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Hugh Ragsdale. *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis, and the Coming of World War II.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xxii + 212 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83030-0.

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Of the many things for which an author cannot be held responsible (artwork, typeface selection, etc.) one is the promotional claim of the publisher written for the dust jacket. If, upon finishing Hugh Ragsdale's *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis, and the Coming of World War II*, the reader is left with a desire to sue someone for having been led to believe that "all of these findings are new, and they contribute to a considerable shift in the conventional wisdom on the subject," he should reserve his ire for the publishers, and not the author.

The ten chapters are neatly organized into three major sections: Background of the Munich Crisis (1. The Shaky Foundations of Collective Security, 2. Soviet-Romanian Relations I 1934-1938, 3. Soviet-Romanian Relations II Summer 1938); Foreground: Climax of the Crisis (4. East Awaiting West, 5. The Red Army Mobilizes, 6. Denoument); and Conclusion (7. What the Red Army Actually Did; 8. What the Red Army Might Feasibly Have Done, 9. Epilogue, 10. Assessment of Soviet Intentions). Useful maps, a list of abbreviations, appendices, and a selected list of sources are included.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to think of this volume, which runs to just under two hundred pages, as a monograph. Rather, it feels like a conversation (or conference paper) on pre-war Romania, which was stretched into an article, and which was then subsequently extended further. It contains many of the defects of the first two forms of scholarship, while presenting few of the satisfying results of a solid book.

This state of affairs is not, however, the result of shoddy research. Ragsdale is incredibly well informed on virtually every aspect of the published literature, in every language in question. His footnotes and "selected sources" are so complete that one wonders what a complete bibliography would have looked like. If he did not know something, he was not afraid to ask the advice of others: "I am told that there is no reliable history of the *Abwehr*; I owe advice on this point to Gerhard Weinberg and Jaroslav Hrbek" (p. 119, fn. 27).

In fact, the book has all the outward appearances of making a significant contribution to the field, promising as it does to focus on Soviet relations with Romania, and the possibility of the Red

Army's transit over Romanian territory to rescue Czechoslovakia from the incompetent clutches of Chamberlain and Daladier. The reader waits for the critical moment in which Ragsdale offers the irrefutable evidence that the Red Army had in fact mobilized on a massive scale, that it was prepared to put its mobilized forces to use in defending Czechoslovakia, that its services were declined by the short-sighted leaders of the Western democracies, and thus the world saw slip away a reasonably realistic chance to avoid the Second World War. The moment never comes.

As Ragsdale is content to point out in Chapter 5 ("The Red Army Mobilizes"), "the bulk of the story was told in a previous work of Zgorniak that is now more than thirty years old" (p. 116). The most significant non-Soviet corroboration that Ragsdale finds is a series of Polish consular reports dealing with massive Soviet activity along the borders. These findings are presented in great detail but are eventually discounted as no other confirmation is found by any other foreign source which should have known what was going on (p. 148). The reader is never brought any closer than this to the potentially historiographically significant promises offered at the outset. And thus the reader may honestly, and without malice, ask himself what the book is all about. Ragsdale is strongest in his chapters on Soviet-Romanian relations, and one suspects, given the imbalanced success of these sections, that it is here that his investigations began. These are the portions that are most clearly based on archival evidence and will likely be of interest to scholars of Romanian history for their elucidation of the twists and turns marked by the dictatorships in Bucharest and Moscow.

The chapter treating what the Red Army might have done is interesting, if somewhat speculative. Some readers may be put off by analysis which includes phrases such as, "If we assume a like per capita capacity of defensibility in Czechoslovakia and in France, factor in the population ratio of 1:4 and the ratio of hostile frontiers between the two allies at 1:7.5 ... then what we might call the crude coefficient of defensibility of the two countries was 1:30" (p. 155). They will be more reassured by Ragsdale's truly excellent evaluation of the literal possibilities for transporting the Red Army across Romania afforded by the rail networks (pp. 157-167). Lastly, with regard to the historiography of Soviet pre-war intentions, Ragsdale comes off considerably the better in a difference of interpretation with Lukes and Pfaff over Stalin's supposed plan to exploit the Sudeten crisis in order to extend the Revolution westwards (pp. 186 ff.) Aside from these points, nothing jumps out as being a new or significant contribution to the field.

Ragsdale is not a distant observer reporting dryly on events. His prose is personal, and at times conversational: "At this somewhat discouraging point in the development of this research, a series of significant documents entered the picture in a most fortuitously happy fashion. A colleague furnished me a fascinating series of documents that prompted me to take my inquiry in a new direction" (p. 123), and "I was frankly impressed by the explicit particulars in the reports, but I was disturbed by the fact that all the evidence of this sort came from one utterly unique documentary source" (p. 125). Both passages appear in the main text of the book, not in footnotes. He also weighs in on older issues of appeasement with obvious irony ("And so, at this point, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain arose--or perhaps he descended--to take the initiative to save the peace of the continent --temporarily--at almost whatever price Hitler demanded" (p. 94)), and later bitterness ("Mr. Chamberlain could give lessons in the arts of casuistry" (p. 172)), which might be more expected from an outraged student coming across the material for the first time. Such clear statements may not constitute cardinal sins; perhaps he is right to want us to not be jaded over the shameful selling-out of the Czechoslovakians.

But the occasional fear on the part of the reader that Ragsdale has lost his sense of perspective comes with his venomous descriptions of encounters with archivists in Russia. These are interspersed throughout the text (why hide them in footnotes?), but conclude with: "If there is any prospect of the refinement and improvement of conclusions such as these, it awaits the capricious impulses of the furtive Neanderthals who are keepers of the secrets of the Russian archives" (p. 192). The Neanderthals clearly bear the brunt of his frustration for not being able to present findings that could match the ambitions and hopes of the publishers. Those who have worked in Russian archives, and on similar material and time-periods, may share Ragsdale's frustration (as this reviewer does), but will still wonder at the personal level at which he seems to take it.

Hugh Ragsdale's work is the product of an erudite and extremely well-read mind, but ultimately it is also disjointed in terms of its overall ability to alter the debates on appeasement and history leading up to WWII. Readers interested in fresh appraisals of the topic in more traditional, less strident terms, could do worse than to consult Silvio Pons's *Stalin and the Inevitable War: 1936-1941 (2002), or, more generally, the collection of essays published by Robert Boyce as* The Origins of World War Two: the debate continues_ (2003). The main successes of Ragsdale's work come with the overview of Romanian-Soviet relations, and the debate on overall Soviet intentions.