

Book Review

“The Appeasers”

By Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott

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I. Why I selected this book?

In all the years I have taught World History the most exciting point for me and the most engaging for the students is the period between World War I and World War II. The Treaty of Versailles, The Great Depression, the rise of fascism and extreme nationalism are enough to get even the slackers a reason to get their heads off the desk. The one area though that I have never spent enough time on though is the appeasement of Hitler as a Cause of World War II. I have taught that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain caved in to Hitler at Munich, went home touting “peace for our time” and has since been viewed as the world’s all time “village idiot”. I tell the students no one but no one wants to ever be compared to Neville Chamberlain because you are being called the ultimate fool or “wuss”. It is as popular as being compared to Benedict Arnold except even Arnold has his supporters who say he was trying to do the right thing for the colonies.

But how could Chamberlain be so foolish? Did he not have people around him that could set him straight? I realize the taste of World War I was fresh in Europe’s mouth but how could anyone ignore the incredible military buildup in Germany in the 1930’s? How could anyone not see the goals of Hitler and fascism?

This what I never really understood about the World War II appeasement process and what I wanted to learn.

II. Authors

Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott were young historians at Oxford in 1963 when they co-wrote "The Appeasers".

Martin Gilbert has written over 80 books including ones on World War One, World War Two and The Holocaust. He also published twelve historical atlases on countries such as Russia, The United States and Britain. In 1968 he became the official Winston Churchill biographer. He is an Honorary Fellow of Merton College, Oxford, and a Distinguished Fellow of Hillsdale College, Michigan. He once said about his writing:

"In my own published work, I have avoided the word "perhaps". It is for the historian either to say what happened, or to say that he cannot discover it. To say, "Perhaps it was like this" is to mask a failure to get to the bottom of a problem: and failure in historical research is no crime. It is one of the hazards of the profession."

Richard Gott after writing "The Appeasers" later became a journalist and was senior editor at the Guardian newspapers. Since writing "The Appeasers" much of Gott's work has concentrated on Latin America issues. Today Gott is an honorary research fellow at the Institute for the Study of the Americas at the University of London.

III. The Authors' Thesis

Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott have 4 points to their thesis in "The Appeasers"

1) After World War One virtually no one in Neville Chamberlain's government or The Conservative Party wanted any part of another major war.

This is not a revolutionary theory. Practically no one In Europe {other than Hitler} or in The United States wanted to be involved in such a war. Therefore the Chamberlain government would do anything, say anything and look the other way to appease Hitler.

2) Many people throughout Britain thought that Germany was mistreated by The Treaty of Versailles and Hitler was due some slackness.

Again this is something that has been discussed thousands of times. Most people knew in retrospect that The Treaty of Versailles went too far and created an environment to produce a Hitler. The part of this piece of the thesis that is surprising is when it relates to the third thesis of the authors.

3) The world and especially Britain, Europe were well aware early on regarding Hitler's treatment of the Jews and they were okay with it (or at least were not going to get involved with it) because of their own anti Semitism.

This point was surprising to me. I always thought the insane treatment of the Jews by Hitler was something that came out, for the most part, after World War II. Gilbert and Gott make it clear that people in the British government were told early in the Hitler regime how he was treating Jews and the Chamberlain administration had a good idea of what Hitler's long term intentions were with the Jewish people.

Sir Harry Rumbold was the British Ambassador in Berlin when Hitler came to power. Of Rumbold, Sir Robert Vansittart said "little escaped him and his warnings were clearer than anything we got later". Rumbold reported that Jews were systematically removed from their posts" in public service. Disabilities were more "the accident of race". Rumbold noted:

"The departure from Germany of so many writers , artists, musicians and political leaders has created for the moment a kind of vacuum, for whatever may have been the shortcomings of the Democratic parties, they numbered among their following the intellectual life of the capital and nearly all that was original and stimulating in the world of art and letters"

Rumbold wrote this on March 15, 1933 in a letter to Sir Robert Vansittart and followed up in April of 1933 in another letter "large concentration camps were being established in various parts of the country."

Why do Gilbert and Gott think these warnings about treatment of the Jews went unheeded? One reason they say was because many in Britain agreed with Hitler. Lord Londonderry, a previous British Minister for Air wrote in 1936 "As I told you, I have no great affections for the Jews. It is possible to trace their participation in most of these International disturbances which have created so much havoc in different countries."

The British scholar Gilbert Murray got a letter from a friend of his which said "as for the Jews, I begin with no aprioristic ideas on this point; but experience has more and more taught me that they are in some peculiar and exceptional way a pernicious element in any country of the West... I understand perfectly the German attitude towards these people and I approve fully."

4) Chamberlain and his inner circle went into isolation listening only to themselves and their own points of view.

The last thesis of the authors is that the Chamberlain administration only listened to themselves. There were other opinions from British leaders on dealing with Hitler, urging the Prime Minister to be more aggressive but these voices went unheard.

Sir Eric Phipps who replaced Rumbold in Berlin had a different view of the Nazis than his predecessor. Phipps impression was that Hitler "may possibly respond to some rather theatrical personal appeal to his emotions". In October, 1934 Phipps met General Goring at a dinner party just a few months after the Rohm-Putsch purge that killed over 100 people who were deemed political threats to the Nazis. It was general public opinion at the time that these murders happened under the direction of Goring. When Goring arrived late to the dinner party he apologized to Phipps saying "I've been shooting" and Phipps replied "Animals this time I hope". Over 100 killed in a political purge and to some British leaders it was a punch line to a joke.

One other example of British tolerance for the Nazis is shown by the authors with stories dealing with Lord Halifax. Halifax was appointed in 1935 as war secretary. In his first meeting with Goring Lord Halifax said "I was immensely interested in meeting the man. One remembered all the time that he had been connected with the 'clean-up' in Berlin on June 30, 1934, and I wondered how many people he had been responsible for getting killed." In 1936 Halifax paid his first visit to Nazi Germany. A friend of his reported after the visit " "He told me he liked all the Nazi leaders, even Goebbels, and he was much impressed, interested and amused by the visit. He thinks the regime absolutely fantastic." This was the leadership of Britain in the 1930's. Not exactly Profiles in Courage.

IV. Do the Authors Prove Their Point?

With a thorough review of the 1930's developments, dealing with events step by step and by relating personal stories of the people involved I think the authors do prove their thesis. One example of this is their description of The Munich Conference:

- Chamberlain took with him just 4 of his aides and they were all in full agreement with him
- Chamberlain made an attempt to bring the Czechs to the table. Hitler refused and that was the end of the discussion.
- Toward the end of the meeting Chamberlain said to Hitler " he hoped there would be no killing of women and children by attacks from the air" as if other forms of killing of women and children, say by tanks, might be alright. (Just the fact that Chamberlain brings up the possibility of Czechs being killed makes one wonder if he knew, even in Munich, that he had been taken.)
- Hitler responded to Chamberlain's statement above by saying: "he would always try to spare the civilian population and confine himself to military objectives. He hated the idea of little babies being killed by gas bombs". By September of 1938 the world had seen and heard enough about Adolf Hitler that everyone should have known this last statement was ludicrous.

V. What Have I Learned?

The two main points I have learned from "The Appeasers" are:

1) The level of anti-Semitism within Britain and most likely most of Western Europe was much greater than I ever realized. I would like to study further the status of Jews in Europe between World War I and World War II. I knew Jews were resented in Germany because to a large extent they controlled banks and business when the depression hit and therefore got the blame.

I was surprised that the authors pointed out that this hatred existed in Britain too. If it was in Britain where else was it? This I would like to study further. It will have an impact on my teaching of World War II.

2) The other point I learned was that as a leader Neville Chamberlain was completely ineffective. I don't say this because of the manner he was duped at Munich. I say it because the whole process leading up to Munich was ineffective leadership by Neville Chamberlain. Unlike someone like JFK and the Cuban Missile Crisis where John Kennedy made sure he got all points of view especially those that disagreed with him, Chamberlain surrounded himself with Yes-Men and distance himself from all those who might question his moves. A true leader wants to be questioned and is not afraid to hear other arguments. A true leader does not get hung up on ego and always want to be the smartest person in the room. A true leader is confident enough to surround him or herself with brighter people. Chamberlain was an incompetent leader and luckily Britain had a great leader waiting in the wings.

VI. What I Will Incorporate Into My Teaching Unit

In the past when I have taught World War II when the question arises why did the world look the other way when Hitler was making his moves I have said there were 4 reasons:

- 1) The world was tired of war after World War I and they would do anything to prevent another
- 2) Europe and The United States for the most part had their eyes on The Soviet Union because they feared communism more than fascism
- 3) Many people, especially in Britain, thought The Treaty of Versailles was extreme in its treatment of Germany and now they were willing to "look the other way" to make things right.
- 4) The world was in a depression and many people were concerned with feeding their own family and not what was happening within Germany.

Now after some further research I feel I might have a fifth reason. "The world did not really care what happened to the Jews in Europe." Either because of apathy or hatred when people heard the 1930's horror stories it was not something that stirred them if Jewish people were the oppressed group. That looks like one change I will make.