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Alvin Finkel, Clement Leibovitz. *The Chamberlain-Hitler Collusion.* Rendlesham, UK and Halifax, N.S.: Merlin Press/James Lorimer & Company, 1997. 319 pp. $48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85345-998-9.

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The central thesis of this book is that the key–and the only key–to British, and to a lesser extent, French appeasement in the 1930s, is anti-Communism. Critical elites in Britain and France were obsessed by the menace of Communism which clearly threatened their way of life or, as the authors are fond of saying, the privileges of the "rich idle classes". Conservatives were far less concerned about fascism. Indeed, they found much to admire in the various European fascist regimes, not least their resolute suppression of Communism, or, comes to that, any forces for social change. Better yet, fascism, unlike Communism, was generally not an article for export. Nazi Germany was a partial exception in that it alone of fascist nations militarily threatened western Europe. But conservatives believed, not altogether without reason, that Hitler's principal preoccupation was with the Judeo-Bolshevik regime in the Soviet Union. With a bit of luck he could be encouraged to move east, leaving western powers alone whilst simultaneously destroying the principal threat to western "civilization".

No one was clearer on this point than the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. On 13 September 1938 he wrote king George VI informing him that Nazi Germany and Great Britain were "the two pillars of European peace and buttresses against communism" (p. 13). The authors place enormous stock in this sentence since they quote it no fewer than eight times. Nor, on their account, would Chamberlain be easily disabused of this illusion. The Godesberg conference of 22-23 September 1938, far from having been, as so many traditional historians have insisted, a humiliating disaster for Chamberlain, was in fact the occasion of an explicit deal between the British prime minister and Hitler whereby the latter would leave western Europe and its colonies alone in exchange for a free hand in the east where he could concentrate his energies on destroying the Soviet Union. The British guarantee to Poland at the end of March 1939 was a response not to the German destruction of Czechoslovakia but to Chamberlain's fear that Hitler had reneged on the Godesberg deal and was contemplating military action against the West. The Polish guarantee was designed to persuade Hitler to redirect his priorities towards south-east Europe. The scheme failed but, the authors insist, long after the outbreak of war in September 1939. British leaders remained hopeful of reestablishing an accord with Hitler.

The book is based on archival sources, notably the published British diplomatic documents and a somewhat eclectic array of secondary sources. Oddly, given the topic, R. A. C. Parker's *Chamberlain and Appeasement* (London, 1993) is absent from the notes (there is no bibliography) whereas Professor Frederick Schumann's vintage 1942 *Europe on the Eve* is cited fifteen times. The writing is both clear and vigorous. The book contains a lively appendix in which the authors take on mainstream scholars who do not share their views about the sources of British appeasement. It makes for entertaining reading, but also somewhat dubious verdicts. Whatever one thinks about P. M. H. Bell's account of the Munich crisis (*The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* [London, 1986]) it is surely tendentious to claim that "he justifies Munich by noting that Prague, unlike Warsaw, was unharmed by World War 2" (p. 301).

In its broad outlines, this is not an entirely unfamiliar argument. Indeed, it is rather more familiar than the authors would admit. There is now a substantial body of literature highlighting the centrality of anti-communism in the appeasement reflexes of British and French conservatives. The proposition that British Conservatives drew some considerable comfort from their belief that Hitler was moving east would come as no surprise to anyone familiar with John Wheeler-Bennet's classic study *Munich: Prologue to Tragedy* (London, 1948)–another work absent from the notes. The authors clearly believe that for British Conservatives "Hitler could do what he liked in Eastern Europe; he could demolish Czechoslovakia or invade the Ukraine". But that sentence was penned by A. J. P. Taylor in his *The Origins of the Second World War* (London, 1961). The authors do acknowledge that

others before them have been alert to the role of anti-communism but fault such scholars for failing to treat anti-Communism as the primary reason for appeasement. Nor can they forgive scholars, most notably Taylor and Bell, for persisting in their belief that Chamberlain, misguided though he clearly was, remained a decent human being.

Here it is useful to remember what Taylor meant when he described appeasement as "a triumph for all that was best and most enlightened in British life." His point of course is that for most contemporaries Hitler's foreign policy ambitions were directed primarily at the Treaty of Versailles, a treaty many felt to have been in flagrant violation of Wilsonian principles and thus devoid of moral legitimacy. To be sure, such concerns for morality might have disguised a more fundamental anti-communism. Certainly the belated discovery by many French conservatives that the Versailles settlement lacked legitimacy coincided suspiciously with their post 1935 obsessions with domestic Communism. But it is to the point that appeasement was not limited to the anti-Communist Right. It was abundant on the Left as well, although that point is rarely acknowledged by the authors. Most left wing appeasers were anti-Communist as well but, unlike conservative appeasers who were often appeasers *because* they were anti-Communist, appeasers of the left, alert to the apparently bellicose stance of the Soviet Union, were anti-communists because they were appeasers. The authors' exclusive preoccupation with conservative appeasement accounts for their rather uncertain treatment of France, second only to Britain in appeasement but governed after 1936 by a left of centre Chamber of Deputies. French politicians Georges Bonnet and Camille Chautemps come in for some well deserved obloquy. But as cabinet ministers in Popular Front governments, neither can easily fit into the Chamberlain mould as defenders of the "idle rich". True, Bonnet did end up in a cabinet with conservatives like Paul Reynaud, who, much like his British counter-part, Winston Churchill, could be seen as a die hard defender of the old order. But Reynaud, like Churchill, was no appeaser.

The authors' single most original contribution and the interpretative cornerstone of the book is their claim that at Godesberg Hitler and Chamberlain struck an explicit "deal". The only evidence for this deal is seven sentences from the memoirs of Dr. Paul Schmidt, *Statist auf Diplomatischer Buhne 1923-45* (Bonn, 1949). Schmidt was Hitler's translator and the only witness to the Chamberlain-Hitler conversations. On his account, after Hitler had harangued Chamberlain and after he had forced him to agree to transmit his new demands to the Czech government, he abruptly adopted an expansive and conciliatory mood and began talking about an Anglo-German rapprochement. In particular he told Chamberlain: "we will not stand in the way of your pursuit of your non-European interests and you may without harm let us have a free hand on the European continent in central and South-East Europe" (p. 16). The authors assign great significance to this passage which has apparently escaped the attention of traditional diplomatic historians. They quote the passage twice, each time giving the German original of the above quoted sentence.

Still, what exactly does it prove? It certainly suggests that Hitler was dangling some seductive bait before Chamberlain. But the critical question is: did Chamberlain bite? Alas, there is not one whit of evidence in Schmidt to suggest that he did. The only thing Schmidt says about Chamberlain (in the sentence immediately following the passage cited by the authors) is that he caught a flight back to London. The authors gamely do their best with this unpromising material. They assert: "After this conversation, noted Schmidt, the mood of the meeting which had been quite positive all along, became especially buoyant" (p. 17). But Schmidt does not say that or anything like that. What he does say, in a passage unaccountably omitted by the authors is: "the harangue had the effect of a purifying rainstorm" ("Der 'Paukenschlag' hatte wie ein reinigendes Gewitter gewirkt"). The phrase comes immediately before the passage cited in the book and, *pace* the authors this can only be interpreted as meaning that the atmosphere improved only because Hitler had stopped yelling at Chamberlain and *before* Hitler got around to mentioning a free hand in the east. All in all, Schmidt's account seems a weak peg upon which to hang the theory of a "deal".

Nothing daunted, the authors proceed as if the existence of a "deal" had been irrefutably demonstrated. So certain are they that even evidence which might cause a sceptic to have doubts about the reality of the "deal" becomes conclusive proof of its existence. Chamberlain appears, for example, to have breathed not a word of the deal to his cabinet upon his return. For the authors this becomes supplementary proof that there was indeed a deal, one too important to be shared with Chamberlain's cabinet colleagues. Just why he would want to keep the deal a secret from a group of arch-appeasers who, on the authors' own account shared Chamberlain's views on foreign policy is never explained. True, Lord Halifax was having one of his periodic crises of conscience and Chamberlain might have feared that the "nervous nellies" in the Cabinet were not yet ready for anything

so audacious. But at least as compelling an explanation for Chamberlain's silence on this point was that he, unlike the authors, did not know that he had struck a deal.

The "deal" (if there was one) certainly helps explain British behaviour at Munich but also, according to the authors, the seeming British turn-about in the wake of the mid- March Nazi annexation of Moravia and Bohemia. It is the case that on 15 March 1939 Chamberlain appears to have greeted the news of the Prague coup with some equanimity. It was only in his Birmingham address of 17 March that Chamberlain unequivocally denounced the German actions. What accounts for this delay? Most historians have argued either that it took Chamberlain forty-eight hours to grasp fully the bankruptcy of his foreign policy, or that it was during this interval when he became aware of the very real back bench revolt brewing among Conservative MP's. But the authors suggest an alternate explanation. According to them, it was only on 17 March that Chamberlain learned that Hitler had agreed to award Ruthenia (the largely Ukrainian parts of the by now ex- Czechoslovakia) to Hungary, something he had refused to do at the time of the Munich conference. This suggested to Chamberlain that Hitler no longer intended to strike first in the east, i.e., into the Ukraine, but that he might, as diplomats had been warning since at least December of the previous year, be turning west. So Chamberlain's sudden resolve was motivated not by Hitler's cynical violation of the Munich agreement, but by his betrayal of the Godesberg "deal". Consequently the subsequent guarantee to Poland was less an act of diplomatic firmness than a desperate attempt to induce Hitler to return to his previous understanding. It is an interesting theory and certainly not inherently implausible. Once again, however, it is a theory that depends on the unproven thesis of an explicit Hitler-Chamberlain deal.

This passionate book clearly seeks to rescue the story of appeasement in the 1930's from the willful blindness of all but a handful of historians. The authors are likely to make few converts if only because where they are convincing they are unoriginal and where they are original they are utterly unconvincing.

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