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Was the “Good War” Unnecessary? Part 2 **by Anthony Gregory**

[Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World](#) by Patrick J. Buchanan (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008); 518 pages.

Britain’s poor diplomacy in the 1930s also helped bring about Mussolini’s alliance with Hitler. Upon taking power, Hitler attempted to win Mussolini over by offering South Tyrol to Italy. Mussolini did not reciprocate the fondness. He condemned Hitler, thought him a thug and buffoon, and threatened war against him over the incomplete Nazi coup in Austria that killed Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, whom Mussolini respected considerably more than he did Hitler. In 1935 Mussolini agreed with Britain and France at the Stresa Front to uphold the principle of an independent Austria and to oppose German violations of the Versailles Treaty.

But Britain itself capitulated to Hitler’s next major move against the terms of Versailles, thus betraying the Stresa Front.

On June 18, 1935, an Anglo-German Naval Agreement was signed permitting Germany to construct a fleet 35 percent of the Royal Navy and a submarine force equal to Great Britain’s.... In coming years, British denunciations of Hitler’s moves into the Rhineland and Austria as violations of Versailles would ring hollow in light of her own naval agreement that authorized Hitler to ignore the Versailles limits on warships. British diplomacy would ... drive Mussolini straight into the arms of Hitler.

Britain lost Mussolini for good over Ethiopia, which Italy had failed to conquer in the late 1890s. “Mussolini was determined to avenge the humiliation and append to his new Roman empire the last great uncolonized land in Africa.” He seized on a border dispute between Italian Somali-land and Ethiopia in December 1934 as a pretext for invasion. In response, Britain threatened sanctions to uphold the principles of the League of Nations, despite Ethiopia’s being of

no strategic interest to Britain. Mussolini invaded and “Britain led the League in imposing limited sanctions on Italy.” Being limited, they produced “the worst of all worlds. The sanctions were too weak to compel Mussolini to give up a conquest to which Italy’s army had been committed, but they were wounding enough to enrage the Italian people.” In 1936 the League lifted the sanctions and in 1938 Britain and France recognized Italian rule of Ethiopia, but “[by] then it was too late. Mussolini had cast his lot with the Hitler he had loathed.”

The facts Buchanan relies on in his treatment of the buildup to the war are from conventionally accepted history, but his interpretation will still be controversial. He gives many examples of Britain’s trying, throughout the late 1930s, to avoid war with Germany, basically believing Germany’s grievances were legitimate, that indeed most of Hitler’s territorial ambitions were expectable, fair, even moderate given the losses at Versailles, which the British had come to believe had been unduly harsh. It was still widely held that the German power, for all its national-socialist idiosyncrasies, anti-Semitic excesses, and reliance on murder to deal with political opponents, could nevertheless be a respectable member among nations and a check against the far more murderous totalitarian regime in Russia. (At this point in history, Hitler had murdered probably hundreds, maybe thousands, of people. Stalin had starved and purged millions. Hitler’s Nuremberg laws and virulent anti-Semitism were a concern to some, but Stalin had by then slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Jews himself.) British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin declared that if there was “fighting in Europe to be done ... [he would] like to see the Bolshies and Nazis doing it.” Given that the two totalitarian regimes were going to go to war, the two’s destroying each other seemed like the best likely outcome.

France, however, sought out an alliance with Russia. In 1936, France approved a pact with Stalin’s regime against Germany. French opponents of the deal, as well as Hitler, saw this as a violation of the Locarno Pact, to which France, Belgium, and Germany had voluntarily acceded in 1925.

Hitler responded by marching into the demilitarized Rhineland, in violation of Versailles. He was prepared to retreat if he met French resistance but he did not. Britain did not see it as cause for war. Lloyd George, the former prime minister, commended Germany’s reoccupation of the Rhineland, saw it as defensive, and, after meeting Hitler to discuss the conquest, said, “He is indeed a great man’ ... as he compared *Mein Kampf* to the Magna Carta and declared Hitler ‘The Resurrection and the Way’ for Germany.”

Siding with Hitler

Churchill also admired Hitler. “In 1937, three years after the Night of the Long Knives murders of [Ernst] Roehm and his SA henchmen, two years after the Nuremberg Laws had been imposed on the Jews, one year after Hitler had marched into the Rhineland,” Churchill published

a book containing his 1935 essay calling the Nazi leader “highly competent, cool, well-informed” with “an agreeable manner, a disarming smile, and ... personal magnetism.”

Churchill mused that Hitler might be one of those “examples of men who have risen to power by employing stern, grim, and even frightful methods but who, nevertheless, when their life is revealed as a whole, have been regarded as great figures whose lives have enriched the story of mankind.” He thought Hitler should give up the Rhineland voluntarily as a show of good faith, but the British did not urge war. Many saw the occupation as just. And Paris, devoted to its Maginot Line strategy and reluctant to wage war over a no man’s land that could have turned world opinion against France, did not respond militarily to Hitler’s occupation. Hitler began massively fortifying a defensive West Wall, underscoring his victory and indicating his likely intention to focus eastward from then on. Prime Minister Baldwin maintained, “With two lunatics like Mussolini and Hitler, you can never be sure of anything. But I am determined to keep the country out of war.”

Hitler continued expanding his territory, next into Austria, his place of birth. By 1938, “Hitler had not abandoned his plan to convert Austria into a satellite, but believed this should and would come about through an ‘evolutionary solution.’” When Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg called for a plebiscite to determine Austria’s independence, Hitler responded by invading the country. With Italy no longer committed to the Stresa Front, Hitler got Mussolini’s approval, although the latter was irritated by his decision to annex the country outright. It was a “clear violation of Versailles” but the British, who had acceded to the Anglo-German naval treaty in 1935 and refused, along with France, to protect the Rhineland, saw no cause for war: “if Austria and Germany wished to unite — 99 percent of each nation would vote in favor of unification in April.”

Lord Halifax and Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain “had come to believe that Germany had been wronged and peace required the righting of those wrongs.” Once again, they allowed Hitler to violate Versailles, thinking his land grab generally just. Nevertheless, they also realized that a Germany unified as it was in 1914 would be the dominant power in Europe. But the ruler of Germany was now Adolf Hitler, and should he turn aggressor, as his words in *Mein Kampf* portended, he would be a graver threat than the kaiser, who had almost conquered Europe, had been. Italy, Japan, and Russia, Britain’s allies in the Great War, were all now potential enemies. And America was gone from Europe.

Churchill looked on with deep concern, and on Hitler’s next power grab he would split with the appeasers.

Appeasement and war

So we arrive at the infamous appeasement of Hitler at Munich that has since branded Chamberlain a disgrace in British history and supposedly proven the prescience of Churchill, who

considered Munich a “total and unmitigated defeat.” But the British and American media at the time saw the Munich agreement as a great triumph for diplomacy. Chamberlain was widely hailed by his compatriots for avoiding war. President Franklin Roosevelt took credit for pressuring the peace accord.

Hitler had wanted the Sudetenland back under German control, and, as Buchanan estimates, so did probably 80 percent of the Sudeten people. But the proximate cause of Hitler’s belligerence toward Czechoslovakia came in a wave of rumors that he was poised to invade. He had no immediate plans to invade and when he affirmed that, “the Czechs bragged and brayed about how they had forced Hitler to back down, showing the world how to face down the bully.” Enraged, Hitler drew up invasion plans. In the midst of all this madness, Chamberlain met with Hitler and signed over the fate of the Sudetenland.

As with Hitler’s earlier land grabs, “[many] British believed justice was on the German side.” Chamberlain wrote to his sister that he “‘didn’t care two hoots whether the Sudetens were in the Reich, or out of it.’ He did not believe that maintaining Czech rule over three million unhappy Germans was worth a war.” Some were encouraged that Hitler claimed he was done with expansion, but his long-declared intentions toward Danzig in Poland should have clued people in.

Although the Nazi absorption of the Sudetenland weakened France’s ally, France did not come to rescue Czechoslovakia. It did not want to enter a bloody war to defend its allies in the east, which could prove more a liability than an asset to France’s security. Although Churchill wanted to wage war rather than see Hitler take the Sudetanland, Britain did not have the military means to effectively prevent Hitler from taking it.

Buchanan argues that it was not Chamberlain’s appeasement that made another world war inevitable.

With Austria and Sudeten-land now his, Hitler in 1938 had added ten million Germans to the Reich without firing a shot.... Yet it is a myth to say Munich led directly to World War II. It was a diplomatic debacle, but it was not why Britain went to war.

In diplomacy and at home, the Nazis were becoming more aggressive. In late 1938, they foreshadowed the genocidal character their savage regime would adopt during wartime.

On the night of November 9-10, Nazi storm troopers went on a rampage, smashing windows, looting Jewish shops, burning synagogues, beating and lynching Jews. Scores perished. Hundred were assaulted in what would be known as Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass, the greatest progrom in Germany since the Middle Ages.

About half the Jews in Germany had already fled their country and Hitler's repressive Nuremberg laws. Of those remaining, about half fled upon the spectacle of Kristallnacht, Buchanan estimates.

In March of 1939, after Czechoslovakia broke up, Slovakia declared independence, and Hitler occupied Prague, an act that "[historians] mark ... as the crossroads where he started down the path of conquest by imposing German rule on a non-Germanic people." As Czechoslovakia no longer existed, Britain considered the Munich agreement void and no longer felt obligated to come to its aid. But Chamberlain felt betrayed and he would soon adjust his diplomatic poise toward Hitler.

As well as enriching the Reich, the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia

appeased four nations. Hungary had the Vienna Award of the Hungarian lands and peoples in Slovakia and regained control of Ruthenia. Slovakia had independence and freedom from Prague and a promise of German protection from Hungary. Poland had gained the coal-rich region of Teschen and a new border with friendly Hungary. And Hitler had done Stalin a huge favor, for Ruthenia was ablaze with Ukrainian nationalism and [Hungarian leader Miklós] Horthy would put the fire out.

This "favor" portended Hitler's pact with Stalin. Buchanan believes it also showed there were limits to Hitler's territorial ambitions.

Amid all this and unsubstantiated rumors of Hitler's intention to invade Romania, Chamberlain was disgusted and began considering a defensive pact with France, Russia, and Poland against Germany.

Poland and war

Poland was stuck between hostile nations. Hitler wanted Danzig, which was 95 percent German, and the Polish Corridor, to which the Poles were more attached. The Soviet Union was even more intimidating. Hitler's immediate goal was an alliance with Poland, ultimately against Bolshevik Russia and to negotiate the return of Danzig. In response to Germany's ambitions, Chamberlain, now convinced by Churchill's warnings, preempted any possible deal between Germany and Poland.

On March 31, 1939, he rose in the House of Commons to make the most fateful British declaration of the century: "[In] the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power."

And it was this war guarantee to Poland, Buchanan argues, that sealed the fate of the Western world. Poland, a dictatorship that had benefited from the divvying up of Czechoslovakia, was far less a strategic interest to Britain and France than the Rhineland and Sudetenland. By guaranteeing to defend Poland against Nazi aggression — which Britain could not do directly, and in fact did not do throughout the war — Britain guaranteed there would be war with Germany. The only way it could back up its guarantee was by declaring war on Germany from the west, ensuring the Nazis would attack the Western democracies.

Chamberlain thought the war guarantee “might block a Polish-German deal, force Hitler to think about a two-front war, give Britain an ally with fifty-five divisions, and enable Britain to avoid the alliance with Stalin being pressed upon him by Churchill, Lloyd George, and the Labour Party.” This is not what ultimately happened.

Emboldened by the war guarantee, the Polish refused to negotiate with Hitler, and so Hitler sought an alliance with Stalin. The two totalitarians would invade Poland in September 1939, meet in the middle, and partition the country, and Britain and France would indeed declare war from the west.

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