the case file and their goal.
10–40 min Play	• Students play all five rounds (about 5 minutes a round). • Circulate. Useful questions: *What does your public think? What happens if Germany's pledge is broken? Who could stop Germany, and what would it cost them?*
40–50 min The reveal and discussion	• Ask who met their goal, by country. Ask Germany players how many pledges they secretly meant to break. • Map the class's outcomes on the board (war over Poland, early war, Germany contained, no war). Compare with the real sequence.
50–60 min Debrief	• Students answer the three debrief questions in the game (or on the worksheet) and download their PDF. Finish at home if needed.

Plan B · Teacher Plus: the class game (in preview)

Seven teams join with a code for each country (or one class code) and take jobs: Leader, Diplomat, Press Officer and Military Chief (with fewer students, one student holds two jobs). Each job has its own screen, and every teammate sees the others' choices live, with hints. Diplomats negotiate face to face, then propose deals on their devices; the other team's Leader accepts or refuses. Each member locks in; you end the round. If anyone resists Germany, the right Leader decides on their device (war or climb down) while the projector shows who is deciding. The computer plays any job or country without students. Each team's secrets (Germany's readiness and hidden promises) reach only that team's devices and your screen. Students never type a name until their own PDF, which stays on their device.

0–5 min Case file	• Open the class game and choose students per country and how they get seats. Project the case file. Teams join at simhistory.org/appeasement and pick jobs.
5–45 min Five rounds	• About 8 minutes a round: briefing on the projector (1), team decisions and negotiation (4–5), lock in, then End the round. Read the front pages aloud (1–2). The 1936 round is quick. Not finished at the bell? Save game, and open it next period.

45–60 min Reveal and debrief	• After Poland, click The reveal: every goal and secret pledge, and the readiness chart. Students answer the debrief on their devices and download one PDF (certificate, then answers) to hand in.

Answer key: what really happened

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENED	WHAT GERMANY GAINED
7 Mar 1936	German troops march into the demilitarized Rhineland. France and Britain protest but do not act.	A defensible western border; confidence
12–13 Mar 1938	German troops enter Austria; the Anschluss is proclaimed. Italy, which had defended Austria in 1934, does nothing.	Austria's people, gold and industry; Czechoslovakia surrounded on three sides
29–30 Sep 1938	Munich: Britain, France and Italy agree that Germany takes the Sudetenland. Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union are not at the table. Hitler signs a declaration with Chamberlain ("peace for our time").	The Czech border forts; about three million people
15 Mar 1939	German troops occupy Prague; Bohemia and Moravia become a "protectorate". Hitler has broken the Munich promise.	The Czech arms industry (Škoda) and the Czech army's weapons
31 Mar 1939	Britain and France guarantee Poland's independence.	—
22 May 1939	Germany and Italy sign the Pact of Steel.	An ally
Aug 1939	British and French talks in Moscow stall: Poland will not let the Red Army cross its land.	—
23 Aug 1939	The Nazi–Soviet Pact, with a secret protocol dividing Eastern Europe (denied by the USSR until 1989).	No two-front war
1–3 Sep 1939	Germany invades Poland; Britain and France declare war on 3 September. The Soviet Union invades eastern Poland on 17 September.	—

What a strong debrief answer notices

- Appeasement was popular when it happened, and resisting early had real costs: there was no guarantee the public would support war, or that Germany would back down.
- Each concession made Germany stronger: the Sudeten forts and the Czech arms industry mattered.
- The turning point in public opinion was Prague, when a promise was broken.
- Historians disagree: some argue appeasement bought Britain time to rearm (radar, fighters); others argue that 1938 was a better moment to fight, with the Czech army and forts still in place.

Assessment

- **Formative:** Plan A: the list of decisions in each student's PDF. Plan B: listen to team discussions while they decide; the debrief's third question asks how the team coordinated.
- **Summative:** the three debrief answers. Suggested rubric for each answer (4 points): names a specific moment from the game (1), uses an accurate historical fact or date (1), explains a cause or consequence (1), clear writing (1).
- **Suggested weighting:** taking part (and, in Plan B, justifications) 40%, debrief 60%. Never the game score: the countries have different goals, and some are much harder.

Accuracy notes

- The numbers in the game are a model, not historical data. Its job is to make the choices of 1936–1939 feel hard. Students should not quote game numbers as history.
- Front pages marked "Dramatized" were made for the game; some show events that never happened. Each has a caption saying what really happened.
- The map is a schematic diagram, not to scale.
- Whether Hitler would have withdrawn from the Rhineland if France had resisted is disputed.

Sources

- California Department of Education, History–Social Science Content Standards (10.8.1, 10.8.2).
- Yale Law School, The Avalon Project: Munich Agreement (1938); Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the USSR, with Secret Additional Protocol (1939).
- Hansard, House of Commons debates, 31 March 1939 (the assurance to Poland).
- U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1939, vol. I.
- Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939* (1984). Wesley Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy* (1985).
- International Churchill Society, *Finest Hour* 162: "Munich in Retrospect: Was It Better to Fight in 1938?"
- Standards: California Department of Education; National Council for the Social Studies (C3 Framework). Linked above.

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