

‘Guilty Women’, Foreign Policy, and Appeasement in Inter-War Britain

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For more than 75 years the historiographical debate surrounding the appeasement policy of the 1930s has centred upon the notorious 1940 publication *Guilty Men*, in which a trio of left-leaning British journalists unleashed a vitriolic polemic castigating those men responsible for leading a hopelessly ill-prepared Britain into a catastrophic war. Thereafter the contours of the historiography are well known. The ‘orthodox’ interpretation ushered in by Cato’s *Guilty Men* and reinforced by early post-war accounts (notably Churchill’s *The Gathering Storm*) held sway until the mid-1960s, when the opening of archives dovetailed with disciplinary and temporal factors to facilitate a ‘revisionist’ defence of Neville Chamberlain and his fellow appeasers that accentuated structural constraints rather than individual culpability. Subsequent developments have included efforts to formulate a post-revisionist synthesis, a counter-revisionist rehabilitation of the orthodoxy (restoring the primacy of individual agency over structure), and most recently a revival of revisionist defences of the ‘guilty men’. Cross-disciplinary analyses of the 1930s have flourished too, political scientists, international relations scholars, psychologists, and many others finding the paradigm of 1930s British appeasement a fertile ground for inquiry. Beyond the academy the appeasement analogy retains its lustre, contemporary villains routinely equated with Adolf Hitler and any perceived appeasers tarnished with the ‘guilty men’ brush. In short, appeasement remains a subject of endless scholarly and popular interest.

Given the crowded terrain, ploughing a new and original furrow is far from straightforward. But in ‘*Guilty Women, Foreign Policy, and Appeasement in Inter-War Britain*’, this is precisely what Julie Gottlieb looks to do. Gottlieb’s title borrows from a little-known 1941 publication by Richard Baxter, his *Guilty Women* evidently inspired by the publication of *Guilty Men* the year before. Lambasting the ‘consciously’ and ‘unconsciously’ guilty women who had acted ‘as the tools of the Nazis’, only ‘Red’ Ellen Wilkinson escaped Baxter’s ire.⁽¹⁾ For Gottlieb, Baxter’s book is instructive for two reasons: first, it had little impact, either at the time or since, which, when contrasted with the influence of *Guilty Men*, is emblematic of women’s overall absence from the appeasement story; second, Baxter’s rant was deeply misogynistic, and his ‘essentialist constructions of women’s nature’ (p. 1) were by no means atypical, reflecting the gendered underpinnings of foreign policy debates. Gottlieb attempts to interrogate these two issues, firstly by addressing the fact that the voluminous appeasement literature is almost uniformly guilty of leaving women

out. This involves positioning women within a mainstream historical narrative from which they have been marginalised or excluded altogether, in an effort to 'reclaim and resituate women in the history of the international crises of the 1930s' (p. 10). But Gottlieb's ambitions are more far-reaching than simply adding women to the narrative; she also demonstrates how the construction of the narrative itself has assumed a distinctly gendered dimension (as is evident in Baxter's polemic), appeasement at the time and since being perceived as a feminine response to the hyper-masculinity projected by the fascist dictatorships. Exposing the gendered dynamics of foreign policy discourses and debates, Gottlieb seeks to reconfigure our understanding of the period, 'providing a necessary corrective to the male-identified Great Man/Guilty Man narrative of appeasement' (p. 9).

That the appeasement story has been written almost exclusively by men and about men is all too apparent. *Guilty Men* was written by three men with a cast list of 15 men. The subsequent historiography is also dominated by men, whether protagonists penning influential and self-exculpatory memoirs (Winston Churchill, Duff Cooper, Anthony Eden, *et al*), or the plethora of historians providing more scholarly appraisals (think Lewis Namier, A. J. P. Taylor, D. C. Watt, David Dilks, John Charmley, R. A. C. Parker, Robert Self, and so on). Furthermore, the appeasement narrative has been woven predominantly by international historians, and international history is a particularly male-centric sub-discipline (a story of 'chaps and maps' as Zara Steiner has put it).⁽²⁾ There are exceptions to the rule, but few could justifiably dispute Gottlieb's assertion that appeasement has been examined through a 'narrow range of conceptual frameworks' (p. 7) that not only paint women out of the picture, but are somewhat gender-blind in their analyses. '*Guilty Women, Foreign Policy, and Appeasement in Inter-War Britain*' is an effort to address this male-centrism and at the same time to encourage a reconceptualization of appeasement itself. In this sense, Gottlieb's book adds to an emergent body of literature that explores the intersection of women's political activism after winning the vote (partially in 1918, on terms equal to men in 1928) and the very male-dominated arena of foreign policy.⁽³⁾

Structurally, Gottlieb's approach is thematic, the various chapters dealing with various manifestations of women's influence on foreign policy debates and discourses in inter-war Britain. Each chapter – whether focusing on women's encounters with fascism, the plethora of letters women sent in support of Chamberlain's stance at Munich, or the gendered representations of public opinion that emerged – stands alone in its own right, whilst collectively Gottlieb does a decent job of retaining an overall coherence. However, when read as a whole, the analysis can seem a touch fragmented, and the rather frequent episodes of repetition are slightly jarring. Similarly, there are too many printing errors, often in close proximity – the level of scholarship here deserves more attentive copy editing. More importantly, perhaps, the book would have been enhanced by providing a more substantial conclusion. Each individual chapter has its own concluding section (in which broader arguments and areas of continuity and discord are duly noted), but the short section at the end of the final section serves as both chapter summary and overall conclusion. A dedicated concluding chapter would have allowed Gottlieb greater scope to tease out the broader significance of her study.

This would have been beneficial, as Gottlieb engages with numerous issues, and the arguments made are multifarious. Chapter one explores women's changing political and public status since 1918, considering women's 'encounters' in three domains: the international, the European, and the fascist. Tracing women's internationalism from its pre-First World War origins through to the latter-1930s, Gottlieb contextualizes how British women were becoming increasingly enmeshed in international affairs, compelling them to 'reconsider and reconfigure their national, their internationalist, and their European identities' (p. 37). Chapter two explores how women grappled with the emergent fascist challenge, their supposedly 'feminine' proclivity for peace and pacifism being tested as their 'sisters' suffered at the hands of the repressive sexual politics exercised in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Distinctly feminized anti-fascist strategies emerged, allowing Gottlieb to contend that women played a pivotal role in framing and shaping the domestic debate about how best to confront the fascist menace, cultivating a 'feminist anti-fascist discourse' (p. 60) that subsequently informed women's responses to the war that came in 1939.

Chapters three and four both provide biographical portraits of several prominent women, some of whom, like Neville Chamberlain's wife, Annie, or the well-known Conservative MP Nancy Astor, simply encouraged the pursuit of appeasement, whilst others, animated perhaps by pro-Nazi sentiment (Lady Londonderry) or inspired by an absolute pacifism (Helena Swanwick), were uncompromising in their support of Neville Chamberlain's policy. Chapter five focuses on the position of Conservative women, including the handful of women Tory MPs and the influence of Conservative women's organisations. Included in this chapter is a brief discussion of 'the guiltiest of all', namely the small handful of women who embraced a far-right platform. As is the case throughout, Gottlieb provides a veritable treasure-trove of insights and commentary provided by contemporary women of all political stripes. The abundant and often lengthy quotations certainly allow these women's voices to be heard in their own right, but at times the analysis is rather quotation-heavy, to the occasional detriment of narrative flow and coherence.

Gottlieb notes that existing studies of Conservative women focus on the 1920s and early 1930s, looking principally at efforts to construct a specifically conservative notion of women's citizenship in the immediate post-war era. As a result, women are relatively absent from studies of the late-1930s, when appeasement reached its zenith. It is in seeking to fill this gap that Gottlieb's analysis is at its most insightful and valuable. Chapter six elucidates and explains how 'gendered' representations were pivotal in shaping foreign policy debates, while chapter seven considers how such representations were expressed, paying particular attention to Mass Observation diaries and the plethora of women's letters sent to both Neville and Annie Chamberlain during and immediately after the 1938 Sudeten Crisis. Thereafter, chapter eight provides a 'gendered' analysis of the well-documented 'Munich' by-elections in the autumn and winter of 1938, before a final chapter brings to the surface those women who, defying the prevailing stereotype that women were natural and instinctive supporters of appeasement, rallied instead behind a Churchillian anti-appeasement line, expressing sentiments of shame each time the British government meekly surrendered to force.

The first half of the book, therefore, provides the essential context, exploring how women in inter-war Britain began to feature more prominently in political debate. Even so, suggests Gottlieb, by the late-1920s and early-1930s a certain perception of women remained dominant, whereby their maternal instincts rendered them more inclined to pacifism. Women were also viewed as relatively uninterested in foreign affairs, their political activism concerned chiefly with domestic and welfare issues, assuming an international dimension only insofar as it advocated women's rights, social reform, and international peace. And, with regard to Conservative women in particular, there was an unspoken assumption that they were overwhelmingly non-confrontational and quiescent. The net result was that women were believed to be unquestioningly supportive of appeasement. Gottlieb challenges these assumptions in the book's latter chapters, arguing that women's attitudes towards foreign affairs were far more nuanced than commonly thought, and that the gendered assumptions so evident at the time cultivated a portrayal of appeasement as an effete, feminine, and ultimately inadequate response to the dictators, a portrayal that retains its lustre to this day. To do so, Gottlieb recreates the distinctly gendered representations of public opinion during the 1938 Sudeten crisis, representations that did much to confirm Chamberlain's conviction that his policies enjoyed popular support, especially with women. If existing studies of public opinion have added a third dimension to the rather stale debates that focus on a straightforward pro-appeasement/anti-appeasement dichotomy, the addition of gender, suggests Gottlieb, allows a four-dimensional picture to emerge (p. 155).

Gottlieb's findings are largely persuasive and certainly provide a fresh approach to the appeasement debate. Making extensive use of Mass Observation data, she detects a distinction between the responses of British men and women to the diplomatic crisis in September 1938. Although there were exceptions on both sides, women were mostly thankful to Chamberlain for saving peace and thus saving their husbands, brothers and sons from the horrors of war; men, by contrast, were more likely to express unease and even resentment at Chamberlain's meek surrender to Hitler's aggression. Distinctly gendered responses were equally apparent across the many thousands of letters and telegrams (the Twitter of their day, according to Gottlieb) received by the Chamberlains. Women demonstrated a proclivity for unabashed thankfulness whilst the notes of criticism were most often penned by men. For Gottlieb, Mass Observation diaries and the 'crisis letters' gave

women an unprecedented platform to express their opinions, all the more important given that their voices were rarely heard in the traditional public sphere (Parliament and the press remaining predominantly male domains). These ego-documents not only provided women with an outlet through which to express an opinion, but also furnished policymakers with crucial insights into the national mood.

Such insights, Gottlieb contends, are of use to gender historians (revealing how women self-identified and the role of gender within this process) and to historians of appeasement (demonstrating how contemporary foreign policy debates assumed a distinctly gendered hue). Taken collectively with the letters and diaries of men, they are also of value to historians of emotion, providing an invaluable resource for those interested in emotional and psychological responses to periods of acute international tension. For Gottlieb, simply accommodating women's responses where they had previously been disregarded facilitates an 'alternative narrative of the Crisis' (p. 211). This alternative narrative compels historians of appeasement to consider domestic responses to appeasement, responses overlooked by the majority of historians but most certainly acknowledged by contemporaries. For Chamberlain, representations of women's public opinion, whether articulated by the crisis letters or mediated through the influential women in his life (notably Annie, but also his two sisters, Ida and Hilda, and his sister-in-law, Lady Ivy), served simply to reinforce his conviction that his policy enjoyed widespread popular support.

This conclusion is hard to refute. Chamberlain frequently sought affirmations of his own righteousness and popularity, and when they arrived he was not shy to revel in them. The regular letters he received from his sisters consistently massaged his ego and applauded him on his wisdom, courage, and his obstinate refusal to be distracted from his task by unmerited criticism. Chamberlain also enjoyed much support amongst men, notably within the Cabinet, the Conservative Party, and the vast majority of British newspapers. Ascertaining which representation of public opinion most influenced him is far from straightforward, and Gottlieb perhaps overplays her hand in claiming that 'the efforts of women letter-writers ... would have a much more tangible and immediate impact on Chamberlain than any other type of public opinion' (p. 187). That Chamberlain collected and retained such a volume of supportive letters indicates that he took much comfort from them, and, on more than one occasion, he did specifically reference his popularity with women. But he was equally likely to take succour from positive editorial commentary in the conservative press, from favourable 'Letters to the Editor' within *The Times*, as well as more general correspondence from members of the public, irrespective of sex. Attaching particular significance to representations of women's opinion seems rather problematic, especially given the inherent difficulties in ascertaining the impact of public opinion at all.

Further clarification would also have been beneficial with regard to Gottlieb's stance vis-à-vis the broader appeasement debate. She argues, for example, that representations of women's opinion were often favourable to appeasement, and that Chamberlain's apparent sensitivity to women's opinions encouraged his pursuit of this policy. At the same time, Gottlieb draws attention to women who actively campaigned against appeasement, whether Conservatives like the Duchess of Atholl, liberals like Violet Bonham Carter, socialists like Ellen Wilkinson, or independents like Eleanor Rathbone. Indeed, Gottlieb asserts that such women were 'among the most vociferous and probably the most *affective* anti-appeasers' (p. 263). Again, the argument is that women's voices were frequently the ones with the most impact, although the weight of evidence in support of this claim is questionable. Nonetheless, Gottlieb's findings necessarily muddy the waters, demonstrating convincingly that neither the 'Chamberlainite narrative of women's championship of appeasement or the gender-blind historiography of the anti-appeasers' are satisfactory explanatory frameworks (p. 262). But more fundamental questions remain unanswered. Does this gendered history of appeasement provide ammunition to either the orthodoxy or the revisionists? Should a heightened appreciation of the gendered representations and connotations of appeasement, in conjunction with the contemporary sexual politics of the time, make us more or less sympathetic to Chamberlain's policy? Or, by positioning a multiplicity of women (and ergo a multiplicity of opinions and responses) into the narrative of appeasement, does Gottlieb add weight to Keith Neilson's argument that the crude distinction between 'appeasers' and 'anti-appeasers' lacks the necessary precision and sophistication to adequately explain the range and nature of the appeasement debate?(4)

Whatever the answers to these broader questions, there can be no doubt that Julie Gottlieb has done the scholarly community an enormous service by providing the first gendered history of British foreign policy in the age of appeasement. Her overriding aim was to connect two distinct areas of scholarship – appeasement history and women's history – in order to demonstrate how two fields converged, as a heightened status of citizenship and political engagement enabled women to contribute more actively and effectively to Britain's diplomatic response to the revisionist powers. In this respect, the endeavour must be considered a success, and *Guilty Women* undoubtedly provides a much-needed and long-overdue corrective to the tendency within the existing literature to position women on the periphery (if they feature at all). But this book does much more than simply weaving women into the appeasement narrative; it compels us to reconceptualise the narrative itself by acknowledging the explicitly gendered connotations of the policy. Portraying appeasement as a distinctly feminine response to the hyper-masculinity of the dictatorships is a device employed by anti-appeasers both at the time and since. Gottlieb deserves credit for challenging the prevailing assumption that women, in particular, were responsible for encouraging the pursuit of a 'feminized' and ultimately misguided diplomatic strategy. Although many women *did* support appeasement, often playing upon their stereotypical roles as wives and mothers to do so, others used the same tropes, in combination with a more politicised feminism and internationalism, to condemn the very policy that Baxter (and others) blamed women for perpetuating. This is a work of admirable scholarship and ambition, and the ever-expanding canon of appeasement literature is richer for the contributions it makes.

Notes

1. Richard Baxter, *Guilty Women* (London, 1941), p. 11.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Zara Steiner, 'On writing International History: chaps, maps and much more', *International Affairs*, 73, 3 (1997), 531–46.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example, Helen McCarthy's work on women's roles within the diplomatic corps (*Women of the World: The Rise of the Female Diplomat* (London, 2014)), and Susan Grayzel's gendered approach to the history of the air peril in interwar Britain (*At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (New York, NY, 2012)).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Keith Neilson, 'Orme Sargent, appeasement and British policy in Europe, 1933–39', *20th Century British History*, 21, 1 (2015), 27.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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