

Appeasing Hitler: Chamberlain, Churchill and the Road to War

Review Number: 2380

Publish date: Friday, 3 April, 2020

Author: Tim Bouverie

ISBN: 9781784705749

Date of Publication: 2019

Price: £20.00

Pages: 512pp.

Publisher: Penguin

Publisher url: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1113054/appeasing-hitler/9781784705749.html>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Adam Timmins

Given that the shelves of those historians who specialise in the origins of the Second World War are figuratively groaning under the weight of works covering the topic of appeasement, it may come as a surprise to some when reading the preface to *Appeasing Hitler* that “while books on the Second World War have multiplied over the past 20 years, the build-up and causes of that catastrophe have been relatively neglected.” A cursory scan of what used to be COPAC reveals at least six books published on the topic in the past ten years so: hardly evidence of a Jim Dixon-esque neglected topic.⁽¹⁾

Only slightly less contentious is the claim that “while there have been many excellent books —on appeasement, most of them have tended to focus on a particular event...or a particular person” (xii). In contrast, Bouverie wanted to “write a book which covered the entire period—from Hitler’s appointment as German chancellor to the end of the Phoney War.” (p. xii) One wonders what is being referred to by “the entire period” in this sentence. The obvious reading is that it covers Hitler’s spell as Chancellor prior to the outbreak of war in 1939; which implies that appeasement was a policy devised solely to deal with Hitler. Yet much scholarship over the past seventy years or so has focused on the idea that appeasement was in fact a central plank of British foreign policy long before Hitler came to power. Again, the claim made does not quite stack up.

Much play is also made of the fact that the book takes a narrative form, with the publishers claiming that it is “the first major narrative account of appeasement.” As Susan Pederson pointed out in her review of the book, this is another slightly dubious claim.⁽²⁾ Bouverie also states in the introduction that his account is based on access “to over forty collections of private papers—several of which yielded exciting new material” (p. xiii). However, he then goes on to say that “not wishing to disrupt my narrative, I have not highlighted these finds in the text but, where possible, have favoured unpublished over published sources in respect of both length and frequency” (ibid.). To hide one’s finds in this way seems slightly self-defeating. Given the microscopic detail in which appeasement has been examined for the best part of seventy years, when approaching a book on the subject, one is entitled to ask: what does this account provide us that is new and original?

Appeasing Hitler is best described—not pejoratively I should add—as a good old-fashioned historical

narrative. It is pacily written and extremely readable; akin in style to William L. Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. The chapters are snappily headed, (although some are slightly incongruous—the shift in tone from 'Bowlers are Back!' (Ch.10) to 'The Rape of Austria' (Ch.11) is somewhat jarring), and Bouverie has the narrator's eye for the small anecdote which illustrates a larger state of affairs.⁽³⁾ I would recommend it to anyone who wanted an introduction to the topic. But does the work really tell us that much about the origins of the Second World War that we perhaps didn't already know?

As noted a moment ago, the ground with regards to the topic of appeasement is extremely well-trodden. The reasons for this are not hard to deduce: the strain of fighting the Second World War pretty much finished off Britain as a Great Power. Hovering at the back of historiography on the origins of the war, then, are two questions: could the war have been avoided, and if it couldn't (and it could only have been avoided by essentially letting Hitler have a free hand in the East) could it have been fought on more favourable terms? In other words, was there a policy that could have been enacted in the same period that would have enabled these alternative outcomes? It is only in the Epilogue that Bouverie analytically examines the motives for the policy of appeasement—not unreasonably perhaps, given that his book is a work of narrative history. What is to be made of his conclusions?

Bouverie neatly sums up the four posthumous justifications for the policy of appeasement:

that the parlous state of Anglo-French rearmament meant that neither Britain nor France was ready for war before the autumn of 1939; that the outbreak of war before this date would have split public opinion and, most probably, the British Empire; that it was not until the invasion of Czechoslovakia, in March 1939, that Hitler proved that he could not be trusted; and that the attempt to avoid the horrors of a new world war by making concessions to Nazi Germany was a reasonable policy worth trying (p. 415).

With regards to the state of the Allied armed forces: although it is true “that there were serious deficiencies in British and French arms in 1938”—the year war almost came about as a result of the Czech crisis—Bouverie argues that “the Germans were also in no position to wage a major war in 1938” (p. 415). While this knowledge comes with the benefits of hindsight, the Allies should have realised “their own strategic and military advantages” – while Germany was diplomatically isolated, and dangerously exposed on her Western flank, whereas the “Western Powers possessed the resources of the world's largest empire, a mastery of the seas and twenty-three divisions (with a potential for another thirty), facing only eight German divisions and a series of incomplete bunkers along Germany's western border. There was also the Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of Alliance” (p. 416). The strategic advantage lay with the Allies in 1938 – but they failed to capitalize on it.

Why was this? This segues neatly into the second factor, the role of public opinion. Both Britain and France were still traumatised by memories of the First World War, and were desperate to avoid a sequel. Not only were the political classes of both countries “imbued with the spirit, if not the doctrine, of pacifism”, but they were also convinced that they could not embark on a war unless they had public support, and that such support would not be forthcoming unless either country was directly threatened. The outpouring of euphoria and relief following Munich “appeared to reveal considerable support for Chamberlain's policy, while the Dominions had made clear their opposition to war over Czechoslovakia” (p. 416).

But was this the whole picture? Bouverie thinks not, citing opinion polls taken after the Anschluss and around the time of the Godesberg summit that suggests that there was no large majority in favour of appeasement. Furthermore, “the swiftness with which relief at Munich turned to feelings of shame and distrust seems to support these samples, while the calmness with which the British public prepared for war, in the autumn of 1938, suggests that the politicians underestimated the people” (p. 417). Rather than provide a lead for public opinion, British politicians sheltered behind it: had “Britain's political leaders spelled out the nature of the German threat and the need to resist it—as Churchill did—then public opinion could have

appeared very different” (p. 417).

This, I think, is something of a thin reed. As Robert Rhodes James has put it elsewhere, the real sea-change in British public opinion came after Munich:

By some strange process which is inexplicable to those who were not alive then, the fear of war which had been too evident in 1938 seemed to evaporate. The British did not want war, but the spirit in the air was not pacific. There was a weariness with procrastination, an aversion from false promises and wishful thinking, and a yearning for a clear solution.⁽⁴⁾

It also is a very difficult exercise to try and put ourselves in the shoes of those who had experienced the trauma of Great War; as long as there was a chance that a second conflagration could be avoided, it seemed reasonable to attempt it, given the alternative. While British and French politicians undoubtedly were fairly timid in their approach to the dictators, they arguably had very good reason to be, given that the 1914-18 war was still within living memory.

Could the British government have guided public opinion rather than hiding behind it by spelling out the nature of the German threat? Bouverie argues that “the failure to perceive the true character of the Nazi regime and Adolf Hitler stands as the single greatest failure of British policy makers during this period” (p. 417). The response of appeasers to this charge would be that Hitler only really demonstrated his mendacity after he tore up the Munich agreement and marched into Prague, while “the full horrors of the Nazi regime only became apparent after the end of the war” (ibid.). But Bouverie argues that this is based on a selective reading of the evidence, and that there were plenty of signs of the real nature of the Nazi regime prior to Munich.

Again, I am not so sure. It is fairly easy for us now, after the Second World War, to get our heads around what sort of person Hitler was, with the full horrors of the Holocaust—among other things—now well documented. But without the benefit of hindsight, one can appreciate that the phenomena of Hitler was something that had never quite been seen before, and that it was, perhaps, no wonder that the statesmen of the 1930’s struggled to accurately judge him. Yes, he was clearly quite an unpleasant character, but again, before the war I suspect few people grasped just how depraved Hitler truly was. Recently, while reading David Cassidy’s biography of Heisenberg, I came across the following passage: at that time [1934] “the Western World had no experience with a regime such as Hitler’s and no conception that such a regime could lead its people inexorably into the evil nightmare that the Nazi dictatorship became” —a sentence that largely sums up my own feeling.⁽⁵⁾ Probably the turning point came with *Kristalnacht*—i.e. after Munich.

Moreover, the problem Britain had was that Hitler’s diplomatic adventures always had a fig-leaf of respectability. With regards to the Rhineland, her attitude was echoed by Eden’s taxi driver (“I suppose Jerry can do what he likes in his own back garden”). Although Britain was none too happy about how Germany had gone about incorporating Austria into the Reich, this outrage “was tempered by the widespread view that the *Anschluss* was bound to have occurred at some stage and was neither immoral nor a threat to British interests” (p. 183-84); Austria was regarded as a legitimate German interest and “the impossibility of preserving her independence, short of all-out war, was recognised by almost everybody” (p. 186). And as for the Sudetenland Germans, the problem was that they were, after all, Germans—the principle of self-determination and all that.

The turning point, of course, was Prague; and after this point, Chamberlain is arguably fully entitled to all the approbation he has received. The occupation of the rump of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 seemingly signalled the end of the policy of appeasement. Yet—as Bouverie correctly notes—even after the events of March, Chamberlain had not fully renounced appeasement; “he still believed that the situation could be rescued by careful and, if necessary, secret diplomacy” (p. 338). As R.J.Q. Adams has put it elsewhere, after Prague, “had the worm actually turned? And if so, had he turned thoroughly?” The answer to the first

question is yes; the answer to the second most probably a no. [\(6\)](#)

As one would expect, the period from Hitler's appointment as Chancellor to Chamberlain's appointment as PM is covered fairly briskly, with the lion's share of the book—300 pages out of 421—devoted to the Chamberlain years. What does Bouverie make of the enigma that is Chamberlain? By the mid-1930s, Chamberlain “had already developed that conceit, some would say arrogance, which many were to identify as a weakness and cause for frustration during his Premiership” (p.127). In particular, he treated the Labour party with undisguised condescension; an attitude that was “to have important, even historic consequences...in the autumn of 1939 and then again in the spring of 1940” (p.127). ‘The Coroner’ had full confidence in his decisions: once his mind was made up, he was loathe to change it. This was a virtue in the years of the McDonald/Baldwin premierships—Baldwin in particular is the classic example of a man who held to the maxim of ‘when in doubt, do nothing.’ But as time went on, Chamberlain developed an increasing tendency to “disregard the views of others and ignore facts which did not suit his conclusions” (p.128). One suspects that to admit in March 1939 that his policy of appeasement was in tatters would have required a humility on Chamberlain's part that simply wasn't there.

Given how much of a disaster Chamberlain's premiership was, it's easy to forget that he didn't become Conservative leader by accident. As much as Churchill turned out to be right, there is a good explanation as to why he was generally not taken seriously in the 1930s: he'd spent most of the previous twenty years blotting his copy book, in addition to having ‘ratted and re-ratted’: not for nothing did Rhodes-James write a book entitled *Churchill 1900-1939: A Study In Failure*. When Baldwin finally stepped down in 1937, there really were no other serious contenders for the Conservative leadership; to use a later phrase about Eden, although Chamberlain ranks fairly low on the list of British PM's—and rightly so—the fact remains that he was the best PM available at the time.

Ultimately, any counterfactual assertions that one makes in the course of a historical work have to be, for lack of a better word, context-sensitive—that is, they have to be workable in the conditions that existed at the time. This is something akin to what, in the philosophy of science, Andrew Pickering has called the ‘mangle of practise’; it's easy to sketch out a path by which Britain could have fought the Second World War on more favourable terms, but whether or not the course that Bouverie prescribes was feasible at the time is, I think, an open question. Take, for instance, the idea that if Britain and France had marched in 1936, Hitler would have had to leave the Rhineland with his tail between his legs. The problem with this counterfactual is that it was difficult enough to get the French to march in 1939, let alone in 1935: “depressed by further large cuts to military spending in 1935, the French General Staff were convinced that they were in no position to risk war with Germany” (p. 86).

Looking back at the above review, two things struck me. The first is that this review might seem to be an apologia for Chamberlain and appeasement. Let me be quick to correct this: although Chamberlain was dealt a bad hand, he played it fairly poorly, and generally deserves his regular spot near the bottom of the list whenever British Prime Ministers of the 20th century are ranked. The second is that it seems as though, on the above account, the Second World War was somewhat inevitable. Like many people, I suspect there's a difference between what I practise and what I preach. Officially, I subscribe to A.J.P. Taylor's dictum that ‘nothing is inevitable until it has happened.’ And yet...once we get past the reoccupation of the Rhineland, it's arguable that, given Hitler's worldview and goals, some kind of European conflagration was indeed fairly inevitable, barring some kind of *deus ex machina*.

While *Appeasing Hitler* is a high readable narrative account, one is inclined to say that the only justification for going over the well-tilled ground of appeasement nowadays is if one has something new to say; and the result of Bouverie's work is in the end, simply more tilling.

Notes

1. They are: Andrew Stedman, *Alternatives to Appeasement* (I.B. Tauris, 2015); Stella Rudman, *Lloyd-George and the Appeasement of Germany 1919-45* (Cambridge Scholars, 2014); Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement* (Routledge, 2011); Terrence Lewis, *Prisms of Appeasement* (Sussex Academic Press, 2011); David Faber, *Munich 1938* (Pocket, 2009); Peter Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement* (Continuum, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Pederson writes, "I spent a pointless quarter of an hour trying to come up with a construction that would render this claim true. Is it that the groaning shelves of books on appeasement in our libraries and bookshops are, because they make some analytical points, not "narrative"? Or is it that AJP Taylor, Donald Cameron Watt, David Reynolds, Richard Overy, RAC Parker, Martin Gilbert and all the other historians who have tilled this furrow (all cited by Tim Bouverie), not to mention Winston Churchill himself, are somehow not "major"?" Pederson, review of *Appeasing Hitler*, *The Guardian*, 5/4/19, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/05/appeasing-hitler-chamberlain-churchill-road-to-war-tim-bouverie-review> [2][Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example, with regards to the dropping of leaflets on Germany at the start of the 'Phoney War': "One story, which appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*, told of a pilot returning two hours early from his leaflet-dropping sortie. Questioned by his commanding officer, the young man explained that he had not bothered to cut the cords and had simply thrown the bound bundles out of the plane. 'Good God, man,' the officer spluttered, 'you might have killed somebody!'" (382-83).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Robert Rhodes James, *Churchill: A Study in Failure* (Harmonsworth, 1970), 342.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. David Cassidy, *Uncertainty: The Life of Werner Heisenberg* (W.H. Freeman, 1992), 132.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. R.J.Q. Adams, *British politics and foreign policy in the age of appeasement, 1935-39* (Palgrave, 1993), 141.[Back to \(6\)](#)

Other reviews:

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/14/appeasing-hitler-chamberlain-churchill-road-to-war-tim-bouverie-review> [3]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2380>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/305435>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/05/appeasing-hitler-chamberlain-churchill-road-to-war-tim-bouverie-review>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/14/appeasing-hitler-chamberlain-churchill-road-to-war-tim-bouverie-review>