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The Burden of Guilt: Munich, l938

By Richard Reinhardt

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On a Sunday morning, September 30, 1938, Mister Neville Chamberlain, the prime minister of Great Britain, stepped down from a Lockheed airliner at Heston, the little air field for British Airway's passenger service to Europe. Outside the doors of the Aerdrome, surrounded by a crowd shouting "Hear, hear!" Chamberlain held up a single sheet of white paper – a document that he had signed that morning in Munich. This piece of paper, Chamberlain said, represented "…a settlement of the Czechoslovakian problem [that is] only the prelude to a larger settlement in which all Europe may find peace." It was an Anglo-German Peace Declaration, Chamberlain said, a simple, one page statement "symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war again." The other signature was that of the Chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler.

Church bells rang in towers and steeples as Chamberlain rode into London. He stopped for s few minutes to deliver the good news to King George VI. Then he drove on to Number 10 Downing Street, where hundreds of reporters, cameramen and government officials, and thousands of men, women and children waited to cheer him.

There, in a dramatic, carefully staged showpiece that he must have come to regret ---- a speech to the rapturous crowd, a speech that was heard, repeated, misquoted, debated and, burned into the history of the 20th Century ---- Chamberlain declared that he was bringing home "a peace with honour…..A peace for our time."

The Houses of Commons gave Prime Minister Chamberlain a vote of confidence, and he took off for several days of resting and fishing for salmon in Scotland

It had been only twenty years since the British and the Germans, and their allies and their enemies, had bled nearly to death in the most destructive war of all time. None of the peoples involved in that was eager for war. That much, everyone agreed, howsoever peace was achieved.. A peace in our time.

With few exceptions, Britons sighed in relief. Chamberlain's policy of ***appeasement***, as he proudly called it, had been tested and had proved its worth. The immediate problem resolved was Hitler's raging, unwavering determination to annex to Germany an area of Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland, once part of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Sudeten was an isolated, mostly rural area of Central Europe ---a mountainous borderland, which, as Hitler correctly argued, was largely German-speaking. At Munich, face-to-face with the shrieking, belligerent Hitler, Chamberlain had agreed, in effect, to force the Czechs to hand over the Sudeten if Hitler would promise not to ask for more. The piece of paper, with its few details and its two signatures, was simply a gentlemen's agreement not to go to war.

Edward R. Murrow, of CBS Radio, who broadcast regularly to the United States from Britain, reported that night that London newspapers were suggesting that Chamberlain should receive a knighthood, a Nobel peace prize, both.

(Chamberlain's half-brother, Austen had received both those honors, in 1925, for crafting the multi-nation Locarno Peace treaty.)

Some commentators, whom Murrow did not name, maintained that Hitler had scored one of the greatest diplomatic triumphs in modern history. But the "average Englishman," Morrow said, was relieved and grateful.

"Men who predicted the crisis and the lines it would follow long before it arrived did not entirely share that optimism and relief," Morrow said "One afternoon paper carried this headline: WORLD SHOWS RELIEF --- BUT WITH RESERVATIONS."

Among those with the strongest reservations ---surely one of Ed Murrow's most important sources of comment--- was Winston S. Churchill, M.P., a powerful member of Chamberlain's Conservative party ---- but a constant critic, never a friend, of Chamberlain, and never a member of Chamberlain's cabinet. As the euphoria began to fade, the House of Commons debated the Munich Agreement. Only five men, including Churchill, refused to rise in a standing ovation for the Prime Minister. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Alfred Duff Cooper,

resigned in protest. And a few days later, Churchill delivered a long, withering speech charging that the whole equilibrium of Europe had been deranged.

In Churchill's words: "Do not suppose that this is the end. This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first foretaste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour, we arise again and take our stand for freedom as in the olden times."

Majority opinion was not with Churchill. Hardy anyone, except Churchill and the political left, questioned the ultimate value of appeasement. The idea of placating a would-be aggressor with bluffs and promises, even with morsels of territory in "far-away countries" was not seen as evidence timidity or weakness but of diplomatic skill. To the contrary, every skillful, peace-making appeaser, like Chamberlain, believed he had displayed moral and intellectual superiority To appease a noisy, screwy, hysterical foreign dictator like Hitler, to win from him a pledge of peace, -- that was a creative, bloodless way of avoiding a horrible general war.. Even the current government of vengeful, suspicious France, which had a treaty to protect the integrity of Czechoslovakia, agreed to accept the Munich agreement.

Over the weekend, while Chamberlain and his colleagues were relaxing in \Scotland and parliament was gearing up to debate the Munich Agreement, German tanks and troops advanced across the frontier of Czechoslovakia. They took not only the Sudetenland, where rosy maidens and boys in lederhosen welcomed the German troops with flags and flowers and hastily painted Nazi swastikas, The Germans also liberated Czechoslovakia's defensive cannons, frontier fortifications and the immensely valuable Skoda armaments factory.

This advance was not exactly what had been endorsed in Munich. But, at least, no guns had been fired. Appeasement had won a delay, time to conciliate, though not much for the nation of Czechs and Slovaks. The Cardinal Primate of Bohemia ordered a prayer that Sunday in all Catholic churches:

"The land of St. Wenceslas has just been invaded by foreign armies and the thousand-year-old frontier has been violated. This sacrifice has been imposed on the nation of St. Wenceslaus by our ally, France, and our friend, Britain. The Primate of the ancient Kingdom of Bohemia is praying to God Almighty that the peace efforts prompting the terrible sacrifice will be crowned by permanent success and, should they not, he is praying to the Almighty to forgive

all those who impose this injustice on the people of Czechoslovakia." In Protestant churches the prayer was offered in the name of John Huss.

Before Chamberlain's tenure as PM, the conservative National governments of Stanley Baldwin had developed appeasement into a fine art. They had acquiesced in permitting Germany to take back its former territories in the Rhineland. They had agreed to let her resume her pre-war control of the industrial Saarland. Above all, they had stood by while Hitler prepared with brutality and murder for the take-over of Austria by *Anschluss,* an act of "union." Germany's gains of territory lost after the Great War were seen by appeasement-minded leaders in both Britain and France as reasonable relief from the punishment levied against Germany by the Treaty of Versailles.

There had been several other previews of appeasement during the past decade. One was the notorious Hoare-Laval Pact of December, 1935, a secret agreement between Britain (represented by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Samuel Hoare), and France (represented by the French Prime Minister, Pierre Laval), to stand aside while Benito Mussolini, the fascist dictator of Italy, gobbled up the best part of the ancient kingdom of Abyssinia, better known as Ethiopia. After all, went the excuses, poor Italy had been disappointed by its gains out of the Great War. Mussolini required appeasement with colonial territory in Africa. And that concession (alas for the Ethiopians) was thought by some to buy Mussolini's friendship.

When the terms of the unconscionable Hoare-Laval deal leaked our, the press and public in Britain and France were outraged. Critics charged that Britain and France, having tried to bluff Mussolini, had instead caved in when he called their bluff. On behalf of the great powers and leaders of the League of Nations, they had agreed to sacrifice one backward, weak country in Africa in order to calm the appetite of "a second rate bully." **(Guilty)** Hoare lost his position in the cabinet (for the moment), Laval quit, and the feebleness of the League of Nations was again apparent.

Did appeasement satisfy Mussolini from asking for more? Well, no, not exactly. He grabbed off the rest of Ethiopia, built up his armies and sent guns, troops and supplies to aid the fascistic rebels against the legitimate government in Spain. .

The neutrality of Britain in the Spanish Civil War --- that was another case of appeasement. Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin upheld that policy, and Chamberlain, as his

Chancellor of the Exchequer, defended non-intervention as a way to "confine" the war. Admittedly, it was tricky to pick sides in the complex struggle between the legitimate government which was ---- well, a little to the left, don't you know – and its innumerable opponents --- anarchist, communist, monarchist, fascist, separatist, ethnic, linguistic and merely adventurous.

Chamberlain argued that the British policy against intervention – no arms, no food, no fuel, no taking sides ---would prevent this unfortunate, one-country-war from "spreading." He did not make clear how he thought the war might spread – from Catalonian or Basque separatism, Russian communism, the aggressive militarism of General Francisco Franco, or the toxic ideologies of Germany and Italy Hitler and Mussolini, meanwhile, egregiously intervened with war materials, troops, and, famously, the use of airplanes to bomb such places as Guernica,. Chamberlain and Baldwin's implication was that ***communism*** would spread from a victory of the Republic. In this case, the position of Churchill, who was so outspoken against appeasement later, was ambiguously for naval blockade, which favored the right-wing forces,.

Before he became prime minister, Chamberlain had been a respected conservative figure, a probable future prime minister. During Baldwin's National Government, Chamberlain had held important posts, most recently as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the second most significant position in the British government. He was a businessman, a former mayor of the industrial city of Birmingham. His father, Joseph Chamberlain, was a self-made business success and liberal party politician. Joseph had been an anti-war Colonial Secretary in the aristocratic pre-war government of Arthur Balfour. Joseph Chamberlain suffered deep regret that he had not been able to play a role, as an acquaintance and confident of Kaiser Wilhelm II, in averting the first World War

Neville's older half-brother, Austen Chamberlain was a diplomat of the old school – a monocle-and top-hat-wearing foreign minister, almost absurdly fluent in foreign languages, faultlessly polite, charming in manner, rotund in speech and elegant in appearance. He shared a Nobel Peace Prize with French and German diplomats in 1925 and was knighted for his conduct of international negotiations in Locarno, Switzerland, on peaceful solutions to world problems.

Neville, by contrast, was a sort of "social Tory" the kind of practical, thrifty, no-nonsense, businesslike guy that George W. Bush once claimed to be ---- a "compassionate

conservative." He wore an ordinary, black business suit and hat, and carried a rolled-up black umbrella. Although he had been stingy as Chancellor with funds for military buildup, he advocated spending for basic national health needs. He publicly favored --- within limits, of course --- the continued buildup of air power. He was the favorite to succeed Baldwin, and he could hardly wait. He correctly saw himself as a logical, experienced successor to the aging but popular prime minister. But different. Baldwin was a pink-faced, pipe-smoking, deliberative, prime minister. Chamberlain was gaunt and gray and grisly mustached. He held himself aloof, proud, severe, precise, reliable, a statesman, a diplomat who was uniquely able to soothe troubled waters. If he sought to imitate or outclass his father or brother, he did not admit it. He was, in his own estimation, his own man, the man who would save the world from a devastating war.

Understandably, he was irritated by a constitutional crisis caused by the philandering of the young, inexperienced and inept King Edward VIII. Edward wanted to marry a divorced woman, an American, Mrs. Wallis Simpson, nee Bessie Wallis Warfield, of Baltimore, Maryland. In 1937, when the London press finally let Britain in on the royal romance, which had been throbbing on land and sea for close to five years, the public was horrified, fascinated and insatiably curious. What was King Edward thinking? Wasn't it literally impossible for a divorced woman to become Queen of England? Did a king have the right to marry just anyone he loved? No one could agree.

Even the Cabinet of Baldwin's coalition government was torn. On one side were those like the outspoken Winston Churchill, who defended the rights of the sovereign to marry whomever he chose. On the other side, the rigid Victorians, who held that the proposed marriage was an affront to social and moral values. Chamberlain was among the moralists. Although he was not asked to do so, he sent around a memo to his fellow Tory cabinet ministers, urging them to summon the king and reprimand him as if he were a naughty schoolboy. Presumably, they would forbid him to marry Mrs. Simpson and order him to get back to work, something the King had never shown any liking to do. Checkmate.

Ultimately, Baldwin reluctantly gave the King three alternatives: to marry Mrs. Simpson (in which case, the government would resign), to give up Mrs. Simpson, or to give up the crown.

For a couple of weeks, Edward VIII agonized. Then he abdicated, choosing Mrs. Simpson over the crown. His younger brother Albert, the Duke of York, became King George VI. Edward was stripped of all but the family name, Windsor, his made-up title (Duke of Windsor), a few superficial privileges of royalty and a very generous allowance. He married Wallis after her second divorce was finalized. They lived, on and off, in France for most of their lives.

With that distraction out of the way, Baldwin resigned, and Chamberlain, without having to face an election, took over as prime minister. Few men in British history came to office with such high recommendations and faced such a deluge of foreign problems. He had only sixteen months to go before he would be challenged to personally prevent the outbreak of another horrific world war.

The Baldwin years of tremendous social change and economic challenge had gone far to divert the British people from the trauma of the Great War, but in haunting ways the war had split the people into two nations, both obsessed with avoiding another conflict. On one hand, the cynical, disillusioned, emotionally numb survivors of the British Expeditionary Forces – on the other, all the other survivors, the Rest, full of cultivated virtues such as High Endeavour, Humility, Thrift, Prudence and Sobriety. (**Sassoon p. 6**) Chamberlain was of the virtuous Rest, but like his father he was deeply affected by the human cost of war and deeply committed to maintaining peace. No one observing him could doubt the sincerity of his intentions. His arrogance in dealing with Hitler might be forgiven if he succeeded in maintaining peace.

His first major task was to hold Britain and France at a polite distance while Hitler completed the Anschluss with Austria. Chamberlain's foreign minister, Lord Halifax, cried, "Horrible! Horrible! I never thought they would do it." Both France and Britain filed protests with Berlin. The Germans replied that the relations of Germany and Austria were nobody else's business. End game.

As the summer passed, Hitler repeated, shrieking and gesturing wildly, his non-negotiable demands for the mountainous Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia and its high population of ethnic Germans. Hardly anyone outside central Europe had ever heard of the place, and Czechoslovakia refused to hand it over the Nazis. Chamberlain, in a radio talk, kissed off the issue as a "quarrel" in a far-away country "between people of whom we know nothing."

But that autumn, as Hitler's claims grew more strident, the Sudeten problem matured into an international confrontation that might set off the much-feared European war. Czechoslovakia was defended with a linked fence of treaties. Among its defenders were France and Soviet Russia. Now, its very existence was seriously threatened. The time for appeasement had arrived.

Shortly before revealing his personal scheme to settle the dispute, Chamberlain sent a privileged and private letter to King George VI. Chamberlain said he had come up with the idea of a "sudden and dramatic step, which might change the whole situation." He would pay a visit himself, alone, as head of the British government, to see Herr Hitler and persuade him, ***in Hitler's own interest***, to establish an Anglo-German understanding, preceded by a settlement of the Czecho-Slovakia question. Possible threats of force were not mentioned. Chamberlain could not imagine Hitler would resist such a persuasive offer.

When reports of Chamberlain's plan --- and Hitler's consent to talk --- reached the Parliament, cheering, hugging and weeping ensued, even among the skeptical back benches. One of the members, a diligent diary writer, enthused: "Neville by his imagination and great good sense, has saved the world." The King also seemed to approve. He sent a note to Neville, asking him to stop by when he got back "at any time convenient to yourself" to share the news.

Chamberlain flew three times to Germany. The very fact of his flying, like all details of his public life, fascinated the London press. He was all of 69 years old and had flown only once before. He hated it. That gave an element of heroism to his effort. For all his starchiness, Chamberlain liked guying the news, starring himself in the drama of great events

Chamberlain traveled civilian style, conspicuously carrying his black umbrella, the escutcheon of an English businessman, not the sword of a warrior. His closest, most trusted consultant, Sir Horace Wilson, went along. He always carried an umbrella, too. They flew to Munich and continued by car to Hitler's Alpine castle at Berchtesgaden to talk man-to-man with Hitler. The trip took seven hours from London.

The first meeting, on September 15, was mainly to meet and talk, although Chamberlain had brought along a portfolio of suggestions. Hitler ranted and screamed. He asked Chamberlain if he believed in self-determination. The prime minister, who was uncomfortably aware that the principles of Versailles would apply to the Sudeten, said he would have to consult his colleagues. At the end of the three-hour chat, nothing much had been accomplished except to set another

date and put pressure on the Czechoslovakians to bend down. Hitler concluded that Chamberlain was, at least, "a man." Chamberlain thought Hitler resembled the house-painter that he once had been.

Chamberlain and Hitler met again to sew things up, this time at a spa called Godesberg, a less tiring flight from London. On Chamberlain's arrival, Hitler announced he was sorry, but the terms had changed. The proposed transfer of power was too slow, he explained. Other areas of Czechoslovakia must also have plebiscites. Germany refused to join in guaranteeing the new frontier. Next day, Hitler added a deadline, five days hence, for the Czechs to evacuate the Sudeten. When Chamberlain protested, Hitler agreed to extend the deadline by three days, to October 1. This later turned out to be *Case Green*, a long-established target date for a German attack on Czechoslovakia.

Prague rejected the new proposal; France began preparing for war. British soldiers set up anti-aircraft guns on London Bridge and dug trenches in parks. Chamberlain gave a dismal report on radio. Next day, during a somber, 80-minute recital of his efforts to keep the piece, another dramatic moment: a messenger brings a dispatch to the Prime Minister. He scans it and says: "I have now been informed that Herr Hitler invites me to meet him at Munich tomorrow morning. He also invited Signor Mussolini and Monsieur Daladier [at that moment, the Premier of France.] Signor Mussolini has accepted and I have no doubt Monsieur Daladier will accept; I need not say what my answer will be."(**Details: Elston & elsewhere**)

The leaders of France and Britain urged the government in Prague to agree to a plebiscite. "[We] had no choice," the prime minister, Eduard Benes told his colleagues. "We have been basely betrayed." He finally agreed to cede the Sudeten, point blank, to Germany

Great cheers in the House, headlines in the evening papers. Chamberlain is off again to Munich for the final arrangements to bring peace to the world. Czechoslovakia, whose legates are waiting outside the conference room at the Fuhrerhaus, do not participate in the discussion. After the agreement is reached, they are handed detailed maps and a timetable for the cession of the Sudeten.

During the next twelve months of peace, Hitler completed his long-planned takeover of all of Czechoslovakia, signed a friendship pact with the Soviet Union and built his military to full wartime strength. Precisely a year after the last amiable chat in Munich, he invaded Poland.

This time (September 1, l939), air raid sirens sounded in London. The sirens were a test, but the meaning of the warning was clear. Chamberlain took to radio again. He announced the declaration of war with Germany. His heartsick words were:

"Everything that I have worked for, everything that I have hoped for, everything that I have believed in during my public life has crashed into ruins." **(Pugh, p. 439)**

Chamberlain held onto his position of leadership until May, 1940, while Germany consolidated her new territories, pushed north to the Baltic to grab off Danzig (now Gdansk) , and occupy Norway. Churchill replaced Chamberlain as prime minister and head of the Conservative party. Until 1945, as the inspiring wartime leader of Britain, Churchill represented all that was tough and unyielding in English spirit, while Chamberlain was painted with weakness and compromise. At worst, his critics suggested Chamberlain personally had caused the drift to war that could have been avoided by a show of strength. Chamberlain's misfortune was to be followed by Churchill, who is often named second only to Shakespeare as the greatest man in British history.

There is little that is tragic in Chamberlain's fate. As a fallen hero, he is too difficult to love, too resistant to sympathy. Appeasement, a word of queasy implications, attaches always to his name. The policy he proudly defended became a subject of derision. In a debate at the Oxford Union, a young man who later became prime minister, himself, accused Chamberlain of "turning all four cheeks to Hitler at once."(**Heath, Life)**

Midway through the year when Chamberlain stepped down, a small, left-wing publisher in London issued a modest, 126-page book that became --and has remained ---the classic denunciation of appeasement. Distributed to newsstands and radical bookstores, it reached the public just as Britain was mustering thousands of small boats to evacuate a major expeditionary army, trapped by the Germans in the Belgian port of Dunkirk. At this awful moment the Battle of Britain began, the air war that became a life struggle for survival on the home island

The book, called "*Guilty Men,"* was attributed to "CATO," This was the nom de plume of a trio of journalists headed by Michael Foot, who later became head of the British Labour Party. They named sixteen major leaders of the government in the last decade whom they held guilty of appeasement -- and they gave the very word appeasement a damning twist: "The deliberate surrender of small nations in the face of Hitler's blatant bullying." Three prime

ministers (stretching back surprisingly to Ramsay MacDonald, the first and only Labor Party PM to that date) four foreign secretaries, one air minister, five Knights of the Garter and the Conservative Party whip -- the top layer of British government for almost a decade (excluding, significantly, Winston Churchill) . Neville Chamberlain headed the list.

It was the Munich Agreement that burdened Chamberlain with personal guilt for failure. Few of his critics, however, admitted that he went almost unarmed to try and placate Hitler. He lacked full support of a British public that had been deeply wounded by personal losses in the Great War. Hundreds of thousands of Brits were emotionally committed to almost religious pacifism. France would not honor its treaty with Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain knew, from sources within the military, that the British army, navy and air force were not ready to go to war. He probably knew that the French army was not ready to go to war. He was acutely conscious of a lack of financial resources. He shared a sense of guilt about certain of the punishments of Germany at Versailles. Like his father and older brother, he admired German intelligence, industry and culture, which he valued to the detriment of the French and Russians. He had an abiding fear of communism. He was ignorant of Hitler's own weaknesses. .He did not understand, he simply could not comprehend, that Hitler was a pathological liar.

How could he, then, in that passive standoff, have compelled Hitler to make an honest promise of peace? The game at Munich was unwinnable.

Perhaps the most important strategic card Chamberlain also lacked, by treaty or pledge or whispered word, was the backing of the world's strongest power, the United States. As for America's reaction to those meetings in Germany about a small and unknown land, we have the words of the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Key Pittman, a Democrat from Nevada.

One: The people of the United States (Senator Pittman wrote) do not like the Government of Japan.

Two: The People of the United States do not like the Government of Germany

Three: The people of the United States are against any form of dictatorial government, communistic or fascistic.

Four: The people of the United States have the right and power to enforce morality and justice in accordance with peace treaties with us, and they will….Our government does not have to use military force and will not unless necessary.

America was not opposed to appeasement at Munich. We just weren't there.

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There is no French town in which the wounds inflicted on the battle-field are not bleeding…not one which may not hear within its own walls an echo of the greater lamentation swelling and muttering where the conflict seems to rage unceasingly. The waves of war break upon the whole surface of the country, and like the incoming tide, strew it with wreckage.

Georges Duhamel, *The New Book of Martyrs*, [*Vie des Martyres*] (1917)

Have you forgotten yet?
Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz---
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats, and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench,---
And dawns coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop and ask, "Is it all going to happen again?"
Have you forgotten yet?
Look up,. And swear by the green of the spring that you'll never forget.

Siegfried Sassoon, *Aftermath* (1919)

Had we returned home in 1916, out of the suffering and the strength of our experiences, we might have unleashed a storm. Now if we go back, we will be weary, broken, burnt out, rootless, and without hope. We will not be able to find our way any more

And men will not understand us – for the generation that grew up before us, though it has passed these years with us, already had a home and a calling, now it will return to its old occupations, and the war will be forgotten -- and the generation that has grown up after us will be strange to us and push us aside. We will be superfluous even to ourselves; we will grow older, a few will adapt themselves, some others will merely submit, and most will be bewildered; the years will pass by and in the end we shall fall into ruin.

Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, [*Im Westen Nichts Neues*)
(Published in Germany, l929; banned and burned, l933)